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TEACHING IN THE SPACES BETWEEN: WHAT BASIC WRITING STUDENTS CAN TEACH US

ABSTRACT: *In a time when remediation is being attacked from both the right and the left, it would seem odd that we have not sought out the views of those directly affected: basic writers themselves. Perhaps if we did so, public discussion as to who "lost" the remediation wars would be replaced by the more productive question, "Whose responsibility is it to promote broad-based literacy in this nation?"*

Remediation under siege

I'd like to begin by noting the irony of my subtitle: "What Basic Writing Students Can Teach Us." In a time when remediation is being attacked from both the right and the left, it would seem odd that we have not sought out the views of those directly affected: basic writers themselves. We certainly have heard plenty of politicians and education professionals weighing in on the issue. The conservative Mayor Giuliani of New York, for example, sees developmental courses as inappropriate for a university setting and wants so-called senior colleges to get out of the business of providing remedial instruction—a fact which seems hardly surprising given the stormy history of open-admissions. Just recently, in fact, CUNY's Board of Trustees voted to phase out remedial instruction in the system's four-year campuses. As striking as is the reaction from the right, what is even more surprising is the view coming from the progressive camp, many of whom have taught those very same courses for years. The battle was joined six years ago when an influential figure in composition, David Bartholomae, announced at the National Basic Writing Conference,

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I think basic writing programs have become expressions of our desire to produce basic writers, to maintain the course, the argument, and the slot in the university community; to maintain the distinction (basic/normal) we have learned to think through and by. The basic writing program, then, can be seen simultaneously as an attempt to bridge AND preserve cultural difference, to enable students to enter the "normal" curriculum but to insure, at the same time, that there are basic writers. (8)

Since Bartholomae's address, another important theorist in composition, Min Zhan Lu, has criticized teachers of basic writing for attending to matters of form only and not enough to the cultural conditions that bring students to basic writing classes (Lu). More recently, the radical educator Ira Shor, whose life work has been devoted to empowering the marginalized student, has referred to the tracking of basic writers as the "other apartheid," and makes the case that basic writing actually "helps slow down the students' progress toward the college degree" (95). Shor's motives in calling for the end of such tracking are, to be sure, very different from those fueling attacks from the right: many on the left, Shor included, want to open the doors fully to all students and in the process remove the stigma that attaches to developmental course work. Those on the right, by contrast, want to raise the bar by which colleges accept students and in the process close the door to the non-elite. Nevertheless, the unremitting attacks from both camps against developmental education have put advocates of basic writing courses on the defensive and they have rendered basic writing students themselves nearly invisible and inaudible in this debate.

English 10.B01

I admit that for a long time I also assumed that these students were simply "not there." I preferred to teach our standard composition course and literature surveys rather than tackle the problems posed by those students who had been tracked into our developmental course. Through last minute scheduling changes, however, I recently found myself in a basic writing classroom encountering students like Denise, Christine, Adam, Melinda, Mark, Nate and the others who made up English 10, Section B01. As I walked in on that first class, I could see the discomfort written plainly on their faces. They were in this class because they had not passed our college's writing test (a forty-five minute writing sample), and they were taking a course which would not count toward progress in their majors, although it would carry

college credit (a very important point and one that would buttress my view that this course would be as challenging as any college course). These basic writers were, to use Tom Fox's phrase, in a kind of "academic limbo" (259). They were enrolled in a college course but a course that most see as pre-college. Everything about them suggested discomfort with being in that class — from the unhappy looks on their faces to their awkward posture. They seemed very tense.

And I quickly made matters worse, for sure — partly as a product of my own style but also because of my ambitions for this course. As to the first, it was clear to me from reading my students' responses to those early classes that many of them were either charmed or mystified (or both) by the words that I used. Steve, a dyslexic student who, by his own account, had gone through more than twelve years of schooling without being tested for a learning disability, wrote early about his dream of using the kind of words that I used on that first day of class — words that suggested for him the prestige and mystery of an education. But it was Elizabeth who pinned down for me what kind of effect my language — both good and bad — was having on these students. Born in the Dominican Republic and having spent less than a year in the States prior to entering my class, Elizabeth described that first day:

Sometimes there are situations in which we are unfamiliar and even illiterate. For instance, while sitting in my chair not very comfortable, by the way, I was anxiously waiting for my English class to begin. It was my second day at college. Although I had attended this college before this was my first semester in regular classes. I was very excited about it. English 10 was mostly about writing and I had always enjoyed writing. As soon as the teacher entered the room, everybody sat straight and became quiet. The teacher took attendance and began the class. Our first assignment was to explain the word Literacy and what [that] meant to us. Soon everybody seemed to be concentrating in his or her writing, except me. That was the first time I had heard that word. I had not even a remote idea of what was that word's meaning. I looked up and down and took a deep breath wishing I were not in that classroom. That was one of those situations in which you find yourself as an illiterate person.

