

## 4 Research

Research on basic writing is in short supply. Chronic marginalization of BW faculty is the chief cause of the dearth of scholarship. Michael Bérubé (with specific reference to his experience as a placement director in English) has referred to the reliance on part-timers as the “adjunctification” of academic labor (355). No branch of academia has been more adjunctified than composition, no subset of that more adjunctified than BW. Marc Bousquet has noted that the reliance on adjunct labor means even those with full-time positions in writing, precisely those who would be expected to carry the research forward, “will frequently expect to serve the managed university as management” (232). Those in the field who aren’t scrambling for sections to teach are usually scrambling for (or tending to) staff, with the consequence that no one has much time for research and writing. Even Mina Shaughnessy had to get out from under administering her writing program at City College to find the time to write *Errors and Expectations*. Like Shaughnessy, who became a university dean, many in basic writing find success means moving up and out, leaving BW behind.

The other great challenge for the field, particularly for its under-sized research arm, has been what to focus on. The burning need for BW instruction is to “fix” things. With this urgency investing BW research, there could be no disinterested way of establishing priorities; the need was to focus on problems that could be solved—or at least grappled with. Ultimately, it did not matter that the larger world seemed the locus of the most important causes and effects of the conditions for students and teachers. Ever aware of the societal implications of the work she undertook, Mina Shaughnessy felt “the ‘new’ remedial English” that she termed basic writing could be dated from the mid-1960s acknowledgment of the “cultural deprivation” of the population it served (“Basic Writing” 178). She concluded *Errors and Expectations*, published in 1977, with the 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).

In her diagnosis of why “academically ill-prepared young adults” have difficulty with writing, she stressed that three explanations are needed: “One explanation focuses on what the student has not internalized in the way of *language patterns* characteristic of written English [in other words, error], another on his unfamiliarity with the *composing process* and another on his *attitude* toward himself within an academic setting” (72–73). Much of the research conducted over the next thirty years dealt with these three broad concerns. But they are all directly related to a fourth. In basic writing, as in real estate, what *really* matters is location, location, location. As David Bartholomae said, “We know who basic writers are . . . because they are the students in classes we label ‘Basic Writing’ (‘Writing on the Margins’ 67). Everything turns on BW placement or, more especially, the assessment that determines it. In this chapter, then, we focus on research in basic writing through the lenses of these four critical categories: *error*, *assessment*, *process*, and *attitudes and identities*.”

## ERROR

Following Shaughnessy’s lead, the first research challenge taken up by the field was that of error in student writing. Error as a research topic circumscribes (without specifying) a vast territory of causes and concerns and questions. Why do errors occur? Which ones really matter? What’s to be done about them? What are errors anyway? Are there, if not immutable standards, at least strong and wide points of agreement about errors? Attempting to answer such questions initially directed the attention of BW researchers to the many varieties of linguistics.

### *Insights from Linguistics*

In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy suggested readings from theoretical linguistics (Jespersen, John Lyons), applied linguistics, and sociolinguistics (Labov, Wolfram). “Basic Writing,” her bibliographic essay in *Teaching Composition*, included even the (then) new Chomskyan linguistics. Readings in linguistics were needed to understand where the problem lay as traditional prescriptive grammars had been discredited as a pedagogic failure. *Research in Written Composition* (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer) had long ago warned, “The teaching of

formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (37–38).

Inflecting instruction in America from the time of Puritan horn-books, prescriptive grammar still had many adherents among instructors, but researchers knew they had to look to something more modern and presumably more productive. There was plenty to look to. Structural grammar, represented in Shaughnessy’s suggested readings by Charles Fries’s *The Structure of English* (1952), was one point of reference and research, but it was really purely descriptive, and basic writing was too hungry for applications and solutions to pursue this approach to any important degree. A qualified exception would be tagmemics in the form offered by Kenneth Pike’s *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (1954; 1967). Pike, who had also authored “A Linguistic Contribution to Composition” (1964), had always had designs on writing instruction, especially in the work he coauthored with Richard Young and Alton Becker, *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (1970). But tagmemics, with its reference to particle, wave, and field perspectives (epistemological/observer functions) and contrastive, variable, and distributive features (ontological functions), has a daunting vocabulary, leading Ronald Lunsford to a conclusion in 1990: “While tagmemic grammars have been rather fertile ground for rhetoricians in the last twenty-five years, the one consistent complaint against applications based on tagmemics is that they require a good deal of sophistication with language. Thus, tagmemics has not led to applications for basic writers” (“Modern Grammar and Basic Writers” 81).

A similar fate awaited BW research on transformational grammar. Noam Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures* (1957) created an alternative to structural grammar, one that was not purely descriptive but, by definition, generative. The problem was that transformational or generative grammar was focused on explaining language behaviors, not on changing them. Studying transformational grammar would, by Chomsky’s own principles, have scarcely more effect on language use than study of the digestive process would have on digestion. The one real contribution transformational grammar had to make to instruction was based on Chomsky’s idea of linguistic competence—the language user’s ability to form grammatical structures in consistent and systematic ways despite the user’s inability to articulate them. As

Donald Freeman showed in “Linguistics and Error Analysis” (1979), this notion applies even and especially to language uses labeled “ungrammatical” (in terms of prescriptive grammars). Their internal consistency—what Shaughnessy called (and was originally going to title her book) “the logic of error”—is attributable to linguistic competence. Errors of this internally consistent kind (for example, errors due to dialect difference) are actually proof of competence, not incompetence.

### *Error Analysis*

While it is useful to the teacher, research in linguistics only provides a starting point, not a method. But the other half of Freeman’s title, “Error Analysis,” would provide richer ground. Error analysis began with work in English as a Second Language (ESL). The representative and seminal text is *Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition* (1974), edited by Jack C. Richards. From the standpoint of error analysis, errors are signs of learning. They may be due to first-language interference, but they are at least as likely to appear as intermediate stages in language acquisition called “interlanguage,” a point stressed by S. Pit Corder in “Error Analysis, Interlanguage, and Second Language Acquisition” (1975).

Whether they stem from such transitional accommodations or the deep structures of transformational grammar, errors proceed more from knowledge than ignorance. That was the critical realization: errors occur as applications of language systems learned, not from the absence of language learning. And the clash of different language systems, generating transferences from one system to another or hybrid approximations, must imbue errors, rightly understood, with an explicability—what Shaughnessy would call the logic of errors. This logic is also a trajectory, since language learning is very much a process rather than a static state.

Clearly, error analysis had important applications for work with error in basic writing. BW researchers came to see that students, in attempting standard English and academic discourse, were going through something very like second-language acquisition. This was the point emphasized in many of the 129 items in the annotated bibliography accompanying the NCTE’s 1974 position statement “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” Students whose oral competence outstripped but also interfered with their written competence, students whose home dialects were effectively different mother tongues than

the standardized one they needed to master—these students were very much language learners, and their errors were ripe for the sort of analysis ESL teachers had given to *their* students.

Shaughnessy had recognized this kinship in the Introduction to *Errors and Expectations*, where she referred to early BW students as “strangers in academia” who spoke “other languages or dialects at home and never successfully reconciled the worlds of home and school” (3). More than a plea for sympathy, this is a description of BW students as much more like ESL students than like native students at an earlier or lower level of instruction. The appreciation of how maturity is combined with limited proficiency, of how the attempt to acquire discourse and assimilate to a culture is combined with a profound sense of not belonging (or belonging elsewhere), is a constant in Shaughnessy’s description of the BW student.

Most of the pieces in the initial, error-themed issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* (1975) could be called instances of error analysis, most notably Barbara Quint Gray’s “Dialect Interference in Writing: A Tripartite Analysis,” Patricia Laurence’s “Error’s Endless Train: Why Students Don’t Perceive Errors,” Nancy Lay’s “Chinese Language Interference in Written English,” and Betty Rizzo and Santiago Villafane’s “Spanish Influence on Written English.” Of course, it was Shaughnessy herself who best represented such methods.

In “Error-Analysis and the Teaching of Composition,” Barry Kroll and John Schafer invoked a range of sources, especially those that supported the viewing of errors “in much the same way that Freud regarded slips of the tongue or that Kenneth Goodman views ‘miscues’ in reading[,] as clues to inner processes, as windows into the mind” (209). In addition to Goodman’s *Miscue Analysis: Applications to Reading Instruction* (1973), these sources included M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan’s *Cohesion in English* (1976), which saw cohesion not as a grammatical but a semantic phenomenon reliant on contextual as well as textual features. What mattered, even and especially with errors, was not only what was happening on the page but also in the writer’s mind and, indeed, in the writer’s world.

This interest in the whys and wherefores for error led to further milestones in error analysis research, notably David Bartholomae’s “The Study of Error” and Glynda Hull’s “Acts of Wonderment,” both of which placed special emphasis on “talk-aloud” protocols, allowing students to reveal their thoughts as they made errors or met

with them in rereading their writing. Such work provided an enriched understanding of errors and their origins. What it did not offer was an ability to generalize about much more than the complexity of the processes, psychological and social, that gave rise to errors. Rather than providing a simple guideline of what needed to be taught, error analysis offered strikingly labor-intensive procedures of individualized instruction that had no place for prefabricated exercises or recycled lessons. It was a tough trade-off.

