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JUST WRITING, BASICALLY: BASIC WRITERS ON BASIC WRITING

ABSTRACT: *This article explores three salient findings from interviews with basic writing students at the University of Michigan-Dearborn: students' definition of "basic writing," their understanding of writing and reading expectations in other courses, and their conceptualization of writing. It suggests that these findings cast new light on the responsibilities that we have toward basic writers, both as teachers and as representatives of the institutions where we teach. Ultimately, the article suggests that we must help students understand what it means to be a basic writer in their particular institutions by providing more thorough information before placement procedures; it also suggests that we can help writers contest and refute their labels as basic writers through the curricula in our courses.*

Introduction

As an area of focus within composition studies, basic writing has come a long way since the publication of *Errors and Expectations*. We have our own journal, *JBW*; we have our own Special Interest Group within the CCCC, the Conference on Basic Writing. Basic writing regularly appears as a submission category in the CCCC call for proposals. In essence, since the late 1970s, basic writing has begun to move through the same kind of professional growth that other fields (including composition) have experienced as they move toward legitimacy *as* fields. If one were inclined to define the development of basic writing as a linear progressive narrative, these developments could be seen as important signs that the sub-field was moving toward such legitimacy, at least within the broader discipline of composition.

As it has moved through this process, scholarship in basic writing has also become more complex. Our research has moved well beyond simply identifying who are basic writers and what are their defining characteristics. Instead, the focus has shifted, broadly, to three areas. The first encompasses studies examining the construction of basic writers and/or basic writing classes and, perhaps, questioning

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the legitimacy of those constructions based on the analysis of them (for example, Adams; Bartholomae, "Tidy House;" Scott; Stygall). Next are those studies describing and/or analyzing pedagogies used for working with basic writers, including assessment methods within those pedagogies (these might include deBeaugrande and Olson; Lu; Perl, "Composing,"; Shaughnessy, *Errors*, "Diving In"). Third are studies examining basic writers in action – those focusing on writers' cognitive processes (like Hull, Rose, et al.; Hull and Rose; Rose), and those examining their actual writing or revising processes (Perl; Gray-Rosendale). More important than serving as a testament to our growth as a sub-field, these studies have enriched our understandings of basic writing and basic writers immeasurably. Yet, as our focus broadens, we have left behind some of the early questions that once captivated researchers.

Back to Basics: Defining Basic Writers

Among these questions is one that Susanmarie Harrington and I have suggested must regain their centrality to our work: Who are basic writers? In "The Dilemma That Still Counts," we examined the ways in which basic writers (and basic writing) has been defined through twenty-odd years of basic writing research. We argued that while "basic writing" remains an essential concept in the academy, we must work to clarify what the term means in order to act upon it, particularly in light of political actions like those recently taken within the CUNY system. Among the issues we posed for further investigation in our article was learning more about how basic writers (or, more appropriately, students labeled basic writers within particular institutions) defined themselves. How do they understand their experiences with writing and reading? Do they find particular features in their writing to be problematic? Do they contest their labeling as "basic writers?" Do they perceive their skills and challenges differently than the university does?

In order to find out how basic writers at my institution answered these questions, my colleague Randy Woodland and I interviewed 16 students chosen randomly from the 80 who placed into our basic writing course during the fall semester of 1998. The questions that we asked students in our interviews reflected the two approaches which Susanmarie and I presented as widely prevalent in basic writing research in "The Dilemma That Still Counts." Cognitively-based studies, we wrote, were concerned with writers' individual processes as they wrote and read. The processes which writers bring to producing or decoding texts are the subjects of study. Thus, in designing this current study Randy and I asked students to bring in examples of past

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writing that they particularly liked and to talk with us about them, and asked questions that prompted students to reflect on their composing processes. Susanmarie and I also suggested that a later trend in basic writing scholarship is toward culturally-based studies, which examine the writer in relationship to larger cultures (like the academy). In this light, a writer is seen as within a broader matrix of literate processes, some or all of which might come into play during their encounters with academic texts. This approach is reflected in questions directed to UM-D students about their writing and reading histories and those about their perceptions of writing and reading requirements that they will encounter in college.[1] The interview protocol was divided into three basic areas (questions are included in Appendix A):

I. *Existing writing.* In the letter inviting students to talk with us, we asked if they had a paper (or several papers) that they particularly liked, and if they would bring those with them to the interview so that we could talk with them about the essays.

II. *Experiences with and ideas about writing and reading.* These included questions about students' families and family histories with writing and reading; students' histories with writing and reading inside and outside of school; students present writing and reading habits; students' experiences with writing and reading in school; about connections between writing and reading outside and inside of the classroom; and about how students defined key terms related to writing and reading.

III. *Expectations for college.* Here, we asked students if they had a planned major and, if they did, what it was. Additionally, if they had a major in mind, we asked what they expected would be required of them in courses in their major.

