

1 Historical Overview

For most scholars and teachers, the story of basic writing is tied to a specific historical moment—the open admissions movement of the 1970s at the City University of New York (CUNY). This seismic shift in university policy grew out of the social and political volatility of the late 1960s. And it resulted in the memorable teaching program led by the charismatic teacher-scholar Mina Shaughnessy at CUNY’s City College. Any overview of basic writing needs to begin with an account of how this outgrowth of the fairly new field of composition, which came into its own in the 1960s, emerged as an important subfield in the 1970s.

Of course, the presence of unskilled writers in college classrooms was not a completely new phenomenon. What was new was the heightened focus on the needs of such students. Michael G. Moran and Martin J. Jacobi make this point in their introduction to *Research in Basic Writing: A Bibliographic Sourcebook*. Surprised that “it took so many years for scholars to turn their attention to the problem of extremely weak student writers,” they ask what changed so that “basic writing is now an important discipline within the larger area of rhetoric and composition” (1). Their answer: “Attitudes toward these students changed during the 1960s and 1970s” (1). Despite all the talk from basic writing scholars about a new kind of student, what really made BW possible was a new kind of attention.

In the opening pages of their introduction to *Landmark Essays on Basic Writing*, Kay Halasek and Nels P. Highberg give a useful overview of “the early moments in the history of basic writing” going back to the nineteenth century (xi-xiv), but the first essay in the collection is Adrienne Rich’s account of open admissions at City College. People like Shaughnessy and Rich represent a critical shift of attention and sympathy, acting as catalysts of BW’s emergence, however far back its origins might be traced. Precisely because other historians of composition have duly traced distant roots and foreshadowings (see, for

example, Berlin, *Writing*; Brereton; Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*), a focused treatment of basic writing needs to know its limits. Though some scholars have found the precursors of BW in institutional and curricular developments many decades earlier, we focus here not on century-distant predecessors of basic writing at Harvard or Wellesley but instead on that time when basic writing became aware of itself, achieving self-definition as a considered answer to an urgent need.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the history of basic writing as it has developed over the decades. Given BW's origin in the crucible of political and educational pressures of the 1960s, it comes as no surprise that its definition has been highly contested, its past repeatedly remapped.

THE 1960S

The 1960s, in the popular mind, is the classic period of unrest and upheaval, much of it concentrated in colleges and universities. Partly, this concentration resulted from the weight of numbers. Ever since World War II, when the GI Bill allowed many returning service personnel to enter college who never would have otherwise, college enrollments had been rising steadily, mounting throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. This was a time of dramatic enrollment growth, faculty hiring, and curricular change. But this unprecedented growth brought problems as well, particularly to institutions unable to support further growth. One flashpoint was City College of the City University of New York (CUNY), where free tuition made the demand for higher education especially great. In the past, raising admissions standards had kept enrollments in check—but at a cost: higher admissions standards brought into question the right to “equal educational opportunity,” which, as Kenneth Howe has shown in *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity*, was a critical principle in public education in the second half of the twentieth century.

New York had found a safety valve of sorts in the legislative mandate that, in 1966, created the SEEK Program. The acronym stood for Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge, and the program's purpose was to provide higher education opportunities to economically and educationally disadvantaged students. As it later turned out, the SEEK Program opened the door and laid the groundwork for open admissions.

With open admissions, the door became a floodgate. Enrollments of first-year students at CUNY nearly doubled in the very first year (1970), jumping from 20,000 to 35,000. Almost half of these students entered under the new open admissions standards. City College and the other CUNY colleges were not ready for open admissions and its consequences, rushed into the change in admissions policy by student demonstrations and campus unrest. Located in Harlem, City College in particular had come to seem a bastion of white privilege in a largely black neighborhood. Calls to make it less exclusive and excluding became increasingly strident. Accounts of this stridency vary, however. One alumnus (and opponent of open admissions) states flatly that “the 1970 introduction of open admissions was . . . in response to race riots” (Berman), while Adrienne Rich, discussing the seizure of City College’s South Campus by the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community in April of 1969, recounts “the faculty group’s surprised respect for the students’ articulateness, reasoning power, and skill in handling statistics—for the students were negotiating in exchange for withdrawal from South Campus an admissions policy which would go far beyond SEEK in its inclusiveness” (6). Yet in the wake of such negotiations came the torching of City College’s Great Hall, which seems to have been a decisive event. Seymour H. Hyman (who was Deputy Chancellor at the time) recalls the fire: “I was telling people about what I felt when I saw that smoke coming out of that building, and the only question in my mind was, How can we save City College? And the only answer was, Hell, let everybody in” (qtd. in Maher, *Shaughnessy* 40). An overstatement, this was nevertheless symptomatic of a significant shift in policy. Open admissions, planned by the Board of Higher Education (now the CUNY Board of Trustees) for gradual phase-in to full implementation in 1975, was renegotiated with the protesting students in May of 1969. Minutes from the Board meeting of July 9, 1969, note that students’ demands were met for the most part.

Much has been made of this acquiescence to students’ demands, then and now. For many, it meant “caving in” and worse. The response of one City College professor at the time, effectively signaled by the title of his book *The Death of the American University: With Special Reference to the Collapse of the City College of New York*, was to declare that “there can and must be no retreat, no craven capitulation to the anarchists, Communists, and know-nothings who would bring down

society” (Heller 12). As recently as 1999, a report on open admissions for the Mayor’s Advisory Task Force on the City University of New York used the telling heading “Policy by Riot” in its account of this time (“CUNY: An Institution Adrift” 19).

Yet presumed immediate causes are usually part of a more complex chain of causes and effects. Especially critical in this case was a looming budget crisis. As documented in *Right Versus Privilege: The Open-Admissions Experiment at the City University of New York*, the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community (BPRSC) made common cause with white student organizations in response to announced budget cuts. The coalition produced demonstrations of CUNY students at the state legislature in Albany many times the size of any back at CUNY (and well before the seizure of the South Campus). What’s more, the budget cuts the BPRSC feared would reduce opportunities for minority students were so serious that the college president himself announced his resignation in protest, only to have twenty-seven department chairs announce theirs as well in a dramatic gesture of support (Lavin, Alba, and Silberstein 10–11).

Open admissions, then, was no sudden, student-led coup, though it is important to see it as a real change shaped by radical egalitarianism as well as fiscal exigency. It is equally important to realize that City College already had a structure in place for the writing instruction of the new students that the hurried-up policy of open admissions brought in. Since 1965, even before the SEEK program, the college had offered a Pre-Baccalaureate Program, and the director of the SEEK Program had some trouble getting out of the habit of referring to it as the “Pre-Bac” Program (Maher, *Shaughnessy* 92). Her name was Mina Shaughnessy.

Like the social circumstances surrounding her program, Shaughnessy’s personal circumstances seem especially significant. An extraordinarily successful and committed teacher passionate about both writing and literature, she lacked a PhD, and her teaching prior to her appointment at City College had been in part-time positions, chiefly at Hofstra University on Long Island and Hunter College, another CUNY campus in Manhattan. Impressive recommendations from Hofstra and Hunter and a successful interview earned her an appointment as lecturer in City College’s Pre-Baccalaureate Program in April of 1967, starting in September of that year. Just how profound an impression she had made as an applicant became apparent over that

summer when the director of the Pre-Bac program suffered a heart attack and Shaughnessy was asked to assume the directorship. Anxious about the challenge she was taking on, she could scarcely gauge the much greater challenges to come. The SEEK program (so renamed) that Adrienne Rich and Shaughnessy taught in and that Shaughnessy directed had classes capped at fifteen students and was a relatively modest enterprise in the 1960s, though Shaughnessy did meet with resistance from the tenured (and mostly male) professors who felt the students served by her program signaled a lowering of standards and a misdirection of effort (Maher, *Shaughnessy* 88–90). But such grumbling was only a mild intimation of the seismic rumblings to come.

THE 1970S

With open admissions came a dramatic shift in scale and intensity. During the summer of 1970, while most faculty were away, Shaughnessy hired over forty teachers for her program (Maher, *Shaughnessy* 101). Just months after threatened budget cuts produced massive protests, Shaughnessy was recruiting for a program that many of her colleagues saw as an unfortunate diversion of resources. Not so long before that, the focus had been on raising standards at City College (partly as a check on burgeoning enrollments), something of a national trend, one documented by Albert Kitzhaber (18). Only a few years later, there was an abrupt reversal. The pressure of rising enrollments hadn't disappeared any more than the concern over standards had, yet a dramatic policy change had suddenly swung the gate open wide, allowing students into college who never would have had a chance to attend only a short time before.

