INSIDE/OUT(SOURCED):

THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF TEACHING BASIC WRITING

AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
AddRan College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Texas Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May, 2007

DEDICATION

Dissertations are seldom, in the end, the work of one individual; they are collaborations and disagreements and – hopefully – discussions about the topic that open new vistas for research and scholarship. I have been extremely lucky to have working with me and around me individuals whose friendship and collegiality have been instrumental in this undertaking. My interest in basic writing was born at Texas A&M University-Commerce, where Dr. Liz Buckley, former director of the Communication Skills Center and basic writing program, took a chance with a terribly green graduate student and put her in front of a basic writing class. So to Dr. Buckley, my utmost thanks and appreciation for sharing her love for basic writing and basic writers with me.

Over the years that have spanned my graduate studies, I have been indeed fortunate to be under the tutelage of some amazing and inspiring professors; to Dr. Richard Fulkerson and Dr. James Grimshaw of Texas A&M University-Commerce, and to Dr. Richard Enos, Dr. Ann George, Dr. Gary Tate, Dr. Linda Hughes, Dr. Stephen Powell and Dr. Rebecca Moore-Howard, thank you all for showing me how it's done and done well.

Every graduate student dreams of getting that one "dream job," and I am indeed blessed to be working with some of the most hard-working and dedicated faculty I have ever met. To all my colleagues at University of Texas-Tyler – especially Dr. Victor Scherb, Dr. Catherine Ross, Dr. Carolyn Tilghman, Dr. Dana Adams, Dr. Chantal Roussel-Zuazu, Dr. Greg Utley, Dr. Karen Sloan, Dr. Paul Streufert, Dr. David Strong, Dr. Sarah Del Collo, Brenda Ross, and Dr. Ann Beebe – I thank you all for your

friendship, your unflagging support and encouragement, and your stellar examples of what the word “colleague” is supposed to mean.

If that graduate student is extremely lucky, she has the opportunity to work with a committee that pushes her, challenges her, and forces her to think and to write in new ways. No one could have had a more dedicated committee than I have had the privilege to work with: Dr. Neil Easterbrook, Dr. Charlotte Hogg, Dr. Luke Niiler, and especially my director, Dr. Carrie Leverenz, have been integral in the ultimate success of this project, and their support, their comments (and their questions), and their time are sincerely appreciated.

My family and friends have been through this entire process with me, and never once did they let me get discouraged or feel defeated. Words cannot fully express how fortunate I am to have a family whose encouragement and love never failed, and their pride in what I was attempting to do made finishing this project possible. I am also fortunate to have good friends in Josie Davis-George, whose hours of prodding and pushing and being the best sounding board any doctoral candidate could hope for make me both a better writer and a better teacher, and MaryEllen Holland, whose patience in letting me vent sometimes kept me sane through many of the rough spots during the completion of this project.

This project would never have been brought to fruition, however, were it not for the hundreds of basic writers I have had the privilege to teach over the past eight years. They challenge me to re-examine my beliefs about basic writing – and about writing in general -- and their influence cannot be underestimated and will never be forgotten.

Finally, there is John, whose unconditional support made all the long hours and sleepless nights bearable. Thank you, John, for everything, especially for having a strong and reliable shoulder to lean on when I needed one.

INTRODUCTION

Inside/Out(Sourced): The Problematic Nature of Teaching Basic Writing at the Community College

The existence of basic writing[1], while engendering some debate from time to time, has generally gone uncontested. Even though some decry the need for it – especially at the college or university level – the fact that it still exists speaks to the recognition (at some level) that it should exist.

However, that existence often masks the real problem, the proverbial elephant that everyone is told to ignore: how is it being taught? Is that instruction effective? And how does that instruction reflect our deep, often unspoken views of writing in general? Despite decades of research that both question the efficacy of an emphasis on grammar instruction and also show that alternatives do exist, much of basic writing instruction today still centers itself in grammatical correctness and an elimination of error. This problem is exacerbated when one realizes that, more and more, basic writing instruction is going on not in the milieu of the four-year university but in the pragmatic atmosphere of the community college. This shift in *locus* goes unnoticed in much if not all of the basic writing research being conducted and published today.

But much of what makes community colleges what they are – created to ostensibly democratize higher education but, where remedial education is concerned, further segregating certain segments of the population – flies in the face of our stated

[1] For the purpose of this dissertation, "basic writing" is defined as that level of composition instruction that precedes a regular, credit-bearing composition course, and a student's placement in "basic writing" is determined by that student's performance on either an institutionally mandated placement exam or a state mandated standardized writing sample.

goals for basic writing instruction (see Bartholomae and Petrosky; Bartholomae's "Teaching Basic Writing" and "Tidy House"; Horner and Lu; Mutnick; Perl; Rose's "The Language of Exclusion"; Shaughnessy; and Soliday's "From the Margins to the Mainstream"). In today's educational marketplace, community colleges serve both as a place where students can accrue credits to be transferred to a four-year university and where students can receive training and certification in a variety of trades. More and more community colleges are focusing on the latter, providing a conduit through which students who may be perceived as incapable of or not yet ready for university-level work can be channeled into blue-collar, trade-related jobs (see Shor, "Errors and Economics"). With a shift in basic writing instruction to community colleges, many universities are, in effect, marginalizing both the basic writer and the courses needed for the basic writer to make a smooth transition into academic writing by shifting the responsibility for basic writing instruction to community colleges.

What has caused this shift in instruction from universities to community colleges? How do community colleges deal with basic writing instruction? What in the mission of community colleges makes them antithetical to how basic writing scholarship has led us to believe that basic writing should be taught?

These are some of the questions I plan to address in my dissertation.

Back to "Basics"

Basic writing – or developmental writing – has been a part of the academic landscape since the nineteenth century (Rose "The Language of Exclusion" 342), originally created to deal with a new influx of students who did not demonstrate the same level of college-preparedness as previous generations had. But since its inception, it has

been a problematic necessity: while administrators and faculty believe that students need it, most administrators and faculty would rather not have to deal with it. In her preface to Mainstreaming Basic Writers: Politics and Pedagogies of Access, editor Gerri McNenny states that the issue of basic writing has become more and more important in “four-year universities” (*xi*), in no small part because it was at universities that the first investigations into what basic writing is and what basic writers are were conducted at universities – and because, at one time, federal and state money was available to universities to conduct this research. However, the growing trend in dealing with this issue is for basic writing (and other developmental courses) to be taught at – “outsourced” to – the community college or two-year college level. In The Politics of Remediation, Mary Soliday states that an academically perceived need to clearly demarcate universities and lower-tier institutions (in which most two-year/community colleges find themselves) has led several states (Alabama, Louisiana, and Missouri, for example) to toughen their admissions standards for their “top tier” universities (tougher standards that would, in effect, refuse admission to those students who would need basic writing), while New York, California, Illinois, Virginia, Texas, and Arkansas were leading the way for four-year institutions planning to shift developmental education from four-year universities to two-year colleges (110). In fact, Soliday reports that “Marian Bagdasarian, a trustee for the California State University, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that remedial classes ‘belong in the community colleges’” and two members of the CUNY Board of Trustees actually stated that they advocated “sending many of the growing number of freshmen who need remedial instruction to community colleges *until they can show that they are ready to do college-level work*” (111, emphasis mine).

The reasons for this shift are varied. Some colleges and universities do not have the finances, the manpower, or the facilities – due to dwindling state funding, budget cuts, or shifting priorities to other growth areas – to accommodate the teaching of basic writing. Others see their resources better used in the teaching of credit courses rather than a non-credit course such as basic writing, while some see two-year colleges (community colleges and technical colleges) as better equipped to handle the growing number of students whose academic preparation is not up to university admission standards. Still others (usually private colleges and universities) offer no basic writing courses because they are not accountable to state funding structures and can set entrance standards independent of any state requirements. In any case, a state-mandated shift in basic writing instruction is indicative of an effort on the state's part to create a division of labor, where universities and community colleges provide different kinds of education to different kinds of students.

Another reason for this shift may be found in an attempt by upper-tier universities to protect their institutional reputations and make themselves more attractive to higher-ranking students. Jamie P. Merisotis and Ronald A. Phipps point out in their article, "Remedial Education in Colleges and Universities: What's Really Going On?," that some universities find it in their best interest not to acknowledge the presence of students who require remediation. "[A]n institution's reputation is the enrollment rates of students with the highest GPAs, the top test scores, and the strongest recommendations," they state, and they go on to quote a paper presented in 1998 to the American Council on Education by A. Astin:

> It goes without saying that the underprepared student is a kind of pariah in American higher education, and some of the reasons are obvious: since more of us believe that the excellence of our departments and of our institutions depends on enrolling the very best-prepared students that we can, to admit underprepared students would pose a real threat to our excellence. (qtd. in Merisotis and Phipps 70).

And so, for economic reasons or to bolster their academic reputations and improve their chances in a competitive academic market to attract better students, universities across America elect to require those students needing remediation to get it somewhere else.

As this shift of basic writing instruction to the community college grows, an alarming chasm develops that is becoming increasingly difficult to bridge. On one side, students deemed "not yet ready" or unable to write at a university level are siphoned into community colleges and technical colleges that are ill-equipped to teach basic writing as it should be taught, according to existing basic writing theory and research. On the other side, these same colleges are facing increasing numbers of basic writing students with faculties that, in many cases, have little if any pedagogical training in teaching basic writing[2]. After all, the resources and manpower of these universities are better suited for those ready for the rigor of academic discourse; basic writers, in the minds of many, are not now and may never be members of that elite.

What can close the chasm between what basic writers need and what they get? What are the ramifications of this shift of basic writing instruction to the community college, not only for the students involved but also for those called on to teach them?

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[2] A recent ad from Dallas County Community College District for a developmental writing instructor listed as the requirement for this position a Bachelor's degree in English (*Chronicle of Higher Education* 4/22/05).

Does this shift in basic writing instruction portend a move back to the "margins" both for basic writing instruction and basic writers themselves?

Background – A "Brief" Review of the Literature

The need for basic (or developmental) writing instruction first came to light in the late nineteenth century at such universities as Harvard and Yale, where an influx of students from a growing middle class revealed a problem for these prospective universities: a perceived inability on the part of these new students to express their thoughts in writing at a level that was expected by academics of that day. Martha Casazza, in "Who Are We and Where Did We Come From?," traces the history of developmental education (including basic writing instruction) to 1871, when Harvard, under the auspices of then president Charles Eliot, began to give examinations to incoming first-year students to determine their readiness for college-level classes (Cassaza). Courses were quickly added to the curriculum at these and other universities to prepare students with inferior previous academic training for the rigors of academic discourse. With the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, students from a broader range of social backgrounds were entering universities, and state universities sprang up across the country to accommodate these students. By the end of the 19th century, Harvard educators were decrying a "literacy crisis among freshmen" that "linked poor writing to a lack of clear thinking" and forced educators to spend more and more of their time teaching "the mere elements of the subject" (Casazza).

Most recently, the issue of basic writing resurfaced during the 1960s, when many universities across America adopted "open admissions" policies, giving access to higher education to thousands of students who previously were precluded from seeking a

university degree. Many of these students, like their predecessors at Harvard and Yale, were ill-equipped to write at an academic level that most universities required. Therefore, universities scrambled to start programs and create curricula that would instruct these students not only in academic discourse but also in basic grammar in an attempt to get them ready for the complexities of academic discourse.

Mina Shaughnessy's "Great" Expectations

As the problem of what to do with basic writers grew in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many researchers of composition practices and theories began to study these writers. Among the most notable of these researchers was Mina Shaughnessy, whose work in Errors and Expectations focused on the phenomenology of error in the writing of these underprepared students. Her research was based not only on her teaching at City University of New York (CUNY) but also on her work in that institution's learning resource center, where she saw first-hand that a concentration on correctness (in lower-order concerns such as punctuation, sentence structure, and syntax) was not producing better essays but, on the contrary, was producing more confused and frustrated writers (Shaughnessy 10). She was also among the first to see a connection between the basic writer and the culture from which he/she comes; the types of errors she saw in the writing of these students were not, in her estimation, strictly a reflection of the writer's lack of knowledge but were, in fact, the effects of cultural (and economic) constraints that the writer brought to the essay. As Mary Soliday points out in The Politics of Remediation, Shaughnessy also championed a cross-disciplinary and institutional understanding of how basic writing instruction, as it was then perceived and implemented, worked as an institutional tool to keep some students from pursuing a baccalaureate degree as well as

inspiring a closer look at so-called "traditional" students. Shaughnessy's call for a new focus on analyzing basic writing laid the foundation for decades of discussion on how best to approach the teaching of basic writers; it opened the way for a discussion not just of the writing but of the *writer*, a study of the cultural schemas upon which these writers drew when they wrote.

In "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence," Min-Zhan Lu takes Shaughnessy's <u>Errors and Expectations</u> to task for its underlying essentialist assumption that "leads to pedagogies which promote . . . a politics of linguistic innocence" – one that "preempts teachers' attention from the political dimensions of the linguistic choices students make in their writing" (57). Using Marxist and post-structural theories of language, Lu takes issue with Shaughnessy's work in light of what Lu considers its lack of closure. Rather than providing some definitive answer to the question of what basic writing is, Shaughnessy, in Lu's estimation, gives us only "tasks which point to the future – to what needs to be learned and done – rather than as providing closure to our pedagogical inquiry" (58). Lu also asserts that Shaughnessy makes no accommodation for the political and social forces that may be at work in requiring students to master a new discourse. While it is true that, at the time of Shaughnessy's work, social and economic factors were not considered in discussions of basic writers' difficulties, Lu still sees Shaughnessy's approach as foregrounding a formalistic, essentialist approach that privileges "attention to prefixes and suffixes," one that "only circumvents the students' attention to the potential change in their thinking and their relationship with home and school" (63), and one that views language as fixed and unaffected by forces or factors outside the student writer.

Despite Lu's call for a pedagogy that is more socially and politically conscious, much of the basic writing instruction taking place at community colleges seems transfixed in what Shaughnessy saw as a "formal" approach, one based strictly on rote grammar drills and an emphasis on sentence-level competence. Scholarship may have shown this approach to be counterproductive in addressing basic writers' needs, but that hasn't stopped some segments of basic writing instruction from continuing its practice.

Perl's Protocols and "Composing Processes"

Two years after the publication of Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations, Sondra Perl, in "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," reported on research she had conducted during the 1975-76 academic year at Eugenio Maria de Hostos College, part of the City University of New York system. Perl's article provided the type of quantifiable research that began to lend credence to basic writing as a legitimate area of academic scholarship and research. Perl's research protocol of having the students in the test group compose aloud resulted in a codification of writing behaviors and shed further light on the problematic practice of focusing solely on lower-order concerns which, Perl states, leads basic writers to conceive of writing as merely a "'cosmetic' process, where concern for correct form supersedes development of ideas" (Perl 436), a preoccupation that can shut down the idea-generative part of a writer's approach to an essay. To combat this perception, Perl advocates a pedagogy in which students are familiarized with the generative portion of the writing process, de-emphasizing lower-level ("cosmetic") concerns. While Perl's method of using these verbal protocols has been faulted by some as unreliable and possibly skewed by the subjects of the study, they still provide a glimpse into the thinking processes employed by "unskilled" college writers.

However, Anmarie Eves-Bowden, in "What Basic Writers Think About Writing," discovered that her students' processes were neither complex nor structured in any way, whether spoken aloud or internalized; in fact, most of the students in Eves-Bowden's study admitted that they had no idea what to say about an assigned topic, how to generate any ideas, or what revision entailed (Eves-Bowden 76-7). Eves-Bowden gathered her information about her students' writing processes through face-to-face interviews after drafts of writing assignments had been turned in, unlike Perl's oral protocols in which students dictated what they were thinking as they wrote, and Eves-Bowden's study results may be affected by a student's lapse in memory of what actually occurred during the student's writing process. However, whether the writing process is merely "cosmetic," as Perl found in her study, or not, most basic writing instruction based solely on lower-order concerns still has not proven effective in getting students to grasp the importance of higher-order, more global concerns, such as critical thinking and analysis skills, that are required in college-level writing.

And yet, basic writing instruction at the community college level continues to be grounded in lower-order matters such as sentence construction, parts of speech, and grammar, relying on computerized modules and exercise-laden textbooks (that are ultimately "teacher-proof") to reinforce a view of writing that is bound up in the types of rules and restrictions that frustrate many basic writers. I have seen this frustration first-hand in many of the basic writers that I have taught. These students have a very difficult time equating the exercises on where to properly place commas with the problems with comma placement in their own essays because the rules were taught completely divorced from the context of their own writing; they work on computerized modules filled with

disconnected phrases and sentences and then are unable to connect what they might have learned to similar problems in their own essays.

At Lamar State College-Orange, for example, one basic writing instructor lamented to me that her students were unable to move from basic sentence structure to the writing of full paragraphs. "They have been doing great on the exercises from the textbook," she said, "but when I ask them to write a paragraph on their own, they're stumped." This same lament was expressed by a developmental writing instructor at Tarrant County College; in both cases, these instructors were expecting students to be able to automatically see the connection between the rule, the sentence exercise, and their writing; and when that connection did not occur, these instructors were at a loss as to how to address the problem. Nothing in their pedagogy or previous education had prepared them for the possibility that this connection might not (and indeed did not) happen. As both Perl and Eves-Bowden point out, basic writers struggle both with the codified rules regulating grammar and punctuation and with the "process" of drafting and revision that we as instructors sometimes take for granted; and when the former is taught completely divorced from the latter, basic writers experience a level of frustration that often stifles their writing processes.

"Just the Facts": Bartholomae, Petrosky's Artifacts

Anthony Petrosky and David Bartholomae, in Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts (first published in 1986), also reflect on and theorize about the "underprepared" writer; however, their research deals with students attending the University of Pittsburgh, more specifically students enrolled in a particular course designed by Bartholomae and Petrosky to introduce these underprepared first-year college students to academic writing

and reading – not the kind of segregated "basic writing" course offered by so many community colleges today. Theirs was a credit-bearing course, and the texts used in this course included Maya Angelou's I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, Margaret Mead's Blackberry Winter and Coming Of Age In Samoa, along with a collection of essays written by the students in the class during the first half of the semester[3].

Their program, created at the behest of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, combined reading and writing pedagogy in an attempt to "push against" what they saw as two diverse, competing pedagogical practices: those that would "restore to students their 'natural' voices" and those that "deposit true knowledge in minds that are otherwise empty" (7) in order to work against these practices by introducing students not only to more challenging texts but also by introducing students to a level of autonomy in their writing they had previously not experienced. Their classes usually would begin with silence, they found, because students unfamiliar with academic discourse were grappling with "the language of the streets or the language of home or the language of the neighborhood . . . something in the margin, belonging neither here nor there and preventing their participation as speakers with place, privilege or authority" (4). Rather than giving students an "authorized translation" of a reading, teachers in Bartholomae's and Petrosky's course would "provide a method to enable students to see what they have said – to see and characterize the acts of reading and writing represented by their discourse" (7); rather than providing "the preliminary skills" often taught by conventional basic writing courses, their course was designed to provide "some groundwork that will enable students to begin later, perhaps after the basic writing

[3] In fact, much of the material used in this course later went into their textbook Ways of Reading, which is intended for more advanced students.

course . . . when, for the first time, they sit down with the responsibility of having something to say" (7). With this "groundwork" in critical approaches to what they've read and written, basic writers would have a less frustrating transition into the kinds of writing expected of them at the university level. As Bartholomae and Petrosky point out, "The purpose of the course is to bring forward the image of the reader and wrier represented in our students' textual performances (what some would take as their inevitable roles) so that they can imagine themselves as readers and writers" (8) and to "give students access to the language and methods of the academy" (9), roles and access that more traditionally based basic writing instruction did not provide.

However, it is this traditional approach that still predominates in basic writing instruction, especially that basic writing instruction taking place at two-year and community colleges[4]. In fact, in subsequent essays such as "The Tidy House" and "Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills," Bartholomae begins to call for dissolution of basic writing programs as usually taught in universities, seeing them as a perpetuation of the "prescribed skills" approach and of the kind of writing that would keep certain students excluded from the mainstream of the university.

Cognitivism vs. Socialization

As Shaughnessy, Perl, and Bartholomae and Petrosky were beginning their research into basic writing and basic writers, two other strands of basic writing research dealt with the genesis of the difficulty basic writers have when faced with the daunting prospect of writing academic discourse. In "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College," Patricia Bizzell elaborates on what she sees as three potential "clashes" that basic writers face in the college community: a "clash of dialects" (294), wherein basic

[4] See Chapters 3 and 4 for a more detailed description of the types of basic writing courses offered.

writers confront the "distance between their home dialects and Standard English, the preferred dialect in school"; a "clash of discourse forms" (295), wherein basic writers must navigate among the genres of academic writing within a conflict between surface features and generation of thought; and a clash in "cognitive dysfunction" (296), using William Perry's scale of cognitive function to show how basic writers are perceived as the least developed cognitively. However, the most important conflict in Bizzell's estimation is in the realm of world views: "the initial distance between [basic writers'] world views and the academic world view and the resistance caused by that distance" (297). The distance between the world views of community college students (usually students from lower socioeconomic strata, from minorities, and from families who have no previous experience in higher education) and those of university students (historically students from middle- to higher socioeconomic strata and from families with previous experience in higher education) adds even more dissonance and conflict. As Bizzell points out, "basic writers may feel that they are being asked to abandon their less prestigious, less socially powerful world views in favor of [the more powerful, more socially acceptable academic world view]" (299). If this is true for basic writers at a university, that pressure is much greater at the community college level; if Bizzell is correct in her assertion that basic writers are "the most alien in the college community" (294), that alienation is multiplied two- or three-fold for basic writers in the community college[5].

[5] It should be noted here that Perry's work, the "developmental scheme" for "intellectual and ethical development" in students (Bizzell 298), is ostensibly for those students in four-year American liberal arts colleges and was based on Perry's research at Harvard. While some aspects of this scheme may be applicable to community college students, since the typical Harvard student is socially, ethnically, and economically different from the typical community college student, any potential comparison should be approached cautiously.

Another voice in the cognition vs. culture debate is that of Kenneth Bruffee. In "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'," Bruffee states that college students need to be "reacculturated," need to "join the established knowledge communities of academic studies, business, and the professions" (649). In order to accomplish this, Bruffee believes, students need to work together – collaboratively:

> To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively – that is, we must learn to converse well. The first steps to learning to think better, therefore, are learning to converse better and learning to establish and maintain the sorts of social context, the sorts of community life, that fosters the sorts of conversations members of the community value. (640)

Much of Bruffee's earliest work was done while he was at City University of New York where, along with Shaughnessy, he dealt with an influx of underprepared student writers when CUNY instated its "open admissions" policies[6]. His research into collaborative learning has been applied to techniques used in basic writing instruction: having students work in groups to discuss what they've read and what they've written, having students work in groups with a tutor (usually in a writing center atmosphere) to discuss difficulties they may be having with a particular writing assignment. His belief that teachers of writing should "contrive to ensure that students' conversations about what they read and write is similar in many ways as possible to the way we should like them eventually to read and write" can be seen as contradictory to Bizzell's assertion that, in attempting to adopt these favored discourse forms, "basic writers may begin to feel that their problem

[6] While the phrase "open admissions" has come to represent a particular time period, the actual "Open Admissions" program began in New York City in the early 1960s, when then-Mayor John Lindsay relaxed admission criteria for the City University of New York (CUNY) and its component community colleges by promising admission to any student who graduated from a New York City high school.

really is that they're too dumb for college, or that they just can't think the way the teacher wants" (296), but they are both in agreement that these discourse forms need to be taught to students (including basic writing students) explicitly.

Here again it should be noted that both Bizzell and Bruffee were writing about basic students in a college (read "university") setting. If this dissonance exists at the university level, it exists to a much greater degree at the community college level, where these writers face the additional stigma of being economically and/or socially incapable of a university education or of being deemed "not ready" or "incapable" of university-level work.

The Liberatory Front: Shor's "Apartheid"

Other studies in basic writing followed in the 1980s, much if not all conducted at larger four-year institutions. Ira Shor, a professor at City University of New York, has written about the teaching of basic writing as a "liberatory" exercise, getting students to examine and rethink the bases of power and privilege. Shor's approach is influenced by his work with and friendship with Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, a collaboration that has resulted in numerous books and articles. In "What Is The 'Dialogic Method' Of Teaching?" (published in the *Journal of Education* in 1987), Shor addresses the "traditional" approach found in many basic writing classrooms:

> This is "cost-effective" education, minimum personal contact between professors and students. Professor-contact is reserved for graduate students, or undergraduate majors, or honors classes, or for students at the most costly universities, where money is invested in small classes for the elite . . . For the rest, there are large college classes mixed with recitation

sections staffed by poorly-paid instructors, or large classes in underfunded public schools. (12)

Shor sees liberatory pedagogy as that which, as he described in a published interview with Nancy Buffington and Clyde Moneyhun ("A Conversation with Gerald Graff and Ira Shor"), "questions the status quo" (Buffington and Moneyhun). Unfortunately, for many basic writers, the "status quo" involves two very segregated academic worlds, and these struggling writers find themselves constantly on the outside looking in.

"In "Basic Writing: Our Apartheid," Shor decries the segregation inherent in basic writing courses, calling for a more inclusionary approach that would mainstream basic writers in regular composition courses. Separating basic writers from regular composition students only reifies, in Shor's mind, the social and economic barriers that keep many students from achieving success at the university level. Mainstreaming these basic writers by including them in regular composition courses would not only bring them into contact with the power structures that want to keep them separate but would also bring regular composition students into contact with students whose world views are much different from their own or from the world view deemed acceptable by the academy.

In the absence of such a mainstreamed approach, the alternative many universities would opt for, Shor felt, would be to "outsource" the teaching of basic writing to community colleges and professional "colleges" such as DeVry, Sylvan, and the like. In "Errors and Economics: Inequality Breeds Remediation," Shor cites Burton Clark's essay, "The Cooling-Out Function in Higher Education," and shows how, should basic writing be shifted to community colleges, this "cooling-out function" would continue the trend toward "downwardly managing student goals through testing, counseling, and courses"

(36), diverting non-elite students away from upwardly mobile liberal arts colleges and universities – "cooling out" these students' aspirations for social and economic advancement and tracking them into trades and occupations more suited for their class and culture (37).

Shor's prediction is somewhat validated in an article by Tonya Harris in the January 6, 2004, edition of *Community College Times*. Entitled "Report: More Remedial Study Done at 2-Year Colleges," Harris reports on a 2000 study conducted by the National Center of Education Statistics that found that "At two-year public colleges, 42 percent of freshmen were found to have enrolled in at least one remedial course in fall 2000, compared with 20 percent of freshmen at four-year public institutions," an increase of 7 percent in five years (Harris). While this increase cannot totally be attributed to universities dismantling their basic writing programs in favor of requiring it at community colleges, as more and more universities follow this trend, the percentage of students enrolled in remedial courses at community colleges can only grow. Further support can be found in a recent study, reported in the February 2, 2005 edition of *USA Today*. In an article entitled "Reality weighs down dreams of college," Greg Toppo and Anthony DeBarros state that, based on 2002 census data, only 6 percent of students 18-24 years of age from families making below $35,377 are likely to earn a bachelor's degree, and only 12.7 percent of those from families making $35,377-$61,244 are likely to do so (Toppo and DeBarros). It is no coincidence that these two demographic groups produce the majority of students most likely to attend a community college, many of whom, according to the above-mentioned study by the National Center of Education statistics, require basic writing instruction.

The Problem

The shift in basic writing instruction has begun; in California, Texas, and several other states across the country, state-funded university systems are doing away with their basic writing programs, and more states are following suit. In some states, legislatures are considering or adopting legislation that limits or curtails the amount of financial aid students who require remediation can receive, even going so far as to mandate that some forms of financial aid (federal grants, federal students loans, etc.) cannot be applied to tuition for remedial courses[7]. Financially strapped community colleges, some of whom also rely on state funding, are scrambling to adjust to sometimes drastically reduced budgets by hiring adjuncts (part-time instructors) or instructors having minimal experience in teaching basic writing or in basic writing pedagogy and practice in an effort to cut costs; and many of these same colleges are putting as many students in a section as possible in order to maximize cost efficiency.

In the face of these challenges, curricular approaches to basic writing, especially at the community college level, take on a new tone. In order to most efficiently deal with growing class enrollments, and faced with department- or college-dictated syllabi and course objectives, many of these instructors aren't given the luxury of adopting an inclusionary or more mainstream approach to the teaching of basic writing, as Shor suggests, nor are they able to provide the introduction to academic discourse that Bartholomae recommends; due to the presence of standardized tests and state-mandated performance levels, basic writing – or "developmental education," as it is often called – is a harsh but inescapable fact of academic life at a growing number of community colleges

[7] See Chapter 3 for a more detailed description of these state mandates and the effects they have on basic writing instruction.

across America, not only for students but for teachers as well. Many basic writing teachers—some trained in basic writing pedagogy, some not—still are forced by these tests and by mandated curricula to spend their classroom time teaching "the basics"—the sentence, the paragraph, the five-paragraph essay—in order to prepare students to achieve performance levels that will allow them to move on to credit courses. With universities either requiring students to take developmental courses at nearby community colleges or refusing them admittance outright, community colleges are having to take up the slack.

Unfortunately, however, the trend in research concerning composition instruction at community colleges still focuses mainly on mainstream courses or regular, credit-bearing courses. Recent articles in *Teaching English at the Two-Year College (TETYC)*, for example, track the progress of former two-year college students as they transferred to universities—students who had taken regular composition courses, not those who had taken courses in basic writing. Almost exclusively, articles found in *TETYC* deal more with the teaching of regular composition courses or literature courses, with a rare mention of basic writing instruction that reflects not research but the type of "lore" mentioned by Stephen North in The Making of Knowledge in Composition. A review of the articles published in *TETYC* in 2003-04 (academic year) shows no articles dealing with the growing numbers of basic writers enrolling in remedial classes at the two-year college level. Not one.

In fact, in the May 2004 issue of *TETYC*, Marilyn Valentino reports on the proposed "Guidelines for the Academic Preparation of Two-Year College English Faculty," submitted by the Teacher-Scholar Initiative (a subcommittee of the Two-Year College Association). In it, the committee recommends that potential two-year college

faculty have master's degree work in such areas as "reading, literary theory, research methods, theories of learning and literacy for adult learners. Suggested electives are bilingual/bicultural education, ESL, technology in the classroom, and classroom assessment." Under "Further Training and Development," the guidelines recommend "higher education politics, issues of language policy, teaching non-traditional students, students with disabilities, ethnically diverse students, course development and evaluation, teacher/self-evaluation, and assessment" (438). While some of these topics may be applicable to basic writing instruction, and despite the growing numbers of students in community colleges who are enrolled (or are enrolling) in developmental classes (including basic writing), there is not one mention of specific training in or a familiarity with basic writing pedagogy or theory. Not one.