IV. *Conceptualizations of and expectations for writing.* Questions here fell into two general areas: those related to the basic writing course (including "what is a basic writer?"), and the specific writing and reading expectations in their proposed or prospective majors.

Students' responses to these questions have helped us develop a better understanding about how they approach post-secondary education, how they imagine the role of writing in that education, and how they see themselves in relation to what they imagine the academy to be. They also provide the foundation for a compelling argument about the responsibilities that institutions (and the teachers who are a part of them) have toward students who are identified as basic writers. Helping students to contest and, ideally, to overcome their status as basic writers is an implied goal of most basic writing courses.[2] But these interviews suggest that to really help students develop a sense of that definition and the means to overcome it, we need to do more than

imply. In fact, we need to explicitly help students understand and act on what all of this means in *our specific institutional contexts*. We might even make the questions "what does it mean to be a basic writer *here*, and what does it take to not be one?" part of the "subject" of our basic writing courses.

To illustrate these findings, I'll ground the discussion in portions of interviews with two writers, Tom and Susan.[3] In some ways, these two writers are typical of UM-D's basic writing population. Like most of our students, they came from inner-ring suburbs of Detroit and commuted to UM-D from homes where they lived with two parents or guardians. Both came from homes where some writing and reading took place, although writing and reading was not a main focus in either home. Tom was unusual in that neither of his parents had completed a two- or four-year degree, but was typical in that at least one of his parents had attended (if not completed) community college.[4] Both described themselves as fairly good students.[5] Neither writer professed a great love of writing or reading outside of the classroom (although Tom said he enjoyed science fiction novels); in this respect, they were also quite representative of the other students whom we interviewed.

After taking the UM-Dearborn placement exam, both Tom and Susan received two scores of 2 (out of a possible score of 6) on the exam. According to the scoring guidelines, a "2" essay

> has significant weakness of one or more kinds: Development of ideas may be weak with few specific details to support main ideas. Paragraphs may be relatively short and loosely organized with inadequate transitions. The overall organizational pattern may be loose or not apparent. There may be a pattern of major grammatical errors or numerous misspellings.

Most writers who take basic writing at UM-D receive scores of "2" on their exams, and in this light Tom and Susan were also fairly representative. Their responses to questions about writing in college were also fairly typical of the basic writers whom we interviewed, and they nicely foreground some of the most interesting findings to emerge from our discussions with basic writing students.

Tom's and Susan's Interviews

Tom

Like the vast majority of students on our commuter campus, Tom still lived at home. His father was recently retired from "Ford's";[6] his mother worked at the Kmart Headquarters in Troy, Michigan. Tom

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said neither he nor anyone in his family did a lot of writing or reading outside of school, although he did enjoy "making up a story and writing about it" and he liked science fiction. Once, in school, he got to write a science-fiction story as a paper, which he enjoyed. But most of his high school writing and reading he found tedious – reading a book and writing reports, and doing "analyzing." Tom could name only one book he enjoyed reading in high school, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

At UM-D, Tom planned to major in Computer Information Systems, a major housed in the College of Engineering and Computer Science. When I asked Tom if he thought he'd have to do a lot of writing or reading for his major, he said, "I don't believe so," although he hadn't talked to anyone to get a sense of whether his impression was correct. He did think he'd have to do a lot of math, "and . . . research with the books and the computer books and stuff," but since he was "into computers," he didn't think he would be "handed a book and [told,] 'Here, read this.'"

When I asked him to describe his writing, Tom said, "I can get creative, but it's mostly just like science fiction stuff that I like to come up with." As a writer, he said, "I'm only doing it 'cause I have to, and I have to get a good grade on it." Tom thought he would learn "how to write essays, you know, essays, papers," in basic writing. Additionally, he thought he'd learn to

> try to keep focus on certain points and use proper grammar, which I was never really good with anyways, but . . . actually, it's the grammar that I don't really care for. I learned a lot of it, but I just can't remember.

Susan

Susan also graduated from an inner-ring suburban high school. Susan's dad was "kind of self-employed," and her mother was a nurse. She said her family did some reading and writing – her mom "[wrote] e-mails a lot and read magazines a lot," and her stepfather read the newspaper. She didn't do a lot of writing or reading. She had a creative writing class in school that she liked, but they didn't do a lot of writing the first semester, and had "a journal" in the second. "It wasn't really a writing class. It ended up being a relationship class." She liked her ninth grade English teacher, who "really pushed you, and made you understand [reading in the class]."

Susan thought she would major in business at UM-D, but wasn't really sure. Susan expected to write papers in college, and that those papers would be "so much different [from high school] . . . everything [in college] is just more intellectual and you have to think more and go, you know, deeper into things and explain yourself . . . and just

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have things to back it up."