### *Upholding the Standard*

Given the labor-intensive nature of error analysis, it is not surprising that not all BW researchers agreed that it was a productive direction to take. From the first, some held that grammar instruction had more potential than emergent research suggested. In the inaugural issue of *JBW* devoted to error, Sarah D'Eloia advocated "Teaching Standard Written English" (1975) and, in a later issue, elaborated on her methods in "The Uses—and Limits—of Grammar" (1977). An extended battery of grammar exercises made it clear that she was more focused on the uses than the limits. In 1985, even as Patrick Hartwell published his argument against the teaching of formal grammar ("Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar"), Mary Epes, in "Tracing Errors to Their Sources: A Study of the Encoding Processes of Adult Basic Writers," was concluding that "direct instruction in the grammar of standard written English is essential for nonstandard dialect speakers" (31). An extreme variant on this view was "IQ and Standard English" (1983), in which Thomas Farrell argued that "the mean IQ scores of black ghetto students will go up when they learn to speak and write Standard English" (481). Holding an opposite position but still noting the connection between standard dialect and standard assessment in "Doublespeak: Dialectology in the Service of Big Brother" (1972), James Sledd held that teaching standard English, even as a second dialect, was part of a white supremacist program, something underscored by the title of his earlier article: "Bi-Dialectalism: The Language of White Supremacy" (1969).

The collective effect of such work was to project a profound lack of consensus among researchers about the attainable or acceptable goals of instruction that focused on errors. Grammar instruction might or might not work to standardize students' language, which might or might not be a good idea. Frankly, the right goal was really less in

question than the ability to reach it. Arguments like Sledd's and Farrell's would certainly have achieved more attention if there had been a strong sense that standardization of students' language was something that could be accomplished effectively, even with great effort. But the work on error that seemed most persuasive seemed to suggest that students' language habits were difficult to uncover, much less change. Discerning patterns of error and means of correction seemed to be so labor-intensive and student-specific as to be beyond the capacities of teachers with dozens of students and little class time.

### *Changing Attitudes toward Error*

The potential efficacy that research on error might hold for teaching, and especially for ways teachers might address error, was further undercut by the pursuit of still larger questions. As Glynda Hull wrote in "Research on Error and Correction" (1985), "Attitudes toward error in writing are now changing, and they are changing, in part, because we have come to value things other than sentence-level correctness in the writing of our students" (163). The field needed to address matters of process (processes of writing and of thought), for instance, and questions raised about levels and types of literacy were particularly vexing. In 1979, Harvey Graff had gone so far as to say that the idea that there was a stable and singular thing we could call "literacy" was in fact a "literacy myth" (the title he gave his book): "We do not know precisely what we mean by literacy or what we expect individuals to achieve from their instruction in and possession of literacy. . . . We continue to apply standards of literacy that—owing to our uncertainties—are inappropriate and contradictory . . ." (323). And James C. Raymond, in his introduction to *Literacy as a Human Problem* (1982), urged that "we must be more cautious and less doctrinaire in our deliberations about literacy and its human consequences" (x). Here, too, consensus was lacking, but the message was clear on one major point: it was easy to make missteps by treading too confidently. Change was the one sure thing. Who could say what kinds and levels of literacy would be critical in the age of mass media and the thawing of a homogeneous, hegemonic notion of discourse, especially academic discourse?

Oddly, one major error study, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford's "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research" (1988), suggested that such big questions didn't seem to matter much in composition classrooms, a conclusion

that may, in effect, have helped to quell research on error. The subtitle presumably was to give a lighthearted air to their work, but the article reported on a massive study, undertaken to provide a scholarly basis for the treatment of error in the handbook they were coauthoring. Working from a stratified sampling of 20,000 college papers, Connors and Lunsford culled 3,000 and noted how instructors responded (or failed to respond) to a variety of errors. They discounted all but the 20 most frequent types, with the consequence that errors that were especially frequent and/or easy to mark loomed large in the study, regardless of their seriousness. In one sense, the upshot of the study was to suggest how little error research, at least of the purely quantified kind, had to tell instructors. Connors and Lunsford were frank about what the study could not determine; it said nothing about the relative seriousness of errors or even why those marked were marked. It could also say nothing about why they occurred. And, when the most frequent error turned out to be the absence of a comma after an introductory element—something many instructors might not even call an error—it seemed that error frequency, however much it might inform a handbook, could do little to inform instruction.

Some solace was found in the discovery that, though errors had changed over the years (Connors and Lunsford admitted they had no idea what errors some decades-old names for them might designate), error frequency had not. Gauging their findings (reported in 1988) against studies from the 1930s, Connors and Lunsford found that the frequency of errors remained remarkably constant; taking into account the mania for TV watching, video games, and other things that could most kindly be called extratextual literacies, they concluded, “In this case, not losing means we’re winning” (406). A follow-up study modeled on the one reported in 1988 (conducted by Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford and reported in 2008) confirms a remarkable consistency in the frequency of error in student writing over time: 2.26 in the 1986 sample and 2.45 in the 2006 sample. Even looking back at a study conducted in 1917, the frequency of error has remained essentially unchanged.

### *Error Recognition*

If error frequency seemed stable, it was an illusory stability. The volatility it masked was another focus of research on error: error recognition. This instability was in fact a subtext of both the Connors and



Lunsford study reported in 1988 and the Lunsford and Lunsford study reported in 2008; what constituted an error changed over time (to such an extent that once-significant errors had become ciphers to present-day researchers), and errors in college papers turned out to be unmarked and unnoted more often than not. For instance, 15 of the 20 errors in the 1988 report were problems with commas, and the frequency with which they were marked ranged from 54% (comma splices) to 4% (missing commas in a series).

Like other quantifications, this does not begin to get at the variation among individuals, but other studies already had addressed this issue. In May 1981, *College Composition and Communication* had published a special issue on “Language Studies and Composing” with two especially important articles. Sidney Greenbaum and John Taylor found great variation in what composition instructors thought needed correction and what to do about it (“The Recognition of Usage Errors by Instructors of Freshman Composition”). Still more sweepingly, Joseph Williams’s “The Phenomenology of Error” discussed the variability in how errors in various contexts are noted, defined, and judged, emphasizing his point by salting his text with errors, most *not* noted by the readership. When it comes to spotting errors, Williams demonstrated, we see what we expect to see, and we don’t expect errors in scholarly publications.

At the other end of the decade, Susan Wall and Glynda Hull conducted a study of fifty-five English teachers, showing they did not share common conceptions and definitions of error (“The Semantics of Error: What Do Teachers Know?” [1989]). This lack of common ground was a problem Hull had struggled with in an earlier (1987) essay, “Constructing Taxonomies for Error (or Can Stray Dogs Be Mermaids?).” There she noted a variation not only in error recognition but also in whole taxonomies and categories of error. She had proposed a system based on the editing process, acknowledging that error recognition rests in the eye of the beholder.

Ultimately, the problem with error recognition could not be solved even with the most powerful and widely accepted taxonomy of error. As error analysis had demonstrated, understanding an error meant understanding not only the surface feature that seemed in error but also the process of thought and intention that gave rise to it. Hull had driven home the point in “Research on Error and Correction”: “If the errors we count and tabulate have no reality besides the interpretation

we give them, if, that is, our counts can't inform instruction (or can inform it only wrongly) because the errors we see don't represent the errors the students actually make, then tabulation research has limits we haven't yet considered" (170). Lest it be thought this shows the limits only of error frequency studies or error taxonomies, Hull recalls that changing attitudes toward error and controversies about the utility of teaching grammar or taking a "bidialectical" approach to instruction mean the pedagogical implications of error research are very much in question. That would remain true even if we settled the controversies about appropriate error categories and "readings" of error: "Once we have a taxonomy that satisfies, however, and once we have tabulated the frequency of errors in students' writing across grades, we still do not know how such information should inform pedagogies and curricula" (170).

A dilemma, to be sure—but Hull would call it "the dilemma that still counts": "We can choose to make it count less by continued scholarship on the processes of mind that govern error commission and correction" ("Research" 181). Drawing the title for their 1998 article "The Dilemma That Still Counts: Basic Writing at a Political Crossroads" from Hull, Susanmarie Harrington and Linda Adler-Kassner wrote, "Despite Hull's conclusion, which outlined a broad research agenda, the study of error has not advanced much in succeeding years" (19). They even suggested that research like Hull's and that which she reviewed—research showing how unstable error taxonomies were, how little consensus there was on what constituted error, and how little error frequency studies could be expected to inform instruction—was responsible for dampening interest in further work on error. In a sense, Hull would have agreed with this assessment. Her overview of the research on error more than a decade earlier had concluded by saying that the real focus should be not on error, *per se*, but on issues of assessment and instruction:

For many students, becoming an insider (like becoming "literate") will have, should have, little to do with learning to be correct; for them error is a minor matter. For other students, becoming an insider will, for a time, have everything to do with learning to edit; for them, error is a dilemma. The research that will aid the second group will pay respectful attention to a student's position as an outsider and will search for ways

to ease his or her entry into the academic setting, even to make such a movement possible. It is such research that will, I expect, drive studies of error and editing for the next several years. (“Research” 184)

The real issues, Hull suggested, were matters of initiation and assimilation, respect and understanding and support. Errors themselves were symptoms and signs of much larger issues having to do with advantages (or the lack thereof), social placement (and not just writing placement), and kinds of public regard and civic enclosure. What had begun as a seemingly simple matter—looking into why students made mistakes—had led to vastly complex sets of questions about social identity and access. The gaze had turned from students’ mechanical errors to the institutional mechanisms that noted them and made them matter. In research as well as in practice, academic structures would be called into question, above all, the structuring of basic writing. Though considerable attention would be given to the students, the harshest scrutiny would fall on the systems that defined them as outsiders—first and foremost systems of assessment.

