

Introduction

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The essays collected in this volume participate in an ongoing debate over how best to represent basic writers and basic writing. Our essays perform cultural materialist readings of discursive practices in basic writing, foregrounding the specific sociopolitical and intellectual contexts of both the production and reception of a discourse dominating the field ("Basic Writing") and the social and political effects of its operation on a range of diverse research and teaching practices concerned with the education of students labeled "basic writers."¹ We map the central problematics, key terms, questions, and assumptions constituting the "foundation" of that discourse, operating to give the field unity and continuity by privileging some while marginalizing other practices. We consider the ways in which cultural materialist readings of basic writing might inform present and future research and teaching practices aimed at addressing the mediation of power relations in such practices.

In 1977, Mina Shaughnessy wrote, "Wherever the new students have arrived in substantial numbers English teachers have begun to realize that little in their background has prepared them to teach writing to someone who has not already learned how to do it" (*Errors and Expectations* 121). Understanding themselves to be in a "new" situation, teachers and researchers of writing have attempted to understand and address the specific needs of their students. They have investigated the characteristics of these students, developed pedagogies for them, and subjected these characterizations and pedagogies to ongoing critical review. Of a wealth of practices and projects addressing such concerns, some have emerged as dominant, constituting a canon of research methodology, pedagogies, and programs. Although critics have pointed out that the history of remedial education did not begin with the Open Admissions movements of the 1960s and 1970s, this discourse of Basic Writing has largely been treated as *new*, beginning with the founding of the *Journal of Basic Writing* in 1975 and identified with work disseminated mostly in that journal and in NCTE publications and conferences.

We map this hegemonic process to investigate the problematics of Basic Writing: how and why some questions and practices have come to seem central and others peripheral or irrelevant to Basic Writing.

In our essays, we trace Basic Writing's selection of certain terms as "key," certain questions to be pursued at the expense of others, certain pedagogies as "practical" or "effective," and we examine the political effects of such selections, showing how the New discourse denies the interrelationship of its discursive practice with the specific social and historical contexts of its production and reception. For this "New" discourse emerged in the context of a range of positions on the nature and goal of higher education during the 1960s and '70s taken by public officials, college faculty, university administrators, college students, parents of students and prospective students, figures in the public media, and established "writers" from minority ethnic or racial groups. We analyze the "birth" of Basic Writing in relation to the spectrum of political positions ranging from the far right to the far left, renewing, defending, or challenging prior positions on college admissions standards, "Bonehead English," and the role of higher education in society. The New discourse of Basic Writing thus represents one among many in a discursive *field*, emerging in response to what Robert Lyons, describing the genesis of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, has termed "the most contentious issue in higher education in New York, . . . at a college [City College] where feelings about this issue were particularly intense" ("Mina Shaughnessy and the Teaching of Writing" 6).

The New discourse speaks to the efforts and success of teachers dedicated to the education of "basic writers" to find a voice and establish authority for themselves through gaining legitimacy as an academic discipline. Positioned within a constellation of discourses constituting other fields within and without English Studies (literary studies, literacy studies, linguistics, sociology, educational psychology), it participates in the general disciplinary project of producing and regulating the movement of knowledge, the forms of language, and the training of minds. Specifically, it treats its statements as (purely) descriptive rather than (also) constitutive of the subject Basic Writing, focusing attention on the need to "get the job done," to understand the "meaning" of the writing produced by Basic Writers and to generate "new readings" of the students and their writing, thus drawing attention away from its role in defining the social and institutional position of Basic Writing. In seeming to try merely to discover, define, and understand the needs and problems of basic writers, it de-emphasizes the function of the teacher/ researcher's choice of

perspective, methods, and language in constructing those "needs" and "problems," in controlling the judgments and responses of students and teachers, and in aligning the teaching of Basic Writing with other power formations within English studies, American higher education, and society at large. However, the terms by which this discourse establishes itself, while ensuring it a specific kind of legitimacy and authority, simultaneously isolate it from the heterogeneity of positions and forms of power in the larger discursive field. In establishing itself as an "academic" discourse, it has risked becoming "merely academic"—participating in a tradition of separating the academic from the social and historical. We use recent challenges to the dominance of this "New" discourse in the field of basic writing to illustrate the need for those of us professing basic writing to attend to the ways in which social historical discursive constraints mediate our efforts to challenge the hegemonic position of Basic Writing within English Studies and American higher education and society. We should neither underestimate opposition nor overlook the full range of alliances which we might mobilize in our struggle to challenge the existing distribution of power, nor the often complex and contradictory pressures on our choice of alignments. By recognizing the heterogeneity of basic writing at any given time and place, teachers can draw on the full range of positions and forces—dominant, alternative, and oppositional as well as residual or emergent—with some of which we might align ourselves and with all of which we must contend.