When I asked her if she thought of herself as a good student she didn't answer directly. Instead, she said, "I know what I want to do and I know what I have to do, so. . . ." As a writer, Susan said "I think I have a lot to say . . . . but I don't know how to write it. I don't know how to put my words together and write it down and make it flow good and make it sound right. I can't do that." She said her writing now was

> really shaky . . . 'cause I'll have to sit there and I'll have to write something over and over again 'cause it just doesn't flow right and it doesn't make any sense the first time I write it, so I have to sit there and I have to really work at it.

I asked her if it came out, but it wasn't what she was thinking, and she said,

> Exactly . . . . Afterwards, when I look at it . . . I'm, like, that wasn't what I was trying to say at all. And I try to put it in different words or I'll just try to rewrite it out later on and it just doesn't work and I'll have to sit there and I'll have to work at it for a while.

Sometimes she continued to work at it; sometimes, she gave up because she found it frustrating. "Being a writer," Susan said, was "being creative about what you say and being able to write it down; having it make sense and come together and having people read it and understand it and know what you're talking about. . . . The thoughts [in your head] come out right." "Learning to write" meant "just developing the skills that you need to get all your words down, all your thoughts out and get them out properly, and just brainstorming and putting it all together and writing it down." In the basic writing course, Susan hoped to learn "better writing techniques, how to get everything out properly, and how to write it down and make everything flow."

Included in Tom's and Susan's responses are three compelling issues that came up with most of the writers whom we interviewed: their understanding of the term "basic writing," their expectations for writing and reading in other college courses, and their conceptualizations of writing. For those who have worked in basic writing for any length of time and/or those versed with basic writing literature, these issues may sound familiar. However, hearing them expressed from students' perspectives led me to think carefully about the responsibilities that we have toward basic writers as teachers and as representatives of the institutions where we teach.

Issue #1

Basic Writers on "Basic Writers": What's in a Name?

> Teachers often label students "remedial," "marginal," at risk,"
> "basic," or "illiterate": labels given by the judges, not the
> judged.
> Alan Purves, "Clothing the Emperor"

What do the words "basic writer" mean to you?

> Just writing simple. Just well, yeah, that's important for jobs
> and communicating with other people, that's the same thing
> there.
> Tom

> Basic writer. I guess just a person who writes, probably some-
> one who just, you know, writes things just... like their given
> assignment and they'll just write it down. But I think a writer
> is actually somebody who does writing and writes a lot.
> Susan

Among the questions that Susanmarie and I raised in "The Di-
lemma That Still Counts" is whether basic writers contest the label that
had been attached to them as a result of their performance on some
kind of assessment measure (like our composition placement exam).
But Tom and Susan, like every other writer we interviewed for this
study, don't know what "basic writer" means. I don't mean that they
don't know what it means to *be* a basic writer – they certainly know
that they're not taking first-year composition. But they don't know
that they are *called* basic writers, or that the course they're in (ours is
called "Writing Techniques") is spoken of in the field as a "basic" (or
"developmental") writing course.

I think that this is a dilemma for several reasons. In a recent es-
say, Peter Mortenson raised questions about the ethics of using sub-
jects anonymously in our research. I see this as an extension of that
problem – here, the issue of "basic writing" itself is anonymous, at
least (as Tom, Susan, and Alan Purves suggest) to the people who are
labeled that way. In fact, many basic writing researchers and teachers
have worked long and hard to help erase the stigma that we think
students must feel when they are placed in basic writing courses. Some
researchers, for instance, attempt to identify the ways in which basic

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writers are multiply literate, despite the labels that have been affixed to them based on performance on a measure like a placement exam. Their positions are clear: these writers have abilities outside of the classroom; their performance in the classroom is affected by the ways that they approach their work (and those approaches, in turn, are affected by any number of internal and external circumstances).

We have taken these more complex labels into the classroom, as well. Many basic writing instructors (and I include myself here) have been shaped by the ideas of Mina Shaughnessy and her intellectual descendants (Perl, Hull, Rose, Bartholomae, and so on). We have developed a number of skillful ways to talk about literacy (or literacies) so that students don't feel they are failures, don't see their experiences as isolated, and don't feel that the literacies that they bring to the academy are "bad." In the mythic story of basic writing, we say that this different way of talking about basic writers and their abilities works against the deficit model that has framed writing instruction since the end of the nineteenth century, pointing to the creation of English A at Harvard University while gnashing our teeth and wringing our hands.

