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# THE ATTACK ON BASIC WRITING – AND AFTER

*ABSTRACT: Attacks on collegiate basic writing have increased sharply. Despite a sense of success in many basic writing programs, we have not marketed our product well enough to shape positive public perceptions about the endeavor and to influence policy makers appropriately. University colleagues do not acknowledge basic writing's utility, have little understanding of what it is, and have undermined its efforts. Mina Shaughnessy's colleagues continue to complain about how she "ruined" the City University of New York. One teacher, reinforcing both error hysteria and a false generic audience imperative, writes to the New York Times and assails some writing teachers for what she sees as their own bad writing. Respected theorists and teachers have made broadside attacks on the enterprise. In truth, the profession has done little to link the specifics of basic writing instruction with data to support its long-term future and fundability, and the lack of valid research allows legislatures and academic executives to call for swift and often unsystematic change. What does the future hold for basic writing? We will see that reduced funding will alter familiar classroom formats; that two-year colleges will have increased responsibilities for teaching basic writing; that colleges will recruit instructors other than typical English and writing faculty; that units other than postsecondary institutions will provide basic skills instruction; and that demands will grow for precise research and reliable assessment. Despite wrenching changes in basic writing instruction, moral obligation insists that we continue our work to surmount the now commonplace challenges and assaults.*

Attacks on college basic writing are legion these days. In New York the attacks have grown more and more vitriolic. At the end of January of this year, New York's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani shifted his target from the City University of New York's senior colleges' basic skills programs (which he had criticized sharply) to the skills programs at the community colleges. A *New York Times* reporter quotes the Mayor: "There comes a point after 15 years of tragically plummeting graduation rates and a total evisceration of standards that somebody has to say: 'This isn't working'" (Levy B1). Never mind that little evidence supports his conclusion. Among CUNY associate degree entrants in 1988 (the most recent year for which data exist), those who passed all their required basic skills courses were more likely to gradu-

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ate than students who took no remediation at all. On the baccalaureate level among 1988 freshmen, those who successfully completed basic skills courses graduated at a 42.8 per cent rate; those who took no remediation graduated at a 48.2 rate—a very small difference indeed. Other University data support the general effectiveness of skills programs, particularly in writing and math.

How do we account for the hostility directed at collegiate basic writing, to the fact that “Top officials of the City University of New York want to get out of the business of providing extensive remediation” (Schmidt A33)? Those of us teaching in basic writing programs can attest to our successes, the transformations we effect among students often just learning to write for the first time, despite their age or academic levels. We know that we have a good product. However, not to be too crass about it, we have not marketed it well. Mina Shaughnessy, the public academy’s literacy conscience of the 1970’s and an ardent advocate for Open Admissions, was justifiably rhapsodic about the untapped potential of students hitherto unwelcome in the university. These were the “strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them” (3)—the students newly served by energetic basic skills programs. Yet only two decades later Shaughnessy’s song plays to deaf ears among policymakers who see only punishment by exclusion as the appropriate heritage of untraditional learners, those who defy arbitrary standards of accomplishment through the schools and attempt to make their mark in what Shaughnessy called “this eleventh hour of my students’ academic lives” (vi).

Those with the responsibility for writing programs have not attended appropriately to public perceptions about the basic writing enterprise. Perhaps we cannot prevent the unenlightened barbs of politicians with an eye on budgets or reelections, but certainly we ought to have educated our University colleagues systematically and thoughtfully about what we do. Yet we have failed here, and, as a result, we continue to suffer uninformed comments and criticisms by the professorate beyond (and unfortunately sometimes within) our English and writing skills departments. Colleagues do not acknowledge basic writing’s utility, have little understanding of what it is, and, to a large degree, have undermined our efforts. One need turn only to Jane Maher’s recent piece on writing Shaughnessy’s biography for confirmation. Interviewing faculty in the 1990’s, Maher writes, “one of Mina’s colleagues at Hunter refused to talk to me . . . ; it’s people like Mina, he claims, who ‘ruined’ the City University of New York” (56). Countless references to colleagues’ negative attitudes appear in Maher’s piece. Many, she says, “wring their hands in dismay—even disgust—claiming that these students couldn’t read or write properly, therefore they

didn't belong in college" (54). The fact that basic writing programs often can safeguard success as students move through the University is irrelevant to those who choose the virulent-punish-the-victim model.