#### ASSESSMENT

As attention to error waned, attention to assessment waxed, ultimately building to a kind of hue and cry in the 1990s. But assessment was always an especially problematic research problem, and the 1970s is the place to start to understand why. Part of the problem from the first seemed to be the lack of a solid research base. In 1978, the *Journal of Basic Writing* devoted an entire issue to evaluation. It concluded with a selected and annotated bibliography by Richard Larson, who found quite a bit of advice on responding to student writing but only two works worth including that bore on “decisions made about where to place student papers, and students, on scales that permit assigning the student to a particular class” (92). These were Paul Diederich’s *Measuring Growth in English* and Richard Braddock’s “Evaluation of Writing Tests.” Larson reminded readers of what was at stake, saying that he hoped his bibliography would help teachers and “may fortify them against capricious efforts to adopt judgmental techniques that have not themselves been fully investigated and evaluated” (93). It was the fitting endpiece to a collection that was bracing in its frankness

about what was lacking in the knowledge of assessments and the application of that knowledge.

The first two pieces in the issue set the tone. Rexford Brown, the director of publications for the National Assessment of Educational Progress, held that the tests in use were clearly inadequate and uninformative: “Like holistic essay scoring, multiple choice testing of writing is seldom diagnostic in any useful way” (3). Brown did hold out hope of improvement (even if it had a “nowhere to go but up” flavor), but Joseph Williams took a bleaker view. Ascribing a general “inability to find simple and reliable measures” to “some questions that I don’t think we have attended to as carefully as we might have,” he quickly added, “I wish I could say that I think the questions will help simplify this matter of evaluation, but in fact their answers, such as they are, seem to complicate it” (“Re-Evaluating” 8). Ultimately, according to Williams, the real issue is not even the ability to devise a viable system of assessment. It’s who is doing the assessing. He tried to imagine a system that would be consistent, reliable, and objective—one that would “rationalize and defend admissions procedures,” even result in “the adoption of better teaching methods”:

But it is not at all clear that such a system would be more than a self-justifying instrument that had taken its values and hence its measures from those who have not demonstrated any special competence in distinguishing competent writing in any world except their—our—own. That is a harsh charge to make against a whole profession and by no means includes every member in it. But I think it is essentially true. (8)

To a remarkable extent, Williams effectively articulated the problems that would, over the next decades, damage and defeat assessment programs that fed and shaped basic writing. For all their attention to matters of validity and reliability, all that was needed to render them invalid was a shift in political climate, one that raised the “right to judge” issue. Then these vast, carefully calibrated assessments would come to seem narrow gates made by the narrow-minded, determined to preserve their positions of privilege.

### *Foundational Work in Mass Testing*

Though such suspicions were always in the air, not least of all in the 1970s, there was, at that time, a much greater, more pervasive sense

of urgency about all the work to be done—and with it the hope that this work would vanquish the problems besetting the workers in the field. Looked at from another perspective, the problem raised by Williams was a kind of opportunity; English professors were invited to determine the values and measures that would distinguish writing competence. No one seized the opportunity like Edward M. White, Director of the English Equivalency Examination and Coordinator of English Testing Programs for California State Universities and Colleges (CSUC). White was the architect of the largest assessment program to date, and his contribution to the 1978 “Evaluation” issue of *JBW*, “Mass Testing of Individual Writing: The California Model,” laid the groundwork for much organized assessment thereafter. The CSUC English Equivalency Examination, as its name would suggest, was originally designed to determine which students could skip college instruction, earning credit in composition simply by scoring high enough on the equivalency exam. But the scales were also designed to register, in addition to proficiency, minimal competency (and even performances below that). A happy marriage of carefully designed prompts that students could choose from and normative scales of performance that readers could refer to and apply holistically, the CSUC Equivalency Examination made evaluation, not least of all the “mass testing” of White’s title, seem sufficiently fair and doable.

White’s own work on assessment was invaluable in California and beyond. He was an indefatigable writer and researcher, with a special gift for practical synthesis, and he was there with a ready answer to the burning question. As Richard Lloyd-Jones emphatically put it in his bibliographic essay “Tests of Writing Ability” (1987), “The question is not whether to test but what kind to use” (159). Lloyd-Jones was no less emphatic about where to look for the answer; he said of White’s *Teaching and Assessing Writing* (1985), “For most readers his book makes earlier works unnecessary except for historical reasons . . .” (160).

A variant on the CSUC English Equivalency Examination with its choice of prompts and six-point holistic scale was the CUNY Writing Assessment Test, and the CUNY Instructional Resource Center (IRC) would publish a series of monographs on testing (see chapter 3 for a more detailed account of this work). Some of the researchers from the IRC (notably Karen Greenberg, Harvey Wiener, and Virginia Slaughter) would create the National Testing Network in Writing (NTNW) to disseminate research and best practices. The Network’s

first two conferences, in 1983 and 1984, resulted in an important collection, *Writing Assessment: Issues and Strategies* (Greenberg, Wiener, and Donovan).

Assessment had clearly given rise to a rich discussion, but its main points were fairly clear and straightforward; the way to assess writing was through actual writing samples, scored holistically (hence White's 1984 manifesto "Holisticism"). The foe was what Rexford Brown had identified as the inexpensive but suspect way: multiple-choice, machine-scored tests that are "cheaper and easier to score" but have "glaring weaknesses" ("What We Know" 3). By the mid-1980s, the need to base assessment on actual student writing had become a kind of orthodoxy. As expressed in the preface to *Writing Assessment: Issues and Strategies*, "Multiple-choice tests cannot measure the skills that most writing teachers identify as the domain of composition: inventing, revising, and editing ideas to fit purpose and audience within the context of suitable linguistic, syntactic, and grammatical forms" (xiv).

In 1987, Lloyd-Jones could say that holistically scored testing was "now the system most used for mass testing" (165). A part that might stand for the whole is the story Harvey Wiener recounts in "Evaluating Assessment Programs in Basic Skills" (1989). In 1983, he and other CUNY colleagues had conducted a national survey of assessment in 1,200 institutions of higher education, discovering that 97% of them did assess entering students. But a subsequent survey done under the auspices of the National Testing Network in Writing showed that, beyond that basic reality, generalizations were difficult to come by. A variety of assessments, many of them homegrown, were used with little regard for reliability or validity. In consequence, Wiener and his colleagues created the College Assessment Evaluation Program to facilitate effective assessment design and evaluation. Without declaring the problem solved, Wiener's story was a clear account of progress toward clearly seen goals.

#### *Disillusionment with Holistic Assessment*

For some time, however, the clarity about assessment had been illusory, persisting for so long because of enormous intellectual and institutional investment. The real research basis for holistic writing assessment, largely unexamined and simply adopted, stretched back decades. Even before Paul Diederich published the 1974 manual, *Measuring Growth in English*, he had done research on assessment for

the College Entrance Examination Board, work distilled in a 1961 research bulletin coauthored with John French and Sydel Carlton, *Factors in Judgments of Writing Ability*. It was this work that led Martin Nystrand, Stuart Greene, and Jeffrey Wiemelt to declare Diederich “the father of holistic essay evaluation” and to say his real coup was to decide to give all factors, from spelling to ideas, equal weight:

This proposal was in effect a psychometric fiat; no validity studies were undertaken to determine appropriate weights. In 1961, then, Diederich could plausibly argue—and in so doing shape an entire generation of writing assessment—that writing could be effectively, reliably assessed by reading one sample on one topic in one genre per writer if—*mirabile dictu*—readers could only be made to agree. (276)

This is not the indictment of arbitrary judgment it might seem; on the contrary, Nystrand and his coauthors, in their “intellectual history” of composition, are stressing what the climate of the times could support—and very nearly dictate. Their point is that the same formalism that gave rise to New Criticism in literary studies supported this insistence on the stable, univocal text in assessment. Like New Criticism, assessment needed to insist on careful reading—without interference by interpretive questioning, worries about authorial intention, and contextual considerations. But this attempt to approach objectivity and stability in assessment was in fact the highly unstable product of its time. Literary studies, pushed by the need to find “original” readings of texts, broke from formalistic approaches much earlier. Assessment, whose twin lighthouses were reliability and validity, took longer to unravel its belief in the univocal text. But it really only took a few voices saying, so others could hear, that the emperor had no clothes.

