Chapter Two

Gaps in Composition Theory and Practice

Any discussion of Composition Studies and learning disabilities should be contextualized by a brief look at the historical developments in both fields. In the previous chapter, we saw how clinical research in reading and learning disabilities has explored the prevailing belief, promoted by Samuel Orton, that reading difficulties are caused primarily by dysfunctions in children. Preoccupation with brain hemisphere differences and visual acuity left little room for the possibility of inadequate educational opportunity and inappropriate reading instruction as causes for reading failure. Today people such as Gerald Coles, James Carrier, Marie Clay, Peter Johnston, and others, view the traditional LD field as one which overemphasized neurological differences at the expense of what they see as very strong sociological and educational forces shaping children's desire and opportunity to read. Indeed, these neurological differences continue to be emphasized by proponents of the structured pedagogies of Orton-Gillingham offshoots such as DISTAR, Slingerland, Lindamood, and Alphabetic Phonics. (See Chapter Three.) Those who rightly point to the sociological and educational barriers that some children have had to contend with often feel they are placing themselves against the historical grain of reading research.

Oddly enough, Composition Studies, a younger field, provides a kind of mirror image to the reading field in that it has traditionally concentrated on social differences. It has had its share of empirical research, of course, but most influential voices—Shaughnessy, Britton, Berthoff, Freire, Rose, Shor, Elbow, Macrorie—have in various ways concentrated on sociological, rather than neurological, approaches to writing. As Stephen North observes in *The Making of*

Knowledge in Composition (1987), the large group he calls the Experimentalist community "has not exercised anything like a proportionate influence on the field" (144). Although there have been well-known studies such as Britton's *The Development of Writing Abilities*, North believes its influence was due more to its "philosophical underpinnings" than to its results (145). North sees Elbow and Berthoff as being highly influential in the composition field, as is Shaughnessy, though he believes "her attitude is more valuable than any of her findings *per se*" (53). As will be seen in this chapter, graduate school programs in composition have those names high on their required reading lists.

Although these writers may be vastly different in their philosophies, none of them considers neurological learning difference as an explanation for writing development. For Shaughnessy, poor writing is primarily a function of inexperience and lack of proper opportunity, instruction, and practice—all sociological factors. For Britton, poor writing can be overcome by using personal, expressive writing as a way toward a more authoritative, academic voice. For Elbow, writers' inhibitions and blocks can be overcome by freewriting, practice, and peer-group responses. These are, of course, somewhat reductive views of these influential figures, but whatever their various approaches, not one of them seriously considers neurologically based processing differences in people.

This is not a criticism of their work. Traditionally, Composition Studies has not dealt with learning disabilities, and these specialists are merely reflecting what have been the main concerns of the field, focusing on the "normal" student. Those first-year students whose writing exhibits qualities radical enough to be obvious in entrance exams or placement essays are often sent to remedial programs outside the jurisdiction of English departments. For many reasons, then, most people in Composition Studies are not directly exposed to the LD controversy presented in Chapter One.

The first half of this chapter will show what Composition Studies *does* say about learning disabilities, first highlighting the concerns of the mainstream Composition field—what is studied in its graduate programs, written about in its journals, and discussed at its national conferences. It will show that although LD is mentioned occasionally, the idea of neurological difference to explain writing difficulties is rarely discussed in detail. This chapter will also provide an overview of what might be called a subset of Composition Studies: basic writing. In the journals that deal with students in this group, the subject of LD has made somewhat more of an inroad, but unless instructors are teaching a basic writing class, they may not have time to read the *Journal of Basic Writing* or the *Journal of*

Developmental Education. Although Composition deals with students at all skill levels, theorists seem most puzzled by "basic writers." Recommendations for this group are usually based on what composition specialists believe is lacking: experience, familiarity with the language, or proper instruction.

If there *is* a language-processing difference, it is likely not be to be addressed. Those few students who are diagnosed LD are generally considered outside the expertise of composition specialists and within the domain of those with masters or doctorates in learning disabilities. However, real life is not always so tidy that LD students appear neatly in the classrooms and offices of LD specialists. Recently, more of these students are showing up in first-year writing classes and may or may not wish to be segregated from their peers. If even one LD student is a member of a college writing class, mainstream or basic, then Composition as a field should educate itself about the needs of that student. The second half of this chapter will examine the theoretical assumptions underpinning the practice of some of Composition's most influential voices—Shaughnessy, Bartholomae, Berthoff, and others—and show what gaps remain in those assumptions.

Graduate School Preparation, Conference Topics, and Professional Journals

One way to predict what books and articles have shaped present mainstream college writing teachers' theories and practices regarding Composition (and LD) is to see what books and articles they were exposed to while in the process of obtaining their degrees. Although many English professors undoubtedly extend their reading interests beyond the required texts of their graduate school days, it is safe to assume that what they read and discussed then continues to influence what they presently think and write about Composition Studies.

Richard L. Graves and Harry M. Soloman, in an article that appeared in *Freshman English News* in the spring of 1980, summarize the results of a survey they did of the texts used nationally in colleges and universities to prepare students to teach college writing courses. In "New Graduate Courses in Rhetoric and Composition: A National Survey," they point out the proliferation of new curricula in basic writing, and they observe what a cursory reading of basic writing materials will also reveal: "New courses in basic writing are a testimony to the influence of one person and one book. The person is Mina Shaughnessy; the book is *Errors and Expectations* "(4). Their

survey also revealed that most Composition and Rhetoric programs listed the following writers as being important: James Moffett, Janet Emig, Edward P.J. Corbett, James Britton, Ken Macrorie, Charles Cooper and Lee Odell, Aristotle, and Cicero.

In its spring/summer issues of 1981 and 1984, the *Journal of Basic Writing* published two special editions in which distinguished professors and administrators from representative institutions wrote about their programs and included required reading lists. Virtually every article listed Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* as being required reading for graduate students in Composition and Rhetoric. Since Shaughnessy's book does deal with basic writers but does not address dyslexia or learning disability, it is not surprising that composition teachers graduating from programs so heavily influenced by her work should know very little about the LD field.

Among the programs described in these two issues of the *Journal of Basic Writing* are the doctoral programs in Composition and Rhetoric at Wayne State University, Queens College, University of Louisville, University of Massachusetts, Ohio State University, Penn State, University of Iowa, and Idaho State University. They all list basically the same readings, attesting to the influence of Shaughnessy, Elbow, Britton, Emig, Macrorie, Moffett, Vygotsky, and Bartholomae (especially Bartholomae's "The Study of Error"). In addition to listing specific full-length texts, most programs also recommend that their students read individual essays published in the major composition journals such as *College English*, *College Composition and Communication (CCC)*, and occasionally the *Journal of Basic Writing*. Although the authors of these essays point out the importance of writing teachers being cognizant of Black English vernacular, Aristotle's works, Shaughnessy's and Bartholomae's versions of error analysis, and a cognitive theory of process writing, nowhere do they consider learning differences.

The theories and research emphasized in Composition and Rhetoric graduate schools are, not surprisingly, reflected in the session topics at the professional conferences and in journal articles, a brief look at which confirms how much (and how little) those in Composition Studies know about the LD controversy. The following two works demonstrate the sometimes opposite approaches taken by writing teachers faced with a problem totally foreign to them.