Sometimes, as in some of my own classes, we use texts (like *Lives on the Boundary*) with which we hope basic writers will identify – that they will read and say, "Aha! That person's experience is like mine!" Because the texts are always carefully chosen (again, like *Lives*), the hope is that students will then understand that they bring something different – not bad, but different – to their learning, and need to find ways to fit that "difference" into writing in this context. But this approach, which certainly isn't one that only I use, still elides the question of what it means to be a basic writer in the specific context in which these writers find themselves. In a sense, it asks students to participate in a system of values that surrounds a particular "reading" of *Lives on the Boundary*. Yet one of the tenets of recent culturally-based approaches to basic writing work is the notion that these writers do not share (some) of the same values reflected in academic discourse. Thus, the logic here is inconsistent: Shared interpretation, to some degree, is based on shared culture. And basic writing scholarship has suggested that these writers do not participate in this culture. Therefore, they might not share interpretations held by members of this culture.[7] (Additionally, imagine the dizzying connections between these things! Is one academic institution like another? Yes, in some ways. Is UM-Dearborn in 1999 like Loyola or UCLA in the mid-1960s and early 1970s? In some ways yes, and in some no. But why should we expect students to make the rather abstract connections that we might see between that circumstance and theirs?) Since we – since *I* – sometimes don't tell basic writers *exactly* what it means to be a basic writer (in this time and place), these students are left to their own devices to figure out what basic writing is, and what makes them basic writers.

Meanwhile, while we talk with students about their multiple literacies inside the classroom, we're talking about them as "basic writers" outside of it, as in this article. I'm a member of the Conference on Basic Writing. I subscribe to the *Journal of Basic Writing*. But the idea of the "basic writer" and all of the characteristics associated with it are invisible to the students themselves.

One could make the argument that I'm quibbling over issues of mere semantics, but I don't think I am. After all, how can basic writers contest their labeling *as* basic writers (and then refute it as well) if they don't know that this is what they're called? Certainly, they can tell us that they know more than they have been labeled as knowing; they might say that they're better at writing in different contexts – they can say a lot of things. But if language is power (and I believe that it is), not giving students the language to talk about themselves (or, at least, their labels) and their situations seems to me an act of withholding power.

Issue #2

Why Writing? Tom on the Role of Writing and Reading in the Academy

Another issue that we were interested in investigating was what writing and reading expectations these writers thought they would face as they moved through college. In fact, it was a remark about just these expectations made by a student in my fall 1997 basic writing course that led me to want to talk with these writers about their experiences with writing and reading, their perceptions of themselves, and what they thought they'd have to do in future courses. In the eighth or ninth week of the semester, just as we were working through the final chapters of *Lives on the Boundary*, my student said, "Why do we have to do all of this reading and writing, anyway? I mean, I'm not going to have to do any of this stuff in my major. I'm going to get all my reading from the computer."

Like this former student of mine, Tom also thought that writing and reading was something that would be necessary mostly in "English" courses like this one, not in courses like the ones he would have to take. His reply to a question about whether he thought he would have to do much reading and/or writing in his major appears above: "I don't believe so." He *did* think he'd have to do a lot of math, but as he said, "since I'm into computers, I probably … won't be as much being handed a book and [told,] 'Here, read this.'"

This is a response that many of us have heard before. But pointing to it as an isolated issue affecting only the student who utters it

neglects a larger problem associated with the belief that writing and reading happens only in writing courses. To illustrate this, I'll cite something that many of us have heard before: "Our students can't write, and it's your [i.e., "the writing program's"] fault." Of course, we can take issue with the key points in the complaint. And of course, we know it's not exclusively *our* fault: we can tell students like Tom and my former student that they will have to read and write in their majors, and (in some cases) they still won't believe us. We also know that composition research that has long made the point that writing skills appropriate for all students in all disciplines for the rest of their academic careers cannot be fully developed in the two or three courses they take with us. But when basic writers (or *any* writers) believe that they won't really need these things they're learning in our classes anyway, it makes what we *can* do all the more difficult.

Issue #3

We Have Seen the Enemy . . . Basic Writers on Themselves

At the heart of "The Dilemma That Still Counts" was a question that Susanmarie and I felt was vital for basic writing to address as a field: who are basic writers? We quickly found what researchers before us had discovered: there is no easy answer. However, after an examination of basic writing scholarship written during the last twenty years, we *did* find that the common feature uniting these writers (as they were represented in scholarship) was error – not just the sentence-level mistakes that students make on their papers, but errors of conceptualization that lead to errors in content and form as well as surface-level error. Within more cognitively-based approaches, we found that some researchers suggested that these errors resulted from what I'll call a non-deficit approach. Embedded here is the principle that, despite assumptions to the contrary, there is not necessarily a misconnection between writers' processes and what comes out in their writing. Instead, to use Shaughnessy's term, there is an internally consistent "logic" in their texts that reflect cognitive processes at work, rather than flawed ones (e.g., Shaughnessy, Perl, Rose, Hull and Rose). The result is a text that is perceived as flawed because it doesn't match or incorporate the conventions of the discourse it seeks to reproduce. Other cognitively-based studies, though, suggested that basic writers *do* have cognitive deficits, or they do have issues that affect the cognitive processes that they bring to their writing that reflect in the production of errors.[8] These include studies suggesting that writers carry with them a hefty case of anxiety, sometimes linked with low self-esteem (e.g., Sheridan-Rabideau and Brossell, Slattery, Adams). Basic

writing scholars whose work is situated within a cultural framework see the error in students' work resulting from the interaction between writer and institutional contexts. They suggest that writers don't negotiate this movement fluidly, and thus their writing does not reflect what is understood as "correct" or "good" (in terms of content and/or form) in the academic context (or among academic discourse communities).