Why had this happened—and not just at City? It was a question Shaughnessy herself struggled with in the opening pages of “Basic Writing” (1976), the bibliographic essay she wrote for Gary Tate’s collection *Teaching Composition*. This question was related to another: what was she to call the new field? The memorable opening of her essay situated her on a frontier: “The teaching of writing to severely unprepared freshmen is as yet but the frontier of a profession, lacking even an agreed upon name” (177). And the evocation of a new frontier was not something she did lightly: she was convinced that the kind of instruction she was speaking of was really quite new, leading her to

reject terms like “remedial” or “bonehead” English—though the latter term

catches something of the quality of the course and the attitudes that shaped it. But this type of course was waning, along with Freshman English, when the new remedial population began to appear in the sixties. In 1964, the first year of the War on Poverty, the headings “cultural deprivation” and “cultural differences” appeared for the first time in *Education Index*. By the next year, they were among the most heavily itemed headings in the *Index*. We can date the “new” remedial English from then. (178)

More important than her choice of terminology that still grounds the field and gives it an identity (people call it basic writing because she did) is Shaughnessy’s sense of social change giving rise to the “new”—above all to “the ‘new’ students who entered colleges under the open admissions revolution of the sixties” (178).

In her teaching and writing, Shaughnessy conveyed her sense of a new population of student writers brought forward by shifts of social perspective and responsibility. For Shaughnessy, blaming the students for supposed deficiencies was feckless and unjust; errors and other nonstandard features were the result of social inequities, not personal failings. As Deborah Mutnick has written, “More than the scholars who followed in her footsteps, Shaughnessy consistently shifted the focus of her research and writing on the problems of Open Admissions from the students to the teachers, administrators, and society in general” (“On the Academic Margins” 185).

At the time, however, City College was not the only CUNY campus to develop programs to meet the needs of the new student population, and Shaughnessy was not the only one working to develop exciting new programs. The 1970s were a time of pedagogical innovation throughout the university. Dynamic programs of a different focus and pedagogy were developed at Queens College under Robert Lyons, later assisted by Donald McQuade. Acclaimed poet Marie Ponsot, also working at Queens, emphasized the imagination in working with open admissions students. Brooklyn College developed an innovative program called the New School of Liberal Arts (NSLA), originally housed in downtown Brooklyn. NSLA was a high-level academic pro-

gram for traditional as well as “underprepared students” that included additional counseling and workshops in academic reading and writing for open admissions students. On the main campus of Brooklyn College, English professor Kenneth Bruffee was doing groundbreaking work on peer tutoring and collaborative learning. At Lehman College, new pedagogies and programs were being developed under the leadership of Richard Larson, Richard Sterling, and Sondra Perl. At Baruch College, experiments in computer assisted instruction (CAI) were taking place. At Hunter College, faculty in the Developmental English Program, under the leadership of Ann Raimés, were developing policies and practices for the new students and also sowing the seeds for what later became known as WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum). At the same time, faculty at CUNY’s five community colleges were also developing programs to meet the needs of the new students who were pouring into their classrooms.

In the mid-1970s, the CUNY Open Admissions Conference fostered a strong community spirit, which led to the formation of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS), initially led by Robert Lyons and Harvey Wiener with Kenneth Bruffee as a third. CAWS gave rise to study and research groups; it also began to sponsor an annual conference and put out a newsletter, CAWSES. A variety of approaches emerged at different CUNY campuses, some of them rather distant from Shaughnessy’s efforts at City College, creating a strong hothouse atmosphere.

But these efforts developed throughout the decade. At its beginning, in 1970, Shaughnessy was faced with immediate practical problems. She had teachers to train and a program to run. She did not assume that she had a controlling theory or even an effective road-map for how to proceed. Her own teaching approach had always been to puzzle through things, looking for patterns and possibilities. Ultimately, that would be the method behind *Errors and Expectations*, the groundbreaking book she published in 1977. For now, it was how she invited teachers in her program to work. She eventually codified her sense of appropriate pedagogical preparation and action, summing it up in the phrase “Diving In,” the title of her talk at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in 1975. A decade later, Robert Lyons described Shaughnessy’s approach as program administrator, a role he succeeded her in:

Instead of establishing a required curriculum for the writing program, she encouraged teachers to follow their hunches and share their insights with one another, and she encouraged them as well to engage in a wide range of research projects: studies of derailments in student prose, contrastive studies of first language interference in nonnative speakers, and examinations of perceptual problems that affect some students' ability to proofread. She also sponsored a different kind of project that sent English teachers as auditors into introductory courses in disciplines unfamiliar to them, such as biology and psychology. Their efforts to grasp the concepts governing these subjects made them more aware of the particular intellectual assumptions and the distinctive languages appropriate to these disciplines. Transforming teachers into learners, a constant in Shaughnessy's pedagogy, but here done quite literally, made the teachers comprehend the situation of students new to all kinds of academic discourse. (176)

Lyons's account of Shaughnessy's program is worth quoting at some length because almost all the critical elements of her legacy are there: embracing an inductive approach, urging collaboration and note-sharing, validating and using classroom-based research (especially with the teacher as researcher asking why students do what they do), and exploring the importance of language uses and academic strictures within the academy.

Shaughnessy's attention to language use in academic contexts is, from some perspectives, the most problematic aspect of her legacy. As Lyons himself notes, "Those who knew her and shared her concern for basic writers were often irritated by the degree of deference she showed to the forms of the academy . . ." (174). Accepting established standards as goals can be a strategic as well as a principled move, a way of stressing that increasing access need not entail a lowering of expectations. Though this was transparently Shaughnessy's intention, individual intentions can be bent in being institutionalized. And Shaughnessy's success and influence were not long in helping to reshape her institution. By 1975, when she gave her "Diving In" address at the MLA convention, Shaughnessy was no longer a teacher or even a BW program

director but an associate dean of the City University, overseeing the development of assessment tests in writing, reading, and mathematics. This change of venue and position also gave her the time and scope to do two things that would round off her legacy in the few years no one knew at the time were all she had: the writing and publication of *Errors and Expectations* and the launching of the *Journal of Basic Writing*.

It's hard to overemphasize the enormous importance of *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (1977). Jane Maher's biography devotes pages to the glowing reviews the book received when it came out—including reviews in *The Atlantic Monthly*, the *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times* (197–99). This attention was quite unlike any ever before afforded a study of student writing. And the attention didn't stop there. In the mid-1980s, Carol Hartzog's national survey of writing programs found Shaughnessy's book far and away the most influential text in the eyes of *all* program directors—not just BW program directors. In 1997, Nancy Myers cited *Errors* as the one scholarly book reliably recommended for canonical status in rhetoric and composition studies. In 1999, it was the first of five texts treated in a special review section of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* titled “Books That Have Stood the Test of Time” (Knodt 118). There are also countless personal testimonials to the power and influence of the book; in a special issue of *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* devoted to the history of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), for instance, Thomas A. Angelo closes his contribution by saying, “The first and most personally meaningful book I've read on writing remains Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors & Expectations*. . . . In twenty years, no other book has had more impact on my teaching” (71). What is most compelling about the way the book was initially received and continues to register is that it is seen as a book “on writing,” not some subset thereof, and it exerts its influence well beyond basic writing to composition, English studies, WAC, pedagogy, literacy, and language studies. But what explains not only its initial impact but also its enduring and widespread appeal?

Those early reviews reflect Shaughnessy's sense that a profound social change had brought a new population to the attention of colleges and those who teach in them. As Benjamin DeMott said in his review of her book in *The Nation*, “Her work was the kind of work you would do if you were really going to take democracy seriously” (645). Anoth-

er reason for the book's appeal is the almost irresistible invitation for the reader to identify with the role Shaughnessy enacts in the Preface, that of someone dumbfounded by the new students on her doorstep who nevertheless learn to cope, even succeed:

I remember sitting alone in the worn urban classroom where my students had just written their first essays and where I now began to read them, hoping to be able to assess quickly the sort of task that lay ahead of us that semester. But the writing was so stunningly unskilled that I could not begin to define the task nor even sort out the difficulties. I could only sit there, reading and re-reading the alien papers, wondering what had gone wrong and trying to understand what I at this eleventh hour of my students' academic lives could do about it.

Looking at these papers now, I have no difficulty assessing the work to be done nor believing that it *can* be done. (vii)

This transformation from confounded to confident would seem magical had Shaughnessy not supplied samples of the student writing she was referring to along with the thinking she brought to bear on it. Suddenly, for teachers in a world defined much more by textbooks than by studies of writing, here was someone who spoke as one of them, puzzling over real student texts and making sense of them.