I did not write a single word on my paper. Though I like the teacher because I could perceive he had the ability to see the insight of things I thought he was a tough teacher, who was expecting us to explain difficult words in good English. So I decided to drop his class and look for another teacher. Obviously that class was going to be very hard for me.

However, the word that best describes my feelings is out-

rageous. I changed my mind and decided to take the challenge. If I was not literate enough to be in that class, then I was determinate and willing to learn [sic]. As soon as I got out of the classroom I went to the TASC [Tutoring and Academic Support Center] to look up the word literacy in the dictionary. Finally, I found the meaning. I felt embarrassed. I could not define Literacy, which made me appear as an uneducated person who was misplaced in the wrong class. I was a little discouraged. . . .

In fact, Elizabeth achieved an enriched understanding of the term “literacy” through her very embarrassment and frustration. But I wanted her to tell this story to you not as simply evidence of her own success, although I believe it is that, but for what it can tell us about literacy itself and about the dicieness of literacy instruction. I grant that in many ways Elizabeth was not typical of the “basic writing” student—for one thing, she “enjoyed writing.” That fact signaled to me that, for her, words were malleable and could bend to her wishes rather than simply remain unknowable and controlling. Moreover, although she was by no means alone among my students in her determination and motivation to learn, she seemed to combine that grit with a resourcefulness and a level of reflectiveness and courage that set her apart from her classmates. No one else among my students felt comfortable enough to write about my own classroom in their narratives on acquiring literacy.

But what really strikes me about Elizabeth’s writing is its edginess. Despite her feeling comfort with writing per se and a sense of her own literacy, the classroom produced quite the opposite feeling in her—agitation and uncertainty. Her reaction to hearing a word for the first time, a word that for the teacher held special importance, was to flee. My invitation to insert her own meaning in the word she construed, I believe, as the typical teacher’s set-up job: to expose students’ ignorance and, perhaps, to discount in the final analysis any alternative meanings of their own. The act of “defining” literacy became the act of limiting interpretative options rather than expanding them—an activity common to classrooms. She was ready to drop the course.

If she had dropped my course, Elizabeth was prepared to find another teacher who could make her feel more comfortable in the classroom—it is very likely, given her motivation, she would have followed through on that objective. But I wonder about those other students, those who never showed for the first class. What had happened to them from the time that they had enrolled (or rather been enrolled after failing our placement exam)? Or what of those students who were in and out for most of the semester and then disappeared alto-

gether in the final weeks? Would they look for another teacher? Or would they give up on college altogether? I have been teaching at the community college level for eleven years now and I have yet to come to terms with the high attrition rates among our students. Why do so many leave? And, where do they go? I used to be devastated, personally, by the numbers of students who would leave through the semester. But after conversations with colleagues who faced similar attrition, I have since tried to come to see students' withdrawals as far more complicated than a reaction to me or my teaching methods. They are bringing years of discomfort with them into my classroom — years of estrangement from the conventions of schooling. Almost as if to drive the point home, Denise, a student about whom I will say more shortly, titled one of her essays, "I hate school" — it seemed to be an emblem for her and others in the class.

A Course About Literacy

It was clear from the start that I would be asking a lot of these students — no doubt adding to their sense of unease on that first day. I told them that the course that I planned to teach would be a college-level course, challenging them continually, and that it would not be condescending towards them. They would be doing a good deal of both writing and reading. Taking my inspiration from David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's description of a basic writing class at the University of Pittsburgh, I wanted to "reclaim reading and writing from those (including our students) who would choose to limit these activities to the retrieval and transmission of information" (4). Instead I wanted to use readings as prompts for writing that was reflective of their experience. They would even be trying their hand at contributing to an electronic listserv, which I called *bwrite* and which I imagined would provide a safe space for them to comment about the class and about our work, while at the same time enabling them to become more fluent as writers.