In our interviews with basic writers, we were interested in learning about what features of their writing *they* thought marked them as not ready for first-year composition – would they identify either lack of familiarity with grammatical or discourse conventions as the defining hallmark in their writing? We expected to hear a fair amount about making grammatical mistakes, some claims that these writers just didn't know what to say, and some people talking about the bad cases of nerves they brought with them to any writing situation.

But what we expected and what we heard were two different things, at least on some levels. A few of our interviewees did mention grammar as the "problem" in their writing. But most of them defined "the problem" as what I've come to call "unsuccessful information transfer," an issue that reflects elements of the deficit model described earlier. Susan's response to my question about how she would describe her writing illustrates what I mean by this. She said, "It's really shaky. . . . After I read it, . . . I'm, like, that wasn't what I was trying to say at all." Earlier in the conversation, she described what happened during a typical paper: "It always just seems like when I would get it down, it doesn't sound right. . . . Usually, I'll, like, think of it, and . . . I could . . . say it out loud what I want to write. But then when I start writing, either I'll forget it or it just doesn't come out the same."

Susan's expectation that what is in her mind should come out on paper just as it's conceptualized is what I mean by "information transfer." It's in the brain one moment, and is quickly moved to paper the next. Susan described this kind of process when I asked her what "being a writer" meant:

> [It's] being creative about what you say and being able to write it down; having it make sense and come together and having people read it and understand it and know what you're talking about. . . . The thoughts [in your head] come out right.

Learning to write, Susan said, was about perfecting this transfer: it was "just developing the skills you need to get all your words down, all your thoughts out and get them out properly, and just brainstorming and putting it all together and writing it down." Other students echoed this conception of writing, too. Sam described "being a writer" as "being able just to pick any topic out of your pocket, you know, and

be able to write a page or two on it. It makes sense. . . ." Irene said that "being a writer" was "Having [your writing] make sense and come together and having other people read it and understand it and know what you're talking about. . . . The thoughts come out and they come out right." It's in the brain one moment; it's on the page the next. Hank's response also typified this approach to writing:

> It always just seems like when I would get [my opinion] down [in an essay], it doesn't sound right. . . . Usually I'll . . . think of [what I want to say], and, you know, I could say it out loud what I want to write. But then when I start writing, either I'll forget it or it just doesn't come out the same.

Sharon said, "I know what I want to say, I just can't put it on paper. And that's the problem I have." In fact, for Susan, Sam, Irene, Hank, Sharon, and three other writers whom we interviewed (eight of the sixteen), "incorrectly" moving ideas from their heads on to the paper was what they thought was "wrong" with their writing.

The notion of writing as "information transfer" isn't a phenomenon unique to this group, of course. In fact, the idea that ideas should come out on to the page wholly formed is a tenet of current-traditional approaches to writing. It reflects the belief that writing is a mechanism for recording on paper ideas that have been clearly conceptualized before they are written; writing is a vehicle for those clearly conceptualized ideas to be clearly expressed. As Sharon Crowley has argued, this approach "tacitly assume[s] that any thinking student should be able to get her writing right on the first go-round" (147). Here, writing isn't a process, it's a product of ideas that are already in the mind, and if they don't come out right, that's where the problem lies. As Crowley and composition historians like James Berlin and Robert Connors have demonstrated so persuasively, this conceptualization of writing is one which is fairly prevalent in American higher education. And given what we know about the way that writing is taught in many high schools, it seems a relatively common model there, as well.[9]

Returning to the deficit/non-deficit distinctions made earlier, these students *do* see themselves as having a deficit. As far as they are concerned, though, the "deficit" has little to do with the kind of writing they are doing or the situation in which they are writing. To them, it has to do with what writing *is* – here or anywhere else. To them, it is about performance – producing so many paragraphs of so many sentences of so many words, doing so in a short period, and seeing that the ideas in those so many paragraphs (etc.) replicate ideas that writers already have. When this doesn't happen correctly the writing is "wrong" and needs to be "fixed."

