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GOING AROUND IN CIRCLES: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN BASIC WRITING RESEARCH

Abstract: Basic Writing has failed to distinguish itself as a mature field of study since the researchers in the field do not seem to listen much to each other or to build on each others' findings. While those working in developmental writing demonstrate, for the most part, ideological agreement, we have significant conflict over what counts as valid evidence by which to build and advance knowledge. An analysis of methodologies used by those embroiled in the "mainstreaming debate" illustrates this methodological confusion, which leads to monologues going around in circles rather than constructive dialectic. While methodological conformity would be undesirable, researchers ought to consider the evidence and arguments of those using a variety of approaches to research.

Mature fields of study have developed forms of progress, ways of developing knowledge. For example, as researchers in chemistry, biology, or cosmology publish findings, the fields find ways of debating their soundness and coming to consensus about them. Thus, while the nature of the Big Bang, or its causes, or what if anything existed before it can still be discussed, astronomers no longer need debate whether it occurred or when; they can move on. And once we know that the planets revolve about the sun, we can move on to further exploration of the cosmos. Now, to be sure, there are segments of the population for whom these matters have not been settled and never will be. But these are people outside the scientific community for whom matters of ideology, personal experience, or special forms of reasoning disallow the professional consensus. Those for whom experience is the touchstone will believe in their hearts that the sun goes around the earth, for they see that happen every day. Nonetheless, this resistance to developed knowledge in the sciences, however popular in some quarters, has little effect on professionals in their laboratories. We can say the same about other mature fields of study. The Shakespeare au-

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thorship controversy is a joke to specialists in the Renaissance.

Perhaps the best parallel to these matters in the field of composition studies has to do with the role of formal grammar study as a means of helping students improve their writing. Since the research team headed by Richard Braddock in 1963 declared the study of formal grammar to be useless or worse for writing instruction, their findings have been repeatedly affirmed, as Hillocks demonstrated in 1986. The definitive article on the matter by Patrick Hartwell in 1985 built on the many studies of grammar and contributed a theoretical framework to the findings. By now, the strong professional consensus about the peripheral place of formal grammar instruction in the teaching of writing is beyond dispute, as almost all contemporary writing textbooks make clear.

As with findings in other fields of study, we do have many for whom this professional consensus on the role of grammar is meaningless or wrong. Some teachers dismiss the consensus in the light of their personal experience: "I don't care what the research says; my students learn to write because I teach them grammar first." Others will argue syllogistically: "you can't write paragraphs until you have learned to write grammatical sentences." Still others will base their arguments on ideology, which negates all the evidence: "grammar is the basis on which all language is built, so students must learn grammar before they can begin to write." While such teachers are more prevalent than Biblical fundamentalists in biology, they also remain on the fringes of the profession, whose knowledge-makers can pretty much ignore them and move on, seeking ways to help students write more grammatically without the useless study of formal grammar.

But it is hard to come up with other examples of professional consensus on matters in Basic Writing, since the researchers in the field do not seem to listen much to each other or to build on each others' findings. In this article, we are defining progress in our field as the development of professional consensus about key issues: findings or premises are published, debated and tested over time, and certain matters are, as a result of the professional dialectic, considered settled. As with the grammar issue, after some hundreds of studies have reached the same conclusions and a theoretical base has been established, we do not have to continue to test the same hypotheses; we can move on. Unhappily, on some of the most crucial matters in Basic Writing, this is not the case. Instead of moving toward a consensus, our researchers too often talk past each other, positions are reiterated rather than reconsidered, and we move in circles. We intend here to look closely at one line of research that exemplifies this and then to offer some suggestions to the field that might straighten out these circles and support our claims to an orderly, or at least an identifiable, discipline: Basic Writing Studies. The advantages to professional consen-

sus are legion, not the least of which is that we can better capitalize on our ideological agreement about the importance of helping the least prepared of our nation's college students succeed.

The Problem of Placing Entering College Students

The problem of placing students into a basic writing curriculum — whether it is or is not the best way to help underprepared students succeed — lies at the heart of basic writing issues and so is an appropriate issue for this study. The problem is researchable from a variety of perspectives, opens into most of the other central concerns in basic writing (such as whether there should be a writing requirement and, if so, what should be the appropriate curriculum), and should be subject to a gradual increase in knowledge as research accumulates. Unfortunately, it is a better example of writing research going around in circles.

