

Mina P. Shaughnessy

## THE MISERABLE TRUTH

*A policy of admissions that reaches out beyond traditional sources for its students, bringing in to a college campus young men and women from diverse classes, races, and cultural backgrounds who have attended good, poor, and mediocre schools, is certain to shake the assumptions and even the confidence of teachers who have been trained to serve a more uniform and prepared student population. For the English teacher, the shock and challenge of this diversity is experienced first through the written words and sentences of the new students, for here, spelled out in words, woven into syntax, is the fact of inequity – in our schools and in the society that is served by these schools.*

*Thus began the first issue of the Journal of Basic Writing. It seems almost unnecessary to say who wrote that "Introduction" (not yet called an Editor's Column) for JBW back in 1975. The voice, the themes, the sculptural syntax – all are unmistakable hallmarks of Mina Shaughnessy. From the moment we considered making the Fall 1998 issue in some way commemorative of the founder of so much besides JBW, it seemed to us vital that this unmistakable voice, stilled but not silenced in the fall of 1978, be represented somehow.*

*Largely thanks to Jane Maher's Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work, many of us have a new sense of how much besides Errors and Expectations there is to the writing she left behind. After reviewing all that, we felt that nothing better represented her contributions then and their continuing relevance now than "The Miserable Truth," a speech given to the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors in April 1976, at a time when Errors and Expectations was still a manuscript, a time when a great financial crisis (nothing less than the near-bankruptcy of New York City) was causing vast retrenchments and threatened to result in the wholesale disestablishment of basic writing programs Shaughnessy had done so much to found and foster.*

*Her response to this crisis was characteristic: outlining the grave perils confronting programs and colleagues so dear to her, she also ennobled them, making one want to be part of the whole imperiled enterprise. And it was clearly not a specific structure or pedagogy she wished to preserve so much as a commitment to students who must, for their sake and society's sake as well, have a fair shot, a real chance. This, we imagine, is the heart and soul of her enduring relevance: that she was always about recognizing diversity but never stopping there, insisting that we see and redress the "fact of inequity."*

Conferences, I know, are times for saying encouraging things, for sharing successes with one another, and regaining a sense of being engaged with others in important work. But to begin this conference on a note of encouragement seems highly inappropriate today – something like trying to give a pep talk on the *Titanic*.

These are discouraging times for all of us, most particularly for the teachers who have been working with unprepared students on basic skills. Both students and teachers are already discovering that they are expendable, and the programs they have helped to build over the past five years to remedy the failure of the public schools (and the society of which those schools are an extension) now begin to shake and fracture under the blows of retrenchment.

We experience the crisis most directly on our individual campuses:

- Our staffs are shrinking and our class size increasing.
- Talented young teachers who were ready to concentrate their scholarly energies on the sort of research and teaching we need in basic writing are looking for jobs.
- Each day brings not a new decision but rumors of new decisions, placing us in the predicament of those mice in psychological experiments who must keep shifting their expectations until they are too rattled to function.
- Our campuses buzz like an Elizabethan court with talk of who is in favor and who is out. And we greet our colleagues from other campuses with relief. "Ah, good," we say (or think to ourselves)—"you're still here."
- We struggle each day to extract from the Orwellian language that announces new plans and policies some clear sense of what finally is going to become of the students whom the university in more affluent times committed itself to educate.

If we turn from our individual campuses to the university itself—this vast free university, the only one of its kind—we see it being pressed to retrench and retrench, treated as if it has been distributing handouts over the past six years rather than entitlements, fragmented now rather than federated as each college struggles for its survival and sees in the demise of sister colleges some advantage for itself.

And underlying all this turmoil we sense a growing national indifference to the goals of open admissions. Ironically, as the national press spreads alarm about the state of literacy in the country, funds (federal, state, and city) for teaching the educationally neglected and betrayed are disappearing. Somewhere, it has been decided that the experiment hasn't worked, that our hopes were overblown, that we are faced, in the words of *Time* magazine, with "continued failures to improve dramatically the lot of the disadvantaged" through compensatory education.

After no more than one generation of open admissions students have been allowed time to lay claim to a college education, and in the face of their achievements during our first faltering years of Open

Admissions, the decision has come out against them. Not, one suspects, because anyone has taken a close look at the experience itself but because the times have shifted and allowed the society to settle back into its comfortable notions about merit, notions which have produced a meritocratic scheme that perpetuates the various brands of race and class prejudice that have pervaded this society since its creation.