Perhaps a telling statistic reveals the interest within the composition community regarding the growing shift in basic writing instruction to community colleges: the preliminary conference bulletin for the CCCC meeting in San Antonio, Texas, in March of 2004 lists 553 session titles (not counting workshops), covering a wide variety of topics dealing with the teaching of composition; out of those 553, only five clearly identify basic writing as their theme, and none of those five mentions the teaching of basic writing at the two-year/community college level. Not one. Ironically, the theme for the conference was "Making Composition Matter: Students, Citizens, Institutions, Advocacy."[8] Judging by the representation of issues dealing with basic writing in general and its instruction at community colleges in particular, the current trend in outsourcing

[8] Subsequent CCCC meetings have had a few more workshops and/or sessions dealing with basic writing instruction; however, the issue of the impact of basic writing instruction being shifted to community colleges still remains underrepresented.

basic writing instruction may not matter to many composition professionals. Our research and our voices may be mainstreamed, but our students are not[9].

Another part of the problem inherent in this shift of basic writing instruction to the community college is the rhetoric found in much of the scholarship forming the basis of basic writing pedagogy and theory. In some cases, it is clear that the subjects studied were at four-year, baccalaureate-granting universities (Errors and Expectations; Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts, etc.). In other cases, one can assume from biographical information about the author whether or not he/she is writing from a four-year or two-year perspective. Additionally, throughout the corpus of basic writing scholarship, the words "college" and "university," when used in general terms, are used almost interchangeably as though the reader should infer that basic writing instruction is the same at both levels. Tragically, this is not the case in modern basic writing instruction.

What makes this shift additionally problematic lies in the stigma that attaches itself not only to basic writing but also to attendance at a community college. Basic writers are told, tacitly, by their very placement in a basic writing course that they are "not yet ready," somehow "not worthy" of a place at a university; this stigma is compounded by the perception of community colleges as "second-rate" or indicative of studies not comparable to or as rigorous as those found at a university. These students are therefore constructed as "the other" twice over: the "otherness" of basic writing and the "otherness" of attending a junior/community college.

In *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, Susan Miller quotes Erving Goffman, a sociologist whose work deals with individuals, for whatever reason, who are

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[9] The 2007 CCCC has several sessions and workshops devoted to basic writing instruction; however, a review of the titles of these sessions and workshops does not reveal any devoted to its instruction at the community college level.

"stigmatized" by a larger, general population. According to Erving Goffman, when an individual has been stigmatized, certain reactions follow: "they attempt to correct the flaw; they use the stigma for 'secondary gains,' such as an excuse for failures in other areas; they see the stigma as a disguised blessing; they reassess the value of being 'normal'; they avoid 'normals' [those they perceive as having no stigma]; and they develop anxieties, hostilities, suspicions, and depression" (qtd. in Miller 130). Is it any wonder, then, when students, who have been told either explicitly or implicitly that they are not "university material" by requiring them to take developmental courses at a two-year or community college, have problems overcoming this stigma? As Burton Clark points out, "Students who pursue ends for which a college education is required but who have little academic ability gain admission into colleges only to encounter standards of performance they cannot meet . . . for large numbers failure is inevitable and *structured*" (571). While some colleges and universities rely on "unequivocal dismissal" or a "hard" response in order to protect institutional reputations, others rely on a "soft" response: "The major form of the soft response is not found in the four-year college or university, however, but in the college that specializes in handling students who will soon be leaving – typically, the two-year public junior college" (571-2).

One is hard-pressed to find any recent work in the area of basic writing that is based on research conducted at the community college level. With the amount of basic writing instruction being conducted at the community college level increasing each year, and in light of the widening demographic differences between students that attend a community college versus a four-year university, the gap between basic writing scholarship and basic writing instruction grows ever wider. Few community colleges

have the financial resources or faculty to bridge this gap, and without that bridge, many basic writers now being taught at community colleges will either never make the transition to a four-year university or will find that transition so difficult that they drop out. As Deborah Mutnik points out in Writing in an Alien World: Basic Writing and the Struggle for Equality in Higher Education, "if students reach college without strong literacy skills, then it is the responsibility of universities to reallocate sources and provide the best possible instruction and support services" (46). Nowhere is this more evident – and more needed – than in basic writing instruction at the community college level.

Research Questions

Based on the preceding, then, the following research questions will guide my work:

- What is the current status of basic writing instruction at community colleges? What rationale is currently given for the shift in basic writing instruction to community colleges, and what segments of higher education are involved in this decision?
  - What aspects of the mission of community colleges in particular put them in a position to benefit from this shift? Who suffers because of this shift?
  - Is the teaching of basic writing at the community college level preparing students for further studies at the university level, or is it, as Shor claims, an instrument within academia that denies access to students from certain segments of society?

    - What aspects of assessment and testing impact who is placed into a basic writing course (and at what level) at the community college?
- How does the history of the community college in America point out strategies and philosophies that contribute to the social and educational marginalization of basic writers?
    - Why were community colleges started?
    - Were these first community colleges meant to serve as a "democratizing" agent in higher education or as a gatekeeper, protecting elite, higher-echelon universities from students deemed underprepared for the rigors of academia?
    - How has the mission and scope of the community college changed in ways that make the shift in basic writing instruction problematic for those students with aspirations beyond the associate's degree?
- How is basic writing taught at the community college level?
    - What curriculum is taught? What pedagogical approach is used?
    - What is the institutional attitude toward basic writers specifically and the teaching of basic writing generally?
    - What institutional conditions affect basic writing instruction (placement, standardized tests, etc.)?
    - Who teaches basic writing at community colleges, and what training in basic writing scholarship and pedagogy do these instructors have, if any?

- What are the consequences (for basic writers, basic writing, community colleges, and the field of composition) of shifting responsibility for basic writing to the community college?
    - Considering the growing trend of community colleges to be more business-, customer-, and worker training-oriented, is it time to rethink our approach to basic writing at this level? Do these orientations make the teaching of basic writing more problematic, or do they open vistas for experimentation with new approaches that better fit these orientations?

Method of Research

My dissertation will look at these foundational works in the area of basic writing, works that have shaped the discipline's view of basic writing instruction, and contrast these to the way basic writing is actually taught at the two-year or community college level. Having been trained at a four-year university in basic writing pedagogy and theory, and having then taught basic writing at a community college, I know first-hand the disparity between what graduate students are being taught about basic writing and how it is being conducted at community colleges. This research will be conducted by interviewing basic writing instructors and administrators at three specific community colleges -- Tyler Junior College, Kilgore College, and Trinity Valley Community College -- determining how they approach basic writing and their views regarding basic writing's role at the community college. These three community colleges are all in Texas, a state in which basic writing instruction is mandated for any student who has not performed at an acceptable level on the writing portion of the THEA (Texas Higher Education Aptitude)

test, formerly known as the TASP (Texas Academic Skills Proficiency) test. I will also be looking at syllabi for basic writing courses at these colleges to ascertain their classroom approach to the teaching of basic writing.

As part of my research, I was given the opportunity to design and inaugurate a basic writing (and reading) course where one has never existed before: at the University of Texas-Tyler. Previously, administrators saw no need for a basic writing program, since Tyler Junior College offered developmental classes for those students requiring them, and offering developmental classes at the university would be seen as "encroaching" on "their territory," according to UT-Tyler Provost Rick Osburn. However, in a rather bold move, the president and provost of UT-Tyler gave their approval for a "trial," of sorts – one section of a hybrid basic reading/basic writing course to be taught in the fall semester, 2005. I was asked not only to teach this section but also to design the course; and this gave me the chance to investigate not only institutional expectations for such a course but also the type of "outcomes" expected by the undergraduate curriculum committee, and the impact this class may have on enrollment and retention at UT-Tyler. I collected data[10] both from students enrolled in the basic writing and reading course who needed only remediation for writing and from students enrolled in the course who needed remediation only for reading, and, if applicable, rates of non-completion of the course or dropping out entirely.

[10] This data will be in the form of interview responses and in a review of writing assignments from random students in the basic writing and reading course at University of Texas-Tyler, looking at these students' views regarding writing (specifically the kind of writing they are expected to do at the college level) and how well they feel their class has prepared them for this level of discourse.

Chapter-by-chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 of my dissertation will introduce the topic of basic writing instruction at the community college level and give a detailed background of the rise of basic writing research as well as introducing the works that form the foundation of basic writing theory, focusing on three particular authors: Mina Shaughnessy, David Bartholomae, and Mike Rose.

Chapter 2 of my dissertation will focus on the history of community colleges in America and how that history – and the individuals involved in it – helped shape the mission of and expectations for this uniquely American facet of higher education. In light of the growing trend to relegate basic writing instruction to these community colleges, it is important to view how this shift in basic writing instruction may also be indicative of the history, purpose, and mission of community colleges.

Chapter 3 of my dissertation will look specifically at how basic writing is taught at the community college level: the state and institutional mandates and "missions" that shape that instruction, how faculty who teach basic writing deal with those mandates, how the stigma attached to basic writing is exacerbated at the community college level, and how the training in basic writing instruction possessed by those currently teaching basic writing at the two-year level (or lack thereof) is exhibited in classroom practice and textbook selection. Specifically, this chapter will outline the current practices in basic writing instruction at Tyler Junior College as an example of the most prevalent trends in contemporary basic writing instruction at community colleges.

Chapter 4 of my dissertation will be a study of the inception of basic writing instruction at the University of Texas-Tyler, the pedagogical and theoretical foundation

for it, the rationale behind the course, the planning and design of the course, the impact it had not only on students but also on the level of resources available for basic writers, and its subsequent successes or failures. Specifically, I will be looking at institutional issues inherent in the decision of whether or not to offer basic writing instruction at a four-year university, the resulting disconnect between implementing the class and the university's mission, which could result in the possible discontinuation of the course and the continued reliance upon TJC for basic writing instruction, and how all of these facets play out in the lives and writing of the course's first basic writing students.

Chapter 5, the conclusion of my dissertation, will look at the need for research into the teaching of basic writing at the community college level and how the trend toward making basic writing instruction strictly an enterprise of the community college necessitates new research and new ways of thinking regarding how best to accomplish this.

CHAPTER ONE

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: THE SITE (AND OVERSIGHT) OF BASIC WRITING INSTRUCTION

The need for basic (or developmental) writing instruction first came to light in the nineteenth century at such universities as Harvard and Yale, where an influx of students from a growing middle class revealed a problem for these prospective universities: a perceived inability on the part of these new students to express their thoughts in writing at a level that was expected by academics of that day. Administrators and faculty at Harvard in the late nineteenth century found, to their dismay, that their students were incapable of writing at a level previously expected of entering freshmen. Courses were implemented that would make up for this discrepancy, courses that focused on grammar, punctuation, and usage – foci that have survived as the mainstays of much of basic writing instruction today.

Martha Casazza, in "Who Are We and Where Did We Come From?," traces the history of developmental education (including basic writing instruction) to 1871, when Harvard, under the auspices of then president Charles Eliot, began to give examinations to incoming first-year students to determine their readiness for college-level classes (Casazza). Courses were quickly added to the curriculum at these and other universities to prepare students with inferior previous academic training for the rigors of academic discourse, students who, until 1862, had previously never envisioned the possibility of a college education or degree. However, with the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 (which established land-grant colleges and universities), students from a broader range of social backgrounds were entering universities, and state universities sprang up across the country to accommodate these students. By the end of the nineteenth century, Harvard

educators were decrying a "literacy crisis among freshmen" that "linked poor writing to a lack of clear thinking" and forced educators to spend more and more of their time teaching "the mere elements of the subject" (Casazza).

More recently, the issue of basic writing instruction resurfaced during the late 1960s and early 1970s when many universities across America adopted "open admissions" policies, giving access to higher education to thousands of students – many who were from lower socioeconomic strata and/or were children of immigrants – who previously were precluded from seeking a baccalaureate degree. Many of these students, like their predecessors at Harvard and Yale, were ill-equipped to write at an academic level required by the universities in which they were enrolling. Administrators and faculty at these universities, like their predecessors at Harvard and Yale, scrambled to start programs and create curricula that would instruct these students not only in academic discourse but also in basic grammar in an attempt to get them ready for the complexities of academic discourse. Out of those programs came a more critical investigation of just who basic writers were and just what constituted basic writing[11]

Since the late 1990s, however, many universities have been rethinking the viability of basic writing instruction (and developmental education as a whole) on their campuses. Renny Christopher, in "The Haves and Have-Nots of Higher Education: The State of Higher Education in California," points to California's budget crises and concomitant cutbacks in state funding of higher education as one of the major reasons for moving remedial or developmental education to the state's community colleges. "The

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[11] See Sondra Perl's "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers" (1979); Andrea Lunsford's "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer" (1979) and "Politics and Practices in Basic Writing" (1987); Lynn Quitman Troyka's "Classical Rhetoric and the Basic Writer" (1984) and "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980s" (1982); Patricia Bizzell's "Literacy in Culture and Cognition" (1987); and Karen Greenberg's "Research on Basic Writers: Theoretical and Methodological Issues" (1987) (in *Sourcebook*).

[state's] elite system, the University of California, has also faced budget cuts, and has instituted measures which affect access, including 'redirecting' freshmen to the community colleges . . . at least one campus (Santa Cruz) has cut the budget for funding tutors for students who don't pass the subject A exam (the basic writing exam) and will charge those students a tutoring fee" (Christopher 16). But there may be more than just budgetary constraints at work in this move to shift or cut back basic writing instruction. Jamie P. Merisotis and Ronald A. Phipps point out in their article, "Remedial Education in Colleges and Universities: What's Really Going On?," that some universities find it in their best interest not to acknowledge the presence of students who require remediation. "[A]n institution's reputation is the enrollment rates of students with the highest GPAs, the top test scores, and the strongest recommendations," they state, and they go on to quote a paper presented in 1998 to the American Council on Education by Alexander. Astin, professor of higher education and organizational change at the University of California-Los Angeles:

> It goes without saying that the underprepared student is a kind of pariah in American higher education, and some of the reasons are obvious: since more of us believe that the excellence of our departments and of our institutions depends on enrolling the very best-prepared students that we can, to admit underprepared students would pose a real threat to our excellence. (qtd. in Merisotis and Phipps 70).

And so, for economic reasons or to bolster their academic reputations and improve their chances in a competitive academic market to attract better students, universities across America elect to require that those students who need remediation get it somewhere else.

That "somewhere else," increasingly, is the community college. Begun in the early 20th century as a way to handle growing undergraduate enrollments at four-year universities, community colleges – almost from their inception – have offered some form of remedial education in the form of classes dealing with the "basics" of reading, writing, and mathematics[12]; therefore, the existence of basic writing instruction at the community college level is not new. However, that existence, coupled with the growing trend of universities relegating basic writing instruction to local community colleges, often masks the real problem: how is basic writing being taught? Is that instruction effective? And how does that instruction reflect our deep, often unspoken views of writing in general? Despite decades of research to the contrary, much of basic writing instruction today still centers itself in grammatical correctness and a concentration on error[13]. This problem is exacerbated when one realizes that, more and more, basic writing instruction is going on not in the milieu of the four-year university, where much of the early scholarship in basic writing instruction was conducted, but in the pragmatic atmosphere of the community college.

But much of what makes community colleges what they are flies in the face of our stated goals for basic writing instruction (see Bartholomae and Petrosky; Bartholomae's "Teaching Basic Writing" and "Tidy House"; Horner and Lu; Mutnick; Perl; Rose's "The Language of Exclusion"; Shaughnessy; and Soliday's "From the Margins to the Mainstream"). In today's educational marketplace, community colleges serve both as a place where students can accrue credits to be transferred to a four-year university and where students can receive training and certification in a variety of trades. More and

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[12] For a more detailed history of the community college and its mission, see Chapter 2.
[13] See Rei Noguchi's *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities* and Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace's *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction: Past, Present, and Future*.

more community colleges are focusing on the latter, providing a conduit through which students who may be perceived as incapable of or not yet ready for university-level work can be channeled into blue-collar, trade-related jobs (see Shor's "Errors and Economics" and Clark's "Cooling-Out Function"). With a shift in basic writing instruction to community colleges, many universities may be, in effect, marginalizing both the basic writer and the basic writing courses needed for the basic writer to make a smooth transition into academic writing.

Andrea Lunsford, in "Policies and Practices in Basic Writing," charts the development of the courses and programs designed to deal with these students at universities across America. "Whatever the varying trends in remedial English courses," she writes, "one element has held steady: the refusal of 'underprepared' students to disappear" (250). This persistence has forced scholars and researchers in the field of composition and literacy studies to rethink and re-envision what such basic writing courses should teach – and what such courses reveal about how we view basic writers:

> [M]ost writers on this new field of literacy studies agree that questions of literacy can never be separated from questions of economic, social and political power. Nor can questions of basic writing. For this reason, basic writing teachers and administrators find themselves, whether they like it or not, in the forefront of a debate over literacy definitions and over access to higher education, a debate that carries enormous consequences for our students. Put more bluntly, we are faced with the question of whether higher education will become more and more elitist, the gap between the

> haves and the have-nots will grow wider and wider, and the definition of literacy will remain narrow and essentially elitist. (253)

Lunsford wrote this in 1987, and, in light of this recent shift for basic writing instruction from the university to the community college, the question she posits is even more divisive today, for while basic writing scholars consistently hold that access to higher education (specifically a university education) should not be determined by one's classification as a "basic writer," college and university administrators as well as state and local lawmakers are increasingly taking a hard line when it comes to students who are "underprepared." As Christopher points out, California's budget cuts have seriously impacted access for thousands – if not millions – of that state's students (18). Similarly, as Ting Man Tsao writes in his article "Open Admissions, Controversies, and CUNY: Digging Into Social History Through a First-Year Composition Course" (published in 2005), new policies governing who gets into (and out of) remedial classes has "in effect eradicated its three-decade-old 'open admissions' policy" and "increased roadblocks on the education path from a two-year college to a bachelor's program within CUNY" (469) – the same university where much of the modern discussion regarding basic writing began with Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*.

City University of New York: *Errors, Expectations*, and Exclusion

In the 1960s, the City University of New York (CUNY) implemented an "open admissions" policy designed to ensure that all high school graduates within its jurisdiction would be enrolled at CUNY by 1975 (Tsao 473). The plan itself was finally implemented in 1970, and thousands of students from New York City and its neighboring boroughs enrolled; however, this sudden influx of students also meant a sharp increase in the

number of students arriving at college without the reading and writing skills required for CUNY's credit-bearing courses. Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* was born out of her work with these types of students at City College, a division of the City University of New York, who were enrolled in the SEEK Program, "a program for poverty-area youth which preceded Open Admissions at City College" (vii). In the spring of 1970, City University of New York adopted a plan by which any student with a high school diploma would be guaranteed admission in one of the university's eighteen tuition-free colleges. This plan led to a dramatic influx of students who had previously been denied admission due to their failure to meet admission standards in areas such as writing competence; however, as thousands of underprepared students seized this new opportunity for higher education, the mindset of teachers and college administrators had not changed: "this venture into mass education usually began abruptly, amidst the misgivings of administrators, who had to guess in the dark about the sorts of programs they ought to plan for the students they had never met, and the reluctancies of teachers, some of whom had already decided that the new students were ineducable" (1).

Shaughnessy's work with these students, while not the first scholarship published on basic writing or the basic writer, revealed what many teachers and administrators were reluctant to acknowledge: that there was a logic in the syntactical and grammatical mistakes found in these students' writings, a logic pitted against society's dominant code of literacy. In attempting to adopt this dominant code, basic writers – many of whom, Shaughnessy found, had written little in their secondary educational experiences – were imposing the competencies of speech (with which these students were familiar) upon writing. "The beginning writer," Shaughnessy notes, "does not know how writers behave.

Unaware of the ways in which writing is different from speaking, he imposes the conditions of speech upon writing" and "tend[s] to think that the point in writing is to get everything right the first time and that the need to change things is a mark of the amateur" (79).

A contemporary critic of Shaughnessy's research was John Rouse, who, in a September 1979 article in *College English*, states that Shaughnessy's biggest error in her study was a failure to take into consideration "the overriding need to socialize these young people in a manner politically acceptable" (1). The errors Shaughnessy found in her students' work, Rouse says, can be traced back to the actual writing assignments these students faced.

> In this program young people are not asked to write about matters that engage them deeply, that draw on their experience and knowledge of life, they are asked to write about "trends in kidnapping" or "City X and the tree crisis." No wonder they seem inarticulate or unthinking. (2)

According to Rouse, this disjuncture between what these students are supposed to write about and what they actually know causes an increased anxiety and desperation that manifests itself in confusion about what grammar they may know, and their casting about for something to say results in errors that further exacerbate that anxiety. Shaughnessy's focus on errors in traditional grammar, Rouse states, belies "a training in amorality so useful to authority everywhere" (2), that instruction based solely on the rules of traditional grammar retains a useful disciplinary value. "It helps train young people to be concerned with the rules laid down by authority, even when those rules do not fit the situation.

Language training is always behavior training" (3). As Ira Shor has pointed out[14], basic writing instruction is a site within higher education where "academic culture marginalizes student culture, keeping subordinate groups in their place" ("Errors and Economics" 32).

Rouse also traces the difficulties Shaughnessy's students were having with their writing to the students' reliance on restricted speech codes rather than the elaborated speech codes required by academic discourse. Restricted speech codes, Rouse states, rely on context to give statements meaning, "a language in which little need be made explicit because so much is understood" (Rouse 4). These restricted speech codes are common in familial or cultural settings where shared common experiences lend themselves to a sort of verbal shorthand, an abbreviated, often "slang" way of communicating, whether in writing or in speaking. However, when a student who is versant in these restricted speech codes faces a writing task in college, relying on context for meaning, relying on that verbal shorthand, does not work; "a child who has only that code is at a disadvantage in school, where the whole educational enterprise is for more explicitness and for the mind that takes nothing for granted" (4). This has a direct bearing on basic writing instruction because students from upper middle-class or lower upper-class families and communities (and school districts) may be more versant with the elaborated speech codes required at the college or university level, but students from lower economic or social echelons – the strata from which most basic writers come – are not and thus have their writing judged as deficient or unsatisfactory. Rouse states that Shaughnessy's concern, instead of strictly with the rules and patterns of written expression, should have been focused on social interaction "and the habits of mind and speech it produces" in order to determine the true cause of these basic writers' difficulties (6).

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[14] See "Errors and Economics" and "Our Apartheid."

While Rouse and others have come to view Shaughnessy's work as propagating an essentialist view of language (see "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence" by Min-Zhan Lu), it is important to note here that her description of how basic writers view the act of writing is still in evidence today, both among basic writers and among some basic writing teachers. The notion that good writing must begin with a mastery of syntax, grammar, and sentence structure imbues many approaches to basic writing, at both the community college and university level, and is still evidenced in the mindset of many basic writers. Shaughnessy notes, "For [the basic writer], error is more than a mishap; it is a barrier that keeps him not only from writing something in formal English but from having something to write" (11). This barrier manifests itself first, for many students, during placement tests which ultimately determine whether a student is in need of remediation or not. In CUNY's case, that test is the CUNY/ACT writing competency test. Aaron Barlow, an adjunct instructor at the New York City College of Technology (part of the CUNY system), points out in "Leading Writers, Teaching Tests":

> Most of my students . . . need to learn to be students, to negotiate between informal and formal language, and to tailor their arguments to academic demands. They make it abundantly clear, though, that they are not willing to work towards these ends unless it is apparent to them that they are also progressing toward success on the CUNY/ACT exam.
>
> Though it may be unintentional, the test has become a barrier that students must find a way over, not a means of forwarding student learning. In effect, as Ira Shor (in another context) points out, this test, like most

> "writing instruction has in fact been working from the top down to protect and reproduce inequality but not from the bottom up to develop democracy and to level disparities"[.] (Barlow)

Barlow states that the CUNY/ACT writing competency test is scored on a six-point scale (with a score of 6 being the highest); the delineating feature between an essay that is given a passing grade and an essay that is given a failing grade is "control of the language," i.e., mastery of mechanical conventions: "If I don't address the specifics of the exam over the semester, my students will fail, no matter how much they have improved as writers. Yet, as a Certified Reader of the CUNY/ACT exam, I know that passing CUNY/ACT essays are not often examples of the effective communication I want my students to aspire to" (Barlow). Teaching "to the test" means, for many basic writing instructors, concentrating more on mechanical (or lower-level) aspects of writing; this concentration on mechanical correctness is reflected in textbooks aimed at basic writing classes[15]. As long as basic writing instruction centers on the exclusion of error above all else, this mindset is not likely to change, essentially silencing basic writers in the process. As long as basic writing instruction only adds to students' frustrated silence, it will remain a tool used by colleges and universities to exclude these students from the possibilities that could be afforded them through higher education.

In the past decade, this exclusion has taken a sadly ironic turn. In "Remediation Phase-Out at CUNY: The 'Equity versus Excellence' Controversy," Barbara Gleason reports on the decision by CUNY's Board of Trustees, first in May of 1998 and then again in January of 1999, for a "remediation phase-out," effectively eliminating remedial

[15] See Robert Connors' "Basic Writing Textbooks: History and Current Avatars," Lewis Meyers' "Texts and Teaching: Basic Writing," and Patrick Bruch and Thomas Reynolds' "Critical Literacy and Basic Writing Textbooks: Teaching Toward a More Just Literacy."

courses from degree programs at all eleven of CUNY's four-year colleges. These votes came after a report issued by then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's Task Force on CUNY that continued remedial course offerings would severely curtail academic standards at City University. After January, 2001, any student applying for admission to one of these colleges must pass three Freshman Skills Assessment Tests before being granted admission to a senior college's bachelor's degree program (488). Remediation would be offered solely by its two-year, community college constituents.

These new restrictions, Gleason found, impacted the same kinds of students who were the basis of Shaughnessy's work. This impact was felt in two major areas. First, a student's future educational attainment, earnings, and professional opportunities could be influenced by whether that student attended a community college rather than a four-year institution; second, if a student had difficulty in passing the basic skills tests, progress through the college's curriculum would be severely hindered, which would eventually limit that student's ability to maintain the requisite number of credit hours per semester to maintain financial aid (490). In essence, the longer a student took to pass the required skills tests, the further behind the student became and less likely to proceed to a bachelor's degree program at a senior college; and since the majority of these students relied heavily on financial aid to be able to attend college at all, a prolonged sojourn through one remedial, no-credit class after another would eventually make it impossible for students needing financial aid to get any. It must be noted here that CUNY's faculty and staff union, the Professional Staff Congress/City University of New York, unanimously passed resolutions opposing the Board's actions and the findings of the mayor's task force, citing that any curtailment of remedial courses at CUNY would

"negatively affect open admissions and the long-established mission of CUNY" (490-1). Despite this opposition, however, in late 1999 CUNY did abolish its remedial programs (Tsao 469)[16].

In "Basic Writing in Mainstream Media," a chapter in their longer work entitled *Basic Writing as a Political Act: Public Conversations About Writing and Literacies,* Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington trace the media coverage of the fight over – and *for* – remedial studies at CUNY that pre- and post-dated the task force findings and the Board of Trustees' vote. Throughout this coverage, they note, "the iconic student figure enters as an aggregate character. The 'Mayor's Task Force' story published [in the *New York Times*] on June 6 [1999] refers to 'the flood of poorly educated high school graduates and . . . immigrants who speak little or no English' attending CUNY colleges," and this iconic generalization was further emphasized by a graphic that accompanied the story, entitled "Unprepared to Start, or to Finish" (69-70). This graphic and the story in which it appeared "suggest that basic writing students – included in the general description of those requiring 'remedial' education – cannot use this system to advance their situations and participate in the dominant culture;" and based on this published perception of students Shaughnessy once called "underprepared," CUNY's Board of Trustees decided that no further funding at the senior college level would be expended to help them (72).

Where Shaughnessy's work with basic writers began in an effort to afford them the chance to glean the benefits of a university education, basic writing and basic writers

[16] Currently, students enrolling at CUNY must demonstrate competence in English and math through national, state, or CUNY-sanctioned placement tests; those students who have accrued 45 credits must take and pass the CUNY Proficiency Exam in order to graduate with an associate's degree <u>or</u> transfer to any of CUNY's senior colleges (Tsao (469-70).

have once again been shunted to the sidelines, and the gap that Lunsford spoke of earlier continues to grow.

After CUNY: Marginalization Moves West

While CUNY was struggling with an attack on its remedial programs from both the political and press arenas, a similar struggle was shaping up across the country in California. The *Los Angeles Times*, in two editorials – "Cal State Is for College Work" published on September 9, 1999, and "College Is for the Prepared" published on November 22, 1999 – takes a similar stance as that taken by its counterpart in New York City: namely, that universities are not and should not be the place for those students whose literacy falls outside the prescribed norms.

Mary Kay Crouch and Gerri McNenny, in "Looking Back, Looking Forward: California Grapples with 'Remediation'," investigate the governmental steps taken by the California Legislature to ensure that remedial classes were removed from the purview of the state's four-year universities, particularly state-funded universities such as the California State University and University of California systems[17]. In the case of these two systems, this new legislation – Executive Order EO665 – is a test of the state mandate, the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education, which was updated in "The Master Plan Renewed," published in 1987. These master plans require that CSU accept the upper one-third of high school graduates, regardless of their proficiency in English and/or math, so long as they have a GPA of 3.0 and have completed the high school courses required for admission. Students' scores on the SAT or ACT tests were used only to place students in corresponding math or English classes; if a student declined to provide his or

[17] See also Renny Christopher's "The Haves and Have-Nots of Higher Education: The State of Higher Education in California" for a discussion of the California financial crises and funding cut-backs.

her SAT or ACT scores, that student was required to take an English Placement Test (EPT) to determine if he or she could take a credit-bearing course in writing or not. According to Crouch and McNenny, the regulations governing the time within which a student must take the EPT were loosely enforced, and, until Fall 1998, when EO665 went into effect, students were waiting until well into their freshman or sometimes their sophomore years to take it. However, under EO665, "putting off this requirement is no longer possible . . . students must begin their remedial work in their first semester and must complete it within one calendar year" (46).

Under the aegis of EO665, the Fall Semester of 2001 became the benchmark; after that date, "incoming freshmen would not be admitted to the university 'if they require remedial study'" (51). However, critics of the Executive Order pointed out that these measures were in direct opposition to the Master Plan, so the proposal was revised:

> [B]y fall 2001 key implementation components, e.g., standards, assessment, early intervention, will be in place leading to the expectation that by fall 2001 there will be a 10 percentage point decline in the number of regularly admitted new freshmen needing remediation . . . and that by fall 2007 no more than 10% of these students will require remediation. (51)

The requirement that students complete their remedial studies within one calendar year remained; "by that time, students must be ready for the credit-bearing course in writing or they will be disenrolled from the university," and they should, in the words of the Executive Order, "consider enrolling in other educational institutions as appropriate";

additionally, universities should clearly define academic levels below which they will not offer remedial courses and should, eventually, phase-out remedial instruction (53).

