

Karen L. Greenberg

THE POLITICS OF BASIC WRITING

ABSTRACT: *The author summarizes her remarks at one of the "Critical Issues" panels at the Fourth Annual CBW Conference. Her topic was "Writing Assessment and its Political Implications for Basic Writing Students and Teachers." The author discusses some of the political challenges that basic writing programs face today and describes strategies for meeting these challenges. Drawing on her experiences directing basic writing programs in a public urban university, she suggests ways to improve basic writing instruction and assessment so as to empower basic writing students.*

When people ask me what I do, I always answer, "I'm a basic writing teacher." I did my doctoral research on basic writers, and I teach at least one basic writing course every semester. In addition, I direct my college's Developmental English Program (which includes basic writing, reading, and ESL courses). I am familiar with the literature on basic writing students and pedagogies, and I conduct my basic writing courses as student centered, collaborative writing workshops. I believe in what I do.

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Therefore, I strongly disagree with many of the assertions made by David Bartholomae in his keynote speech at the Fourth Annual Conference on Basic Writing in Maryland. David characterized most basic writing courses as “obstacles rather than opportunities.” He stated that most basic writing programs “marginalize students” and “preserve them as different.” He also accused basic writing teachers of “merely satisfying [their] liberal reflexes” by trying to make students “more complete versions of themselves” in courses that “don’t work.” David was equally unimpressed with the assessment procedures used to place students into basic writing courses. He asked the conference participants, “Do you sort students into useful or thoughtful groups?”

I take these challenges to heart, since in addition to being a basic writing teacher and coordinator, I also conduct research on writing assessment. I study writing assessment programs, instruments, and procedures because I know that valid, reliable assessment is the best means of demonstrating and guaranteeing that students are improving their writing abilities. From my research, I know that many basic writing programs *are* sorting students into “useful and thoughtful” courses that have helped thousands of inexperienced writers persevere and succeed in college.

My two vocations—basic writing and writing assessment—have taken me across the country, to seminars, conferences, and workshops on teaching and testing students’ writing. At every one of these meetings, I have listened patiently to college writing teachers complain about testing and about having to evaluate their students, their courses, and their programs. I have heard all of the arguments: “Assessment is a destructive intrusion into the learning process.” “Our current assessment tools are inadequate.” “We teach process, so we should not test product.” “We cannot quantify the skills and abilities that we value most in our writing courses.”

The terrible irony of these beliefs is that the resistance of basic writing teachers to designing and implementing effective assessment procedures and instruments creates a vacuum for university administrators or state legislatures to fill. If basic writing teachers are unwilling to design measures that evaluate the effectiveness of their programs and courses (or lack thereof), administrators, legislators, and accrediting agencies are ready and willing to step in and take over. If this occurs, we may soon see our programs decimated or eliminated.

State-mandated assessments of college basic skills programs are sweeping the country. Taxpayers and their representatives

want evidence that the millions of dollars they give to finance public colleges is providing for “quality” education. Many states are attempting to link the public funding of higher education with the results of state-developed tests. For example, the New Jersey Department of Higher Education has developed the College Outcomes Evaluation Program—uniform standardized tests that purport to measure student learning and their reading and writing skills. Even more far-reaching (and ominous) is the Colorado Higher Education Assessment Program, mandated by the Colorado state legislature and developed by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. Results on this literacy assessment program are linked to the financial appropriations of all public colleges in Colorado.

If reactionary political academics and budget-minded administrators and legislators join forces with composition “stars” like David Bartholomae to attack basic writing programs, then these programs are doomed. Students will have to “sink or swim.” Given the priorities of most universities, underprepared writers will not benefit from any of the tens of thousands of dollars that schools would save by ending placement testing and basic skills instruction. Most of the money will probably be spent on small senior seminars, on the library, on research projects, and on visiting professors. Indeed, if enough people subscribe to David Bartholomae’s views on basic writing, there won’t be any basic writing instruction in college much longer.

The only way we can make sure that underprepared college students continue to get basic skills instruction is by showing that our basic writing courses are—to use David’s words—“useful and thoughtful.” In order to do this, we must lessen the divergence between theory and reality in basic writing classrooms at many colleges and universities.

