

2 Defining Basic Writing and Basic Writers

In the early 1960s, remedial work in college seemed to be fading away. In 1963, Albert Kitzhaber reported in *Themes, Theories, and Therapy* that the “number of colleges and universities offering remedial English courses has dropped sharply” and would drop further because of rising enrollments and raised standards (18). In “Basic Writing,” Mina Shaughnessy acknowledged that “this type of course was waning,” with the immediate qualification that, because of social changes in the 1960s, a new “remedial population” was on the way (178).

It was in fact this sense of a cultural shift and a new population granted access to college that caused Shaughnessy, in this same essay, to call the “‘new’ remedial English” “basic writing” (BW), thereby creating something else that could be called new: a field of teaching and scholarship constituted as such, conscious of itself and its mission and proud of work that had previously been hidden. Wanting to be seen as both new and necessary, basic writing has always needed to distinguish itself, to say what it is and whom it is for.

To an unusual extent, however, BW derives its conceptual existence by being distinguished from related kinds of instruction. First-year composition is the most obvious point of comparison and contrast: basic writing has to be more “basic” somehow, situated underneath or before what is nevertheless conceived as introductory. It is also, by its nature, associated with remediation, developmental education, “pre-college instruction,” ESL (English as a Second Language), ELL (English Language Learning), and other related fields.

Still, over the years, first-year composition is the course to which basic writing has had the closest connection. It could be said that basic writing has recapitulated the fate of first-year composition. Starting out, as composition did, with a powerful and perhaps undue attention to error, BW broadened its purview to include a host of other

instructional interests: matters of process, voice, genre, development, diversity, and so on. In so doing, it matured, no doubt, but it matured into something ever harder to distinguish (and to keep separate) from first-year composition, which had experienced its own markedly similar diversification of interests.

The other source of definition for basic writing, its student population, was always a troubled question. Leaders in the field were often critical of the assessments that defined their constituency. They were understandably loath to insist on hard and fast distinctions where none existed, at least none they found defensible. Finally, it turned out that the crucial distinction of basic writing, the difference and disadvantage it had in mirroring the development of first-year composition, is that, though first-year comp never had something like first-year comp to disappear into, BW did. When it seemed a budgetary or political liability, its opponents could argue it away because its advocates had brought it (and its students) ever closer to the point where their rightful place seemed to be first-year composition. The students either ought to find their way into mainstream composition courses, the logic went, or disappear altogether. Ultimately, they did both, in droves. (See chapter 5 for a fuller discussion of the status of basic writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century.)

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. In this chapter, we focus on matters of definition both for the field of basic writing and for the students it serves.

EARLY DEFINITIONS

Basic writing is distinguished first and foremost by its history. Attention to a new cadre of students, formerly excluded from higher education but then provisionally admitted, gave rise to the new field. Yet however new the students themselves might have been, the instruction given them was not created out of whole cloth but rewoven from existing strands. Mina Shaughnessy had to rename the field to save it from being stuck in the nether regions already denoted by terms like “remedial” or “bonehead” English (“Basic Writing” 178). This attempt at renaming and re-creation was never wholly successful. The stigmata of remediation, structurally integrated into BW from the start, persisted as issues of funding, staffing, and status. The struggle to achieve selfhood and respectability as a field included redefining the curricu-

lum for the sake of the students, improving their access and progress. But it never managed to redefine the way basic writing itself was marginalized. Relegated to the margins of the institution, BW ultimately came to represent, at least to some, a locus of instruction that could save its students from marginalization only by disappearing, allowing students to flow unobstructed into the “mainstream.” Mainstreaming is by no means the end of the story for basic writing; however, it is a way of underscoring that BW itself was never fully accepted into the academy and so gives us good reason to attend not only to how BW defines itself but also to how it gets defined.

Basic Writing as a Fix-It Station

Regarding basic writing, academia responded to profound change as if it were a temporary disruption of the presumably enduring status quo. Just as colleges and universities responded to growing enrollments with temporary positions that became permanent features of the landscape, BW became a kind of halfway house addressing problems that presumably would or should be solved by better college preparation—though it would take a social revolution to redress the disadvantages of students who wind up in basic writing. This was a predicament sounded prophetically by Mina Shaughnessy. In the conclusion to *Errors and Expectations*, she had strong words (by no means for the first time) for “an educational system that has failed in countless ways and for countless reasons to educate all its youth. Now that we have begun openly to admit to this failure, we can hope for reforms which over the next decade may close the shocking gaps in training between the poor and the affluent, the minority and the majority” (291). Yet the next decade—in fact, the next quarter century—did not see the closing of these gaps. The Reagan years instead saw the coinage of the term “permanent underclass”; with that came a sense that the so-called “underprepared,” like the poor, would always be with us. In that light, what Shaughnessy went on to say seems still more important:

Colleges must be prepared to make more than a graceless and begrudging accommodation to this unpreparedness, opening their doors with one hand and then leading students into an endless corridor of remedial anterooms with the other. We already begin to see that the remedial model, which isolates the student and the skill from real college contexts, imposes

a “fix-it station” tempo and mentality upon both teachers and students. (293)

The warning notwithstanding, this is precisely what became of BW: it was institutionalized as the “fix-it station.”

Basic Writing as a Back Formation of First-Year Composition

One explanation for the persistence and subordination of basic writing in the college curriculum is that something similar had happened before. First-year composition, situated after basic writing in the college course sequence, had gone before, chronologically speaking, and in so doing had defined the situation. BW was basically a back formation of first-year composition, itself brought into being to address a literacy crisis, one hemmed about with assessments and the search for quick fixes.

As John Brereton has noted, the pressure on college enrollments was just as intense in the early days of freshman composition as during the dawn of open admissions: college enrollments nearly doubled from 1890–1910, the decades that saw the birth and solidification of first-year composition as a college requirement (7). Most agree that the focus and upshot of this earlier literacy crisis was concentrated at Harvard, partly because of the institution’s stature and influence. And it was rooted in the vision of Harvard’s president at the time, Charles W. Eliot. Edna Hays, in her 1936 book on college entrance requirements, quotes from his annual report of 1873:

The need for some requisition which should secure on the part of the young men preparing for college proper attention to their own language has long been felt. Bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation, and almost entire want of familiarity with English literature, are far from rare among young men of eighteen otherwise well prepared to pursue their college studies. (17–18)

Social transformations in the wake of the Civil War had brought a new sort of student (and above all, many more students) to the doorsteps of colleges and universities, including Harvard. And Eliot’s pronouncement on their fitness for college study would have its echoes in

what was said about open admissions students a century later. Similarly, Shaughnessy's belief (or at least hope) that educational reform would eradicate what basic writing was created to address is mirrored in Eliot's conviction that better pre-college preparation would eliminate the need for Harvard's composition courses. These courses were, after all, conceived less as college instruction than as remediation to make students fit for college work. Mary Trachsel writes, "Eliot proposed that such fundamental literacy instruction was actually the responsibility of the preparatory schools and fully intended the college freshman composition course he instituted in 1874 to be nothing more than a temporary bridge between preparatory schools and college"; nevertheless, "freshman composition soon became ensconced as a permanent fixture of Harvard's curriculum" (42). The moral of the story is that structures set up as accommodations for new or changed student constituencies do not wither away but instead become self-perpetuating. By 1894, as James Berlin reported in *Rhetoric and Reality*, the composition course that was supposed to become superfluous became entrenched as the one university requirement at Harvard (20). Within another decade, hundreds of other colleges and universities had made it so as well.

What could be wrong with that? Well, as Wallace Douglas noted in his now-classic account, that may not be quite the right question to ask: "The interesting questions are those that ask why and how rhetoric in its truncated and debased modern form has been able to survive, and indeed flourish, as the study of written composition, or as practice in the production of written compositions and communications" (99). The answers lie in what happened at Harvard, starting with a president who complained that students came to that institution unable to spell and punctuate correctly or to avoid other telltale signs of being dubious inductees into the club of the educated elite. Thus, wrote Douglas, "the purposes of composition, as it came to be conceived in the latter days of rhetoric" narrowed down to "the acquisition of certain linguistic forms of relatively narrow currency, which today would be said to represent good or appropriate English, but which in more candid times could be described, simply and without apology, as signs of social rank" (110). It was the foredoomed fate of a "brush-up" course to perform a narrower function than opening up the full range of rhetorical possibilities; if this didn't dumb down what instruction in English might be, it certainly constrained the possibilities. And it's

surely significant that, from Eliot's first salvo to the entrenched composition requirement's eventual focus, the instructional emphasis was on making students' writing presentable. The preoccupation of composition (and later basic writing) with matters of form and surface (often preceded by the word "mere" in indictments of this preoccupation) are rooted in this emphasis.

