

# BASIC WRITING AND POLICY REFORM: WHY WE KEEP TALKING PAST EACH OTHER

*ABSTRACT: Attacks on basic writing and liberal admissions in the late 1990s highlight a perennial gap between faculty and policy advocates. Each group approaches the "remediation debate" in very different ways. This article explores some of these differences by analyzing spatial/directional metaphors used by individuals in each professional domain to describe notions of access and standards. Advocates in the policy-oriented discourse tend to use vertical metaphors, emphasizing linear mobility and hierarchically organized standards, favoring certain types of quantitative methodologies. Educators engaged in the pedagogical discourse tend to use horizontal metaphors, emphasizing the non-linear negotiation of contextually situated standards, privileging qualitative judgments. But there are ways proponents of basic writing might bridge the methodological gap and introduce horizontal perspectives to the vertical discourse of institutional policy.*

The dust hasn't settled yet. Universities from New York to California are still assessing the consequences of admissions reform carried out over the last five years. Through the late 1990s, the conservative crusade to "save" academic standards swept through basic writing programs across the country, profoundly altering the shape of liberal-admissions education. With rare exceptions, reforms were passed with little consideration of faculty input. There were, as Romer notes in the case of CUNY, various political and organizational factors at the institutional level that made it difficult for faculty to participate in the policy-making process. More generally, there is a conceptual gap between those who teach composition courses and those who determine institutional policy.<sup>1</sup> Composition instructors and policy advocates tend to approach the education of underprepared students with different concerns and different ideologies, compounding the challenge of communicating across professional domains. This, I realize, is hardly a new revelation to *JBW* readers. Basic writing instructors saw, first hand, how fiscal concerns led CUNY officials to scale back open admissions in the mid-1970s (see Lavin and Hyllegard). Then, for the next two decades, the worlds of policy making and classroom teaching settled back into their respective orbits. The system-level discourse had rela-

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tively little consequence for faculty. Now, reform has come crashing back into basic writing, and the effects are reverberating throughout the profession. Wiener argues compellingly that the reconfiguration of basic skills instruction makes it necessary for faculty to respond directly to audiences outside of composition studies. If we remain aloof from policy-oriented discussions, we leave basic writing open to future ideological attacks from outside critics. This is a concern whether we choose to contest or comply with recent policy changes.

It is worthwhile comparing how composition educators and policy observers have approached the so-called remediation debate. In doing so, we might determine how the professional discourses differ and where they may be spanned. Central to the controversy is the question of how basic writing promotes institutional access and maintains academic standards. Some, whom I will call supporters (e.g., Day and McCabe, Greenberg) argue that basic writing instruction performs both functions reasonably well (or could do so with minor refinements within the existing apparatus). Others, whom I will call critics (e.g., Traub, Ravitch), claim that basic writing cannot fulfill one or both mandates so the system should be radically altered or scrapped altogether. Typically, the remediation debate is characterized as an ideological tug-of-war between these factions.

I find it useful to make finer distinctions. There are supporters and critics among composition faculty, just as there are supporters and critics among policy advocates. We might characterize the remediation debate as two concurrent professional discourses, each of which embrace distinct assumptions about access and standards. How can classroom-based advocates of basic writing span these conceptual differences to respond to critics at the policy level? The politics of such an undertaking are complicated, indeed. Perhaps I can approach the political question indirectly by addressing some of the rhetorical challenges.