Many who oppose basic writing have resisted what practitioners have taught over the last twenty-five years or so: that writing is a process, that its assessment is not error driven, that writers write for different audiences, that gradations of public and private writing exist, each having its own protocols. And, most sadly, some of those who teach on the basic skills frontlines have learned little and applied less to their views of writing and how to teach it. In "Johnny's Teacher Can't Write Either," an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, Rachel Erlanger, an English as a Second Language teacher at Queens College, blasts Ira Shor, James Berlin, and me as she reinforces both an error hysteria and a false generic audience imperative that writing teachers have struggled for years to combat. First, she assails Berlin, Shor, and others for bad writing—that is producing Latinate, needless, elaborate, and pretentious words and phrases. Yet she misses the point of writers always needing to write for carefully defined audiences. Surely to a general readership an essay title such as "Holistic and Performative Assessment of ESL Writing" may invoke puzzlement, even snickers from a general readership; but for the audience of its readers—members of the National Testing Network in Writing and other writing teachers and administrators—such a title that Erlanger taunts is perfectly clear and useful as a marker of the content within. In Erlanger's scheme there are no gradations of writing, public or private. "Perhaps we should require [the teachers] to take a course in basic writing before they teach one," she says. My fateful blunder was what Erlanger saw as an utterly egregious and unforgivable misuse (a "mistake in syntax" she labels it) of "among" in place of "between." But a thoughtful reader, seeing the whole sentence and not just the phrase she wrests from context, easily would recognize the error as a typo. "Which writers," Nora Eisenberg, a colleague and collaborator, responded in an unpublished letter to the *Times*, "including those of the *Times*, are not pursued by these little devils in print—a dropped word here, an extra word there, a misspelling which an editor occasionally can miss?" Elevating to the level of shocked dismay small errors and language not meant for general readers—how such a mind set must paralyze students learning English! How for basic writing students such a teacher must "bloody their efforts with red ink on the most minor matters," Eisenberg continues. I received vicious hate mail from *New York Times* readers as a result of my among-between transgression. James Berlin told me that he had collected more letters after Erlanger's piece than he had as a result of all his books combined. One irate reader demanded of Berlin's dean that that the professor resign from the academy for writing the sentences Erlanger wrests from context and runs up the

righteous writer's flagpole for the newspaper audience.

Even renowned theorists and teachers have made broadside attacks on basic writing. At a basic skills conference in Garden City, New York in 1993, Peter Elbow called for the end to basic writing and the mainstreaming of students into "regular" freshman composition classes. Mindful of the challenges to teachers' jobs, Elbow recommended that basic writing instructors serve as tutors or curriculum assistants for faculty across the disciplines. And Ira Shor has attacked basic writing even more severely. "Curricula for containment and control" (98), basic writing, he says, secures "unequal power relations" and is "part of the undemocratic tracking system pervading American mass education." He sees our purpose in placing students in basic writing courses "a new field of control to manage the time, thought, aspirations, composing, and credentials of the millions of non-elite students marching through the gates of academe" (93). Karen Greenberg, one of the most convincing and articulate speakers for basic writing, has with her usual passion taken Shor to task for stereotyping basic writing students and for turning into negative politics of empowerment what are simple realities of poor reading and writing skills. "The instruction provided by basic writing courses," she insists, "enables students to acquire the academic literacy skills, motivation, and self-confidence to persevere and achieve in college" (94).

Who listens to such pleas in light of the current times—times marked by what Greenberg (and many others) see as "reactionary political forces" trying to bar access and reduce the "size of colleges across the country," returning a people's University like CUNY "to the elitist institution it was before 1970, when Open Admissions began" (94). In an editorial, the *New York Times*, long critical of CUNY, has sounded a cry perhaps too late in coming: "the need for remedial courses is so widespread that confining them. . . . [to the junior colleges] would almost certainly reduce the number of minority college graduates, further whitening New York's professional work force. . . . Anything that discourages poor students, and immigrants from attending college damages the city's long-term prospects" ("Assault").

Yet basic writing, like other skills programs, has done little to link the specifics of instructional programming with data that would support its long-term future and fundability, leading to continuing assaults on current practices and the rush to ban or sharply modify remedial programs across the country. It is hard to see clearly through Shor's basic-writing-as-politics-only lens, but he captures the target in the cross hairs when he insists, "I want to see hard evidence that BW courses shelter more than they shunt" (96). A U.S. Department of Education-sponsored study (by Stanford University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Michigan) reviewed the national literature on basic skills and found little reliable inquiry or research on the

impact of remedial programming and best practices (Koski and Levin). The point here is the lack of research: it is a complaint I have made many times before, urging mainly to the indifferent the need to document the effectiveness of what we do. Instincts, sixth sense, and anecdotal reports: these never serve the policymakers and money holders who want only evidence. How do you know that drill and grammar work? they ask. How do you know that fifteen-week terms of three hours a week best teach basic writing skills? How much writing do students do in college classes anyway? And how does basic writing in fact affect the way a student writes for freshman comp and for courses in the disciplines?