This political move toward removing remediation from California universities is further exacerbated by those within academia who see students who require remedial studies as anathema to their perceived goals for higher education. While administrators and trustees (and, yes, some in the professoriate as well) congratulate each other for the diversity that is increasingly manifested on American university campuses, this diversity is also seen as a double-edged sword: "diversity is acceptable, it seems, only if they can turn themselves into what the university sees as the right kind of students, ones who need no real help beyond financial assistance once they are accepted" (54). If these students cannot transform themselves within the prescribed time limit, then they "threaten the university's ability to offer undergraduate instruction at a level that will prepare a competitive workforce and an enlightened citizenry" (54). Crouch and McNenny point out that, in a state like California whose non-English-speaking population represents a greater and greater percentage of the general public, this new approach to remedial studies affects thousands of students who apply to California universities. "Here again, one finds a recurring theme from the '80s on: remediation can be tolerated but only for limited periods of time. When remediation is thought of simply as a term rather than as a population of students, limits for it are easy to set" (53).

David Bartholomae: *Facts, Artifacts,* and Counterarguments

While many universities are relegating basic writing instruction to community colleges, some scholars within the field of composition in general and basic writing specifically are beginning to wonder if the time has not come for a dismantling of all

basic writing courses or, at the very least, a re-examination of what we really mean when we say "basic writing." These sentiments, especially those advocating the elimination of basic writing instruction, are often welcomed by administrators who see the presence of basic writers (and basic writing instruction as a whole) as a lessening of the university's academic rigor and standing; however, composition scholars and basic writing researchers have another view: the presence of basic writing instruction creates a perpetual underclass of students who, either by institutional or departmental dictates, are and will continue to be segregated from the rest of the academic population. One such individual is David Bartholomae, whose *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* (written with Anthony Petrosky) was seen by many, when it was published in 1986, as a blueprint of how a basic writing course should be structured.

Bartholomae and Petrosky's book was the result of their work at the University of Pittsburgh, where they were asked by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences to design a course "to teach young adults how to read and write . . . students unprepared for the textual demands of a college education" (4). Their approach is much different than Shaughnessy's; their emphasis is two-fold: to engage students with challenging texts and then to ask the students to write about what they've read. The corpus of these student-generated essays then becomes the "textbook" of the class, and discussions center more on learning the discourse needed to communicate within the academic community rather than a concentration strictly on grammatical correctness.

A look at Bartholomae's work before and after the publishing of *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* reveals Bartholomae's mistrust of how basic writing instruction was being handled – and used – in American academe in general and English departments in

particular. In “Inventing the University,” “The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum,” “Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills,” “Writing on the Margins: The Concept of Literacy in Higher Education,” and a multitude of presentations and dialogues at conferences and in journals, Bartholomae reveals a growing disenchantment not so much with the enterprise of basic writing instruction but rather with the discipline’s handling of it and, in some cases, reliance on it.

In “Teaching Basic Writing,” published in 1979, Bartholomae first outlines the basic writing program then in place at the University of Pittsburgh, which, Bartholomae states, is based on “the assumption that students must be actively writing and simultaneously engaged in a study of their own writing as evidence of a language and a style, as evidence of real and symbolic action” (158). The program and pedagogy he summarizes here would later form the basis for *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*. Their approach, as Bartholomae describes it, is “a systematic investigation of how they as individuals write, and of what they and their fellow students have written” (157), accomplished through the use of mimeographed copies of student papers which students study and comment on both individually and as a class. The assignments they are given “[present] writing as a process of systematic inquiry, where the movement from week to week defines stages of understanding as, week by week, students gather new information, attempt new perspectives, re-formulate, re-see, and, in general, develop a command of a subject” (157); they are, as Bartholomae describes them, not that different from the assignments one might find in any level of composition instruction at the University of Pittsburgh.

Bartholomae quickly goes on to compare this pedagogy with that of many basic writing programs – as well as the pedagogy behind many basic writing texts. Rather than the assumption Bartholomae cites as the basis of the University of Pittsburgh class, these pedagogies "begin with the assumption that the writing of basic writers is . . . evidence of unformed or partially developed language behavior," that "basic writers need, finally, to learn basic or constituent skills, skills that somehow come prior to writing itself" (158). Instead of a pedagogy, Bartholomae argues, these skills are broken down into discrete terms and sequences – words, sentences, paragraphs, essays – that take the place of pedagogy and meet the needs of "teachers who are frustrated by an almost complete inability to understand what could be happening in the heads of students whose writing seems to be so radically different from their own, or from the writing they've learned to read" (159). The convenience of this pedagogy absolves both teacher and student from ever having to really talk about writing in any sort of productive way and does not even fit the word "pedagogy" as Bartholomae defines it:

> The responsibility of a pedagogy is to enable students to imagine the kind of relation between themselves and their world that allows them to turn their experience into "subject matter" and to define a relationship with that subject that makes creative thinking possible. This is not just a matter of a lesson in class or a pep talk, since whatever we say in class will be understood only in relation to our actual assignments, where we are, in effect, establishing the conditions of such a relationship. (164)

By this definition then, basic writing instruction that focuses solely on discrete elements such as sentence structure, paragraph construction, or parts of grammar or speech is not so

much pedagogy-based as convenience-based; discussions center not on making the connection between the student and the student's world that might engender creative thinking but rather on rote drills and rule memorization that is devoid of context and meaning for a student's own writing. Exercises that have "right-or-wrong" answers are much easier to grade – at least for teachers – than trying to make sense of an essay written in labored, frustrated English, and they provide students with an opportunity ***not*** to write, not to, once again, put their thoughts and words on paper for scrutiny.

In "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum," published in the *Journal of Basic Writing* in 1993, Bartholomae revisits the dilemma of basic writing instruction; in it, he goes beyond the indictment of skill-drill-based classroom practice, as in his earlier work, and re-envisions English departments and composition programs as complicit in the silencing of basic writers:

> I find myself characterizing basic writing as a reiteration of the liberal project of the late 60s early 70s, where in the name of sympathy and empowerment, we have once again produced the "other" who is the incomplete version of ourselves, confirming existing patterns of power and authority, reproducing the hierarchies we had meant to question and overthrow, way back then in the 1970s.
>
> We have constructed a course to teach and enact a rhetoric of exclusion and made it the center of a curriculum designed to hide or erase cultural difference, all the while carving out and preserving an "area" in English within which we can do our work. (323)

This “rhetoric of exclusion” invades not only how we view basic writers, Bartholomae states, but also how we view basic writing instruction. “As Shaughnessy told us, the first thing we would need to do to change the curriculum would be to change the way the profession talked about students who didn’t fit”; he stops short of openly advocating an elimination of all basic writing courses, stating that “I fear what would happen to the students who are protected, served in its name” (325). However, he feels that it is time for all parties concerned to rethink the reified, institutionalized nature of basic writing in general:

> “Basic writing,” it seems to me, can best name a contested area in the university community, a contact zone, a place of competing positions and interests. I don’t want to stand in support of a course designed to make those differences disappear or to hide contestation or to enforce divisions between high and low. (325)

Bartholomae takes great pains to make clear that the course described in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* is one in which he still believes; however, he states that this same course, in a slightly different fashion, is taught as the mainstream composition course and also the introductory course for the department’s majors. Because of this, Bartholomae goes on to express some doubt as to the necessity of a course to be populated by those students deemed unprepared for college-level work. “The point is that while I believe in the course, I’m not sure I believe in its institutional position as a course that is necessarily prior to or lesser than the mainstream course. Do I believe that [a basic writer] is served by being called a basic writer and positioned in the curriculum in these terms. I’m not sure I do” (324-5).

Other scholars echo Bartholomae's call for making basic writing instruction "a contact zone," calling for different approaches that would allow basic writers the opportunity to challenge the differences that, in Bartholomae's opinion, many basic writing courses strive to conceal. Patricia Bizzell, in "Literature in Culture and Cognition," challenges the idea that basic writing instruction should focus on academic literacy solely as the "mastery of Standard English and critical thinking . . . The problem then is whether the acquisition of academic literacy, because it carries with it the political power of its origins in the privileged social classes, will crowd out whatever other cultural literacies students bring to school, unfairly devaluing and perhaps even extirpating them" (134). Ira Shor, a professor at Queensborough College, a division of the City University of New York, has written about the teaching of basic writing as a "liberatory" exercise, getting students to examine and rethink the bases of power and privilege. In "Basic Writing: Our Apartheid," Shor decries the segregation inherent in basic writing courses, calling for a more inclusionary approach that would mainstream basic writers in regular composition courses. Separating basic writers from regular composition students only reifies, in Shor's mind, the social and economic barriers that keep many students from achieving success at the university level. Mainstreaming these basic writers by including them in regular composition courses would not only bring them into contact with the power structures that want to keep them separate but would also bring regular composition students into contact with students whose world views are much different from their own or from the world view deemed acceptable by the academy[18].

In the absence of such a mainstreamed approach, the alternative many universities would opt for, Shor felt, would be to "outsource" the teaching of basic writing to

[18] See also *Mainstreaming Basic Writers: Politics and Pedagogies of Access*, ed. Gerri McNenny.

community colleges or professional "colleges" such as DeVry, Sylvan, and the like. In "Errors and Economics: Inequality Breeds Remediation," Shor cites Burton Clark's essay, "The Cooling-Out Function in Higher Education,"[19] and shows how, should basic writing be shifted totally to community colleges, this "cooling-out function" would continue the trend toward "downwardly managing student goals through testing, counseling, and courses" (36), diverting non-elite students away from the liberal arts colleges and universities attended by the upwardly mobile, "cooling out" these basic writers' aspirations for social and economic advancement, tracking these students into trades and occupations more suited for their class and culture, and maintaining the prestige and character of elite, upper-tier universities at the ultimate expense of students whose futures may well depend on access to higher education.

Mike Rose: Writers on the Boundaries

Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* chronicles just such students, students who have been academically "pigeon-holed" even before getting out of high school. Rose's concern for these students is understandable in light of the fact that he, at one time, was just such a student: mistakenly placed on the "vocational" track due to erroneous reporting of test scores, Rose felt first-hand the stigma that accompanies such classifications. Luckily, the error was discovered and corrected, but what Rose experienced obviously left an indelible mark on his writing and on his career. His teaching experiences both at UCLA and with various literacy initiatives has led to a body of work that focuses on how higher education exacerbates rather than alleviates the struggles faced by basic writers. The three specific essays I will be looking at are "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal," "Remediation as Social

[19] See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of Clark's work.

Construct: Perspectives from an Analysis of Classroom Discourse" (with Glynda Hull, Kay Losey Fraser, and Marisa Castellano), and "From 'The Politics of Remediation' in *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*"[20].

In his introduction to "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal," an essay that originally appeared in *College English* in 1983, Rose admits that much of the research he utilizes in the original essay would by today's standards be considered *passé*. However, he states, many of the points he makes are still legitimate concerns today, not just on an institutional level but also on a disciplinary level. "There has *within* the composition community been debate about the function and consequences of remedial courses. The criticism is that the establishment of remedial courses stigmatizes those students placed in them . . . and creates barriers to students' advancement, for the courses lock in place another level of requirements, one that some students have a difficult time fulfilling" (112). While Rose admits that some universities have chosen to meet this challenge by "eradicate[ing] such courses or [to] mov[ing] them to the community college," he cites two concerns about such a move: one, that the importance of institutional context must be taken into consideration because "such a move would work well in some places, yet in others would lead to the compromising or loss of any instructional space for students who need extra, funded assistance"; and two, that "[i]nstitutional structures can be modified but . . . shifts in attitudes and beliefs don't necessarily follow" (112), intimating that doing away with basic writing instruction will not fully address the issues that need to be investigated, including "assumptions about language, cognition, and motivation" (112). Simply doing away with basic writing

[20] All of these essays can be found in a new compilation of Rose's work, entitled *An Open Language: Selected Writings on Literacy, Learning, and Opportunity*, published in 2006 by Bedford/St. Martin's.

courses allows universities – and some composition programs – to divert their attention away from the much bigger problem of how these assumptions about language, cognition, and motivation often grow into misconceptions about basic writing and basic writers.

In the 1983 essay, Rose tackles five ways in which, in his opinion, basic writing courses are ineffective and, in some cases, counterproductive in helping basic writers move into the mainstream of higher education. While all of these are pertinent to any discussion of basic writing instruction, the two most pertinent to this discussion are:

> 3) The writing teacher's vigilance for error most likely conveys to students a very restricted model of the composing process.
>
> 4) Our notion of "basic skills" has become so narrow that we attempt to separate the intimately related processes of reading and thinking from writing. (113)

I have chosen these two because they most closely relate to how much of basic writing instruction is carried out at the community college level through classroom practice and textbook selection.

A teacher's overemphasis of error, Rose states, might be "unwittingly passing on an extremely constricted notion of what composing is" (117) and can result in students being "so vigilant for error, so concerned with placing every bit of language in its correct place, that their writing processes [are] stymied – they [cannot] get the flow of their thoughts onto paper" (118). Rose traces this vigilance for error to narrow definitions of what writing skills actually are, definitions born in the 1920s and 1930s, decades in which a "cult of efficiency" reduced learning to "discrete steps, stages, bits of information" and then held "teachers accountable for imparting fixed numbers of these steps, stages, bits

during a given period of time" (119). In this educational atmosphere, writing was "reduced to text production and text to its most salient constituent parts" (119).

This reductionist model is still evident in the way many basic writing programs are designed and delivered, especially on the community college level. Basic writing programs are often segmented into "levels," each level concentrating on one or two discrete "bits." For example, the first level may deal solely with sentence construction, concentrating on rules of grammar and parts of speech; the next level would be focused on paragraph construction; the third level, then, would finally get around to the actual writing of an essay. In this sort of program, ostensibly, a basic writer could go almost three semesters before ever composing a full essay, all the while being told, explicitly or implicitly, that eradication of error is everything and actual content is of lesser importance. As Rose states, "[j]ust about the only rhetorical connection the correctness model establishes is the negative sociolinguistic one: don't err lest ye be judged. That is sound advice, but not when it becomes the only rhetorical advice students get" (118). Unfortunately, on many community college campuses, the correctness model is the only model of writing afforded to basic writers.

The next area of concern for Rose was the tendency in many basic writing programs to separate writing from reading and thinking. "In our attempts to isolate and thereby more effectively treat 'basic skills' we have not only reduced discourse complexity, we have separated writing from reading and thinking" (121). As long as the emphasis in basic writing instruction is on the elimination of error through drills and exercises that are completely divorced from a student's own writing, this separation can

be perceived as efficient; however, it also sends a dangerous message to students: the message that reading and writing are disconnected processes.

In Rose's view, "'thinking skills' must not be taught as a set of abstract exercises (which, of course, they will be if they are not conceived of as being part of writing), but must be intimately connected to composition instruction" (121). Writing *about* texts – analyzing, summarizing, and incorporating outside texts into one's own writing – is a major portion of the writing students will be asked to produce in their other courses; why should reading and writing be espoused as completely separate activities, especially in basic writing classrooms? As Rose states, "we have no choice but to begin – and to urge the scholars who have sequestered themselves in segmented disciplines to begin – conceiving of composition as a highly complex thinking/learning/reading/writing skill that demands holistic, not neatly segmented and encapsulated, pedagogies" (122). As long as instructors see writing as a mastery of certain skills, how can student, especially basic writing students, help but see writing in a similar light?

Basic writers, in Rose's view, generally come from educational and experiential nightmares when it comes to writing; as Rose states, they "come to us with narrow, ossified conceptions of writing" (128), conceptions based on incessant messages that their writing is no good because it has too many errors, messages based on curricula and pedagogies that, through vigilance for error, valorize mechanically correct but meaningless writing. Then they arrive in basic writing classes where the same messages are iterated on a daily basis, classes that Rose describes as "flat":

> How flat some of our remedial courses feel. And how distant the eyes of too many of our students. We sometimes take this flatness, this distance as

> signs of intellectual dullness. They are more likely the signs of boredom, humiliation, even anger. But in my experience anyway the dullness dispels and the distant gazes revitalize when students are challenged, engaged, brought fully into the milieu they bargained for. Yes, we teachers will work slowly, scale carefully, provide as much assistance as we can. But we will still be creating an "edge" to our "remedial" classroom. Our students will grumble about the strain – grumbling is a part of the student's drama – but they will know they are participating in the university. And that is a strain that can make one feel worthwhile. (128-9)

In 1990, Rose's *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared* was published. In "From 'The Politics of Remediation,'" an excerpt from that book, Rose tackles the issue of the expectations placed on university students to have a heretofore unexpected level of critical literacy, a level that can heighten the sense of frustration for those students underprepared for the rigors of academic discourse. According to Rose, today's college students "come to the university able to summarize the events in a news story or write a personal response to a play or a movie or give back what a teacher said in a straight-forward lecture" but do not possess the ability for "framing an argument or taking someone else's argument apart, systematically inspecting a document, an issue, or an event, synthesizing different points of view, applying a theory to disparate phenomena, and so on," all skills associated with critical literacy (291). As Rose points out, these skills, traditionally, were only expected of the elite, "in priests, scholars, or a leisure class. Ours is the first society in history to expect

so many of its people to be able to perform these very sophisticated literacy activities" (291). Students who arrive at colleges and universities struggling with even the most basic writing skills are in a much deeper bind; "those coming to the university with less-than-privileged educations, especially those from the lower classes, are particularly in need . . . Their social marginality, then, is reinforced by discourse and . . . they might withdraw, retreat into silence" (294), their frustrations might be reflected in what many would see as halting, disjointed, disorganized, grammatically incorrect writing, or they withdraw from the academic community altogether.

How can we help these students not only become more familiar with critical literacy skills but also gain confidence in their ability to express themselves in writing? Rose suggests the following:

> Students need more opportunities to write about what they're leaning and guidance in the techniques and conventions of that writing . . . They need more opportunities to develop the writing strategies that are an intimate part of academic inquiry and what has come to be called critical literacy – comparing, synthesizing, analyzing . . . They need the opportunities to talk about what they're learning: to test their ideas, reveal their assumptions, talk through the places where new knowledge clashes with ingrained belief. They need a chance, too, to talk about the ways they may have felt excluded from all this in the past and may feel threatened by it in the present. They need the occasion to rise above the fragmented learning the lower-division curriculum encourages, a place within a course or outside it

> to hear about and reflect on the way a particular discipline conducts its inquiry. (294)

Notice that nowhere in Rose's list is the mention of exercises covering sentence structure, parts of speech, or grammar rules. In fact, Rose states that his list of suggestions reflects "the kind of education a privileged small number of American students have received for some time" (295). This restriction of literacy education to a certain segment of the population is nothing new; however, as we move further into the 21st century and become part of a more global, more information-dependent world, and as we have broadened the need for (and the appeal for) a college education for more and more of our citizens, we must face an inevitable question, one that Rose stated in *Lives on the Boundary* and is still pertinent today: "The basic question our society must ask, then, is: How many or how few do we want to have this education? If students didn't get it before coming to college – and most have not – then what are we willing to do to give it to them?" (295-6). For many universities and university systems, the answer to that question has been and is to relegate developmental or remedial education to the community colleges, an American phenomenon that, since its inception, has both democratized education and helped to demarcate and segregate those with fewer literacy skills. How it does this, and how this recent relegation of developmental classes to community colleges fits its history and mission, will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: AN OPEN DOOR, BUT TO WHAT?

The existence of basic writing programs is a matter of fact; whether we believe in their efficacy or not, they do exist. The question then becomes a matter of logistics: if we must have basic writing programs, *where* should we offer them so that they will be as effective as possible?

For some states (most notably New York and California[21]) the answer to that question is community colleges. From its inception, the community college has been seen by politicians and higher education administrators alike as the perfect site for remediation of any kind. After all, community college advocates state, these institutions were founded for just such a reason: to offer those previously excluded from higher education a chance to pursue their educational goals, a "democratizing" of higher education.

However, a growing number of studies report that students receiving basic writing or other remedial instruction at the community college level are far less likely to finish even an associate's degree, much less transfer and complete a baccalaureate degree. In their introduction to *The Politics of Writing in the Two-Year College*, Barry Alford and Keith Kroll point out that, at community colleges, literacy and writing become sizeable barriers that must be hurdled by the students for whom community colleges were meant to help. "Not surprisingly, students fall victim to the linguistic and cultural markers they bring in the door. It is still true that only about 12 percent of two-year college students ever graduate" (vii). As Penelope E. Herideen points out in *Policy, Pedagogy, and Social Inequality: Community College Student Realities in Post-Industrial America,* community

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[21] See Mary Soliday's *The Politics of Remediation* and Kathleen Shaw's "Reframing Remediation as a Systemic Phenomenon: A Comparative Analysis of Remediation in Two States."

colleges are “more likely than the four-year college to enroll academically less well-prepared students, minority students, part-time students, economically disadvantaged students, commuter students, older students, and first-generation students” (1), and she raises the question of whether community colleges reproduce existing social inequalities (2). So what happened to the “democratizing” effect of community colleges, especially where basic writers are concerned? The search for answers to this question must take us back to the beginning of the twentieth century, when community colleges in America began; there perhaps we’ll find a clue among the forces and figures who birthed the first community colleges as to why this twentieth century American phenomenon was intended to be (and, according to some critics, still is) a valuable gatekeeper for the more elite American universities in particular and higher education in general.

The Birth of the Community College – And An Important Definition

Before investigating these issues, an important distinction must be made here regarding *junior college* (or *two-year college*) and *community college.* W. A. Harper, in “The Community and Junior College: An Overview,” defines these terms as follows:

> It is necessary, in presenting this overview of the two-year college in America, to make some distinctions in nomenclature. Up to this point, the term *community college* has been interspersed with two-year and junior. This is not just for variety’s sake. The term *junior* is perhaps best described as the generic word, the umbrella, for the entire movement. It is a term still used by many of the colleges, both public and private. And this suggests the real difference in terms for the two-year colleges – public and private. (258)

While some still may see these terms as interchangeable, they do carry some salient denotations – and connotations – which stem from the birth of this American educational phenomenon and from the reputation both the movement and the entity itself have achieved since then.

At the turn of the twentieth century, college and university enrollments were increasing rapidly; students previously unable (for financial or logistical reasons) to pursue a college degree were being accepted as new universities were being established in locations more accessible to a larger segment of the American population, and existing universities were expanding their facilities to handle this influx of students seeking educational and vocational advancement. But as enrollments grew, so also grew the trepidation in the minds of some university administrators and university faculty. Many of these new students did not have the same level of educational preparation of those students previously admitted, and administrators and faculty members were concerned that accommodations for these "unprepared" students might endanger the scholastic integrity of their institutions.

In 1901, at the University of Chicago, William Raney Harper saw this situation as a chance to introduce to American higher education a model of the German *gymnasium* – a two-year preparatory curriculum that would better equip students to handle the rigors of university class work, as Hugh Ross points out in his 1963 article in *History of Education Quarterly*, "University Influence in the Genesis and Growth of Junior Colleges in California." Ross attributes this to the fact that many university administrators during this time had received their training and graduate degrees from German universities, a system in which the first two years of university study are separate from upper-division classes.

As a result, Ross states, these administrators "argued that the freshman and sophomore years of college had more in common with secondary education than with the university" (Ross 143). By 1896, at the University of Chicago, Harper had already instituted a clear distinction between "a Senior College and a Junior College" (Ross 143), complete with separate faculties and curricula. With the establishment of Joliet Junior College in 1902, Harper saw his plan to institutionalize the distinction between the first two years of undergraduate work and the second two years of upper division study become a reality, allowing the "Senior College" to become more closely aligned with graduate-level courses of study.

Thus was born the "Junior" College, but it would take a few more years before this new part of the American educational landscape would be considered truly "higher" education. As these junior colleges spread out across the country (most rapidly in California), their existence was seen not so much as an extension of universities but as a continuation of secondary education. In fact, a 1907 law, introduced by State Senator Anthony Caminetti and passed by the California legislature, mandated that school districts' boards of trustees should "prescribe post-graduate courses of study for the graduates of such high schools, which course of study shall approximate the studies prescribed in the first two years of University courses" (qtd. in Ross 144). Caminetti's legislation tapped into the fears of university trustees and administrators and, according to Ross, attempted to shift the responsibility for preparatory instruction to the state's high schools. For California students, there was to be no "separate and distinct institution to fit into the educational ladder between the high school and the university rungs" (Ross 144), leaving high schools scrambling for solutions and relieving the state's universities of the

onerous relieving the state's universities of the onerous prospect of the unprepared college student and leaving the state's high schools scrambling for solutions.

However, funding for state high schools did not anticipate these additional courses, and communities were loathe to assume the financial burden. Calls from Alexis Lange, then dean of the School of Education at the University of California-Berkeley, and David Starr Jordan, then president of Stanford University, for state and private universities to "[jettison] the first two years of the traditional four-year undergraduate course" (Ross 145) were met enthusiastically among higher education professionals; communities and school boards, on the other hand, were not yet sold on the idea. With the inauguration of the "Junior Certificate" (the equivalent to today's associate's degree) at the University of California-Berkeley in 1907, the distinction between a high school diploma and a baccalaureate degree started to emerge. This possibility of an interim step between secondary and higher education convinced some students, particularly high school students in Fresno, Santa Barbara, Hollywood, and Los Angeles, to take advantage of these new preparatory courses at local "junior" colleges as an intermediate step between high school and university studies. By 1915, "some fifty students had transferred from these embryonic junior colleges" (Ross 145). As Kevin Dougherty points out in *The Contradictory College: The Conflicting Origins, Impacts, and Futures of the Community College*, the growth of community colleges across the country, while slow at first, gained momentum in post-World War II America. For example, in 1919, in the state of California, there were only 21 community colleges; by 1940, there were 47, and by 1950, there were 66. In Washington, enrollment in the state's community colleges in 1940 totalled only 1,398; by 1950, over 14,000 students were enrolled (115). By the

1960s, this growth was enhanced, Dougherty maintains, by four key congressional acts advancing the community college: the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963, the Vocational Education Act of 1963, the Higher Education Act of 1965, and the Higher Education Amendments of 1972 (119-20).

With the rapid expansion of the junior college movement, some community college scholars maintain, community colleges have been struggling to keep up with unprecedented challenges. As George R. Boggs reports in "Community Colleges in a Perfect Storm," since 2001, "student enrollment pressure has escalated, and college leaders have struggled to meet demand in the face of steep state budget cuts, limited facilities, faculty turnover, rising technology costs, and increasing numbers of student who need remedial work before they can take college level classes" (8). With all of these conflicting factors converging at once, many community colleges have chosen to shift their focus from the traditional transfer function to a different and, in the minds of some, more efficient avenue for a community college's strapped resources: vocational training.

Vocational Training: A New Niche

As new junior colleges sprang up across the country, those in the vanguard of the movement began to carve out for community colleges a very distinctive niche in higher education: vocational training. Educators and community college pioneers such as Walter Crosby Eells saw right away that the transfer function of community colleges might weaken the prestige of the baccalaureate degree; and since the distinction between "senior colleges" and "junior colleges" was becoming more and more clearly defined, Eells and his counterparts (including William Rainey Harper and Lawrence V. Koos and A. Lawrence Lowell) wrote and spoke enthusiastically of the potential for junior colleges

to offer vocational education for those for whom the "senior college" was impractical. Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel, in *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985*, chart the rise of this drive for vocationalization as part of the underlying belief that community colleges should act as a buffer, keeping those students deemed unfit for higher education out of the elite universities of the day.

Brint and Karabel point out that university officials in California and other administrators at the nation's more prestigious institutions were at the vanguard of the movement to divert those clamoring for higher education away from the nation's four-year colleges and universities: "As A. Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard, explained in 1928, 'One of the merits of these new institutions will be the keeping out of college, rather than leading into it, young people who have no taste for higher education'" (37). Robert Sproul, president of the University of California from 1930 to 1958, emphasized that the allocation of students in the state's educational system should mirror the natural distribution of talent in society. "Insisting that 'the university is primarily designed for one type of mind and the junior college for another,' [Sproul] argued that what was needed was 'not more colleges and universities of the traditional type . . . but altogether different institutions which will suitably train [less able] students and get them to their life work sooner'" (Brint and Karabel 37-8). This emphasis on the community college being the site for job and technical training for the "less able students," even back in the early decades of the 20th century, predisposed many community colleges to downplay transfer curricula and developmental classes for vocational and technical training (also known as

voc-tech) for that portion of the student population deemed not fit for university-level work.

As community college historians Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer point out, in 1929, the ratio of collegiate (or transfer) curriculum courses to vocational training courses in California community college was approximately 80 to 20; in Texas during the same time period, the ratio was 77 to 23. By the 1970s, vocational training programs and curricula had reached parity with collegiate programs (Cohen and Brawer 22). Today, for some community colleges, the ratio has tipped in favor of vocational training over collegiate programs. Cohen and Brawer also ask a very salient question: "To what degree should the schools be in the business of providing trained workers for the nation's industries? None, say the academic purists; totally, say many community college leaders" (240). They also cite a study conducted in 1986 that rejects the notion, supported by some, that "community college students are counseled into career programs on the basis of their academic ability and hence their socioeconomic status" (243). This, Cohen and Brawer assert, represents an oversimplified view of vocational education and "perpetuates the myth that vocational studies are the exclusive domain of low-ability or low-income students" (244); however, they do admit that "the public's view of community colleges as agents of upward mobility for individuals seems to be shifting toward a view of the institutions as occupational training centers" (251).

Brint and Karabel point out that this vocationalization project came about because of the recognition by many junior college advocates and administrators of the hierarchical nature of an industrial society's division of labor. "A central task for the junior college, Eells believed, was to prevent the popular clamor for educational and economic mobility

from leading the system of higher education to produce more highly trained graduates than the economy could absorb" (40). This structurally based diversion of students away from the universities—as well as from the professions and higher management positions that a university education could afford them – was simultaneously legitimated because of the perceived individual "deficiencies" of those who attended the junior college. John Lombardi, in a 1973 article published in the community college supplement of *Change*, states:

> It is snobbish or unrealistic for the student from the ghetto or the slum to aspire to white-collar status, but not for the student from the suburb or exurb. For the latter it is considered normal to seek the kind of education that will enable him to become a member of the white-collar class because he has acquired by birth the qualities necessary for that status. (82)

Lombardi, whose experience with community colleges began in 1936 at Los Angeles City College and culminated in his tenure as assistant superintendent of the Los Angeles Junior College District, makes no apologies for his perception of junior college students in general, and vocational training students specifically, as "lower in status," stating "Just as most of us accept the fact that the universities from which we graduated have different rankings, so students who freely enroll in vocational-technical courses will accept the fact that they are considered lower in status than those in the academic sequences" (83). However, Lombardi does not believe that vocational training courses should be used as a convenient alternative for underprepared students:

> The community college should not become an instrument for those who would like to direct cast-off students into the vocational-technical

> programs. The more they try, the more unsuccessful they will be and the more harm they will inflict on these programs . . . Experience shows that if a program becomes merely a place in which to shunt low-aptitude students, the higher-aptitude students will avoid it, no matter how worthwhile. (85)

Even thought Lombardi's words were initially published in 1973, the spirit of his views regarding remedial education and vocational training still exist. Unfortunately for many students who enter the community college – whether of their own volition or due to state mandates governing remedial education – vocational training programs have become a convenient mechanism through which community colleges can channel at-risk students, thereby "cooling out" their aspirations for a baccalaureate degree.