At the 1978 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), Alan S. Loxterman spoke about learning disabilities in his presentation, "College Composition and the Invisible Handicap." One of his students, John, received poor grades in English because his writing was filled with spelling errors. He was sent to a

writing lab for programmed instruction via filmstrips and tapes. Although he reportedly improved somewhat, he still received a poor final grade because of his errors. In another case, Norman Lavers (1981) wrote in *College English* about a student he encountered who made excessive spelling errors. Lavers read what he could about dyslexia, but when he discovered "a vast and contradictory literature," he dismissed the traditional view and set out to find "the mechanisms of what my evidence told me was the neurotic source of the particular spelling disability I was dealing with" (713). After consulting with a psychoanalyst about his student's problems, Lavers came to believe "that some students, especially males, unconsciously develop this problem to covertly express aggression against parents" (714). This teacher's solution was simply to ignore the spelling errors, an approach he claimed was effective. Neither one of these essays provides enough information about the students' work to determine whether or not they improved. The two examples, however, illustrate the frustration, bordering on desperation, that composition instructors may feel when confronted with surface errors of the magnitude LD writers can produce. Whether they send students to a programmed writing lab or subject them to Freudian analysis, it is clear that these two composition instructors knew little about what to do or where to turn for help.

An informal examination of recent Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) programs demonstrates that learning disabilities have received little attention. Most experts on LD present not at CCCC but at the Orton Dyslexia Society's conference, usually scheduled in March. Ironically, in 1990, several professionals writing extensively about LD research and teaching practices—Charles A. Perfetti, Keith E. Stanovich, Isabelle Y. Liberman, and Phyllis Bertin—all spoke in New York City on March 22–24, the same dates as the Chicago CCCC.

A sampling of the workshop titles at the 1990 CCCC reveals current interests in the field: "Using the Diversity of the 'Urban Culture' to Teach Reflective Essay Writing to Developmental and Remedial Students"; "Essential Skills and Knowledge for Teaching ESL Students"; and "Valuing Diverse Discourses in Our Classrooms and Professional Journals." Although there are many references to "diversity" and "difference," there are no allusions to learning disabled or dyslexic students as being among those who are different. There is a section for "Basic Writing," but many of the speakers listed in this category assume that all BW students come from *under*privileged social backgrounds. They do not allow for students placed in developmental writing classes because of multitudinous surface errors due to a neurological learning difference.

The 1991 CCCC reveals a similar pattern, although Paula Gills delivered a paper called "Serving the Needs of Linguistically Handicapped Students in the Writing Center: A Challenge for the '90's." And there was one session by Allen Einerson and Adelaide Bingham of the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater entitled, "Again the Issue is Literacy: How Students with Learning Disabilities Perceive Writing." This rare use of the terms "learning disabilities" indicates at least a recognition of the syndrome. The 1992 and 1993 programs had a section on "Diversity," but LD was not mentioned in any of the listed papers. Under "Basic Writing," in the 1993 program, Nancy R. Ives had a paper called "Learning Disabled Students in the Composition Classroom." Among other things such as process writing, collaboration, computer training, and sentence-combining instruction, Ives recommends a peer tutoring system in which the tutor is in a Special Education or other teacher-training or writing program.

At the 1994 CCCC in Nashville, there seemed to be a slight increase in interest in LD-related topics. The program had a new category called "Issues of Difference," in which at least four papers in the eighteen sessions listed dealt with LD in some way. Kathleen A. Patterson had a paper called "Teaching Disability Studies in the Freshman Composition Classroom." Sue Fisher Vaughn's presentation, "The Impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) on the Writing Class," focused on accommodations used by her students, among them the use of peer partners. Linda Houston's presentation on learning differences, however, spoke of one LD student who did not work with peer tutors because he felt they did not understand his frustration. He would instead voice tape his paper and revise and edit orally. In the discussion that followed Houston's presentation, it was pointed out that for many LD students whose primary mode of functioning is through dialogue, the typical classroom's emphasis on being quiet and listening hinders their progress. Anne Mullin's presentation, "Of All Places: Students with Learning Disabilities in the Writing Center," included a list of resources, a checklist of typical signs of LD, and advice for LD students from her colleague Liz Scheid on strategies for reading, writing, note-taking, etc. In the days and weeks following the Nashville conference, many Internet users requested copies of Mullin's handouts. While the proportion of papers on this subject was still minuscule, this noticeable increase in attention to LD at the 1994 CCCC may be a reflection of the 1990 ADA's becoming effective, or it may be a result of the high number of students labeled in the 1980s beginning to show up as first-year college students. The 1995 CCCC proposal form has an area cluster called "Writing and Difference,"

in which are included issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, orientation, language, and nationality—but not learning difference. At the 1995 CCCC in Washington D. C., Anne Mullin spoke about the use of color-coded felt pieces and other forms of "non-verbal representation" designed to help LD students with their writing. She credited Linda Hecker and others at Landmark College for their work with these objects, called "manipulatives." Unfortunately, the approximately four minutes allowed for Mullin's presentation in the new forum format did not give her much time to elaborate.[1]

Probably the best gauge of a profession's interest in a topic is what appears in its journals. Here, LD fares better than at conferences, but those Composition professors attempting to learn about LD from their own journals would not obtain a thorough view of the subject. Very occasionally there will be an article such as Carolyn O'Hearn's "Recognizing the Learning Disabled College Writer" in *College English* (1989), which laments "the absence of scholarship in this area" (295), but most pieces on basic writers in this professional journal, if they are included at all, deal primarily with the social background of this group.

Not long ago, when LD summaries occasionally appeared in Composition journals, the authors usually related their surprise at discovering the existence of legislation that bars discrimination against students with any kind of handicapping condition. Alan Rose, in his article, "Specific Learning Disabilities, Federal Law, and Departments of English," which appeared in the fall 1986 *ADE Bulletin*, quotes from the U.S. Code and discusses what it might mean in college English departments. He expresses a concern that accommodation for LD students not result in a lowering of academic standards (26–29).

Two people in Composition Studies who are recognized as experts in basic writing, Mike Rose and Andrea Lunsford, have had articles on that topic published in major NCTE journals, but neither one mentions brain research being done in learning disabilities or comments by students describing the instability of letters or words as they attempt to internalize them. In "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal" (1983), Mike Rose refers to an article on learning disability which appeared in a 1975 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*: Patricia Laurence's "Error's Endless Train: Why Students Don't Perceive Errors." He mentions some of the reasons Laurence gives pertaining to why students cannot find their own errors, but someone reading only Rose's summary would have no idea that Laurence's article was about learning disabilities, nor would they see her reference to Katrina De Hirsch's research involving students whose envisioning of words is unstable (Laurence 1975, 32).

In an article in *CCC*, "Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism" (1988), Rose critiques, among other theories, what he calls "hemisphericity" (277). He claims that EEG studies are inconclusive and should not be used to make sweeping generalizations concerning whether people are primarily left-brained or right-brained. While he acknowledges neurological research that establishes "different areas of the brain contribute to different aspects of human cognition" (275), he points out the methodologically problematic areas of brain research, suggesting that it could be "culturally biased" (295) (but so, of course, is one field's critique of another field's research methods). Rose's summary, in a well-known composition journal, provides information on neurological research that college writing teachers are unlikely to encounter in their usual professional reading. He wisely cautions against using ambiguous, sometimes biased research results to create reductive categories regarding types of writers. His main purpose is an admirable one—to turn attention to individual students' texts in order to analyze their thought processes more accurately. The problem, however, is that instructors reading about neurological research exclusively in Rose's summary will get the general impression that such research is not really worth investigating. The interesting possibilities of such research, however flawed it might be, are not probed. He does not explore what it might mean that different parts of the brain *do* handle different tasks, nor does he encourage instructors to do so.

