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HOW WE HAVE FAILED THE BASIC WRITING ENTERPRISE

ABSTRACT: This "open letter" to the coeditors of JBW and the field of basic writing generally outlines four ways we have failed the basic writing (BW) enterprise: 1) by giving insufficient attention to public relations; 2) by allowing ourselves to be co-opted by traditional academic politics; 3) by not unraveling the confusion of legitimate differences of dialect with "bad grammar"; and 4) by not taking a more critical and enterprising approach to research. But this account of failures should not obscure the success of teachers, whose dedication to and achievements in the BW enterprise have been truly great.

April 2000

Dear George and Trudy:

We've not been getting good news, have we? At our home base, the City University of New York (CUNY), the retreat from a thirty-year tradition of Open Admissions (OA) is complete. And now CUNY has been severely crippled by the draconian decision to cut back on what central administration and the Board of Trustees still insist on calling "remediation" programs. Senior colleges are under orders to dismantle their often nationally acclaimed basic skills programs for underprepared students. No longer can students in our senior colleges find review courses that often greatly increase their chances for successful college careers and employment. Yes, CUNY's community colleges, with their model basic skills programs, can still offer developmental courses.¹ One small administrative matter has been overlooked, however: Our community colleges have been hit, with only a few months' warning, with exponential increases in enrollment that threaten to choke the system.

Unfortunately, CUNY is not alone in such responses to a backlash, both public and academic, against basic skills instruction in col-

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lege. Although my focus is on CUNY, I write this open letter, to express my condolences to you, me, and all readers of *JBW*, and I write to share my reflections on why this terrible retreat has happened. You asked me, George and Trudy, to address the question of where I think Basic Writing (BW) has been and is going.² (And, by the way, I join you in wincing at the pun “W[h]ither BW?”). This prompt has forced me to organize and give voice to my felt sense that we BW faculty have collectively failed the BW enterprise. I’m as much at fault as my esteemed colleagues. We’ve let our vision blur and our idealism be put aside.

I want to say at the start that you two, as current coeditors of the *Journal of Basic Writing (JBW)*, are *not* on my list of four ways I think we’ve failed the basic writing enterprise. Nor are Peter Miller and Bill Bernhardt, the *JBW* coeditors before you from 1989 to 1995. As *JBW* editor in the mid-to-late 1980s, I know first hand that juried journals such as *JBW* publish the best essays offered by colleagues and/or solicited by editors.³

The net I cast for these personal reflections has caught more than a single journal, college, event, or person. In my net are my years teaching BW at Queensborough Community College (QCC), one of 17 post-secondary schools that comprise CUNY; my synthesis of thirty years of reading the popular press and professional literature; my having attended lots of regional and national conferences, often as an elected leader in the sponsoring professional associations; and my having visited hundreds of US and Canadian colleges and universities as consultant and/or workshop leader.

Be warned, therefore. This open letter is subjective to the core.

At the start of OA, we BW faculty, researchers, and cheerleaders joined eagerly in the basic enterprise at CUNY. Like us, many colleagues across the United States were doing the same. We were pragmatists, yet idealists. We were egalitarians and believers in the power of language to give folks chances to make choices as individuals, consumers, and workers. “Enterprise” is a word I used in my title quite intentionally. To me, it’s a term that connotes optimism, boldness in response to challenge, determination to persevere, and energy that stands undiminished when unexpected complexities threaten to hobble. Terms such as “establishment,” “industry,” “venture” don’t do it for me: The first is too cynical, the second too commercial, the third too frail.

How did we fail our proud enterprise? Our first failure was we didn’t tend to public relations. Did we think college students’ need for BW and other basic academics would be accepted easily by our many publics? Didn’t we realize that the vast majority of consumers of media, white and blue collar workers, professionals, homemakers, community leaders, legislators, educational administrators, and even faculty and students would be frankly repelled by what aspiring college students clearly did not know? Why did we not anticipate that the

newspapers, eager to sensationalize, would jump on the chance to print examples of college basic writers' writing before they took catch-up courses?