Few issues have sparked as much emotional debate in the pages of the *Journal of Basic Writing* as the question of whether colleges and universities should “mainstream” developmental writers into the standard, first-year writing course. Those who support mainstreaming believe higher education should cease and desist the sorting and placing of students and make schools more egalitarian spheres. By maintaining systems of remediation, the pro-mainstreaming faction argues, writing programs perpetuate a hierarchy of dialects and linguistic differences. Meanwhile, those opposed to the mainstreaming of basic writers believe that basic writing courses serve the most underprepared writers on campus. Without basic writing, this camp suggests, a diverse student body would be less prepared to succeed in college and beyond. Although the debates between those who support mainstreaming and those who oppose it have grown increasingly divisive, it is evident that both factions want to democratize higher education.

Those embroiled in this debate represent an essentially homogeneous set of political beliefs. They demonstrate an acute awareness of the historically elite role higher education has played in American culture, and want to take proactive steps to combat the trend. Howard Tinberg, arguing in favor of basic writing, writes, “[W]e 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” (88). Tinberg clearly values that colleges have become increasingly accessible, less elite places. Ira Shor writes with even greater passion about the egalitarian goals institutions of higher education ought to enact as well as declaim. Arguing contrary to Tinberg and calling for the abolition of developmental writing, Shor declares that we should

be “serious about democratic education in a democratic society” (99-100). Tinberg and Shor find themselves, despite ideological agreement, on opposite sides of this important and ongoing debate about the effects of placement.

While controversy and debate are generally healthy ways to stimulate thought and advance knowledge production, the subfield of Basic Writing frequently finds itself needing to present a unified front to administrators, politicians, and policy makers who do not share the belief that institutions of higher education should be diverse and democratic. Basic Writing is a particularly, even uniquely, public wing of English studies. Frequently, those in charge of basic writing programs and curricula need to defend their very existence to audiences beyond their professional peers. When conservative lawmakers convinced the Board of Trustees at the City University of New York (CUNY) to end all “remedial” coursework at its senior colleges in 1998, they capitalized on the dissension in the ranks of basic writing scholars and practitioners, quoting abolitionist arguments from our professional literature. This is not to say we think this particular conversation should end. Nor are we calling for a reductive, “can’t we all just get along?” resolution. The subfield of Basic Writing needs to examine more closely the nature of our disagreement. A more critical “meta awareness” of our methodology could help us build consensus and work toward our common ideological goal, what Mike Rose calls “education for all members of a vast pluralistic democracy” (238).

Writing Placement and the “Universal Requirement”

A particularly instructive example of the way in which we have failed to reach the methodological consensus of which Rose speaks is the debate over what Sharon Crowley has called “the universal requirement.” In her provocative book *Composition in the University* and elsewhere, Crowley puts forth a “modest proposal” to abolish requiring first-year college students to take composition (*Composition* 240). Robert J. Connors has shown how advocates for the abolition of required first-year composition surface every few decades, “when some teachers declare it too hopeless to reform” (47). Essentially, Crowley problematizes both the ability of the academy to know what students need and the ethical implications of a mandate that perpetuates and facilitates poor labor practices. John Ramage last year critiqued Crowley’s methodology, stating, “Abolitionists offer suggestive but hardly definitive evidence for universal problems of hyperbolic proportions, buttressed by chilling anecdotes and pithy quotes” (online). Notice that Ramage takes Crowley to task not on ideological grounds but methodological ones. To be sure, most compositionists share

Crowley's egalitarian goals: Who among us would deny the need to attend to institutional labor practices? But we have strong divisions about what might constitute valid evidence, that is, a "definitive" research methodology that could advance these goals.