The theme that would guide us in our reading and writing would be "literacy": what is it? how can we achieve it and why? I thought, given the fact that these students had just failed our college's writing placement (in some cases, the reading test as well), that the standards for written literacy set up by the college would be uppermost in their minds — that plus the fact that historically these students must have struggled to understand what teachers have wanted from them and may have questioned why they were in school in the first place. I developed a sequence of writing assignments that would start with the central question, *Why are you here?* — and then move on to having students consider their earliest memories of speaking, reading, and

writing and to narrate an experience in which they felt illiterate, as they would define that term. From there they would bring favorite family stories to class and reflect on the uses of such stories. Later, I would have them think about the differences between school and home literacies, followed up by a reflective narrative in which they tell the story of their best class ever and render an account of what they took from that class. Somewhere near the end, I wanted them to think about how an education — that is, the acquisition of some body of knowledge and/or set of skills — might change a life. To deepen their understanding of these issues, I wanted them to read some very challenging pieces from our class anthology, including Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," Richard Rodriguez' "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood," and an excerpt from Frederick Douglass' "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" (all in Garnes et al).

This was the grand scheme that I brought into the class on the first day. I did wonder what right I had to ask of these students to read such difficult works, given that for many of them reading in school has been so problematic (and continued to be so, for some of them were in developmental reading classes even as they were taking my own class). I also wondered whether I would be doing them a service by having them write as much as I planned to have them write (a full-length, two-page, paper every other week, in addition to a variety of in-class pieces, not to mention the listserv and a portfolio of revised drafts), rather than short, paragraph-length pieces and exercises. Given the inevitable sentence-level errors that would mark their writing, would they have time and energy to attend to such matters if they were churning out long narratives and essays for me? Indeed, would I have time and energy to assist them with their editing needs? I wondered about all these things but decided to go ahead, in large part because I wanted to assure them that this course was serious, college level work and that, by semester's end, they would show themselves capable of such work.

But how could I know what awaited me? How could I know that these students, while sharing some frustration in school over the years, would have such different stories to tell and would have such varied abilities as writers to tell them? How could I be ready for Denise, who would bring to my class a string of nightmarish accounts of her experiences in and out of school but a tremendous motivation to succeed despite all the odds? How could I be ready for Mark, who was legally blind but who refused to wear specially adapted glasses that would help correct the problem in school? How could I be ready for Katherine, who dropped out of high school as a sophomore, came back to school years later (taking and passing the GED) like gangbusters, with tremendous maturity, energy, and insight, but who would disappear from my class shortly after the midterm without a word?

The Case of Denise

And how could I be ready for Denise? From the start, I knew she would pose a special challenge. A returning student, a single mother of two young children and the first in her family to graduate from high school, she brought her heartache into English 10, Section B01. For the class's first writing assignment, she demonstrated her anxiety about being back in school and in this classroom—not so much by what she wrote but what she left out. The assignment asked that she first examine the cover of our reader, *Writing Lives: Exploring Literacy and Community*, which contained a black and white photo of the puzzled face of a man, his hands held over his ears. I then drew upon the editors' gloss of the photo. "We selected this piece of art," the editors wrote,

To encourage you to ask the same question of your participation in a college first-year writing course. Why are you taking this course? Why are you attending college? We admit that these are big questions with many implications. If you have trouble coming up with answers, consider the witty possibilities that Kruger [the artist], included in her work. Look closely at the cover, and you find even more text just below the figure's mouth. Are you here:

to kill time?
to get cultured?
to widen your world?
to think good thoughts?
to improve your social life?
(Garnes et al, 2)

Next, I encouraged my students to ask the same questions of themselves but to try, as I put it, "to move beyond the simple response and the narrow reading" of the questions . . . Dig as deep as you can."

Denise, after roughly 45 minutes, wrote the following in response:

Why are you here?

because I want to think good thoughts on a better education, and to improve my social life so I could better myself in the near future. I want to be able to widen my world around me, so I could learn what is going on, in the outside world and to be able to get cultured around my surroundings and I don't want to kill time doing this because life could be so short sometimes

The prompt or series of questions that I meant only as a guide is taken up by Denise as the substance of her response. Although she adds a brief phrase to each borrowed category (“on a better education,” for example is added to the prompt’s “think good thoughts”), the writing has been pre-empted by others. My attempt to help her generate words left her without words of her own.

As contrast—and as evidence of the range of writing abilities in this class—Nate, who had entered the workforce briefly before coming to college, produced the following response under the same conditions:

In the real world you can either start at the bottom, or you can have a building block to get the upper hand in the job place.