In the 1920s Yale, like Harvard before it, found the need to institute a form of basic writing, designated unapologetically as the "Awkward Squad." Using archival records, Kelly Ritter examined the way this "course" was conducted between 1920 and 1960. The young men designated by their English instructors as belonging to the Squad, which was not listed in the official catalog, "had no support beyond the tutors who drilled them weekly in spelling and grammar, until such time as they were deemed fit to return to the mainstream" (Ritter 21).

A more serious consequence of Harvard's fashioning of first-year composition related to institutionalization rather than pedagogy. The implications of the institutional positioning of composition were diagnosed by Albert Kitzhaber in his 1963 doctoral dissertation and were summarized some thirty years later by Donald Stewart, who described Harvard's impact on subsequent English instruction:

- (1) reducing writing instruction to a concern for superficial mechanical correctness, (2) greatly increasing an unproductive and debilitating fixation on grammar instruction, (3) dissociating student writing . . . from any meaningful social context, and (4) contributing significantly to the division between composition and literature people in English departments, a division which saw writing instruction increasingly become the responsibility of intellectually inferior members of English department staffs. (455)

Whatever, exactly, the causal connection between that last effect and the others, it is ultimately the division between composition and literature faculty that mattered most. Writing instruction would forever be the grunt work, the job of the downstairs staff in the "upstairs/downstairs" relationship between literature and composition in English departments (a relationship given theoretical articulation in the first chapter of Robert Scholes's *Textual Power*). Writing instructors (and later BW instructors) would do battle against the other ex-

ercises in reduction—that writing correctly was all that mattered, for instance, or that their instruction was only about form and not content. They could even emerge victorious in some of these battles, but they would always be a tier down, the degraded gradation. The division of labor was one in which the kind of work mattered more than the degree (though Robert Connors, in “The Rhetoric of Mechanical Correctness,” has documented the egregious overwork of composition instructors, particularly in the early days). This enduring scheme of things forever consigned composition to the lower level.

Thus when basic writing had to find its place, that place was pre-defined. As Ira Shor puts it, “In education, BW is less than freshman comp, below comp”; institutional logic would inevitably relegate it to the status of “a gate below the gate” (“Our Apartheid” 95, 94). With such a structure as first-year composition in place, hierarchically as well as historically situated, only one kind of slot could be waiting for BW. If the students it was to serve were to be given access, their entry point would necessarily be placed beneath the established, official point of entry. But structures are not scripts. Within a pre-determined structure, basic writing would find room for self-definition, and the early moves would prove critical.

A Sense of Mission and Purpose

Gatekeepers can let in as well as close out, and there is no question which role the early leaders of basic writing embraced. Even before open admissions, in the days when Mina Shaughnessy was administering “pre-Bac” and SEEK instruction, she was devoted to those who in former times would not have come to college. She was, in her own metaphorical terms, an “anteroom” staffer, a part-timer turned administrator (but, significantly, not a member of the professoriate), and the programs she oversaw and inspired were never granted full integration and collegiate status. But they were defined, and more especially self-defined, by a sense of purpose and even mission. *Errors and Expectations* opens with an account of this exercise in definition, one that started not with structures and precedents (for these were felt to be lacking) but with the students:

. . . those who had been left so far behind the others in their formal education that they appeared to have little chance of catching up, students whose difficulties with the written language seemed of a different

order from those of the other groups, as if they had come, you might say, from a different country, or at least through different schools, where even very modest standards of high school literacy had not been met. (2)

So different were these students that developing appropriate instruction for them meant proceeding inductively, especially since “there were no studies nor guides, nor even suitable textbooks to turn to” (Shaughnessy, *Errors* 3). Initially, teachers of these new students felt themselves at a loss, and Shaughnessy memorably includes herself among them. By the time of the publication of *Errors and Expectations*, however, she could write that things had changed: “The teachers who five years ago questioned the educability of these students now know of their capabilities and have themselves undergone many shifts in attitude and methodology since their first encounters with the new students” (3–4). Still, this had not given the field definition, except as a frontier (Shaughnessy’s famous, favorite metaphor for BW—she also used it in her bibliographic essay “Basic Writing”):

Despite such advances, the territory I am calling basic writing (and that others might call remedial or developmental writing) is still very much of a frontier, unmapped, except for a scattering of impressionistic articles and a few blazed trails that individual teachers propose through their texts. And like the settlers of other frontiers, the teachers who by choice or assignment are heading to this pedagogical West are certain to be carrying many things they will not be needing, that will clog their journey as they get further on. So too they will discover the need of other things they do not have and will need to fabricate by mother wit out of whatever is at hand. (*Errors* 4)

The need to jettison unwanted baggage is at least as striking as the acknowledged need for new approaches. Most striking of all is how loosely and vaguely the field is described, especially in terms of teaching practices. Much more is said about basic writers than about basic writing. With her introduction to *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy may be said to have blazed the most important trail of all with this reluctance to prescribe and define. Not just here but hereafter, the

definition of basic writing by its practitioners would focus more on whom it was for than what it was. Shaughnessy's introduction painted pedagogy only with the most general strokes, but she was ready to get quite specific about the students, talking about how they talked and felt as well as how they wrote, describing them in concrete as well as figurative terms—above all as urban and “other”:

Natives, for the most part, of New York, graduates of the same public school system as the other students, they were nonetheless strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them. Most of them had grown up in one of New York's ethnic or racial enclaves. Many had spoken other languages or dialects at home and never successfully reconciled the worlds of home and school, a fact which by now had worked its way deep into their feelings about school and about themselves as students.

They were in college now for one reason: that their lives might be better than their parents', that the lives of their children might be better than theirs so far had been. (2–3)

Struggling and straddled between cultures, racially and/or linguistically different, these products of a system that made education generally but not equally available were effectively hailed as the *raison d'être* of BW. Their motivations—above all, the quest for upward mobility—were as evident as their disadvantages. The students were in a sense more readable than the writing they generated, calling out for action that was much clearer in purpose than in procedures. Teaching them at all was obviously a step toward social justice. Just how to teach them was less clear.

Though Shaughnessy had not defined BW as a full field of pedagogical approaches, she did define the way it would define itself: begin with the students, define their needs, and then address those needs. Again and again, the sequence would play out in a cycle of diagnosis and prescription. What would not change, what would endure, was the sense of mission and purpose Shaughnessy derived from the students BW was to serve.

ADJUSTMENTS AND REVISIONS

Ironically, the resolve to start with the students was always at least as much a problem as a solution. For Shaughnessy, starting with them had meant starting with the errors in their writing; the definition inevitably focused on output rather than intake (on writing rather than reading as a literacy-shaping factor), and attention to matters of form diverted attention from matters of content (concentrating on how writers wrote in terms of error control rather than thought and expression).

Cognitivist Definitions

Perhaps because social causes for BW placement seemed such a “given,” the search was on for something like scientific grounds for defining basic writers. For a time, schemas of cognitive development shaped and dominated the discussion. It didn’t matter if the focus was on literacy (as in Frank J. D’Angelo’s “Literacy and Cognition: A Developmental Perspective” [1983]), on the composing process (as in Mike Rose’s “Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist’s Analysis of Writer’s Block” [1980]), on assessment (as in Lee Odell’s “Measuring Changes in Intellectual Processes as One Dimension of Growth in Writing” [1977]), or even error (as in Thomas Farrell’s notorious “IQ and Standard English” [1983]). Like some booklength collections that came out in the decade after Shaughnessy’s death—collections like *Cognitive Processes in Writing* (Gregg and Steinberg [1979]) and *The Writer’s Mind: Writing as a Mode of Thinking* (Hays et al. [1983])—these pieces testify to a fascination with developmental models in basic writing and composition scholarship. And they all get prominent mention in Andrea Lunsford’s 1986 “Basic Writing Update” of Mina Shaughnessy’s bibliographic essay on BW. There Lunsford, herself the author of such pieces as “Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer” (1979), even noted that Shaughnessy’s sense that “error is a way of learning” represented the application of “the insight of philosophers such as Michael Polanyi and Gilbert Ryle” (208)—themselves developmental theorists of a kind.