Clark's "Cooling Out" Function

In May of 1960, an article was published in *The American Journal of Sociology* that has generated much heated debate over what function community colleges should play in higher education. That article, "The 'Cooling Out' Function in Higher Education" by Burton R. Clark, posited that students who are, in Clark's words, "unpromising," those in need of remedial education, those students who "pursue ends for which a college education is required but who have little academic ability," encounter an educational system in which "failure is inevitable and *structured*" (571, author's emphasis). To alleviate this problem, many colleges and universities opt for what Clark calls a "soft" response: to provide students an alternative to failure. This alternative most often is not found, Clark states, "in the four-year college or university, however, but in the college that specializes in handling students who will soon be leaving – typically, the two-year public junior college" (571-2). Clark calls this alternative the "cooling-out" function.

This function is best suited for community colleges, Clark feels, due to the very nature of the community college system: community colleges, for the most part, are "unselective in admissions and by law, custom, and self-conception [accept] all who wish to enter" (572); tuition is generally much lower at community colleges (as compared to four-year baccalaureate institutions); and a large percentage of its students are, in Clark's terms, "'latent terminal students' . . . their announced intention and program of study entails four years of college, but in reality their work terminates in the junior college" (572). More lenient admissions standards and more economical tuition costs are very attractive factors, especially for those segments of the population in the lower-middle class or upper-lower class socioeconomic strata – strata from which a disproportionate number of basic writing students come, strata that are, perhaps, the most vulnerable to the "cooling-out" function that Clark describes. Clark sets out a five-step reorienting process necessary for the "cooling-out" function to be successful.

The first step is pre-entrance testing; those students scoring poorly on these tests are assigned to remedial classes, which "casts doubt and slows the student's movement into bona fide transfer courses" and which instigates "an objective record of ability and performance" (572). The major problem with pre-entrance testing is that, in the majority of cases, there is no consensus or consistency on what this testing should entail or how it should be administered or scored. As Kathleen Shaw points out in "Reframing Remediation as a Systemic Phenomenon: A Comparative Analysis of Remediation in Two States," a skill level termed remedial in one institution may be considered college level in another. "This inconsistency is exacerbated by forms of assessment and placement which can vary enormously – in some states, even by institution" (195). Shaw

cites a study conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), in which the organization's member states revealed that nearly 100 combinations of 70 different tests in reading, writing, and mathematics were used in assessing students' college-readiness "with such a wide range of cutoff scores on these examinations that there is no clear consensus regarding what constitutes even a minimal competence level" (195). However, reliance on these pre-entrance tests (whether nation-wide standardized test scores such as for the ACT or SAT or institutionally based test scores) for placing students either in transfer credit-bearing courses or remedial courses continues to this day.

The second step in Clark's process is a counseling interview that takes place before classes begin. In this interview, counselors consult a student's test scores, the student's high school record, and the student's stated objective in helping the student choose the proper course of study. But what if there is a glaring disjuncture between test scores, high school record, and the student's objective? Clark quotes one counselor at San Jose City College as saying, "I never openly countermand his choice, but edge him toward a terminal program by gradually laying out the facts of life" (572). "Terminal" programs (also known as "certificate programs") have become synonymous with vocational training and vocational education, long a stalwart of the community college curriculum and, for some community college scholars (see Lombardi above), the best place for students who come to higher education underprepared.

Edging students toward terminal programs is furthered by the third step in Clark's process: the mandatory orientation class. Many higher education institutions, four-year universities and community colleges alike, now offer these orientation courses for first-year freshmen in an effort to ease the transition from high school, and many of them, as

Clark states, "assist students in evaluating their own abilities, interests, and aptitudes" (572). For those students who have been identified as latent or potential terminal students, however, these courses also include vocational planning and, sometimes, vocational aptitude tests that are closely linked to the college's terminal or vocational programs. These scores become a part of the student's record, and the "facts of life" mentioned earlier by the counselor from San Jose City College become strong advice coming from one's academic counselor or advisor. Of course, the student can opt to disregard that advice – duly noted, of course, in the student's file; "when this is the case," Clark states, "the deterrent will be encountered in this regular classes. Here the student is divested of expectations, lingering from high school, that he will automatically pass" (573). When and if the student does receive low or failing grades in his/her regular classes, more counseling sessions ensue.

These counseling sessions constitute the fourth step in Clark's process; here the student's unsatisfactory performance and the counselor's previous advice are brought to bear in an attempt to persuade the student to rethink educational objectives and career goals. Continued unsatisfactory performance, then, leads to the fifth step in the process – "one necessary for many in the throes of discouragement" – probation (574). In order to escape probation, many community colleges give students the option of being "reclassified," changing their status from transfer students to terminal students, or dropping out. At this point, many students, rather than see money and months of hard work go for naught, are persuaded to switch to terminal or vocational programs; after all, probationary status, in many cases, is the death knell for a student's hopes to transfer to a four-year university. As Clark states, "students who are failing or barely passing find

their occupational and academic future being redefined . . . the student is brought to realize, finally, that it is best to ease himself out of the competition to transfer" (574), and the "cooling-out" function is complete.

It is in the community college's best interest, Clark maintains, to keep this particular function concealed; indeed, many community colleges even today are quick to extol their transfer function, their role as a student's first step on the road to academic and professional attainment. And while for many this is true, both the growing numbers of students enrolled in remedial classes and the falling graduation rates at many community colleges might suggest that Clark's perception of the "cooling-out" function may have some merit. In fact, in a later article, "The 'Cooling-Out' Function Revisited," published in 1980, Clark maintains that, while the opposite of the "cooling-out" function may well occur for some students -- "There clearly are students who perform better scholastically than they did in high school and who raise rather than lower their aspirations. They may even begin in a terminal program and are moved by observant personnel or by their own efforts to transfer programs" (25) -- his second investigation of the "cooling-out" function reveals evidence of its persistent and growing effects. He cites L. Steven Zwerling's 1976 study, in *Second Best: The Crisis of the Community College*, which concluded that the "cooling-out" function "helps the college maintain the existing system of social stratification. By means of cooling out, the college 'takes students whose parents are characterized primarily by low income and low educational achievement and slots them into the lower ranks of the industrial and commercial hierarchy'" (27). This social stratification would be revisited in 2001 by Ira Shor, who in "Errors and Economics: Inequality Breeds Remediation" states:

> Cooling-out is useful at such moments [too many educated people chasing too few good jobs] because it transfers blame from the system to the individual, encouraging students to internalize fault, to blame themselves for their own failures, especially on entry exams and in first-year writing classes . . . a new tribe of *remediants*, students constructed as cultural deficits (the 'latent terminals' Clark encountered 20 years earlier) who would be detained in academic limbo, quarantined in a no-credit curricular reservation. At the heart of these complex maneuvers, the simple fact was that the new collegians encamped in basic writing were the wrong color and the wrong class, too dark and too low-income to get the same access to four-year campuses and degrees enjoyed by an elite prior to 1970. The lower a student's family income, the more likely he or she is to attend an underfunded community college and/or be enrolled in remedial courses" (40).

Clark's findings also seem to be substantiated in a study conducted by Thomas J. Kane and Cecilia Elena Rouse, reported in their 1999 article "The Community College: Educating Students at the Margin Between College and World." In this article, Kane and Rouse report that "a majority of students who ever enroll in a two-year college complete one year or less," with 35 percent of students completing only one semester or less (68). There may be a plethora of factors involved in these students' decisions to drop out or to not finish a community college education, ranging from health concerns to family or work constraints. However, with an increasing number of universities relegating basic writing and other remedial instruction to community colleges, it may be only logical to assume

that the percentage of students who stumble and fall in taking their first steps on the road to academic and professional attainment will continue to belong to identifiable socioeconomic groups, that these students will continue to come from secondary educational experiences in underfunded and understaffed schools, and that the number of students opting to drop out will increase due in no small measure to the "cooling-out" function Clark identified over forty years ago.

Countering Clark's "Cooling-Out"

Since the publication of Clark's two articles outlining the "cooling-out" function at the community college level, some educational and sociological critics have come forward, maintaining that Clark's depiction is malevolent at worst and misinformed at best. Katherine Boswell, in "Bridges or Barriers?: Public Policy and the Community College Transfer Function," places much of the responsibility for community colleges' low transfer rates on different factors, namely the elimination of many upper division transfer slots due to budget rollbacks at four-year universities and inconsistent statewide higher education policies and institutional practices that combine to create barriers to successful transfer (26). Until these issues are fully addressed, Boswell feels, any pronouncement linking low transfer rates to any sort of "cooling out" function would be premature and misinformed.

In "The Unintended Consequences of Stigma-Free Remediation," Regina Deil-Amen and James E. Rosenbaum take not only Clark to task but also those more recent community college critics (e.g., Brint and Karabel, Dougherty, et al) who subscribe to Clark's "cooling out" theory as the reason explaining poor performance by minorities and remedial students at community colleges. The "nonstigmatized remediation" that has

occurred in the wake of Clark's articles, they feel, has led to a problem that may be of a more serious nature than the "cooling out" function Clark cited: "nonstigmatized cooling out delays students' recognition, which prevents them from making timely career decisions to pursue other options that may be more constructive for their occupational attainment" (252). This new "stigma-free form of cooling out," they found, "also fails to encourage students to choose alternative educational and career paths . . . and students are paying the price in confusion, delayed recognition, efforts that have a low probability of attaining their goal, and failure to take actions that may be more promising" (253). What they recommend is a more straight-forward approach that apprises at-risk and/or remedial students of other educational avenues – i.e., vocational education – that, in many respects, is identical to the "cooling out" process Clark first described. This approach, they feel, will ultimately be most beneficial to both school and student.

Other problems identified by Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum are the heightened expectation among high school students that their high school achievement will have little if any effect on their educational attainment -- "Unfortunately, for these students, high school grades strongly affect the completion of college degrees" (251) – and the decrease in the ratio of high school guidance counselors to students, which, in their view, has led to a much greater tendency toward non-interference with high school students' college plans. "Some counselors confided that they had misgivings about not warning students who had little chance of success, but they reported that parents often complained when they conveyed such warnings, and principals supported the parents" (252). What Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum suggest is a "stigma-free" approach based in developmental rather

than behaviorist theories of learning and relying heavily on instructor involvement and small class size (254).

What makes Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum's study problematic, however, is their choice of community college campuses on which to base their research. Their data were collected from two campuses within a large, multi-campus community college district in Illinois, campuses that, by their own admission, had a strong emphasis on the transfer function, "especially among liberal arts faculty" (253-4). Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum go on to state that "the transfer of students to four-year colleges is still a major part of the missions of most community colleges" (254); however, while that may be true of the two campuses they studied, they seem to disallow other factors or circumstances that can account for the transfer emphasis besides the "standards" approach they found; additionally, the existence of a strong emphasis on the transfer function at these two isolated campuses should not be extrapolated to other regional or institutional contexts without further research.

Unfortunately, for many community colleges, reliance upon instructor involvement and small class size may not be a viable option. In a situation where a greater-than-average number of basic writing sections are taught by adjuncts or part-time instructors, and in situations where there are upwards of 15 or more sections of basic writing offered each semester, each with enrollment caps of between 20 and 30 students per class, intense instructor involvement and small class size may be out of the question. What Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum found in their study of these two community college campuses may work in that particular context, but extrapolating those findings as applicable in most if not all cases is extremely problematic.

Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum maintain that tracking certain students into applied occupational courses (vocational training) has clear economic benefits. They state that a student's choice to pursue an A.A.S. (Associate of Applied Science) degree is unlikely to affect that student's employment opportunities; in fact, they maintain that "it is unlikely that employers understand the difference between the two degrees" (264), meaning that employers aren't going to take the time to determine if the student has completed a liberal arts-oriented, transfer-oriented associate's degree – the Associate of Arts (AA) degree – or a degree that is based more on vocational training – the AAS degree. Additionally, "the bulk of these AAS credits can also be transferred to a four-year college if students choose to continue their education. Deception prevents students from even considering these alternative options" (264).

Here again, institutional and regional constraints come into play, making Deil-Amen's and Rosenbaum's assertions only partially applicable. While it may be true that, in some instances, AAS credits transfer to four-year institutions, there is no guarantee that the requisite cooperation agreements exist between the majority of four-year institutions and the community colleges from which these students would be transferring. In "Community Colleges and Tracking in Higher Education," Richard D. Alba and David E. Lavin report on their longitudinal study of the success rates of two groups of students: those who applied to and were granted admission to CUNY and those who applied to CUNY but, for remediation reasons, were admitted instead to one of the community colleges that are a part of the CUNY system. What they found at the end of their study was that, while "[m]any of the students who applied for or were placed in community college aspired to at least the baccalaureate degree," by the end of the fifth year of the

study only a quarter of these students actually transferred to CUNY (225). In addition, they found that second-year students at every community college they surveyed were less likely than those at any of the senior-level colleges to earn a baccalaureate degree (233). Alba and Lavin concluded that, while it might be tempting to exaggerate the impact of the difference made by community college placement, there was a discernable impact: "Placement in a senior college could perhaps be described as giving a student an extra edge or push; placement in a community college as posing an extra hurdle" (236). When taken with other factors in a student's educational history – "to come from non-academic tracks in high school, to have poor high school records, to be black or Hispanic, to be older than the modal age of freshmen" (237) – Alba and Lavin conclude that placement into a community college strictly based on a perceived need for remediation may contribute yet another factor that will ultimately have a large negative impact on a student's educational success.

The rationale for moving basic writing courses in particular and remedial education in general to the community college level is two-fold. As Eric P. Bettinger and Bridget Terry Long point out in "Remediation at the Community College: Student Participation and Outcomes," many administrators and faculty "philosophically disagree with the practice of teaching precollege-level courses at four year institutions," preferring to have community colleges and/or high schools be the site for remedial education; and secondly, since it is more costly to remediate students at a four-year institution than at a two-year one, universities can protect already strained budgets and resources by insisting that remediation take place at the community college (19). An additional consideration brought out by Bettinger and Long is that, since remedial courses carry no degree or

certificate credit, remediation frequently lengthens the time needed for students to complete a course of study, thus increasing exponentially the chances for remedial students to drop out due to frustration or drop out because their financial aid either has been decreased[22] or denied due to time-limited financial aid packages (20). This also impacts graduation rates, since "remedial courses are often the gateway for students to enroll in upper-level courses" and enrollment in these classes restrict admittance until all remediation is complete (20); universities are more likely to relegate remedial education to other sources – usually local community colleges – if they perceive that maintaining these courses will adversely affect their retention and/or graduation rates.

What Deil-Amen's and Rosenbaum's study does, in fact, uncover is an aspect of basic writing practice and pedagogy that continues to trouble scholars, faculty, and students alike: the institutionally contextual nature of the enterprise. These basic writing programs are like snowflakes, with no two alike; what works – or doesn't work – in one context may prove to be extremely successful – or unsuccessful – in another because of the multitude of factors that shape and guide how basic writing is taught in different settings. Some community colleges adopt a single-tier approach, offering only one level of basic writing instruction, while others adopt a multi-tier approach[23]; some institutions have specific time constraints placed on the amount of time a student can be given to successfully complete basic writing and move on to first-semester composition, while others are more lenient. For example, within the University of California and California State University systems, students requiring remediation are given a one-year time limit

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[22] Some forms of federal financial aid are not applicable toward the cost of remedial courses; therefore, in some instances, students requiring remedial courses are forced to pay for them – sometimes at prices much higher than regular credit courses cost.
[23] See Chapter 3 for an explication of the three-tier approach utilized by Tyler Junior College.

within which to complete all required remedial courses before those students can be considered for admission at one of the systems' four-year institutions[24]. For some community colleges, budgetary constraints determine how many courses will be offered and how many students will be allowed in each class, while other campuses may have a freer budgetary rein in making these decisions. At some community colleges, the curricular emphasis is on vocational training, while other community college campuses either split their focus between vocational training and transfer courses or maintain a focus strictly on the transfer function. Just as with pre-entrance testing, there are as many variations and variables at work as there are community college campuses across the country.

The nature of community colleges in general is to be the less autonomous and more resource-dependent sector of higher education than their four-year institutional counterparts. In "Statewide Governance Structures and Two-Year Colleges" by Richard C. Richardson, Jr., and Gerardo E. de los Santos, the authors point out that community colleges face constraints from a variety of governmental (federal, state, and local) agencies that many four-year institutions do not have to consider:

> Given the nature of community colleges as resource-dependent organizations, the ideal of local autonomy will always be something to be pursued rather than an attainable end . . . Most community college leaders accept the reality of state-level coordination and governance, particularly as it applies to budgeting and allocating resources fairly; being accountable for state-appropriated funds; planning for statewide access to an appropriate range of programs, including the use of technology to deliver

[24] See Chapter 1 for a more detailed explanation of the California approach.

> distance education; assuring barrier-free articulation and transfer; and providing credible information to elected state leaders and the general public about services and performance. Less accepted realities are actions that cap enrollments, require high-stakes tests of student competencies, specify admission eligibility, mandate responsibility for remedial education, limit program or course availability, mandate faculty governance arrangements, or base allocations on state-specified performance criteria. (42)

Because of these constraints, factors which inevitably vary from state to state and, at times, from campus to campus, recommendations on how to deal with the issue of basic writing at the community college on anything but a local level will continue to be land-locked, of sorts – applicable in a few but not all situations. If viable recommendations and solutions for addressing this issue are to be found, it will be within a study of specific institutional contexts and how specific campuses deal with basic writing instruction as part of their institutional (and, often, state-mandated) missions and unique situations. In Chapter 3, I will be looking at three such situations, three different community college campuses in East Texas, at how each one deals with basic writing instruction, and at the effects of their basic writing approaches on student progress and retention.

CHAPTER THREE
BASIC WRITING AT THE POINT OF DISJUNCTURE: HOW IT IS, HOW IT SHOULD BE

With the growing trend of relegating basic writing instruction to community colleges, coupled with what some say is the problematic nature of community colleges as a gatekeeper limiting the aspirations of the more underprepared students, an examination of how basic writing is taught at community colleges becomes crucial in determining the possible ramifications of this trend. Such an examination is needed for two reasons. First, in light of the increasing shift of basic writing instruction to community colleges, an examination is needed to see where changes in curricula and/or practices should be made. Such an examination is, at times, frustrating due to the number of institutional and state-mandated constraints that influence each community college's approach to basic writing instruction; and extrapolating any kind of formula for fixing potential problems is further complicated by those varying contexts.

The second reason why this examination is needed is because of the increasing numbers of students from low-income or minority backgrounds who are placed into basic writing courses each year[25]. These students come to community colleges seeking the advantages that higher education can offer; many of them, unfortunately, get placed in basic writing classes that, as delineated in Chapter 2, can thwart these students' aspirations for post-college success. What this chapter attempts to do is to look not only at various approaches nationwide but also at the more immediate situation in community colleges in Texas, where state laws dictate who should be in basic writing classes and

[25] The word "minority" here may be misleading; for example, in California and in Texas, "Anglos" are now officially the "minority."

where programs are often designed to deal with the growing number of students required to take basic writing classes.

As part of this examination, I will be looking at course descriptions from a select sample[26] of community colleges' most recent catalogs, at course syllabi (where available through the respective college's web site or faculty web pages), at job descriptions detailing what some colleges require of applicants for basic writing instructor positions, and at the criteria these colleges use to place students in basic writing classes. I will be looking in more detail at the basic writing program at Tyler Junior College, one of the biggest basic writing programs in Texas at the community college level, with a closer look at the philosophical and pedagogical approaches of those who teach basic writing there and the approach dictated by the chair of the College Preparatory Studies department, within which the basic writing courses are offered. I will also be examining the laws and regulations currently in effect in Texas, from both the state legislature and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, that reveal a deeper philosophical view of basic writing (and of writing in general) that may be in direct opposition to what basic writing theory and pedagogy tells us is the best way to approach basic writing instruction.

Different States, Different Strategies?

There are as many variations in basic writing courses nationwide as there are community colleges – each one with its own agenda and function within its system. Trying to examine all of them would be a Herculean effort far beyond the limits of this work; however, I have attempted to gather a sampling from various regions – west coast, east coast, north, and south – in addition to specific sites that play an integral role in the

[26] The sample was chosen using various criteria: I tried to select community colleges that have a historical tie to the development of community colleges in America (Joliet Community College, for example); I also selected community colleges that have large student populations and large basic writing programs.

history of community colleges (California, Illinois, for example) in order to see if there are any constants that can be identified.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges[27], there are over 1,100 community colleges in the United States (as of January 2006), the vast majority of which are public institutions; and the 11.6 million students attending those community colleges constitute 45 percent of all undergraduates and first-time freshmen in the country. American community colleges also enroll a growing percentage of minority students, groups from which, historically, basic writers usually come: 47 percent of all African-American undergraduates, 55 percent of all Hispanic undergraduates, 47 percent of all Asian/Pacific Islander undergraduates, and 57 percent of all Native American undergraduates are on community college campuses (American Association of Community Colleges).

TABLE 3A – COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACT SHEET (A/O JANUARY 2006)[28]

Number and Type of Colleges
Public institutions - 986
Independent institutions - 171
Tribal institutions - 29
Total - 1,186

Enrollment:
11.6 million students
6.6 million credit
5 million noncredit
Enrolled full time - 40%
Enrolled part time - 60%

45% of all U.S. undergraduates
45% of first-time freshmen
59% women; 41% men
62% part time; 38% full time (full time = 12 + credit hours)

[27] See Table 3A for a more detailed breakdown of community college statistics.
[28] From American Association of Community Colleges website (www.aacc.edu)

Student Profile:
47% of black undergraduate students
55% of Hispanic
47% of Asian/Pacific Islander
57% of Native American

Average student age - 29 years

Students Receiving Financial Aid:
Any aid - 47%
Federal Grants - 23%
Federal loans - 11%
State aid - 12%

Percentage of Federal Financial Aid
Pell Grants - 35.0%
Campus-based aid - 9.8%
Stafford Loans (subsidized - 5.4%; unsubsidized - 4.4%)

Degrees and Certificates Annually:
Associate degrees - 486,293
Two-year certificates - 235,999

Revenue Sources: (Public Colleges)
42% - state funds
18% - tuition and fees
24% - local funds
6% - federal funds
10% - other

Governance: (Public Colleges)
More than 600 boards of trustees
6,000 board members
29 states - local boards
16 states - state boards
4 states - local/state boards

As more and more universities opt to discontinue basic writing programs and to require that students needing remediation of any kind receive this instruction at community colleges, these numbers will continue to grow, making community colleges an increasingly vital site for research in basic writing pedagogy and technology. However, a look into current practices and approaches to basic writing instruction at community colleges across the country reveals that many basic writers are currently in

programs that emphasize grammatical competence over the writing process and that depend on the completion of exercises rather than the actual writing of essays.

Joliet Junior College in Joliet, Illinois, is the nation's oldest community college, tracing its roots back to 1901 and the efforts of William Rainey Harper, then president of the University of Chicago. Its mission and philosophy statements cite "this college's commitment to lifelong learning" by way of providing "a broad spectrum of transitional, extension, adult, continuing, and workforce education" and establishing "partnerships with its community to provide high quality training and work force development" (Joliet). While this may seem to some as indicative of the approach Clark defines as a "cooling-out function," the college's course descriptions for its basic writing classes are just ambiguous enough to make any definitive judgment regarding how long it might take a student to pass from basic writing into a credit-bearing composition class difficult to pin down.

Joliet's approach begins with placement; all students attending Joliet are required to take COMPASS tests[29] in mathematics, reading, and writing; those students who have accumulated 12 or more credit hours must take these tests before registering for future classes, and all new full-time students make take these placement tests before registering for their first classes (Joliet "Admission Policies"). However, according to Joliet's testing procedures, "only one retest is permitted. Once a student begins an English/math course sequence, the COMPASS cannot be retaken" (Joliet "Placement Tests"); once a student is

[29] COMPASS® is an acronym for COMputer Adaptive Placement Assessment and Support System and is a computerized exam which uses adaptive testing techniques to quickly and accurately place students into courses appropriate to their individual skill levels. (See www.compassprep.com for more information.)

placed in one of Joliet's basic writing courses, only a grade of "C" or better can move that student from basic writing to a credit-bearing composition course.

Joliet's basic writing courses are designed to begin with a course entitled Fundamentals of English (ENG 098), a course that, according to the course description in the college's catalog, offers "practice in the fundamentals of written expression[30]" (Joliet, *Catalog*). Students who pass ENG 098 with a "C" or better then have the option of either enrolling in the next course in the sequence (ENG 099) or in an integrated college reading and writing course (ENG 096). The course description for ENG 099 states that this course's primary focus is "practice in the essential principles of effective writing expression: sentence skills, unity, support, and coherence" which will, hopefully, culminate in "effective paragraph writing, pre-writing techniques, and essay development" (Joliet, "Catalog"). In order to move from ENG 099 to ENG 101 (Joliet's first-year credit-bearing composition course), students must have a "C" or better in ENG 099 (or must have scored high enough on the placement exam to be enrolled directly in the course). Since the COMPASS test cannot be retaken, students must be enrolled in one of these two non-transfer courses until they can receive a grade of "C" or better – which may mean, for some students, two or more semesters of accumulating credits (and tuition costs) for courses that will not count toward their degrees or certificates.

The other option for Joliet students needing basic writing is ENG 096, an integrated college reading and writing course that, according to the catalog course description, is designed to "develop critical thinking skills and written responses to current cross-disciplinary materials showing the integration of reading and writing in

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[30] What these specific "fundamentals" might be are not enumerated, neither in the course description nor in any available course syllabi.

college-level coursework" (Joliet *Catalog*). This course is open to students who receive a "C" or better in ENG 098, and the description does not include the "not intended for transfer" limitation nor does it specify the emphasis on lower-level concerns such as sentence skills or paragraph writing[31]. This approach comes closer to mirroring the pedagogy advocated by many basic writing scholars such as David Bartholomae, Bruce Horner, Min Zhan-Liu and others: it integrates writing and reading as well as focusing on the types of materials that students are likely to encounter in other disciplines and other classes. This approach, I feel, would better prepare basic writing students for writing situations they are likely to face, especially for transfer students seeking a degree beyond their community college experience. As Bartholmae, Horner and Zhan-Liu, and Shor have pointed out, writers taught in an atmosphere where they are engaged with texts that challenge them and that have a greater likelihood to have some bearing on these students' lives or their future coursework – and in an atmosphere where lower-level (sentence-level) concerns are addressed in the context of the students' own essays – are more likely to have success after leaving basic writing[32].

William Rainey Harper College (also known as Harper College) is located in Palatine, Illinois, and is named after the man who started Joliet Junior College (see above). It was begun in March of 1965 as a result of the then-newly enacted Illinois Community College Act, and it serves the northwest suburban Chicago area (Harper College Catalog). Students new to Harper College or those who are transferring to Harper must take the COMPASS placement test before enrolling in any math, reading, or

[31] Attempts to ascertain from faculty at Joliet Junior College how many students take this option and successfully complete it were met with no response.
[32] See also Susan Stan and Terrence G. Collins's "Basic Writing: Curricular Interactions with New Technology" in Dialogue on Writing: Rethinking ESL, Basic Writing, and First-Year Composition.

writing courses (www.harpercollege.edu). At Harper College, basic writing courses are divided into two tiers as well: one two-section tier dealing strictly with those students who are deaf/hard of hearing and one one-course tier for other basic writers. What I find intriguing about this arrangement is Harper College's recognition that deaf and hard-of-hearing students who require basic writing instruction must be taught differently because of their distinctive learning needs. In my experience with deaf/hard-of-hearing students in a basic writing class, I have found that these students have the same problems with language barriers as ESL (English as a second language) students. American Sign Language (ASL) is a pictorially-based language, and students relying on ASL must then translate those signs, those pictures, into written discourse; if a student needs basic writing instruction, that translation function can cause the student difficulty in effectively expressing in writing what he or she would normally sign. A key ingredient to the success of these courses is the availability of ASL translators in the classroom; some colleges require anyone teaching a course with deaf or hard-of-hearing students to know and be able to teach in ASL, while other colleges provide translators through a disabilities support office or student services.

The other option for basic writing instruction at Harper College is ENG 098, a three-hour, non-transfer-credit course that "provides instruction in developing basic writing skills essential for effective written discourse by giving students the conceptual tools necessary for developing a basic framework for writing" (Harper *Catalog*). As with the descriptions from Joliet Junior College, the wording of this course description is vague enough to accommodate any pedagogical approach from "skill drills" to intensive writing and revising of entire essays. What Harper College defines as "basic writing

skills essential for effective written discourse" may not be identical to those at a neighboring community college; therefore, the approach for each section of a particular basic writing course may vary from instructor to instructor, campus to campus, college to college, based on the college's mandated performance or learning outcomes for that course and the instructor's familiarity (or lack thereof) with best practices in basic writing instruction.

This varied set of contexts and mandates is also seen in California, where the number of community colleges and the ethnic diversity of the students in them grow every year. Unfortunately, as mentioned in Chapter 1, both the University of California system and the California State University system have put strict time constraints on the completion of any needed remediation; students who need more than a year to complete remediation and to provide evidence (either through retesting or grade achievement in a particular class) of their readiness for university-level work are forced to continue their educations at the community college[33]. As a result of these constraints, and as a result of the growing numbers of minority students entering the California higher education system, the number of basic writing courses and the variety of basic writing courses at these community colleges are going to be much different than, perhaps, any other state's offerings.