Ramage's critique, rather, gets at the lack of consensus about how to generate knowledge about this issue. He argues that the unconvincing evidence provided by the New Abolitionists consists only of hyperbole, anecdote, and quotations out of context. While reductive for rhetorical effect, this complaint might be restated in terms that Stephen North would recognize as a combination of what he calls "practitioner" and "philosophic" research. That is, the abolitionists advance their conclusions by argument from first premises and classroom experience, without attempting to reach generalizations through the more usual routes such as experimental data. We might extend Ramage's argument by pointing out that the methodologies used by the New Abolitionists are precisely those *not* adapted for gaining consensus but rather for stimulating dialectic, argument, and impassioned debate. In other words, in order to convince us that the conclusions we have been hearing from the New Abolitionists are sound, Ramage seems to be saying, we need a different kind of evidence, "definitive" evidence, or, as we would put it, experimental data. In fact, at the same conference where Ramage debated Crowley (The Western States Composition Conference), another member of the same English department attempted to present such data, the results of a systematic survey of student satisfaction with their experience in the required first year courses of the writing program. The data showed that a very high percentage of the students surveyed actually valued their required composition course. The data were entirely ignored as the discussion proceeded, and one of the Teaching Assistants declared that the required writing course was one that teachers hated to teach and students hated to take. It appeared then and appears in general that the methodology of the New Abolitionists is not interested in data or surveys — the "definitive" evidence produced by what North and others call "experimental" methodologies. To ignore data that contradicts one's doctrines seems short-sighted. But we can only say this if we trust and value evidence produced by an experimental methodology.

Crowley lacks empirical data, as does her fellow New Abolitionist Peter Elbow. This is not to accuse either of lack of scholarly rigor per se, but rather to point out their methodological orientation, which leans toward philosophical dialectic and anecdote. Philosophical dialectic is useful for advancing the conversation and integrating multiple voices into the debate and narrative has a unique rhetorical ability to persuade through emotion. Crowley and Elbow have suggested, respectively, provocative implications of the universal requirement and the assessment measures which support the requirement. However,

as a methodology, philosophical inquiry lacks the kinds of data that experimental methodology boasts. One of us, White, responded to Crowley's call for proof that the requirement helps students. His article in the *Journal of Basic Writing* was a direct response to that challenge, using both argument and experimental data. Crowley in turn responded to that article with a letter published the following year. When we look closely at that exchange, we can see a clear example of the ideological consensus; both mentioned the value of protecting access to higher education and helping less-prepared students succeed. But just as clearly that exchange demonstrates a fundamental disagreement over what counts as valid evidence and hence the lack of productive dialectic between the two researchers. When White asked Crowley, also at the Western States Composition Conference, why she had not responded to his article, she replied that her letter had done so. White in turn said that she had ignored his article in her letter. What could account for such a different view of the *Journal of Basic Writing* exchange?

Methodologies at Work

The inability to communicate effectively, that is to say in a way that advances our knowledge of issues of developmental writing, is not limited to the Crowley-White exchange. An examination of the scholarship concerning the "mainstreaming" debate within the *Journal of Basic Writing* in recent years reveals the presence of multiple and competing methodologies at work. Though it is not uncommon for different researchers to approach an issue using various modes of inquiry, it is imperative that we build consensus in order to appeal effectively to audiences outside our immediate discourse community. At the risk of hyperbole, higher education's ability to serve the populations that fill our developmental classrooms depends on the identification of methodological common ground. In the remainder of this article, we examine some representative scholarship on mainstreaming in the hopes of building methodological meta-awareness, which we consider the first step toward making informed and collective decisions about how best to advance knowledge in our field.

It is evident that the field of basic writing trusts the validity of experimental research to varying degrees. Perhaps this should not be surprising, given the problematics of identifying meaningful variables and interpreting experimental data. Further, opponents of experimentalism have long pointed out that the methodology has its roots "in formulations designed to deal with corn yield per acre," a far stretch from testing the efficacy of developmental writing courses and programs (North 141). Still, experimental research, on the surface at least,

appears to be the most appropriate methodology for inquiry into the mainstreaming of basic writers. As Stephen North points out in his still relevant text *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*, experimentalism has historically been useful for testing the success level of various pedagogies, from formal grammar instruction to sentence combining to various teacher commentary styles (143-4). But empirical studies that suggest the benefits of basic writing have been met with mixed reactions.

There is likewise little agreement over the validity of "practitioner research," a dominant mode of inquiry in the pages of the *Journal of Basic Writing*. Concerning the issue of mainstreaming, the temptation, of course, is to come to grand conclusions based on anecdotes emerging from our basic writing classes. No doubt, for all of us, our immediate reaction to the mainstreaming issue is rooted in our classroom experience. *My students mean so much to me that I would never dream of doing away with basic writing courses. Or: I've observed students improve during the semester.* We work in a knowledge-building community that consciously seeks to acknowledge the classroom as a meaningful and scholarly domain, but we risk sacrificing rigor and validity when we fail to interrogate what we mean by "evidence."