Surely there is little in such a scene to generate encouragement. Wherever we look we find reason to feel discouraged, angry, and paralyzed. Open Admissions at CUNY is being trimmed and tracked to death and we cannot begin to count the cost of its collapse. I can think of only one encouraging thought in the midst of this disaster. It is best expressed in an old Jewish saying: The truth never dies; it simply leads a miserable life.

I have said enough, for now, about the misery. But I have not touched upon the truth—the truth, that is, of what we have learned during open admissions about our students, about ourselves as teachers, and about the art and science and craft of writing. Let me mention some of the truths we have uncovered or discovered because they seem to me indestructible, despite retrenchments and shifts in the winds of social doctrines.

First, we have learned—and documented—that it is possible to get a high school diploma in New York City without reaching minimal competence in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Doubtless we suspected this before, but now we know the real taste of that failure. What open admissions writing teacher does not remember the shock of those first student essays, the stunning evidence of failure woven into the very syntax of sentences and the letters of words. For most of us it was a traumatic moment. We asked, What went wrong? What were they doing for twelve years? How can I possibly teach them to write now? Where do I begin? And behind those questions lay the troubling, forbidden thought—perhaps they are ineducable.

For the first time in the history of the city, we created, through open admissions, a massive feedback system which revealed an unconscionable failure to meet the educational needs of the poor and the dark-skinned. To be sure, the roots of that failure are tangled, and now that college teachers have begun to talk with and meet with high school teachers (largely as a result of open admissions) they are more sensitive to the many institutional conditions that have made teaching almost impossible in many of our schools.

But whatever the causes, Open Admissions documented the fact of failure. And until that happened, it was possible for thousands of students to drift quietly into the labor force of the city, taking up the jobs that others rejected, convinced somehow that something in *them* had caused the failure.

Second, we have learned that late adolescence is a creative and critical juncture in life and that, far from being eleventh-hour learners, our students come to us ready to begin their lives anew. And while the skills and priorities of studenthood are not easily acquired at the age of eighteen or over, students have demonstrated that they can acquire them at that age. In fact, much of the energy they mobilize for the effort seems to come from the opportunity college gives them to redefine themselves as young adults who might accomplish something in the world. To encourage this emerging view they have of themselves while at the same time representing honestly to them the amount of work that lies ahead has proved to be one of the teacher's most delicate and essential tasks.

Neither like children nor the retarded—with whom they have been compared—they are a distinctive group: young adults who are capable because of their maturity of observing the processes they are going through as learners, of taking conceptual shortcuts that are not available to children, of alerting us easily and swiftly to the effects of our instruction, of committing themselves to routine and work and constant, often discouraging evaluation, in order to change the quality of their adult lives.

We have not unfortunately had the time nor the expertise to study our students as learners nor to document our sense of them as a unique group, ripe for learning and capable of both steady growth and dramatic leaps into new levels of competence. But we have, in a sense, discovered them.

Third, we learned that we didn't know much about teaching writing when we started out, even though many of us had been teaching the subject before, in traditional ways and with traditional students. There were many reasons for our deficiencies, but one of the chief ones was that most of us had not been formally trained to teach writing—only to read and analyze the outstanding belletristic literature of the centuries. Teaching writing was a kind of fringe penalty for teaching literature, and since students coming into college had generally been prepared for college writing by their schools and by the culture they grew up in, we got by. There was little motivation to give much thought to those features of the skill that now seem so central to our understanding of our task. Let me mention at least a few of those features.

We had not thought much about the writing process itself: how accomplished writers behave when they write; what sorts of stages they go through; what coordinations and perceptions are required of them; and how the behavior of our students as writers differs from that of accomplished writers—are they, for example, in the habit of re-scanning their sentences, can they objectify their own pages, looking at them at one moment for semantic sense and at another for formal correctness?

We had not given much thought to the relationship between oral and written language, a relationship that once seemed so simple (merely a matter of the writer's tending to his colloquialisms) but that suggests increasingly profound differences not simply in the ways we choose words but in the very ways we think under two modes.

Faced as we have been with students who have had very restricted and largely unpleasant encounters with written English, we have *had* to pay more respect to these differences, to observe them more carefully, for one thing, and to find ways of making the transition from one medium to the other more conscious. We have also had to turn our attention to the academic uses of written language, to that "dialect" of analysis that confronts our students not only with many new words and phrases, but with more heavily qualified sentences than they are used to producing in speech and with unfamiliar strategies for making their points or winning their arguments.

