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EXPECTATIONS, INTERPRETATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF BASIC WRITING

ABSTRACT: This essay argues that Basic Writing students, teachers, and scholarship are crucial to enabling colleges and universities to live up to their ideals of diversity, interdisciplinarity, and student-centered learning. BW scholars and teachers have developed ways to work with students to better understand the different perspectives they bring to their writing and learning, and to use those perspectives to break down barriers between academic and non-academic worlds and develop "borderland" knowledge and perspectives. The authors call for more research exploring the potential of basic writing students to develop such perspectives, and for research exploring the implications of BW scholarship for assisting in the retention of students and the revitalization of faculty committed to interdisciplinary learning. Finally, they call on working with BW students to assist teachers in researching and developing ways of fighting the material social barriers to the education of students and teachers.

To go by the mission statements in current college catalogues, "diversity," "interdisciplinarity," and "student-centered learning" are among the most publicized goals of higher education. According to these catalogues, institutions across the nation expect to serve a new student body diverse in not only race and ethnicity but also economic class, gender, sex, age, and educational or work experiences. The academy expects students to take part in programs designed to develop new styles of thinking and writing and new voices which break down the boundaries separating academic fields and isolating the academy from society at large. Furthermore, the academy expects faculty to

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treat students as the center of learning rather than the passive receivers of established knowledge.

Given these grand expectations, how might the field of Basic Writing challenge the academy to turn its paper ideals into lived realities? One direction would be to articulate the place of Basic Writing in an academy which pays more than lip service to its vow to inculcate diversity, interdisciplinarity, and student-centered learning. This would involve reviewing Basic Writing's historical contributions, through faculty and student efforts, to challenge traditional institutional complacency towards uniformity in the student body, disciplinary purity, and top-down transmission of established knowledge. In many ways, Basic Writing came into being by fighting for the educational rights of students traditionally kept outside the gates of the academy as a result of their less privileged class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, or previous educational background. And it had to do so by confronting the deficit model underlying traditional academic interpretations of why students produce "errors."

The academy had traditionally approached error from "top down," and thus had understood error as an indication of the students' lack of cognitive skill, linguistic knowledge, or motivation to learn the rules of academic discourse. By contrast, Basic Writing researchers set out to learn about the viewpoints and efforts of students. Basic Writing has gathered information on what individual students were actually thinking, trying to do, and aiming to achieve when producing textual deviations from the established norms promoted in various college classrooms. It has compiled a rich pool of data demonstrating the cognitive agency of basic writers and a whole range of logics behind seemingly random departures from conventional syntax, tone of voice, organization, and forms of argument. Such student-centered research has led to a wealth of pedagogical strategies to help students improve their writing, strategies centered on what the students actually need rather than what the faculty assume the students need (Bartholomae, "Study of Error"; Hull; Lees; Shaughnessy; Tricomi; Wall). In short, Basic Writing has always been at the forefront of efforts to increase diversity and inculcate student-centered learning.

However, given the political climate of the late sixties and the seventies, Basic Writing teachers and program directors often had to argue for its legitimacy through invoking problematic images, such as depicting basic writing students as "foreigners" and "beginners" (see Horner, "Mapping"). The imagery of the "foreigner" was often used to depict basic writers as different from the students previously attending college, not in intelligence or motivation but in educational and family background. The imagery of the "beginner" was often used to depict basic writers as inexperienced, new at writing as a result of the inequities in our nation's distribution of educational resources and

opportunities, rather than as lacking in capacity and ambition as learners. Both moves are indicative of the political climate of the time, when a significant number of those in positions of power within and outside the academy had openly portrayed basic writers as “barbarians” and a threat to the academy’s integrity and traditions. The images of the beginner and foreigner worked effectively to appease the opponents of Basic Writing by reassuring them that although Basic Writers were newcomers to academic culture, they were also model immigrants eager and able to learn the ways of the academy. Thus, their presence would not disrupt business as usual. At the same time, these images emphasize society’s moral obligation to remedy its longstanding history of discrimination by extending to these native-born “foreigners” and adult “beginners” the educational opportunities denied them as a result of social injustice.