I remember a mid-1970s complimentary profile in the *New York Times* about Mina Shaughnessy's compelling, foundational book about BW and basic writers, *Errors and Expectations*. The illustrations accompanying the article "just happened" to be samples of "before-BW" student writing. Predictably, most public reaction to that story and similar articles was negative. What are illiterate students doing in college? Won't an OA program that attracts such students water down the value of our hard-earned college degrees? Why are public funds being spent to repeat what students should have learned in high school "if only they had paid attention"? For months after that article appeared, I, along with my BW colleagues, was grilled with such questions when I saw friends or went to a social gathering of non-academics. Sadly, the tone was far more enraged and bitter when academics, particularly senior and almost senior faculty, got together. To this day, some thirty years later, these attitudes persist vocally.

But almost universally we supporters and teachers of college developmental courses were delighted with that newspaper article. We saw it as recognition and confirmation. In the face of the public's and senior faculty's responses, we simply sighed, shook our heads, thinking "What do *they* know?" Whatever each of us knew about learning from history evaporated.

A free society wants to be inspired on moral and practical grounds when something generous and constructive strikes so many as wrong. Clear information with specific supporting evidence, along with compelling stories, are vital for any new, semi-revolutionary movement, to take root and grow. The responsibilities of the pioneers, the semi-revolutionaries, is to fill that need. Yet, we were silent. We didn't question whether samples of "before BW" circulating in the popular press needed to be countered with strong examples of "after BW." Even without the comfort of the sorts of quasi-scientific quantitative studies that educators used to love universally, we could have at least supplied alternative visual images for the public. Instances of student success in our BW classrooms evolved before our eyes. But we did not share them publicly. We remained silent.

We didn't write for the popular press, neither op ed pieces nor articles for widely read national magazines. We didn't try to get our story out on television and radio. We didn't doggedly seek to "prove" our results to college administrators who control policy and funding. We didn't attempt to curry favor with sympathetic political candidates who were likely someday to design public budgets. We didn't lobby sitting legislators, civic leaders, or grassroots influential organizations like Rotary Clubs and local business associations. We failed as com-

municators.

Public relations were fine on another front, without effort. The story of OA and developmental programs mobilized hundreds of faculty at CUNY and many other colleges. Enthusiastically, we created curriculum and experimented with teaching strategies to serve our new student constituency. We searched for appropriate textbooks, with no luck – and we “settled” to keep things going. (I confess my first semester teaching BW, I settled for a collection of dull, mediocre readings merely because it was available in sufficient quantity at the college bookstore.) In reaction to the nonexistent teaching material we needed, we wrote our own fledgling resources. We succeeded often and fell flat at times, always trying to push ourselves ever closer to “what worked.” Some of us even dared to publish college-BW textbooks, opening ourselves as novices to the scrutiny of our peers and students. We tried innovative teaching practices – collaborative learning, simulation games, freewriting, to name a few. Our internal public relations were fine.

Our second failure was we couldn’t seem to find the strength to resist being appropriated by traditional academic culture. By implication, the newly hired faculty expected to teach basic skills⁴ were charged to find news ways to reach and teach developmental students. We collaborated, experimented, traded ideas and experiences. But after six or seven years, a round of CUNY budget cuts led to reassigning many of those full-timers to non-basic courses. Queensborough, my college, had in 1969 established a Basic Education Skills Department and was therefore less affected immediately, but as soon as faculty members left or retired, their positions were refunded for adjuncts. Soon far more than 50% of all basic skills courses were taught by adjuncts, many of whom were high school teachers during the day. Slowly, many CUNY colleges could not help but lose their innovative edge. Adjuncts were not paid to participate in faculty development, so we could not pass along easily what we full-timers had learned in the early years of OA. No expansion of criteria for promotion and tenure took place to recognize the creative, non-mainstream academic achievements of BW faculty.