It may have been the very multifacetedness of developmental theory (or theories) that spelled the end for the dominance of cognitivist definitions. George H. Jensen’s “The Reification of the Basic Writer” would take one “personality or cognitive style theory” (specifically the

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) to demonstrate that other theories (or theorists) were not doing justice to the “the diversity of basic writing classes” (62). In “Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism” (1988), Mike Rose would mount a critique of such “developmental models”—models he himself had used previously. And Lunsford, in another bibliographic piece (coauthored with Patricia Sullivan) just a few years after her update of Shaughnessy’s “Basic Writing,” would concede that no developmental theory could adequately define basic writers, who were “too protean to be captured by any single psychological model” (22).

A greater blind spot for cognitivists was not what they failed to capture but what they turned away from. All the attention to global descriptions of writers’ minds and stages obscured the social mission of basic writing for the sake of generalized stages and generic schema. As Maureen Hourigan noted retrospectively in 1994, “Those who sought to investigate the cognitive processes that writers employ when faced with a writing task generally ignored the influence of class on students’ composing processes . . .” (27). Even early critiques of cognitivist approaches registered this inattention to social context—as did, for instance, Patricia Bizzell’s “College Composition: Initiation into the Academic Discourse Community” and “Cognition, Convention and Certainty: What We Need to Know About Writing” (both published in 1982). The irony is that the fascination with cognitivism was rooted in that core goal of basic writing—defining the basic writer. Yet pursuit of that goal caused researchers to stray far from focusing on the social conditions that for so many, from Shaughnessy on, did so much to define the basic writer.

Contextual Definitions

Gradually, attention circled back to students as individuals and their writing as primary evidence; there was a return to seeing things in context, not as patterns of behavior but as specific moves made in a classroom—and made for the sake of making moves in a larger social context. The watershed document in this refocusing of attention was Lynn Quitman Troyka’s “Defining Basic Writing in Context” (1987). It approvingly cited George Jensen’s critique of what Mike Rose would call “cognitive reductionism” and called for a richer, rounder treatment of the basic writer, one giving attention to reading as well as writing. What gave the piece special valence was its position as the specially

commissioned lead-off in Theresa Enos's collection *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*. In fact, all of the pieces in the first part of the *Sourcebook*, titled "Contexts for Basic Writing Teachers," spoke to Troyka's recommendation to heighten attention to reading and larger issues of literacy.

But this recommendation was also the root of new problems and tensions. "Defining Basic Writing in Context" represented the "gathering of data from a national sample of students to answer the questions such as, 'Nationally, what is basic writing?' and, 'Nationally, what typifies the writing of basic writers?'" (3). Troyka found the results to be rich, provocative, and complex: "But the message is clear. Basic writers are a diverse group" (12). Troyka made rigorous attention to evidence-on-the-page the necessary basis for developing definitions and answers to her initial questions. But what followed from this seems rather unexpected:

What implications for research and teaching might be derived from the realities of our democratic society as well as the study I report here? I would like to suggest two broad concerns. First, the matter of definition. Writing is not writing only. Too long have most discussions of writing ignored reading. Too infrequently in our journals do we see essays that speak of reading as a complement to writing. (12)

Strange as it may seem to see this redirection of attention from writing to reading, it seems stranger still to see what emerged as the other of the "broad concerns." The emphasis on difference and diversity seemed to be leading not only to an acknowledgement but also perhaps even to a celebration of range, variety, and multiplicity. But that is not how the piece concluded:

My second concern is the matter of identity. Basic writing has begun to lose its identity. The bandwagon effect seems to be taking over. The term *basic writing* is applied loosely to various populations of students, thus diminishing the energies we must spend on those students central to our undertaking. (13)

The question is not the scholarly or pedagogical propriety of Troyka's conclusions—both are inferable from the study and both are po-

tentially salutary—but they are so far from being foregone conclusions as to give pause. Close attention to writing results in a call for more attention to reading. A demonstration of diversity calls for a kind of purification of the sampled population, a narrower and more efficient refocusing. The former conclusion is justified by being “derived from the realities of our democratic society as well as from the study,” whereas the latter speaks to the core “purpose in this paper”: “to offer data that will help us to resist generalizing from small samples of basic writers” (13). There is at least the appearance of contradiction here, which prompts the question of why it surfaces, especially from a leader of the field so thoughtful and influential as Troyka—someone who, at this point in time, had already put in some years as the editor of the *Journal of Basic Writing (JBW)*. The answer does not lie in inevitable breakdowns in discursive logic but in the pressures bred into the field from its inception.

For basic writing, definition was never enough. For all the concern leaders of the field would develop about medical metaphors—Troyka herself here describes the word *remedial* as “negatively medical” (4)—BW was a field in which definition was always in large part diagnosis, and diagnosis led, quickly and inexorably, to prescribed treatment. The whole point of the field was always, after all, to do something for a population of students. Knowing and saying what that was (or should be) was always the first order of business. Here, in Troyka’s piece, a more mature development of the field, diagnosis and prescription were accompanied by a reluctance (or at least a conflicted readiness) to do just that. The whole point of “Defining Basic Writing in Context” is that effective, rigorous, well-grounded definition is difficult, and that, without it, prescriptions for basic writers are dubious: “We need, for example, to avoid thinking that the writing processes of a few basic writers apply to all, that all basic writers must edit when we decide they should rather than when they want to, that all basic writers suffer from too many ‘shoulds’ or too much anxiety” (13). Nevertheless, Troyka departed from her own evidence—and significantly invoked the social mission of BW with a reference to “the realities of our democratic society”—in delivering her own very generalized diagnosis and prescription: that basic writers need more reading, more attention to language and literacy (and not just to writing narrowly construed). This is not so much an inconsistency as a response to the field’s categorical imperative and top priority: Act as if you not only know the students but

also as if you know what they need—and say what that is. Troyka had responded in a way that chimed nicely with a movement already afoot: the basic reading and writing program developed at the University of Pittsburgh.

Prescribing Without Defining

The cognitivists had shown how work in BW could get bogged down in definition. They earnestly confronted the question of what defined the basic writer, but unwieldy explanatory models of intellectual development brought to bear on a diverse student population produced results that were ultimately inconclusive and unsatisfactory. The masterstroke made by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky at the University of Pittsburgh was to refuse to get bogged down in defining basic writers: they would jump right to what those students needed. Diagnosis and prescription would and could be virtually one and the same. The students, after all, were a preconstituted group—already defined as basic writers by being so assessed and tracked (as they were at so many institutions, if rarely by the same means). The issue was to show what worked for these students. This they did in *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts: A Basic Reading and Writing Course for the College Curriculum* (1986). The book was a compendium of teaching practices authored by a host of teachers working in the Pittsburgh program. Clearly, the book seemed to say, there are more important things to be done than defining the basic writer. Why get bogged down in definition?

Why, indeed? Bartholomae, who led off the second part of Enos's basic writing *Sourcebook* just as Troyka had led off the first, effectively shifted the burden of definition from diagnosis to prescription. Defining basic writers was almost a waste of time, or so he suggested in his specially commissioned piece, "Writing on the Margins": "As a profession, we have defined basic writing (as a form or style of writing) by looking at the writing that emerges in basic writing courses. . . . We know who basic writers are, in other words, because they are the students in classes we label 'Basic Writing'" (67). The question was less who basic writing students were (since the answer was essentially tautological) than what sort of teaching was most appropriate for them; the real goal of definition ought to be the description of effective teaching practices. Definition *was* prescription. And it was not accomplished with sweeping generalizations but with a particularized laying-

out of the full curriculum, authored collaboratively. It's not hard to see why the approach achieved a popularity that endures to this day. Here was a book teachers could use as well as embrace. Rich and multifaceted as the curriculum was in assignment sequences, treatment of error, and so on, its overarching goal could be put quite simply: the idea was to initiate students into academic discourse.