The recent public trend to put a “multi-” or “trans” before everything—“culture,” “media,” or “national”—has the potential to open some new routes for asserting the place of Basic Writing in the academy. To begin with, if one of the catalogued grand expectations of the academy is to advance interdisciplinarity and service learning, which allegedly means cultivating ways of thinking and speaking that break down the boundaries separating the academy and society at large and isolating academic disciplines, then we might use existing research in Basic Writing to foreground the capacity and aspirations of basic writers to meet this institutional expectation. For instance, if academic language represents the language of those who teach in the academy and the language of those whose writings we regularly assign our students to read, then the popularity of Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing in college readers suggests that the new voice endorsed by the academy is increasingly more diverse and hybrid. It has become trendy not only to assign writings by authors interested in forging hybrid styles out of multiple languages in courses listed under “interdisciplinary programs”—women’s studies, cultural studies, environmental studies—but also to host symposia and workshops where faculty exchange experiences in developing such new voices in their own work and pedagogies which invite students to read and write from the borderlands (see Bridwell-Bowles; Lunsford and Ousgane).

Given these trends in the official academic climate, the same aspects which had made basic writers appear “alien” and “novice” to an academy interested in melting differences into the pot of disciplinary purity and academic uniformity—namely, these students’ need to respond to the dissonance between the discourses of school, home, and work when reading or writing and their reluctance to take an either/or approach to these competing ways of thinking and speaking—should now mark them as experienced practitioners of the borderlands and, therefore, ideal citizens of an academy aiming to inculcate diversity,

interdisciplinarity, and service learning. In theory, these students are indeed not only the kinds of students the academy officially expects to serve, because of the diversity in their backgrounds, but also the kinds of students most interested in developing the hybrid voices the academy expects faculty and students to inculcate: hence, the kinds of students the academy needs. In fact, these students have a lot to teach the general faculty about the challenges facing writers who try to read and write from the borderlands of cultures and disciplines, and about the kinds of pedagogy which can best help students develop new voices on those borderlands.

To assert this potential place of Basic Writing in the general curriculum, we need more research on the contributions of basic writers to the academy not just in terms of body counts in statistics on racial, ethnic, gender, and age ratios, but more importantly, as writers and thinkers with experiences, ambitions, and perseverance for living in the kind of borderland the academy is vowing to become (see, for example, Gilyard; Soliday, "Translating"; Sternglass; Villanueva; Wallace and Bell). That is, we need to create a discourse which presents Basic Writing as not only a moral imperative for an academy willing to pay more than lip service to its paper ideals but also a practical imperative—a means to improve student retention and faculty vitality, two aspects crucial to the well being of any institution.

One direction this research might take would be to further examine discrepancies between academic interpretations of deviations in the writings of published writers, on the one hand, and its interpretations of deviations in the writings of students, on the other. We have in mind here, for example, the tendency, on the one hand, to celebrate deviation in texts by writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa as an expression of her desire and efforts to live in the borderlands of cultures and disciplines while, on the other hand, continuing to treat deviation in student writings only as "errors" — evidence of the writer's lack of cognitive or linguistic sophistication (see Lu, "The Vitality" and "Professing Multiculturalism"). There is a continued refusal to acknowledge the desire and efforts of students to think and write in the borderlands even as they learn to become more experienced users of the established discourses of individual sites. We also need more research which challenges discrepancies between the kinds of voice the academy demands of students labeled Basic Writers and the kind of voice it expects of other members of the academy. On many campuses, the effort to write from the borderlands is still preserved as the privilege of those who have earned the right to do "real" work within the academy. Curriculum structures often indicate that students are not ready to venture into the borderlands and experiment with alternative voices — earn credits in interdisciplinary programs — until after they have proven they have been naturalized into the supposedly univocal context of aca-

democratic culture or individual disciplines — i.e., after they have been placed out of Basic Writing courses. The borderlands has thus become an elite institutional space reserved for writers already fluent in the so-called academic discourse, while basic writers continue to be exiled from the real, social borderlands they occupy in real life by being forced to simplify the context of their writing into a univocal “academic community.” They have continually been told that they are simply not yet cognitively, emotionally, and psychologically “ready” — just as elementary school children traditionally have been perceived as being too immature — to handle the challenge of reading and writing in multivocal contexts.