Andrea Lunsford, in a *College English* article, "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," acknowledges Mina Shaughnessy's influence on her and limits her discussion of cognitive research to Vygotsky, Piaget, Odell, Chomsky, and Britton. Lunsford makes no distinction between basic writers and learning disabled students (neither did Shaughnessy), and to remediate them, she recommends (as did Shaughnessy) simply more practice (1979, 41). In *College Composition and Communication*, Lunsford has another article, "The Content of Basic Writers' Essays." While Lunsford recognizes that the writing of these students is often more interesting, albeit fraught with errors, than the sometimes sterile texts of "normal" students, she nevertheless views basic writers as somehow being more limited than other students. She ends her essay with a quote from Wittgenstein, which she says applies to basic writers: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world" (1980, 288). Lunsford's assumptions about her students' "limits"—ideas published in major journals read by composition teachers and graduate students—may be assumptions which subtly limit what writing instructors believe their students can do.

In the January, 1990 issue of *College English*, Paul Hunter has a review of recent texts, all of which critique the LD field. In "Learning Disabilities: New Doubts, New Inquiries," Hunter gives a positive response to the views offered by Gerald Coles, James G. Carrier, Kenneth A. Kavale and Steven R. Forness, whose works ridicule the "socially created facts of the LD field" (94). Although these texts have already been discussed in the Chapter One, it is important to note here that anyone reading only Hunter's review of this material and not the three books themselves, the vast amount of LD material they critique, or the reading field's response to these critiques, would certainly come away from this single article in *College English* with a very limited view of learning disabilities. In the Comment and Response section of the February 1991 issue of *College English*, Patricia J. McAlexander takes issue with Hunter's review of those three texts. She especially objects to Hunter's claim that Carrier, Coles, and Kavale and Forness "dismantle virtually every fact [he] had ever read about learning disabilities." She says, "the 'dismantling' of the LD field is not as great as the review suggests." Further, "the four authors do not as fully reject a neurological basis for learning disabilities as might be assumed from the review" (224). To challenge Hunter's claim that the sociological aspect of LD is new, McAlexander points to Vygotsky's work, which years ago took that into account. (As discussed in the previous chapter, even Samuel Orton considered social factors in his analysis of a student's predicament.) Finally, McAlexander calls for English teachers to "maintain a middle position between the two extreme reactions of defensiveness or sudden disbelief in learning disabilities" (225).

Also in a 1990 issue of *College English* was an interesting essay called "Of Brains and Rhetorics," by Jeffrey Walker. He summarizes brain research of the twentieth century, relating it to what neurologists say about language and thinking and how that relates to rhetoricians. Contrasting the neurological research of the 1970s with the most recent research, Walker reports that traditional left- and right-brain theories are usually reductive, and that the brain really utilizes both sides (308). In other words, it is too simplistic to say that one side of the brain handles creativity and the other handles logic. At the same time, however, other beliefs about left- and right-brain functioning have held up. The relegation of the speech cortex to the left side has been supported by current research, as has the traditional theory that damage to the left hemisphere results in aphasia. Walker points out the importance of brain research to those who teach writing, but cautions those reading neurological reports to do so with skepticism because any results are "frequently ambiguous"

and "still fraught with methodological and interpretive problems" (315). Walker's is one of the few essays in *College English* that deals with brain research. Therefore, his view of the issue is likely to influence many of that journal's readers, especially if they read no further. However, writing instructors should not rely exclusively on Walker's perceptions of such work and should judge for themselves continuing neurological research outside Composition. For example, in a 1992 *Scientific American* special issue devoted to the mind and brain, neuroscientists Antonio and Hanna Damasio explain that while language processes involve both sides of the brain, it is primarily the left hemisphere that handles phonetic and syntactic structures (89)—a point that may be relevant in error analyses and other aspects of Composition Studies.

Research in the Teaching of English (*RTE*) , an NCTE quarterly, regularly publishes a lengthy annotated bibliography (Durst and Marshall 1988, 434–52). Although this annotated bibliography concerns itself with research that has to do with the teaching of writing, it does not include LD studies that might impact on how writing teachers perceive differences in their students. Included in this list of works are many studies of a sociological nature and research regarding the effect of family life on academic progress. One such example is Gene Frank LoPresti's 1987 dissertation, "Four Basic Skills Students: A Naturalistic Study of Reading/Writing Models They Bring to College." LoPresti blames parents and former teachers for students' low-level linguistic skills: "The study . . . revealed how home environment can inadvertently encourage behavior antithetical to academic success . . ." (585A). He does not raise the possibility of a learning difference. In the 1988 *RTE* annotated bibliography, there are several projects concerning basic writers, but they are not differentiated from LD or dyslexic students. Those terms are not used. Although many studies from this issue of the *RTE* Annotated Bibliography on Research in the Teaching of English could be listed, suffice it to say that some research arguably vital to the study of composition and/or basic writing, the research done in the LD field, is not included.

One would expect to find more essays on learning disabilities in those journals that deal specifically with basic writers or remedial writing programs. The *Journal of Basic Writing* contains, obviously, many more essays about basic writers than do *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *Research in the Teaching of English*. Graduate students and composition teachers who limit their professional reading to *CE*, *CCC*, and *RTE*, would have missed the following articles in the *Journal of Basic Writing* (*JBW*) which might concern a number of their students.

In 1985, Frank Parker had a summary of the LD controversy in his essay, "Dyslexia: An Overview." In it, he gives typical problems evidenced by dyslexic students and explains that the deficit is a linguistic rather than a perceptual problem. He summarizes Vellutino's research, as well as that of Geschwind, Liberman, and other LD experts whose work appears in publications *not* likely to be read by teachers of writing: *Advances in Neurology*, *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Educational Research*, *Cortex*, *Science*, etc. Also in the *Journal of Basic Writing* is Amy Richards' essay, "College Composition: Recognizing the Learning Disabled Writer" (1985), which summarizes ways of using error analysis to distinguish between writers who are simply inexperienced and those who are truly learning disabled. In this same journal is an essay by Patricia J. McAlexander and Noel Gregg, "The Roles of English Teachers and LD Specialists in Identifying Learning Disabled Writers: Two Case Studies" (1989). Although many people who write for the *Journal of Basic Writing*, the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, and the *Journal of Developmental Education* speak at the Orton conference, McAlexander and Gregg presented a portion of the material from this article at the 1989 CCCC in Seattle. However, there it was included as part of a panel entitled "The Challenge of Problem Spellers."[2]

One influential writer whose work appeared in the *Journal of Basic Writing* is David Bartholomae. His important essay, "The Study of Error," was published in *CCC*, won the 1981 Richard Braddock Award, and is cited second only to Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* in the Composition and Rhetoric graduate programs as the most recommended piece on basic writing. Bartholomae's influence in Composition Studies is further demonstrated by the fact that he delivered the keynote address at the opening general session of the 1988 CCCC convention. In "Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills," Bartholomae's essay that appeared in the spring/summer 1979 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, he criticizes what he calls the "basic skills pedagogy" of most remedial writing classes and refers to error as sometimes indicating growth (88). Bartholomae states at the beginning, "This paper draws heavily on Mina Shaughnessy's work" (86), and like Shaughnessy, Bartholomae seems to realize that there might be something going on that prevents some students from "manipulating a pen" as easily as others. However, Bartholomae never introduces the idea of a linguistic processing problem, other than to mention "the few who are learning disabled," a condition he never defines or explains. There is, of course, a danger in classifying students according to the kinds of errors they make,

especially since "learning disability" and "dyslexia" remain in some sense hypothetical phenomena. But to exclude them from discussions of error analysis is possibly to exclude from help those students, even if they are only a few, who make the "bizarre" errors no one has yet satisfactorily explained. For that matter, it is to exclude—even as a possibility—the chance that there are more such students than we have traditionally believed.