Initiation as a Goal

The need to initiate basic writers into the ways of academic discourse seems—or seemed—indisputable. Why it came to be controversial—not only fiercely debated but also disavowed to some extent by its initial proponents—has something to do with the way in which Bartholomae and Petrosky skipped over the question of definition and went right to treatment/prescription. The outlines of this leap can be seen in the brief preface Theresa Enos gave to her *Sourcebook*. There she included the replies from three of the book's contributors to her request that they give “definitions of the term *basic writing* to include in this preface” (v). Karen Greenberg focused instead on *basic writers*: “Basic writers are people who simply have not had enough experience writing in a variety of roles and registers for a variety of concerned readers” (v). Patricia Bizzell's response was similar, if more elaborate, conditional, and cautionary: “If basic writers need academic cultural literacy in order to achieve full participation in the academic community, then a way must be found to give students access to this knowledge while at the same time encouraging some critical distance on it” (vi). Robert Connors was the only one of the three to focus on *basic writing*, as Enos had requested, defining it as “that kind of student writing which disturbs, threatens, or causes despair in traditional English faculty members” (vi). All the respondents had rather more to say, but this is enough to raise the key question: Is the real point to help BW students or to make sure they will not offend the faculty who read and evaluate their work? The question seems unfair, but it is not without a point. Basic writing was brought into being for a purpose, and that purpose, put frankly, was at least as much to shield faculty from the rawness and inexperience of a new wave of open admissions students as it was to support those students in their quest for access to college instruction. Shaughnessy and her recruits, drawn from outside the professoriate, were charged with handling what professors could not handle, taking at least the roughest of the rough edges off the type

of student writing that “causes despair in traditional faculty members.” The goal had always been initiation, but the very word acknowledges how unaccommodating and one-sided this demand for change would be. The students must change to fit the institution, not the other way around.

The scholar who acknowledged this most clearly, and who also seemed most troubled by it, was Patricia Bizzell. She was, arguably, the first and most important proponent of initiation after Mina Shaughnessy. Bizzell took up the cause of basic writers even as she took up arms against E. D. Hirsch’s call for “cultural literacy” in his book so-named—a book that acknowledged Shaughnessy as an influence (10). In fact, Bizzell’s arguments about the necessity of some form of initiation (which included “What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?” and “College Composition: Initiation into the Academic Discourse Community”) were always more qualified than her arguments against a single form of “cultural literacy” (as in “Arguing about Literacy”). Characteristically, her contribution written specifically for the *Sourcebook*, “Literacy in Culture and Cognition,” argued against monolithic notions of cultural or social literacy and instead for more modest and nuanced ideas of literacy, the sort of “literacy that confers a reasonable degree of education and economic success and political participation” (135).

The way to nurture this type of literacy may have been described by Bartholomae and Petrosky. But perhaps that way took basic writing too far—or not far enough. Richer in described teaching practices than Bizzell’s work, their approach may have been less wary in its justifications. Bartholomae was the member of the pair who would achieve more prominence. His “Inventing the University,” the outline of the prescribed immersion in academic discourse detailed in *Facts*, is clear about his debt to Bizzell (which, he says in an endnote, “should be evident everywhere in this essay”). But he seems a good deal more emphatic than Bizzell about students’ need to learn the rules and the ropes—and a good deal less emphatic about their need to develop “critical distance” from imposed demands on discourse and behavior. Just how nuanced his view is seen to be may depend on how much guarded irony he is granted when he says (in statements so often cited they became litanies) that the basic writing student “must know what we know, talk like we talk” (“Writing Assignments” 300) and “must learn to speak our language” (“Inventing” 135).

What did that mean, exactly? It meant many things, of course, but most of all it meant learning the conventions, from the conventions of standard English to those of sophisticated academic discourse. Why conventions matter so much was something Bartholomae took from Shaughnessy. The problem of definition was forever surfacing in terms like “nonstandard” or “nonacademic,” terms that implied not the definition of something but rather its lack—“the absence of whatever is present in literate discourse,” as Bartholomae put it in his essay in Enos’s *BW Sourcebook* (“Writing on the Margins” 67). This is part of his extended gloss on a snippet from Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, which is worth quoting here:

The term *BW student* is an abstraction that can easily get in the way of teaching. Not all BW students have the same problems; not all students with the same problems have them for the same reasons. There are styles to being wrong. This is, perversely, where the individuality of inexperienced writers tends to show up, rather than in the genuine semantic, syntactic and conceptual options that are available to the experienced writer. (40)

Here Shaughnessy effectively outlines the problem of definition that would haunt the BW teachers and scholars who followed her. The key to understanding basic writers lies not in what they are but in what they have not yet become. They are too unconventional in a strict and significant sense, significant because this unconventionality makes their writing all the more idiosyncratic and difficult to define. Yet these students are not innocent of language in its written form, nor are they somehow “preacademic.”

This is a point Bartholomae stresses as he explains why Shaughnessy’s insight effectively preordained the failure of the cognitivists’ whole attempt at defining the basic writer (as an abstraction, a type). In consequence, he says (to the entire field) that

we are stuck, and we are stuck because we have begun to imagine the problem as an abstract problem and because we have chosen to define the problem . . . within the language and methods of developmental psychology. Basic writers, we are asked to imagine, work with a style that is preacademic. They are

caught at some earlier step in cognitive development (at the level of concrete rather than formal operations, for example), or they belong to a culture that is pretextual (an oral culture, like those that preceded the development of alphabetic writing) and that hinders the cognitive development required for literate participation in a textual culture. (“Writing on the Margins” 69)

Fundamentally, the problem with such definitions was that they located “the basic writer outside the conceptual structures that his more literate counterparts work within” (69). This was untenable, Bartholomae argued, and it was also dangerous. It engendered failures of sympathy and imagination in those who most needed to be sympathetic and imaginative as they worked with basic writers: “We define them in terms of their separateness. We do not see ourselves in what they do” (69).

Bartholomae’s move, implicit in his title “Writing on the Margins,” was in some sense not a huge step; he argued that basic writers should not be seen as outsiders but should rather be seen as located on the margins of academic culture: “These marginal students (and I will call them basic writers, but out of default, since I argue that this is a slippery label) are where they are because of the ways in which they read and write” (67). These were literate students, in other words; they only needed to become more so. In some ways, this conception of basic writers seemed reasonable, even obvious. Yet there were huge consequences to this position (or positioning), not all of them positive. It is true that the pedagogy Bartholomae advocated was in many ways empowering to both students and teachers. If all students really needed was schooling in conventions they were not utterly unacquainted with in the first place, then teachers presumably had the necessary directions, and students didn’t have an enormous distance to travel. But what they were traveling toward was an odd sort of El Dorado. The academic status quo was embraced as a desideratum that basic writers disrupted by virtue of their incomplete initiation. Not completely outside, they were not completely inside either, and this raised questions about increasingly fuzzy distinctions that seemed mere matters of degree. Other questions inevitably followed. Was more complete initiation really assimilation? Was full insider status predicated on becoming entirely conventionalized? Was something short of that,

something that preserved otherness and difference, somehow a sign of failure or incompleteness? Was academic discourse really so homogenous and hegemonic that it made sense to speak of being inside “it”?

Problems with Initiation as a Goal

The significance of questions about the implications of “initiating” basic writers into academic discourse can be seen in what Bartholomae was saying only a few years later precisely because of his success in having redefined the terms of engagement. By the time he gave the keynote at the fourth National Basic Writing Conference in 1992, that success had become a problem: “In the name of sympathy and empowerment,” said the later, self-chastening Bartholomae, “we have once again produced the ‘other’ who is the incomplete version of ourselves, confirming existing patterns of power and authority, reproducing the hierarchies we had meant to question and overthrow . . .” (“Tidy House” 18). But now, Bartholomae confessed, that sympathy has been recast as condescension and a form of estrangement, that empowerment as something more sinister—something like conversion or even colonization. (For a more extended account of Bartholomae’s remarks at the 1992 Basic Writing Conference, see chapter 1.)

