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A RESPONSE TO IRA SHOR'S "OUR APARTHEID: WRITING INSTRUCTION AND INEQUALITY"

Ira Shor's "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality" (*JBW* 16.1) is both stimulating and frustrating. The piece is so right about the ways in which higher education and Composition can be manipulated to serve entrenched, classist interests that, while reading it, I nearly lost sight of why Shor is so emphatically wrong in his generalizations about Basic Writing as agent of educational apartheid. My response has two parts: clarification of an erroneous point about Basic Writing at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities used in Shor's article, and related to that, a comment on the artificially homogenized Basic Writing landscape presented by the article.

As I read the piece, I found myself frequently in agreement with the argument, as I have been on numerous other occasions when reading Shor's books, listening to him speak, or conversing on a listserv, admiring his wide ranging discussion that brings together current economics, labor theory, and Composition history. Then I stumbled. Shor writes:

... find out how big a surplus your local BW/comp programs are generating each year, like the \$1 million generated by the former comp program at Minnesota, I was told. BW/comp is a cash cow — full tuition paid by students while part-time wages are paid to teachers. No costly equipment needed as in engineering labs or nursing departments. BW/comp is like the former colony of India, the jewel in the crown, a territory generating lots of wealth for the imperial metropolises of lit, grad school, and administration." (99)

Confronted with Shor's general assertions about the economics and labor conditions of "BW/comp" in the familiar neighborhood of my own institution and its Basic Writing Program (which I helped build and which I coordinated for 16 of the last 21 years) I was startled. He simply got it wrong. At the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, there is no "BW/comp program." There are actually three writing programs

with different institutional purposes and locations: a Basic Writing program in the relatively open-admissions General College, where I work; the larger Composition Program in the English Department of the very selective College of Liberal Arts (most likely what Shor has in mind in his statement about a million dollar budget surplus – the CLA program certainly does create a surplus for the College of Liberal Arts if one’s analysis is based on directly attributable program costs vs. tuition revenue); and there is a smaller-enrollment freshman writing sequence offered in the Rhetoric Department (College of Agriculture) in conjunction with the excellent Scientific and Technical Communication program.

Anyone can make a factual mistake, to be sure, and the tangled collegiate structure at Minnesota might foster mis-statements by outsiders, like that which Shor makes. But what’s really interesting is that the Minnesota experience is just opposite of what Shor posits about the economics and labor conditions of Basic Writing programs and the educational purposes they serve. We do indeed like to think of our Basic Writing program as a curricular crown jewel (to reapply Shor’s term) which operates as a supportive social-intellectual home base for our open-admissions students, but Basic Writing here in the General College is hardly a cash cow. I formulate and manage instructional budgets for the entire college, and I can tell you very confidently that Basic Writing here is an equitably funded enterprise. A two quarter credit-bearing sequence offered to all General College students without punitive placement exams, the Basic Writing course enrollments are capped at 18 or 19 per section. These Basic Writing workshops are all offered in a well-supported instructional environment. All sections meet exclusively in up-to-date, computer networked writing classrooms where the student-to-workstation ratio is 1:1, rivaling anything our engineering or nursing colleagues (using Shor’s comparison points) might have available in their teaching environments. The teachers and students get reasonable training and tech support, and the Basic Writing courses are supported by a free, walk-in tutorial center in the same building as the classrooms. If anything, Basic Writing is supported with class size, tutorial assistance, and technology in ways which elicit envy from General College colleagues in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