In *theory*, our profession’s perspectives on basic writing have changed dramatically since the publication of *Errors and Expectations*, a mere fifteen years ago. In theory, we now no longer believe in or use a “deficit” or “remedial” model to define basic writing students, skills, and courses. Theoretically, no longer do we create learning objectives for our basic writing courses based on what students “lack,” nor do we reduce these objectives to rule-governed steps that each student must master in the same order. And, of course, we are no longer obsessed by correctness, since we now understand the cognitive and linguistic differences between composing and editing, between generating language and identifying errors. Finally, we think we know what our basic writing students are learning and how well they are learning it because we are

continuously examining and responding to changes in their essays and in their composing and revising processes. Right?

Wrong. Much of the evidence that I have seen indicates that in too many schools none of these assertions is true. Despite critical insights into basic writing gained from research in composition, in cognitive psychology, and in applied linguistics, too many basic writing courses are still based on a remedial model, and too many basic writers are still subjected to skills/drills content and to pedagogies that conceptualize writing as a set of subskills that must be mastered in a series of steps or stages. Finally, many programs continue to define student writers as “basic” based on their ability to identify and correct errors in someone else’s sentences or texts.

Basic writing programs and instructors who teach students “The Least You Should Know About English” (the title of a best-selling basic writing textbook) probably deserve to be eliminated, since they ignore the critical issues in basic writing today, including questions such as the following:

1. What is the role of assessment in the labeling of students as “basic writers”?
2. What kinds of assessments might be appropriate for making decisions about students’ writing course placements?
3. What relationships exist between writing assessment and writing instruction?
4. What curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative techniques should be used in basic writing classes to help students improve their writing processes and their essays?
5. What is the role of assessment in evaluating students’ writing competencies, proficiencies, or exit from courses?
6. What criteria, procedures, and evidence should we use to determine whether our basic writing programs and courses are effective?

Let me answer some of these questions by describing basic writing instruction and assessment at The City University of New York (CUNY). All CUNY basic skills courses (in writing, reading, and English as a Second Language) are aimed at improving students’ academic literacy and preparing them to succeed in the intellectual community that college represents. Thus, the most important goal of all of our basic writing courses is to help students develop more sophisticated ways of thinking and writing, based on induction, deduction, generalization, and evidence. Two other objectives that CUNY’s basic writing courses share are increasing students’ sensitivity to the power of language and strength-

ening their positive attitudes toward reading, writing, and revising.

The growth and diversification of basic skills instruction at CUNY have led to a variety of basic writing programs across the seventeen undergraduate colleges. Although these programs differ, they all provide supportive and challenging classroom experiences and instruction. Basic writing instruction at CUNY integrates the learning of language and literacy with the development of higher level cognitive abilities. CUNY basic writing teachers provide students with clearly articulated course goals, performance objectives, and criteria for success. Our courses use small-group instructional techniques to facilitate the improvement of students' skills *and* their self-confidence and self-esteem. We try to involve students actively in their learning by requiring them to collaborate on composing, revising, and editing paragraphs, essays, and research reports.

CUNY's writing programs rely on the early identification of students' strengths and weaknesses. All seventeen colleges administer an essay test (The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test) to evaluate the writing skills of entering students. This test asks students to examine a position and to write an expository essay "agreeing or disagreeing" with the position stated in the essay question. The essays are holistically scored by at least two readers (using a six-point holistic scoring guide).

Our placement test was developed by writing teachers who surveyed the research and practice in the field of composition. They decided that the writing skill most essential for success in college-level courses was the ability to write expository/argumentative essays in Standard Written Academic English. Research supports this decision (Purves et al., Ruth and Murphy, White). American college students need to know how to take and defend a position in writing. This is true for native speakers and for ESL speakers, as noted in a recent research report on the academic writing tasks required of undergraduate and graduate foreign students enrolled in American colleges (Bridgeman and Carlson). The report stated that in order to function successfully in American universities, students need to know how to write expository and argumentative essays and reports that reflect the "logical proof, culturally defined levels of formality, and cultural referents of American academic English" (8). The report also noted that the skill considered most important for undergraduates is "skill in arguing for a particular position" (9). This skill is what the CUNY writing placement test and the basic writing exit tests ask students to demonstrate.