One such voice came from Pat Belanoff, who labeled all the past certainties “The Myths of Assessment” in a 1991 *JBW* article by that name. According to Belanoff, assessment lacked a clear purpose and focus as well as a clear consensus and basis. Here’s how she put the “four myths”:

1. We know what we’re testing for
2. We know what we’re testing

3. Once we've agreed on criteria, we can agree on whether individual papers meet those criteria
4. And the strongest myth of all, that it's possible to have an absolute standard and apply it uniformly (55)

Pointedly recast, these were in fact the fundamental premises under which the great assessment enterprise had been operating.

Belanoff was not articulating a sudden and general change of heart (or mind), of course. This was also not a matter of postmodernism finally knocking on BW's door. There had been some rethinking even and especially within the assessment community. By coincidence, the lead piece for the same issue of *JBW* was the published version of the keynote for the 1989 National Testing Network in Writing conference. The speaker/author was Rexford Brown, the erstwhile director of publications for the National Assessment of Educational Progress who had led off the evaluation-themed issue of *JBW* in 1978. Now the director of communications for the Education Commission of the States, Brown had a different (though by no means uncritical) take on assessment. Perhaps thinking of the landscape he had surveyed over a decade earlier, he saw much accomplished: "You certainly see more and more people using writing samples, whether they score them holistically or analytically or through primary trait or error analysis" (11). But for Brown the use of writing samples was no longer the assessment grail. The big challenge, as he saw it now, was how to teach and test for something much more elusive than formal traits, something he was calling "thoughtfulness," which would become better known as critical thinking ("Schooling and Thoughtfulness" 3–15).

The changing views on assessment reflected more than just a change in the intellectual climate. The job of assessment research in the 1970s and 1980s had been to address an urgent need, to tell BW instructors and programs how to sort and place students. If anything, the job had been done too well. The burning need had been answered with what was feeling more and more like a calcifying imposition. Teachers for too long had felt that assessments were imposed on them, circumventing their own judgments (particularly when those assessments governed exit as well as placement). The blame could be (and was) placed on specific assessments, but in another sense no assessment could be good enough. The research question closed for much of the 1980s—not how to assess but whether to assess at all, at least in externally imposed and institutionalized ways—was once again opened.



*Not How to Test, But Whether*

For researchers, the empirical basis for questioning the vast (if various) assessment industry was to be through one of that industry's tenets: accountability. If assessments were necessary for placement and BW programs were salutary, could those salutary effects be documented?

The 1990s, and particularly the fourth National Conference on Basic Writing in 1992, offered a negative answer (see chapter 1 for an extended analysis of this conference and the resulting special issue of *JBW* in 1993). Suddenly the thought-leaders in the field like David Bartholomae were asking if BW placement ought to exist at all. There were even anecdotal accounts, like Peter Dow Adams's, that being placed in BW courses did more harm than good ("Basic Writing Reconsidered"). Assessment research in BW had to turn from the means to the ends, had to make a case for assessment. Edward White's "The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies: Helping Students Succeed Under the New Elitism" (1995) defended assessment by arguing that the attacks gave support to the "new elitists" on the right who saw remediation as beneath the task of higher education and an unwarranted drain on university budgets. "Nonetheless," White reasoned, "if faculty and administrators could be persuaded that the required course and placement testing do in fact help underprivileged students succeed, they would be less likely to join those seeking to limit opportunity for them" (78). To that end, White presented data from two statewide systems, and then, in his conclusion, conveyed his hope—but also his sense of the powerful forces aligned against it:

Those of us concerned about preserving the hard-won higher education opportunities for the new students may not be able to stem the elitist tide, at least not immediately. But we can present the data and the arguments for basic writing programs and force those opposing them to confront the social biases they are endorsing. The argument that our programs do not work is baseless, as the California and New Jersey data show; given adequate support, we can help most low-scoring students succeed. (83)

Other, smaller scale studies, such as William Sweigart's account of pre- and post- testing (1996), showed in a more localized setting what White's review of whole state systems revealed: that, by and large

(and in statistically significant ways), BW placement and instruction seemed to work. But BW placement was also being reworked with important consequences.

### *Alternatives to Established Assessments*

Beginning in the 1990s, assessment research itself was reorganizing, becoming less unidirectional and univocal. Pat Belanoff of SUNY Stony Brook advocated portfolios. Eric Miraglia of Washington State proposed self-assessment. And Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles of Grand Valley State University favored self-directed placement (an idea that caught on widely enough to result in their edited collection titled *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices* [2002]). Particularly important were mainstreaming experiments like those of Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson of the University of South Carolina and Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason of CUNY's City College, since these helped to surface multifaceted longitudinal assessments, information-rich alternatives to the snapshot placements like the timed impromptu writing test. At about the same time, the 1993 CCCC Position Statement on Writing Assessment effectively indicted widespread practices like the timed writing sample without mandating specific alternatives. Research was opening new avenues that focused on tying assessment to the curriculum it potentially drove.

Not surprisingly, representatives of the established methods responded to the changing climate for research on assessment. In his "Apologia for the Timed Impromptu Essay Test," White argued that the lately maligned test was not only preferable to multiple-choice assessments but also more efficient and reliable than alternative forms like portfolio assessment. But the discourse had changed. White's arguments were about economy, efficiency, and efficacy. There was something utilitarian about his take—a kind of "greatest good for the greatest number" argument that worked best in large institutions that never could assess each student's individual situation. The case studies approach used by such scholars as Barbara Gleason in "When the Writing Test Fails: Assessing Assessment at an Urban College" (1997) or Deborah Mutnick in *Writing in an Alien World* (1996) functioned on a different principle—the belief that if assessments failed a single student unfairly, then that was one student too many—and the cost, at least for that student, was too great.

For the new research vanguard, there would also be ironic upsets. The mainstreaming experiment of Soliday and Gleason at CUNY's City College, the focus of so much attention for so long, is an illustrative example. A three-year, grant-funded project initiated in 1993, it established that BW students (or rather students who would ordinarily have had BW placement) could function and even flourish in "enriched" versions of regular writing courses (whose other students would also benefit from this enrichment). As documented in "From Remediation to Enrichment: Evaluating a Mainstreaming Project" (1997), the project used an impressive array of assessment tools: traditional assessments (as a kind of baseline), student self-assessments, cross-read portfolios, even a cadre of outside readers/consultants. But meeting its own goals was not enough to ensure the project's success. The students it was designed to serve were being denied access to City College by the time the project had run its course. In "Evaluating Writing Programs in Real Time: The Politics of Remediation" (2000), written as a retrospective and even a postmortem of the project in which she and Mary Soliday had invested so much, Barbara Gleason concluded, "The empirically verifiable account that we were striving for in this evaluation was fatally compromised by the socio-political forces that had gathered around the issue of remediation" (582). In *The Politics of Remediation* (2002), Soliday would add, "Empirical accounts remain central to arguing for the worth of programs, but evaluation is a political enterprise in many respects, which is merely to say that alone, data won't do the job of ideological justification" (142).

But Soliday would not stop there. Empirical accounts may not be enough, but she stressed that accounts focusing on case studies of individual students may have their own fatal flaw. If they show what often eludes the "big picture" perspective, then they can also elide the "big picture" itself. This is true whether the goal is to argue for reform in approaches to BW or to argue that attempts at remediation are doomed enterprises and wastes of money. It really does not matter if a critic of remediation is arguing that remediation is unfair or suggesting that it is impossible. The problem with focusing on BW students as special (and especially needy) cases is, as Soliday sees it, that they come to seem unusual and their problems intractable when the real issue is for institutions to ensure that such students are adequately supported: "By invoking the discourse of student need, critics of remediation often focus on students' agency, eluding or downplaying the roles

that institutions do or could play in enhancing students' educational progress" (*Politics* 138).

With the help of hindsight, Soliday sees that it is the political context that matters most even and especially when it comes to matters of assessment and placement. More than this, she sees that both sides were focusing on student success or failure without taking the institutional context sufficiently into account. Yet as events unfolded, even that broader context proved too narrow a focus. By the time Soliday's book was published, students with remedial placement were no longer admitted to City College, her institution, and the assessment that determined their placement was no longer made by the CUNY WAT. The real assessment revolution had happened outside the academy altogether.