The change in stance was no doubt influenced by countless factors. One factor was the work of Min-Zhan Lu. From a point very much on the left of the political spectrum, Lu launched a critique of Shaughnessy and specifically of her supposedly essentialist view of language. Her first salvo was “Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence,” published in 1991 and drawn from a dissertation supervised by David Bartholomae. At the heart of Lu’s critique was her sense of Shaughnessy’s inattention (even obliviousness) to “the potential dissonance between academic discourses and [basic writers’] home discourses” (27). This was something Lu could speak on with personal authority (see her “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle”).

Lu was by no means the only one to speak out on these issues. Literacy narratives of the time (e.g., Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*, Keith Gilyard’s *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, and Victor Villanueva’s *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*) drew attention to tensions between academic and home culture. (For a fuller discussion of these narratives, see chapter 1.) Such accounts further complicated attempts to define the basic writer. Diversity among

basic writers had earlier presented a considerable challenge. But now, with the trope of the divided self recurring in literacy narratives and scholarship, the diversity without met the diversity within. Individuals were themselves multiple—in their roles, their voices, their cultural contexts.

Bartholomae had once chastised the field for a lack of sympathy for basic writers: “We do not see ourselves in what they do” (“Writing on the Margins” 69). Now he found that view trumped by full-blown identification with them—not only more or less vicariously in Rose but also especially in the compelling, self-divided accounts of Lu and Gilyard. In the latter accounts, particularly, assimilation was not an interest or an option; difference (and resistance on behalf of it) came to be valued rather than targeted for elimination or sanded down by convention. Bartholomae’s keynote at the 1992 BW conference showed he had been paying attention. He effectively declared that he had gone too far in advocating a kind of homogenization for the sake of integrating or initiating the basic writer into the world of academic discourse; now, invoking Mary Louise Pratt and her idea of “the contact zone,” he was advocating something quite different, a “curricular program designed not to hide differences . . . but to highlight them, to make them not only the subject of the writing curriculum but the source of its goals and values (at least one of the versions of writing one can learn at the university)” (“Tidy House” 13).

The importance of Bartholomae’s changed direction to the quest for definition in basic writing cannot be overestimated. Here the person who had done most to minimize the enterprise of defining the basic writer—rejecting conceptual and developmental distinctions, insisting that the basic writer already came endowed with a fair share of literacy and academic conventions—now backed away from this minimal definition of the “marginal” student as if that were extreme overstatement. Basically, the basic writer no longer had definition in scholarly terms. True, there were, in addition to literacy narratives, case studies like those provided in Deborah Mutnick’s *Writing in an Alien World*, but these defied generalization except as cautionary tales detailing the dangers of generalizing. Even Shaughnessy had been wary of abstract definitions of what a basic writer was, but she and Bartholomae had clearly pointed to a state or status the basic writer should attain. Now uncritically making that initiation into the world of academic discourse the objective was untenable, retrograde, and po-

litically incorrect. If the basic writer was chiefly defined by something not yet attained, and that something was a set of conventions at least as much in need of critique as inculcation, then the definition was more question than answer, more problem than solution. Who was the basic writer? That was now a trap masquerading as a question.

This perception—that trying to define the basic writer was fraught with dangers—was a recurrent issue at the 1992 BW conference (and the special Spring 1993 issue of *JBW* devoted to it). There was a profound and pervasive sense that supposing students needed to move beyond one state to another (and a better) unfairly demeaned the one and privileged the other. Jerrie Cobb Scott indicted “the recycling of deficit pedagogy in basic writing and other programs targeted for marginalized students” (47). William Jones, who shared Scott’s conviction that “basic writing is fundamentally framed in terms of deficit,” emphatically called that framing racist since “*basic writer*, the term itself, was used with notable frequency, as euphemism and code for minority students” (73–74). Tom Fox argued that a focus on “writing standards” obscured “the powerful forces of racism, sexism, elitism, heterosexism that continue to operate *despite* the students’ mastery of standards” (42–43). He called for redefined, more broadly construed standards that acknowledge “the social forces that really do prevent access” and “remind us of the blurred and perhaps ultimately unhelpful boundaries between ‘basic’ and ‘regular’ writers” (44). Taken together, these positions constituted a profound reversal for a field founded on defining (and thus aiding) a special kind of student. The very project of defining seemed wrong in everything from motives to outcomes, at least for some of the field’s leaders.

A POINT OF CRISIS

This shift of position was less radical or sudden than it might seem. Even the earlier, unreconstructed Bartholomae had questioned the boundaries used in defining BW, insisting that they were slippery rather than hard and fast. Still, the business of defining basic writing and especially the basic writer had reached a crisis point. If (with some adjustments for social injustice) the difference between basic writers and other college students was only a matter of degree, how great was that degree? This was an important if unsettling question. With other marks of distinction called into question, what was left to define the

basic writer but assessment and consequent tracking? These had always been suspect, never more so than at the 1992 conference on basic writing. It was there (and in the Spring 1993 issue of *JBW* devoted to it) that Peter Dow Adams made one of the earliest and most compelling arguments for mainstreaming. After reviewing the scholarship and documenting practice in basic writing, he concluded that everything that had been learned about appropriate and effective teaching in recent years had “gradually but consistently pushed the pedagogy of the basic writing classroom in one direction: toward that of the freshman composition classroom” (“Basic Writing” 24). But this was by no means the clincher. It seemed that at his home institution (Essex Community College in Maryland), many students with BW placement instead wound up in freshman composition—mainly because there was little to prevent them from registering for it save the designated placement. And those who managed to elude basic writing fared quite well. In fact, Adams found, his “data would seem to indicate that students’ chances of succeeding in the writing program are actually reduced by taking basic writing courses in which they are placed” (33).

It may appear, at least on the evidence presented thus far, that the definition of basic writers or even basic writing was a moot question. But other contributors to the 1993 special issue of *JBW* dissented. One of them was Karen Greenberg, the lone representative of the City University of New York (CUNY), effectively BW’s birthplace. She was careful to stress that she was speaking of local testing and teaching practices when she said, “I believe that CUNY’s current policy of testing entering students’ skills and requiring them to take appropriate developmental courses embodies a ‘right-to-succeed’ philosophy” (“Politics” 70). CUNY’s testing and placement procedures at that time did, in fact, contrast markedly with those Adams described for his institution. Developed by teachers, CUNY’s testing was by writing sample, holistically scored on a six-point scale by faculty at each of the different colleges. Adams’s institution, by contrast, was using a commercially developed multiple-choice grammar test, and apparently teachers were halfhearted about enforcing the placements determined by it. But there was another, perhaps more significant reason why students were finding it so easy to circumvent their assigned placements at Essex Community College. Adams allowed that his institution—indeed, his whole state system—was under “extreme financial strain. Vacancies are remaining vacant, broken equipment is remaining bro-

ken, and faculty are learning the meaning of furloughs. And then, this summer, talk has begun of actually eliminating programs” (25–26). As it turns out, this retrenchment was one of the reasons for Adams’s study, undertaken in hopes of demonstrating that basic writing instruction was important, since it suddenly seemed so vulnerable.

The Vulnerability of Basic Writing

Basic writing’s vulnerability had always been an issue—indeed, a critical part of its definition. The remaining two pieces in the special Spring 1993 issue of *JBW* addressed an ongoing vulnerability that had become entrenched since the 1970s. They were Jeanne Gunner’s “The Status of Basic Writing Teachers: Do We Need a ‘Maryland Resolution?’” and Mary Jo Berger’s “Funding and Support for Basic Writing: Why Is There So Little?” Significantly, both cast their cases as extensions of composition’s plight within the university. Gunner’s title invoked the Wyoming Resolution (see Robertson et al.), an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to improve conditions for teachers of writing in post-secondary institutions. Gunner referred to the Wyoming Resolution in order to highlight the still worse plight of BW teachers:

The concerns of teachers of basic writing as a distinct professional group have not been part of the professional discussion; clearly, we have failed to make an impact on the profession at large. Our failure, I argue, is due to the fact that we have yet to constitute ourselves as a professional group. Instead, we have been content with our identity as composition’s version of the Peace Corps, volunteer teachers going into the educational hinterlands to do good in the face of appalling conditions, assuaging the larger profession’s social guilt, and expected to find our labor its own reward. (61)

Berger, in explaining the chronic underfunding of basic writing, similarly cast BW teachers and BW itself as under-recognized. She explained that she was drawing on a piece titled “The Spare Room,” in which Ernest Boyer and Arthur Levine explain that faculty tend to the major and students to the electives, but general education (including composition) goes begging—is, hence, the “spare room.” Berger elaborated on the figure: “In my mind, basic writing, with other devel-

opmental studies, does not live IN the spare room but rather is hidden from almost everyone's view—including most of those who teach general education courses—on the top shelf of the infrequently opened spare room closet" (82–83).