In my senior year of high school everybody was gearing up for college. I knew that I had slacked off[f] for four years, and that I didn’t want to go to any more school. With that in mind, I entered the work force. I’d always like hands on work, so I got a job at a machine shop as an apprentice. I soon found out that not having any experience and or background in the field, I would stay at the bottom for a long time.

In conclusion, I can say first hand that any kind of schooling is a must if you want to have a stepping stone to get ahead.

Although not developed to any great extent (he would flesh the piece out in a revision), Nate’s piece demonstrated a comfort with school writing that was undeniable. Although brief, it contained a structure nonetheless—something to hang an essay on. This was a kid who it seemed had lost interest in school but was smart enough and savvy enough to do as his friends had done—only he wanted instead to go out and work. In his support of hands-on learning, by the way, Nate articulated a view expressed often in our class discussions and by a good many of my students. One of the lessons that I would take away from the course was to reconsider the value of non-school learning. For many of these basic writers, the turning away from school was a principled and self-conscious decision. It had always been easy for me to assume that all learning begins and ends in the classroom. These students reminded me of how limited that view of education really was.

Another student, Adam, who from the start made it clear to me that he felt he should have been out there working for a living and who, throughout the semester, showed me how hard-working and level-headed he was, managed by the end of the semester to strike a very skillful balance between work and school. “The greatest way that education can change a person’s life,” Adam wrote,

is by teaching them how to learn. I believe that there are many things that are taught to us in school that we will never use again in our whole lives. But that is not the reason why we go to school. By learning in school we also learn how to learn outside of school. School trains a person's mind. This way they can learn a certain trade or job in the future. Or even how to do a new sport or hobby.

It is a marvelously subtle argument for the value of what we teachers do. At the same time, Adam reminded me that the world does not stop at the classroom door. I need to make connections between students' lived experience, or experience to be lived, and the work that they do in my classroom. I must do more than pay lip service to the notion of multiple literacies and resist the privileging of classroom learning.

While Nate and Adam successfully negotiated the demands of my class, Denise found the going much tougher. Time and time again, she would voice her frustration with the way the class was going, not understanding what I was asking of her. In one conference—one of several in which she was reduced nearly to tears—I wanted Denise to reflect in writing about the changes she needed to make in one of her essays—a reflective piece that would be part of her end-of-semester portfolio. Instead she produced a rehash of her previous draft. She sensed my dissatisfaction immediately. It was not the high point of our relationship.

And yet, amidst all this storm and stress, what became clear to me was that Denise had stories to tell about and out of school and, if given the opportunity, would tell them. In a literacy narrative, written out of class, she began to fill-in the blanks of her own history:

Well when I was in school. I was always in a special needs class all through middle school and high school. I was always in a one class room type of thing. I watched all the other kids go to room to room and I was upset about it at the time. I felt like I wasn't like the other kids in school. And when I was all done with school I was going to have this training skill after I graduated. But I didn't get to do it. They said I was too old to do it. They said I was too old for it or unable to do it. So I was mad for a long time about it. That. But I got over it though. I don't know if I was read to.

But I did do a lot of reading in my bedroom at the time when I was at home. I was always in my room listening to the radio too I was always by myself, because kids used to pick on me. And they used to pick fights with me. I was never a fighter. I always stayed out of trouble. But the kids just bothered me.

That I just used of being in my room all the time. One day a girl started a fight with me. That I couldn't take it anymore that I just beat. The pants off of her that she didn't bother me again. And every now and then when I see her she says hi to me now.

And she doesn't bother me anymore.

Although straining to render speech into the formal constraints of written language, Denise achieved a breakthrough on many levels. She had found a space for her own words. She had, at the same time, established engagement with the assignment. Put another way, she was finally responding to what was being asked of her. "How difficult has it been for you personally to acquire the skills at reading, writing, and speaking you now have?" I asked in the prompt. Like the teacher in Langston Hughes' poem "Theme for English B," a text that we had read in this course, I was also saying to her, "Go home and write/a page tonight/ And let that page come out of you . . ." (ll. 1-3). Of course, for Denise, as for Hughes' young speaker, it was not that simple or painless.