In his 1995 article, "The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies: Helping Students Succeed Under the New Elitism," one of us, White, uses experimental research to argue in favor of both basic writing and the large-scale assessment measures that place students there. White's evidence suggests that basic studies and placement measures assist students who otherwise might not remain in college. He seeks to counter "both well-meaning academics and less well-intentioned legislatures and governing boards" who support abolition (76). He sees both of those groups as putting forth an elitist program in opposition to education's "egalitarian motif" (75). Furthermore, White suggests that the effectiveness of basic writing *can* be proven, and presents yet-unpublished research to support his claim.

This is fairly traditional experimental research. He presents data from two sets of institutional experiments, one conducted by California State University's Institutional Research Office and the other by the New Jersey Basic Skills Council. The California State study tabulated retention among first-year students from Fall, 1978, and found that students who took the English Placement Test remained in college at markedly higher percentages than the freshman class as a whole. Further, those who tested into Basic Writing *also* were retained in greater numbers than the entire population of first-year students. White acknowledges that these data are difficult to interpret but suggest the success of the basic writing program at the numerous CSU campuses.

The New Jersey data, similar in design, had a larger scope. Researchers studied first-year students at all public institutions of higher

education in New Jersey, from community college to large, research-oriented four-year universities. The New Jersey study also examined multiple areas of remediation: reading, writing, and math. The results of the study were much like the other to which White refers. In New Jersey, White explains, "students who do not complete the basic writing courses leave school at a much higher rate" (82). So although White cautions about generalizing too much from the studies, he suggests we can gather data to show that basic writing "can help most low-scoring students succeed" (83).

White's article has elements of philosophical research as well. Specifically, White enters into a dialectic with the new abolitionists. Stephen North suggests that philosophical research contains the "back and forth of argument and counter-argument," a dialectical conversation between multiple voices (106). The philosophical researcher examines previous scholarly work and questions either the premises or the argument's validity (North 106). White connects his argument to previous listserv conversations: "writing program administrators on the WPA e-mail computer network are widely sympathetic with abolitionism, despite its implications for their jobs" (77). Dialectic with Sharon Crowley is also established. White calls into question Crowley's problematization of the notion of student need, thus questioning one of her major premises. White partially agrees with the claim that little has been done to document the success of basic studies, but offers data to counter the trend. As we noted above, the dialectic continued. Crowley, in her response to the article, suggests that she had an anti-elitist agenda in mind when she advocated for abolition. She rejects the notion that her position can be construed as neoconservative and refers to a right-wing publication, *Academic Questions*, which also challenged her modest proposal. However, Crowley does not respond to the data. So in effect, Crowley responds to White as a philosopher but not as an experimentalist. To return to our thesis, there is essentially no ideological opposition here. White and Crowley agree that we ought to work to counter the elitism of higher education. The difference is methodological. Crowley seems to want to engage White philosophically, but scarcely acknowledges the empirical data.

Tracey Baker and Peggy Jolly, in a primarily-experimental, 1999 *Journal of Basic Writing* article, are less willing than White to shed their practitioner identity. In "The Hard Evidence: Documenting the Effectiveness of a Basic Writing Program," Baker and Jolly present the results of a thorough program evaluation of basic writing at their home institution. Baker and Jolly are primarily interested in retention and find "slightly higher" retention among basic writers compared to overall enrollment. So their work is primarily experimental. Unlike White, Baker and Jolly are not philosophical. Their article is not a "think piece," nor do they situate their work very heavily in ongoing dialectic, al-

though they briefly allude to arguments put forth by Bruce Horner, Richard Miller, and Ira Shor. More than responding to other scholars, they are responding to a localized, institutional call to “assess retention rates for the student body” (28). So as experimentalists, their work has an immediate exigency: justify to administration the effectiveness of basic writing in order to maintain the program’s very existence.

But elements of practitioner knowledge also lurk in their report. In fact, Baker and Jolly, to their credit, have a meta-awareness of their methodology and defend the use of “instincts, sixth sense, and anecdotal reports” (28). They suggest that experimental knowledge is most rhetorically effective, given their institutional context, but suggest that the practitioner way of knowing “helps us understand our students, their strengths and weaknesses, even as we also study the hard facts. One without the other tends to distort the picture – at least within individual institutions” (28). Here, Baker and Jolly suggest that practitioner knowledge is particularly useful at the micro, localized level. They don’t suggest their practitioner knowledge applies to everybody, everywhere; rather, they assert such a viewpoint further contextualizes their local conditions.