Our analyses are built upon several assumptions about the relationship between language, power, and subjectivity: (1) a notion of discourse as a form of material practice operating through a grid of terms and questions to establish a body of knowledge, define a particular subject, and construct particular relationships between those participating in the discourse and various social institutions and systems of power; (2) the notion that individual subjectivity is nonessentialized, emerging out of a process of conflict and change each time a writer thinks, speaks, reads, or writes; (3) a view of "education" as constituted by the social, political, economic, and cultural structures of a given time as well as constitutive of these structures—contributing to the renewal and transformation of existing structures; (4) a concept of "hegemony" or "domination" that recognizes, on the one hand, the constraints which the dominant social and political forces of a given time and place exert on individual work, and, on the other, the range of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture existing as significant elements in society at any given time: that is, the belief that the particular social conditions of a given time and place can exert pressures on an individual to act not only in ways that maintain and renew existing

ways of distributing and organizing social power but also to transform those ways; (5) a notion of human agency as "overdetermined," working for social change but in circumstances not of one's choosing.² These assumptions lead us repeatedly to call attention to issues of difference and power inscribed in ongoing debate on the meaning of such concepts as learning, resolution, development, self-expression, community, frontier. We do so by drawing on images of negotiation, conflict, struggle, repositioning, and borders from the work of such feminist, post-colonial, and marginality critics as bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Mary Louise Pratt. These latter terms recur in our arguments, for to us they accentuate what has traditionally been denied, muffled, or displaced: the operation of power, society, and history on individuals, discourse, and institutions.

Two of the central aims of the essays collected here are to understand all work in basic writing as social and historical, and thus to contest the objectification of the researcher, research discourse, and the "object" of research. It is therefore appropriate that an introduction to our own work, represented by the writing collected here, locate that work in the conditions of its own production and reception. This is not, of course, to provide the defining narrative for or defense of that writing. Indeed, to do so would be counter to our own understanding of writing/history as constitutive rather than reflective. But we offer our account of the intellectual, historical, and institutional conditions of our work to invite interrogation of the politics of our own representations of basic writing.

We see ourselves as part of a generation of compositionists trained in the late 1980s whose experience of basic writing was shaped by the canonical reception of certain texts on basic writing in graduate programs and professional journals. The gap between the official accounts of basic writing and our day-to-day experience as writing teachers and students resulted in a dissatisfaction with what we saw as the occlusion of attention from the social struggle and change involved in the teaching and learning of basic writing, and representations of the "problems" of basic writers and basic writing in ways that risked perpetuating their marginal position in higher education. This furthered our interest in and desire to contribute to an emerging position in composition and literary and cultural studies which relocated writing and the teaching of writing in society and history. By attempting to resituate texts as work performed in specific social and historical contexts, we have hoped to explore how the study and teaching of writing might proceed in the present and future. For us, this has involved delineating the parameters setting and set by the production and reception of canonized texts in Basic Writing—for example, investigating how and why and to what effect CUNY's implementation of its SEEK and

Open Admissions program during the 1960s and '70s has been constructed as the originating, authoritative center of Basic Writing, the site of its "birth."

We come to this project in part as a response to the "lived experiences" of family, friends, and ourselves negotiating cultural dissonance along lines of ethnicity, race, class, gender, and sex as this gets played out at the site of institutionalized education. Our interest in basic writing as an important site for our teaching and scholarship arises from our understanding of this experience and of the historical role of basic writing as the only space in English which seriously investigates the challenges of students whose writing is explicitly marked as "not belonging" to the academy. Simultaneously, this "lived experience" makes it difficult for us to accept representations of "basic writers" as the "other." It makes perspectives which foreground the politics of representation—acknowledging issues of power involved in the question of who is speaking for whom, about whom, when, where, and why—both relevant and necessary. This in turn makes more apparent the marginalization of such perspectives in dominant discourse on basic writing.