The *Journal of Basic Writing*, although not as well-known as *College English* and *CCC*, is still read by many college writing teachers, especially those who teach basic writing. Since some essays on learning disabilities do appear in *JBW*, at least those who occasionally scan that publication would have some background on LD. Even further out on the periphery of Composition Studies is the *Journal of Developmental Education*, in which writing teachers would find articles such as Belinda D. Lazarus' "Serving LD Students in Postsecondary Settings" (1989). In it she quotes from Public Law 93-112, which states that "all postsecondary institutions benefiting from federal funds must provide equal access to educational programs for all persons regardless of their handicapping condition" (2). She explains the implications of this law regarding college writing courses, and provides a summary of practical instructional alternatives and evaluation accommodations for LD students in composition classes. Unlike Bartholomae, Lazarus makes a clear distinction between developmental students and those who are learning disabled (3).

An important essay for all composition teachers appears in the *Journal of Developmental Education*: Judith A. Longo's "The Learning Disabled: Challenge to Postsecondary Institutions" (1988). Another branch of the LD controversy is evident here. Longo points to what she sees as the "incurable" aspect of LD, in the hope of eliminating repetitive, traditional teaching methods she claims will not work. This "permanent" diagnosis of LD, however, is what others view as especially problematic. Peter Johnston and Richard Allington suggest that such a diagnosis may by itself discourage students, slotting them in a destructive, self-fulfilling role of failure (1991, 999). As we will see in Chapter Four, however, some students find the LD label somewhat encouraging because it helps them understand their frustrations in a reading-based educational system. Longo (1988) also cites comments from questionnaires filled out by college writing instructors revealing their ignorance of learning disability and their associating it with a lower level of intelligence. One professor said, "We cannot allow everyone into college—the integrity of the B.A. degree cannot be challenged." Wrote another, "I am trained to teach bright students, not handicapped ones" (14)—note the

binary opposition, with "handicapped" juxtaposed to "bright." Longo points out the effect such thinking can have on teachers' expectations and students' self-esteem (14).

Although Shaughnessy, Lunsford, and Bartholomae write frequently about basic writing classes, and their articles appear not only in basic writing journals but also in the more well-known NCTE publications, those articles do not include many references to neurological research or the depth of the controversy surrounding it. Composition instructors have not been sufficiently exposed, either in their graduate training or in their professional reading and conferences, to the critical issues in the LD controversy, except in what is usually a cursory, dismissive way. They have not been sufficiently encouraged to learn more about LD, to conduct their own investigations, or to collaborate with others and pool their professional resources.

It may be time for composition specialists to learn more about what admittedly may be only a handful of students per semester who have a learning disability or difference. Even the latter term is not neutral because *different* means *not normal*. Although we can never eliminate semantic implications when attempting to discuss this small group of students, perhaps we need to expand our definition of normal to include those whose intelligence is not primarily linguistically based. Even though the LD field is a bottomless ocean into which composition specialists have rarely ventured, we may need to get our feet wet, since we *do* claim to know about "basic writers," and we know that influential people have attributed their problems to defects in experience, opportunity, or inclination. We need a theory to account for those few students whose writing or reading problems cannot be fully explained by environmental factors. Granted, we may not find an ideal way to test, teach, or even name such students, but we owe it to them to track down every clue available about learning. We need to examine theories, however controversial, put forth by those in other disciplines. A more detailed analysis of the views of selected Composition professionals will show how their theoretical assumptions attempt, but fail, to account for the problems of *all* students.

Theoretical Assumptions

This section examines the theoretical assumptions of those experts who, for various reasons, seem most to represent contemporary writing theory. Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, a book about "basic writers," is, as I have suggested, the most

influential one on that subject. David Bartholomae is, by his own admission, deeply influenced by Shaughnessy, and his essay, "The Study of Error," is cited repeatedly in graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition. James Britton's and Janet Emig's pioneering studies have greatly affected contemporary research. Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow are representative of those teachers who endeavor to help students express their individual selves through writing. Elbow's work especially is well-known enough to have reached commercial bookstores. The last part of the section concerns itself with a mix of theorists who, although they may contribute different philosophical or political perspectives, are nevertheless all concerned with the social construction of knowledge and with the power of writing. The theorists included—Ann Berthoff, Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, Pat Bizzell, and Ira Shor—are all interested in writing as a way of knowing and as a way of changing the world. It is not my purpose here to create rigid categories for Composition theorists. Rather, I want to explore the pedagogical implications of what these influential writers believe about learning.

Mina P. Shaughnessy's 1977 book *Errors and Expectations* is the most comprehensive analysis of student error patterns that exists in the Composition and Rhetoric field. In her perceptive study, Shaughnessy exhibits a sensitivity to the individual differences among "basic writers" (BW), and calls upon teachers to scrutinize student texts not merely to correct errors but to discover *why* the student made a particular series of errors. Because Shaughnessy's work is so comprehensive, and because it has had so much influence on other scholars trying to understand the reasons why students make the errors they do, this section analyzing her work is quite lengthy. What are the reasons Shaughnessy gives for the errors her students make? How do the reasons she finds for the errors affect their remediation? What might learning disability professionals say about the kinds of errors Shaughnessy finds in her students' papers? One of Shaughnessy's main points is that the remediation of an error must be dictated by the reason the student is making it. If there is a gap or a missing link in her analysis of a problem, then there would be a resulting gap in the solution to that problem.

Convinced that students' problems are primarily related to their inexperience as writers, Shaughnessy reiterates this premise throughout her book. Unlike some teachers who blame students' errors on laziness or stupidity, Shaughnessy gives them credit for intelligence and motivation, but says their mistakes are caused mostly by their position as apprentice writers in a sophisticated academic system. She realizes what part the frustrating and sometimes paralyzing

effects of fear and repeated failure might play in the student's problems with writing. She has worked enough with basic writers to realize something many people still do not: that the number of sentence-level errors students make can*not* be used as a measure of their intelligence. Finally, while many composition experts minimize the need for basic writers to focus on grammar and syntax, Shaughnessy empathizes with those students who feel that they are controlled by the English code—a feeling probably unfamiliar to some writing teachers who have possessed for many years an ease and control of the written language (13). Although this section is a critique of Shaughnessy's work, a question about what she has *not* considered in her otherwise comprehensive study, it is also a recognition that hers is a most sensitive, compassionate study of basic writers and their texts. *Errors and Expectations* is divided into chapters which address the various error patterns basic writers make regarding spelling, syntax, vocabulary, and the like. I will be following a similar format in this section. My aim will be, in each case, to present first Shaughnessy's analysis of the particular error pattern, and then to discuss alternative explanations LD experts might offer.