Furthermore, we certainly operate within the spirit of what Shor proposes for a CCCC “Labor Policy.” The Basic Writing staff is comprised of four full time, tenured or tenure track Faculty who teach six quarter-term courses per year, whose tenure and promotion decisions are grounded in the quality of their research and teaching in Basic Writing, and who are among General College’s best-paid faculty. The Faculty work with four full-time academic professionals on annual non-tenure-track appointments at reasonable load (nine quarter sections

per year, no research requirements) and with respectful pay, paid health benefits, and good working conditions. In addition to full time faculty and staff, we work with nine half-time graduate students from a variety of disciplines who are paid a stipend consistent with the graduate salary ranges for the entire University, health benefits, and full tuition waiver (which alone averages \$4,800), a defensible, though admittedly not lavish, package for half-time nine-month graduate assistant work. The program is administered collaboratively among full-time faculty and staff, and graduate students are trained, mentored and evaluated collaboratively. Our least experienced ESL students, primarily refugees from southeast Asia and eastern Africa, are taught in a year-long comprehensive program, also credit-bearing, which emphasizes writing, speech, and reading in content area subjects via linked courses, taught by a combination of full time professional staff and graduate students.

Recurring institutional research tells us that General College students like our Basic Writing courses, see them as both challenging and valuable, and, in retrospective assessments, attribute significant power to these courses in accounting for their eventual college success. We know that 100% of the General College students who successfully transfer into degree-granting colleges at Minnesota complete the Basic Writing sequence (data based on Fall 1996 cohort). And we know that those who find a way to avoid the Basic Writing courses or who postpone enrolling tend to fail to transfer into degree programs, and they drop out at elevated rates. In this regard, I see our program in a light consistent with Ed White's meta-analysis of positive student progress in the California State University system as correlated with enrollment in recommended writing course sequences ("The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies," *JBW* 14.2 [1995]: 75-84). We who work in Basic Writing at the University of Minnesota do not see ourselves—and are not seen by our students—as a barrier or as a tool through which the institution retards degree progress among our financially strapped, racially diverse, largely urban student population. Quite the contrary, we work with fairly good institutional investment to help students move toward timely, more effective completion of degree requirements.

Financially, Basic Writing at Minnesota operates at the same level of support as does the rest of the General College curriculum, not as a colony feeding belletristic or administrative "metropolises." The Basic Writing program is (dis)advantaged no more or no less than is the rest of General College's multi-disciplinary general education curriculum by the fiscal arrangements of undergraduate education at Minnesota.

Granted, Shor made a relatively minor mis-statement or unclear association regarding the situation at Minnesota. That it sponsored my admittedly defensive re-reading of the article and led to the pre-

ceding program description is interesting, I think, only because I found myself less convinced of the article's overall notion of Basic-Writing-as-apartheid as I re-read it. Like so much of the anti-Basic Writing discourse associated with the current mainstreaming moment in Basic Writing history, Shor's article posits a monolithic entity, a "Tidy House of BW Inc." of sorts, omnipresent in higher education, operating uniformly coast-to-coast in a kind of post-Shaughnessy mindlessness which serves to oppress its students. We know that this is simply not the case. In fact, the article itself makes the point that there is a great deal of diversity in how institutions support the work of inexperienced writers. Shor points to the work of Soliday and Gleason, Fox, Grego and Thompson, Glau, and others, all of whom have built on knowledge generated by research in Basic Writing programs to build creative local solutions to the situation of inexperienced writers on their varied campuses. Various critics of traditional discourses of Basic Writing, such as Horner ("Discoursing Basic Writing" CCC 47.2 [1996]: 199-222), suggest the limits of a CUNY-based redrawing of the landscape of institutional response to students whom elites define as outsiders to the enterprise of higher education. Likewise, Hunter Boylan, although to different purpose, in his survey of developmental education, notes that 74% of colleges and universities offer some sort of supportive work for students who are seen as underprepared, an enterprise involving three million students and one hundred thousand staff and faculty, reflecting a wide range of approaches and status markers ("The Scope of Developmental Education: Some Basic Information on the Field," *Research in Developmental Education* 12.4 [1995]: 1-4). The Basic Writing landscape is far more varied than Shor suggests, as he relegates it to the status of "a containment track below freshman comp, a gate below the gate" (94).