Her ability to dispel what she called the "mystery" of error" (according to Robert Lyons, her book was originally titled *The Logic of Error* ["Mina Shaughnessy" 183]) was complemented by an ability to think and feel along with the students, to enter into both the affective and cognitive dimensions of error:

The "mystery" of error is what most intimidates students—the worry that errors just "happen" without a person's knowing how or when. . . . Freedom from error is finally a matter of understanding error, not of getting special dispensation to err simply because writing formal English is thought to be beyond the capabilities or interests of some students. (127–28)

This demystification of error is a complex task, but Shaughnessy conveys the invincible conviction that, for the students' sake, it must be done, and it can be done. Seeing how it could be done led the reviewer in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to say that Shaughnessy had brought to bear on student writing the kind of "intelligence that literary scholars have traditionally been trained to lavish on T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound"; her urgency that it must be done made him reckon her book a "force that can redirect the energies of an entire profession" (Hungiville 18).

For all this, there remains the focus on error, with its ramifications for the new field. Just how would and should the profession's energies be (re)directed? Shaughnessy was clear that error was only an important initial focus—not the be-all and end-all of basic writing. Still, one has to start somewhere, and (a choice made all the more consequential by her early death) error seemed to her the place to start. She explained why in her introduction to the first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* (*JBW*), the in-house journal she ushered into being in 1975 with an entire issue devoted to error. Characteristically, she opens with the sense of a new student population:

A policy of admissions that reaches out beyond traditional sources for its students, bringing in to a college campus young men and women from diverse classes, races, and cultural backgrounds who have attended good, poor, and mediocre schools, is certain to shake the assumptions and even the confidence of teachers who have been trained to serve a more uniform and prepared student population. ("Introduction" 1)

In introducing the new journal, she seems almost apologetic about the perceived necessity of foregrounding errors, as much as they figure in the initial impressions of teachers (to say nothing of placement assessments readers). "Error," she confesses,

may seem to be an old place to begin a new discussion of writing. It is, after all, a subject English teachers already know about. Some people would claim that it is the English teacher's obsession with error that has killed writing for generations of students. Yet error—the unintentional deviation from expected patterns—dominates the writing of many of the new

students, inhibiting them and their readers from concentrating on what is being said. And while no English teacher seems to have difficulty counting up and naming errors, few have been in the habit of observing them fruitfully, with the intent, that is, of understanding why intelligent young adults who want to be right seem to go on, persistently and even predictably, being wrong. (3–4)

In introducing the articles in this first issue of *JBW*, Shaughnessy notes that the issue's "opening and concluding articles take up some of the social and pedagogical issues that hover about the subject of error" (4). The first article, Sarah D'Eloia's "Teaching Standard Written English," begins by unapologetically and unequivocally announcing the conviction that "teaching 'basic' writing is synonymous with teaching standard written English" (5). Its counterweight is the concluding article, Isabella Halsted's "Putting Error in Its Place," which approvingly cites the 1974 Conference on College Composition and Communication position paper "Students' Right to Their Own Language" and argues that "a major problem our students (and we ourselves) have is fixation on Error" (77). Certainly, D'Eloia's and Halsted's positions were not the extremes they could be taken to; moderated by Shaughnessy's gravitational pull, they were brought into closer orbit around her center. Shaughnessy, as Glynda Hull has noted, occupied a kind of critical middle ground in those early days, staking out

a position [that] can be seen as a sidestep, even a sleight of hand, since it shifts our attention from the overwhelming question of whether we ought to sanction through our roles as teachers the existence of a privileged language, particularly when privileged means only arbitrarily approved scribal conventions. But it can also be seen as a compelling argument, both to provide instruction on error and to include editing among those aspects of writing worth our study. ("Research" 167)

Shaughnessy had her own ways of registering what she might be sidestepping, as when (at the end of *Errors and Expectations*) she allows that college, for the students she cares so much for, can have a negative aspect despite its proffered rewards, "threatening at the same time

to take them from their distinctive ways of interpreting the world, to assimilate them into the culture of academia without acknowledging their experience as outsiders” (292). And, of course, it is not just *what* a teacher focuses on but *how*. Hull grants Shaughnessy not only a compelling argument for a focus on error but also a compelling method: a determination “to study error from the point of view of causation” (“Research” 173). This resolve to investigate the whys of what writers did opened up new vistas for basic writing: once the question was what was happening in the writer’s mind, the answers could not stop with treatments of error, and so studies of process, cognition, and resistance ultimately came to take center stage.

But, at the time, there were also more practical concerns to be dealt with. The original pioneer in what she memorably labeled the frontier (she concluded as well as began the bibliographic essay “Basic Writing” with that figure) spent her last years not only making a beginning for the field, notably with *Errors and Expectations* and the *Journal of Basic Writing* but also fighting off what looked like its end. Maher’s biography of Shaughnessy makes especially compelling reading in its discussion of her last years as a university administrator. It was a time of fiscal crisis for New York as the city was near bankruptcy, and fledgling programs were especially vulnerable to cuts. An attempt to bring enrollments down included proposed entrance exams, which Shaughnessy opposed as “the end of the University’s Open Admissions policy” (from her memo to the Board of Higher Education, qtd. in Maher, *Shaughnessy* 177); as an alternative, she began work on a never-realized project of collaboration with high schools that would ensure better preparation for college. The inaugural issue of *Resource*, the newsletter of the Instructional Resource Center she created and directed, began, “As I write this, we are still uncertain about the kind of University the budget cutters will finally allow us, and the survey of CUNY Skills programs which we began runs the risk of being more historical than we originally planned” (qtd. in Maher *Shaughnessy* 179).

That was May 1976. The month before, as the keynote speaker at the first conference of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS), she had given a more detailed and poignant picture of what the budget cuts might mean, had indeed already meant:

These are discouraging times for all of us, most particularly for the teachers who have been working with unprepared students on basic skills. Both stu-

dents and teachers are already discovering that they are expendable, and the programs they have helped to build over the past five years to remedy the failure of the public schools (and the society of which those schools are an extension) now begin to shake and fracture under the blows of retrenchment.

We experience the crisis most directly on our individual campuses:

- Our staffs are shrinking and our class size increasing.
- Talented young teachers who were ready to concentrate their scholarly energies on the sort of research and teaching we need in basic writing are looking for jobs.
- Each day brings not a new decision but rumors of new decisions, placing us in the predicament of those mice in psychological experiments who must keep shifting their expectations until they are too rattled to function.
- Our campuses buzz like an Elizabethan court with talk of who is in favor and who is out. And we meet our colleagues from other campuses with relief: “Ah, good,” we say (or think to ourselves)—“you’re still here.”
- We struggle each day to extract from the Orwellian Language that announces new plans and policies some clear sense of what is finally going to become of the students whom the university in more affluent times committed itself to educate. (“The Miserable Truth” 263–64)

Things would get worse, considerably worse. The need to curtail enrollments (and so expenses) was achieved not by entrance exams but by the charging of tuition, something the Board of Higher Education voted through in June 1976. An account of this time, LaVona L. Reeves’s “Mina Shaughnessy and Open Admissions at New York’s City College” (2002), succinctly outlines the immediate consequences: “In the fall of 1976, enrollment had declined 17 percent, making it necessary for several thousand faculty members to be laid off. As usual, the last to be hired were the first to be fired, and many of the newer minority teachers lost their jobs, despite massive student protests” (123).

Such was the turmoil that surrounded Shaughnessy as an administrator, and it made the publication of *Errors and Expectations* in the

same academic year all that much more the “godsend” Reeves calls it (123). The honors and attentions bestowed on Shaughnessy and her book had to be gratifying, given the circumstances, but they did not change those circumstances. Only weeks after the release of the book, Shaughnessy was diagnosed with kidney cancer, first misdiagnosed as a stress-related ulcer (Maher, *Shaughnessy* 200). By December 1977, she was diagnosed as having a brain tumor. By November of the following year, she was dead.