Shaughnessy concludes, and perhaps rightly so for many students, that the writing instruction given in their former schooling must have been of poor quality, that the opportunities for writing must have been infrequent, and that what few occasions existed for writing must have been "strained" and "artificial." She reports, however, no investigations involving former teachers or administrators to back her assumptions, no sample course outlines, curricula, or assignments confirming students' lack of writing experience. There are no quotations or summaries from interviews with BW students in which they might have indicated that their past writing experiences in school were inferior to those, as Shaughnessy assumes, of more "practiced" students. Although she may indeed be correct in assuming that inferior teaching accounts for the problems of her basic writers, by viewing her students' writing problems ever and always through this unsubstantiated premise, she risks recommending solutions based on "more practice" when that may not be the entire problem. As we have seen, Shaughnessy's indictment of the teacher as a cause of her student's problems has been echoed by Gerald Coles and others who conclude that learning disabilities are socially caused. By contrast, Beth Slingerland, who promotes a structured, multisensory approach to teaching reading and writing for LD students, argues against blaming the classroom instructor (1982, 34). Noel Gregg also differentiates between the groups *basic writers* and *learning disabled*, contending that while

the former group should improve by simply practicing linguistic structures (Shaughnessy's advice), the latter group needs more explicit, multi-modal instruction as to how those structures function (1983, 334–36).

Shaughnessy notices that many basic writers have a handwriting that is a combination of print and script (1977, 15). Her solution to BW students' notoriously poor handwriting is more practice (16). Again, she is assuming that these students have not been properly trained, or else their handwriting would be better than it is. Although a more fully developed definition and history of *dyslexia* and *learning disability* is included in Chapter One, it is important to note here that as defined by the U.S. Congress Public Law 94-142, *specific learning disability* excludes those children whose disabilities are caused primarily by "environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage" (Hallahan et al. 1985, 14). Although evidence supporting a neurologically based theory is controversial, no one has yet disproven it, nor has anyone yet shown that sociological factors account for all differences.

Some students intersperse capital letters seemingly haphazardly throughout their texts. Shaughnessy attributes this partially to students' reading of "sermon literature or Bible passages that follow seventeenth-century conventions of capitalization" (38). Carolyn O'Hearn, in one of the rare essays on learning disabilities to appear in *College English*, "Recognizing the Learning Disabled College Writer," also discusses the kind of haphazard capitalization used by many students O'Hearn would categorize as learning disabled. She cites unusual capitalization habits as being clues, albeit not always reliable ones, that the student may be LD (1989, 300). Shaughnessy's attributing mistakes with capitals to a hand-to-eye slipup, and O'Hearn's attributing them to a learning disability, may not appear to make much difference. However, since prescriptions are based on diagnoses, these different explanations could indeed have important implications for teaching. Shaughnessy, thinking the student merely needs practice to become more physically coordinated, might assign more writing or conventional exercises. Instructors who believe as O'Hearn does that LD is a neurologically related phenomenon might experiment with alternate, multisensory, or mnemonic methods of teaching. (See Chapter Three.)

Besides studying errors in handwriting, Shaughnessy also looks at punctuation problems, which she attributes to "inexperience" (1977, 16), or in some cases, to "carelessness" (27). If we are reluctant to implicate the basic writers themselves, Shaughnessy allows the culprits to be previous high school or grade school teachers who failed to teach these conventions (27). However, the study by Noel

Gregg suggested that although normal, basic, and learning disabled writers all made errors involving comma omissions and verb tense, the type and frequency of errors for the learning disabled students was qualitatively and quantitatively different from the errors made by the basic or normal students (1983, 335). Gregg cites other researchers who also found that learning disabled students make "significantly higher" numbers of punctuation errors on their compositions than do normal or basic writers (337). On a different test, Gregg found that while basic writers made conventional errors such as sentence fragments and errors in verb tense and parallelism, learning disabled students made more errors in spelling and dropped letters. As is the case with all such studies, Gregg's results are subject to interpretation, but they raise enough questions about learning differences to warrant further investigation. Gregg concludes that the errors involving parallelism and verb tense might, as Shaughnessy suggests, indicate a lack of instruction, but that the number and types of errors made by the other group indicates learning disability.

Amy Richards also comments on the high frequency of errors—LD students making sometimes twice as many spelling errors as other students. Richards, like Gregg, says that LD students make different types of errors than those made by basic writers. She distinguishes between unpredictable errors and common ones such as *summer* capitalized by mistake; *boy's books* for *boys' books*, etc. and points to apostrophe mistakes that are not merely simple misplacements (as in *boy's* for *boys'*). She says that LD students are known to produce oddities such as *The bu's came* instead of *The bus came* (1985, 74). Richards believes that composition teachers should be alert for papers such as these, for they signal problems much more complicated than lack of experience.

While Shaughnessy is correct when she says, "Not all BW students have the same problems" (1977, 40), she partially contradicts this statement when she asserts, as she does throughout her book, that BW students are simply inexperienced. *If* students are merely inexperienced, then the solution is to immerse them in meaningful writing situations, where their natural ability for language will develop. Some experts, however, might challenge this idea of a universal, "natural" ability to handle linguistic abstractions, or, at least, to handle them well.

In her chapter on syntax, Shaughnessy reproduces students' sentences in which prepositions, contractions, pronouns, and irregular verb forms are frequently misused. She acknowledges something that some LD experts have suspected for a long time, that nonspecific, nonconcrete words such as *by, of, it,* and *be,* have

proven especially difficult for some writers. Unable to explain why students make these errors, Shaughnessy nevertheless concludes that students need better proofreading skills (48). According to research conducted in the LD field, those students labeled LD frequently make errors of this type. Their short-term memory for linguistic symbols seems to give them more problems than most people experience, especially if the words are abstract, such as *were, at, through, where, when,* etc. The theory in LD circles is that these students, because they have more difficulty than others with abstract language, are particularly stumped by words such as *of* and *be* because no concrete picture can be associated with them. Vellutino and Scanlon have said that dyslexics seem to have more trouble with abstract than with concrete words (1991, 247–48). As discussed earlier, conclusions about people's recall of concrete and abstract words should always be scrutinized because the clinical studies from which they are drawn often have design flaws which render them controversial. However, the number of studies that replicate, to a certain extent, findings regarding differences in abstract and concrete recall suggests a problem exclusive to dyslexics.

Continuing with her analysis, Shaughnessy says the many *that* and *which* errors made by basic writers are made because "they are not used in the writer's mother tongue" (65). While this may be true for students whose first language is not English, it cannot account for these errors in the papers of all students who might be LD. While Shaughnessy would recommend practice, LD students might better benefit from learning an associative link to find the words and phrases they want to use but cannot remember. To remediate students on the premise of dialect interference is useless if it is the abstract nature of the word that is the problem.

Interestingly, Shaughnessy discusses some problems her basic writers have which, although they are called by different names in the LD field, are the same problems LD students are reputed to have. She gives the example of the student who cannot reverse an awkward clause or successfully transpose a sentence because he cannot produce the "right" word, citing James Moffett's example of the student who must write "what is left in the cup after you finish drinking" because he does not know the word "dregs" (73–74). Shaughnessy here is more perceptive than Moffett in that she considers the possibility that although the student might have the word in his vocabulary, he hesitates to use it because he either cannot spell it or is unsure of the proper context, or is so overly concerned about proper usage that his thoughts are truncated. Therefore, says Shaughnessy, the student uses a "circuitous syntactic route," a long-recognized syndrome in the LD field called "circumlocution."

Although she has discovered that basic writers have trouble producing a word that would best fit their meaning, she does not attribute it to the specific linguistic *recall* problems believed to be experienced by LD students. (One student who came to the Writing Center for help told me that his written vocabulary was much poorer than his real vocabulary because he could not recall the words he wanted when he wanted them.)