Another Dilemma That Still Counts: What We Want; What We Get

There are certainly some college-level basic writing instructors who think of writing as the expression of clear ideas, clearly expressed. But many of us bring to our courses an alternative conception of writing that frames as it a process that helps writers think, that facilitates communication, that mediates among communities. From this alternative perspective, it's easy to look at what students say about not producing "successful information transfer," gnash our teeth, wring our hands, and think about one more conceptualization that we must dispel in our courses before students can see writing as a medium for developing ideas and thinking through issues over a period of time. This reaction certainly perpetuates the myth of the basic writing instructor that Jeanne Gunner has recently suggested is associated with the "iconic teacher-figure" descended from Mina Shaughnessy. As Gunner describes her, this teacher

> occupies a position of honor. The teacher is constructed as a kind of hero, one who identifies with and champions basic writers, and who enacts a Virgilian role of guide into academic discourse or a Wordsworthian validator of expressivism. Like Dante's Virgil or Wordsworth's Romantic poet, this teacher is positioned as a kind of outsider – as one who is outside the institutional hierarchy and the traditional academic values that have been seen as hostile and unwelcoming to basic writers. The primary credential of such a teacher is individual commitment, a sense of mission to teach, initiate, inspire, and defend basic writers. (31)

But to come to this familiar, comforting conclusion would be to let ourselves off several hooks, absolving ourselves of complicity in issues that we need to confront when we discuss the goals of our basic writing courses. First, there is the issue of course design discussed earlier – we have constructed entire curricula around helping writers develop alternative conceptions of themselves. As empowering as such a curriculum might be, it also elides the issue of what it means to be a basic writer here and now, in this institution and this place. I will return to this issue of curriculum later in this article. First, though, it's necessary to look at what comes *before* that curriculum.

When students arrive on our campus the first writing-related assignment that students face is a placement exam. At UM-Dearborn, students write this analytic/response essay even before they have en-

rolled for a single class, as part of their day-long orientation. Students have two hours to read a short (two-page) passage and respond to a question that asks them to interpret the reading and respond to it using concrete evidence (including their own experiences) to ground their analyses. The exam that Tom and Susan took, for instance, involved reading a portion of Paule Marshall's "The Poets in the Kitchen," an essay about how language helped the author's mother and her friends also employed in domestic service to create a community. The instructions accompanying the exam suggest that students do some "process work" before they write, brainstorming and perhaps making an outline or a cluster to guide their final essays. The instructions also encourage students to use this as an opportunity to consider their own experiences through writing about an idea, and to use evidence from those experiences in their response.

But, in the end, the quality of the evidence in the essay is, at best, no more important than the form that the response takes. A student who produced a perfectly formed, relatively superficial exam that demonstrated some development, some fluency with the language, and some understanding of structure and surface conventions in their response to the question about this excerpt would be placed in first year composition, not basic writing. In other words, if a student had a successful information transfer session on this exam, they wouldn't be labeled a "basic writer." Similarly, an exam that had some great ideas but was jumbled up and hard to follow – one where the information transfer wasn't as successful – would land a student in basic writing.

The placement process that we use certainly is not unique – there are many campuses that use measures like the timed exams to assess students' writing. And the reasons why we (and, doubtless, other campuses) use the placement process that we do are probably all too familiar – it's the best we can do with what we have. Our current placement exam replaced one that contained approximately 70 questions about grammar, punctuation, spelling, and word usage that were to be answered on a Scantron form. At the end of the exam, there was a short essay question. Given the current balance of time and resources available for writing assessment, then, the current strategy seemed to be the best option. But neither our good intentions nor the institutional realities that result in this approach to placement testing change the net result here: the first "college writing task" that students face privileges a conception of writing, a performance model, that we know doesn't work for students (our research shows it), and which students say doesn't work for them, either. Additionally, this *isn't* an approach that many of us endorse, and for that reason it also is not one that basic writers are likely to encounter when they get to some of our basic writing courses.

Once students *are* placed in basic writing courses, they face a range

of experiences in their courses. But regardless of what their particular class is like, they probably won't learn much more about what "basic writing" means for them in this institution in these classes. They also don't spend much time trying to figure out why they're "doing all of this writing and/or reading" either. In fact, I would argue that on each of these issues, we rarely fulfill our responsibility to these students: helping them develop the language and strategies that they can use to contest their labeling as "basic writers" and, perhaps, free themselves of it. But just because some of us have not done this doesn't mean that we cannot begin to do so.

Conclusion: A Modest Proposal

Reflecting on the implications discussed here may, I think, provide possible solutions to some of the issues raised in these student interviews. These solutions begin with some slight modifications to placement procedures, then move into curricular change.

The first part of this proposal involves telling basic writers what we mean when we identify them as such. For instance, we might start by naming courses what they are, rather than using polite euphemisms for them. (Again, our basic writing course is called "Writing Techniques.") But of course, "basic writing" is itself another term that is laden with meaning that needs to be unpacked. Thus, we might accompany these modified names with descriptions of the courses (particularly of their goals), and distribute these to students *before* they take the exams that affect their placements. While many institutions may do this, many others (including my own) rely on other people to do it for them – admissions officers, orientation coordinators, or counselors. But rather than hand over this small but significant responsibility, I would argue that we should do it ourselves.