The memorializing of Mina Shaughnessy, beginning with an event in December 1978 at which Adrienne Rich, Irving Howe, and others spoke, went on for some time. She was eulogized by Janet Emig in the February 1979 issue of *College Composition and Communication* and by E. D. Hirsch and others at an MLA conference special session at the end of that year. As late as 1985, Robert Lyons, summing up the “most widely respected authority on basic writing in this country,” stated, “In a field often marked by controversy and division, her work was invariably accorded attention and respect” (171–72). Lyons tellingly preceded his remarks with the admission that “I still find it difficult to accept her absence and to regard her as a writer and teacher to be appraised rather than solely as a colleague to be mourned” (171). By force of personality as well as intellect, marshaling support and sympathy for the students who mattered so much to her and for the instruction she believed would save them, Mina Shaughnessy had an influence on basic writing, one that the field is still learning to reckon with. In the years that were to come, Shaughnessy’s legacy was revered by some but found to be stiflingly enduring by others, as is suggested by the title of an essay published two full decades after her death: Jeanne Gunner’s “Iconic Discourse: The Troubling Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy.” But in the decade following the one she dominated, critiques of her were in fact rare, though winds of change certainly swept the BW landscape.

Maxine Hairston’s “The Winds of Change,” based on her speech at the 1978 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication and published in 1982, heralded a paradigm shift in composition, including a turn of attention from product to process. Much of the impetus for this shift came from BW research, not least of all from what Glynda Hull called the resolve “to study error from the point of view of causation” (173). In addition to Shaughnessy’s own work, which had been preceded by her good friend Janet Emig’s seminal study *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (1971), there

were several especially noteworthy research projects and publications as the 1970s came to an end. A particularly clear-cut case of a causal approach to error was Muriel Harris's 1978 *College English* article "Individual Diagnoses: Searching for Causes, Not Symptoms of Writing Deficiencies." That same year saw the completion of Sondra Perl's important dissertation "Five Writers Writing: Case Studies of the Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," which quickly spawned a series of articles: "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers" (1979), "Understanding Composing" (1980), and "A Look at Basic Writers in the Process of Composing" (1980). In addition to providing the case studies Shaughnessy had called for, Perl backed up Shaughnessy's claim that basic writers were not without established writing patterns and processes; the problem was that these processes tended to be far from efficient or proficient, full of disruptions in the flow of thought, ironically creating and compounding errors partly out of a debilitating attempt to eliminate them.

THE 1980S

The process movement, which had its roots in the 1970s, flourished in the 1980s. Early in the decade, critical work in BW on the writing process was highlighted in themed issues of journals like the Fall/Winter 1981 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* devoted to revision and the "Language Studies and Composing" issue of *College Composition and Communication* published in May of that same year. Attention soon widened to show how the process of writing was also the process of thinking about writing. Why not make the process of thought itself a focus of study, particularly in application to basic writers? At the end of her bibliographic essay, Shaughnessy had noted that "no effort has as yet been made to determine how accurately the developmental model Piaget describes for children fits the experience of the young adults learning to write for college" ("Basic Writing" 206).

This was, in effect, an invitation that many would accept. An important early example was Mike Rose's 1980 essay "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block." Not the first—Linda Flower had already published "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing" in *College English* in 1979—but Rose's was the rare treatment of such ideas by a teacher/researcher with graduate training in developmen-

tal psychology. Significantly, Flower teamed up with John R. Hayes, a cognitive psychologist, as her coauthor in other articles: “Problem Solving Strategies and the Writing Process” (1977), “The Dynamics of Composing: Making Plans and Juggling Constraints” (1979), “The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem” (1980), and “Problem Solving and the Cognitive Processes of Writing” (1981). Another early “cognitivist”—her “Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer” had been published in *College English* in 1979—was Andrea A. Lunsford, the person picked to do the “Basic Writing Update” that followed Shaughnessy’s bibliographic essay “Basic Writing” in the revised and expanded 1986 edition of Gary Tate’s anthology of bibliographic essays, *Teaching Composition*. Lunsford began as a researcher in basic writing (it had been the focus of her dissertation), eventually becoming one of the foremost scholars in composition (she became chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1989). At this point, her major focus was cognitive development, and she may have produced the best summation of its perceived relevance to basic writing and to composition generally in “Cognitive Studies and Teaching Writing” in the 1985 MLA overview *Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition*.

Though the tide would turn against it—Mike Rose would be speaking of “cognitive reductionism” in the late 1980s (“Narrowing the Mind”)—efforts to place (and move) basic writers along a scheme of cognitive development proliferated in the first part of the decade. As titles like “Building Cognitive Skills in Basic Writers” (Spear) and “Cognitive Immaturity and Remedial College Writers” (Bradford) suggest, work of this kind partook in the two great tasks BW teachers and researchers had set for themselves: to define what they should do and to define whom they should do it to.

The latter project was the more pressing one. Just who was the basic writer? What were the distinguishing features? Answers were needed to warrant the appropriate pedagogical strategies and to set the appropriate goals. And though answers in terms of recent preoccupations were certainly being offered—Lee Odell’s “Measuring Changes in Intellectual Processes as One Dimension of Growth in Writing” (1977) is one example—the most powerful answers were coming from something that apparently preceded (and superseded) both research and practice in BW: mass mandated, standardized assessment.

Richard Lloyd-Jones, in his 1986 essay “Tests of Writing Ability,” makes it easy to see why it’s hard to find much intellectual excitement in such assessment:

The assessment of writing abilities is essentially a managerial task. It represents an effort to record quantitatively the quality of the writing or writing skills of a group of people so that administrators can make policies about educational programs. Tests are given and scores are assigned to individual performances of people as parts of large groups. As a rule the scores then are used in the aggregate. (155)

The caution with which Lloyd-Jones generalizes is telling: writing assessments and the uses they were put to were eventually found to be almost as various as the institutions that deployed them. Little could be counted on beyond the tendency of such assessments to mark underprepared or weak students for BW placement. Questions about how effectively and accurately they did this caused concern and controversy, as did questions about what to do with the students so marked.

Some found BW scholarship less helpful for this purpose than the practical guides for instruction that began to appear, chief among them Alice Trillin’s *Teaching Basic Skills in College* (1980), Harvey Wiener’s *The Writing Room* (1981), and Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen’s *Beat Not the Poor Desk* (1982)—all, significantly, authored by CUNY faculty. Wiener’s introduction gives some of the sense of such books’ motives and methods:

This is a book of ideas for beginning teachers who must teach beginners of a special sort—those who are just starting to learn the writer’s craft in any serious and comprehensive way. It is a book about traditional composing tasks taught to “remedial” or “developmental” students, happily called *basic writers* (BW) now at many enlightened colleges and high schools, which have accepted Mina Shaughnessy’s thoughtful tag. Such students are working to *qualify* for instruction in the usual sequence of courses. (3)

As Wiener suggests, BW instruction was proliferating well beyond CUNY, as were questions about how BW instructors ought to pro-

ceed—and, not least of all, how they ought to define their roles within their institutions (especially as members of a college community that marked them as “pre-college” in terms of whom and what they teach).

The marginal status of basic writing teachers—a perennial problem—meant they desperately needed a sense of common cause and community that scholarship and even practical guides could not give them. They got it in the Conference on Basic Writing (CBW). As Karen Uehling recounts in her history of CBW, Charles Guilford, interested in starting a Special Interest Group (SIG) of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), posted a sign-up sheet on the message board at the 1980 CCCC convention in Washington, D.C. Soon there were four sheets filled with signatures, and CBW had its start (48). In addition to meetings at the annual CCCC conventions, CBW sponsored its own national conferences in 1985, 1987, 1989, and 1992 as well as a newsletter, an electronic journal (BWe), and an active listserv (CBW-L), all of which further the organization’s goal “to provide a site for professional and personal conversations on the pedagogy, curriculum, administration, and social issues affecting basic writing” (“Conference on Basic Writing”).

Another venue for a national conversation about basic writing was the *Journal of Basic Writing*. Initially an in-house publication supported by CUNY’s Office of Academic Affairs and called simply *Basic Writing*, it gradually developed a national advisory board and a wider net: the Fall/Winter 1981 issue on revision included such respected scholars in rhetoric and composition as Nancy Sommers, Donald Murray, Ann E. Berthoff, and Linda Flower. Still, publication had been irregular (*JBW* had produced four volumes in the space of a decade), and the decision to devote each issue to a specific theme made the publication of unsolicited manuscripts on a variety of subjects unlikely if not impossible. In 1986, under the editorship of Lynn Quitman Troyka, this changed: *JBW* became a refereed journal with a large editorial board representing a variety of institutions nationally. The broadly pitched call for articles, first published in the Fall 1985 issue, shows how diverse and wide-ranging the field of BW was becoming:

We invite authors to write about matters such as the social, psychological, and cultural implications of literacy; rhetoric, discourse theory; cognitive theory;

grammar; linguistics, including text analysis, error descriptions, and cohesion studies; English as a second language; and assessment and evaluation. We publish observational studies as well as theoretical discussions on relationships between basic writing and reading, or the study of literature, or speech, or listening; cross-disciplinary insights for basic writing from psychology, sociology, anthropology, journalism, biology, or art; the uses and misuse of technology for basic writing, and the like.