Recognizing this difference in cause might greatly affect how the teacher views the student. It is well established in educational psychology that teacher expectations influence student performance. If teachers assume a student is using simplistic words because he or she *does not know* more sophisticated ones, they might also make inaccurate assumptions concerning the student's intelligence, which might in turn impact how they treat that student and what expectations they overtly or subtly convey. If, however, teachers are acquainted with the LD theory that poor vocabulary might be due to poor recall and not to ignorance of words, they might be more inclined to treat the student with more respect and to have appropriately higher expectations. This resulting change in teacher attitude might do wonders for a student's self-esteem, which might in turn enhance that student's attitude toward school and even writing performance. Charles T. Mangrum and Stephen S. Strichart, in their book, *College and the Learning Disabled Student,* stress the importance of professors' attitudes and point to research which, although limited, "tend[s] to suggest that many professors do not accept these [LD] students" (1988, 174). It is difficult to measure attitudes or student sensitivity to them. However, it seems obvious that if writing instructors with no background in learning disabilities assume that the myriad of incomprehensible errors are caused by their students' slow-wittedness, or even by their "inexperience," they will behave in a different way toward them. The formal and informal terms used for such remedial classes, from "Bonehead English" to the only slightly less pejorative "Basic Writing," reveal what society thinks of people who cannot spell or punctuate correctly. Although the phrase "learning disabled" is also problematic, suggesting perhaps another set of unhelpful assumptions, it at least raises the hope that teachers will view writing problems for this group as a *specific* language difficulty, the way they themselves might have math or spatial blocks.

Shaughnessy presents a good summary of the debate concerning when and if grammar should be taught in writing classes. She rightly points out that English teachers can become overly concerned with surface errors and that often an appearance of many mistakes is simply the result of a student repeatedly making two or

three types of errors. However, her contention that these errors will "be rubbed off by time" (1977, 121) simply may not be true. For example, the seven-year-old child who says, "You my way," for "You're in my way," and "No can't how do dat" for "I don't know how to do that" when no one else in his family speaks that way, defies the hypothesis that all people equally absorb the forms and conventions they hear used around them. Although the errors made by this child and by many LD students may indeed be "rubbed off by time," it may take a lot more time for some students, time they may become too frustrated and discouraged to devote to a task they see "regular" students doing so easily. If LD students require more explicit or multisensory instruction, and are denied it in the belief that more general practice will suffice, then the few years they have left in college might be wasted practicing writing strategies not suited to their ways of learning.

Preceding a lengthy section on grammar exercises, Shaughnessy says that students need to be "introduced to the grammatical concepts of sentence, inflection, tense, and agreement," because it will provide them with "a conceptual framework within which to view [their] own difficulties in those areas" (137). Again, she is assuming, without substantiation, that basic writers make the errors they do because they are inexperienced, because they have had poor teachers in the past, and because they have never properly been "introduced" to grammatical concepts and terminology. If she is correct, then her fifteen pages of exercises may do some good. If, however, basic writers *have* been previously exposed to these kinds of grammar worksheets, the same way their peers in the "regular" classes have, and their reason for making mistakes is related to something else, then this "introduction" may be fruitless, even oppressive.

Regarding spelling errors, Shaughnessy recognizes that many students deliberately reduce their vocabulary, in some cases because they cannot spell the sophisticated word they want. She also points out that bad spelling is not associated with intelligence. Regarding the misspellings of words that contain the schwa sound, Shaughnessy points out the difficulty that many BW students have with such words. Because that sound is represented in so many ways, Shaughnessy reasons that the basic writer has trouble with it because "he has not *seen* the words often enough as a reader nor felt the spelling of them as a writer to be able to make the right choices" (her emphasis, 167). Again, what she does not consider is that these students have seen these words as often as their peers, but it is perhaps more difficult for them than it is for others to internalize the standard spelling.

Peter Johnston has shown that adults with reading difficulties have essentially devoted their lives to avoiding situations that involve reading, and the resulting lack of practice makes a bad situation worse (1985, 159). While this lack of practice no doubt contributes to spelling and other problems, it does not answer the "chicken or the egg" question concerning the original cause of the difficulty. In addition, adult poor readers who have avoided reading have probably seen the words they are tripping over more times in print than has the eight-year-old who reads them effortlessly.

In her chapter on vocabulary, Shaughnessy discusses the "uncanny connections," the malapropisms that BW students often make. As an example, she gives the sentence: "The program uses a new *floormat* (format)." To remediate this kind of error, she assumes the students do not know what the two words mean. "The differences between *floormat* and *format* . . . are memorable once they have been pointed out" (1977, 191). However, students have confided to me that inadvertent slips such as these are embarrassing to them, that they realize immediately they have made a mistake, and that the word seemed to slip out as if of its own accord. To avoid such uncontrollable humiliation, these students limit their vocabulary to a very basic one. Having to listen to a teacher explain the difference between *floormat* and *format* must be extremely exasperating to students with this problem. One danger of assuming, as Shaughnessy does, that the student's vocabulary is poor, is that the teacher may encourage traditional vocabulary-building exercises concerning words the student already knows but confuses or blends with other words in ways that embarrass her. So she avoids them. Also, as mentioned above, teacher assumptions and expectations are subtle but powerful factors in determining how and what students learn. It is probably better that a teacher overestimate a student's vocabulary than underestimate it.

Another assumption Shaughnessy makes—that students are not familiar with "the reader's need for specificity" (202)—might dictate a lesson on the importance of specific examples in backing up a statement. While this might not do any students any direct harm, there is the chance of boring or frustrating students who have heard this admonition many times before. They may already know that they are supposed to use specific nouns or adjectives, but they cannot recall the words they want fast enough or accurately enough to use them in their writing. Indeed, students previously may have been exposed to "writer's strategies" for being specific, but the strategies that work for their English teachers may not work for them.

It is important, for the self-evident value of teacher expectation and student self-esteem, that students perceive the instructor's

respect for their intelligence and past academic experience. Students may not need word exercises or lessons in specificity, but instead ways of coping with a recall problem, such as leaving a blank where the desired word should go and then filling it in later with the help of a thesaurus or a peer. Shaughnessy claims that a writer may know the right words but "does not seek them out" (204). If the teacher conceives of the student as lazy or uncaring, that will be obvious to the student. It may be that the student has tried all too much to seek out the word in her memory file, but has severe problems doing so. What Shaughnessy repeatedly fails to address is the possibility that the student does have an adequate vocabulary, has struggled probably more than anyone realizes to locate that exact word in her mind, but for reasons we can only yet guess, is unable to do so.

Throughout her extended analysis of errors, Shaughnessy exhibits insight and intelligence, doing her compassionate best to locate the student's meaning behind a web of misused words and tangled syntax. Although it is an unarguable fact that we all learn language through use, some people may have a knack for learning it much faster or in different ways than others. Shaughnessy's primary remedy, more practice with writing, is based on an assumption that students are inexperienced. And many of them may be. However, if the problem for even a few of those students is not inexperience but too much experience—that is, too much prior experience with failure at writing—then her solution may cause only more frustration for everyone.

Shaughnessy, like others cited in this book, admits: "We do not, in short, understand how people learn to think or be logical" (237). It follows then that we must remain open to ways of thinking that might differ from those with which we ourselves are familiar. From her extensive study, Shaughnessy learned that her basic writers "are, in some respects, a unique group from whom we have already learned much and from whom we can learn much more in the years ahead" (291). In order to learn from them, however, we need not to have made up our minds what is wrong with them before we really listen to them. We cannot, without some kind of evidence, conclude that they have had poor academic background and little experience with writing. If they have had experience, and they continue to have difficulties more severe than those of their peers, then perhaps we need to add neurological difference to Shaughnessy's list of possible reasons. While this will not solve their problems, it will allow us to view these students in a more positive light and force us to work with them in finding new and more creative ways to help them recall and use what they might already know.