But in this report, Baker and Jolly are primarily experimentalists. They lay out their methodology and process under such categories as “Variables” and “Data Collection.” The article, in fact, reads much like a piece of scholarship from the social sciences. They pay particular, though not exclusive, attention to retention, important since one of the critiques from the new abolitionists has been that basic writing is in part a tool of forces that do not wish to see ethnic minorities and working-class students receive their degrees. They study the first-year basic writing populations from the Fall Terms, 1993 and 1994, and track their progress. Retention was especially striking, and Baker and Jolly present their findings in tables so readers can easily grasp their various findings. Fourth-year retention for the general enrollment was only 23 percent, but for the sample population – all students enrolled in basic writing – it was 50 percent (32).

Baker and Jolly are also interested in current classification of the retained students after four years. The majority (73 percent) are either sophomores or juniors. Nine percent are seniors and three are enrolled in graduate programs in ESL. It’s difficult to do much with this data, especially since the authors don’t indicate the status of the entire population of students who began school in 1993 or 1994. Baker and Jolly looked at their sample population’s grade point averages as a third variable, but found nothing conclusive. In some years, GPAs were higher among retained students and in other years GPAs were higher among students who left college: “apparently, grade point average is not a variable which predicts whether students will complete university studies” (35). But we should note that Baker and Jolly have begun

to widen the conversation to include more than just retention and they base their generalizations on a research methodology that is designed to produce convincing generalizations.

In "Teaching in the Spaces Between: What Basic Writing Students Can Teach Us," Howard Tinberg makes two major claims. First, basic writing professionals need to spend more time listening to basic writers. Second, we should stop concentrating on the question of abolition and start concentrating on the question, "Whose responsibility is it to promote broad-based literacy in this nation?" Tinberg discusses the abolition debate briefly and then moves on to what he considers more important matters: students. His style is much like that of Mike Rose, as he tells stories about his students and quotes quite extensively from their writing. In his analysis, Tinberg sees in his basic writing students "edginess" as well as "agitation and uncertainty" (79). Underneath the problems with clarity and fluency, he argues, are insightful critiques of the system that placed them in remediation. Tinberg urges readers to do the kind of careful listening and analysis of the words of basic writing students, and consider the immense amount of knowledge that students bring with them to college. He ultimately advocates fighting for the preservation of basic writing, since the course is a space where educational institutions *can* listen and respond to an important group of students.

Of course, Tinberg's article is primarily a practitioner piece of scholarship. Readers learn about Tinberg's teaching style, that he thematizes his basic writing course around literacy acquisition, that he incorporates readings by Richard Rodriguez and Tim O'Brien and Frederick Douglass, and that he assigns a literacy narrative. Not only does he discuss classroom techniques, he incorporates many quotations from his students. Here Tinberg distinguishes himself. This multivocal text allows students to weigh in on professional conversations about education's role in society. We learn about Denise, a non-traditional student juggling more responsibilities and commitments than most students we encounter. Denise critiques the school systems she has encountered:

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 classroom 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. (84)

Tinberg uses Denise's words to illustrate the insights that basic writers have about education and society.

Tinberg is also a philosopher of sorts. He frames his article with current debates between scholars and politicians. He draws on the anti-open-admissions rhetoric of Mayor Giuliani, as well as the debates among major scholars such as David Bartholomae, Ira Shor and Min Zhan Lu. So his work is in dialectic with these individuals. But he takes it a step further and allows *his students* to be in dialectic with the politicians and scholars. Tinberg's dialectic has a unique agenda: allow a new set of voices to enter the ongoing conversation. Toward the end of his report, he even "cites" students in the way scholars traditionally cite other scholars, referring to their claims and premises with an air of respect for their writing.