At my college—Hunter—each CUNY placement test essay *and* basic writing exit test essay is read by two or three full-time writing teachers. Another administrator and I spot-read hundreds of these essays to confirm the teachers' decisions. For placement purposes, on the first day of class, students are asked to write an in-class "narrative/descriptive" essay. Teachers evaluate their students' in-class essays, and, if they think a student's placement is incorrect, they read his or her CUNY placement essay. Based on the student's performance on these two essays, the teacher decides whether the student should be moved to a different writing course.

Students do well in our basic writing courses. Passing is determined by coursework and by students' scores on a programwide essay test (i.e., no student can pass simply because of his or her diligence or improvement). During the past three years, average pass rates of basic writing students at Hunter have ranged between 80% and 93%.

In addition to pass rates, another important indicator that our courses are helping students is their rate of retention and graduation. According to data collected by Hunter's Office of Administrative Services, more than 36% of the students who graduated from Hunter within the last five years were students who completed basic writing courses. Moreover, approximately 55% of the students who graduated from Hunter within eight years are basic writing "graduates." (Most CUNY students "stop-out" for a semester or more; the average time it takes them to graduate is six or seven years.) The data indicate that students who pass our basic writing courses are as likely to persist and to graduate as are students who needed no basic writing instruction. Thus, I feel justified in asserting—to David Bartholomae and to anyone else who challenges the validity of our courses—that our basic writing courses are preparing students to succeed. We teach them the linguistic, cognitive, and social components of academic literacy necessary to make the transition to college-level coursework. We *are* sorting our writers into "useful and thoughtful groups."

The most important lesson that we have learned from our experiences is that basic writing teachers and administrators must take charge of writing instruction and assessment at their schools. The research on assessment clearly indicates that faculty "ownership" is a necessary prerequisite for instruction and assessment that leads to improved learning and teaching. Basic writing instructors can begin by setting forth—in *writing*—the knowledge, abilities, and values that they expect students to acquire and the

standards that students must meet. Doing this will enable students to take charge of their own learning processes. Specifically, students can use their teachers' or their college's criteria to evaluate their own work and to revise it until they are satisfied with it.

Moreover, basic writing teachers and administrators must learn the vocabulary and methodology of writing assessment *and* of program assessment. There are a variety of effective measures and procedures available for assessment. These include holistically scored essay tests, holistically scored or analytically scored portfolios, interactive computer exercises, structured and spontaneous writing performance assessments, simulation activities, student logs, student and teacher questionnaires, interviews (with students, teachers, and administrators), and collaborative learning exercises that result in group projects. (See Belanoff, Greenberg et al., Ruth and Murphy, and White for information about these techniques.) These kinds of evaluations can provide more accurate assessments of students' writing abilities than we are currently realizing.

To conclude, I know that David Bartholomae is wrong; most basic writing courses are not obstacles to students' progress. They *are* opportunities for students to learn collaboratively—from peers as well as from their instructor—to improve their academic reading and writing processes. Yet I also know just how vulnerable our courses are. Across the country, in current academic, legislative, and public forums, people are debating the extent to which postsecondary basic writing instruction should be offered or required. Indeed, many administrators and professors at my university have argued that students with serious basic skills deficiencies should not be admitted to any four-year CUNY college. These people want to do away with all skills testing, which, obviously, would lead to a diminished need for basic writing courses.

In essence, this strategy exemplifies the “right-to-fail” theory of open admissions education—an approach that, in my opinion, ignores students' literacy problems and allows them to revolve right out of our open-admissions door. I believe that CUNY's current policy of testing entering students' skills and requiring them to take appropriate developmental courses embodies a “right-to-succeed” philosophy. The developmental education and the supportive community offered by our basic writing programs enable students to acquire the academic literacy skills, motivation, and self-confidence to persevere and to succeed in college. Until there is a marked improvement in the basic academic skills of high school graduates, transfer students, and adults returning to

school, basic writing courses will continue to be necessary to improve student outcomes.

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