At CUNY, new faculty energies began to steer toward traditional academic politics. Most of us BW faculty had come young to our assignments. We wanted to keep our jobs. We looked around, listened, and accurately concluded that our potential for promotion and tenure wouldn’t benefit from our having spearheaded time-consuming alliances with high schools with whom we were eager to collaborate. We’d get no CV mileage out of writing the college textbooks desperately needed to fill a serious college-level pedagogic vacuum, no matter how groundbreaking the content and approach. We would have ventured too far afield had we spent time working toward what some of us envisioned as a way to universal literacy: a US Civilian Youth Corps.

Academe for us was back to business as usual. This happened at many US colleges, not only those of CUNY. Couldn't we collectively have changed that reality by doing more than complaining among ourselves? We did not mobilize to demand that our administrators enlarge the playing field of traditional academic politics.

Our third failure, not unrelated to the issue of grammar yet extending far beyond it, was that too many of us beat a hasty retreat from the so-called "Black English (BE) controversy." It can be said to have begun in earnest in 1977 with the publication of Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. BE, sometimes called "Ebonics" today, describes the spoken dialect of some, but not all, African Americans. It operates with the same consistent, logical grammatical categories as do other languages and dialects, including so-called "standard English." BE has verb tenses, pronoun use, adjective and adverb placement, and so forth.

Smitherman's work quickly caught the attention of national media, which rarely reports on scholarly books as news. Most newspapers—even highly respected ones—published supposedly objective articles that in tone and emphasis were one step removed from mockery. Nothing was said about dialects being ubiquitous no matter what the language, today and throughout history. The examples chosen for the newspaper reports "just happened" to be ones that would appear relatively extreme to people unschooled in the history of linguistics.

Racist outrage and disgust laced the public's predictable outcry. Illiteracy! This proves inferiority! Non-African-American comedians joked on radio and television about BE, and the jokes using BE phrases got the biggest laughs. As John McWhorter (among today's outstanding scholars of dialects) says "There is always a fundamental sense that they [dialects such as BE, "Joe Pesci's Brooklynese," and "Jeff Foxworthy's Southern 'redneck'"] are evidence of grungy mitts leaving their prints on the cool, clean formica of standard English" (ix).

In the 1970s at CUNY, many basic writers, though certainly not all, were African Americans. Today, they come from groups including African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Haitians, and many more according to geographic region and workforce. BE, spoken dialect, found its way into the written work of some students. Those of us non-African Americans who seriously studied the scholarship in BE understood the logic behind the written "errors" of African Americans. In turn, we taught and teach parallels in structure between standard written English and BE. And we honestly talked about issues of economic mobility, offering choice rather than edict.

Given the academic politics I discussed earlier, too many BW faculty at CUNY and across the United States had neither time nor inclination to persevere in speaking out about the legitimacy of BE in the

face of so intense a public, and academic, reaction. I wish more of us had pressed on, speaking out vigorously to educate the public in the scholarship of dialect, whether BE, varieties of British English, Creole, or dozens of others.⁵ I also wish the publication dates of Shaughnessy's and of Smitherman's books hadn't collided. Shaughnessy's 1977 book, highly influential among BW faculty, *Errors and Expectations* devotes its second half to teaching suggestions, some of which needed to be informed more thoroughly by scholarship in BE.

Our fourth failure related to research. Too often, we refused to look dispassionately at the results of pedagogic research studies from the 1960s and before. We tended to swallow them whole, ignoring our knowledge of the inevitable limitations on applying outcomes. Let me give an example, the teaching of grammar, that has implications for appealing to public perceptions (and therefore, public relations) and for offering faculty opportunities for innovation (and therefore, affecting traditional academic politics).

Any layperson looking at the mid-1970s "before BW" images in the *New York Times* (picked up by the wire services) that accompanied the article about Mina Shaughnessy would conclude that the whole problem of underprepared writers is their rank ignorance of grammar. Often, I heard faculty who opposed OA say: "They're even too stupid to know correct grammar."