Few studies address those questions, and the absence of study gives rise to calls for swift and often unsystematic change. A 1997 member survey by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, summarized by Alene Bycer Russell, points to a number of states engaged in active review of remediation at the college level. In many cases, basic writing instruction is shifting away from senior colleges and into the two-year colleges. Additionally, about 25% said that postsecondary institutions limited the length of time for completion of basic skills work. Legislatures have restricted funding for remediation; to take one example, the California State system in 1996 began reducing remedial offerings to 10% of current levels over a 10-year period. In Massachusetts, state colleges and universities limit the number of freshmen who can enroll in remedial courses to 10% in 1997 and 5% thereafter.

Continued poor preparation of elementary and secondary school youngsters (despite some progress here) and increasing immigration to the United States of speakers of other languages will assure the survival of some form of basic writing on the post secondary level. CUNY may in fact succeed in terminating college remedial instruction through the efforts of Mayor Giuliani and New York State Governor George E. Pataki, "making CUNY virtually alone among public universities and barring remedial classes for students" (Arenson B8). Yet like the rumors of Mark Twain's death in his lifetime, the news of basic writing's imminent demise is grossly exaggerated. But what does the future hold? Some current trends, in New York and elsewhere, suggest a number of factors that will influence direction over the next decade.

**Sharply reduced funding will alter dramatically familiar classroom instructional formats.** At CUNY a small but statistically significant higher passing rate for basic writing students appears in new intensive modes, which generally are condensed courses for several hours a day over the summer or intersession. These new formats reduce teacher-student contact, making up lost classroom hours with concentrated instruction and dependence on computer word-processing programs to speed draft development, revision, and editing. Some fac-

ulty are germinating a different kind of computer-based course that draws on the Worldwide Web, Listservs, and OWLs (On-line Writing Labs) as well as on on-line and live tutorial support. Here too, actual classroom hours shrink, even more substantially, as students and teachers rely on e-mail comments and responses. Experienced instructors still must work out the protocols for these courses: how much time does each student get from the teacher? From other students? Many on-line courses, intending to cut instructor time, actually increase it sharply, but flexible sign-on sessions for teachers and students may outweigh the burden of extra hours.

**Increased basic writing instruction will take place at the two-year college level.** As legislators and policy makers insist on proscribing remedial studies from the senior colleges, two-year institutions, already overtaxed with basic skills programs, will bear much of the burden. Currently, in Arizona, Colorado, South Carolina, and Utah senior colleges expect community colleges to perform all remedial services; in Florida only one state university has authority to offer basic skills instruction. This trend will expand, and two-year colleges will have to experiment with alternative teaching-learning modes that give students necessary skills without killing faculty with excess workloads. Certainly the stress on skills education will affect associate degree programs and course instruction over the disciplines as thin resources grow thinner.

**Colleges will recruit instructors other than typical English and writing faculty.** In further efforts to cut costs, postsecondary administrators and policymakers will turn to low-cost programs, such as continuing education, to provide basic skills services. Continuing education courses generally require no faculty senate or state approval, they rely on inexpensive teachers who get no benefits, and their costs are low enough that students might pay on their own without applying for State aid, even if allowable. Issues of quality control will rise, and conventional writing faculty numbers no doubt will shrink.

**Institutions other than postsecondary units will provide basic skills instruction.** As both political and financial pressures minimize the role of basic writing in a four-year college student's education and as two-year colleges strain under their increased load of skills instruction, community youth organizations, union instructional programs, workforce "universities," and private, for-profit higher educational institutions like the Berkeley School and the DeVry Institute will expand basic skills offerings at cut rate prices. These entities will turn enthusiastically to basic skills programs as a way of drawing students to the for-profit institution both for short and long-term enrollment.

**Demands for precise research designs and reliable assessment measures will grow hard-edged and uncompromising.** Much of CUNY's institutional research relates to longitudinal studies that ex-

plore persistence, attrition, and graduation rates. But only individual colleges and departments through focused investigation can determine successful instructional paradigms—and these institutions have not attempted the studies or, if they exist, broadcast them. Legislators, academic executives, state and federal agencies will link grants and other funding much more substantially than in the past to demonstrably successful programs. Given an undistinguished past history of research in instructional efforts by college and university teachers and department managers, I'm not sanguine that colleagues ever will see the urgency of research as a way of assuring appropriate support for our basic writing efforts.

These factors will affect profoundly basic writing as we know it, and I believe that we will have to struggle to keep a humanistic sensibility in the endeavor. Yet after twenty-seven years or so of serving students who otherwise would have little chance for survival in college, we have a moral obligation to continue our work, despite wrenching changes in time-on-task and curriculum delivery. United, I believe that we can surmount the odds and continue our endeavor, brought into focus by the great social experiment of Open Admissions. Everybody loses when good products face challenge, even extinction, through bad marketing, poor strategic planning, inertia, or lack of imagination. These elements are contributing to the decline of a vital university service: through basic writing instruction to give underserved and poorly prepared students the skills to make their voices heard as they move through the academy and into a complex world.

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