### *High Schools as Gatekeepers*

From the early days of open admissions, basic writing students had been labeled as "underprepared" for college. But in the 1990s there was a growing conviction on the part of policy makers that students who were leaving high school without being ready for college simply shouldn't get a high school diploma. In 1998, the National Governors Association published, on the NGA website, an "Issues Brief" titled "High School Exit Exams: Setting High Expectations" (Otte, "High Schools as Crucibles" 109). That "Issues Brief" is no longer available, partly because this is no longer policy proposed but policy implemented. According to *State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year*,

In 2006, 65% of the nation's public high school students and 76% of the nation's minority public high school students were enrolled in school in the 22 states with current exit exams. By 2012, an estimated 71% of public high school students and 81% of minority public high school students will be enrolled in school in the 25 states that expect to have exit exams in place. (Kober et al. 10)

As a consequence, BW students are disappearing from higher education because they are not completing secondary education. In *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level*, Marilyn Sternglass managed to combine statistics with case studies to show that BW students could succeed if given time—

something she could show only by tracking them over longer periods and with more in-depth attention than ever before. Yet even as *Time to Know Them* received the Mina P. Shaughnessy Award of the Modern Language Association in 1998 and the Outstanding Book Award of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1999, Sternglass's college and the focus of her study, City College of the City University of New York, was phasing out basic writing—or, more specifically, the students who would have taken it.

At this point, the most important work on assessment of BW students is quite possibly not about college assessments at all. *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning* (2002) by George Hillocks, Jr., is about the assessments going on in the high schools, where graduation is increasingly determined by state-mandated testing. Hillocks is careful and balanced in his conclusions and finds some practices much more estimable than others, but the overall picture he paints is effectively summed up by his title. However wise or unwise the states are in test design and administration, state-mandated assessments—created a world away and shaped by policy, expediency, and political decisions—now effectively control which students will eventually be admitted to college. The assessment and placement of BW students have never been further removed from those who design and teach in BW programs.

Thomas Hilgers, making a brief for the 1993 CCCC Position Statement on Assessment, wrote, “It is my belief that bad assessment is what gets most students labeled as ‘basic writers’” (69). Many in the field agreed, and their research certainly challenged the assessments as well as the BW label. The students so labeled, however, may be a vanishing species now that state-mandated assessments at the pre-college level have become more like a wall than a gate.

## PROCESS

When basic writing students first appeared on the scene, the task was simply (or not so simply) to describe these students, initially seen as “strangers in academia” in Shaughnessy's Introduction to *Errors and Expectations* (3). Five years later, taking a national rather than a local perspective, Lynn Quitman Troyka expanded: these students were generally older, often with children and jobs. Many were from the first generation in their family to attend college. An increasing number

of them were foreign born. And most important for this discussion, they arrived at college “without strong literacy skills” (“Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980’s” 253). In the descriptions of the time, BW students were seen as less prepared, less acclimated, and less literate. But such descriptions had a subtext: the definition had to be a diagnosis; the description had to be a prescription.

Generally speaking, this description/prescription could take two forms. One, largely observational or theoretical and quasi-objective, was to define the BW student in terms of needs, leaving those for the teacher to address. The other was to give a narrative of an attempt to meet those needs. This was most often done in the form of what the field learned to call the “teacher as hero” story (and sometimes the “program as hero”), though a variant could be the story of a failure to meet needs, a kind of confessional that offered enlightenment instead of a full teaching program.

Mina Shaughnessy encapsulated both of these forms in *Errors and Expectations*. Hers was largely a success story; after five years she could say of the students whose essays had inspired her book that more than a few “of those ‘ineducable’ students have by now been graduated” (3). Yet her book was more diagnostic than prescriptive. It was certainly a revelation in how to make sense of the writing of BW students, but just where to go from there was less than certain. As exercises in definition that were also ineluctably diagnostic (and prescriptive), they could be generally described as attempts to define how BW students thought as well as how BW students thought about themselves (but also, importantly, how others thought about them). Attention to the thought processes of basic writers would dominate research in the 1980s.

The groundbreaking work on process was done by Janet Emig. In 1971, Emig published *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, which Mina Shaughnessy approvingly cited in *Errors and Expectations* as important “for the contrast it offers between the ways students behave as writers and the ways textbooks and teachers often have assumed they ought to behave” (299). By having students talk through their acts of composing, Emig was able to show how their thinking got translated into writing and how their thoughts about that process bore on the process itself. But hers was a double revelation. She would show not only how thought processes influenced writing processes but also how writing, in turn, influenced thought. She would become an important formative and informing influence on work in writing across

the curriculum with research like “Writing as a Mode of Learning” (1977), arguing that writing fostered analytical and relational thinking important to academic work (and discourse). From the beginning, then, the focus on process was never only on the writing process but also on the thought process, and the teaching goals that came of this focus were as much about teaching students how to think as teaching them how to write.

### *Writing Process(es)*

Initially, BW research focused more on the writing process. Mina Shaughnessy had warned, in her bibliographic essay “Basic Writing,” about the “rigorous and informed thinking that must take place before there is any substantial yield for writing from current learning theory” (206). That was of course a challenge as well as a caution, and many in the field would soon rise to it. Adopting and developing Emig’s methods, especially the approach of having students talk through their composing processes, Sondra Perl based her dissertation on intensive work with five students. She published the findings in several important articles. “A Look at Basic Writers in the Process of Composing,” published in 1980, was keyed specifically to basic writing. Accessible yet still detailed in terms of primary research, “A Look at Basic Writers” dispelled the persistent myth that BW students “do not know how to write” by showing each had stable and consistent composing processes. Their chief problem in fact seemed to be an arsenal of self-imposed constraints and counterproductive strategies that reined in the writing and often interrupted the flow for the sake of correction (or hypercorrection): “Seen from this point of view, teaching basic writers how to write needs to be conceived of in a new way, in part, by ‘loosening’ the process rather than ‘tightening’ it” (31). Perl’s great strength was also the great challenge to applications of her research; because she regarded composing processes as individualized if not idiosyncratic, due attention to these processes would logically need to be the kind that she paid. She would not generalize about steps and stages. She would not make the composing process singular and schematized.

Taking the schematic approach meant turning away from individuals (and all their problematic differences) and turning to theory. Of those who did just that, the most influential was Linda Flower, who often partnered in her research and publication with John Hayes,

a cognitive psychologist. In “Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing” (1979), she used cognitive theory to argue that the root of many writing problems—writing that is self-focused, associative rather than logical, and insufficiently considerate of its audience—is that it has not met the cognitive challenges of reader-based prose, which is considerate, thought-through, literate, logical, and propositional—in short, writing which takes various needs of the reader into account.

In a number of subsequent articles coauthored with Hayes—among them “The Cognition of Discovery” (1980), “Identifying the Organization of Writing Processes” (1980), “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing” (1981), and “Images, Plans, and Prose: The Representation of Meaning in Writing” (1984)—Flower would delineate a sense of what the general writing process was, often with the help of diagrams and flow charts. There would be caveats about how the process was recursive, context-bound, even unpredictable. But what the work of Flower and Hayes communicated first and foremost was that the writing process was knowable (if complex), step-by-step (if recursive), and consistent across individuals and contexts (if only in its very general outlines). This was a powerful message for the beleaguered instructor. It didn’t require an intimate knowledge of each student to teach process; what was needed—and at hand—was a model and a theory.

### *Thinking Process(es)*

Cognitive theory, as its name implied, was about the very process of thought, and it became important well beyond its application to the writing process. After all, from the beginning, the writing process had never been only about writing but also about the thinking brought to bear on that writing. And the aspect focused on by most BW researchers was its longitudinal, developmental nature—less the act of cognition than the development of cognition over time. For better or worse (it would be both), this development was fundamentally seen as a matter of maturation.

Initially, this view was embraced. No one assumed that first-year college students, BW students in particular, were especially mature. As a political project, basic writing was concerned with democratizing education, opening up higher education to those who had not had access until now. The fear, not least of all from those who opposed such access, was that these students would prove to be ineducable.



Seen through the lens of cognitive or developmental theory, they were not unintelligent, just cognitively immature—largely a consequence of being underexposed to the tasks and settings that would spur their mental maturation. That made their intellectual growth, now that they were in college, seem not only possible but almost inevitable.

There were scholarly bases for this assertion of the possibility of intellectual growth. Of the thinkers who figured in developmental or cognitive research, particularly as it applied to BW, there were four principals: Lawrence Kohlberg, William Perry, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget. Kohlberg was primarily concerned with moral and ethical development, not intellectual growth per se. Perry had the virtue of focusing on college students—a focus problematically lacking in Piaget and Vygotsky—but his sampling had largely been restricted to Harvard males back before Harvard had gone coed; that had to seem an unfortunately restricted sampling, particularly to the BW research community indisposed to use yardsticks associated with privilege and power. Vygotsky, like Piaget, was concerned principally with childhood development; he had his arguments with Piaget, most rooted in his greater attention to social context, but he also resisted the neat schematizing that Piaget accommodated. Piaget was the main informant for cognitivists. In “Cognitive Studies and Teaching Writing,” Andrea Lunsford effectively summed up why:

The work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget is of particular significance to our field in that it represents a turning away from the rigid focus of behaviorism and logical empiricism and toward the ways in which people “know” the world and hence construct both knowledge and reality. For Piaget, knowing is an action or, more explicitly, an *interaction* between the self and its environment, and development occurs as we alter mental structures in order to make sense out of the world. Piaget categorizes this mental development into four “stages”: the sensori-motor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete-operational stage, and the formal operational stage, which is characterized by the ability to abstract, synthesize, and form coherent, logical relations. . . . (147)

Culminating in a stage that sounds like the great desideratum, not only of BW instruction but also of college instruction generally, the attraction of this scheme is immediately apparent. But the great problem with it becomes no less apparent as Lunsford continues:

At the stage of concrete operations, the child's thought is still closely linked to concrete data; completely representational, hypothetical thought still eludes the child. As the child moves through the stages of cognitive development, he or she relies less and less on such concrete data and direct physical experience and more and more on general, abstract, representational systems. . . . (147)

What is most problematic is that this is a *maturational* scheme of development—specifically, of child development. The concrete-operational stage is characteristic of children from six to eleven years of age. What's more, Piaget had grave doubts about the ability of formal education to accelerate the developmental process. His whole theory was, in fact, an alternative to the (for him repugnant) idea that the growth of knowledge and thought is merely additive, the accretion of information. Instead, knowledge structures restructure themselves to accommodate new concepts, new logics. These new ways of thinking cannot be imposed from the outside, though they do result, as Lunsford affirms, from complex interactions between the self and the environment. Cognitive growth is not an easy or smooth process. It tends to work by disruptive interactions of the sort that overturn long-held conceptual frameworks. Creating such interactions in a classroom might be a dubious enterprise, supposing it was possible.