This lack of recognition, this near-invisibility—part of the ongoing structural reality that marginalized students are served by marginalized faculty and programs—seems especially significant in light of the retreat from defining the student constituency that basic writing serves. In a sense, basic writing had reached a juncture where it was no longer capable of clearly articulating its own *raison d'être*. Suffering from what Gunner called "lack of status that stems from our being narrowly associated with the classroom and curriculum" ("Status" 61), BW teachers were not only overworked and underpaid, but they were also engaged in work that was increasingly difficult to define outside of local contexts and assessments. Hard at work, they were also hard-pressed to give clear definition to the work they were doing or for whom. To add insult to injury, many of the scholars who had complicated the matter of definition were deserting the field. Gunner observes the irony that although basic writing had begun to achieve some status because of the growth of scholarship in the field, "researchers and theoreticians who began as basic writing professionals have allied themselves with more status-bearing professional groups, leaving basic writing behind" ("Status" 61). Ultimately, Gunner herself moved on and up, becoming editor of *College English*, the official journal of the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

The Crisis as Reflected in the Journal of Basic Writing

The first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* (*JBW*) to come out under the editorship of Karen Greenberg and Trudy Smoke (Spring 1995) testified to the crisis in basic writing. It was the shortest issue since *JBW* had become a national journal, yet it had the longest editors' column. There, the editors registered what had been happening to the field—and how discomfiting they found it:

We have listened carefully (and uncomfortably) to our colleagues' critiques of basic writing. . . . Some have characterized basic writing programs as tracking systems which serve to preserve the idea of nontraditional students as being "different." Several scholars

have asserted that basic writing courses “ghettoize” students, prevent them from joining the mainstream of college-level courses, and often serve as obstacles rather than opportunities. Others have challenged our profession to provide evidence that basic writing courses work.

We have begun questioning whether our definitions are still accurate, whether our placement procedures are still valid, whether our strategies do, in fact, still work. (2)

The editors’ response to such challenges was not, as it had been for Greenberg at the 1992 National Basic Writing Conference, to level a series of counterclaims. Instead, the editors opted for an open-ended question: Should the journal be renamed? Some who responded to the question (actually made before the publication of this issue, which contains the results) felt the matter wasn’t worth pursuing. These included Thomas Farrell and Mike Rose, both of whom were cited in the editors’ column and neither of whom felt that an established identity and readership should be fiddled with. Those who did respond at length basically affirmed the importance of the journal, whatever its title. For instance, Joseph Harris (who succeeded Bartholomae as composition director at the University of Pittsburgh) wrote of “Negotiating the Contact Zone” in an article so titled. Like Bartholomae in “The Tidy House,” he drew on Mary Louise Pratt’s idea of the contact zone as a means of making BW a site of cultural negotiation, not assimilation. In “Basic Writing in Context: Rethinking Academic Literacy,” Lee Odell drew on Peter Dow Adams’s critique of tracking as well as Bartholomae’s critique of BW in general to argue for an expanded notion of what academic literacy is—something Patricia Bizzell had been urging for years. In “Language and Authority: Shifting the Privilege,” J. Milton Clark and Carol Peterson Haviland argued for using texts in a variety of languages to tap into the growing linguistic diversity appearing in writing classrooms.

With the next issue of *JBW*, the name remained unchanged, but a still greater sense of change and urgency had emerged, signaled with the first words of the editors’ column:

As we edit our second issue of *JBW*, we are aware of the serious challenges facing our profession, our stu-

dents, and our colleges. Several hundred participants attended our basic writing panel at the 1995 Conference on College Composition and Communication last spring. Most spoke with eloquent anguish about the dissolution of their programs and the loss of resources for basic writing courses across the nation. They, and we, are troubled by the devaluing of literacy and education as government and public priorities. We believe that basic skills courses democratize higher education by providing students with academic access and support. Thus, the role of *JBW* as a voice for our profession has become more critical. (1)

The sense of basic writing as embattled but defensible permeated the issue. Significantly, a majority of the articles related to the perceived need to redesign curricula or assessments. These built to a kind of climax at the end of the issue, with Thomas Hilgers revealing that nearly half of all colleges and universities tracking students into BW used multiple-choice tests to place them, and Edward M. White affirming that assessment and placement, done right, could have demonstrable benefits for basic writers (“The Importance of Placement”). White was the big gun in the issue, a nationally recognized expert in writing assessment and also an important figure on both the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. He mustered data that, he argued, showed students with BW placement experienced improved access and retention.

Another big gun fired back. The subsequent issue carried Sharon Crowley’s “Response to Edward M. White’s ‘The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies.’” She reminded those who needed reminding that she had long been calling for “abolishing the universal requirement in introductory composition,” believing that “Freshman English is a repressive institution.” Tracing its roots to the nineteenth century and Harvard, she argued that “the universal requirement began life as an instrument of exclusion” (89). Thus far, she could be confident that those who knew her work from elsewhere would find these arguments familiar. But she did not stop there. “In the current mean-spirited political climate,” she wrote, “I doubt whether we serve ‘new students’ well by using mass examinations to segregate them into classrooms that can be readily identified as remedial or special” (90).

CLIMATE CHANGE FOR BASIC WRITING

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that everything hinges on that change in context Crowley crystallized as “the current mean-spirited political climate.” Basic writing had come in for harsh critique before: its assessments questioned, its placements called ghettoization. But White’s defenses of good instances of both—from his perspective, demonstrations that they were providing the identification and support that aided students in making academic progress—were really not questioned by Crowley. This was not a failure of understanding on her part. For Crowley, the more general problem with placements and assessments was that these supposedly necessary forms of shelter and support for students prior to their confrontation with freshman English were unnecessary and wrong because freshman English was unnecessary and wrong, though she was also clear that this institutionalized rite of passage was unlikely to go away soon. The real and immediate problem for Crowley was the change in political climate. She goes on to cite representatives of the National Association of Scholars declaiming against the prevalence of remediation and its presumed cost. Her suggestion was strategic: BW could be targeting the very students it was supposed to protect, labeling them as remedial while calls to cut remediation (and thus to eliminate BW students) became more strident in the public arena.

Responding to Calls to Eliminate Basic Writing

There were several possible ways to respond to Crowley’s “Response.” One was to go on disputing the right way to do BW. Programs and assessments could be defined and redefined, attacked or defended. In fact, this was already happening: as an instance, Crowley’s “Response” was preceded in the Spring 1996 issue of *JBW* by Kay Harley and Sally I. Cannon’s “Failure: The Student’s or the Assessment’s?” The problem with discussions of what was right or wrong about basic writing was that they were always unavoidably local. Even White, with his national reach and reputation, had focused his argument on two large but hardly all-inclusive studies, one done by the California State University and the other by the New Jersey Basic Skills Council.

Alternatively, there was the option of accepting Crowley’s premise that the fundamental problem was that basic writing, like required composition, needed to be eliminated, not reformed or redefined

(much less defended as-is). But BW did not have the established durability of required composition, a century-old requisite that had managed to become remarkably entrenched in the college curriculum.

There was a third option. With political forces mobilizing against basic writing and other forms of remediation, it might well be time to make a case for BW in the court of public opinion, to rise above the disagreements within the field in an effort to defend the field itself. As Crowley had suggested (still more powerfully than Bartholomae had in the 1980s), arguments over how to define basic writing were effectively a waste of time: it was already defined. Its definition resided in the tracking, the assessment, and the placement of BW students. For so many who argued for BW as a place for initiation into college, this was the given. Basic writers had been found wanting, and so the question was how to remedy their deficiencies, even if terms like “remedial” and “deficient” were under erasure. Crowley had put her finger on a cruel paradox: the very mechanisms instituted to ensure adequate support for “new students” were painting those students and the programs that served them as targets. The cuts had begun, spurred by recessionary economies and calls for higher standards. Basic writing had always been hard to define and justify pedagogically, harder still to refine and reform. But nothing could be easier than to eliminate it.