Of course, this small action still doesn't help students confront the much larger question of what it means to be labeled a "basic writer." What was it about *these* students' writing that was seen as problematic? What does it mean, within the context of the institution, to be in basic writing? At my own institution, why are these students – many of whom earned high marks in their high school English classes – in basic writing? One way to begin addressing this, and perhaps to concomitantly help students develop the language they need to contest their definitions as basic writers (if they want to, of course) is to begin basic writing courses with the documents that landed students in the course in the first place. We might ask students to re-read these documents, and then to write about why and how they wrote what they did. We might also ask those who rated the essays to write back to students about their readings, providing a basis for a discussion about

these responses within the context of the academic writing situation where students could *really* begin to think about the issue of what is a "basic writer," and whether they thought they were one or not.

In the basic writing course I'm teaching this semester, I've designed a curriculum (stemming from these interviews) that I hope will help students develop additional answers to these and other questions, as well. In their first paper, students define a problem or issue related to education and literacy that they want to investigate, write about what, in their experience, makes them interested in it, and consider how they might investigate the problem or issue. Remaining true to my basic writing roots, I have students read the first two chapters of *Lives on the Boundary* as they write this paper. This time, though, I'm not asking them to empathize with Rose's experience as an underprepared student. Instead, I'm asking students to participate in the same kind of intellectual inquiry that Rose does as a researcher, identifying the methods that he used for his investigation and considering whether they might be appropriate for their own.

So far, students have identified some problems that they feel strongly about: How does the placement process work? Why are students placed in basic writing courses? How do high schools prepare students for college-level English and math? Who decides what classes students should take, why, and how? (Certainly, to readers of this essay, these questions may sound familiar. But in my own defense let me say that I helped primarily with shaping, not defining, them.) When it comes time for students to write their third paper of the term, they'll return to these first essays. They'll read through them and choose a problem or issue that they want to investigate, conduct the investigation (individually or in groups), and write up their results. Then they'll use that writing as the basis for another piece of writing – a public document intended for (and distributed to) an audience whom they feel can learn from the results of their investigation.

Ultimately, I hope that this approach will accomplish three goals. First, of course, I hope that students will develop as writers – that they will build strategies that they can carry with them to other courses, that they might discover that writing can help them think and is a medium for communicating ideas between writers and readers. Second, I hope to rectify some of the issues I've raised here by creating an environment where students can learn more about the issues related to education and literacy that they have defined and, in the process, more about what it *really* means to be a basic writer here, ultimately developing their skills and thinking so that they can move beyond that classification. Finally, I hope that this approach will raise questions within the institution about basic writers and basic writing. While I don't agree with the notion in some "abolitionist" arguments that basic writing exists as a self-perpetuating enterprise, I do agree that insti-

tutions must be aware of, and accountable to, basic writers – particularly when we ask them to enroll in classes that carry "additive" (or, as Randy Woodland says, "fictional") credit.

There are other approaches that might be taken to these issues as well. For instance, it might be possible to design an assignment or a course around an ongoing investigation of "college level writing." This could start with the first piece of such writing students complete – the placement exam — and then move to the larger context of writing in our institutions. This part of the investigation might involve finding out more about the writing and reading practices in other disciplines – like the ones that students planned to go into as majors. Such investigations would require support from colleagues, and would need to be carefully structured. But they also would help students understand the contexts in which they are writing (and writing toward), and give them a clearer sense of the writing and reading demands that they might encounter in those majors. This exploration might also be augmented by varying degrees of involvement *by* faculty members from different disciplines. They could come for a "one shot" talk about writing and reading practices; they might even co-teach a section of the course. Whatever shape this investigation takes – whether it's a single assignment, or a term-long focus – it may help students understand what reading and writing they will face and what shape those might take. Ultimately, such an investigation might also lead students to take their composition courses (basic writing and other ones) more seriously. Additionally, such an investigation could also be framed as part of the process of investigation into college-level writing, and could serve as an additional basis for students to reflect on the ideas of "basic writer" and "basic writing" in their institutional contexts.

Of course, this is only a beginning. And as a "modest proposal," it is not without its own complications. For instance, we need to decide to what degree we *will* formulate our courses according to students' responses to questions about writing. For instance, sometimes basic writers cite lack of interest in the subjects of their essays as a reason for the quality of the ideas and/or writing in them. Will students be interested in investigating the institutional contexts for their own writing, and that writing in those contexts? As a long veteran of reflexive courses that have approached some of the issues from perspectives somewhat similar to those raised here, my own experience says sometimes yes, sometimes no. I am certainly optimistic about the approach I am using in my own basic writing course that I described earlier, but that course is only three weeks old at the time of this writing. One word of caution, though: I would argue that we not use students' responses to questions about themselves and basic writing to design a typical "client" (or set of clients) to which we market. Instead, these responses can be the beginning of *dialogue* – and in this

light, we have something to offer, as well.