Our project is also a response to our experience of basic writing as already institutionalized, however problematically. In our own experience, we first confronted courses called "Basic Writing" not as "new" but as an established institutional fact, part of the undergraduate curriculum in courses called "Basic Writing" and "Basic Reading and Writing" in a wide range of colleges and universities across the nation. In graduate seminars, we encountered Basic Writing as an object of study and field of research, with its canonical texts and figures. The construction of Mina Shaughnessy as an authorizing figure in Basic Writing perhaps best illustrates the effects of this canonization. The dominant discourse of Basic Writing views critiques of the discourse with criticism of individuals' integrity and character: in the case of Shaughnessy's writings, with criticism of Shaughnessy. It approaches "history" by attempting to trace causal influences among events or the "evolution" of ideas whose "unity" and "origin" supposedly reside in the intentions and integrity of individual authors like Shaughnessy. In this discourse, Shaughnessy becomes the originating author of Basic Writing; critiques of texts associated with her thus become critiques of her. This has the effect of silencing critique and authorizing the individual figure and those who can then speak in that figure's name, having "known" her and, by implication, her "true" intentions.

Our project responds by historicizing the canonizing process that produces these effects. Rather than recovering originating intentions of an "author," we investigate the social and historical production, regulation, and effects of dominant discourse.

While our project clearly arises from different theoretical assumptions, the difference in theoretical assumptions intersects with a difference in institutional and historical positions. First, it speaks to the historically changing currency of theoretical assumptions about discourse, identity, and meaning. It speaks as well, however, to different historical and institutional circumstances. Claims of access to authorial intentions have simply not been readily available to those of us studying, teaching, and writing in institutions such as the University of Pittsburgh and Drake University during the late 1980s and 1990s. Our relationship with Basic Writing is not populated by memories of having personal contact with the Basic Writing "trailblazers." Similarly, our perspective on the 1960s–1970s inception of basic writing programs speaks to our position as both institutional and historical "outsiders" to such movements. This is not to grant greater "authority" to those who might claim to have "been there," nor greater "objectivity" for those "outside." Radical differences in the stories told by those who might make such claims negate the attribution of any such authority to any such individuals.³ But our "distance" from those movements makes it possible for us to engage in discursive analysis of those movements in a manner less readily available to those writers who were "part of" them. Simply put, we respond to a different set of interests and pressures by virtue of the specific social and historical locations of our work. This is perhaps most evident in our concern with the resurgence of New Right attempts at retrenchment and attacks on "political correctness," a concern obviously not available to earlier writers but which motivates our interest in the strategies of Open Admissions and the academic retrenchment of the later 1970s.

We started our careers at institutions interested in exploring the implications of poststructural theory and cultural materialism for the structure and work of English departments. We have been encouraged in our work both at the graduate level and as English faculty to challenge distinctions traditionally maintained between English and other disciplines, theory and practice, research and teaching, composition, literature, criticism, and creative writing, and between "beginning" and "advanced" performance. That institutional setting encouraged us to challenge the distinction between "beginning" and "advanced" writing, aligning us with the conclusions drawn by teachers in open admissions programs as they confronted the limitations such distinctions placed on their work as teachers, as researchers, and as administrators.⁴ We are the beneficiaries of such conclusions, which we encountered not as tentative formulations but as established assumptions informing the programs, theories, and teaching to which we were introduced.

Finally, our work is made possible by other, very specific material circumstances. We speak here not just of matters of time and money in the form of grants for course release and research support, important and necessary as these are and as important as we believe it is to acknowledge these bases for intellectual work. We mean as well the freedom given us to work with a variety of students and to design our own courses with appropriate enrollments that make certain kinds of work with students possible. We mean, also, conditions in which our work in "composition" receives institutional encouragement and is accorded status at least equal to work in other areas of English, while not being viewed as separate from those areas. In short, our work is made possible and thus indebted to the institutionalization of basic writing as an academic field, which we problematize.