Initially, such problems did not stop the cognitivists. They were prepared to make adjustments, not least of all in regard to Piaget, as Karl Taylor did in explaining the genesis of his DOORS program (for the Development of Operational Reasoning Skills) in 1979: "Despite Piaget's hypothesis that 17- or 18-year-olds should be at the formal level, I concluded that my students might not have fully arrived at that point" (53). How far such notions would take some in a fairly short space of time is strikingly instanced by the opening sentence of Anna Berg and Gerald Coleman's *JBW* article "A Cognitive Approach to Teaching the Developmental Student" (1985): "There is a growing consensus among developmental researchers that a substantial number,

perhaps even a majority, of the freshmen admitted into colleges and universities in the United States approach the academic task of college-level courses on the concrete operational level of cognitive functioning” (4). For anyone who knows this is the preadolescent stage in the Piagetian scheme, this pronouncement has to seem alarming, but for the BW community, it gets worse: “The undereducated, urban community college student lags far behind the average college or university freshman in the ability to deal with intellectually complex operations called for in college courses” (4). The latter statement was made with specific reference to the authors’ home institution, “Passaic County Community College, an inner-city school with a large enrollment of educationally disadvantaged students” (4). Berg and Coleman go on to describe their “remedial curriculum, The ‘Cognitive Project,’” which provides “underprepared, nontraditional students an opportunity to actively experience ways of acquiring, solidifying, and using knowledge while acquiring the basic reading and writing skills necessary for college work” (4–5). This hardly seems a solution commensurate with the problem, but any prescription has to pale in the face of the damning diagnosis.

Berg and Coleman’s “Cognitive Approach” was the leadoff article in the last of the themed issues of *JBW* under the old editorial board, billed “Basic Writing and Social Science Research II.” In fact, the first several articles of that issue used a cognitivist approach; in addition to Berg and Coleman’s piece, there was Joan M. Elifson and Katharine R. Stone’s “Integrating Social, Moral, and Cognitive Developmental Theory” and Annette Bradford’s “Applications of Self-Regulating Speech in the Basic Writing Program” (though the latter used “the early research of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Luria” [41] only as a starting point). The journal’s recourse to this theme (for the second of two issues) highlighted the tendency of researchers at the time to cloak themselves in the vestments of other disciplines, notably psychology, sociology, and linguistics.

### *Cognition or Discourse Conventions?*

A glimmering of what lay beyond cognitivists’ explanations of the deficiencies of BW students appeared in the very next issue of *JBW*, the first under Lynn Quitman Troyka’s editorship. Here is the opening sentence of Myra Kogen’s article on “The Conventions of Expository Writing” (1986): “A number of composition researchers in the past

few years have come to the conclusion that students cannot think” (24). The shift away from the specialized vocabulary of the Piagetian model to the bald and false-sounding claim that “students cannot think” is the first clue that this is not another such researcher. Kogen cites a number of developmental researchers, including the author of “Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer” (1979): “Andrea Lunsford asserts that basic writers ‘have not attained that level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions or conceptions’ (38)” (24). Other researchers making such striking and damning charges against basic writers come in for citation and disputation—notably Janice Hays, an editor of the collection *The Writer’s Mind* (1983) and author of a piece in that collection titled “The Development of Discursive Maturity in College Writers.” Hays was a special target for Kogen not because she was making more damning or dramatic claims about student writers than other cognitive researchers had but because she provided, as evidence of these claims, samples of student writing. Kogen maintained that, like other developmental researchers, “. . . Hays is asserting that poor writers have not developed the ability to think abstractly and conceptually” (34). But the writing samples given by Hays offered the opening for an alternative interpretation: “Looking at the same student samples,” Kogen concluded that “freshman writers certainly can think abstractly but they have not yet learned to present their ideas in accordance with conventional expectations” (34). The next year, Hays published an apologia of cognitivism called “Models of Intellectual Development and Writing: A Response to Myra Kogen et al.” But even this spirited defense was rendered irrelevant. Kogen’s turn of thought had introduced reasonable doubt about cognitivists’ claims.

In finding the argument that “students do not have sufficient cognitive maturity to argue successfully in academic discourse” muddled and in claiming that the real issue was not students’ maturity but adequate knowledge of discourse conventions, Kogen was making a point whose time had come. She was certainly not the only one, not even the first. Ann Berthoff had clearly expressed her exasperation with developmental theorists two years before in “Is Teaching Still Possible? Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning” (1984). Two years before that, in “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty” (1982), Patricia Bizzell had argued that cognitivists were too focused on inner processes and needed to be more attentive to social context, a notion

put forth even more emphatically that same year by Janet Emig in “Inquiry Paradigms and Writing” (1982), an article that had nothing nice to say about composition researchers who proceeded “a-contextually, with no consideration or acknowledgement of setting” (71). It seems ironic that this rebuke came from the researcher who had done so much to focus attention on composing processes and, concomitantly, thought processes.

A shift of attention for basic writing research was in the works, and *JBW*, under the editorship of Troyka, helped to bring it forward. In the “Editor’s Column,” she announced several changes. Now a national refereed journal, *JBW* would move away from issues with a single theme to issues on various topics, a move calculated to encourage more timely publication of new material (1). Despite this emphasis on new material, the leadoff piece of the reincarnated *JBW* was an abridged reprint of David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University,” published the year before in Mike Rose’s collection *When a Writer Can’t Write* (1985). The Bartholomae piece is famous for insisting that the challenge for his students is “to know what I know and how I know what I know . . . ; they have to learn to write what I would write . . .” (9). What is less well known is that this is simply Bartholomae’s way of putting in memorable phrasing what he quotes Bizzell’s “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty” as saying—that the challenge faced by basic writers is not so much a matter of cognitive development as a lack of familiarity with academic discourse: “What is undeveloped is their knowledge both of the ways experience is constituted and interpreted in the academic discourse community and of the fact that all discourse communities constitute and interpret experience” (Bizzell, “Cognition” 230, qtd. in Bartholomae, “Inventing” 11–12).

That Bartholomae’s piece immediately precedes Kogen’s in this issue is a small indication of how much was coming together in this seismic realignment of perspectives, the collective suggestion that conventions trump cognition in explaining the challenges that basic writers face in the academy. Some of this realignment was truly subterranean, like the fact that Bizzell’s criticism in the cited piece (“Cognition, Convention, and Certainty”) is focused less on the developmentalists who claim that “students cannot think” than on the chief cartographers of the writing process, Flower and Hayes, who are (Bizzell argues) too schematic, linear, inner-directed, and a-contextual in their mappings of that process. The tracers of process, whether writing or thinking,

were charged with being blinded by theory, ignoring context and difference, and reducing the life and individuality of what individuals do to stages of growth and flow charts of process.

There were many other instances of this realignment. In a widely discussed typology (and judgment) of what his title called “The Major Pedagogical Theories” (1982), James Berlin would exclude the cognitivists from what he called “the New Rhetoric” (a.k.a. “social epistemic” rhetoric) for being too inattentive to social context and the social construction of knowledge. The extent to which Linda Flower, at least, took this to heart may be seen in her eventual publication of *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning: A Social Cognitive Theory of Writing* (1994). And there were other conversions, notably that of Mike Rose, who could sum up the major research shift of the decade by publishing a piece subtitled *A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer’s Block* at the start of the decade (1980) and, before it was out (1988), writing an article that in its title leveled a charge of “Cognitive Reductionism” and gave high praise to the contextual focus of Bartholomae and Bizzell.