For example, Los Angeles City College, part of the Los Angeles Community College District, offers 10 different courses under the heading of "English—Basic Skills" (LACC *Catalog*). Students are placed in these courses based on their performance on a

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[33] According to a report issued by the Center for Community College Policy in 2002 ("State Policies on Community College Remedial Education: Findings from a National Survey"), California has also instituted a restriction on how many times a specific remedial course can be re-taken: once.

computerized writing test which, according to the website for the school's Assessment and Placement Office:

> [W]ill measure your ability to write clear and coherent English compositions. Essays that are developed and organized with appropriate details and examples will have a higher score than shorter, less organized, more general essays that may have more grammatical errors. Note: Your English Essay score represents 60% of the English placement determination. (http://www.lacitycollege.edu/services/matriculation /matric%20pages/assessment)

ENGLISH 20, the lowest level, concentrates on "instruction in techniques in writing of clear, coherent compositions and improvement in reading skills which reinforce writing skills necessary for academic success" (LACC *Catalog*). The next level, ENGLISH 21, is an introduction to "English fundamentals," including "basic grammar, reading, and writing skills" with a concomitant lab that offers individual tutoring and writing practice. Other courses offered are Composition and Critical Reading, Reading and Study Improvement, Reading Clinic, Writing and Reading on the Computer, and Writing a Memoir.

These basic writing courses are supported by a Learning Skills Center, which, on the Los Angeles City College website, is touted as having individualized programs that are "developed on the basis of diagnostic tests administered to each student to determine his or her academic needs" and take place on a self-paced basis with instructor-student conferences and peer tutoring available if requested by the student. Overall, the emphasis of these self-paced lessons is "on the improvement of basic skills in reading, vocabulary,

study skills, writing, [and] grammar" (LACC "Learning Skills Center"). Generally, any individualized program that is self-paced is done through computer modules covering skills such as punctuation, sentence comprehension, and parts of speech. While none of the courses offered under "English – Basic Skills" require students to complete a predetermined number of hours in this lab environment, students may still be referred there by instructors to address specific problem areas identified in their writing. Note that instructor-student conferences and peer tutoring are strictly at the student's request; however, basic writers are probably the least likely to initiate any requests for tutoring of this kind and ask for it only at the behest of their instructors, instructors who, if adjunct or part-time, have little time or the facilities needed to conduct these conferences due to course loads and/or large course enrollments.

At Cabrillo College (also in California), some of their basic writing courses are offered in a distance-learning format, with instructors available only through televised lectures or via telephone or e-mail. While this may be logistically convenient for some students, it also deprives them of valuable one-on-one time with their instructors where face-to-face conferences can help students address potential writing difficulties[34]. Those courses offered on campus start off with ENGL 255, Basic English, which "develops writing and grammar skills that are below college level with emphasis on essay writing, grammar, word processing, and other skills for success in college" (Cabrillo *Catalog*). Those students successfully completing ENGL 255 are then eligible to take ENGL 100, Elements of Writing, where students are introduced to a variety of discourse modes such as personal narrative, analytical essays, reports, and persuasive prose. This course also

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[34] For more information on distance learning and remedial education, see "Use of Advanced Technology in Remedial Education," part of an Executive Summary issued in 2004 by the National Center for Education Statistics (http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/peqis/publications).

has a lab requirement in which students "practice and study . . . grammar, sentence structure, punctuation and style" in the context of their own writing in small weekly workshops. While this particular course comes close to the approach advocated by basic writing professionals, other required remedial courses revert the focus back to an emphasis on punctuation and sentence structure (as in ENGL 115), basic sentence writing (ENGL 250), and lessons in sentence writing (ENGL 251). According to the course descriptions in the most recent catalog, Cabrillo College students may repeat ENGL 100 and 115 three times; however, if their skill proficiencies have not yet reached college-mandated levels after that third time, they cannot go further (Cabrillo *Catalog*).

These regulations may not seem, on their surface, onerous; however, one must remember that both the University of California System and the California State University System have decreed that any student wishing to attend one of their campuses must first complete needed remediation within one school year. If a student must begin with ENGL 255 and then ENGL 100 and then ENGL 115, even with no repeating of any course, that would mean three semesters (or two regular semesters plus a shortened summer session); if any of those courses should need to be repeated, however, that would put the student beyond the year deadline, and any hopes of transferring to or continuing at either the University of California or California State University systems might be in jeopardy, especially those Cabrillo students who are unsuccessful in passing ENGL 100 or 115 after their third attempt. With these regulations in place, it might not be outside the realm of possibility for basic writers trapped within this system to feel frustrated – or, as Burton Clark put it, "cooled out -- which might lead many of them seek out alternatives in vocational education.

Just such a scenario is anticipated by the Community College of Baltimore County, in Baltimore, Maryland. According to their most recent catalog, students who lack the minimal skills required for developmental courses are referred to Academic Skills Enhancement (ASE) courses offered by the Continuing Education and Economic Development division. These courses promise students an emphasis on "writing skills needed in the contemporary workplace" (CCBC *Catalog*) but provide no mention of preparing students to go further, either to developmental courses or to credit-bearing courses. For those students whose skill levels are deemed requisite for developmental courses, there are two options: ENGL 051, Basic Writing I, and ENGL 052, Basic Writing II.

ENGL 051 is described, in the college's catalog, as providing "intensive instruction and practice in basic writing," including activities covering "drafting, revision, and editing processes as well as instruction in grammar and mechanics" (CCBC *Catalog*). However, the "Common Course Outline" available through a link on the college's web page offers more information about what the end objectives for this course are:

> Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:
>
> 1. employ a generative and recursive writing process that includes invention, planning, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading
> 2. develop related paragraphs on an assigned topic
> 3. write for a variety of specific audiences
> 4. write clear sentences that are varied in structure and length
> 5. write well-developed paragraphs

6. write topic or controlling sentences for individual paragraphs
7. support main points with appropriate evidence
8. maintain a clear aim or purpose throughout related paragraphs
9. use simple transitions effectively
10. identify and correct major sentence-level errors (especially sentence fragments, comma-spliced and run-on sentences, subject-verb-disagreement, and incorrect verb tense and form) in their own writing. (CCBC "Online Syllabi")

While that is quite an impressive list of objectives, even for a four-hour course, and while some of the objectives are laudable, a bit of deeper investigation reveals that the textbook required for all sections of this course is *Write Smart with Readings: Sentences to Paragraphs*, a text that is predominantly exercise driven and focused strictly on the writing of sentences and, later, paragraphs. As Patrick Hartwell points out in "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar," there is no clear consensus within basic writing scholarship that a focus on sentence-level error and/or grammar is effective (368), while other studies (see Noguchi) state quite clearly that such a focus may actually have detrimental effects on a student's ability to successfully write essay-length compositions.

Students enrolled in ENGL 051 either must pass a cumulative test (based on the above-mentioned competencies) or submit an end-of-the-course portfolio for assessment in order to be eligible for ENGL 052, Basic Writing II. Basic Writing II is a three-hour course that takes students from the sentence and paragraph to a focus on paragraphs and essays. According to the Common Course Outline provided on the college's website, the overall course objectives are:

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. employ a generative and recursive writing process that includes invention, planning, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading
2. write for a variety of purposes and audiences
3. develop and organize appropriate evidence
4. use a variety of sentence structures
5. write effective, focused and logically organized paragraphs
6. write topic sentences for individual paragraphs
7. write thesis or controlling sentences for essays
8. write introductory and concluding paragraphs
9. use effective transitions within and between paragraphs
10. write coherent essays, as appropriate to topic, audience and purpose
11. work collaboratively with peers in the development and revision of an essay
12. identify and correct major sentence-level errors (especially sentence fragments, comma-spliced and run-on sentences, subject-verb-disagreement, and incorrect verb tense and form) in their own writing
13. identify and correct minor sentence-level errors (including apostrophes, punctuation[35], pronoun reference and agreement,

[35] Why an apostrophe is not classified as punctuation is not explained on the syllabus.

and capitalization) in their own writing. (CCBC "Online Syllabi")

Many of these items are almost identical to the objectives for ENGL 051, and, although the tenor of these objectives suggests that grammar error is a minor concern, some reveal a focus that is not far removed from the sentence-level focus of ENGL 050. Here again, no conclusive studies have shown that such a focus culminates in any real advantage for basic writing students. As for textbooks required for sections of this course, there is a much wider variety than for ENGL 050; however, many of them are of a similar nature – handbooks such as Lynn Troyka's *QA Compact* and *Simon/Schuester Handbook*, the late Diana Hacker's *Bedford Handbook*, and Hugh Aaron's *Little, Brown Handbook*. As with ENGL 050, students must demonstrate their readiness to move on to ENGL 101 (a transfer-eligible, credit-bearing course) by either submission of a portfolio or a cumulative test based on the end-of-course competencies listed above. The portfolio for this course must include "at least six pieces of writing . . . at least one of the multi-paragraph pieces will be written without the assistance of the teacher or tutors as a means of assessing students' end-of-semester competency" (CCBC "Online Syllabi"). Expecting basic writers – or any writer, for that matter – to not take advantage of outside assistance or review gives these students a rather Gradgrindian view of the writing process: something to be faced, from beginning to end, alone, with no one to call on for assistance[36].

This is not the case at Broward Community College in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where each of the three College Preparatory Writing Skills classes comes with a

[36] There is no mention in either of the Common Course Syllabi of a lab requirement or the availability of a writing center or learning skills resource center where these students might receive extra assistance or tutoring.

laboratory component that supplements classroom instruction. The first class, ENC0010, focuses on an "overview of the fundamentals of grammar, mechanics, usage, sentence structure, and paragraph development" (Broward *Catalog*). Any student receiving a "D" or an "F" in this course must repeat it, and students must complete the 16-hour lab requirement[37] in order to receive credit for the course, credit that may not be used to meet degree requirements. The second class, ENC0021, focuses on "a refinement of grammatical, mechanical, and usage principles including an overview of the strategies of paragraph and essay development" (Broward *Catalog*) and also requires completion of the 16-hour lab component to receive credit (again, not usable for degree requirements) for the course. The third class, ENC0085, Integrated Grammar and Writing, compacts the previous two courses in a one-semester course. According to the college's catalog, "students who earn a 'D' [in ENC0085] may enroll in ENC0021," but "students who receive an "F" must enroll in ENC0020" (Broward *Catalog*). Students have the option to attempt this combined course; however, if they are not successful, they must go back, potentially to the very beginning, and take each course separately; the catalog also specifies that students unsuccessful after their second attempt at what they term a "college-prep" course are ineligible to use any form of financial aid to pay for additional remedial courses. With the special needs and writing barriers that many basic writers bring with them to the classroom, attempts to complete the integrated course could result in more time needed to complete remediation, a delay in completing degree requirements, and an additional financial burden.

[37] While the Broward catalog mentions this 16-hour lab requirement, no mention is given as to what specifically these lab hours will entail or encompass, other than students would have access to tutoring and lab computers.

Delays in completing degree requirements as well as delays in completing remedial prerequisites seem inherent in the design of basic writing programs; with multi-tier course designs and the ominous spectre of having to take specific courses more than once, delays play a potent role in a basic writer's successful completion of his or her community college degree and may be integral in many students' decisions to forego that degree in favor of a vocational certificate. It seems the more steps there are for a basic writer to complete in order to move out of remediation, the more likely it is for those students to either drop out or opt for a switch to vocational education[38]. And nowhere are these delays more evidence, or more insidious, than in Texas.

The Texas Context: Testing Rules, or, How to You Solve a Problem Like a THEA?

The delays inherent in the Texas system are not due so much to the design of individual college's basic writing programs but rather to regulations put in place by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), governing not only who belongs in developmental education but also how developmental education is defined. Also known as the Texas Success Initiative, these regulations determine scoring guidelines for the Texas Higher Education Assessment test (THEA), formerly known as the TASP (Texas Academic Skills Program) Test. This test scores students in three academic areas: reading, mathematics, and writing. Table 3B provides a breakdown and description of each section of the test.

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[38] See "Dropout and Stopout Patterns Among Developmental Education Students in Texas Community Colleges" by Hansel Burley, Bonita Butler, and Brent Cejda, Community College Journal of Research and Practice 25 (2001).

TABLE 3B

Section	Description
Reading	**Consists of approximately 40 multiple-choice questions matched to about seven reading selections of 300 to 750 words each.** The reading selections represent a variety of subject areas and are similar to reading materials (e.g., textbooks, manuals) that students are likely to encounter during their first year of college. Students will be asked to answer several multiple-choice questions about each reading selection.
Mathematics	**Consists of approximately 50 multiple-choice questions covering four general areas: fundamental mathematics, algebra, geometry, and problem solving.** The test questions focus on a student's ability to perform mathematical operations and solve problems. Appropriate formulas will be provided to help students perform some of the calculations required by the test questions. Note that you may use a four-function (+, –, ×, ÷), nonprogrammable calculator [with square root (√) and percent (%) keys].
Writing	**Contains two subsections: a writing sample subsection requiring students to demonstrate their ability to communicate effectively in writing on a given topic and a multiple-choice subsection including approximately 40 questions assessing students' ability to recognize various elements of effective writing.** Students are asked to prepare a multiple-paragraph writing sample of about 300–600 words on an assigned topic. Students' writing samples are scored on the basis of how effectively they communicate a whole message to a specified audience for a stated purpose. Students will be assessed on their ability to express, organize, and support opinions and ideas, rather than on the position they express.

(From the THEA web site)

For the purposes of this work, we will be focusing solely on the writing portion. This test is required of all high school seniors planning to attend a state-funded college or university and is used by colleges and universities as a placement tool to determine whether a student should go directly into first-year composition or requires remediation. According to Section 4.57 of the Texas Success Initiative, the minimum passing standard on the multiple choice subsection of the writing portion of the THEA test is a score of 220, coupled with a score of 6 on the written essay portion (or a score of 5 if the student

has passed the multiple choice portion of the test)[39]. The multiple choice questions focus on such discourse conventions as sentence structure, usage and style, and correct wording; the writing portion of the test gives students a prompt from which they are to write a 300-600 word essay, which will be scored based on its compliance with the following criteria:

- APPROPRIATENESS—the extent to which you address the topic and use language and style appropriate to the given audience, purpose, and occasion.
- UNITY AND FOCUS—the clarity with which you state and maintain your main idea or point of view.
- DEVELOPMENT—the amount, depth, and specificity of your supporting details.
- ORGANIZATION—the clarity of your writing and the logical sequence of your ideas.
- SENTENCE STRUCTURE—the effectiveness of your sentence structure and the extent to which your writing is free of errors in sentence structure.
- USAGE—the extent to which your writing is free of errors in usage and shows care and precision in word choice.

[39] Essays produced for the written portion are scored by two different readers based on a scale ranging from 0 to 4. If both readers give the essay a score of 3, it passes; if both readers give the essay a score of 2, it does not pass; if the readers are split with one giving the essay a score of 3 and the other giving the essay a score of 2, then the student's score on the multiple choice section of the writing portion determines whether the student receives a passing score for the entire writing portion.

- MECHANICAL CONVENTIONS—your ability to spell common words and to use the conventions of capitalization and punctuation. (THEA Practice Test)

However, in some cases, these prompts ask students to write about subjects that they know little about, which can cause confusion and frustration in an already tense situation. These students are left groping for something substantive to say about a topic that they know – or care – little about and for an audience that they have a hard time defining. In most cases, the only audience identified within the written essay instructions is "for a classroom instructor." Such ambiguity can leave a basic writer with little on which to form his or her ideas. As Richard Paul and Linda Elder point out in "Critical Thinking ... and the Art of Substantive Writing, Part I," skilled writers write purposely, with an agenda, a goal, and an objective in mind. The kind of impressionistic writing required by most THEA writing prompts, Paul and Elder state, leads to fragmented writing that comes from a fragmented way of thinking. "Being fragmented, it fragments what it writes. Being uncritical, it assumes its own point of view to be insightful and justified and therefore not in need of justification relative to competing points of view" (Paul and Elder 40). Having participated in several scoring sections for these essays, I have seen Paul and Elder's assertions become reality – essays built on little more than an "I think so, therefore it must be right" attitude with little in the way of cohesiveness; essays rife with fragmented, tortured sentences and syntax and vague generalizations rather than concrete support; essays replete with the kinds of errors first studied (in any quantitative manner) by Mina Shaughnessy. These are the kinds of essays that usually receive less-than-passing scores, sending their writers to basic writing classrooms across Texas.

What students encounter when they arrive in these classrooms varies by institution. Some colleges, and those universities who still have basic writing programs, focus on techniques students can employ to better and more successfully address writing prompts like the ones they encounter on the THEA test, while other colleges place these students in a multi-tiered basic writing program that, in some cases, focuses solely on grammar and usage drills drawn from an exercise-driven textbook in classes taught by individuals who may – and usually do not – have some passing acquaintance with effective basic writing pedagogy and practice. And since the Texas Success Initiative dictates that students requiring remediation must be enrolled in remedial classes until they can successfully pass any and all sections of the THEA test that they failed[40], these students are often trapped in a recursive, time- and money-consuming cycle of frustration and, sometimes, failure, delaying and often thwarting their plans for a degree[41]. In the most recent catalog for the Dallas County Community College District, students learn that "the State of Texas will pay for only 27 hours of attempted Developmental Studies courses" and that "students may be required to pay a higher rate of tuition for any developmental hours beyond the 27 hour limit" (DCCCD *Catalog*). Students can progress on to credit-bearing courses only upon submission of passing scores to the particular institution within the district where they are attending; until then, they are restricted to developmental courses only.

[40] The Texas Success Initiative makes allowance for students requiring remediation to complete up to 27 credit hours; if after that time, however, the student has not passed his/her remedial courses, the student cannot enroll in any other courses until he/she can produce evidence that all sections of the THEA test have been passed.

[41] TSI also mandates that a student who is enrolled in only one remedial course (be it math, reading, or writing) and who attempts to drop that course will have the rest of his/her courses for that semester cancelled.

No definitive studies have been done on Texas community college students to determine whether this 27-hour limit is within the realm of possibility for most remedial students. Since studies have shown that a large segment of basic writing students come from economically depressed sectors of the population and from less-than-stellar secondary education experiences, the prospect of having to pay higher tuition fees for developmental courses they are required by state statute to take may make these students think twice about pursuing any goals they may have for higher education.

Actual basic writing instruction at the Dallas County Community College District takes many forms; according to their catalog, “instructional formats vary and may include computer-based, self-paced, lecture and online offerings” (*Catalog*). Those courses offered in a more traditional classroom setting vary from DWRI 0090, which purportedly introduces students to the writing process through “getting ideas, writing and rewriting, making improvements, and correcting mistakes,” to DWRI 0400, which is designed “for students with significant writing problems” and is organized around skill development (DCCCD *Catalog*). Where a student falls along that spectrum is determined by his or her score on the writing portion of the THEA test or, in the case of DWRI 0400, direct referral by an instructor.

Interviews with faculty and administrators at some of these community colleges reveal not only the specifics of course offerings but also the insights of the administrators or faculty involved. At Kilgore College, located in east Texas, basic writing students are offered three different levels of instruction, ranging from ENGL 0304 (Developmental English) where the emphasis is on “basic sentence structure, principles of grammar, and spelling” to ENGL 0308 (Developmental English III) which emphasizes multi-paragraph

essays. According to the college's catalog, movement from one course to the next is dependent on an "appropriate placement test score or a C or better" in the previous level course (Kilgore *Catalog*). For example, a student placed in ENGL 0304 can only progress to ENGL 0306 by making a C or better in ENGL 0304; similarly, any student placed initially in ENGL 0306 can only progress to ENGL 0308 by receiving a C or better in ENGL 0306. According to Rebekah Johnson, chair of the English department at Kilgore, many students who begin in ENGL 0304 do not progress very far. "Some never will [complete all three courses]; they 'hit a wall' in ENGL 0306 and never progress further. In fact, not that many actually make it from 0304 to 0308 and then out to ENGL 1301, where they can learn and use correct English" (Johnson). Johnson attributes this failure to many factors: immaturity of the student ("generally non-traditional students have better success"), family and work constraints ("many of our students just have too much on their plates to be very successful"), and lack of preparation at the high school level ("how can we expect them to be ready to write at a college level when they don't write that much in high school?") (Johnson).

However, part of the problem may lie not with the students themselves but with the instructors and the approach they take to basic writing instruction. According to Johnson, during the Fall 2006 semester, Kilgore's basic writing courses were taught by nine instructors, only one of which is full-time and few if any with any background in teaching basic writing (either from past experience or in graduate/post-graduate study). All instructors use the same syllabus (written and designed by the English department) and use the same textbook: the *College Writing Skills* series by John Langan, published by McGraw-Hill Publishers. This series starts with sentence-level drills and culminates,

in Volume 3, in the writing of short essays; each volume is dominated by exercises (complete with perforated pages that the student can tear out of the book and turn in to be graded) that focus on skill drills and error recognition, both totally devoid of any contextual connection with any writing the student may have done independent of the prescribed exercises. "By using the same textbook for all classes," Johnson states, "students know what they're getting and what to expect" (Johnson). Unfortunately, what they are getting has been shown to have little if any effect on their growth as writers (see Noguchi; "Research on Error and Correction" by Glynda Hull, and "Re-thinking the 'Sociality' of Error: Teaching Editing as Negotiation" by Bruce Horner). In the hands of an instructor with little knowledge of how to address basic writers' difficulties, these textbooks (and others like them) only serve to reinforce the notion held by many that anyone can teach basic writing -- that basic writing instruction can be (and perhaps should be) reduced to skill exercises that can be quantifiably graded, with right and wrong answers, and that have little pertinence to the kinds of writing students will have to produce to escape remediation.

What puts many of these students into these basic writing classes is the not-so-simple matter of a score on a standardized test. More and more, both universities and community colleges are relying on students' scores on such standardized tests as the ACT, the SAT, THEA, and the like to assess students' readiness for university- or college-level work. However, many higher education scholars and researchers have begun speaking out regarding the contradictions and perils inherent in such a reliance.

George Hillocks, Jr., a long-time critic of standardized testing and our nation's growing reliance on it[42], states in "Fighting Back: Assessing the Assessments," published in a March 2003 issue of *The English Journal*, that his study shows a definite tendency toward assessment dictating curriculum. "[W]riting assessment drives instruction . . . It stipulates the kinds of writing that should be taught; it sets the standards for what counts as good writing; and it sets the conditions under which students must demonstrate their proficiency, and, as a result, sets out what students learn" (64). He goes on to state that, in many cases, a state's conception of what writing entails will affect decisions about what will be tested, how it will be tested, and how the writing samples will be perceived:

> The questions to be asked are important because the conception that the state adopts will result in decisions about what will be tested and how it will be tested. Does it include attention to all kinds of writing, even those we might not attend to in schools? Does the theory attend to what writing entails, e.g., the writing process? Does it attend to learning processes for writing? Does it have a sound basis in research? Finally, are all of the tests sound? To what extent do they hold up to careful scrutiny? If they do not hold up well to scrutiny, it is predictable that the writing assessment itself will be a disaster. (64)

These are the types of questions that those involved in the every-day workings of composition and basic writing instruction at the university and community college levels know must be addressed in a real, substantive way if these assessment instruments are to be of any valid use; however, the *kairos* for asking these types of questions never arises.

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[42] See also *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning* (Teachers College Press, 2002).

Instead, as Jeanne Cameron, Tina Stavenhagen-Helgren, Philip Walsh, and Barbara Kobritz point out in "Assessment as Critical Praxis: A Community College Experience," the matter of whether or not to assess has been taken out of our hands:

> "To assess or not to assess" is no longer a question in higher education; it has become a political imperative. Instead, we confront the dilemma of whether to assert our role in and ownership of the assessment process or whether to allow external agents to impose their vision of assessment upon us. If we remain passive, we compromise not only our professional autonomy but also the quality of our students' learning. (414)

Remaining passive has resulted, so far, in standardized writing tests that trap thousands of students in basic writing programs (many times contravening their aspirations for higher education goals and social mobility) and that contradict what we know about the writing process.

Edgar H. Schuster points this out in his recent *Phi Delta Kappan* article, "National and State Writing Tests: The Writing Process Betrayed." In it, Schuster maintains that while some state academic standards may say they "broadly support the writing process, including the planning (prewriting), drafting, revision, editing, and publishing (sharing) stages," national and state standardized writing tests validate only one of those stages: drafting (Schuster). In an atmosphere where students are only given a prescribed amount of time, limited resources, and prompts that are sometimes difficult to decipher, many of the steps generally accepted as part of the writing process must be eliminated altogether. How can the results of such tests, then, give administrators and educators a true picture of a student's ability to navigate that process? Schuster also states that most of these

standardized writing tests ask students for persuasive forms of writing which "almost always require more prewriting than other types" (Schuster); however, no time is allowed for prewriting – or for revising, or for proofreading or editing. This is true for the THEA test, administered in Texas, as well as for the SAT and ACT timed writing tests.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) recently released a report entitled "The Impact of the SAT and ACT Timed Writing Tests" in which a panel examined the scores given to writing samples produced during the inaugural SAT and ACT writing tests; their findings concluded that "the timed writing tests may worsen the gap in educational preparedness between the nation's 'haves' and 'have-nots'" ("Impact"), a finding corroborated by Hillocks and others[43]. These are the same tests – and test scores – that determine who gets placed into basic writing instruction and who does not, and in Texas, as in many other states, those lines quite often follow social and economic boundaries, with inordinately large numbers of students from socially and economically repressed segments of our population herded into basic writing programs at community colleges, programs where their desires for baccalaureate degrees and substantially better lives are often derailed or denied.

TJC: Big Program, Big Problems?

Perhaps the biggest basic writing program on the community college level in the state of Texas (based on enrollment figures and number of sections offered) can be found at Tyler Junior College (TJC), located in Tyler, Texas. Founded in 1926, TJC serves thousands of students from across the East Texas region and boasts of a credit enrollment

[43] See also "Special Report: Confronting the Widening Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT," published by *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, "Test-Based Accountability: The Promise and the Perils" by Tom Loveless, and David H. Price's "Outcome-Based Tyranny: Teaching Compliance While Testing Like a State."

of over 12,000 students a year (with an additional 20,000 students enrolled in continuing education courses). In the Fall 2006 semester, 23 sections of basic writing were offered, ranging from ENGL 0301 (College Preparatory English I) to ENGL 0303 (College Preparatory English III)[44]. According to Shelly Caraway, formerly director of retention and student success in the College Preparatory Studies department at TJC, almost half of all students enrolling full-time at TJC require some sort of remediation, with more than two-thirds of that number needing more than one College Preparatory course[45] (Caraway).

As is the case with many basic writing programs in Texas, students entering TJC are placed in remediation as a result of their failure to pass the writing section of the THEA test or based on lower-than-acceptable scores on writing portions of the ACT, SAT, or the Accuplacer test (a computerized exam that, like the COMPASS test, assesses a student's readiness for college-level work)[46]. The basic writing program at TJC is a three-tiered arrangement, with most students starting at the ENGL 0301 level. According to the 2005-2006 TJC Catalog, this course emphasizes "fundamentals of basic grammar and usage, sentence structure, and paragraph development using standard American English"; ENGL 0302, the next course in the sequence, emphasizes "writing logically developed paragraphs and short essays in standard American English"; the final course, ENGL 0303, focuses on writing advanced paragraphs and medium length essays in standard American English" as well as "writing skills necessary for THEA and ENGL 1301" (TJC *Catalog*). The amount of time it takes for a student who starts out at the ENGL 0301 level to make it through this sequence and into ENGL 1301 varies, according

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[44] A fourth course, ENGL 0104, THEA Writing Review, is listed in the college's catalog but was not offered during the Fall 2006 sermester.

[45] See Attachment A for a breakdown of the course descriptions for these College Preparatory courses in English.

[46] See Attachment B for the Testing Requirements for TJC, taken from their 2006-07 Catalog.

to Dr. Deborah Kelley, director of the College Preparatory Studies program, and depends on two things: "where they start in the sequence and whether or not they are a 'serious' student" (Kelley)[47].

According to Kelley, whose background is in ADA compliance and clinical psychology, TJC students generally come from two very different populations: those with "a genetic predisposition and home environment conducive to higher levels of learning" and those who, for various reasons, "have missed several educational milestones" (Kelley). For the latter group (which, as Kelley notes, is increasingly Hispanic), the goal of credit-bearing courses leading to either an associate's degree or a baccalaureate may not be the answer. "We need to stop looking at education as a 'cookie-cutter,'" Kelley states. "It's the kind of education students get rather than whether or not they're going for a bachelor's degree. We need to train these people to be successful in the workforce" (Kelley). Ira Shor, in "Illegal Literacy," takes a different stance:

> Literacy and schooling are officially promoted as ladders to success (as parts of the American Dream) but are unequally delivered as roads to very different lives depending on a student's race, gender, and social class . . . This suggests that the dominant writing pedagogy for the last hundred years – refined usage [as defined by Shaughnessy], basic skills, grammar drills, abstract forms like the 5-paragraph essay, bogus literacy assessment like fill-in-the-blank tests and impromptu timed writing exams, and teacher-centered syllabi – is a curriculum for producing failure for the majority. (105, 107)

[47] See Attachment C for an overview of the College Preparatory Program at TJC, taken from their 2006-07 Catalog.

Kelley's desire for success for these students is laudable; unfortunately, as Shor points out, that success is not likely to be found through the doors of most basic writing classrooms.

That success, however fleeting, can be thwarted if the student drops out of college altogether. According to Kelley, of the students who drop out of TJC from one year to the next, over one-quarter of them come from the College Preparatory Studies department. Another one-third of those who do not drop out never finish the basic writing sequence and opt to shift their aspirations to vocational training programs that do not have an ENGL 1301 prerequisite. This does not pose a problem for Kelley; "Not every job requires a degree; we need to find what is the best fit for the student. Not everyone needs to be a chemist or an engineer. We need plumbers and electricians, too" (Kelley). As for the amount of time it takes a student who is originally placed in ENGL 0301 to finish the entire basic writing sequence, Kelley estimates that, barring unforeseen difficulties, it takes three to four semesters to complete remediation.

One of those unforeseen difficulties may be the number of times a particular course in the sequence must be repeated before the student either passes the writing portion of the THEA exam or successfully completes the "B or Better" option[48]. Another may be the frustration felt by many students at being placed in a basic writing course; still another may be the confusing array of expectations students encounter from their instructors. Michelle Burton, a graduate student at the University of Texas-Tyler, taught basic writing (ENGL 0301) for the first time at TJC during the Fall 2006 semester, and

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[48] Some community colleges in Texas, including TJC, offer basic writing students who have attempted and failed to pass a remedial writing course the option of enrolling in a credit-bearing composition course with the provision that, if that student does not make a grade of 'B' or better in that course, the student must go back to basic writing instruction and cannot progress until he or she passes the writing portion of the THEA exam.

she states that she has noticed that some of the other basic writing instructors there "have low standards for their students' performance behaviorally and overly high standards academically." For instance, Burton states, these instructors consistently assign exercises that the students have no reference point for understanding; "they'll tell students 'do all the exercises on verb tense' when the student does not understand the relationship between a verb and a subject." Additionally, many of the basic writing instructors she has encountered at TJC do not require regular writing assignments; "I've heard some of them totally disregard this as 'being a lot of extra work' that they'd rather not do" (Burton).