Although Mina Shaughnessy's is perhaps the most well-known and influential study of error in the Composition field, it is not the only one. Other selected experts in our profession have also puzzled over beginning college writers and their development. While some, such as Shaughnessy and Bartholomae, do detailed error analyses, others argue in more philosophical or theoretical terms their reasons for underdeveloped writing.

Shaughnessy's influence on David Bartholomae is evident in the fact that he recommends reading student texts almost as a detective might, searching for clues regarding the causes of their errors. In "The Study of Error," Bartholomae says that basic writers do not have "arrested cognitive development, or unruly or unpredictable language use" (1980, 312). While it is refreshing that Bartholomae credits basic writers with intelligence, it is somewhat odd that he rules out "unruly or unpredictable language use" as a problem when so many of his student John's errors were *not* from dialect interference, or from "some intermediate system" of an idiosyncratic grammar code. Bartholomae can only call these errors "accidental." To call "accidental" what happens to most of us only occasionally but to a few of us all the time is to dismiss, as Shaughnessy does, the very real possibility that some people do have learning differences.

Bartholomae, like Shaughnessy and others, admits that we know little about "the natural sequence of learning" (313) by which people become better writers. What he never problematizes is the word "natural." Because Bartholomae does not understand why writers make what he calls "idiosyncratic" errors, he assumes it involves an "intermediate system" of misunderstood or misapplied rules. However, the reason a writer makes these unpredictable errors, instead of being due to Bartholomae's "intermediate system," could instead be due to an unstable internal image of the words in the writer's mind. Unless we arbitrarily discount what some students say about letters looking "weird" or "not standing still," we should also add to Bartholomae's list of problems the possibility of a learning difference. If writers make mistakes because of their own rules, then it makes sense to teach the conventional ones. If, however, they already know the rules but make mistakes because their internalized pictures of the words keep shifting, then reteaching the rules will not help. In his explanation of "interference," Bartholomae seems to realize that writing requires an accurate, automatic internalization of how a letter "looks" in the mind, but he does not consider how this internalization might be different for some students than for others.

Bartholomae notes that the errors John made with verbs "almost all involve *s* or *ed* endings, which could indicate dialect interference

or a failure to learn the rules for indicating tense and number" (318). While it is dangerous to make assumptions about one student based on the errors of another, I think it appropriate here to discuss Ryan, a student I had in the Writing Center who, like John, also made numerous errors involving verbs and nouns with *s* endings. He had brought in a typed draft for revising, and when he read his piece aloud, he found most of the *s* errors, which he corrected in pen. Curiously, he sometimes wrote the added *s* backward, and then seemed embarrassed for doing so, making the unsolicited comment that he had "always done this." His speech gave no evidence that his writing errors were due to dialect interference, and he obviously knew the rules concerning plurals and agreement because he was able to correct his own work when he read it, or when I read it the way it was written. Thus, Bartholomae's hypothesis concerning an intermediate system of misunderstood rules could not be applied here, since Ryan had no problem editing orally. While it is still possible these errors could be called "accidental," it seems more likely that there may be a processing or retrieval difficulty experienced by Ryan that we can only partly understand.

Bartholomae spends several pages attempting to explain why John could not see the difference between *frew* and *few*, even when it was written on the board. He finally concludes that this error, as well as John's substitution of *when* for *went* is no more than "an accidental error, a slip of the pen" (321). Bartholomae says that while some teachers might have interpreted John's use of *chosing* for *choosing* as evidence of grammar rule difficulties, his error analysis has shown that this mistake is "only" an accidental error (322). While Bartholomae's discovery may prevent a teacher from conducting another fruitless lesson in grammar, his dismissal of "accidental" errors may be a reflection of his own ease in correcting them. He says a student's omission of a needed word in a phrase ("I would to write about" rather than "I would *like* to write about") can be easily dealt with: "It is an accidental error and can be addressed by teaching editing" (323). However, teaching editing to students with stable mental images of words may be quite different from teaching editing to students (such as my student Ryan), who say that their mental picture of a word keeps shifting. I agree with Bartholomae's statement regarding these accidental errors, that "This is an important area for further study." In further studies, however, it is vital that we remain open to seeing all possible reasons for error and listen to what our students say about what goes on in their minds when they write a word.

Patricia Bizzell, in her article, "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College" uses and supplements William Perry's

view of development. Bizzell says that learning new discourse conventions gives the student access to "a whole new world view," which is different from implying, as she claims other theories do, that the basic writer's thinking is inferior. As a solution to basic writers' problems, Bizzell recommends "a series of interviews to tell us how they [the basic writers] mediate between their home cultures and the academic culture as they move on through their college educations" (1986, 300). A problem with Bizzell's proposed research is that the assumption has already been made on the researcher's part that it is the "clash" between the student's home and school cultures that is causing his or her problems. She does not mention the possibility of a learning disability. By devoting so much of her essay to a discussion of "discourse communities" and "new world views," she makes it obvious that she is limiting her analysis of basic writers to their social background.

James Britton, like other modern Composition theorists, never questions the idea of writing development as a "natural" activity that occurs for all students in the same way. To illustrate the ease with which a child develops as a writer, Britton, in *Prospect and Retrospect*, uses as a case study a child named Clare. Although an *E* for her at first could face "right or left or up or down," she merely needed to be reminded how to do it correctly. When she was three and a half years old, and instructed on how to write the letter *R*, she said, "*R*—that's easy—just a girl's head and two up-and-downs!" (1982, 60). Britton uses this example, and Clare's estimation of picturing this letter as "easy," as evidence for his assumption concerning the "natural" development of language. What he does not consider is that what may come easily to Clare at age three may not come so easily to other children two to three times her age. Compare Clare's remark, "That's easy!" to a comment by another student, this one a nine-year-old dyslexic: "For other kids, learning to read is like a feather. For me, it's like a ton" (Rome and Osman 1977, 44). For Clare, who "continued to read and write stories for many years" (Britton 1982, 61), writing, especially her own successful writing, was its own reward. Once she had internalized the shape of that letter, it obviously always looked the same to her. We cannot help but wonder, however, if she sometimes mentally visualized an *R* as a *B* or a *p* as a *q* or *b*, and if her experience with letters and words were as frustrating for her as some children claim it is for them, would she have as happily continued writing her stories.

Britton's premise in his chapter "Spectator Role and the Beginning of Writing," is that story writing should be encouraged in children because when they write stories in which the world they create "is a world they control," the satisfaction they experience

encourages them to write more (63). He also believes that beginners should start with stories rather than with transactional (informative) writing because "a story makes fewer demands" (63). In other words, Britton is associating the pleasure and ease with which a child controls language with the development of the child's writing abilities. He uses this premise to support his promotion of expressive writing as the proper way to begin writing instruction.

Although he sees the importance of a child's facility with language as vital to that child's use and resulting mastery of that language, he fails to consider that not all children will have that ease and control with written language, whether or not they are encouraged to write stories. There *is* great pleasure in watching one's words transform a page into an imagined world one can control. There must, however, be an equal and opposite pain if one cannot control what forms appear on the page. Britton's pedagogy is dictated by his belief that people learn to write implicitly. How teaching might be different for children who do not as easily process the formation of letters, words, etc., is something that he does not consider because he assumes all children learn the same way—like Clare. For Britton, "[writing] development comes from the gradual internalization of the written forms . . ." (110). If, however, some children have a neurological difference in the ways the letters become "internalized," or if the storage and retrieval system governing these internalized patterns goes slightly awry, Britton's remedy of "more reading" and "more writing" may only bring more frustration to some LD students whose writing teachers fully accept Britton's model of learning, or view it in strict binary opposition to other models. Of course, Britton's view of learning is valid. It may need to be supplemented, however, by other views in order to include the perspectives of all individuals.