Countering the cuts that had already begun might have been impossible. Logically, it meant battling it out in the political arena, trading sound bites and oversimplifications. Even if BW practitioners could do this (and some, like Harvey Wiener, urged that they should [“The Attack on Basic Writing”]), they were overworked and simply hadn’t the time. Instead, within the BW community, there was a growing acceptance of the idea that BW students represented only differences of degree while institutionalized placements were so many lines drawn in the sand. Yet, if BW students weren’t all that different, then a clear case could not be made for special support. Experiments with mainstreaming basic writers were undertaken and represented a kind of blending of BW into regular composition. The programs that garnered the most attention were Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson’s at the University of South Carolina and Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason’s at CUNY’s City College. By the end of the 1990s, mainstreaming of basic writers could be fairly called a movement (well rep-

resented, together with arguments against it, in *Mainstreaming Basic Writers: Politics and Pedagogies of Access* [McNenny]).

“Our Apartheid”

Still more attention—in fact, outright notoriety—went to the option of abolition. The person who brought that to the fore in the mid-1990s was Ira Shor. Repeatedly citing Crowley (and the history of Harvard’s institution of the composition requirement), he shared her dim view of freshman English but was far more emphatic about the need to eliminate basic writing: “Our Apartheid,” he called it, and said that “BW is less than freshman comp, below comp, often non-credit bearing, so its rise . . . into an empire of segregated remediation fits an age when the status quo urgently needed to divide and conquer and depress young people aroused for social change and for economic success” (95).

Fighting words, to be sure—and they would provoke angry responses—yet there was more truth than perhaps even Shor realized in that phrase “divide and conquer.” Not because of any conscious or malign design—on the contrary, because of the need for individual institutions to exercise some degree of self-determination—basic writing was everywhere different. Joseph Trimmer, a decade earlier, had surveyed nearly a thousand different institutions offering BW programs and found that scarcely any shared the same definition of a basic writer. Yet, however defined, every basic writer at every institution with a BW program was an identifiable target for the remediation-removers. Frequently (as was the case at CUNY, the cradle of open admissions), the same means used to identify basic writing placement was used to determine, or rather deny, college access altogether.

Shor’s characterization of basic writing as “Our Apartheid” and his call for its dismantling led to heated discussions at the convention where it was presented (in a workshop sponsored by the Conference on Basic Writing at the 1996 Conference on College Composition and Communication) and on the listservs thereafter. The responses to Shor published in *JBW* voiced the concern that forces of conservative reaction like the editorialists for the National Association of Scholars cited by Crowley were also calling for the dismantling of BW programs. Karen Greenberg, for example, argued that “if Shor’s vision came to pass,” it would mean the triumph of “reactionary political forces.” She further asserted: “No one should make the mistake of believing that

the current atmosphere of draconian cutbacks would not operate in this way if opponents of basic skills courses are successful in their goal” (“A Response” 94). Terence Collins similarly argued that Shor’s position was a strategic mistake: “Shor’s piece is a thrilling synthesis of disparate perspectives on how students get sorted and ground up in a factory model of higher ed, but in its strained assertions about Basic Writing practice it will likely serve simply to distract us from direct action against more pressing forces of exclusionism” (“A Response” 100).

Context-Contingent Definitions

Significantly, the responses to Shor’s critique of basic writing relied on the strategy of getting ever more specific about how basic writers and basic writing get defined. Collins took virtually every objection that Shor raised against basic writing and showed how, whatever might be the case elsewhere, the objections couldn’t be leveled against BW as practiced at the General College of the University of Minnesota. He concluded that Shor’s was a “too-homogenized sense of how we all have created Basic Writing from our multiple perspectives in our multiple sites” (100). This was also effectively the thesis of Greenberg’s response to Shor, which began, “One of the problems in thinking about basic writing is that this term means nothing apart from its context.” Shor, she insisted, was guilty of “oversimplifying the term and demonizing it. In reality, basic writing differs at every school; at each college, administrators, teachers, and students all participate in the process of constructing basic writing and basic writers” (90). History, as always, would have the last word. Basic writing was phased out at Greenberg’s institution, CUNY’s Hunter College, in 2001, and the University of Minnesota’s General College was disbanded in 2005. (See chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of these developments.)

In the 1990s, there was a growing trend to resist general definitions of basic writing. Given the theoretical climate within the academy at the time, this resistance seemed strategic, even wise. But in the face of what Crowley had called “the current mean-spirited political climate” (90), this strategy militated against the development of a united front in defense of BW. And BW needed defending. Whole statewide efforts coalesced to assume the proportions of a national anti-remediation movement, something captured in the introduction to the 1998 report “College Remediation: What It Is, What It Costs, What’s at

Stake” (prepared by Ronald Phipps, senior associate of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, and sponsored by the Ford Foundation):

Over the past several years, attempts have been made to limit remedial education in states such as Arkansas, California, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Virginia. More recently, in states like New York and Massachusetts, efforts are underway to reduce the amount of remedial courses offered in postsecondary education. Legislators in Texas and other states are troubled that tax dollars are being used in colleges to teach high school courses, and some states like Florida have shifted virtually all remediation efforts to the community college level. The legislatures in New Jersey, Montana, Florida, and other states have considered proposals that would force public school systems to pay for any remedial work that one of their graduates must take in college. (1)

“Basic Writing at a Political Crossroads”

Confronting a steamrolling effort to reduce or remove remediation from colleges and universities, BW scholars proliferated definitions rather than consolidating them—often with the full consciousness of the threat to BW. Published the same year as the “College Remediation” report cited in the previous paragraph was an important article by Susan Marie Harrington and Linda Adler-Kassner, “The Dilemma That Still Counts: Basic Writing at a Political Crossroads” (1998). The authors said at the outset, “Our internal debates about the nature of basic writing are exciting, but political exigencies challenge us to formulate a clear statement of purpose. Without forgetting the diversity of students currently enrolled in basic writing classes, we should be able to define basic writing in keeping with current theory and in awareness of the political climate” (8). But Harrington and Adler-Kassner’s review of two decades of scholarship did not allow a clear definition to emerge:

Given what we see in the diversity of basic writing scholarship in the last twenty years, we are faced with an important question: where do we go? We began

this project with an attempt to define basic writers in a rich yet satisfying manner. Perhaps unsurprisingly, our reading and analysis has not allowed us to frame a simple definition that will settle the heated disputes now raging in hallways and legislatures. (16)

Instead, what Harrington and Adler-Kassner urged was further attention to what seemed to them important but neglected areas of BW scholarship. They gave most attention to the area they knew would be most unpopular, the study of error. Acknowledging that “error analysis is not a trendy subject in research these days,” they asserted that it needed much more attention than it was getting: “While most writers and readers would agree that there are other dimensions of writing that are more important, such as focus, purpose, or rhetorical context, it is error that stigmatizes in a way that weaknesses in those other dimensions do not” (17). For whatever reason, Harrington and Adler-Kassner’s call to refocus attention went largely unheeded, effectively underscoring their own contention that “the move away from an oversimplified view of correctness has led to a reduction of interest in language use” (17).

Interest in language use did experience an uptick of a kind those authors had not called for—one that played into the ongoing trend to complicate and blur distinctions. The next special issue of *JBW* (Spring 2000) featured a number of prominent scholars pronouncing on the state of BW at the invitation of the editors, George Otte and Trudy Smoke. In this issue the hope was repeatedly expressed that academia might learn from BW (rather than the other way around)—and not least of all with respect to language use. In “Basic Writing and the Issue of Correctness, or, What to Do with ‘Mixed’ Forms of Academic Discourse,” Patricia Bizzell asserted that “to prepare students now for success in school, it may no longer be necessary to inculcate traditional academic discourse. Rather, what is needed is more help for students in experimenting with discourse forms that mix the academic and non-academic . . .” (5). “For instance,” Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner argued in the same issue of *JBW*, “if academic language represents the language of those who teach in the academy and the language of those whose writers we regularly assign our students to read, then the popularity of Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing in college readers suggests that the new voice endorsed by the academy is increasingly more diverse and hybrid” (“Expectations” 45). In a sense, Susan Miller only made

explicit the implication of such claims when she urged that change should extend beyond language use to institutional structures, stressing that “the righteousness of both old and new forms of academic superiority needs testing, not just commitment to either self annihilation or to holding the earliest BW forts. We should hope for more than shifted discourses in stable sites” (“A Future” 62).