Fortuitously situated at mid-decade, that first issue of the repositioned *Journal of Basic Writing* represents a turning point of sorts. It was a particularly rich issue, framed by David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University"—with its famous observation that students must "appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse" (9)—and Andrea Lunsford's forward-looking program for the field "Assignments for Basic Writers: Unresolved Issues and Needed Research." Also appearing in this issue, and too often overlooked (it is not in *The Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Basic Writing*), was George H. Jensen's "The Reification of the Basic Writer." Taking his cue from Stephen Jay Gould's critique of intelligence testing, *The Mismeasure of Man*, Jensen argued that the definition of the basic writer, like the concept of "general intelligence," was shaped and reified with recourse to "political and social pigeonholes" (52). The chief villains of the piece were researchers (especially cognitivists) who oversimplified their characterizations of basic writers and assessments that provided a flat and tidy definition of basic writers as distinguished by a certain (low) level of cognition and writing ability. This type of research obscured "Shaughnessy's most consistent message," Jensen argued, "that basic writers are a diverse lot" (53). It may be that Jensen would have been more influential had he himself not used what he called "personality or cognitive style theory" (specifically the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) to demonstrate (if not reify) "the diversity of basic writing classes" (62). Jensen implied that what instruments of measurement and cognitive research supposedly obscured could be demonstrated by an instrument of measurement developed by cognitive research; this might seem a coup, but it could also seem a contradiction. In any case, Jensen's argument sought to explode the ability of standardized assessments to sort basic writers effectively into anything like homo-

generous groups and questioned and complicated the characterizations of basic writers made by a number of BW researchers, notably Andrea Lunsford (“Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer”), Sondra Perl (“The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers”), and Nancy Sommers (“Intentions and Revisions”).

Interestingly, Lynn Quitman Troyka, the new editor of *JBW*, was spared Jensen’s criticism though she herself was one of the relatively few to argue for the validity of mass assessments—something she did in the 1984 article “The Phenomenon of Impact: The CUNY Writing Assessment Test.” Troyka had, however, stressed the diversity of basic writers in her 1982 article “Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980’s.” In fact, the call for articles she fashioned as *JBW* editor included the caveat that “authors should describe clearly the student populations which they are discussing,” since “[t]he term ‘basic writer’ is used with wide diversity today.” It was a point she echoed in “Defining Basic Writing in Context” (1987), where she stressed that such diversity means we must “describe with examples our student populations when we write about basic writers” (13). Troyka came to conclusions similar to Jensen’s regarding the difficulty of characterizing basic writers, though her study, based on a national sampling of actual writing done by basic writers, was much more influential. Troyka compellingly established the diversity, the astonishing range, that the term “basic writing” represented. It was as if the term, at least as it appeared in BW scholarship, had little meaning. What mattered was not *basic writing* but *basic writers*. That population, in all its particularity, is what demanded careful attention. And this attention, especially in pedagogical practices, needed to extend beyond just writing. Troyka stressed that “basic writers need to immerse themselves in language in all its forms” (13), including reading as well as writing.

Having reached a kind of adolescence, BW was rejecting as well as embracing influences. One was computer-assisted instruction (CAI), which had seemed to hold almost utopian promise in its early days: the labor-intensive work of teaching BW students (especially about matters of grammar) seemed susceptible to a benign form of automation. By the end of the decade, however, Stephen Bernhardt and Patricia Wojahn would note in their overview of “Computers and Writing Instruction” that, despite this start in CAI, especially for practice with grammar, “growth in computer use has largely been away from drill and practice toward uses as either heuristic devices or simply tools for

writing.” They approvingly cite an earlier overview, Mark S. Tucker’s “Computers in the Schools” (1985), as being acute enough to register “the growing recognition that the machine is most appropriately used as a tool—as a word processor, a graphics process, a spreadsheet, or a database” (165–66).

A much greater disappointment was the growing realization that BW research was having relatively little impact on BW instruction. Nothing crystallized this more devastatingly than Joseph Trimmer’s 1987 *JBW* article “Basic Skills, Basic Writing, Basic Research.” It addressed the question of why, in spite of the efforts of BW researchers, sentence skills approaches still seemed to have hegemony (at least if one judged by textbooks available at the time). Building on research by Robert Connors (“Basic Writing Textbooks”), Trimmer surveyed 900 colleges and universities and interviewed editors at a score of publishing houses. Though it would be easy to blame the publishers for this sorry state of affairs, Trimmer’s research told a different story, an appalling one of confusion, demoralization, and apathy. Trimmer asked how the surveyed institutions identified basic writers: “The 900 respondents reported 700 different ways to identify such students” (4). His results included the revelation that 70 percent of BW faculty were not professors but graduate students and adjuncts. And he found the editors of the publishing houses no less dismayed than he was by the failure of textbooks to keep pace with research: “These editors know what kind of books they should be selling, but they also know what kind of books sell” (6). Ultimately, Trimmer found BW faculty themselves the real obstacle to effective BW pedagogy, giving him another problem to puzzle through. Why should this be the case? “The simplest answer, of course, is that given the training, the incentives, and political status of these teachers, they see no reason to invest more of themselves than they already have in remedial English” (7).

The implication in Trimmer’s article was that if BW teachers would attend to and act on good basic writing research, then all would be well. But the scholarship itself implied otherwise: BW research seemed not only open to question but also truly questionable, particularly in terms of its accuracy and applicability. Jensen and Troyka had suggested that characterizations of a generic “basic writer” were glib and reductive. This seemed particularly true of the work of the cognitivists: what initially seemed rooted in science ultimately seemed to lead to caricature. An early (and, in retrospect, prophetic) argument along

these lines was “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know About Writing” by Patricia Bizzell (1982). She argued that Linda Flower and others who used theories of cognitive development radically simplified writers and writing, blurring individual differences and contextual complications for the sake of a clear (and fairly linear) account of the writing process. Bizzell called for balancing such a view with the ineluctable complexities of social interaction. Her own approach was effectively signaled by another article she published that same year: “College Composition: Initiation into the Academic Discourse Community.”

Arguments against cognitivist characterizations of writers and writing began to intensify. By 1987, Janice N. Hays, coeditor of the 1983 anthology *The Writer's Mind: Writing as a Mode of Thinking*, felt so beset by attacks on cognitivist approaches that she published “Models of Intellectual Development and Writing: A Response to Myra Kogen et al.,” a primer-like article addressing “prevalent misunderstandings about developmental models” (11). Among these “misunderstandings,” Kogen’s article with the seemingly innocent title “The Conventions of Expository Writing” was the explicit and immediate provocation. But Ann Berthoff’s “Is Teaching Still Possible? Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning” and Patricia Bizzell’s “William Perry and Liberal Education” were also featured instances of opposition to developmental theories of writing.

This defense of cognitivism now seems a rearguard action, effectively trumped by Mike Rose’s critique of such “developmental models,” though they were models he himself had invoked and applied at the start of the decade. In “Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism” (1988), he enumerated three major problems with cognitive and developmental theories: (1) they “end up leveling rather than elaborating individual differences”; (2) they “encourage a drift away from careful, rigorous focus on student writing”; and (3) they “inadvertently reflect cultural stereotypes” (296–97).

Not one to skewer one approach without pointing to an alternative, Rose used the same article to direct attention to the “immediate social and linguistic conditions in which the student composes” (297). He had in fact elaborated what this meant in another important article published mid-decade: “The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University.” There he invoked Shaughnessy and her

resistance to simplifications and stereotypes: “If we fully appreciate her message, we see how inadequate and limiting the remedial model is. Instead, we need to define our work as transitional or as initiatory, orienting, or socializing to what David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell call the academic discourse community” (358).

As Rose was issuing the call for socialization into the academic discourse community, the work that had the most significant impact on BW pedagogy since *Errors and Expectations* came out: David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky’s *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts* (1986). The book, essentially the documentation of a successful “Basic Reading and Writing Course for the College Curriculum” (Bartholomae’s descriptive subtitle published in the *Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*), was influential for a number of reasons beyond the conjunction of reading with writing. The appeal of the program was in fact multifaceted: well-grounded in a specific institutional context (the University of Pittsburgh), it offered a fully realized curriculum, created collaboratively (with the collaborators describing its different aspects). Conceptually, it resolutely resisted “dumbing down” instruction for the sake of weaker students, advocating instead constructive “misreadings” and doing so by recourse to contemporary critical theory. Anecdotal yet scholarly, theoretical yet practical, general in its implications yet carefully situated and contextualized, it seemed to be just what the field needed.