Additionally, some basic writing instructors might look at this modest proposal and decide that it's not so modest – that asking students to investigate the reception of their writing, the institutional context surrounding that reception, and the role of writing and reading in different parts of that context is ambitious for such a course. Certainly, this proposal could be broken up into a series of smaller assignments; students might even focus on only one part of this proposal during a basic writing course. But in response to the charge that students *cannot* do this kind of work, I cite my favorite line from *Lives on the Boundary*: "Students will float to the mark you set" (26). In a carefully designed, carefully guided process where students can work together, in steps, on even a small part of this complex investigation, they will do good work.

Another problem with this modest proposal is that it remains an unfortunate fact that some of the materials associated with basic writing – like textbooks – still conceptualize writing as an act that is more about producing texts that look good. The alternative proposed here doesn't negate the possibility of dealing with surface-level errors, or making nice sentences, or any of the other elements of writing included in those texts. But it does move the idea of *writing* to the forefront of the basic writing course, and it does place basic writers in a situation where they will learn more about their own writing and the place of writing (and reading) in the academy. Doing so may ultimately help basic writers develop the language (and language/writing-related skills) to talk about themselves in the academy, and help basic writing courses (and programs) move closer to solving the dilemmas we face.

Notes

1. These questions were also shaped, in part, by Deborah Mutnick's outstanding study of basic writers described in *Writing in an Alien World*. Questions asking writers to define some terms ("basic writer," "learning to write," "being a writer") were asked by Mutnick, and were used in our study with her permission.

2. This notion of basic writing and basic writer is in some ways reflected in (and is a reflection of) the research in basic writing. Often, the pedagogy in basic writing courses is influenced by research which focuses on helping students work through issues that have resulted in their placement in basic writing courses. While the analysis in that research probably stems from specific institutional contexts (like this article's does), the ideas in it are meant to be generalizable (as the ideas in this article are). But we must ask ourselves: does the need to con-

struct "basic writers" and "basic writing" as semi-homogenous categories lend credence to an avoidance of specifically defining those categories? While this issue is outside the scope of this article, it will be taken up by the larger study of which this research is a part.

3. These names, along with all other student names in this article, have been changed.

4. While we did not ask specifically about parents' education levels, most students told us something about their parents' educational backgrounds. Two students had at least one parent with an advanced degree; five had at least one parent with a four-year degree; four had at least one parent with a two-year degree; three had parents with no higher education. Among those who didn't specifically identify higher education experiences of their parents, three had at least one parent in what might typically be considered a "blue collar" job (e.g., working on the line in a stamping plant); three had at least one parent who worked in what might be considered a "white collar" job (e.g., nursing).

5. Admission to UM-Dearborn is quite competitive – generally, students are in the top ten percent of their high school classes. For this reason, it is not surprising that Tom and Susan described themselves as fairly good students.

6. Typically, blue-collar workers at Ford Motor Company (or those related to them) refer to the company as "Ford's"; employees in more "professional" position (e.g., managers or engineers) refer to it as "Ford."

7. Of course, this is a point raised in Glynda Hull and Mike Rose's article "This Wooden Shack Place: The Logic of an Unconventional Reading" as well.

8. For a thorough review of some of these early cognitive approaches, see Rose, "Narrowing the Mind: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism."

9. Certainly, Tom and Susan's high school grades reflect this interpretation. Tom reported that in classes devoted primarily to composition, he received two B's, and a "B or a C." Susan reported receiving a B and three A's. Yet, in citing these high school writing experiences, I don't want to lay blame entirely at the feet of high school writing instructors – like those of us in post-secondary education, their choices are affected by a number of factors that are not for us to judge.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Existing Writing
1. Why did you choose this paper? What did you like about it?
2. Show us the areas in the paper where you think you did something particularly well, and talk about why you think you did a good job in these places.
3. Are there things in the paper you wish you might have done differently? If you had more time, what more might you like to do with this paper?

Experiences with writing and reading
1. Can you tell me a little about your family? (Where is your family from? Do you have brothers or sisters? Are they in college? Where do your parents work?)
2. Does your family do a lot of writing and/or reading? (If so: what kinds of things do different people in your family like to write and/or read? Do you know what you like about them?)
3. Do you like to read and/or write? What kinds of things do you enjoy?
4. Did you do much of the kind of reading or writing you like to do in school? (If yes – what kind? How were these things used? If no – what did you do instead? Did teachers know about the

kinds of things you like to read/write? If so, what did they think about them?)
5. How do you define "being a writer"?
6. How would you define "learning to write"?

Expectations of college careers
1. What do you think you might want to major in? Why do you want to major in that?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about what you think will be required for that major? For example, will you have to know a lot about a particular area, or be academically strong in a particular subject?

Expectations of college writing
1. What do you think of taking 099, "Writing Techniques?" What kinds of things do you hope to learn there?
2. What do you think writing in college will be like? (Will it be like what you did in high school? Will it be different? Do you think you'll have to write longer/shorter/more/fewer papers, etc.)? What do you think college professors, especially writing professors, will be like?
3. Do you think you'll have to do a lot of writing and/or reading in your major? What kinds of writing and/or reading do you think you'll have to do there?