The writing of the essays collected here did not follow any simple, linear narrative of research and report. Rather, while all emerge out of the assumptions described above, each adopts a somewhat different angle and focus toward thinking through the problematics of representing basic writing. We have therefore not arranged these in the chronological order in which they were either written or first appeared. Instead, we present them in two clusters. The first five essays—"The 'Birth' of 'Basic Writing,'" "Conflict and Struggle," "Importing Science," "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy," and "Mapping Errors and Expectations"—situate Basic Writing in various discursive fields and historic moments to examine the complex material conditions mediating its production and reception. The first of these situates the emergence of the discourse of Basic Writing in the context of political and institutional struggles surrounding the adoption and implementation of CUNY's Open Admissions policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It approaches some of the key terms dominating Basic Writing's representations of itself as "new" and on the "frontier," and of students as "new," apolitical beginners hoping to join mainstream American life, as active responses to the discourse on open admissions opposing "academic excellence" to "political activism" and social concerns, and linking academic unpreparedness with minority identity and political interests.

"Conflict and Struggle" further locates dominant discourse on Basic Writing among competing ways of representing and addressing the "needs" of student writers to negotiate with cultural dissonance. It examines the hegemony of two views of education as acculturation or accommodation in culturally authorized narratives of the experience of "minority" students. It argues that these operate to dissolve rather than make productive use of conflict and struggle in the teaching and learning of writing. Just as "Conflict and Struggle" shows Basic Writing discourse to participate in ongoing debates

on education, "Importing Science: Neutralizing Basic Writing" shows how research in that dominant discourse actively participates in an "expressive realism" pervasive across mainstream composition, literary criticism, education, linguistics, and various other social sciences during the 1970s. It approaches Basic Writing's success in establishing itself as a legitimate academic field in terms of its ability to use "science" to promote the "objectivity" of teaching, research, and writing at an historical period and in classrooms where the dominant found issues of diversity and power most difficult to contain.

"Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence" shows how such alignments operate in Shaughnessy's reading of error to occlude attention to issues of power and subject positioning in the process of learning to master "correct" English. "Mapping Errors and Expectations for Basic Writing" identifies the conceptual dilemmas in which Basic Writing discourse has been trapped through its attempts to understand and justify the teaching of basic writing by imagining basic writers either as beginners growing cognitively or as aliens becoming initiated into a specific discourse community.

In one way or another, all these work to locate basic writing in history: a response to, produced and sustained by, and altering specific social and historical conditions and thus as never fixed but always provisional and strategic, continually involving individuals in renegotiating their positions and their work. The remaining pair of essays—"Rethinking the 'Sociality' of Error: Teaching Editing as Negotiation" and "Professing Multiculturalism"—apply this understanding to the classroom, specifically to the question of how to present and address "error," the issue that, perhaps more than any other, has defined basic writing for many. Uniting both is an understanding of the work of writing—including deviations from conventions of "correct" English—as not an "object" to be consumed but as a practice, with the material writing understood as notations part of a larger process of production and reception and thus liable to changing forms of social relationship (see Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* 46-47). In this understanding, "error" represents not a phenomenon located on the page but a negotiated social power relationship between specific readers and writers. Contrasting this view with theories that explain error as evidence of writers' cognitive development or discourse habits, "Rethinking" argues for a pedagogy highlighting the negotiating process between readers and writers that produces work as either in "error" or not.

"Professing Multiculturalism" describes a pedagogy that problematizes the distinction traditionally maintained between "error" and "style" in approaches to the writing of "student" and established authors. It demonstrates how error—traditionally the province of basic writing alone and proof that it deserves its "low status"—represents a zone for the reconfiguring of discursive practices traditionally compartmentalized by definitions of low and high ranking literature, literary criticism, creative writing, "advanced composition," and "basic writing."

"Some Afterwords" offers our sense of ongoing debates now dominant in discourse on basic writing and in composition studies generally: the possibility of eliminating basic writing through "mainstreaming" or other strategies; the relevance of contact zone pedagogies to basic writing; intersections between basic writers and other writers; the continuing distinction between matters of "style" and matters of "content"; feminist and post-colonial critiques of composition work; and the perduring textual bias of research in composition. By delineating what we see as intersections and divergences between our work and such debates, we hope both to further the location of the work that we have begun in this Introduction and to suggest directions we and others might take to address the specific gaps and strengths we identify in the struggles now confronting us all.