### *Academic Literacy*

In teaching practice, the shift away from cognitive approaches and toward academic literacy is nowhere better captured than in Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* (see chapter 3 for a discussion of this book’s impact). In the field’s research, however, the work to look to is that of Patricia Bizzell. She was campaigning against the cognitivists at a time when they seemed to hold the field. One of her earliest articles was “Thomas Kuhn, Scientism, and English Studies” (1979). It was a reaction to Maxine Hairston’s speech at the 1978 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the gist of which was published three years later as “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing” (1982). Both Hairston and Bizzell were drawing on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1970), Thomas Kuhn’s argument that significant scientific discoveries are conceptual crises forcing new ways of thinking (with Copernican astronomy the paradigmatic example). Hairston was arguing for a new empirical rigor in composition studies, something less like the fuzziness of literary methods and more like the problem-solving strategies and reliance on “hard” evidence found in the social sciences. Bizzell would have it

quite the other way. The apparatus of literary/critical methods and rhetorical analysis should be just the thing to help the struggling student as well as to feed research; there was no need to appeal to scientific (but really just scientistic) modes of observation and verification. She also noted (with special attention to Kuhn's lengthy postscript to his second edition) that Kuhn himself resisted claims of objectivity or empiricism, holding instead to the importance of structures and contexts of thought.

It is easy to see the seeds of later attacks on cognitivism in Bizzell's "Thomas Kuhn," but she is not just arguing against a "scientistic" redefinition of her discipline. She is arguing *for* something, and it is a sense of continuity she traces through Shaughnessy. In her first published article, "The Ethos of Academic Discourse" (1978), Bizzell credits Shaughnessy with being the one who began the project Bizzell herself would commit to for so long. In arguing for "making the ethos of academic discourse available to beginning adult writers," she was quick to say that the project did not begin with her: "By calling for a 'taxonomy' of academic discourse, Shaughnessy has suggested how we might begin to make the academic ethos available to these students" (36). In her "Thomas Kuhn" essay, Bizzell says that students and teachers don't need empirical methods and claims of proof but persuasive methods and rhetorical strategies. Again she sees Shaughnessy pointing the way:

. . . Shaughnessy suggests that the study of these rhetorical strategies should be the special province of English studies—to make accessible in our composition classes what I have called the ethos of academic discourse. . . . If we can uncover the rhetorical conventions that help us, in our own professional work, to establish this ethos and make our arguments respectable, we can cease to make the insulting claim that a badly argued essay contravenes universal standards of rationality verified by simple inspection of the natural order. (770)

This uncovering of "the rhetorical conventions" was a research program that more and more would join. The fact that these conventions inhere "in our own professional work" had to help. What also helped was that this was cast not as a new method but as an ongoing disciplin-

ary project. By the end of the 1980s, the ascendant research project for basic writing and composition generally was so far from the paradigm shift Hairston demanded and predicted as to seem its opposite: not a vanquishing of the old by the new but something quite the reverse. The invasion of methods and concepts from the social sciences had obscured an older, deeper tradition and chain of influences now re-manifested. The presence of assorted literary theorists in the introduction to *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfactuals* has been duly noted (see chapter 3), but no less important—probably more important—than the invocations of deconstruction by way of Jonathan Culler and of German hermeneutics by way of Hans-Georg Gadamer is the acknowledgment of I. A. Richards, whose *How to Read a Page* (1942) is cited as well as his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936). What conquered cognitivism (besides time and that movement's own inherent weaknesses) was actually a return to a discipline's tradition, one comprising the literary/critical as well as the rhetorical. That tradition (and conjunction) had been incarnated in Richards, carried on and amplified by his fiercely loyal and brilliant student Ann Berthoff, and, with Patricia Bizzell, taken up by a new generation. Looking back, in fact, Bizzell said that

the Kuhn essay was important because it got me the attention of Ann Berthoff. At the 1979 Conference on College Composition and Communication, one of the first meetings I attended, I sat in a large lecture hall listening to Ann give a major address and suddenly heard her praise my Kuhn essay, which had appeared only the month before. I experienced a feeling of pure pleasure I thought was only available to little girls being praised by their mothers. (*Academic Discourse* 10)

Bizzell went on to say that the two were introduced by David Bartholomae, who had been a graduate student with Bizzell at Rutgers. Reflecting on this meeting, Bizzell says that she “can't overemphasize the importance” (10) of this connection—this sense of kinship, approval, and alliance.

Bizzell would go on to map out the program of initiating students into academic discourse while people like Bartholomae would be the popularizers and demonstrators, taking the theory into application. If Bizzell did less of the latter it was not because she was a “pure” re-



searcher—BW never had one—but because she was consistently more attentive to knotty problems rather than their solutions, to the distance to travel rather than the steps to take. “College Composition: Initiation into the Academic Discourse Community” (1982), for example, is very far from taking the subject of its title as an accomplished fact; on the contrary, Bizzell’s sense is that she and her colleagues have scarcely begun to account for

the nature of academic discourse as a form of language use that unites a particular community, and we have not examined the relationship between the academic discourse community and the communities from which our students come: communities with forms of language use shaped by their own social circumstances. We have not demystified academic discourse. (108)

Seeing such challenges, Bizzell also imagined that students would rise to meet them, even and especially the BW students who were her initial and ongoing concern. She concludes “What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?” (1986) with the proposition that they would be especially willing and even able to adopt “the comparative deliberative stance of the academic world view” precisely because of their struggles and disadvantages:

The basic writers already know that their home communities’ standards are not the only ones possible—they learn this more immediately and forcefully when they come to college than do students whose home world views are closer to the academic, when they experience the distance between their home dialects and Standard English and the debilitating unfamiliarity they feel with academic ways of shaping thoughts in discourse. . . . But precisely because of the hegemonic power of the academic world view, my hypothesis is that they will also find its acquisition well worth the risks. (173)

Bizzell, like others who made initiation into academic literacy the great project of the 1980s, wasn’t interested in mere conversion. Like Berthoff, she was influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, the liberatory

educator who had done so much to bring literacy to the Brazilian peasantry. And the project of demystifying academic discourse was not only to give access to it, as Bizzell stresses in *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, the retrospective account she published in 1993 but also to make sure that it didn't seem something generalized and "natural"—the discourse of the "right" way to write and think rather than a socially constructed network of conventions:

Thus academic discourse is not allowed to masquerade as the clearest or most rational or most efficient form of language use, to the detriment of the students' home languages, and the students are encouraged to relativize their acquisition of academic discourse, to see it as one more addition to their discursive repertoires, useful for specific purposes, rather than to see it as a means of growing up or learning to think. Nevertheless, like Freire, I assume here that with the critical detachment academic discourse affords when it is acquired in a (supposedly) liberatory manner will more or less automatically come insight into social injustices and the will to correct them. (*Academic Discourse* 20)

The problem Bizzell hints at she then makes explicit. It really isn't that initiation into academic discourse is a form of indoctrination, though she admits that

the idea that teaching academic discourse could *cause* critical consciousness in students . . . was somewhat exaggerated. I was more dissatisfied with critical consciousness itself as a goal for pedagogy. I began to doubt that critical detachment in the Freirean sense could be achieved. . . .

I think this doubt began to grow due to my continued contact with postmodern and deconstructive theories of literary interpretation, which implied that one could not get "out of" the cultural text by any critical means. (*Academic Discourse* 21)

This realization is crucial. It represents the downside of what saved BW research from marching steadily to the empirical "certainties" of

“scientific” research. When Bizzell and others had argued for turning away from that path, the resources they recommended instead were those “native” to the discipline of English, notably the tools of literary theory and interpretation. But these afforded something very far from easy certainties or clear pedagogical procedures. Given the way they themselves were (re)structured over this time, with the growing attention to postmodern takes on texts and culture, they were more or less guaranteed to stoke doubts about pedagogies of initiation. The long-term effect might be traced as the arc Bartholomae traveled from saying in 1985 that his students must “know what I know and how I know what I know “ (in “Inventing the University” 9) to worrying, in his keynote for the fourth National Conference on Basic Writing in 1992, that he and basic writing as a field had effectively turned BW students into “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” (“The Tidy House” 18).

#### ATTITUDES AND IDENTITIES

In research, the move away from pedagogies of academic initiation had the effect of shifting attention increasingly from the teacher’s methods (and what might make them seem appropriate) to the student’s situation. The researcher’s gaze was redirected from what might be said about or done for the students to what the students might say for themselves. This redirection came with its own set of problems, of course. One of those was necessarily how students long defined as inarticulate could give accounts of themselves. There were basically two answers, and they became the two new important research trends of the 1990s: the case study and the literacy narrative.