Another influential work in the Composition field is Janet Emig's 1971 study, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders.* Emig's study is often read in graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition and is cited as a landmark study in the field. (See North [1987], 197–203, for a thorough discussion of Emig's study.) Like Shaughnessy, who also blamed the "poor instruction" of the past for many of her students' problems, Emig blames teachers she has never observed for her present students' distaste for writing. In the makeup of her sample of student volunteers—interested students who were "good" at writing—Emig has probably eliminated those students who might have had a learning difference. In *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders,* Emig makes conclusions about "bad teaching" similar to those of the critics of the learning

disability field, who dismiss claims of neurological difference on the basis that it is the (former) teacher's deficiency that accounts for the student's present difficulties with reading and writing. Interestingly, in a 1978 essay, "Hand, Eye, Brain," Emig advised English professors to educate themselves regarding the physiology of writing, ending the essay with a call to investigate "what is truly organic about writing development" (120). Her advice to administrators of English doctoral programs to develop "closer ties with departments of biological sciences" has gone unheeded.

Ken Macrorie, in his 1984 book, *Searching Writing*, speaks of the human mind functioning much like a "connector" that somehow knows just what to do: ". . . ordinarily, it will work for you like a fan sucking in leaves and then blowing them in the direction you point it" (2). By using the generic "you," Macrorie reveals that he is talking about the mind functioning the same for everyone. If the mind fails to connect, it is only when "pressures become heavy." He does not allow for those who discover repeatedly that although they intend to write one thing, they end up writing something else.

A generic audience is similarly the target of Peter Elbow's recommendations. Attempting to free his students from the inhibiting restraints of early proofreading and too much attention to grammar, he invites them to "free write" about themselves or anything else that interests them, without stopping, without attention to sentence structure, form, syntax, or grammar. Elbow's emphasis is always on fluency first, overcoming writing anxiety—what he feels is the ultimate culprit responsible for bad writing. Correct grammar is, however, necessary in a final product, but Elbow does not give much direct advice in this regard, except to get an editor or to try to convince a couple of friends to help proofread. The main purpose of Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) is to convince people to write without paying much attention to form, because it is precisely that excessive attention to form which makes them write poorly in the first place. For most students in Elbow's class, freewriting would lead to fluency and confidence, thus eliminating many problems with incoherence and grammar. For learning disabled students also, freewriting would undoubtedly make writing a more pleasant undertaking than one in which a teacher waited with red pen poised. Elbow expects, however, that surface errors will ultimately disappear once the student develops fluency and confidence. But for those students for whom the written language presented more difficulties than could be overcome through confidence, Elbow's pedagogy would offer little help except the advice to get a couple of friends to help proofread.

For Ann Berthoff, who holds that there is no reality beyond language, writing becomes primarily a means of "making meaning." Writing, according to Berthoff, is "a non-linear, dialectical process . . ." (1981, 3), during which students should be encouraged to "interpret their interpretations." Her recommendations can, no doubt, challenge writers at all levels to rethink and reconsider, to open their minds to become critical of their own ideas as well as those of others. If, however, there are students for whom writing is not their best way of making meaning, Berthoff's maxims offer little help, or recognition of a difference.

In *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*, C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon also recommend pedagogical approaches that support the idea of writing as something done naturally by people (1984, 15). Their philosophy of writing is a consistent, humane, and liberatory one. It advocates an approach to teaching writing by providing a challenging yet nurturing environment with alert, facilitative readers. They correctly point out that people learn best by writing about important subjects, aimed at a real audience, an idea that has sometimes become lost in pedagogies that stress grammar exercises and strict adherence to artificially imposed models and forms. By de-emphasizing correctness and encouraging students' further involvement with their own ideas, Knoblauch and Brannon's pedagogy would no doubt reassure LD students that they have valuable things to say, giving them real motivation to keep trying. It would also challenge them to rethink their ideas, providing for LD students (perhaps for the first time) a reaction to *what* they are saying rather than *how* the initial sentences appear. It would, however, provide no special help for or recognition of anyone having extreme difficulties recalling or writing the needed words.

Ira Shor opposes typical practices of public school life. In *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (1980), he writes about his classroom practices designed to promote Paulo Freire's philosophy that students need to be made critically aware of what Freire and Shor see as capitalism's oppressive powers. According to Shor, this will both change the world for the better and improve students' writing. He believes that if students are allowed to choose topics of interest to themselves, their writing will naturally improve, and that practice and political commitment will automatically erase most problems with code or form. In Shor's "liberatory classroom," students are nevertheless expected to abide by conventions of written English. The terms used to describe these forms and conventions are slightly different, and the emphasis is placed on the student's

experience, but the fairly rigid expectations are still there: all students will learn, and all students will make progress in proportion to their interest in doing so. Shor makes no provision for students who might *want* to learn but whose neurological makeup makes it very difficult for them to do so. A student having severe problems with the code of written English might initially have a rewarding experience in Shor's classes because Shor gives the impression that content matters more than form. That student, however, if he or she is experiencing unstable word images, may ultimately be faced with very painful "voicing" sessions—Shor's editing cure designed for the problems of the majority only.

Both Shor and Elbow expect (but do not emphasize) that students' writing will ultimately conform to conventions of academic writing. Whether the student resorts to Shor's "voicing" or Elbow's "couple of friends," his or her piece must be grammatically correct. If this presents an impassable barrier, it will remain one. Whether these teaching practices are based on the theory that bad writing is caused by noncritical subject matter (Shor) or by a crippling fear of the blank page or surface correctness (Elbow), they are both based on an assumption of language use as an easy, natural occurrence that will develop through interest and use. Elbow admits that his practice is based on what worked for him as a writer. Composition instructors basing their pedagogy on the models provided by Shor or Elbow will undoubtedly make similar assumptions about writing development and will not consider or provide accommodations for a written-language block so many people say is a real phenomenon.

These influential theorists base their practices on certain beliefs concerning language, writing, and human development. Professionals in the Learning Disability field would agree with Composition theorists that context and social situation are important in learning. They would also agree that practice must be informed by an analysis of how people learn—the difference being in assumptions regarding what is "natural." The theory and practice of Composition Studies, as articulated by its most influential voices, is extensive. It makes an attempt to be critically self-aware and inclusive of many diversities. However, its glaring blind spot concerning learning disabilities has reached a critical point and needs to be addressed immediately in graduate schools, professional journals, and national conferences. To better understand all writers, Composition Studies needs healthy inquisitiveness, open-mindedness, and an ability to tolerate "both/and" theories of learning.

Notes

1. In her handout at this forum, Anne Mullin referenced Karen Klein's and Linda Hecker's article, "The Write Moves: Cultivating Kinethestic and Spacial Intelligences in the Writing Process," in *Presence of Mind: Writing and the Domain Beyond the Cognitive*, edited by Alice Brand and Richard Graves, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1994.

2. Patricia McAlexander, Noel Gregg, and Ann Dobie now have a book entitled *Beyond the 'SP' Label: Improving the Spelling of Learning Disabled and Basic Writers* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992).