The pieces in this book are all separately authored, with Min-Zhan Lu writing chapters 2, 3, 4, and 7, and Bruce Horner chapters 1, 5, 6, and "Some Afterwords." Rather than reworking these into a unified voice, in the form of the "we" speaking here, we have chosen to retain the differences between and among the multiple "I's" appearing in the chapters. We hope to use these disjunctions in the speaking voices to acknowledge two aspects of this collaborative project. First, it is a project spanning nine years of extensive discussion between the two authors over the texts each of us was reading and writing. Drafts and revisions of each chapter were composed by one of us in response to questions raised by the other. Moreover, the inception of many of these chapters has arisen from questions provoked in one of us by reading the other's work. For example, Horner's critique of an earlier version of Lu's essay on "Professing Multiculturalism" led Lu toward a further exploration of the intersection as well as differences between the "contact zone" approach to error she describes and pedagogies described earlier by Epes, Tricomi, and Lees. Horner responded to Lu's "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy" by contextualizing the construction of basic writing as an academic field in "The 'Birth' of 'Basic Writing.'" Similarly, in "Professing Multiculturalism," Lu places the approach to teaching editing Horner presents in "Rethinking the 'Sociality' of Error" in the context of multicultural approaches to style in both literature and composition classrooms.

The second aspect of this collaborative project we would highlight is the fact of differences in the personal, social, and academic conditions each of us has brought to the project at different moments through the years. The direction of the project bears traces of the different trajectories in which the teaching and scholarship of each of us has developed. This is perhaps most obvious in Horner's use of historical studies of literacy practices and Lu's use of feminist, post-colonial, and Marxist criticism. Shifts in the "I" appearing in the chapters by each of us also bear traces of changes in the vocabularies used and questions raised in dominant discourse on composition studies and traces of our specific, varied experiences in teaching. The book thus presents the changing ways in which we have engaged and re-engaged the issues of the teaching of writing, as the conditions, pressures, and possibilities of our respective academic careers and teaching experiences shift. For example, Chapter 4, originally a part of Lu's 1989 dissertation, aims at applying theories of language to a canonical text in the field, while Chapter 7 revisits the field (in 1994) and her dissertation from the perspective of her experience attempting to develop a "multicultural" pedagogy for teaching both composition and literature. In "Some Afterwords," written in 1996, Horner revisits issues of the politics of pedagogy first addressed in 1992 in relation to the teaching of editing (Chapter 6) from the perspectives afforded by subsequent work on authorship and contact zone pedagogies.

We have found these disjunctions in our work and between our concerns and interests a constructive resource. We hope that by leaving these visible, our project might invite different ways of imagining how we might follow, respond to, and intervene productively in one another's work. And we hope the presence of these differences will enable readers working in a range of sites and conditions to pursue the intersections of their work with Basic Writing.

NOTES

Introduction

1. We take Raymond Williams's term "cultural materialism" to designate the materiality of discursive practices—that is, interpreting historical materialism as treating "superstructural" practices as constitutive of as well as constituted by the structure of the "material base."

2. These assumptions draw on Louis Althusser's notion of ideology, Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Raymond Williams's notion of the materiality of culture, Jacques Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence, Fredric Jameson's notion of the political unconscious, and Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power. For a more detailed account of the Foucauldian impress on our work, see Lu's discussion in her response included in the December 1993 *College English* "Symposium on Basic Writing: Conflict and Struggle, and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy," (55.8: 894–901).

Jameson's concept of the political unconscious informs Horner's reading of dominant discourse on Open Admissions ("Birth" 15–23). Horner discusses Althusser's notion of ideology in "Some Afterwords" and Williams's notion of the materiality of culture in "Some Afterwords" and "Re-thinking the 'Sociality' of Error."

3. Compare, for example, Wagner, Heller, and Kriegel's *Working Through*, Shaughnessy's *Errors*, and Ira Shor's *Culture Wars*.

4. See, for example, accounts by Patricia Bizzell and David Bartholomae of their first experiences with basic writing programs, and Shaughnessy's observation near the end of *Errors and Expectations* that teachers are beginning to see the difficulties of basic writers as those of every writer "writ large" (Bartholomae, "The Tidy House"; Bizzell, Introduction; Shaughnessy, *Errors* 293).