The student’s literacy narrative was always more important as a pedagogical strategy than as a research tool, but it had its complement (and to some extent its impetus) in the teacher’s literacy narrative. (See chapter 1 for a discussion of the literacy narratives of the 1990s.) Especially important were the literacy narratives of those whose racial, ethnic, class, and/or language backgrounds made them the supreme (because they became highly successful) exemplars of the very students basic writing was designed to serve: teacher/scholars now situated on the other side of the literacy divide. These included not only writers of

color like Keith Gilyard (*Voices of the Self* [1991]) and Victor Villanueva (*Bootstraps* [1993])) but also writers with working-class origins like Linda Brodkey (“Writing on the Bias” [1994]) and Mike Rose (*Lives on the Boundary* [1989]). Influential as they proved, these of course had their antecedents, in works like Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* (1982)—oft-excerpted and anthologized (in Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading*, for instance)—and like Rodriguez’s explicitly acknowledged precursor, Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy* [1959]). What made the latter-day literacy narratives especially important was their explicit determination to make autobiography a means to a scholarly end, a way of plumbing more deeply into the educational lives and struggles of BW students. As Rose put it in the preface to *Lives on the Boundary*,

I’ve worked for twenty years with children and adults deemed slow or remedial or underprepared. And at one time in my own educational life, I was so labeled. But I was lucky. I managed to get redefined. The people I’ve tutored and taught and the people whose lives I’ve studied . . . hadn’t been so fortunate. They lived for many of their years in an educational underclass. In trying to present the cognitive and social reality of such a life—the brains as well as the heart of it—I have written a personal book. The stories of my work with literacy interweave with the story of my own engagement with language. *Lives on the Boundary* is both vignette and commentary, reflection and analysis. I didn’t know how else to get it right. (xi-xii)

For all their differences, these scholarly literacy narratives had this much in common: getting it right meant getting personal—but never “merely” personal. The turning inward was also a turning outward, a means of using the self as the measure of institutionalized rigidity and resistance, social pressures and social injustice. The bifocal nature of the literacy narrative is perfectly captured by the title of an early instance: “The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition” (1989). And though the title seems to promise a pedagogical program, it is actually Fan Shen’s personal account of the need to become bicultural as well as bilingual as a native Chinese learning to write in English.

*The Conflict Within, the Conflict Without*

Since what Shen and others described was effectively a clash of cultures (experienced on a personal level), an apt and compelling definition for what might be appropriate pedagogical approaches came in the form of a metaphor for just such a clash. In 1991, Mary Louise Pratt published “Arts of the Contact Zone,” an account of what teaching might mean in contexts where cultures are not only coming together but also confronting each other on unequal terms. Though two examples are drawn from the education of her own children, Pratt’s most sustained example comes from classic colonialism, specifically the confrontation of an Incan with the culture of the Spanish conquistadores. As she sees it, the problem of the classroom is to some extent the problem of colonization. The context for interaction is defined in terms of lopsided power relations; consequently,

only legitimate moves are actually named as part of the system, where legitimacy is defined from the point of view of the party in authority, regardless of what other parties might see themselves as doing. Teacher-pupil language, for example, tends to be described almost entirely from the point of view of the teacher and teaching, not from the point of view of pupils and pupiling (the word doesn’t even exist, though the thing certainly does). (38)

To some extent, the situation Pratt described exists in any classroom, a danger she immediately went on to warn against: “If a classroom is analyzed as a social world unified and homogenized with respect to the teacher, whatever students do other than what the teacher specifies is invisible or anomalous to the analysis” (38). This description had a special aptness for the BW classroom, a “social world” that was so obviously like a war of the worlds of home and academic culture, of difference from the dominant—a point made even before Pratt’s “Contact Zone” by Tom Fox in “Basic Writing as Cultural Conflict” (1990). What’s more, this conflict was very much an internalized one, a war comprising any number of wars (or at least border skirmishes) within, as so many literacy narratives had come to proclaim. Each BW student might well present, it seemed, a variant on Gloria Anzaldúa’s famous description of her “border identity” (from the Preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* [1987]):

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape. (19)

There is a strong sense of social injustice here, one that would be declaimed against and addressed in a parallel track of BW research stretching from the inspiration derived from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) to Tom Fox's arguments leavening the students' stories in *Defending Access* (1999) and beyond. But Anzaldúa is describing not only a plight but also an opportunity:

However, there have been compensations for this mestiza, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being "worked" on. (iii)

Significantly, though the sense of struggle is what she highlights in an epigraph from Anzaldúa, Min-Zhan Lu concludes her "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" (1992) with the compensatory perspective and what it should mean for and to researchers:

We need more research which critiques portrayals of Basic Writers as belonging to an abnormal—traumatized or underdeveloped—mental state and which simultaneously provides accounts of the "creative motion" and "compensation," "joy," or "exhilaration" resulting from Basic Writers' efforts to grapple with the conflict within and among diverse discourses. We need more research analyzing and contesting the assumptions about language underlying teaching methods which offer to "cure" all signs of conflict and struggle, research which explores ways to help

students recover the latent conflict and struggle in their lives which the dominant conservative ideology of the 1990s seeks to contain. (911)

### *Case Studies of Conflict and Struggle*

Research of the type Lu was calling for was forthcoming, and not all of it in the form of literacy narratives—for there were only so many who could write from the perspective of a Gilyard or an Anzaldúa. From those who couldn't, and even from some who could, there came a veritable explosion of case studies, an attempt on the part of BW researchers to have the BW students speak for themselves. In some cases, the focus was on a single student or a single student-teacher interaction. The extent to which these individual cases could be freighted with weighty, general arguments is evident from such titles as “Remediation as Social Construct: Perspectives from an Analysis of Classroom Discourse” (by Glynda Hull et al.) and “Warning: Basic Writers at Risk—The Case of Javier” (by Sally Barr Reagan). These single-case examples, both from 1991, were essentially cautionary tales, accounts of how predetermined ideas of what BW students are like can shut down possibilities for understanding on the teacher's part and learning on the student's.

As the decade advanced, more sustained ethnographic work made the case for such understanding and such learning. Sometimes, the focus was on the special trials and resources of a specific group, as in Valerie Balester's *Cultural Divide: A Study of African-American College-Level Writers* (1993) or Tom Fox's account of five African-American students in *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education* (1999). More often, the sampling was mixed, but the point was largely the same: students had unacknowledged, untapped competencies (like the oral skills of the students represented in Laura Gray-Rosendale's *Rethinking Basic Writing* [2000] or the reflective abilities of the student highlighted in Rebecca Mlynarczyk's “Personal and Academic Writing: Revisiting the Debate” [2006]). Some simply needed more time to show what they could learn and accomplish (as demonstrated in Marilyn Sternglass's *Time to Know Them* [1997]). The point of these studies, as emphasized by Eleanor Kutz, Suzy Groden, and Vivian Zamel in *The Discovery of Competence* (1993), was that students possessed competencies if only their teachers could find a way to acknowledge and foster these abilities. Part of the message was often that

the learning and teaching could be mutual, something affirmed by Mlynarczyk's "Finding Grandma's Words: A Case Study in the Art of Revising" (1996), Howard Tinberg's "Teaching in the Spaces Between: What Basic Writing Students Can Teach Us" (1998), and Linda Adler-Kassner's "Just Writing, Basically: Basic Writers on Basic Writing" (1999). And there were, inevitably, searches for patterns, perhaps most comprehensively made by Richard Haswell in *Gaining Ground in College Writing: Tales of Development and Interpretation* (1991). Prefiguring Min-Zhan Lu's arguments in "Conflict and Struggle," Haswell sought to show that tension and instability in students' educational lives were preconditions of important steps forward in their learning and thought.

It was also true that these case studies had the cumulative effect of showing how hard the struggles of BW students were, how great the odds against them. This was especially true of Deborah Mutnick's *Writing in an Alien World: Basic Writing and the Struggle for Equality in Higher Education* (1996). Mutnick's exploration of four students' lives constituted a reminder that nothing defined BW students so much as their disadvantages in an unequal society. This was an essential shift in definition since it justified special support (as a means of redressing injustice) without prescribing the form that it would take.

The mid-1990s seemed to be a time of rethinking the instructional and institutional forms for providing BW support. A concentrated example of this type of rethinking was the February 1996 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. It contained two important accounts of mainstreaming, Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson's "Repositioning Remediation" and Mary Soliday's "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Reconceiving Remediation," along with shorter pieces in a section titled "Rethinking Basic Writing" that included Judith Rodby's "What's It Worth and What's It For? Revisions to Basic Writing Revisited," a report on another mainstreaming experiment, this one at Cal State Chico (for a fuller account of mainstreaming, see chapter 3).

Following hard upon these tales of restructuring basic writing instruction—in the very next issue of *College Composition and Communication*—Bruce Horner's "Discoursing Basic Writing" (1996) invited a conceptual restructuring of BW both as a field of research and a teaching endeavor. Arguing that BW had tried to become safe and self-enclosed, especially as a CUNY-centric formation conscious of



its precarious position in the wake of open admissions, Horner cast BW—and particularly BW research—as too focused on teachers’ methods and student texts, too inattentive to the social and material conditions that marginalized those students and teachers. As the sources cited earlier in this chapter indicate, case studies and programmatic overviews went on throughout the late 1990s and well into the new century, informed by the revisionist urgings of Horner and others. But social and material conditions also reasserted themselves in ways that such research could not adequately account for or counter. Reconceptualization and even restructuring quickly came to seem either luxuries or desperate acts as forces dismissive of remediation threatened to sweep away basic writing entirely.

In the next chapter, we will look more closely at the realm of public policy in light of such developments and the ways they have reshaped the terrain of basic writing. These putatively “external” forces are forcible reminders of the importance of the social and material conditions of BW students and teachers, and their vulnerability to these forces is impossible to ignore as we contemplate what the future may hold for them and for the field.