We had not thought much, until Open Admissions, about the fact of linguistic diversity, with which most of us collided from almost our first day of open admissions teaching when we found our classrooms filled with native Americans who had grown up with the sounds and melodies of other languages or dialects in their ears and on their tongues—Cantonese, Afro-American, Spanish, Yiddish, Greek, Polish, diverse language groups who nonetheless shared the experience of having had their language differences ignored or treated as a disadvantage, of having had the fun and pride of language drained out of their school lives.

How we have argued, and puzzled, and struggled over the issue of mother-tongue interference, over whether to change, how to change, when to change those nonstandard features of a student's language that distract the general reader. We have arrived by now, I think, at a rough and pragmatic consensus. But looking back, the important point seems to me that we grappled with both the phenomenon of diversity and the phenomenon of linguistic convention and in doing so developed greater respect for our students' linguistic aptitudes and for the subtle, stubborn, yet mercurial quality of language itself.

Such insights have had, of course, to be incorporated into our teaching. And here we can claim, I think, a major advance. Open Admissions has taught us about learning, that is, about the importance of perceiving where students are in relation to what we want to teach them, about sequential and paced instruction, about being clear and realistic, about going below the surface of our subjects, not in order to become simpler but to become more profound, for it is at the level of principle as well as practice that young adults learn more efficiently.

This was an inevitable consequence of Open Admissions. Traditionally, colleges have been able to guarantee success by *selecting* their students ahead of time rather than by *teaching* them after they arrived.

Thus it has been argued that in the days when City College screened out all except the most highly prepared graduates from academic high schools in one of the largest cities in the world, the chances of the students succeeding in college were tremendous, whoever taught them.

If we imagine a continuum of competence, with at one end the exceptionally competent and at the other the barely competent, we could say that colleges have traditionally felt it their responsibility to identify the students at the upper end of this scale and give them four more years of education. The open admissions college, on the other hand, makes a commitment to involve itself in the education of young men and women *all along* the continuum on the assumption, first, that people are not consigned to their places on that continuum forever but are capable of remarkable growth and development when given the opportunity; second, that the social benefits of advancing as many as possible along that continuum are inestimable; and third, that this broadening of the base of higher education, if properly planned and supported, can further the education of all students on the continuum.

But the decision to open a college to a more diverse population commits that college to becoming a *teaching* college, a college where everyone, not just the remedial teachers, accepts the responsibility of *teaching* rather than merely *presenting* a subject. Certainly this message about teaching has reached the skills teachers of CUNY. Working this year in the Instructional Resource Center, I have had a chance to do what few of you have perhaps had the time or occasion to do, that is, to take a close look at the work going on in skills instruction. We are all aware, of course, that many of our colleagues have gained national recognition in our field—have published articles, read papers at conferences, served on various professional organizations, produced textbooks. (It is no accident, I'm sure, that when five major publishers decided over the past year or so to produce new writing handbooks—a major publishing decision—they chose CUNY English teachers to write them.)

What I had not been so aware of, however, was the number of teachers who, without fanfare or remissions and with heavy class loads, have been at work developing imaginative new materials for our students. Probably at no school in the country is there such an accumulation of wisdom and know-how in the field of compensatory education as there is within this university at this moment. I cannot imagine a group of teachers who have ever had more to say to one another. It is a special fraternity joined not only by our common purposes and problems as teachers but by our having come to know, through our students, what it means to be an outsider in academia. Whatever our individual political persuasions, we have been pedagogically radicalized by our experience. We reject in our bones the traditional meritocratic model of a college. We reject it not only on principle; we would sim-

ply be bored teaching in such a college.

Such changes, I would say, are indestructible, wherever we go from here. And indestructible, too, are the ideas that have awakened our students. It is puzzling how long people can go on—for generations— tolerating the inequalities that restrict and even shorten their lives. But once the possibility of change touches their imaginations, once a right has been extended to them and they have felt its power to open and enrich their lives, they cannot go back. They may have setbacks. But they cannot go back. CUNY extended a right, six years ago, that has been revoked, and we appear to be back where we started in 1970, only much poorer. But no one can revoke what has gone on in us and in our students.

So the lion got out of the cage before the gates were shut. And we had better keep learning how to teach writing because the brothers and sisters and cousins and children of our students will be back. If we can transcend for a moment the personal disappointments and uncertainties that surround us now, we can perhaps agree that that is a fairly strong truth for a miserable time. And it is a truth we helped to make.