Burton's approach is to have her students write regularly. "I think that students learn to write by writing, which is why I have them write weekly paragraphs. I don't think that any one textbook is going to make them better writers." Since Burton was teaching ENGL 0301, which has a mandated focus on grammar and mechanics, she employed some rather non-traditional methods to get the subject matter across to her students. "For those students who seem frustrated [with being in a basic writing course], I assign them [ten-minute] presentations. When we were covering the section on the difference between nouns and verbs, the two students who were assigned that presentation brought in a rap song they had composed; it was great and conveyed the material much better than the textbook did." Another approach Burton takes is to use the students' own writing to exemplify remedies for common usage and grammar problems. "How else are students going to make the connection between what the textbook tells them and their own work?" (Burton).

How else, indeed. Unfortunately, Burton's approaches are not the norm at TJC. While Burton comes from a graduate program with courses that deal with basic writing

pedagogy and practice, many of her colleagues, she states, professed little acquaintance with – or interest in – what the late John Lovas termed "best practices" (Lovas). Like many community college basic writing programs across Texas, most of the basic writing courses at TJC are taught by adjuncts who have little educational background in teaching basic writing or who are hindered by institutionally generated course descriptions and departmentally dictated objectives, syllabi, and textbook selection from approaching their classes in ways that would be most effective for their students. To their credit, however, I must admit that many of these adjuncts are doing the best they can under sometimes frustrating and demeaning conditions. In *Honored but Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching at Community Colleges*, W. Norton Grubb and associates state that at the community college level, remedial classes are looked on as more of an "activity separate from the core purposes [of the college], isolated in a jigsaw puzzle of developmental reading and writing departments and tutorial programs" and that, while "most instructors are quite sympathetic to their students, a few seem to think the task of teaching underprepared students is hopeless" or see themselves merely as "gatekeepers, performing quality control in a flawed production system that had let too many unqualified students pass too far down the line" (171-2).

Contradictory expectations and an over-emphasis on skill exercises rather than actual writing – how can students be expected to ever be ready to assay the level of written discourse that will be expected of them in other college courses when their basic writing instructions is devoid of relevance to that discourse? That is the question I faced when I was given the task of designing and teaching the first developmental writing (and reading) course at the University of Texas-Tyler, which will be covered in Chapter 4.

ATTACHMENT A

College Preparatory Studies
College Preparatory Studies is an intensive academy of courses and programs designed to provide development for students underprepared for college-level work. Assistance in basic skills such as reading, writing, mathematics and personal development is offered to students identified for college preparatory studies in both semesterlength developmental courses and shorter term, individualized programs of study. College Preparatory Studies has several components for success.

English

ENGL 0104 THEA Writing Review (1 credit)
Review and practice in both recognizing various elements of effective writing and also composing original writing samples that effectively communicate a whole message to a specified audience for a stated purpose. This course is conducted on the PLATO system in Pirtle-315.
Prerequisite: Consent of program director.

ENGL 0301 College Preparatory English I (3-1) (3 credits) (CB3201085312)
Developmental course covering written communication with emphasis on fundamentals of basic grammar and usage, sentence structure, and paragraph development using standard American English. [Required of students who do not present qualifying THEA (or alternative) writing test scores.]

ENGL 0302 College Preparatory English II (3-1) (3 credits) (CB3201085312)
Developmental course covering review of basic sentence skills with emphasis on writing logically developed paragraphs and short essays in standard American English. [Required of students who do not present qualifying THEA (or alternative) writing test scores.] Students who have completed ENGL 0302 before the Fall 2003 term are considered to have completed all English developmental coursework.

ENGL 0303 College Preparatory English III (3-0) (3 credits) (CB3201085312)
Developmental course covering review of sentence skills with emphasis on writing advanced paragraphs and medium length essays in standard American English. Focus on writing skills necessary for THEA and ENGL 1301. [Required of students who do not present qualifying THEA (or alternative) writing test scores.]

ATTACHMENT B

Testing/Assessment
State Testing Requirements
The Texas Success Initiative (TSI) (SB 286—Sections 51.3062 & 51.403e) was put in place with the repeal of the TASP mandate during the 78th legislative session. Tyler Junior College (TJC) will determine a student's readiness for college level coursework through an assessment which **may be required of all first-time, entering students**. This statute includes students involved in distance education enrolled through TJC. Under no circumstances will the results of any assessment be used as a condition of admission to TJC.

The Texas State Education Code requires that students who enter Texas public institutions of higher education may have to take the state-mandated THEA or an approved alternative test prior to enrolling. This includes all full-time and part-time freshmen enrolled in a certificate or degree program. Results of the test will be used for course placement only.

TSI Exemptions/Exceptions
1. The following exemptions or exceptions related to assessments apply to incoming students needing assessments:
a. For a period of 5 years from the date of testing, a student who is tested and has earned college credit and performs at or above the following standards:
ACT: Students who score 19 or above with a composite score of 23 will be exempted in corresponding subject area(s).
SAT: Students who score 500 or above with a composite score of 1070 will be exempted in corresponding subject area(s).
b. For a period of 3 years from the date of testing, a student who is tested and has earned college credit and performs at or above the College Readiness standard as determined by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) or for students prior to August, 2003 who, on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) have a minimum scale score of 1770 on the writing test, a Texas Learning Index (TLI) of 86 on the mathematics test and 89 on the reading test.
c. A student who has graduated with an associate or baccalaureate degree from an institution of higher education.
d. A student who transfers to TJC from an accredited private or independent accredited institution of higher education or an out-of-state institution of higher education by a regional accrediting body and who has satisfactorily completed (C or better) college-level coursework as determined by TJC.
e. A student who has previously attended a regionally accredited institution and has been determined to have met readiness standards by that institution as indicated on an official transcript.
f. A student who is enrolled in a certificate program of one year or less (Level-One certificates, 42 or fewer semester credit hours or the equivalent) at a public junior college, a public technical institute, or a public state college. (A student who enters under this exception and then changes his/her major must meet the qualifications set for his/her degree or certificate.) (Selected certificate programs may require

testing.)
g. A student who serves on active duty as a member of the armed forces of the United States, the Texas National Guard, or as a member of a reserve component of the armed forces of the United States and has been serving for at least three years preceding enrollment.
h. A student who on or after August 1, 1990, was honorably discharged, retired, or released from active duty as a member of the armed forces of the United States or the Texas National Guard or service as a member of a reserve component of the armed forces of the United States.
i. Under exceptional circumstances, TJC may exempt a non-degree-seeking or noncertificate-seeking student. These students have traditionally been deemed casual students and are not allowed to take more than 6 hours per semester.

ATTACHMENT C

COLLEGE PREPARATORY STUDIES

College Preparatory Studies is an intensive academy of courses and programs designed to provide development for students underprepared for college-level work. Assistance in basic skills such as reading, writing, mathematics and personal development is offered to students identified for College Preparatory Studies in both semester-length developmental courses and shorter-term, individualized programs of study.

Some of the components are:

- Strict attendance policy: If a student misses more than six unexcused hours of a college preparatory class, the instructor can drop the student. (The only excused absences are college-approved activities.) If a student is dropped from one THEA-required college preparatory class, they will be dropped from all college credit classes and may be withdrawn from Tyler Junior College. Students should consult the TJC Student Handbook for more details.
- Students in lower-level classes are required to complete one hour each week in the Jenkins Learning Lab, J1108. Lab assistants are available for help in college preparatory math, reading and English.
- Math tutorials are offered in the Rogers Student Center (room 307) each Monday through Thursday and on Saturday mornings in Potter 104. Individualized English, reading and math tutorials are also available in the Learning Loft on the third floor of the Rogers Student Center.
- PLATO computerized tutorials are available in the Pirtle Technology Center, T–315, Monday through Sunday; and in Rogers Student Center Support Services computer labs, Monday through Friday.
- THEA review software is available through the Internet THEA site and in the Pirtle Technology Center, T–315, from Monday through Sunday.
- Free THEA math review is offered each long semester prior to the end of semester Quick THEA.
- Free Quick THEA is required to be taken during the last of each semester by students completing the highest level of their college preparatory coursework.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE FIRST YEAR OF BASIC WRITING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS-TYLER: A CASE STUDY

Introduction:

If leaving basic writing instruction in the hands of community colleges poses such a problem, then what can be done to make sure that basic writing and basic writers stay at a four-year university or college, where they might have a much higher chance of being taught by individuals who are, if not fully aware of basic writing scholarship and pedagogy, familiar enough with the "best practices" (both in a basic writing classroom and a credit-bearing composition classroom) that have been identified as most helpful to students in a basic writing classroom[49]? Or, should we be focusing more on changing how basic writing is taught at the community college in order to give these students a better chance for success? The contextual dissimilarities of basic writing instruction at the community college level, with criteria and practices varying greatly from state to state, district to district, institution to institution, make any widespread change at the community college level nearly impossible. There are, to be sure, probably just as many dissimilarities between college/university basic writing programs; however, in Texas specifically, a study has shown that developmental students who take basic writing (and other remedial courses) at the community college level are far more likely to drop out or "stop out" than students who take those same courses at a four-year university or college.

In a 2001 article published in the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, Hansel Burley, Bonita Butler, and Brent Cejda report on their study of dropout and stopout patterns among developmental students in Texas community colleges. Their

[49] See Chapter 3 for a more detailed exposition of prevalent community college attitudes and approaches toward basic writing instruction.

study shows that, of the 51,903 students in the study, all of whom were first-year college students enrolled at community colleges across Texas, only 32 percent were "diagnosed" as "having no skill deficiencies in reading, writing, mathematics, or some combination of these competencies" based on their scores on the TASP test (Burley et al 771). Of the remaining 68 percent, they found that nearly 60 percent stopped out or dropped out, with 40 percent dropping out during the first semester (775). While these students were placed in remedial math, writing, and/or reading courses based on TASP scores alone, Burley, Butler, and Cejda found that other factors such as high school performance and GPA played significant roles in whether or not a student stayed in school or left. In their conclusion, they state:

> [C]ommunity colleges need to know more about their developmental education students than their placement test scores. It is also important to get students into for-credit college coursework early, so that they are always making meaningful progress toward a degree . . . We need to rethink what placement into remediation means. Placement into remediation will not ensure academic success, and it does not mean that students cannot do college credit coursework. (779)

Unfortunately, for many community colleges, placement into remedial courses strictly on the basis of a test score is seen as an easy way to manage the growing influx of basic writing students[50]. Unfortunately, for many community college students, placement into

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[50] Some colleges and universities use portfolios rather than reliance strictly upon test scores. Students under this method of placement submit writing portfolios along with their applications for admission, portfolios that reflect the students' best works and which are then judged by a committee made up of English faculty as to the students' readiness for a credit-bearing composition course. Others may rely on scores on impromptu writing samples that students produce when they come to campus for their first orientation visit, which are then (much like the portfolios) judged and scored by English faculty. These methods, however,

remedial courses strictly on the basis of a test score, as the Burley, Butler, and Cejda study shows, may result in more and more students dropping out or stopping out before their educational goals are met.

So now that I had been asked by my department chair to design and propose this course, how was I going to design it in such a way that would benefit the student enrolled in it while staying in the guidelines for admission and placement set forth by the University of Texas-Tyler? Initially, I faced two tasks: first, to design a developmental reading and writing course that would meet the needs of students whose ACT or SAT scores labeled them as "marginal" under the admissions criteria at the University of Texas-Tyler, students who, in previous years, would have had to take the needed remedial coursework at one of the local junior colleges before attempting coursework at UT-Tyler[51]. TJC's approach to basic writing instruction centers on grammar drills and exercises and is tiered in such a way that students are not asked to write full-length essays until the highest level of remediation – the ENG 0303 course. I realized immediately that our approach would have to be different for several reasons: (1) ours would be a combined course, integrating both reading and writing instruction, while TJC's courses are segregated into basic writing courses and basic reading courses; (2) ours would be a much smaller program, since we were only offering one section of one level (the highest level) of remediation; and (3) ours would have a much smaller student population, since many students who would normally enroll in such a class were not yet aware of the

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may be deemed much more time-intensive and expensive than reliance upon standardized test scores – even though students may benefit more from these alternative placement methods. See Chapter 3.

[51] See Appendix A for the requisite test scores used by the Admissions Office at UT-Tyler to determine admission and placement.

existence of our course and would opt to enroll at TJC or would require a level of basic writing and reading instruction not offered at UT-Tyler.

The second task I faced was designing a case study of the basic writing students enrolled in this course. I had originally planned a comparative study between basic writers enrolled in TJC's program and basic writers enrolled in our course. However, this proved problematic for two reasons: (1) since TJC's program is much bigger than ours, the samples would not be comparable; and (2) repeated requests for assistance and participation addressed to TJC's basic writing faculty were either ignored or rejected outright, and information regarding classroom practice that might be gleaned from online syllabi was limited to course descriptions from their online catalog (see Appendices A and C in Chapter 3). These two factors led me to develop a case study strictly of the basic writing students enrolled in the inaugural UT-Tyler developmental reading and writing course. In formatting this case study, I based my methodology on similar studies conducted by Marilyn Sternglass at City College of the City University of New York (CUNY) and by Laura Gray-Rosendale at Syracuse University.

Sternglass's Study: Longitudinal Learning at the College Level

In *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level*, Marilyn Sternglass reports on her seven-year study of students she encountered at City College in 1989. The aim of her study, she states, was to investigate how students' "subjective lives" – in other words, their every-day existences -- impacted their "objective lives" – in other words, their academic existences – because "it is impossible to comprehend the nature of their academic experience or to contemplate educational approaches that meet their needs without understanding how integrated these

aspects of their experience are" (xii). Sternglass's work was very important to my study since these were the same types of students – and from the same college – that Mina Shaughnessy worked with while she was compiling her work in *Errors and Expectations*. However, since the ethnic and social backgrounds of my students would not be as varied as those of the students in Sternglass's study, because my students would not be coming from a variety of levels of basic writing classes, and because my study would not have the scope of Sternglass's longitudinal study, I decided to focus strictly on these students' academic lives and how their perceptions of themselves as writers and as learners impacted those lives.

Sternglass's original study population was 53 students from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds who were enrolled in either her English 1 (the lower level of basic writing), English 2 (the second level of basic writing), or English 110 (a single-semester freshman composition course).   Students enrolled in the two basic writing classes were placed according to their performance on City College's Writing Assessment Test (WAT), which basic writing students had to retake and pass before completing their 60th credit hour in order to continue in their majors (xii).

In her book, Sternglass reports that, as of January 1996, of the 53 students who began the study in 1989, 17 (32 percent) had graduated, 10 (19 percent) had transferred to other colleges, 18 (34 percent) had dropped out, and 8 (15 percent) were still enrolled at City College. She writes specifically about nine of these students (four African-Americans, three Latino/as, one Caucasian, and one Korean), detailing how they came to integrate their personal lives with their educational experiences and how that integration impacted their understanding of the writing demands they faced in composition

classrooms and institutional testing settings. Sternglass admits that her study was "skewed to multicultural backgrounds that may not be replicated in institutions of higher education," but she is quick to also note that "their experiences do not differ markedly from those of all students who come to college disadvantaged by their previous educational histories and/or their socio-economic status" (295).

Sternglass's methodology for acquiring her data consisted of interviews with the students in her study group over a period of time (while they were in one of the above-mentioned classes and for up to five years), observations of these students (by one of Sternglass's research assistants) in their subsequent classes, and submission of papers written for these courses. Sternglass had each student complete an initial demographic questionnaire at the beginning of the study that concentrated on ethnic origin, socio-economic status, and other family factors that might impact these students' educations, and she collected these students' transcripts and written examinations (from other courses) at the end of each semester in order to chart their progress. My methodology would differ in many respects from that used by Sternglass; while I intended to interview these students and keep track of their transcripts both during the course and afterwards to gauge their progress, I did not have research assistants to do the classroom observations, and getting copies of these students' written examinations in other courses is regarded by UT-Tyler as an invasion of a student's private record; accordingly, I relied on input from the students as to the type of other writing assignments or written examinations they encountered. This information was gathered through our interviews and through what these students wrote about in their assignments for my class. And, as noted earlier, since

these students were all from the same approximate ethnic and social groups, garnering that kind of demographic data would, most likely, be repetitive.

As a result of her study, Sternglass comes to the following conclusion:

> I do not intend to argue that there is no role for basic writing instruction; students with the least expertise in reading and writing processes, I believe, can benefit from specific instruction in overcoming reading and writing difficulties. But most of the students who were placed both at the English 1 and English 2 levels in my study did not need specific remedial work; they would have benefited more strongly from a 1-year "regular" composition course[52] that would have integrated reading and writing skills with a single instructor. (298)

The main factor that Sternglass seems to be taking issue with here, the one aspect of her study that, perhaps, surprised even Sternglass herself, is the method of assessment used at City College to place these students in these classes. While her study and methodology focus on the impact that these students' home lives had on their educations – and vice versa – and on how well these students were able to integrate the two, the question of why these students were in these classes to begin with, and the institutional mandates and constraints that dictated that decision, can only be answered by individuals outside of Sternglass's study group: those individuals who, based on students' scores on impromptu writing tests, decide what level of basic writing instruction these students require. Since I

[52] This "mainstream" approach has been advocated by others (see McNenny's *Mainstreaming Basic Writers*); however, many colleges and universities prefer to keep reading instruction and writing instruction separate, some even going so far as to offer them in separate departments or divisions. The placement of students in basic writing courses based on their scores on such internal instruments as the Writing Assessment Test at City College is a fairly common practice; on the other hand, some states – such as Texas – prefer to utilize a standardized test taken by all students either during the last months of their senior years of high school or within the first semester of classes at a college or university.

knew that one of the goals of the basic writing and reading class I was designing was to prepare students to take and pass the writing portion of the THEA exam, I knew that, as much as I might have grave concerns about that test's reliability as a measure of a student's true writing ability, I determined that I would make clear to my students the criteria by which these scorers would be judging their writing samples; I also made clear that their writing assignments for my class (especially the "practice tests") would be graded accordingly.

The nature of these often impromptu[53] writing tests also comes under Sternglass's scrutiny and is a source of both consternation and, at times, resignation for those teaching basic writing in other states. In Texas, students taking the writing portion of the THEA (formerly the TASP) test do not know until they arrive at the test site the topic they will be required to write about, and sometimes students face prompts asking them to write about topics about which they know little if anything. It is the impromptu nature of standardized writing tests that Sternglass takes issue with: "Topics for impromptu placement and evaluation tests should be provided beforehand so that students have an opportunity to gather information and spend some time in reflection and information gathering before they are required to do the actual writing" (298). While some may protest that students must know how to handle such impromptu writing situations, I believe it is impractical to assume that all students come out of high school with this skill; and with so much riding on the results of that one writing sample, I believe it is equally impractical to base placement decisions, decisions that could quite possibly affect the rest of a student's academic career, on one impromptu essay.

[53] "Impromptu" here refers to the way in which the writing test is administered. Students are given no previous notification as to what the prompt will be or what type of writing the test will ask them to produce. Students taking these types of tests only find out this information when they take the actual exam.

But these are the types of essays that determine whether students in Texas (and other states) are required to take basic writing courses or whether they can go on to full credit-bearing composition courses. And as mentioned in Chapter 3, these essays are scored on a grading scale that puts a lot of emphasis on error – or the lack thereof – as a measurement of a student's readiness to handle college-level writing tasks. These measurements speak to what a basic writing student can – or cannot – do, which is the focus of Laura Gray-Rosendale's study.

Gray-Rosendale's <u>Rethinking</u> What Basic Writers Can Do:

In *Rethinking Basic Writing: Exploring Identity, Politics, and Community in Interaction*, Laura Gray-Rosendale reports her study of students whom she tutored in a 1996 "bridge program" instituted by Syracuse University for those students deemed "at risk," another term often associated with basic writers. Gray-Rosendale's methodology involved interviews conducted during tutoring sessions with students in the bridge program, interviews centering on how these students perceived their own abilities as writers. Her tutoring sessions, both with individual students and in groups, showed Gray-Rosendale that these students, while they may have exhibited difficulty in written expression, did have a great deal of "oral rhetorical dexterity" (3-4). She found that when these students were communicating with specific audiences (usually their peers), audiences who "can be tested, prodded, and explored by the speaker/writer with more immediacy," they communicated more effectively; however, these same students struggled with written exercises for which the audience was an unknown (4). She states, "Given the interfaces between [these students'] written choices and their oral

conversations, teachers might better assign programs, curricula, and assignments that facilitated such interconnections" (5).

Because of this interconnection between her students' oral and written proficiencies, Gray-Rosendale put them in peer drafting groups and found that these processes "may have much more to do with using rhetorical concepts on a microlevel germane to the specific context of conversation but equally applicable to the writing situation" in the following areas:

- audience – establishing common ground, creating group identity markers, utilizing positive/negative politeness strategies;
- ethos – calling others to account in ways that utilize or disrupt reflexivity, oral sequences that are reflexive or non-reflexive of an actor's positioning toward another group member's justification, excuse, blame, or assessment of his/her actions;
- rhetorical constraints – changing the frame of an activity or keying a pre-existent frame, attributing motivations to each other, characterizing the scene. (24)

These aspects of exchanges in peer review sessions, Gray-Rosendale found, resulted in much more productive sessions and much stronger drafts from the individuals in the group. As a result of her study, Gray-Rosendale posits that this combination of the oral and the written aspects of communication involves participants "more directly in the construction of meaning" (25) and "are both grounded within social contexts' they both entail the minute-by-minute arbitration of competing social norms and conventions as well as cultural and institutional practices" (26). This type of collaborative exercise (see Bruffee, "Writing and Reading as Collaborative or Social Acts") is lacking in some basic

writing classrooms, especially those geared toward sentence-level or paragraph-level concerns and grammar-drill exercises; it was this type of interaction between the oral and the written that proved to be the impetus for the developmental reading and writing course I was asked to design at UT-Tyler.

How Firm a Foundation?

Before setting out to actually design the course, I also had to decide what theoretical and philosophical foundation would best serve these students. Out of the many approaches to basic writing instruction that have been attempted and/or written about, which one(s) would I choose for this particular group? I knew from the outset that I was not going to focus solely on grammar drills that had no connection with the students' own writing. These types of exercises have been shown to focus more on specific errors than on what students are, perhaps, trying to say and have little if any effect in a student's progress as a writer; however, they *do* at times indicate our assumptions of what good writing is and, more importantly, what "bad" writing is. David Bartholomae, in "The Study of Error," points out that teachers of basic writing need to get past the notion of error as indicative of "non-writing, as meaningless or imperfect writing" and need to start seeing error as "evidence of intention. They are the only evidence we have of an individual's idiosyncratic way of using the language and articulating meaning, of imposing a style on common material" (339-40). In designing this basic writing and reading course, I also took from Bartholomae (and Petrosky) the idea of using the students' texts as the *locus* of meaning-making; their approach articulated in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* was one of having students read material

then write about what they'd read, making some connection with their own lives, and then using those student-generated texts as a text for class discussion.

The idea to make this a hybrid class – a combination of developmental reading and writing – was not mine (it came from the provost and the then-dean of the College of Arts and Sciences); however, I quickly learned that some basic writing researchers endorse this approach. In "Reading and Writing in the Developmental English Class," Gregory Shafer traces the call for combining reading and writing as active, very personal processes to Donald Murray, Louise Rosenblatt, and Frank Smith:

> If the class were to become meaningful, if it were to ever transcend simple riot control, I was convinced it would have to practice the sentiments of researchers who see both reading and writing as enterprises of self-actualization. We do not learn to read and write for mechanical or academic pursuits, but for selfish, social reasons. Both are participatory in nature and demand our contributions as well as our passions. (Shafer 33)

I share Shafer's belief that reading and writing – as well as learning to do both or either – should evolve from students' interests and concerns, those "selfish, social reasons" that evoke in all of us the desire to communicate something. If a student doesn't see a connection between a reading or a writing assignment and a perceived need or concern in his or her life, reading and writing become meaningless, and those urging him or her to read or write are perceived as disingenuous. As Shafer points out, "[reading and writing] must be rooted in the lives of the students and include meaningful activities" (33) in order to counteract strong cultural traditions that make students "hesitant to transact with the text in a forceful, meaningful way" (36). For my students, then, the "meaningful activity"

that they, perhaps, would most be interested in, the connection for their lives, was the THEA exam.

Although my goal for this class was to help these students learn to write better, on a pragmatic level I also knew that the university's goal for this proposed course was to prepare students to retake – and pass – the reading and/or writing portions of the THEA exam. These portions of the exam would focus on certain target areas that students would be required to address. For the reading portion of the test, students would be asked to read a passage (similar to one found in a college-level textbook) and then to answer questions that would measure their ability to identify the writer's main idea, to identify the relationship among ideas, to demonstrate critical thinking and reading skills (identifying main ideas, determining an author's purpose through analyzing the author's diction and tone, etc.) and study skills (being able to identify the organization of material in the passage, etc.) in reading, and to determine the meanings of certain words and phrases. In the writing portion of the exam, students would be given a prompt to address in an essay that would be judged by the following four-point scale and criteria:

> **4 - A well-formed writing sample that effectively communicates a whole message to a specified audience**
>
> The writer maintains unity of a developed topic throughout the writing sample and establishes a focus by clearly stating a purpose. The writer exhibits control in the development of ideas and clearly specifies supporting detail. Sentence structure is effective and free of errors. Choice of words is precise, and usage is careful. The writer shows mastery of mechanical conventions, such as spelling and punctuation.
>
> **3 - An adequately formed writing sample that attempts to communicate a message to a specified audience**
>
> The focus and the purpose of the writing sample may be clear; however, the writer's attempts to develop supporting details may not be fully realized. The writer's organization of ideas may be ambiguous, incomplete, or partially ineffective. Sentence structure within paragraphs is adequate, but minor errors in sentence

structure, usage, and word choice are evident. There may also be errors in the use of mechanical conventions, such as spelling and punctuation.

2 - A partially developed writing sample in which the characteristics of effective written communication are only partially formed

The statement of purpose is not clear, and although a main idea or topic may be announced, focus on the main idea is not sustained. Ideas may be developed by the use of specific supporting detail, and the writer may make an effort to organize and sequence ideas, but development and organization are largely incomplete or unclear. Paragraphs contain poorly structured sentences with noticeable and distracting errors. The writer exhibits imprecision in usage and word choice and a lack of control of mechanical conventions, such as spelling and punctuation.

1 - An inadequately formed writing sample that fails to communicate a complete message

The writer attempts to address the topic, but language and style may be inappropriate for the given audience, purpose, and/or occasion. There is often no clear statement of a main idea and the writer's efforts to present supporting detail are confused. Any organization that is present fails to present an effective sequence of ideas. Sentence structure is ineffective and few sentences are free of errors. Usage and word choice are imprecise. The writer makes many errors in the use of mechanical conventions, such as spelling and punctuation. (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, THEA Website)

However flawed I might have believed this system to be, the pragmatics of the matter dictated that I at least make these criteria and expectations known to my students and help them hone their skills as writers in order to meet these expectations. Aaron Barlow, in "Leading Writers, Teaching Tests," published in the Spring 2004 *Basic Writing e-Journal*, explains his response to a similar situation at New York City College of Technology (part of the CUNY system), where he teaches as an adjunct. His challenge, as was mine, was to "find a way to combine test preparation with at least some development of writing skills, to do both when I have hardly the time for either" (Barlow). Barlow also opted for a hybrid course of the type I was trying to design, a combination of reading and writing, and his reading assignments consisted of copied op-

ed pieces that would be read and discussed in class and then would be the subject of a short in-class written response; through these short responses, Barlow says, he then chooses "other short articles or fiction pieces that the students can react to and use in developing their own writing skills" (Barlow), basically introducing students to the process of interacting with a text by utilizing readings that the students would find interesting or would want to read.

My major concern with Barlow's approach, however, was two-fold: first, its contextual specificity -- that is, would his approach with students on his campus be successful with the students on my campus?; second, this approach with short, easy-to-read pieces might tend to reinforce students' hesitancy in addressing whole texts. As Bartholomae and Petrosky point out in "Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts: A Basic Reading and Writing Course for the College Curriculum," many students (especially "true" freshmen straight out of high school) are "hesitant, unsuccessful readers" who are "powerless when faced with a text of even moderate difficulty for their age level – powerless, that is, when asked to *do* something with what they read" (290, authors' emphasis). My decision, then, was to approximate in difficulty the types of readings that students would encounter in the THEA exam[54], going over the passages specifically in the target areas noted above. As for the writing portion of the exam, I decided to construct "sample writing tests" that approximate the prompts these students would most likely encounter, having first discussed the scoring criteria and scale by which their actual writing tests ultimately would be scored.

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[54] According to the THEA Practice Test, found on the THEA website, these readings are taken from textbooks in areas such as sociology, biology, history, and political science.

I also decided to require all the students in the class to do the same work – to do the same readings, to respond to the same writing assignments. Due to the hybrid nature of the class, I knew that some students would require help only with the reading portion of the exam, others with only the writing portion, and still others with both sections; however, as Bartholomae and Petrosky and others have pointed out, the connection between reading and writing is a strong one, and while some may have received passing scores on their writing samples or reading tests, extra assistance in dealing with college-level writing and reading might make them stronger in both areas.

The writing assignments were designed as follows:

> FIRST-DAY WRITING ASSIGNMENT - The writing prompt asked the students to address their goals while a student at UT-Tyler: what they were expecting in the way of classes and campus life, what they were planning to major (and/or minor) in, and what they wanted their education to do for them after graduation.
>
> Rationale: to get students thinking – and writing – about how they see themselves as students: their role in their education, their expectations; and, most specifically, their goals for after their university education is over.
>
> SECOND ASSIGNMENT – This assignment asked students to reflect on the terminology we use when addressing a student's success or failure (pass/fail, complete/incomplete) and how that impacts their perceptions of themselves as students.
>
> Rationale: to have students "unpack" (begin to think critically about) the ways basic writing and basic reading is perceived, both by them and by the educational system as a whole.
>
> THIRD ASSIGNMENT – For the next in-class assignment, I asked the students to begin working on an essay/ letter that they could send, if they so chose, to one of their English teachers in high school, comparing the kinds of writing and complexity of writing they had experienced in high school with the kinds and complexity of writing they were facing in college. At the end of the assignment, I made it clear that, while this had to be civil discourse, the students should feel free to ask any question of that particular teacher regarding writing.

Rationale: to allow students the chance to talk back to those individuals in their pasts who had influenced their views of writing and learning.

FOURTH ASSIGNMENT - This assignment, which was introduced and workshopped around mid-term, asked the students to assess both their performance to date and their experience at UT-Tyler to date.

Rationale: to have students assess their own progress in light of where they were at the beginning of the semester and how (or if) they'd sensed change in their ways of thinking and writing.