Does this variety of locally situated work on behalf of basic writers signal an end to Basic Writing? Hardly. While there may have been homogenizing episodes in Basic Writing (such as curricular reforms following publication of Wiener's *The Writing Room* or Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfactuals*), there has never been a homogeneous Basic Writing entity which ought now to be "mainstreamed." There have been only local realizations of writing pedagogy in local structures, some designed well and some designed badly, in support of inexperienced writers about whom traditionalist faculties have expressed doubt or hostility (*vid.* the spate of "how to kill a college" articles which greeted open-admissions at CUNY). Indeed, had there ever been the kind of homogenized practice that Shor asserts or that Bartholomae sets up as straw man in his "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum" (*JBW* 12.1 [1993]: 4-21), it would have morphed by now into dozens of situated iterations. The process of local realization of innovation, in fact,

seen from an anthropological or linguistic perspective, would predict the very multiplicity of responses to local conditions that Shor applauds in the work of Grego and Thompson, Soliday and Gleason, and others, and which in its multiplicity is more like the actual situation in Basic Writing nationally (see Peyton & Bruce, "Innovation and Social Change," in Bruce, Peyton, and Batson, eds., *Network Based Classrooms: Promises and Realities* [Cambridge, 1993], 9-32).

At the University of Minnesota-General College, Cathrine Wambach is currently midstream on a study of how large Midwestern universities work with students defined as "underprepared" by site standards (for further information, contact <wamba001@tc.umn.edu>). She is discovering a rich combination of institutional approaches, variously anchored by access programs, involving mostly credit-bearing writing courses, summer bridge programs, specially supported first year writing programs, and other ongoing supports. Her work reinforces the notion that there is nothing monolithic about Basic Writing, nothing so congealed as to warrant the homogenizing critique or the offensive (to some, at least) implication of apartheid politics in service of such students.

Shor is surely right that there is a history of exclusionist practice in higher education, grounded in race, class, and gender assumptions, and some practices in writing instruction and tracking are undoubtedly tied to this history. It is an unfair corollary that there is a Basic Writing industry acting out a cynical apartheid agenda. Rather, there are any number of situated, institutionally constrained iterations of things like "Basic Writing," some more fortunately located than others, some more successful in resisting pariah status than others, some formed with more authentic educational purposes than others.

Shor urges us to find our allies and to work with them. I couldn't agree more wholeheartedly. Basic Writing programs were born in many institutions as a function of access initiatives, sometimes out of a genuine attempt to open higher education, sometimes as a cynical reinscription of status demarcation in a time of social change. Surely, it is in "safe house" access programs that we are most likely to find our current allies in common resistance to regressive closure of higher education, as recently reasserted by Canagarajah, among others ("Safe Houses in the Contact Zone," CCC 48 [1997]: 173-196).

While reading Shor's piece I was reminded of Deborah Mutnick's warning to be careful in how we mount educational critique from the left, that in impolitic critique of Basic Writing we risk crawling into bed with the very elements of right wing elitism which access programs and many Basic Writing programs were founded to counteract (*Writing in An Alien World* [Boynton Cook, 1996], xiv). Mutnick's warning echoes the question Michael Moore (*Downsize This* and "TV Nation") asks again and again: Is the left nuts? (Most recently in "Is the

Left Nuts? [Or Is It Me?]" *The Nation* 265.[16 November 17, 1997]: 16). We who teach from the left are peculiarly fond of beating each other up while the right wing eats our lunch. Shor's piece is a thrilling synthesis of disparate perspectives on how students get sorted and ground up in a factory model of higher ed, but in its strained assertions about Basic Writing practice it will likely serve simply to distract us from direct action against more pressing forces of exclusionism. Its view of Basic Writing is at least in one instance wrong in its implication, and may well be guided by a too-local, too-homogenized sense of how we all have created Basic Writing from our multiple perspectives in our multiple sites.