BW specialists knew such reactions were ignorant and simplistic. But in reaction, many took the easy way out. They openly declared that grammar didn't matter for writers. No nuances. So what if the public believes that grammar "matters"? Privately, some faculty, myself included, held a more relative view. But in influential circles, it became vogue for BW faculty to jump onto that ill-informed bandwagon. Many vocal colleagues drew on studies conducted in the 1960s and earlier, well before OA and basic-skills college courses came into existence. Those studies, on the impact of teaching grammar on student writing, concluded that grammar instruction is a waste of time. Few asked key rigorous questions: How were those studies designed? Were groups of students matched and randomly assigned in pairs? Were the teachers assigned to groups randomly, no matter how firm their formal knowledge of English grammar and linguistics? These were interventional studies, so precisely what was the curricular content in the control and the experimental groups? What specific materials were used to teach and not teach grammar: error as sin? drill and kill? decontextualization from student writing? At least some, though not all, later studies of the effect of grammar knowledge on writing skills were well done. And as George Hillocks reminds us, based on his meta-analysis of 500 English instructional interventional studies, although teaching grammar is the least effective of the strategies, it should not

be discounted entirely.

We erred by not asking such basic methodological questions. We erred, too, in reading public sentiment. We needed to take time to explain that “knowing” the rules of grammar mechanically wasn’t the sole, or even a major, cause of substantive lapses in writing skills. The truth is far more textured. Hindsight, always 20/20, tells us that one size does not fit all, or most. With today’s research about learning-styles in mind⁶, we can somewhat safely suggest that person A derives no benefit from grammar instruction; person B benefits when the material is derived solely from student writing, most often his or her own; person C likes learning arcane facts about grammar and language in action for their own sake; and person D “gets it” best on his or her own privately with repetitive drill with self-checking. With recent research in the theory of Multiple Intelligences in mind⁷, we can responsibly hypothesize that persons E and F grasp concepts quickly and well if the information is presented visually, musically, or through other natural human modalities.

Another problem with research involved our choices of topics. Why did we recoil from the public’s demand that we show results? Early on we could have built dossiers of anecdotal student successes. We wrongheadedly resisted one-semester “before and after” studies; had we looked a bit beyond our discipline, we might have put our heads together with educational psychologists and other scholars to try to invent creative, smart, and useful research designs. Instead, we did little. I imagine we kept hoping someone might come to our rescue. In 1997, someone did. The work took years, as it should have given its methodology, and it resulted in the most important BW research study to date: Marilyn Sternglass’s *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level*. The book won the two top awards in our profession: the MLA Mina Shaughnessy Best Book of the Year Award and the College Composition and Communication’s Outstanding Book of the Year Award. Sternglass’s book, which convincingly demonstrates the benefits to students and society of OA goals, is often cited today and frequently assigned in graduate courses in the teaching of college composition. But in the interim, after Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* until Sternglass’s study, we didn’t have the numbers or strength to hold back the flood of negative public and academic opinion.

Yet another problem with research had an impact at the BW classroom level. Tacitly understood limits on legitimate avenues for classroom research hampered some of us severely. I, for example, was intrigued by the potential in concepts of learning styles. I and a few others similarly interested were rebuffed, even ridiculed. We seemed to have entered an area deemed akin to witchcraft. To make things worse,

review boards of respected academic journals were uninterested in all topics pedagogic. Happily, in 1984, thanks to the insight of Richard Larson, then editor of *College Composition and Communication*, we got to read the groundbreaking article by George Jensen and John DiTiberio "Personality and Individual Writing Processes." Thus began the legitimization of the subject. Their 1989 book further informed our teaching decisions. Today, learning-style awareness is firmly entrenched in all subjects at all levels of education, though too many college faculty still resist. I wish I had persevered, as I'm sure do colleagues intrigued by unusual areas such as "expanded perspectives on learning" do. For a sense of what could have been, see the stance in the formidable essay "'Building A Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking."

Rather than end this open letter sounding like a total scold, I'd like to cite one area in which we did not fail the BW enterprise: teachers, the ones who labor daily in the vineyards. Usually unpublished (who has the time given their teaching loads of four or even five BW and freshman English classes a semester?), they are the ones who, student by student, make life-altering positive differences in the lives of students. They are the ones who after their first decade of BW teaching see former students reappear with their college-age child, or niece, or nephew in tow. "I want him/her to be in *your* class."