FIFTH ASSIGNMENT – This assignment, introduced and workshopped before the students retook the THEA exam, asked them to address their concerns about the upcoming tests – in which areas did they perceive weaknesses or strengths in their own writing, what they had learned about strategies for dealing with impromptu writing examinations – and to assess their progress in the course so far.

Rationale: first, to judge students' readiness for the exam, and second, to allow students the opportunity to express their frustrations and anxieties before the actual exam.

These assignments, as well as their prompts, were designed to approximate as closely as possible the prompts these students would encounter in a THEA writing exam; in addition, I also designed in-class writings and discussions of practice prompts taken from the THEA Practice Exam to better prepare them to more successfully analyze and respond to these prompts. To facilitate my study, I also designed into the course one-on-one conferences after each writing assignment that would focus on all the drafts produced for a particular assignment, asking each student to "walk me" through their thought and writing processes and discuss what the student saw as each essay's strengths and weaknesses.

All of this information – and the theoretical foundation for it – was then integrated into a Course Adoption form[55] which would have to be approved by the curriculum committees for both the College of Arts and Sciences and the university as a whole, as

[55] See Appendix A, Course Adoption Form

well as gaining approval from the provost and the president of the university before being included in the catalog and in the schedule of classes for the Fall, 2005 semester.

Birth by Committee – Starting from Scratch at UTT

Since its upgrade to a four-year university in 1997, the University of Texas at Tyler (UT-Tyler) has focused its recruiting efforts on those students scoring in the upper 10th percentile on the ACT or SAT test. However, as national trends and reports have indicated, more and more underprepared students have begun showing up in university classes, and UT-Tyler recognized two very important facts: first, that greater numbers of first-year freshmen were requiring remedial classwork; and second, that unless the university offered some level of basic writing instruction, many of those students – and tuition dollars – would enroll in local community colleges rather than at UT-Tyler. In addition, many among the UT-Tyler faculty had been voicing their concerns about the growing number of freshmen whose writing skills were below the standard required in writing-intensive classes, students who, for reasons previously unexamined, failed their freshman composition classes (sometimes more than once). Finally, in the spring of 2005, the provost, Dr. Rick Osburn, and Dr. Donna Dickerson, then dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, decided that, perhaps, the university should offer one section of "upper-level" (0303) developmental reading and writing for those students deemed "marginal" by the UT-Tyler admissions office – those students whose overall ACT or SAT scores were high enough for admission but whose reading and writing scores fell just below the minimum required for automatic placement in ENGL 1301 (the first course of a two-semester freshman composition sequence)[56].

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[56] See Appendix B for the breakdown of ACT, SAT, and THEA scores used by the university for placement and admission purposes.

Rather than have two classes, one devoted to developmental reading and the other focused on developmental writing, Osburn and Dickerson decided to combine the two so all "at-risk" students could be in class together and, according to Dickerson, could hopefully increase the possibility for retention (Dickerson). With this decision made, they approached Dr. Victor Scherb, chair of the Department of Literature and Languages, with the prospect of offering the course in the fall semester of 2005, should the requisite curriculum committees approve it. Scherb then came to me and asked that I design and teach the inaugural course since "basic writing, after all, is your area of research" (Scherb). In consultation with him, I filled out the required course proposal forms and, armed with what I knew about basic writing instruction and the students I had already encountered at UT-Tyler – that they, for the most part, came from the highest percentiles of their graduating classes and that, despite what their test scores and transcripts may have indicated, many of them were underprepared for college-level writing, I prepared myself for the first curriculum committee meeting.

The reception that the proposal for a developmental reading and writing course received, even among those committee members who were faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences, was underwhelming. Even with the provost's and dean's backing, our proposed course faced stiff opposition from those who despaired that we were "opening the flood gates" to an entire student population that we, as a university, were never designed to address. One committee member, a tenured professor in biology and botany (whose name has been withheld by his request), went so far as to ask, "Do we really want **those** people here?" While the response from this professor and others was not unexpected, I was rather taken aback by the reluctance on the part of some faculty to

admit not only that some of **those** people were already here but also that **those** people and hundreds like them were, year after year, opting to enroll at the local junior college only because they required basic writing instruction (which had previously not been offered at UT-Tyler).

As I tried to answer their questions and calm a few of their fears, I learned that there were university charter issues involved: upon being granted our charter as a four-year university by the Texas state legislature, the university promised that it would not offer remedial instruction. The decision was made at that time to leave remedial instruction to be handled by the local junior college for two major reasons: it was perceived by legislators and educators at that time that remediation was not within the purview of a four-year university and, perhaps, legislators and UT-Tyler administrators wanted to stave off accusations of territorial encroachment from Tyler Junior College, the local community college where remedial education was offered. While this mandate did not pose a problem for many years, a recent attempt by university administrators to increase enrollment revealed that many of the students being shunted off to the junior college needed only, perhaps, one semester of remediation in order to pass the state-mandated proficiency test (THEA, formerly known as TASP). So, in the fall semester of 2004, a basic mathematics course was instituted; the fall semester of 2005 would see the first developmental reading and writing course. Both the College of Arts and Sciences' curriculum committee and the university curriculum committee had to be assured that these courses would be the only ones offered, unlike the multi-level developmental courses offered at the junior college[57].

[57] At the local junior college, developmental writing is divided into three separate courses, each with between eight and ten sections offered per regular semester; developmental reading, likewise, is divided

These "why are *they* here?" reactions did not come as a surprise to me; this response to the presence of basic writers (and basic writing instruction) on university campuses has been in existence since the era of the Harvard Committee of Eleven. As mentioned in Chapter 1, many modern universities and university systems have coped with the arrival of underprepared students by requiring anyone needing remediation to take those courses elsewhere; others have responded by setting time limits on how long students have to complete their remedial studies. In most of those cases, basic writing instruction (in some form or fashion) already existed at these four-year institutions; however, at UT-Tyler, I had to face those reactions as a possible impediment to the adoption and success of our proposed course.

Figuring out how to incorporate both writing and reading into a one-semester class was the first hurdle to clear. My previous experience had been in classes where only basic writing was the focus; on most other campuses where I had taught, developmental reading was the purview of another class or another department. My familiarity with the various aspects of the reading test these students would be required (by the state of Texas) to pass was of great help; unfortunately, with no clear picture of how many students would require help in only this area, I could only rely on past experience in shaping the curriculum for the course[58]. It was not until I got preliminary enrollment figures from Dr. Lou Ann Berman, executive director of community relations and student success at UT-Tyler, that I realized that the majority of these students would require supplemental instruction in reading only; only three of the ten students enrolled in the inaugural

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into three separate courses, and students in either developmental reading or developmental writing who begin at the first level (0301) must progress through the other two levels before being allowed to enroll in credit-bearing courses or until they pass that portion of the THEA test.

[58] See Appendix A for the official Course Recommendation submitted to the College of Arts and Sciences Curriculum Committee.

developmental reading and writing course would require basic writing instruction. While basic writing theory might make it seem only natural to teach both reading and writing together (as our course was designed to do), the structure of the THEA exam and the artificial separation of reading and writing by both the THEA exam and the way many basic writing and reading programs are structured make it hard to implement the kinds of "best practices" endorsed by basic writing professionals.

My study, ultimately, consisted of five students[59]: three students who had not as yet passed the writing portion of the THEA test and, as a point of comparison, two students who had passed that portion of the test and had not passed the reading portion of the test, students whose initial writing samples in the class revealed some of the same struggles and inconsistencies exhibited by those students historically placed in basic writing classes (simplistic reasoning, lack of elaboration or support for claims, along with local-level errors in areas such as punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure). All of these students had varying levels of writing proficiency and varying (and fluctuating) attitudes about their futures as university students – a future, they felt, was inextricably bound up in their perceived lack of ability as to read and write at a college level.

Stephanie: "Why Am I Here?"

The first student in my study was Stephanie, a young woman of 18 whose writing scores were barely below the minimum standard for passing the writing sample portion of the THEA test (she received a score of 5[60] on her THEA writing sample and did not pass

[59] Each of these students has been given a pseudonym for the purposes of this study and this work.
[60] As mentioned in Chapter 3, each student's writing sample is scored by two different readers; a combined score of six (6) on the sample or a combined score of five (5) and a passing score on the multiple choice section of the writing exam are needed to pass.

the multiple choice portion of the writing exam). Her first-day writing sample[61] showed some difficulty with a few lower-, sentence-level concerns (such as sentence fragments and run-on sentences, noun/antecedent agreement, etc.); however, the thing I noticed first was Stephanie's ability to change the subject rather quickly and rather conveniently.

The writing prompt asked the students to address their goals while a student at UT-Tyler: what they were expecting in the way of classes and campus life, what they were planning to major (and/or minor) in, and what they wanted their education to do for them after graduation. Stephanie started off with some rather distinct expectations: "*I want my clases to give me the infomation I need to suceed in my chosen profesion: education.*"[62] In the very next paragraph, however, Stephanie's expectations turned to exasperation:

> *I dont know why Im here. I mean, I was validictorean of my senior class. Doesnt that mean anything anymore? I made As in all my english classes and now they tell me I dont know how to write. Must mean Im not as good as I thoght I was.*

Stephanie's particular frustration is understandable; in speaking with her after this particular assignment about her previous experiences with writing, she was very open about her anger – first at being placed in a developmental reading and writing class and second at how she felt cheated by her high school English classes. Stephanie's experience is not uncommon, especially in states like Texas where standardized testing has taken over as the preeminent focus of public school classroom practice; students can

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[61] I always have my composition students, whether developmental or first-year, give me a writing sample during the first week of classes; in that way, I can acquaint myself with each student's individual writing style and can have a benchmark by which to chart a student's progress over the semester.
[62] All excerpts from student writing are shown as they appeared on the student's paper, misspellings and all.

make passing scores on their TAKS exams but still not be fully prepared to address college- or university-level writing assignments due to the fact that writing is not a requirement every year on the TAKS exam. However, what I found compelling in Stephanie's first-day writing assignment was, despite her earlier statements about her background and about her anger, her rather clear concession to the opinions of those "in power": "*Must mean Im not as good as I thoght I was.*"

In subsequent writing assignments, Stephanie's frustration became a block; no matter what the topic of the particular assignment, her writing would always find its way back to the issue of her placement in the developmental reading and writing class. After the second writing assignment, I met with Stephanie privately to discuss her writing up to that point. I made a conscious decision not to mention the frustration and anger I saw in her writing, opting to see if she brought it up in our conversation; however, her demeanor and comments reflected anything but the anger I sensed in her writing. In fact, when we went over her first-day writing assignment and her first two in-class writing assignments, she was actually a bit chagrined about the comments she'd made in her essay:

> *I don't know why I said that. Sometimes – I don't know – I just say the first thing that comes into my mind sometimes. I want to learn how to write better for all my classes, but it seems like I'm always making the same mistakes. And that makes me angry, too.*

When I asked her about her high-school experiences with writing, she winced and then laughed. "*My teacher* <u>*bled*</u> *on my papers, and it was always the same things: punctuation, misspelled words, each and every time. Makes me wonder how I got an A in there*." I then asked how much writing she'd done in high school; she answered with "*a*

couple of essays when I was a junior, one book report as a senior, mostly we just crammed for the TAKS[63] *test*." Gone was the anger she'd expressed in our earlier meeting; in its place was a resignation, of sorts, to being what she called "*not quite all there when it comes to writing*." She perked up a bit when I reminded her that no writer is always "all there," that every writer has moments of frustration and anger, and that one of my goals was to introduce her, hopefully, to some tools and techniques to combat that frustration.

Before she left my office, she hesitated a bit and asked if she could ask a question. "*How can they expect students like me to be able to pass these **** tests when they don't give us a chance to write in class?*" I told her that I didn't have an exact answer to her question but that she would be able to address this question in her next writing assignment.

In the next in-class assignment, I asked the students to begin working on an essay/ letter that they could send, if they so chose, to one of their English teachers in high school, comparing the kinds of writing and complexity of writing they had experienced in high school with the kinds and complexity of writing they were facing in college. At the end of the assignment, I made it clear that, while this had to be civil discourse, the students should feel free to ask any question of that particular teacher regarding writing. Stephanie's response was particularly telling:

> *I hear alot of people saying that its the student's fault, that we "did't get it" in high school. To those people, and to you, I would just like to say that*

[63] TAKS stands for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test required by the state of Texas to be taken each year, starting with the third grade and ending in a student's junior year. Students must be able to pass the TAKS in their junior years of high school in order to graduate the next year. Unfortunately, writing is not included every year.

that's not fare. How are we going to learn how to write if we dont write? And quit with the mixed messages! Telling me I did a good job after bleding all over my paper just gets me confused.

In my conference with Stephanie subsequent to this assignment, I asked her if she intended to send this letter to her high school English teachers. At first, she didn't reply but finally said, in a rather soft voice, *"I don't want to send it if it's not going to do any good. How can I be sure that it'll do anything, that my teacher will actually do anything about it?"* Since I didn't know many of the details about Stephanie's high school experience, other than the few tidbits she had talked about in her previous writings and in our previous conferences, I left it up to her to decide.

The third writing assignment and conference showed some improvement not only in Stephanie's attitude but also in her writing; while at the beginning of the semester she was often ill at ease during class discussions, she was beginning to speak out more in class, asking questions and verbally thinking through assignments with other classmates as well as demonstrating a more critical approach to the assumptions of basic writers I asked students to address in informal in-class writing assignments. While a few of the surface errors were still present (comma placement, usage of semi-colons, misspelled words, etc.), her tone and her style were more direct, more "in charge" than I had seen in previous assignments. The third assignment, which was introduced and workshopped around mid-term, asked the students to assess both their performance to date and their experience at UT-Tyler to date. Stephanie's response, while not as long as some of the others in the class, was both self-reflective and critical:

I had some misgided notions of what college was going to be like. And I've been working hard to get beyond those, but its hard. Im trying my best to be a better writer but old habbits die hard. Like when to put in commas or when to leave them out. I guess that's the diffrence between a good writer and a not so good one. At least thats what my history teacher tells me.

When I talked with Stephanie about this particular passage – especially the part about comments from her history professor – she showed me an essay that she had turned in two weeks previous to this writing assignment, an essay on which she received an "F" from her history professor. There were no marginal comments about content; instead, there were only circles and a series of slashes where commas were or were not needed and other circles indicating misspelled words. I asked Stephanie what she thought about this particular professor's approach to what she had written:

It's like he doesn't care whether I get the facts right or not or if I say anything at all. Just one comma out of place and he goes ballistic. And what's worse, he never says beforehand that he's going to count off for this stuff – he just does.

Unfortunately, for many basic writers, situations such as this – and professors such as this – are not uncommon. Fixations on grammatical and punctuation perfection are, at times, easy enough to address inside our discipline or writing programs; however, how professors outside our discipline view writing (and what makes writing "good" or not) can serve as roadblocks for those students struggling with the writing process and with what academic discourse will demand of them. These fixations often form the foundation

of a grammar-drill approach to basic writing, found in many community colleges, and constitute the corpus of many of the better-selling basic writing textbooks on the market today.

While it would indeed be a disservice to basic writers to give them the impression that such things as grammar, style, and punctuation do not matter, it must be noted that scholarship exists showing that an over-emphasis on these lower-level concerns is, at times, detrimental to a basic writing student's progress (see Noguchi). What Stephanie was experiencing was a contradiction in approaches to writing: just as she was beginning to see in our class that writing is often more than just concentrating on lower-level concerns, she runs head-long into a situation where those concerns not only count but also are essential to making a passing grade on an essay. These conceptions of what makes writing "good" – or "bad" – are not only harbored by professors outside (and inside) our discipline but also by those in charge of mandating by what criteria writing on such placement instruments as the ACT, SAT, and THEA tests will be judged.

Stephanie missed the in-class workshop and discussion of the next writing assignment (the one which asked students to assess their progress at mid-term) and didn't turn it in; however, she did complete the fifth and final writing assignment of the term, one in which I asked students to address their upcoming retakes of the THEA exam. In that essay, I learned why Stephanie neglected to turn in the previous writing assignment, as well as her trepidation about the upcoming exam:

> *Pressures from home have been geting unbearible. I haven't had the time Id like to have to study for all my classes much les the exam because my mom is constantly calling me, asking me to come home and help her out*

> *with my younger brother. Shes afraid hes running with the rong crowd I try to explain that im busy but she won't listen she just keeps the pressure up until I finally say yes, so I don't know if Im as ready for this test as I should be.*

In our conference on this writing assignment, Stephanie seemed reticent to talk about her home situation, stating instead that *"Everyone's got problems, right?"* When I asked her about the fourth writing assignment (the one she didn't turn in), she replied that she had intended to work on it the weekend before it was due, but instead she went home for a visit and ended up staying a week and a half in order to help out her mother. This resulted in her being behind in all her classes, and she was desperately trying to get caught up. *"I don't want to think about the THEA test right now, because when I do, I get afraid that I'm going to get in there and freeze up. I don't feel ready."* She and I discussed strategies she might use to approach the writing sample -- freewriting or mapping and other idea-generative techniques -- as well as reading strategies she might employ to ascertain with greater certainty what the prompt was requiring of her. We also went over the scoring rubric (the four-point grading scale) that the scorers would be using to judge her writing, discussing in detail how she might best ensure that her essay would receive two passing scores.

Fortunately, Stephanie did pass her retake of the THEA writing exam; unfortunately, Stephanie's academic performance after she left our class resulted in her being placed on academic probation for one year; attempts to contact Stephanie to discuss her progress were unsuccessful, but university records show that she attempted seven (7)

credit hours during the Fall 2006 semester. Out of those seven hours, she only passed three, and she is now enrolled at a private college closer to home.

Joseph: "Talk to the 'tude"

In the same class with Stephanie was Joseph, a young man of 18 from what he described as a middle-class fifth-generation east Texas family, with a predominantly adversarial attitude; from the first day, Joseph's demeanor and comments in class made it clear on several occasions to everyone in the room that he didn't care, that he didn't want to be there, and that he didn't expect to stay in school for very long. During a class discussion in the first week of class, Joseph told one student that *"your comment shows that you're just as big a loser as the rest of us."* When I asked him where he got the idea that he and the rest of the class were "losers," he said, *"look around you, lady, if we weren't losers, would we be in this class?"* Joseph habitually arrived at class late, even though this was his first class of the day, and when I asked him the reason for his tardiness, his response was *"You gotta want to be somewhere to be on time, right?"* When he was in class, his attitude and general comments were dismissive and curt; I would later get a chance to see the Joseph behind the attitude, but in public encounters, Joseph's message was clear: "leave me alone."

In his first-day writing assignment, Joseph's essay consisted of two terse sentences: "*I dont know why I have to take this ****ing class or that ****ing test, I always hated school and writing more than school. So talk to the 'tude, lady.*" Joseph's response reminded me of the one David Bartholomae discusses in his "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum." In this essay, Bartholomae recounts the writing of one of his students which Bartholomae initially believed displayed a belligerent

attitude toward the class and its curriculum but which, upon further reflection, challenged Bartholomae to rethink his approach to basic writers and which challenged him to design the course which he and Anthony Petrosky would later discuss in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*. After I talked with Joseph about his first-day assignment, I began to get a glimpse into the source of his combative attitude:

> *I've had people telling me my whole life that I'm smart but I don't apply myself, so, you know, you develop an "I don't give a ****" attitude and they leave you alone. Me going to college was my parents' idea, not mine. Maybe if I do bad enough, they'll see that I was right.*

With no way to verify Joseph's parents' intentions or wishes, I took what he'd said with the proverbial grain of salt; however, his perception of what his parents – and other authority figures in his life – expected of him was vital in my understanding not only of his in-class attitude but also of the attitude that came across in his writing; additionally, it was vital in my understanding of the stigma felt by those students defined by the term "basic writer."

Joseph's bravado can be traced, in some measure, to the stigma that attaches itself not only to basic writing but also to basic writers. According to Erving Goffman, in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, stigmatized individuals often respond to potentially embarrassing social situations – including classroom interactions – with what he terms "defensive cowering" which can result in an array of behaviors:

> [T]he stigmatized individual may attempt to approach mixed contact with hostile bravado, but this can induce from others its own set of troublesome reciprocations. It may be added that the stigmatized individual sometimes

vacillates between cowering and bravado, racing from one to the other, thus demonstrating one central way in which ordinary face-to-face interaction can run wild. (17-8)

In my interactions with Joseph, both in class and face-to-face, I noticed just this disparate behavior: in class, he adopted a very strong "I don't care" attitude which often lapped over into writing assignments and in-class writings that consisted of a few terse phrases that, at varying times, either superficially addressed the assignment or avoided it altogether; however, in a conference setting, Joseph was more likely to be almost apologetic at times, pensive at others, when discussing the difficulties he was having both in our class and in others. The consistent level of "bravado" in his writing assignments did not match up with the at times belligerent, at other times reticent individual I saw in class and in our interviews.

In class, Joseph appeared to be sullen, spoke rarely and then only to add an acerbic or sarcastic comment, and might seem to the disinterested that he spent most of the class period doodling on a piece of paper. In fact, that is what I thought at first, but when I was allowed a look at Joseph's "doodling," it was actually words and phrases, built into pictures or line drawings across the page[64]. As we discussed one of his drawings in a conference meeting, I asked him if he thought he could translate that drawing into an essay. At first he was a bit reluctant, but as he talked me through the drawing, I could tell from what he was saying that the drawing represented Joseph's version of freewriting or brainstorming. It was, in fact, a rather complicated but well-organized representation of what Joseph wanted to say but, for whatever reason, either refused to or could not say in essay form; the actual essays that he did produce were short, extremely terse, and

[64] I asked Joseph if I could include one of his drawings in my dissertation; he refused.

dismissive both of the particular assignment and of the class in general, with Joseph opting to disregard what the assignment had asked him to address.

As Joseph left that particular conference, I entertained the thought that, perhaps, we had made some headway, some progress toward breaking through the barrier he had carefully constructed around himself; however, our conference was followed by two solid weeks of absences, during which time he missed two writing assignments. When I contacted him about the possibility of my working with him to get caught up, I got no response. Finally, Joseph appeared at my office door one day before class. "*I just wanted to ask you a question, Ms. Tuberville. Why do you care so much about whether I can write a decent essay or not? Huh?*" Before I could attempt an answer to his question, he was gone, and he only attended class three more times during the remainder of the semester.

Since he did not finish the work assigned for the class, and since he did not pass the writing portion of his retake of the THEA exam during the semester, I had no choice but to give Joseph an "F" for the course, which meant that he would have to take basic writing at TJC in the Spring semester of 2006 (since our course would not be offered that semester). It took Joseph one more try to finally pass the writing portion of the THEA test, which allowed him to enroll in credit-bearing courses in the spring semester of 2006. At that time, he expressed to Dr. Berman his appreciation for everything she and I had done; at that time, Berman noted, his attitude was much more upbeat and positive, and he indicated to her that he was looking forward to classes starting again. However, when I checked his transcript for the Spring 2006 semester, I learned that he had flunked the four courses he attempted, which, after flunking two of the credit-bearing courses he attempted

during the fall semester, placed him on academic suspension for a year. What might have happened to cause this, or whether Joseph will return at the end of this suspension – or whether he plans to finish his education elsewhere (if at all) – is not known.

Tiffany: Trying to "Pass"

Tiffany, the third student in the study, is a 20-year-old Asian-American student who transferred to UT-Tyler from a rather large university in another state. Her transcript revealed two previous attempts at passing a first-semester composition course, both times receiving an "F." In her first-day writing assignment, Tiffany alluded to her experience at her former university:

> *I transfered here to major in nursing, because I'd heard you have a good nursing program, but when I tried to enroll, they told me I had to take this THEA test. Well, I coulda told them how that would turn out. Just look at my transcript, I tried taking a writing curse twice before and flunked it both times. Don't get me wrong I tried hard, but I guess me and the teacher just didn't see eye to eye on things. And what has writing got to do with nursing anyway?*

Tiffany's experience is probably the same as other students who come from other states to universities and colleges in Texas; while other states' universities may have internal proficiency tests that transfer students must take, Texas requires all students attending a state-funded college or university to take and pass all three (math, reading, and writing) sections of the THEA test or an institutionally recognized substitute such as Accuplacer

or COMPASS. When I talked with her about the writing portion (on which she scored a 4[65]), she had trouble recalling even the slightest details of it:

> *I don't recall what I wrote or how long it was. All I do recall is reading the prompt twice and thinking to myself, "What the heck is this?" I couldn't even understand what they were talking about, much less what they wanted me to do with it. I scribbled down a few things that I thought might sound good – guess I was wrong, wasn't I?*

The problem Tiffany experienced with the prompt for the writing portion of this particular test is not unique; in fact, the entire approach inherent in the writing portion of the THEA test has been criticized by some who see it as antithetical to the writing process advocated in composition classrooms (see Sternglass above; see Chapter 3 for more scholarship regarding writing and placement tests).

In her second writing assignment, Tiffany brings up an interesting question about the terminology we use when addressing a student's success or failure: the notion of passing:

> *All I could think about was passing but then it hit me: I know what I mean when I say "passing," but what do they mean? In my family, in my neighborhood, if you're "passing" its not exactly a good thing . . . Im constantly coming up against all these people wanting me to be something Im not.*

[65] Essay samples for the writing portion of the THEA test are graded holistically on a four-point scale (with four being the best). Two scorers read each essay, and a combined score of six (6) on the essay, or a combined score of five (5) with a concomitant passing score on the multiple choice section of the writing test, is required to be considered "passing."

For Tiffany, the idea of “passing” has very negative connotations. When I discussed this with her in our next conference, she elaborated on how she is viewed within her extended family:

> *You’ve gotta understand; in my family, being different from everyone else is liable to get you into trouble. My grandfather’s the worst – any time he sees me, he makes this clicking sound with his tongue and says under his breath “little miss educated thinks she knows everything, knows more than me.” Just because I’m the first in my family to go to college, they think I’m trying to pass.*

At first I did not quite catch her meaning, but eventually I began to see what Tiffany was referring to in using the term “pass” – and this understanding caused me to re-examine our terminology. When a student gets his or her official THEA test scores, there are numbers indicating percentiles and rankings, but there is also one of two words that can tell a student in an instant how he or she fared: “passing” or “failed.”

But if we see “passing” in the connotation in which Tiffany encounters it, telling a student that she is “passing” is a dubious distinction. As Goffman points out, passing does have some advantage: “Because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent” (74). However, this act has negative ramifications as well: “He who passes can also suffer the classic and central experience of exposure during face-to-face interaction, betrayed by the very weakness he is trying to hide, by the others present, or by impersonal circumstances” (84). Therefore, those attempting to “pass” – or those who are told they must “pass” – are constantly walking a precarious line, always on guard, always

wondering if or when they will be found out. This inner turmoil could quite possibly lead many basic writers to restrict the amount of writing that they produce. Similarly, the negative connotation that accompanies "passing," especially among minority populations (from which many basic writers come), may act as a subversive influence, effectively silencing some students.

After our conference, Tiffany asked to meet with me after our class discussion of the next writing assignment. As stated previously, the assignment asked students to write an essay/letter to someone from their past writing or educational experience; Tiffany, however, had another audience in mind. She wanted to write her letter to her family, trying to explain what she was hoping to accomplish by coming to college. We discussed some possible strategies she could employ to best convey her feelings without alienating or angering her family, and the resulting essay, albeit halting at times, expressed not only her aspirations but also her fears:

> *You say you want me to go to college but then turn arouwnd and put me down because you think college will make me different somehow. Maybe if youd just be proud of the person Im becoming, all the stuff Im learning, I might surprise you. I want to take my heritage with me where ever it is that Im going and that includes all of you even if I have to drag you kicking and screaming with me. Im not trying to "pass" Im just passing through to something better for all of us.*

Tiffany's "passing through" finds her today in good academic standing at the university, actively pursuing a career in nursing. When I spoke with her at the beginning of the Fall

2006 semester, she seemed upbeat about her prospects and her future, until the subject of her family came up:

> *I think my passing the THEA was a big shock to them as if they expected me to fail. My grandfather still clicks his tongue at me, but I have to keep reminding myself that I'm not the girl he sees, not the girl he thinks I am.*

The Tiffany I see today (who comes by my office often, sometimes "just to say 'hi'") seems much different than the sometimes confused, sometimes angry young woman I encountered at the beginning of the Fall 2005 semester; she admits readily that she has a long way to go – and that her writing isn't quite yet what she'd like it to be – but she's determined to pass, in the best sense of that word. In our most recent conversation, when I asked her how she was doing, she smiled and said, with a wink, "I'm passing – and I mean that in a *good* way."

The next two students in the study were placed in this class not because of their need for basic writing instruction but because of their sub-standard scores[66] on the reading portion of the THEA exam; however, their writing raises issues pertinent to how basic writing instruction is handled – and viewed – today, specifically regarding how writing samples for the THEA exam are scored and the criteria by which they are judged. As far as the state of Texas was concerned, these students could very well have enrolled in a credit-bearing composition course based solely on their passing scores on the THEA writing exam; however, the writing samples they turned in for their first-day writing assignments exhibited many of the same traits that I saw in the writing samples of those students who had not passed the writing portion of the THEA exam: difficulties in articulating ideas; unclear or inconsistent development of ideas; noticeable and, at times,

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[66] A "passing" score on the THEA Reading Exam is a minimum score of 230.

distracting sentence-level errors, etc. After explaining my study to each of these students individually, I asked them if I could include them in that study, and they consented. I wanted to see if their attitudes about being placed in a remedial-level course might affect their perceptions of themselves as students and their success at the university.

Christine: "Where to from here?"

Christine, an 18-year-old east Texas native, came to UT-Tyler from a relatively small school district in a nearby town. Her transcript revealed above-average grades in her high school English classes and a score of 6 on her THEA writing sample; her score on the reading section of the THEA exam was a 228, only two points shy of the minimal score for a "passing" designation. She had been provisionally admitted to UT-Tyler subject to her passing the THEA reading exam, and she was enrolled in 12 hours that semester, many of the same classes that other students in this class were taking[67].