What she offered was a critique of a school system that callously segregates students on the basis of ability and vocation and lets slip through the cracks those who simply don't conform to the institutional plan. Denise played by the rules given her but when it came time for the pay off—the learning of the skills that had been promised her—they said she was "to old or unable to do it." In a very telling analogy, Denise revealed in an email message to all of us on the listserv that her experience in tracked classes was part of a larger pattern in her life. "When I was living at home," she wrote,

I was one of the fourth oldest in my family [read "the oldest of four"]. Yes I felt like a slave like douglass. I always had to clean the house. Do the dishes and babysit all the time. When I was in school all my life until I graduated from high school. I was always in special needs class all through my education. And now I go to class like I wanted . . .

I had asked students to read Douglass' narrative about learning to read and to write and to consider how his story might shed light on their own stories. Many rightly wondered whether it was logical to imagine anything that could have happened to them could be remotely like the horror of Douglass' narrative. Of course, it was not the horror of slavery that I wanted them to consider but rather the sense of powerlessness that derives from illiteracy. For so many of these basic writers, the classroom had been a setting for their own vulnerability. Denise

clearly associated school with the various beatings and humiliations that she had experienced in her life—being attacked by a friend on the way home from school, the taunting and spitting from other kids on the school bus, the beating from her mother who mistakenly believed that Denise had cut school.

And yet despite Denise's claims—and the claims of other students in my class—that specially set aside classrooms created stigmas and much hurt, many—including Denise herself—came to see the potential for good in creating a homogenous and non-threatening classroom community. Recalling her best classroom experience, Denise told the story of her three-year experience as a student in Mr. Rounds' class. She remembered his patience and his desire to show his students "how to do the work." "I would have all my subjects with the teacher," she wrote,

The classroom size was small and broken down into groups with about five kids in each group. We also had teachers' aids to help out with the teachers. I also made a few friends because of the fact that we were together for three years and in that time I became familiar with the teacher and the classmates. I knew what to expect from the classroom environment and I felt comfortable there.

I think my experience in this room taught me a lot about myself. I always had a lot of self-esteem in Mr. Rounds' classroom. But now that I am in college I find it difficult. I miss the comfortable environment of his classroom. Adapting to constantly changing classes, unfamiliar people, and different teachers' personality, I have developed a problem with low self-esteem. I am trying to better myself for my children. I am hopeful that my education will help me get off welfare.

At first glance it might seem as if Denise simply couldn't get her story straight—on the one hand, the special education classroom was humiliating; on the other, reassuring and friendly. In fact, as I read the whole of her classroom narrative, I saw a common thread running throughout. In all of her stories, Denise asked that school make sense—that it come together in a rational, predictable and meaningful way. She wanted continuity, surely—but not necessarily the continuity created by having the same teacher or classmates for years. She wanted to know where this was all going to lead to and she wanted the rewards for the work that she had done. Now the college experience seems a maze to her. She is not alone in seeing college as lacking coherence.

Challenges and initiatives

Just in case any of us is lured into thinking that basic writers don't want a challenge or want to be treated differently from other writers and other students, consider what Melinda, another student from the class, had to say about her "most memorable classroom experience," her eighth grade math course:

In that class we already entered there with the idea we were the stupid kids who were going to be taught stupid peoples math. Mr. Barros never treated us any better or worse than honors class students. And made us feel like we could do anything we were just suppose to learn basics like addition, subtraction, multiplying, and dividing. But he got into teaching us Algebra, and geometry, which was unheard of for Chapter 1 kids. And he taught us a way that we knew we could do it and participate with are answers. Even if were wrong we wouldn't be ridiculed we would be corrected and participate with even more answers, we were enjoying are ideas being let known, and that someone thought they were important.

Challenge us, Melinda was saying: and respect us. Melinda, by the way, was one of the silent students in my class. She said very little throughout the semester and rarely smiled in room B117 or K233. And yet here she was speaking loudly and clearly – in a language that, yes, required editing for grammar and mechanics but in a language that contained power as well. Among the many lessons that these basic writers have taught me was not to misconstrue the silences that they bring to the classroom. Rather than view them as signs of indifference, of stupidity or of fear, I have come to see them as spaces in a broad and compelling narrative. Teaching basic writing requires that we become more adept at reading the complex stories that these students carry with them – and the spaces between.