But even shifted discourses could be too much to hope for. The agency ascribed to BW could be quite remarkable, even utopian; Lu and Horner opined that it had already taught academia much, and that was the one thing that should not change: “We can expect, and demand, that our colleagues and institutions learn to expect and depend on basic writing to continue to do so, to the benefit of all” (“Expectations” 50). But this was only the best possible construction that could be put on events at the turn of the century. The same issue of *JBW* had Terence Collins and Melissa Blum mourning the students they had lost to cuts, Shor continuing to argue for the abolition of BW, Keith Gilyard and Deborah Mutnick (in separate articles) countering that argument, and William DeGenaro and Edward White bemoaning the lack of “professional consensus on matters in Basic Writing, since the researchers in the field do not seem to listen much to each other or to build on each others’ findings” (23). Most emphatic of all was Lynn Quitman Troyka, whose title “How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise” left no doubt that, to her at least, failure was a fait accompli, not just a threatened outcome.

CAPITULATING ON DEFINITION

Troyka held that the fundamental failure was that “we didn’t tend to public relations” (“How We Have Failed” 114). But that “we” seemed to assume more unity than actually existed, particularly if the dissensus among the luminaries in the Spring 2000 issue of *JBW* was any indication. When BW scholars did make a bid for a common definition and a common cause, they were likely to be treated with indifference if not scorn by others in the field. Harrington and Adler-Kassner’s unheeded call for a refocusing of attention on error in “The Dilemma That Still Counts” is one case in point. Another more striking case is “A Method for Describing Basic Writers and Their Writing: Lessons from a Pilot Study” (2000) by Deborah Rossen-Knill and Kim Lynch.

Explicitly an attempt to define basic writers across different institutions, the study involved multifaceted (and rather complicated) surveys and diagnostics. It included a proviso about sensitivity to context: “Importantly, while we have found our method—our particular mix of tools—extremely useful, we do not suggest adopting it without consideration of the contexts in which it will be used” (97). Such sensitivity notwithstanding, the authors met with profound resistance: “Not surprisingly, as we sought to learn about basic writers as a group, we confronted the greatest objection to our work” (115). As evidence, they cited one (anonymous) respondent who claimed what they were attempting “is almost impossible, and I think, possibly pernicious,” saying they risked seeming “to pathologize ‘basic’ writers.” The authors apparently took such comments to heart: “We understand and, to a certain extent, agree that it could be dangerous business to classify or pigeonhole basic writers” (115).

That resistance to classification, for all sorts of reasons, might be said to be the real point of consensus as the 1990s came to an end. Like other fields, basic writing (at least as a scholarly enterprise) had always moved forward by agonistic debate, oppositional exchange honing general claims to ever finer distinctions. In the case of BW, general characterizations of the basic writer had been challenged and disputed until they were virtually nonexistent. Reversing this tendency would have required more than just an against-the-grain adjustment. Michael Apple, in a concluding section of his *Cultural Politics and Education* tellingly titled “It Ain’t All Local,” argued that reversing this tendency would have meant making a most difficult move, especially for scholars driven by a sense of social justice: “studying the Right”—and, yes, even learning from it. According to Apple, “The rightists have recognized how important it is to build social movements that connect the local with the global. They have been more than a little successful in reorganizing common sense by engaging in a truly widespread education project in all spheres of society—in the economy, in politics, and in the media and cultural apparatus” (114). Apple gave a good sense of what an effective public relations campaign for BW would have entailed—and what it would have been up against.

In a less general way, so did others. A number of contributors to *JBW* around the turn of the century—notably Gail Stygall, Steve Lamos, Mary Kay Crouch and Gerri McNenny—analyzed the social forces and state mandates that were behind the reconfiguration and/or

disappearance of BW programs. Other works moved from local cases to more general and extended analyses as did Tom Fox's *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*. Such analyses could not be expected to be disinterested, but that meant that they were fundamentally and unavoidably scholars' reactive responses to powerful political trends. In this David-and-Goliath struggle, the scholars were not only beaten in terms of seizing the initiative and capitalizing on public-relations resources but also even in terms of rhetoric, at least according to Stanford Goto. Arguing that policy makers employ discourse that is hierarchical, linear, progressive, programmatic, and quantitative—in a sense everything that academic discourse is not—Goto argued that BW advocates almost inevitably respond with mismatched rhetoric that is fated to have no impact on policy (or at least on policy makers). Goto took Fox as an example:

In a sense he is preaching to the converted, rallying supporters of accessible education. In doing so, he employs professional language and theoretical constructs that are familiar to composition instructors, particularly those who embrace critical multiculturalism. If we composition educators were to present Fox's argument or any other discipline-based argument to policy advocates, we would need to find ways of penetrating the vertical, quantitative discourse. (8)

A very real question is whether anyone truly expected basic writing to match the rhetoric or impetus of the anti-remediation forces. Those forces had sent a clear, short message to the BW administrator, if not the BW teacher/scholar: blend or die. Small wonder that mainstreaming was the hot topic in the latter half of the 1990s. Fox himself exemplified this trend. His contribution to the Spring 2002 special issue of *JBW*, coauthored with Judith Rodby, was an account of mainstreaming at Cal State Chico. It is true that this mainstreaming project was done in the right ways, and for the right reasons, but it is no less true that it was done in a state that left BW administrators no choice but to blend into the mainstream, whatever their convictions and arguments about expanded access.

Yet striking the apocalyptic note of doom for basic writing is no more accurate or appropriate than succumbing to utopian suggestions

that it should transform the academy instead of being subsumed by it or excised from it. The sites for basic writing have been reconfigured and relocated in many cases, but BW has by no means disappeared. Basic writers have begun to make their presence felt outside of BW programs, notably in a growing number of accounts of such writers in writing-across-the-curriculum work (see Sternglass, *Time*; Zamel; Zamel and Spack; Cohen; and Fishman and McCarthy). What is more to the point, their reduced presence at four-year institutions has been counterbalanced by a corresponding increased presence at two-year institutions as state systems like those in Florida, Texas, California, Massachusetts, and New York have relegated students with BW placement to community colleges. When William Lalicker surveyed the configuration of BW programs in 1999, he found he had to develop a fairly extensive typology for the variety of shapes these took; in his results, he listed, in addition to the more traditional or standard configuration (which he called the “baseline”), no fewer than five alternative models—of which mainstreaming was but one. Regardless of whether these models all served the same sort of student (however defined), the real issue was *how* they served the student. Similarly, after noting how often “the discourse of student need” is unexamined or co-opted, Mary Soliday, in *The Politics of Remediation*, concluded by shifting her “focus from institutional access to writers’ access to mainstream cultures” (145), countering the initiation model with an alternative: “translation pedagogy” (146–85). She exemplified this by her own teaching (at City College, where BW has been phased out, at least as a visible program) and by accounts of her own students “contesting the status of academic writing from within an institution” (150).

However basic writing and the students it serves are defined, it continues, becoming ever more varied in its contexts and methods. Bartholomae had once made serving basic writers the first order of business because their definition (at least in terms of assessments and placements) was a given. Now, early in the twenty-first century, the premise is quite the opposite but with the same sort of result; the definition of basic writing is so much a matter of contestation (and, for strategic reasons, so often a subterranean or surreptitious sort of definition) that the first order of business again becomes serving the student. Because what was once generally accepted now seems so much in doubt or dispute, definition must matter less than method, placement

less than pedagogy. What is basic writing? Who is the basic writer? No longer questions with any clear answers, they have been supplanted as the key questions by what may be a better one: What exactly is it that BW does? That is the focus of the following chapter, “Practices and Pedagogies.”