Christine's first-day writing sample addressed her goals while at UT-Tyler and what she intended to major in:

> *I came here to make new friends and learn a lot. Like in high school. I'm defiantly going to major in education because I want to teach elementary school. Like some of my friends are doing now. I see UT-Tyler giving me the skills I'll need to be instrumentile in my students lifes.*

While I must admit to a chuckle when I read of her "defiantly" majoring in education (I assumed she meant "definitely"), I was struck by two thing in Christine's overall writing: first, that she saw her education at UT-Tyler as a sort of means to an end (to be a good teacher); and second, the overabundance of the word "like" in her essay (she used it a

[67] According to Dr. Lou Ann Berman, all "provisional" students were placed in a "learning community" in which they all would be taking the same classes.

total of 23 times in a three-paragraph short essay). While on one hand I understand the prevalence of “like” in the spoken language of many students Christine’s age, I was struck by how much Christine wanted to be “like” her friends and by how much she wanted her educational experience at UT-Tyler to be “like” the one she had in high school. Many high school students leave their secondary education experiences believing that the kinds of writing that sufficed in high school will suffice in college. As Gerry McNenny points out in “Collaborations between Basic Writing Professionals and High School Instructors: The Shape of Things to Come,” many times there is a disjuncture between how writing is approached in high schools and the expectations for college-level writing, a disjuncture highlighted by “the gap between the statewide standards and the reality of students’ preparation for college level writing” (McNenny). Many times, McNenny found, approaches to writing at the high school level were not the conscious decisions of individual teachers but rather the mandates of institutional cultures that see formulaic approaches to writing as the safest way to ensure better scores on high-stakes standardized tests. To address this gap, McNenny and her colleagues at California State University instituted a series of colloquia with high school English instructors that would address institutional and state performance mandates in light of what students could expect at the university level. What McNenny and the participants learned was that, sadly, too often students leave high school thinking they know what writing is “like” – perhaps much as Christine had – only to learn that college- and university-level writing is “unlike” anything they had encountered before.

In our conference about this assignment, I asked her about the approaches her high school English teachers took to writing and what else she might get out of her tenure as a UT-Tyler student:

> *I guess I'm here for the same reasons everyone else is here. I mean, like, we all want good jobs and we know that it takes a college education to have a good job. My high school English teachers were, like, freaked out and constantly harping about good writing and bad writing and that it was so-o-o important to learn the difference and now here in college we're told that there's more to writing than knowing where to put a comma. It always struck me as kinda weird, you know – we all want to learn, and my teachers all want me to think. Like they're trying to change us all of a sudden. We all see it as a big goof.*

Even though Christine seemed to pass off her teachers' concerns and her classmates reactions rather lightly at the time, the notion of adopting new beliefs, including beliefs regarding "good" and "bad" writing, is an intimidating one for all first-year college students and for basic writers especially. Judson Curry, in "A Return to 'Converting the Natives,' or Antifoundationalist Faith in the Composition Class," states that, as teachers of composition, "[w]e now seem more than willing to admit that the goal of our teaching is to change, to transform our students" (162). Curry cites a 1987 article written by Susan F. Harding and published in *American Ethnologist* that examines what Harding calls the "rhetoric of conversion" (161) used by fundamentalist Baptists and which sometimes finds its way into how we refer to and talk to our students:

> Through our lectures, discussions, writing assignments, paper comments, and conferences, we are deconstructing our students' foundationalist paradigms in the hope that they will become able to deconstruct other such paradigms that may seek to oppress them in the future. This is the same process of "coach[ing] the unconverted in the linguistic dimension of conversion" that Harding describes. (164)

In effect, then, we try to "convert" students to a view of composition in particular and, sometimes, life in general that can be seen as diametrically opposed to the views they previously held, views that may have their roots in family, educational, or social interactions. That this conversion needs to take place we often take as a given; however, when it comes to basic writing and basic writers, we seem to overlook our own need for "conversion" – converting how basic writers are perceived, converting how basic writing is approached, converting how and where basic writing is taught – and then seem amazed when our students reflect back to us our own intractability.

The "teach me but don't try to change me" attitude was also noticeable to Michelle Burton, a graduate student at UT-Tyler who taught basic writing (ENGL 0301) at TJC during the Fall 2006 semester[68]. Several of her students in that class, she states, expressed to her their concerns about having to discard previously-held beliefs in exchange for new ones they encounter at college. "I kept hearing phrases like 'my parents said' or 'my teachers said' until one day I asked them what exactly they meant. One student replied, 'My teacher said there's a right way to see life and a wrong way, a

[68] Michelle was, at the time, enrolled in a graduate level Theories of Rhetoric and Composition course at UT-Tyler; and when she mentioned to me that she was teaching basic writing for the first time that semester, I asked if I could interview her for my research; she graciously said yes.

right way and a wrong way to write, and that I was writing the wrong way, so I was viewing life all wrong'" (Burton). Curry concurs:

> [Students] believe in the eternal, transcendent existence of correct grammar and good writing. There is, they are convinced, a right way to write. And they expect us to teach it to them. Some may want to learn it, and some may not; some may think they've already mastered it; some may resent it; some may fear it; but all acknowledge the existence of correct writing. They've learned that comma splices, whether they can identify them or not, are always wrong and that topic sentences are always right. (163)

For many students, and especially for basic writing students in classes where "good" writing is defined as relatively lacking in error, suggestions that writing entails more than just knowledge of grammar rules and conventions are anathema: once you get past the seemingly secure ground of knowing when and where to put a comma, as Christine said, "where to from there?"

By her third writing assignment, the one that asked students to compose a letter to their high school English teachers, Christine was showing a little more confidence in the content of her writing, a confidence that was consistent among several members of this class; however, in our conference for that assignment she voiced her concerns about what she saw as the erosion of other skills:

> *Before this class started, I was pretty sure about all those grammar rules and stuff but now it looks to me like I never learned them at all. I still don't see this as good writing, at least not the "good" writing my English*

teachers expected. Maybe it's gonna take me a while to get used to it all, you know?

My assurance that her trepidation was not uncommon and that some facets of our writing may seem to get worse as the content of what we write becomes more complex didn't do much to allay her fears, as evidenced in her fourth writing assignment:

> *I'm torn. On one hand, I can see the need for [the level of writing and critical thinking expected at college], but part of me still wants to go back to the kind of writing I did before. Nothing hard, nothing elaborate. That's where I feel safe. Not the kind of writing my college professors want, but the kind of writing I know how to do.*

Christine's prediction that the kind of writing that she felt was "safe" was <u>not</u> the kind of writing expected by the professors in her other classes was not far off the mark; during the Spring 2007 semester, she has come back to my office several times to discuss her performance in her ENGL 1301 class[69]. She admits she's struggling, and Dr. Dana Adams, her professor, has expressed concerns that she might receive only a "C" in his class. It would seem, as Curry indicates in his article, that Christine "may no more wish to be converted to our antifoundationalism than an agnostic would wish to be converted to the Baptist's fundamental Christianity" (166). Perhaps knowing what is expected in order to pass the THEA writing test is not enough; perhaps, as McNenny's article suggests, the "safe" approach inherent in the formulaic approaches to writing found in many high schools and evidenced in the criteria by which writing for standardized tests is judged needs to be re-examined in order to uncover our own inability to move away from

[69] At UT-Tyler, ENGL 1301 is the first of a two-semester, first-year composition sequence. The kinds of writing assigned in this course vary from instructor to instructor, depending on the instructor's focus for that course (from rhetorical modes of discourse to argumentative and persuasive writing).

foundationalist (or essentialist) views of writing. Christine's struggle is indicative of many basic writers – and many basic writing instructors -- who, faced with increasingly sophisticated and challenging writing assignments and with increasingly stringent state and federal performance mandates, choose the safety zone of the writing they know how to do.

Belinda: Need versus Want

Belinda, an 18-year-old freshman from a mid-sized high school in western Mississippi, came to UT-Tyler for two reasons: because she could live with family members in the area and because she could complete her general education requirements here less expensively and then transfer to Mississippi State University, where her boyfriend attends. Being placed in a developmental reading and writing course meant the possibility of not being able to transfer when she had anticipated; her dreams of joining her boyfriend in Mississippi would have to be put off an extra semester, and I wanted to see if this delay would, in turn, affect her attitude and her performance.

In her first-day writing assignment, Belinda expressed her concerns and questioned her need for this particular class:

> *They tell me I* need *this class, I dont know maybe I do, but it makes me angry because at Miss. State these courses arent required. My boyfriend and I had plans to get an apartment together and graduate togeher, but now I guess thats all out the window. I may* need *this class, but I* want *to be in Mississippi.*

This conflict between needing a remedial class and wanting to be with and finish with cohorts is a difficult one for basic writers and grows more and more difficult with each

successive semester in which basic writing instruction is mandated. If a student is identified as needing the most basic level of remediation (0301-level) of a three-level basic writing program, the prospect of being at least three semester behind their friends can lead some basic writers to switch to technical training programs that, perhaps, do not have a writing requirement or to drop out altogether (see Clark's "Cooling Out" and Burley, Butner, and Cejda's "Dropout and Stopout Patterns"). One of the unstated goals of our one-semester course was to minimize the delay between remediation and credit-bearing courses, thus hopefully improving a student's likelihood of progress and, ultimately, retention (Berman).

In her second writing assignment, Belinda addressed the ambiguity in the pass/fail terminology that students encounter when dealing with tests aimed at measuring a student's skill level:

> *I passed every English course I ever took in high school, most times with As, but now theyre telling me I didnt pass one test. Did they ever stop and think that mabe its the test that didnt pass? Wouldnt you think that weird? What passes for passing. There should be one defintion that everyone has to use. Either that or dont make us take the test at all.*

While Tiffany took issue with the negative connotations of the word "pass" in her culture, Belinda takes issue with the seemingly arbitrary definition of "passing" attached to standardized tests and higher education's reliance upon them as instruments of placement. In our conference on this assignment, I asked her to be more specific about this definition that she feels everyone must use:

> *I guess you could say that a definition of "passing" has to include more than just how well I did or didn't do on one stinking test. I know I'm not perfect [when it comes to reading and writing] but I'm probably not as imperfect as they say I am.*

The terminology we use to define who and what basic writers – and basic writing – are can result in what Min-Zhan Liu and Bruce Horner call an "elitist double-standard." In "Expectations, Interpretations, and Contributions of Basic Writing," published in the Spring 2001 issue of *Journal of Basic Writing*, they state:

> On many campuses, the effort to write from the borderlands is still preserved as the privilege of those who have earned the right to do "real" work within the academy. Curriculum structures often indicate that students are not ready to venture into the borderlands and experiment with alternative voices – earn credits in interdisciplinary programs – until after they have proven they have been naturalized into the supposedly univocal context of academic culture or individual disciplines – i.e., after they have been placed out of Basic Writing courses . . . [Basic writers] have continually been told that they are simply not yet cognitively, emotionally, and psychologically "ready" – just as elementary school children traditionally have been perceived as being too immature – to handle the challenge of reading and writing in multivocal contexts. (46-7)

In other words, and as Belinda points out, what is seen as "passing" for admission into academic discourse and academic culture may be in direct opposition to what most students perceive as "passing" at a high school level. As Horner and Lu state in their

article, when institutions of higher education dictate that certain “basics” must be mastered before students can permitted to undertake intra- or interdisciplinary writing, they are setting up a hierarchy that privileges standard English when no such hierarchy should exist. Telling a student who successfully passed all of his or her English classes in high school (and, in some instances, advanced placement classes at that) that he or she has been deemed “not yet . . . ready” for college-level work and has been placed in a basic writing course can, quite understandably, engender a great deal of confusion in the student’s mind. This confusion can be compounded, then, when, in lower-levels of basic writing instruction, students are faced with the kinds of drills and exercises reminiscent of their high school English classes; is it any wonder, then, that these students begin to perceive themselves as chronically “not yet . . . ready,” especially when their writing is devalued in favor of these exercises, exercises that have little if any connection with their writing? Like Belinda, what many basic writers are perceived to *need* stands in stark contrast to what these students *want*: they *want* their words and ideas to be validated, however haltingly they may be expressed.

I had hoped that Belinda’s revision of this assignment would address these issues that we discussed in our conference; however, she dropped out of UT-Tyler before the semester was over to move back to Mississippi. She’s now working part-time and taking classes part-time at Mississippi State, where she wanted to be in the first place.

Although Tiffany’s story is the stuff all basic writing instructors dream of, I must admit that, even though the majority of the class did eventually pass the writing portion or reading portion of the THEA examination (which was one of the goals of the course), the subsequent performance of these students leaves me wondering about the overall

effectiveness of the class: if one of the aims of such tests as THEA or the ACT or SAT is to judge a student's readiness to handle the rigors of college- or university-level coursework, how then does one explain students like Stephanie or Christine, who seem to still be struggling despite their performance on state-mandated proficiency tests? Perhaps the answer lies in the amount of support these students receive after they leave basic writing (or other remedial) courses, support that can possibly help these students through the difficult and frustrating courses (and writing assignments) to come. The true causes for a student's poor performance or, at worst, dropping out of college are numerous and varied, as Burley, Butner, and Cejda point out (781), many of which we as instructors may never know.

Whatever the causes may be, I believe that my case study of the these five students revealed that focusing basic writing instruction on a more integrated approach that combines reading and writing along with frank discussions of how writing is defined and judged can have an impact, albeit at times seemingly tenuous, on a student's perception of himself or herself as a viable member of a learning community; and while much of what determines a student's success may lie outside the classroom walls, giving students a chance to address those concerns while fostering a view of writing that helps students hone those skills necessary for success in future classes may be more productive than an approach based solely on grammar drills or skill exercises at the expense of writing. Depending solely on a score that a student receives on a standardized writing exam for his or her subsequent placement in a basic writing course can be misleading and can ignore other factors that, in many cases, have a much greater effect on how a student

writes and perceives of himself or herself as a writer and a student with attainable potential both in the classroom and out of it.

Afterword: A Painful Birth, A Painful Death

The fall semester of 2006 was the next time this course was offered at the University of Texas-Tyler; however, my concerns began to mount as the first day of classes neared and the enrollment of the class consisted of only three students. I felt a growing concern that, if these enrollment figures did not improve dramatically, the administration at UT-Tyler would have no choice but to discontinue the class for financial and budgetary reasons. To forestall this, I met with Dr. Lou Ann Berman and Dr. M. Sathyamoorthy, associate provost for academic affairs, in an attempt to step up our recruiting efforts and to let students know about the availability of this course at UT-Tyler. Dr. Sathyamoorthy indicated that he would speak with James Hutto, who is in charge of student recruiting for the university, while I volunteered to speak with Sarah Bowdin, who works with the individual recruiters. This particular meeting ended with the understanding among all parties that, with the help of the student recruiting office, we might possibly see higher enrollments in this course.

Two days after our meeting, I received an e-mail from Sarah Bowdin, indicating that she had some grave concerns about "bringing those types of students into the university" and that she would certainly pass her concerns along to Mr. Hutto. Three days after our meeting, I received another e-mail message, as a "CC" recipient, from Sarah Bowdin to Mr. Hutto, which concluded with the following statement: "Student recruiters cannot, should not, and will not be recruiting developmental students to come to UT-Tyler" (Bowdin "Recruiting Question" e-mail correspondence).

Four days after our meeting, I met with Dr. Scherb, who had also received a copy of the e-mail message from Bowdin to Hutto, and it was decided that, lacking any assistance from the student recruiting office, we could not with any degree of certainty guarantee that future offerings of the developmental reading and writing course would bring in the requisite number of students to offset the cost of the course to the department and the university.

Four days after our meeting – and two years after fighting to get the course approved – the developmental reading and writing course was pulled from the Fall 2007 schedule of classes. After its painful and sometimes contentious birth, the course suffered an equally painful and contentious death. At this point, I will never know whether subsequent offerings of this course could have made a positive impact on these students' careers as members of the "community of scholars," as UT-Tyler has taken to calling itself. What is particularly painful for me is the knowledge that basic writing instruction, especially instruction that can really help students prepare for and pass the writing portion of the THEA test, was allowed to languish and die. What, perhaps, could have saved our course is a change on the part of crucial UT-Tyler staff and administrators in the attitude toward and perception of who these "developmental students" really are and what they are capable of on; lacking that, the prospects of this course ever being offered again are, unfortunately, almost non-existent.

APPENDIX A

COURSE PROPOSAL FORM

FOR
DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING AND READING III
FNDT 0303
FALL 2005

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

An introduction to those aspects of reading and writing necessary for college-level literacy. Students needing a writing concentration will write at least five (5) essays over the course of the semester and will revise papers extensively in order to develop an understanding of (and appreciation for) the methods and purposes of revision and an ability to shape essays and frame arguments in effective and convincing ways. Matters dealing with grammar or usage will be addressed within the context of the students' essays. Students will prepare a final portfolio that demonstrates what they have learned and that they are ready to meet the demands of ENG 1301 and the expectations for a successful THEA writing sample. Students needing a reading concentration will be assigned readings closely approximating those encountered in a credit-bearing college-level course and will be expected to identify the key elements of those readings as they pertain to the areas covered in the THEA Reading examination.

JUSTIFICATION FOR THE NEW COURSE:

The course is needed to give those students identified by the registrar (by test scores) as "at risk" or identified by their scores on the THEA test as needing remediation in either reading or writing (or both) the skills they need to be successful both in their general education requirements courses and in the courses for their chosen majors. This course will also introduce these students to the level of academic discourse and critical reading and thinking expected of them at the university and will open the university's doors to students previously excluded from pursuing their higher education goals at this university due to the absence of such a course.

APPENDIX B

PLACEMENT AND ADMISSION CRITERIA BASED ON TEST SCORES

(from the Office of Student Disability and Support Services, UT-Tyler)

TEST	CLASS RANK	COMPOSITE SCORE
ACT	top 25% of class:	20
	2nd 25% of class:	21
	3rd 25% of class:	22
	4th 25% of class:	23
SAT	top 25% of class:	1410 (with writing)
	2nd 25% of class:	1500
	3rd 25% of class:	1530
	4th 25% of class:	1590
THEA	Reading	minimum score of 230
	Writing	a writing sample score of 6 or better OR a writing sample score of 5 with a passing score on the multiple choice section

CHAPTER FIVE
SO WE'RE HERE – WHERE TO NOW?

As I think now of the students from that initial basic writing and reading course, I can't help but think that many of them, had they attempted similar courses at TJC or another community college, would still be in the "remedial loop": taking semester after semester of basic writing and/or basic reading classes, using up valuable time and money taking classes for which they receive no real college credit (but which cost as much, if not at times more, than credit-bearing courses), getting more and more frustrated by their seeming lack of progress. Fortunately, today, 85 percent of the students in that inaugural class are approaching their sophomore years at UT-Tyler, some still struggling in other areas but all making sufficient progress to be categorized as in "good academic standing." What I learned from these students is something I had not anticipated: that regardless of a score on a standardized test, all "true" freshmen are, in many respects, "basic writers," unsure of themselves when it comes to writing on a university or college level and, many times, ill-prepared for the new level of complexity expected in their writing.

But what of those that *are* in the "remedial loop"? What can be done to make basic writing instruction, for them, more profitable?

Outsourcing: Back to the Margins?

"Outsource" is an interesting word, both in its meaning and in its function. Its meaning denotes definite ties to modern-day economics: "to procure (as some goods or services needed by a business or organization) under contract with an outside supplier." Basically, it all has to do with the "bottom line" and the word's connotation – restructuring a task, a job, so that it can be done as cheaply as possible – bespeaks a certain measure of dehumanization; the focus is on the goods or services, not on those

who had previously supplied them or benefited from them. In the case of basic writing instruction, these denotations and connotations fit all too well. For many universities, basic writing instruction has become a financial burden (and somewhat of a philosophical one as well), so many of them have chosen to outsource that instruction to community colleges where it can be done more cheaply. For many community colleges, the actual basic writing instruction is then outsourced in another way – by assigning it to adjuncts or other low-ranking instructors, by relaxing enrollment caps so that more students can enroll in each section of these courses, and by relying on easily graded exercises or computerized modules – in order to facilitate basic writing instruction at the lowest possible cost to the college.

But the function of the word is also telling. "Outsource" is a transitive verb, a verb that always has with it a direct object. Whatever is being outsourced is being acted upon, a non-agent with little if any influence in the transaction itself. In the case of basic writing, this holds true not only for its instruction but also for the students involved. Not only is basic writing taught at many community colleges by part-time or low-ranking instructors with little training in basic writing pedagogy or theory, individuals outside the sphere of influence on the campuses where they teach, but the students taught are also non-agents, non-entities, deemed ineligible for inclusion in the normal life of higher education. They have little say in why they are placed in these classes, they have little influence, many times, over what is taught or how it is taught, but they have the most at stake, the most to win or, unfortunately, lose. As long as basic writing instruction is viewed as something that <u>can</u> be outsourced, and as long as community colleges are

viewed as the best possible "outside supplier" for that instruction, basic writing and basic writers will remain on the losing side of this particular bottom line.

Basic writing instruction, as a collegiate enterprise, will probably be in existence for the foreseeable future; *where* it should be conducted remains a matter that should be investigated in more detail than it has been in the past. While community colleges, by their nature, seem to be the most amenable location for basic writing instruction, there is still the matter of numbers: the number of students who, in need of basic writing instruction, start their post-secondary educations at community colleges and then never finish; the number of students who, due to their scores on a standardized writing test, are placed into a basic writing class when, with some extra help, might be able to make it in a credit-bearing composition course; the number of basic writing instructors who, for various reasons, prefer to base their basic writing instruction on grammar drills and other discrete skill exercises. What can be done to ensure that basic writers who choose to attend community colleges get the help they need?

The first (and arguably the most urgent) change should be a change in the perception of what it takes to effectively teach basic writing, and this change can and should come in the hiring of instructors who have some background in basic writing theory and pedagogy. Every week, on websites such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s job site and HigherEdJobs.com, ads appear for basic (or developmental) writing positions. During the week of February 26 through March 2, 15 ads were posted on the HigherEdJobs.com site for basic or developmental writing instructors; of that number, 13 were for positions at community colleges, only five were for positions that were full-time, and only three listed as one of the requisites a master's degree with an

emphasis in basic writing theory or experience in teaching basic writing courses. In more and more of these ads, colleges are opting for experience in teaching secondary English; however, with an increasing number of states adopting standardized tests to measure students' writing ability, a background in teaching secondary English could only reinforce the "skill drill" or grammar exercise instruction currently in place in many community college basic writing programs.

In the introduction to this work, I mentioned a set of guidelines proposed by the Two-Year College Association (TYCA) for the kinds of academic preparation English faculty at community colleges should have. These guidelines were revised and published again in the September 2006 issue of *Teaching English at the Two-Year College*; unfortunately, only one change can be detected from the original guidelines in the area of addressing the needs of basic writing instruction. The September 2006 guidelines set forth the following as items under "Academic Preparation and Professional Development": "Additional courses recommended in: . . . Teaching writing (including courses in basic writing, bilingual/ bicultural writers)" (8). Under the heading of "Master's degree in English or English education should include," they list "Other coursework in: . . . Theories of learning, including basic writers and literacy for adult learners" (8). However, under the heading "Adjunct Faculty," the requirements become more ambiguous:

> Since much of the teaching of composition is taught by adjunct faculty, they should have the same qualifications expected for full-time hires, specifically, a master's degree in English with coursework in composition

> theory or the teaching of writing, or experience with the National Writing Project, writing centers, or similar organizations.
>
> For those who may be teaching without this background (whether full-time or adjunct), the English Department in the two-year college is urged to offer courses or workshops in these areas as well as in methods of evaluation, adult learners, and assessment. (9)

While the new guidelines may seem laudable at first glance, they are just that – guidelines – that may or may not be followed at a college's discretion. In fact, a recent informal survey conducted on the Basic Writing listserv asked respondents whether their colleges or universities offered workshops or courses dealing with basic writing issues and what backgrounds the basic writing instructors at their campuses had. The majority of those responding indicated that their institutions did not offer any workshops or courses on a regular basis that would keep instructors up-to-date on current basic writing scholarship and/or practices; not surprisingly, these same respondents were the ones who indicated that the majority of their basic writing instruction was conducted by adjuncts with little if any basic writing background or by full-time hires with only a bachelor's degree and 18 graduate credit hours in English (BW Listserv Survey). With the number of students needing basic writing instruction growing each year, and if the trend toward relegating basic writing instruction to community colleges continues or increases, instructors with a background in basic writing theory and practice are going to be needed. Perhaps if more graduate programs in English offered classes in basic writing pedagogy, there might be a larger number of newly-minted PhDs entering the job market with a solid background in how basic writing should be taught. But that may be a matter for another project.

The second most pressing need is for higher education to re-evaluate its dependence on standardized test scores for placement, especially standardized writing tests that cannot possibly show a student's true ability when it comes to writing. In composition courses, we tout the writing process; however, when dealing with standardized writing tests, we seem to look the other way and rely on a score given to an essay that was produced in a manner completely foreign to the process we espouse. There are alternatives to placement writing tests – portfolios, student self-directed placement, etc. – that are likely to give us a better and more realistic picture of a student's writing process than a piece of writing that, due to the nature of these writing tests, can be nothing more than a draft (see Chapter 3 for a more detailed exposition of assessment via timed writing tests). Unless those of us in composition in general and basic writing in particular begin to come forward with viable alternatives – at least some alternatives that, as George Hillocks points out, "rise above the level of whining" ("Fighting Back" 63) – and unless we bring our concerns and alternatives to the notice of state and federal legislators, we will remain in the untenable position of having to rely for assessment on a test that betrays what we most firmly believe about the process and the act of writing.

A possible solution that has been proposed is better communication between high school English teachers and their counterparts in higher education regarding what is expected of students both in the way of admission standards and in the area of competencies required for enrollment in standard college credit courses. The Bridge Partnership, under the guidance of Bob McCabe of the National Association of Developmental Education, is entering its third year of collaboration between community colleges and partner high schools, with 60 community colleges and 90 high schools in 22

states participating during the 2005-06 school year ("Bridge"). One of the partnership's stated goals is to make the transition between high school and credit-bearing college courses more successful for those students who, historically, are placed in remedial courses when they enroll in college or at a university. By improving a student's chances of doing well on college placement examinations, McCabe states, the Partnership's collaboration with high schools decreases the likelihood that the student will be placed in remediation. The problem, however, is that this Partnership deals only with community colleges, and no mention is made of any future inclusion of universities in this partnership. This oversight, whether planned or inadvertent, further limits some high school students' possibilities where higher education is concerned, especially those at-risk students or students of color who, historically, populate basic writing classes in greater numbers.

The third and perhaps the most problematic pressing need goes far beyond a commitment to hire instructors with backgrounds in basic writing pedagogy and practice or any potential partnership between high schools and community colleges or a commitment to speak out for more realistic and less biased writing assessments: it is a call for those of us in composition to re-examine our commitment to the entire basic writing enterprise. Tom Fox, in *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*, posits that such a re-examination is problematic for many compositionists because it requires us to come to terms with the ambiguous position composition holds on many campuses:

> Even more than freshman composition, basic writing is concerned with issues of access. Its history as part of the Open Admissions movement at

> City College attests to basic writing's commitment to what we now call students of color. And yet this commitment comes with an equally powerful commitment to the second half of composition's "institutional ambiguity" – the part about gatekeeping. (51)

The word "gatekeeping" arouses very mixed feelings: while in one breath we decry the need for it, we must also admit that on many campuses (and even within our own departments) composition in general – and basic writing specifically – is seen in just such a light. While we may believe in equal access theoretically, we face daily voices from within our own institutions and from without that expect us to be pragmatic about such things (i.e., the "do we really want *those* kinds of people here?" reactions). Universities eager to protect their elite positions or state or federal funding have opted to exercise this "gatekeeping" function by moving basic writing instruction to "general colleges" on their own campuses (the equivalent of a community college) or to local community colleges in their areas. Some English departments and composition programs, eager to bolster their positions within the university community, have relegated basic writing instruction to completely separate departments in order to distance themselves from the thorny nature of the "gatekeeping" function.

Teachers of basic writing face these problems every day, in growing numbers. In some instances, those with a background in basic writing instruction are required to put aside what they know about how basic writing should be taught in favor of departmental mandates regarding syllabi and textbook selection; in other instances, those without a background in basic writing instruction – especially those who are part-time or adjunct status – face increasing class enrollments the only way they know how: by assigning

easily gradable exercises that, unfortunately, have not proven to improve student writing significantly enough to ensure that a student will be able to write at a level commensurate with mandated performance levels. As Lynn Quitman Troyka points out in "How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise," We [need] to take time to explain that 'knowing' the rules of grammar mechanically [isn't] the sole, or even a major, cause of substantive lapses in writing skills The truth is far more textured" (119). However, most basic writing instructors, as Troyka points out, have little time – or are given little encouragement – to do the types of research necessary to find out just how textured that truth may be. Instead, many of them to either "teach the test" or fall back on exercises and drills that have more to do with time management than helping students become better writers.

Unless composition as a discipline reaffirms its commitment to basic writing instruction and the students it serves, we may soon see a day when basic writing and basic writers, once inside the university, find themselves outside and outsourced with no avenue for return.

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VITA

Brenda Gail Tuberville was born August 27, 1955, in Wichita, Kansas. She is the daughter of O. D. Tuberville of Magnolia, Arkansas, and the late Helen Tuberville. A 1973 graduate of Hazelwood Senior High School, Florissant, Missouri, she received an Bachelor of Arts degree (cum laude) with a major in English from Southern Arkansas University, Magnolia, Arkansas, in 1995.

She received her Master of Arts degree in English (with an emphasis in composition and rhetoric) from Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, Texas, in 2000. She began her doctoral studies at Texas Christian University in 1998, where she held an assistantship from 1998 to 2001. She has taught at various universities and community colleges across Texas, including Texas A&M University-Commerce, Tarrant County Community College, Lamar State College-Orange, Paris Junior College, and is now a Senior Lecturer at the University of Texas-Tyler in Tyler, Texas, where she will assume the title of Visiting Assistant Professor and Interim Director of the Writing Center in August, 2007. She is a member of the Conference on College Composition and Community, the National Association of Developmental Education, and the Texas Association of Developmental Education.

ABSTRACT

INSIDE/OUT(SOURCED): THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF TEACHING BASIC WRITING AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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This work deals with the growing trend among many American universities to relegate basic writing instruction and other remedial courses to community colleges and the problems contingent with such a trend. While American community colleges were initially founded to give students a foundation of coursework that could then be transferred to a baccalaureate-awarding university, recent decades have seen community colleges grow away from this transfer function and toward vocational training and a stratification of the American population that further marginalizes basic writing and basic writers. Additionally, the placement instruments currently used to gauge a student's ability to handle university-level coursework can, at times, give an unfair assessment of a student's true ability, thereby forcing that student into a recurring cycle of remedial classes from which he or she may never emerge to finish a baccalaureate (or even an associate's) degree.

This work also looks at basic writing programs at Texas community colleges as a representative of the types of basic writing instruction currently being undertaken at the community college level across the country as well as at the problems that arise within these programs and the practices that contradict existing basic writing pedagogy and theory. In contrast to this, the work details the beginning of a basic writing course at the University of Texas-Tyler, the theoretical foundations for that course (as opposed to the practices currently in place at the community college level), and a case study of five students in the inaugural offering of this course and how the methods employed in the course helped these students address issues such as their perceptions of themselves as students and scholars and their perceptions of the difficulties they faced in handling university-level writing assignments.

Finally, this work looks at some recommendations for basic writing instruction in the present and implications for basic writing research in the future.