The masterstroke was not to define the basic writer so much as to define what the basic writer must work on and work with. Cognitivists and others had tried to define the basic writer with recourse to schemes and abstractions. The charge laid against them, inevitably, was oversimplification, reductionism, reification, and caricature. They had neglected context. And *context*, in the Pittsburgh model, was key: BW students had to be situated in and socialized to the academic context, acclimated to “the academic discourse community.” It would be the 1990s before the field would come to acknowledge just how problematic this goal was, a project of acculturation that would seem, from some perspectives, egregiously assimilationist. Caught in such a politically incorrect posture, the field would also be prepared, from some perspectives, to declare itself outmoded. What complicated that inclination to dismantle BW from the inside was the dismantling of it by outside forces, once again threatening to eradicate support structures

and to limit access for weaker students—and doing so with motives Shaughnessy would have recognized as all too familiar.

THE 1990S

A book published in 1989 (on the eve of the nineties, as it were) and republished as a popular paperback in 1990 helped set the tone for a significant shift of attention. This book got personal about teaching and learning, about students and teachers. And its publication and reception were of such import as to make its appearance something almost everyone would notice. The book was Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. When it was published in paperback, the subtitle became *A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educational Underclass*; poignancy was, in fact, at the heart of its appeal. Already a force to be reckoned with, Rose made *Lives* about his own life to a considerable extent. A mix-up in test scores had placed him on the vocational track for a while in high school, and his account of this episode added special force to his ongoing argument against the easy labeling of remedial students—especially unexamined constructions of them as insufficiently developed or intelligent or literate and above all when so construed by high-stakes, single-shot assessments. His accounts of the students he knew as a caseworker were similarly multidimensional, offering a rich sense of their ethnic backgrounds, their economic and educational difficulties, their often untapped strengths.

Lives was the academic equivalent of a blockbuster. A few years after its publication, Mark Wiley was writing that it met with

deservedly unequivocal praise. In fact, the book's overwhelmingly positive reception suggests that Rose managed to do what no one else has so far been able to accomplish: to get everybody to agree on something. In this case, it is the power and eloquence of *Lives* to validate and reaffirm the potential of America's underclass, those who have much to offer but who inevitably slip through the (I think rather large) cracks of the educational system and who in the process become the system's casualties. These are the students who are consigned to the lower tracks, who are

labeled “remedial” and sometimes harshly judged as “uneducable.”

If it’s possible to imagine a canon for composition, Rose’s book, I suspect, would be a unanimous choice. (529)

Actually, Wiley said as much in responding to someone who might dissent from that unanimity. His “Building a Rose Garden: A Response to John Trimbur” (1993) points to an exception in the “unequivocal praise” *Lives* met with. Trimbur, in “Articulation Theory and the Problem of Determination: A Reading of *Lives on the Boundary*” (1993), had not disputed the enormous popularity of Rose’s book but had worried about its cause: for Trimbur, it was too much the conventional success story, a kind of academic variant on Horatio Alger. But he concluded in the book’s favor, reckoning that Rose had used the conventional frame to appeal to a wider audience with an important message.

Rose’s *Lives* did, in any case, usher in the great decade of literacy narratives—autobiographical accounts of educational development and watershed moments in the acquisition of language and literacy. What’s more, it helped to focus attention on both sides of the watershed for underprepared students: not just the confrontation with academic culture but also the home culture that sustained identity formation. In this it was complemented by “Arts of the Contact Zone” (1991), in which Mary Louise Pratt argued that different discourses grounded in different cultures should find a place for meeting and even mediation in the classroom. This was an invitation for teachers and students to negotiate racial and ethnic as well as cultural differences. Soon other work encouraging this type of negotiation began to appear. Keith Gilyard’s *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* was published in 1991 and received an American Book Award in 1992. Gilyard looks at studies in Black English, bidialectalism, and code-switching in light of his own experience. Another influential literacy narrative was Victor Villanueva’s *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color* (1993). At this time, an interest in the literacy stories of students began to infuse classroom practices as well (see Patthey-Chavez and Gergen; Lu, “Conflict”).

The richness of these literacy narratives began to engender an anxiety of influence. Perhaps the most influential of the pioneering work, that done by Mina Shaughnessy—now almost canonical for many in

basic writing—had overgeneralized and oversimplified the basic writer. In the early 1990s, Min-Zhan Lu launched the first major salvo in her campaign to realign the origins and direction of basic writing: “Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence” (1991). In this essay, Lu maintained that by focusing so heavily on “error,” Shaughnessy was isolating language from meaning and, at the same time, minimizing the significance of cultural and linguistic differences. Not long after, her extension of this argument, “Conflict and Struggle,” appeared in the same issue of *College English* as Paul Hunter’s “Waiting for Aristotle” (1992), his analysis of the 1980 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* published as a memorial to Shaughnessy—an issue, he argued, that defined her contribution so as to co-opt it for conservative ends. The response was an unprecedented six-author “Symposium on Basic Writing” (1993) in the next volume of *College English*. Four authors—including a co-worker of Shaughnessy’s and an open admissions student who had gone on to become a professor—charged Lu and Hunter with decontextualizing and misrepresenting the historical and philosophical foundations of basic writing; Lu and Hunter responded to these charges.

The call for more careful historicizing of BW took an ironic turn not long thereafter with Bruce Horner’s “Discoursing Basic Writing” (1996). Horner, a colleague and frequent coauthor of Lu’s, argued that the representation of basic writing even and especially by its advocates had been decontextualized, cut off from the social realities that forged it; he called for a recuperative, alternative history. Meanwhile, finding Lu’s critique of Shaughnessy a misrepresentation of BW’s seminal figure, Jane Maher embarked on her biography of Shaughnessy, itself not only a recuperative act but also a countermove whose motivations she discussed in a *JBW* article (“Writing the Life”). More recently, Brian Ray, writing in 2008 and representing a new generation of BW scholars, reassessed the debate of the 1990s from a fresh perspective, arguing that when viewed through Donald Davidson’s concept of linguistic charity (as articulated by Kevin Porter in “A Pedagogy of Charity: Donald Davidson and the Student-Negotiated Composition Classroom”) the views of Shaughnessy and Lu are really not so far apart.

To return to the debate as it surfaced in the 1990s, about the same time that Shaughnessy’s legacy was being critically reassessed, something else occurred that would lead to debates about the future of basic

writing. In 1992 the fourth (and, to date, the last) National Conference on Basic Writing was held in College Park, Maryland. It featured David Bartholomae as the plenary speaker and focused on the theme “Critical Issues in Basic Writing: How Are We, Our Writing Programs, and Our Institutions Meeting or Failing to Meet the Needs of At-Risk Students?” The way Bartholomae chose to answer that question would have enormous impact on the field. At that point, early signs were that enriched perspectives could and would breed enriched pedagogy. In addition to the powerful personal narratives of scholars like Rose, Gilyard, and Villanueva that gave personal depth and cultural complexity to a field increasingly unhappy with pat labels and neat placements, there was the considerable success of Bartholomae’s own program at the University of Pittsburgh, documented in *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*. That 1986 book had been followed by Bartholomae’s ascension to the leadership of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1988. The Pittsburgh program had been widely praised and adopted. In his plenary speech, Bartholomae recounted the success story:

[T]his is a story I love to tell. It is convenient. It is easy to understand. Like basic writing, it (the story) and I are produced by the grand narrative of liberal sympathy and liberal reform. The story is inscribed in a master narrative of outreach, of equal rights, of empowerment, of new alliances and new understandings, of the transformation of the social text, the American university, the English department. I would like, in the remainder of my talk, to read against the grain of that narrative—to think about how and why and where it might profitably be questioned. I am not, let me say quickly, interested in critique for the sake of critique; I think we have begun to rest too comfortably on terms that should make us nervous, terms like “basic writing.” Basic writing has begun to seem like something naturally, inevitably, transparently there in the curriculum, in the stories we tell ourselves about English in America. It was once a provisional, contested term, marking an uneasy accommodation between the institution and its desires and a student body that did not or would

not fit. I think it should continue to mark an area of contest, of struggle, including a struggle against its stability or inevitability. (“Tidy House” 6)

Bartholomae was by no means alone in this struggle. When Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller, who had succeeded Lynn Quitman Troyka as editors of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, approached Bartholomae about publishing his keynote, he suggested that they consider including other presentations as well. They did. The resulting Spring 1993 issue of *JBW* is a rich re-examination of basic writing as a field—but a highly critical one, not afraid to suggest that BW as an enterprise may be fundamentally misguided. With the help of hindsight, the issue seems a checklist of the misgivings and concerns about basic writing that would become increasingly grave over the next ten years, concerns seeming to support Bartholomae’s suggestion that BW, as an institutionalized curricular construction, was suspect. Peter Dow Adams, outgoing co-chair of the Conference on Basic Writing, presented evidence that students who somehow escaped being tracked into BW classes actually fared fairly well in the mainstream. Tom Fox looked at the term “standards” as a kind of codeword used to justify exclusion. Jerrie Cobb Scott and William Jones examined the racism inherent in the deficit model of remediation, formed on the assumption that BW students are lacking rather than different and unassimilated. Jeanne Gunner addressed the sorry status of BW teachers, something Joseph Trimmer had already cited as keeping the field less productive and progressive than it might otherwise be. And Mary Jo Berger, a writing teacher turned college administrator, considered the chronic underfunding of BW instruction.