Ira Shor, in "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction & Inequality," presents the piece of research that is methodologically most complicated and most interesting. Shor, a leading figure in critical pedagogy and collaborator and friend to Freire, argues that basic writing does more harm than good. Remediation, an enemy to both egalitarianism and progressive education, only serves to separate students into worthy and unworthy groups, Shor asserts. Further, basic writing – younger sibling to composition – helps maintain a system of corrupt labor practices among institutions of higher education by creating an underclass of students taught by an underclass of instructors:

BW/comp is a cash cow – full-tuition paid by students while part-time wages are paid to teachers. No costly equipment needed as in engineering labs or nursing departments. BW/comp is like the former colony on India, the jewel in the crown, a territory generating lots of wealth for the imperial metropolises of lit, grad school, and administration. (99)

Most damning to remediation, Shor charges that basic writing is a form of containment, "a gate below the gate" to hinder underprepared – largely minority and working-class – students (94). Shor carefully traces the role tracking has played in the history of American education and asserts basic writing's primary achievement has been to "slow down the students' progress toward the college degree which could enable them to expect higher wages in the job market" (95).

Shor is primarily an historian in this piece. He carefully lays out a narrative of education as an historically-dubious agent. Specifically, he relates composition's early history at Harvard as an extension of the admissions office, a means to weed out those not worthy to be Harvard Men. The narrative continues into the turbulent 1960s and 1970s when student movements began to demand "democratic change"

and egalitarianism in the classroom and beyond. Open-admissions, of course, became one of the prizes won by these democratizers of higher education, and Shor suggests "an extra layer of control was apparently needed to discipline students in an undisciplined age" (92). The punishment was basic writing, according to Shor's narrative, and it was a successful punishment, too. Shor points to the widening wealth and income gap, racial and gender inequality, and concludes that higher education has successfully squelched education as democratizer (93).

North considers the identification of patterns and the creation of narrative to be the primary roles of historians, the means to disseminating research and data. Ira Shor does just this; he locates relevant historical occurrences and finds a common bond: education as a means to tracking and sorting. He creates a narrative that tells the story of composition and basic writing, situates that story's relevance to professionals in basic writing, and explains that story's implications for our work. Yet his narrative is immersed in an explicit agenda and Shor makes no attempt to hide his ideology. Perhaps this is true of all historians, who likely can never fully separate their work from their positionalities and politics. Shor, however, goes a step further and makes radical proposals at the end of his piece. He not only proposes that we ought to mainstream basic writing students into the general population, he also suggests that the Conference on College Composition and Communication draft 1) a labor policy against the use of part-time instructors, and 2) a "curricular policy against tracking, testing, and skills-based instruction" (100).

Shor's methodology takes a sharp turn at the end, and it is here where Shor transcends North's historian category. Readers expect Shor to conclude his narrative with the argument for mainstreaming. Throughout his historical account, he deplores the negative aspects of basic writing and builds up audience expectation of an argumentative conclusion. But then he abruptly lobbies for his professional organization to take practical action. His "solution" is consistent with the radical, civic action for which critical pedagogy aims. Shor refuses to make a generic call-to-action and merely advocate for mainstreaming. Instead, he indicates the specific institutional manner that he thinks will bring about change. Ultimately, then, in terms of methodology Shor is not merely an historian, but also a progressive reformer. But this leaves those who would engage in dialectic with him in an awkward methodological posture. To dispute his practical proposal at the end allows him to respond that the historical issues are central, while a different reading of the history would necessarily scant the call for action. This situation is typical of a research community that, to recall the metaphor of our title, keeps going around in circles.

Coming to Conclusions

To mainstream or not to mainstream. That is the question. Whether the group we label “basic writers” ought to be placed in standard first-year composition or a developmental-level course “below” composition is a debate fraught with political and ideological implications. Who has access to higher education? Is college for everybody? How do educational institutions sort and place students? Do we enculturate students in such a way that their futures, and by extension their material conditions, become set in stone? What kind of language belongs in the academy? As rhetoricians and public intellectuals, how can we shape institutions that are more ethical and diverse? We maintain that although the mainstreaming debate raises complicated and provocative questions such as these, the primary reason basic writing scholars differ so emphatically is because they differ methodologically – not politically. It is doubtful that we will unite under a single research methodology, and equally doubtful that this would be desirable. Yet those of us committed to Basic Writing and the democratic potential of education also need to work toward our field’s intellectual maturity. We contend this maturity can advance if we carefully and ethically take account of methodologies other than our own in our scholarship. For example, we should take particular note of a massive research study issued by The Institute for Higher Education Policy – a report most of those in our field will never read – which concludes, “The social and economic consequences of not providing remedial education [at the college level] are high” (*College Remediation* viii). In short, we need to do a better job of listening to each other in order to stop moving in circles.

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