## **Dimensions Of Contrast: Two Examples**

To get a sense of the ideological rift between these groups, we might consider two contrasting statements. The first is from former Assistant Secretary of Education Bruno Manno, whom I consider a policy-oriented critic. The other is from composition educator Tom Fox, whose book *Defending Access* offers a composition educator's response to critics. Obviously, these individuals take opposite stances on the issue liberal admissions. In addition, they articulate their arguments using different metaphorical images, which reflect conceptual differences in the discourses of policy and pedagogy. Manno argues:

Today, access to postsecondary institutions is afforded those who are prepared to do college-level work as well as those who are not. We undermine the promise of American life and do neither group a service when we use race or class or some other substitute rather than academic criteria to determine college advancement. Further, by continuing the 'race for the bottom'... we create a sea of remediation on campuses that... devalues the worth and significance of a college degree... (47)

This statement shows a consistent pattern of spatial/directional imagery. Consider the reference to "a sea of remediation." Any number of adjectives (e.g., vast, tranquil, life-sustaining) might come to mind when we think about a sea. However, Manno calls attention to a specific quality when he evokes this metaphor. He associates remediation with a "race to the bottom" which "devalues the worth" of a college degree. The pertinent characteristic, here, is depth. The sea of remediation is deep, and the treacherous waters threaten to drag academic standards to the bottom (where faculty and students presumably will die a horrible death). The conceptual movement is vertical; things are moving downward. The theme is repeated in the phrase "undermine the promise." Again, the threat comes from below. The answer, according to Manno, is to raise academic standards, which presumably will strengthen the meritocratic system of sorting and screening by ability. We might say that Manno sees the relationship of access and standards primarily in vertical terms.

Now, let's consider Fox's perspective. The topic of institutional admissions is policy-oriented, but the author's approach to admissions-related issues is not typical of policy discussions. In his comments we see a different set of spatial/directional metaphors:

My argument is that there is not a crisis of standards, but a continuing crisis of access. This crisis of access is caused by wide-ranging economic, social and political issues – only some of which can be solved by changes in higher education. I want to argue specifically and strongly against the narrow view that the crisis of access is caused mainly by underpreparation or a lack of literacy skills on the part of students of color. (10)

This declaration contrasts sharply with Manno's statement urging educators to focus exclusively on the issue of academic preparation. In Fox's view, issues of race and class are not irrelevant distractions as Manno asserts. Rather, such socio-historical factors must be considered in any analysis of student progress. Note the spatial connotations of the terms "wide-ranging" and "narrow view." Width and narrowness are descriptions of horizontal distance. Fox uses a broad lens

to critique narrowly conceived notions of discursual competence. To put it another way, the author argues against a vertical emphasis on standards by offering a horizontal interpretation of access.

These examples illustrate a distinction between what might be called vertical and horizontal perspectives on open-door education. This is an important dimension of contrast between the policy-oriented discourse (which tends to frame issues in predominantly vertical terms) and the pedagogical discourse (which tends to contextualize vertical relationships in horizontal terms). I borrow these terms from Basil Bernstein, who explains:

A vertical discourse takes the form of a coherent, explicit, systematically principled structure, hierarchically organized, or it takes the form of a series of specialized languages with specialized modes of interrogation and specialized criteria for the production of texts. (171)

A horizontal discourse consists of local, segmentally organized, context-specific and dependent strategies for maximizing encounters with persons and habitat. (171)

Bernstein uses these concepts to describe how patterns of language are situated in relation to each other. Applied to discussions of basic writing, this taxonomy calls attention to structural differences between the discourses of pedagogy and policy. Moreover, going beyond Bernstein's definitions, the vertical/horizontal distinction highlights differences in how policy advocates and composition instructors characterize the subject matter of their respective discourses.

There is also a methodological dimension of contrast between the two professional discourses. This is evident in the ways that Manno and Fox develop their arguments. Manno cites various statistics (e.g., percentage of institutions offering credit for remedial courses; percentage of institutions allowing students to take regular and remedial courses concurrently) to argue that instruction below the regular college level necessarily degrades academic standards. This rhetorical pattern is common in the policy-level discourse concerning basic skills instruction. Policy advocates (both critics and supporters) typically declare an ideological stance, which they bolster with statistical data that support their position. In this respect, the policy-oriented discourse (particularly the means of evidentiary support) is largely quantitative. The pedagogical discourse, in contrast, is mostly qualitative. We see this in Fox's response to those who claim that standards are declining. Fox cites some statistics (e.g., increasing SAT scores among African Americans), but for the most part he avoids fighting numbers with numbers. Instead, he questions how abstract notions of standards serve

to restrict access. In responding to critiques of basic writing, classroom-based supporters generally have not refuted statistically-based arguments directly, but rather, have challenged fundamental assumptions underlying the open-door debate.