The one person to defend the status quo—and to resist Bartholomae’s against-the-grain tack—was Karen Greenberg, then director of the National Testing Network in Writing (NTNW), who later became coeditor of the *Journal of Basic Writing* with Trudy Smoke. In her contribution to the Spring 1993 issue of *JBW*, Greenberg wrote:

I believe in what I do. Therefore, I strongly disagree with many of the assertions made by David Bartholomae in his keynote speech at the Fourth Annual [sic] Conference on Basic Writing in Maryland. David characterized most basic writing courses as “obstacles rather than opportunities.” He stated that most

basic writing programs “marginalize students” and “preserve them as different.” He also accused basic writing teachers of “merely satisfying [their] liberal reflexes” by trying to make students “more complete versions of themselves” in courses that don’t work. David was equally unimpressed with the assessment procedures used to place students into basic writing courses. He asked the conference participants, “Do you sort students into useful or thoughtful groups?” (“Politics” 65)

Greenberg answered yes to this question, but even she was careful to ground her defense of established practices for assessment and teaching in the details of her own context, the Developmental English Program she ran at Hunter College. As the only CUNY representative in the issue as well as the sole defender of current practices in BW assessment and instruction, Greenberg represented a legacy that others elsewhere were repudiating or at least calling into question.

Leading the charge was David Bartholomae, who, with Anthony Petrosky, had built a program at the University of Pittsburgh that purportedly moved the field well beyond Shaughnessy’s early vision at City College. But even their legacy was subject to critique. In “On the Academic Margins,” Deborah Mutnick wrote: “Despite the Pittsburgh program’s theoretical advances, Bartholomae and Petrosky continued to elide the political basis for excluding social groups from cultural institutions like universities; their narrative of basic writing omits the race, class, and gender inequities that pervade higher education” (191).

Redressing inequities and exclusions had been a centerpiece of Shaughnessy’s agenda in the early years, but then attention had turned to other questions, with answers sought in cognitive science and critical theory. With the fourth National Basic Writing Conference in 1992, however, the political dimension had returned with a vengeance. Bartholomae, explicitly reading against the grain of his own narrative and citing Mary Louise Pratt’s recently published “Arts of the Contact Zone,” was calling for “a curricular program designed not to hide differences . . . but to highlight them” (“Tidy House” 13). The highlighting of differences would in fact be reflected in some of the most important books of the decade, notably Mutnick’s own *Writing in an Alien World: Basic Writing and the Struggle for Equality in Higher Edu-*

cation (1996) and Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu's *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Writing* (1999).

The perceived need for a narrative of basic writing that acknowledged inequalities of race, class, and gender was also subsequently acknowledged by the Conference on Basic Writing (CBW). Though it had given up on national conferences as too expensive and logistically difficult, CBW decided to hold all-day workshops each year on the day before the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) began (Uehling). The second of these workshops, held in 1997, was devoted to "Race, Class, and Culture in the Basic Writing Classroom"; papers from it were published in another special issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, this time put together by new editors George Otte and Trudy Smoke. For all the weight these papers had and all the attention they deserved, one piece far outstripped the others in impact. It was Ira Shor's "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality." In figuring basic writing as "our apartheid," Shor claimed that the problem was structural: with students identified by suspect tracking mechanisms, BW represented a subcollegiate curricular level that would always see concentrations of students with socioeconomic disadvantages and cultural differences, always be tended by underpaid, overworked, and inadequately prepared teachers. Basic writing, according to Shor, did not need to be rethought or revised; it needed to be dismantled.

Shor's piece kindled fires of controversy. His characterization of basic writing as "our apartheid" and his call for its dismantling provoked heated discussion at a CBW post-workshop meeting, a meeting he did not attend; the discussion was picked up on e-mail lists like CBW-L and WPA-L thereafter. A special concern fueling the discussion was that others besides Shor (and with politics very different from his) were calling for the dismantling of BW programs. Public systems in Georgia and Florida had eliminated them from four-year colleges, and plans to do the same were moving forward in states from California to Massachusetts. CUNY, so thoroughly identified with advances made in the early days of open admissions, was itself in the process of dismantling BW, at least at the four-year schools. James Traub's *City on a Hill* (1994) cast City College, that seedbed of BW, as a once-proud institution devalued and dumbed-down by the admission of underprepared students. In the wake of this attack, New York's mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, encouraged CUNY's Board of Trustees to take a critical look

at CUNY's admission and placement practices and appointed a special task force to review these policies. On January 25, 1999, the Board voted to phase out all "remediation" in its four-year colleges by January 2001. Such dramatic changes were by no means confined to New York. Across the country, policy makers well to the right of Shor on the political spectrum were demanding an end to remediation as a drain on resources and an institutionalized lowering of standards.

The editors of *JBW* received a number of responses to Shor and chose to publish two of them in the Fall 1997 issue, both making due note of this conservative trend. Karen Greenberg, who saw what was happening at CUNY, stressed that "there are reactionary political forces currently trying to achieve precisely this barring of access and precisely this reduction in size in colleges across the country" and claimed that Shor's proposal "would, in fact, justify the curtailment and the consequent reduction or elimination of basic skills programs" (94). Terence Collins, academic dean of the General College of the University of Minnesota, more tersely and colorfully remarked, "We who teach from the left are peculiarly fond of beating each other up while the right wing eats our lunch" (100). But he also said Shor's argument put him in mind of "Deborah Mutnick's warning [in the preface to *Writing in an Alien World*] to be careful in how we mount educational critique from the left, that in impolitic critique of Basic Writing we risk crawling into bed with the very elements of right wing elitism which access programs and many Basic Writing programs were founded to counteract" (99).

For the remainder of the decade, the *Journal of Basic Writing* would often include accounts of the dismantling of basic writing programs, sometimes on a statewide basis, like Gail Stygall's account of the "unraveling" of BW at the University of Washington. What these accounts showed was that such dismantling tended to disregard pedagogical considerations, whereas Shor's call for dismantling was in fact founded on concerns about pedagogy. Attacks on basic writing from the right took advantage of the vulnerability accompanying low-status programs for unwelcome students, whereas Shor's critique decried that lack of status and welcome.

Still, different as these points of attack from the left and the right were, they combined to make basic writing programs seem not only vulnerable but also almost indefensible. Even for champions of BW, defending the status quo was tough; however deserving the students

were of attention, the attention granted them often seemed too arbitrary in its placements, too unsure of its methods and pedagogy. The key question—what would become of BW students once BW programs were gone—was almost imponderable. Hemmed about with contingencies, value-laden claims about what could be done or should be done for such students, the answer to that all-important question could seem too speculative until it was too late. Would basic writers survive without support (and stigmatizing placement), as some claimed? Should they have access to better instruction in their pre-college years, as others insisted? Such arguments among those interested in basic writing could go on endlessly, often while ignoring the obvious: the easiest, likeliest thing to do was not to test the efficacy of different placements or instructional structures but simply to slam the door, to cut off access.

To the extent that it was about access (or its evil opposite, exclusion), the debate around Shor's argument was by no means new. In fact, in an important sense, it had simply reversed the order of another recent debate: Edward White's 1995 defense of assessment and placement practices ("The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies") that Sharon Crowley critiqued in 1996. Like Crowley, who felt that tracking and placement procedures were fundamentally mechanisms of exclusion, Shor argued for radical restructuring of institutions—including the abolition or thorough reconfiguration of first-year composition. With basic writing, Shor was also able to point to significant experiments along these lines, notably Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason's mainstreaming experiment at City College at CUNY and Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson's at the University of South Carolina. Yet these attempts at mainstreaming did not easily take root—the one at CUNY did not outlast its grant period—so the debate went on as a discussion of both politics and pedagogies.