It is about such teachers, given the respectful label "practitioners" by Steve North in his *Making of Knowledge in Composition*, that lore is plentiful. Indeed, practitioners of teaching BW have many fine stories stored up. They tell of quiet successes, ones those teachers know are proof. Perhaps not data-ready, but proof nonetheless. Here's one: the husband of a BW teacher was once stuck in an interminable summer traffic jam. When drivers got out of their cars to commiserate, the husband pointed to the QCC decal on the rear window of the car in front of him and asked, "How'd you like that college?" The young driver said he was embarrassed to have had to leave to support his family by working two jobs. Then he added "I had one teacher, she taught us how to write and think analytically. I don't know her name, but she sticks in my memory because I really learned about writing and critical analysis." As icing on the cake, the husband pulled out of his wallet, showed the young driver his wife's photo, and heard "Where did you get that? She was my teacher!"

Such teachers genuinely *like* BW and basic writers. Perhaps they want to return to the community some of what it gave them as they grew up. Perhaps they greatly enjoy seeing students progress in the visible, often dramatic ways possible only in BW classes. Perhaps, above all, they sustain an active commitment to the notion that everyone should have the chance for equal access to economic, social, and political wisdom.

Well, George and Trudy, I hope some folks who read this open letter will be moved to write you other letters. I hope they disagree or agree, adding their alternative views. And perhaps some will make practical proposals for the future, ones that seek to pull us together with a reasoned plan of repair and renewal (if it isn't too late and if enabling funds can be found).

With my warmest personal regards,

Lynn

Notes

1. Letter to author. 3 November 1999.
2. For a more detailed picture of the implications, particularly concerning racism and a two-tiered system, and impact of CUNY's decision, see "Remediation Phase-Out at CUNY: The 'Equity versus Excellence' Controversy," by Barbara Gleason.
3. In "Investigating Our Discursive History: *JBW* and the Construction of the 'Basic Writer's' Identity," Laura Gray-Rosendale offers a trenchant analysis of *JBW*'s evolution. I look forward to other such analyses, perhaps from alternative, equally valid perspectives. By the way, I've intentionally not mentioned *JBW*'s early incarnation, titled *Basic Writing (BW)*, founded and edited for a few years by Mina Shaughnessy and later edited by Sara D'Eloia. *BW* started our collective conversations about our emerging specialty. No matter the sometimes-heated, hindsight-driven debates they inspire, *BW* issues are mostly considered defining historical artifacts to be honored.
4. The 1970 summer at Queensborough Community College, CUNY, the department's P&B (Personnel and Budget) Committee, on which I served, almost daily interviewed applicants for full-time tenure-bearing positions. From the scores interviewed, our department of ten full-time faculty tripled. A few summers later, we added more faculty.
5. I've recently discovered a brilliant book *Spreading the Word*, by McWhorter. In 78 pages, it offers a reasonably quick read from which to learn volumes about dialect, including BE. A taste of its clarity and accessibility is reflected in its four chapter titles: "I Hear So Much Bad Grammar These Days"; "It's Just Slang, Isn't It?"; "They Just Mix Them Up!"; and "The Linguistic Rain Forest."

6. The research is plentiful by now. For direct application to the teaching of writing, see Jensen and DiTiberio in CCC; also see their book *Personality and the Teaching of Composition*. Theories of learning styles, also called cognitive styles, are plentiful. For a description of many of them see <<http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/model2.html>>.

7. Howard Gardner, professor of psychology at Harvard, pioneered work on the theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI). *Frames* is a detailed description of the theory; *Multiple Intelligences*, my personal favorite, summarizes *Frames* in a concise, lucid opening chapter and then reports on many educational research projects that applied MI theory. Originally, Gardner identified seven intelligences; a few years ago he added an eighth. The latter is not discussed in either book I cite here. For a creative application of MI theory to teaching strategies for the English classroom, see Smagorinsky. For a detailed, creative application of Gardner's visual intelligence, see *Image Grammar (with Interactive CD-Rom)*, by Noden.

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