To combat this elitist double standard, we need more research which treats basic writers as real historical agents and acknowledges the extent to which many basic writers are already living (out of social necessity and/or personal choice) in the borderlands of dissonant cultural sites when learning to read and write.¹ We need research which acknowledges the interests of a significant number of basic writers in composing thoughts and texts which examine the power relations among diverse discursive sites rather than separating and hierarchizing the competing ways of thinking and speaking immediate to their school, work, and family lives. In short, we need more representations of basic writers as experienced and active — creative — practitioners of the kind of borderlands the academy officially expects the general faculty and students to inhabit.

We should also encourage research which focuses not only on what faculty and peer tutors have learned about basic writers but also on what, in the process of helping basic writers revise their writings, faculty and peer tutors have learned about themselves as thinkers and writers. For instance, Basic Writing teaching is marked by the challenge of figuring out the “logic” behind deviations basic writers produce in their writing. To what extent have faculty and peer tutors’ efforts to learn to read and write about a text or context from the points of view of basic writers inspired them to consider perspectives other than the ones in which they have become fluent and have thus been locked into as a result of their own professional training? (See, for example, Hull and Rose.) To what extent have their efforts to help basic writers articulate the challenges they face when negotiating the dissonance of home, work, and school and to come up with strategies for tackling such challenges conceptually and syntactically enhanced faculty and peer tutor efforts to develop multivocal voices in their own writing? These are cogent questions for researchers. We need more research which presents basic writing students as making significant contributions to the efforts of faculty and peer tutors to think and write from the borderlands (see Soliday, “Translating”).

We should encourage research which explores the implications

of existing Basic Writing research and pedagogy for the general curriculum. Basic Writing teachers and scholars have long been involved in researching ways to treat basic writers as the center of learning, interpreting deviations in student writing in the context of the writer's aims and aspirations as a thinker and writer. It has developed research and pedagogies aimed at understanding the logic behind students' production of "errors" and at honoring the students' sophistication and ambition as thinkers and writers when helping them to revise their writing. For instance, when basic writers try to examine the strengths and limitations of the established norms of one discipline from the perspectives of a variety of disciplines and cultures, and when they try to forge more complex and hybrid viewpoints out of dissonant cultures, their existing command over standard written English often appears to "fall apart" (see Bartholomae, "Inventing"; Schwalm). Researchers have come up with a range of pedagogies for helping students to sustain these efforts when revising. Researchers in Basic Writing have argued that although basic writers can benefit from instruction which expands their exposure to the established norms of thinking and writing within individual disciplines, this kind of teaching by itself is not enough not only for those desiring to forge a hybrid voice out of competing discourse but also for students who wish to "master" such norms. Students lose motivation and trust in our ability to teach when faculty fail to grasp what each student has to tell us about what exactly he or she is trying to do on the conceptual and syntactic levels during a particular instance of writing.

Given the academy's catalogue expectations towards diversity in our new students' backgrounds and aspirations, towards more student-centered learning and teaching, and towards multivocal voices, the general faculty and students have a lot to learn from Basic Writing concerning the new and diverse problems surfacing in their learning and our teaching as they join us in meeting the academy's grand expectations. This is especially the case for those faculty directly involved in interdisciplinary programs and eager to encourage students to explore multivocal texts. Faculty failure to grasp the different challenges facing students when writing in univocal and multivocal contexts could lead students to distrust the faculty's explicit commitment to cultivate interdisciplinary perspectives and prevent faculty from helping students develop the voice they claim to expect. Thus, Basic Writing research and pedagogy can provide insights on how to improve student retention, especially the retention of those students who have taken seriously our catalogued expectations of diversity and interdisciplinarity but who end up in classrooms which continue to use "top down" and univocal approaches to knowledge.