What the arguments on both sides shared (and in a way that bodes much for the future and draws much from the recent past) was an ever deeper grounding in particulars. Like the highlighting of difference that made the personal political (and vice versa), the consideration of institutional change (hoped for or mourned) suggested that the politics of change sprang at least as much from local considerations as from larger political forces. Context was ever more important.

Ironically, too, at the same time that basic writing was being billed as "our apartheid," a major book arrived on the scene suggesting that,

given enough time and support, students who had initially been placed in basic writing could succeed in the academy and beyond. This was *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level* published in 1997 by Marilyn S. Sternglass. As the title and subtitle suggest, Sternglass tracked a number of students at City College, most of them initially placed into basic writing, over an extended period (a full six years). Most were success stories, but more compelling than that heartening news was the depth of detail in Sternglass's account. How these students fared in a variety of courses over their entire academic careers was richly, thickly described, as was the impact of their personal and social circumstances on these careers. Unlike the largely autobiographical accounts of a Rose or a Gilyard or a Villanueva that were likely to be read (and perhaps too likely to be downplayed) as exceptional cases, *Time to Know Them* included the stories of students like those teachers met with all the time, often told in their own words. The book never became an academic bestseller like Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, but it did garner gradually growing attention and admiration. In October 1998, Sternglass drew from it for her keynote address at the annual CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors Conference, and in Spring 1999 *JBW* published a version of that keynote as the lead article. In December 1998, *Time to Know Them* received the Mina P. Shaughnessy Award of the Modern Language Association at the organization's annual convention. In March 1999, it received the Outstanding Book Award at the annual convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. The careful, patient research the book represented was more powerful for many than the strongest polemic. Into discussions permeated by politics and invective, Sternglass injected the stories of students who struggled on while standards were supposedly ratcheted up and gates of access were beginning to swing shut. The lessons to be learned were the sort summed up in one of Emerson's aphorisms—"The years teach much that the days never know." The student experiences recounted in *Time to Know Them* cautioned against giving credence to easy generalizations and quick fixes to problems as complex as those faced by the field of basic writing as it prepared to move into the twenty-first century.

2000 AND BEYOND

The new millennium began with basic writing scholars taking stock of the field—looking back to the past and into the future. In her 2001 overview of BW pedagogy, “On the Academic Margins,” Deborah Mutnick begins with a telling allusion to “Mark Twain’s famous quip about his father: Shaughnessy seems to have learned a great deal since I carefully worded my critique in *Writing in an Alien World* of what I saw then as her essentialist depiction of the basic writer” (184). Mutnick goes on to say that Shaughnessy, dead for a quarter century, now seems to her to remain impressively relevant, still the figure to contend with.

The *Journal of Basic Writing* was also taking stock in another special issue published in 2000, the result of a fin-de-siècle invitation that editors Otte and Smoke made to luminaries in the field, one they summed up with the wryly punning question “W(h)ither Basic Writing?” The responses showed a wide range of opinion, perhaps even a widening of differences. Shor, for example, continued to argue for the abolition of basic writing—using accounts of students who could elude BW placement and yet forge ahead, guilty of the “Illegal Literacy” that gave his piece its title. Others in the issue argued against this position. Deborah Mutnick held that “to indict basic writing . . . obfuscates the real impediments to democratizing education” (“The Strategic Value of Basic Writing” 77). And Keith Gilyard wrote, “Shor thinks composition’s future lies in discipline-based, field-based, critical social work. Critical? Field? Fine. But I’m not all the way on board with that vision for I’m not ready to give up an important interdisciplinary site, which I think courses in critical language awareness can be” (“Basic Writing” 37). Other ramifications of the debate—accounts of alternatives to BW as well as eliminations of it—continued to play out in this issue. Judith Rodby and Tom Fox described their mainstreaming work at Cal State Chico, while Terence Collins and Melissa Blum of the University of Minnesota General College mourned the loss of students to state-mandated cuts.

The issue included suggestions that there was more to mourn than program cutbacks. Lynn Quitman Troyka described “How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise” in an article criticizing the field’s failure to grapple with certain tough problems, particularly those with political consequences. “Why,” for example, “did we recoil from the public’s demand that we show results?” (119). Troyka noted there were

recent answers to some long-burning questions—she described Stern-glass’s *Time to Know Them* as “the most important BW research to date” (119)—but her indictment of the field’s failures was sweeping and incisive. Similarly, William DeGenaro and Edward White decried BW researchers’ “inability to communicate effectively, that is to say in a way that advances our knowledge of issues of developmental writing” (“Going Around in Circles” 27).

And yet, if the field had not communicated its answers effectively, then it had at least developed a central, critical question. The concluding section of DeGenaro and White’s article begins, “To mainstream or not to mainstream. That is the question” (34). The most thorough answer to date is a book edited by Gerri McNenny and Sallyanne Fitzgerald (with a foreword by Marilyn Stern-glass) and published in 2001—though it explicitly traces its genesis to that momentous fourth National Basic Writing Conference held in 1992 (1). The book is titled *Mainstreaming Basic Writers: Politics and Pedagogies of Access*, and the plurals in the title are telling. Regardless of whether a former sense of singular purpose for basic writing was really a kind of mythical hegemony (as some scholars like Bruce Horner aver), it is now a fragmented enterprise. Some chapters in *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* resist or question mainstreaming while others advocate it from a variety of sites and perspectives. One piece resisting mainstreaming is by Terence Collins of the University of Minnesota and Kim Lynch of Anoka-Ramsey Community College in Cambridge, Minnesota. Working in BW programs at their respective institutions (and focusing on that of the General College at Minnesota), they are unapologetically proud of BW’s success at a specific site. Indeed, they argue that specificity makes all the difference: “‘Mainstreaming’ rhetoric too often (and too conveniently) implies that there is a single entity X (bad, essentializing, otherizing, exploitive basic writing) that ought to be transformed into entity Y (good, liberating, mainstreamed composition). Isn’t it more complicated than that? And shouldn’t we know better?” (83–84).

Sadly, the institution that Collins and Lynch were so proud of ceased to exist in 2005 when the General College was given departmental status within the University of Minnesota’s College of Education and Human Development as the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning (PSTL). Basic writing courses were transferred to the newly created Writing Studies Department in the College of Liberal Arts. The rationale given for this change by university admin-

istrators was that students in the General College were not succeeding at a high enough rate—as measured by time until graduation (University of Minnesota). In a sense, students who had previously received special support from the General College are now mainstreamed. Although the PSTL is attempting to keep something of the General College’s legacy by crafting a curriculum of connected courses in interdisciplinary learning communities for first-year students, there have been losses for students placed in basic writing. It’s harder to get into the University of Minnesota now.

By the fall of 2006, the *Journal of Basic Writing* was again assessing the state of BW in a special issue, this one in recognition of the publication of the journal’s twenty-fifth volume. Leaders of the field were invited to contribute articles in a variety of areas including BW and public policy (Adler-Kassner and Harrington), the place of the increasing number of multilingual students in colleges and universities (Zamel and Spack), and—once again—how the field defines itself and thus relates to the larger institutional and political world (Gray-Rosendale).

Increasingly in the new century, that institutional and political world has been exerting pressure on basic writing and the students it serves. Like the University of Minnesota’s General College, which was the victim of institutional pressures, colleges and universities across the U.S. are being pressured to eliminate basic writing. Legislatures in several states including California and Tennessee have passed laws eliminating or severely curtailing “remedial courses” in four-year schools. Pedagogically innovative BW programs have been created to meet these stipulations—for example, at the University of Tennessee at Martin (Huse et al.), Arizona State University (Glau, “*Stretch* at 10,” “The ‘Stretch’ Program”), and San Francisco State University (Goen-Salter; Goen and Gillotte-Tropp). By offering some academic credit, such programs have begun to move BW instruction out of the anteroom that Shaughnessy described and ever closer to the college mainstream.

Regardless of where it is located or how it is structured, the success or failure of a mainstreaming initiative or BW program has to do with a host of factors: how students are defined (and define themselves), how programs are constituted, what theories drive the work, what practices are encouraged, what institutional support is provided (or withheld), and, as Mary Soliday’s *The Politics of Remediation* (2002)

has stressed, how the work is represented and understood by policy-makers as well as stakeholders. Soliday's book also stresses that it is never enough to examine the present moment, for what happens now is rooted in what went before. The unfolding, over time, of these issues of definition, of practice and theory, of the applications of scholarship and the structuring of professional support will be examined in more detail in the subsequent chapters.