But that is not all we must do – and here I want to send out a call for all of us to respond to the many threats to abolish basic writing, using as many of the media and cybermedia outlets as we can. We must all fight to preserve a space in the curriculum for basic writing because without such a space students like those I've described may very well be tracked out of higher ed altogether or simply discouraged from continuing any further in school. Having said that, I do confess to sharing some of Denise's ambivalence about remedial and vocational instruction. On the one hand, setting students on a career track

does limit their choices and may offer promises that cannot be realistically fulfilled. And separating students like Denise may further stigmatize them. And yet, as Denise so eloquently attests, there is genuine comfort to be had in a classroom where special attention is paid to students who so desperately require such interventions. In the final analysis, Denise probably would not have been where she was, taking a course with me, if she hadn't had a course like that of Mr. Rounds.

If we are agreed that basic writing merits our support, we need as well to make a case that it be regarded as college-level in its objectives and methods. Indeed, I would like to see the teaching of basic writing carry the prestige that such work deserves, taught by motivated, full-time faculty for whom incentives should be provided. Basic writing needs to become something other than a course in which the writing of paragraphs or the filling-in of workbook exercises dominates. It needs to be something other than a course that refuses to offer challenging and stimulating texts. It needs to be, like composition itself, reflective of a discipline. It needs to have weight and significance. It is time that basic writing—and developmental education generally—stop being the scapegoat for what ails schools and colleges. But it is also time for all of us to demand more of our students. Only then can we with any legitimacy say that this course has every right to be a part of the college curriculum.

But what sort of demands ought we to make of ourselves? If we teach at universities or four-year colleges, we must come to the realization that if the students whom we admit to our colleges lack basic reading and writing skills, we have a moral and ethical obligation to those students to give them what it takes to succeed in college. Rather than abdicate our responsibilities to teach basic writing and reading to others, we must stand up to the challenge and accord the resources to get the job done. Do we really want to hand over that important mission to private companies whose motives and expertise are so problematic? That said, it surely will not be enough just to disparage the “outsourcing” of developmental education to the private sector. We must make a cogent and urgent argument that we can best meet the needs of students like Denise and Melinda and Nate.

If we teach at the secondary level, we must work harder to prepare students for the challenges of both the workplace and the college or university, working in collaboration with business leaders as well as college faculty and administration. “Prepare the kids for writing,” suggested Michelle, one of my basic writing students, when I asked her and the others in that class what they might want to say to high school teachers; go beyond “the basics [of] adjectives, verbs, nouns.” Let them write and let them read.

Finally, I want to direct my attention to two-year college faculty, and, in the process, drop the artifice of impartiality. We two-year col-

lege faculty, like the very students whose stories I have been recounting, occupy a very strange limbo state in the academy. We are college professors and yet perceived by many colleagues at the four-year level as somehow “pre-college” or grade 13 — we are seen as teaching drones, essentially, and the students whom we teach are at best marginally capable to do the heavy lifting required in a genuine college classroom. All the studies that have shown our transfer students performing as well or better than university students mean absolutely nothing to those administrators, faculty, and politicians who would gladly hand off the teaching of developmental reading, writing, and math skills to community colleges. How convenient for them to regard the two-year college as purely developmental in its mission and to view the two-year college student as not quite college material. This attitude is especially prevalent in the public universities. How ironic it would be if our transfer students, sensing that they are but second-class citizens in the big state university, choose in increasing numbers to transfer to private universities and colleges instead.

Community colleges can take all this lying down, of course, and allow others to transform their comprehensive mission into a narrower, developmental purpose. But let me say the obvious: the public two-year college will simply not have the resources to do the work that all of us should be doing — four and two-year colleges and high schools, together. Freeing up money to purchase new computers, to set up Internet and distance learning courses, will not by itself resolve the central question, Whose responsibility is it to promote broad-based literacy in this nation? I submit that we all have a stake in such a mission.

We two-year college teachers need to say, simply, that we’ve had enough. We need to feel confident enough in our mission and in our own capabilities to resist the reductive construction of who we are and what we do that others make of us. But beyond refusing to be complicit in the abdication of responsibility to endow literacy skills, we have an obligation to offer constructive possibilities of our own. Our unique position as “translators” or mediators between the schools and the universities gives us a special opportunity and responsibility to broker the needs of both sides. Moreover, our understanding of the worlds of work and school can serve to enrich literacy instruction at both the high school and university level.

But this transformative role begins with our own transformation. We need to believe that we are up to the task, a formidable challenge indeed given how little recognition community colleges receive. Here I find myself returning to the basic writers for instruction and inspiration. “It all starts here,” wrote one student. Surely, we can be as courageous and as hopeful.

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