Examining the contributions of Basic Writing research and pedagogy to the general curriculum could improve not only student reten-

tion but also faculty revitalization. For instance, faculty in interdisciplinary programs often get depressed by the seemingly poor quality of student writing, when they take that to mean that some of their students have not been properly prepared, nor are sufficiently motivated, to learn the real subject the faculty are eager to teach. If deviations often mark moments in student writing where complex attempts are being made at both the conceptual and syntactic levels and when students take seriously the faculty's endorsement of multivocal voices, learning to work with these students on these deviations can offer real incentives to faculty in interdisciplinary programs.² Engaging in student-centered writing instruction can help these faculty recognize the energy and sophistication students often bring to their learning in spite of the seemingly poor quality of the texts they produce. This may help these faculty reach the most motivated and ambitious of our students. Such contact can in turn boost the vitality of faculty members, inspiring them to become more interdisciplinary in their research and teaching. We need to encourage more research which explores the applicability to the general curriculum but especially interdisciplinary programs of existing Basic Writing research and pedagogies.

Finally, at a time when many Basic Writing programs are struggling simply to maintain what marginal institutional space they occupy, we need to call on our basic writers, well-versed as they are in the challenges of competing for institutional resources of time, space, and material support, to assist us in researching, documenting, and developing ways of fighting the material barriers to learning and contributing to society which academic and other institutions, despite their paper ideals, regularly place in the way of those who would aspire to join in achieving those ideals (on this strategy, see Horner, "Traditions" 393-94; Soliday, "Class" 739; and Thompson A23). Just as Basic Writing scholarship has benefited from recognizing students' cognitive and social agency, Basic Writing programs may benefit from recognizing, and drawing on, students' political agency. Such collaborative research with students can benefit not only the students themselves and those who work most closely with them, but also 1) interdisciplinary programs many of which trace their beginnings to the same movements to give a space and voice to the disenfranchised, and more generally 2) academic institutions as a whole.³ Many interdisciplinary programs in ethnic, cultural, women's, multicultural, and working-class studies were initiated during the same period as programs in Basic Writing, and were developed to meet not only the needs but demands of students previously not admitted or not recognized as having anything to contribute to the academy. In the current climate of academic downsizing, these programs, like Basic Writing programs, face the prospect of competing with more established, traditional academic programs for institutional space, as add-ons threatening academic integ-

riety. Such programs might be called upon to live up to their own rhetoric of inclusion and to join Basic Writing programs and basic writing students in documenting both the material needs of students and their contributions to achieving the catalogued academic ideals. And similarly, academic institutions themselves can benefit from mobilizing such students as their true constituents, whose voices the academy not only should but needs to listen to if it is to maintain its integrity.

There is a long, if neglected, history of academic institutions changing not from the top down but from the ground up, transformed by each wave of “new” students pushing at their gates. Such students—Jews, blacks, returning GIs, women, immigrants, the working class—have almost always been viewed by the academy, and society at large, as a threat to the academic mission, people to be either ignored, assimilated, or rerouted away from the gates. Yet they have always improved any institution they entered, not only by contributing to the quality of learning and knowledge-making but also by holding the academy more firmly to the ideals it espouses—by putting “academic” truths to the test. Basic Writers, the latest of these institutional classes of students, have already forced the revision of many an academic “truth” through the new questions they ask, and force us to ask, and the new answers they present to our questions. We can expect, and demand, that our colleagues and institutions learn to expect and depend on basic writing to continue to do so, to the benefit of all.

Notes

1. See Gloria Anzaldúa’s account of her own history with writing instruction in Lunsford.
2. See David Bartholomae’s observations on the irony of attempts to “import ‘multiple cultures’” into classrooms which already represent various cultures in their students’ writing practices, and of scholars going to archives to “‘discover’ working-class writing by women” on campuses “where young working-class women [students] write” (“Tidy House” 14-15, 17).
3. For a discussion of the difficulties of enlisting interdisciplinary programs and the academy generally in supporting composition programs, see Horner, *Terms of Work* Chapter Four.

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