I consider Fox's piece an important step in responding to policy-oriented critics of basic writing. Fox lays out a set of conceptual tools for composition educators to wield in defense of accessible education, but he does not land the knockout punch. This is not necessarily a shortcoming of his argument, but rather a function of whom he addresses and how he frames his discussion. It appears that Fox directs his discussion primarily to an audience of composition educators and secondarily (i.e., indirectly) to policy critics. He explains, "Unless we rigorously examine the assumptions about standards that we hold, our political commitment to economic and social access for students is compromised" (3). The "we" in this statement refers to those who are already sympathetic to Fox's political stance. In a sense, he is preaching to the converted, rallying supporters of accessible education. In doing so, he employs professional language and theoretical constructs that are familiar to composition instructors, particularly those who embrace critical multiculturalism. If we composition educators were to present Fox's argument or any other discipline-based argument to policy advocates, we would need to find ways of penetrating the vertical, quantitative discourse.

## **Vertical Discourse, Quantitative Emphasis**

Central to the policy-oriented discourse is a vertical, linear conception of institutional mobility. Administrators and policymakers often talk about students "climbing the educational ladder" or "moving up the pipeline." We can imagine people climbing a ladder or crawling into an inclining pipe: Everyone starts at one end and moves upward. There are no side entrances or alternative routes. The supporting structure compels everyone to move in a straight line. The ladder/pipeline metaphors suggest that gaining access to college involves coming into the academy and pulling oneself upward from one rung-like level to the next along a designated route. A related assumption is that the standards regulating movement along the ladder/pipeline are, likewise, arranged in a linear hierarchy. Everyone presumably must pass through progressively more restrictive checkpoints in order to move through the programmatic sequence.

This linear/vertical model lends itself to an all-too-common notion that access and standards are inversely related. As conservative critics see it, the enforcement of high standards requires educators to deny advancement to individuals who do not meet requirements. Con-

versely, the pursuit of equitable access supposedly requires educators to dumb down the curriculum. Traub draws both conclusions in *City on a Hill*, which has become a favorite citation among opponents of liberal admissions. Underlying his zero-sum argument is an assumption that there is only one legitimate way to define standards. He further assumes that academic proficiency must be judged on a linear scale (i.e., from high to low) indicating the extent to which a student meets universal standards. While Traub claims to endorse the principle diversity, his unidimensional understanding of aptitude prevents him from recognizing the diverse abilities of the students he encounters. Ultimately, he concludes that individuals are deficient if they do not advance through the institutional hierarchy in the prescribed ways.

More than a few postsecondary administrators and policy advocates disagree with the "either/or" logic of the access-versus-standards argument. Defenders of open admissions claim that, given sufficient resources, public institutions can fulfill the promise of open-door education. This argument hinges on premise that colleges and universities can simultaneously promote social equity and academic rigor, a claim summed up in the title of Roueche and Baker's work *Access and Excellence*. College presidents Day and McCabe declare:

In a democratic society, higher education is one means of gradually reducing the inequality of the human condition... In this context, the investment in remediation provides a direct return: the costs are low and the success rate is impressive. Students develop the skills and confidence to become self-sufficient; and, business and industry gain a better-prepared workforce. (10)

Obviously, the authors' stance on remedial education is opposite that of Manno. Day and McCabe argue that remediation is not only a democratic imperative, but also a viable instructional approach. Beyond this, the distinctions between the arguments become rather blurred. Day and McCabe implicitly assume that students should move up through the academy to build the "skills and confidence" necessary to meet the requirements of the academy and the private sector. Like Manno, Day and McCabe draw on vertical metaphors in their conceptions of institutional advancement. And like him they use a particular form of vertical logic in evaluating the viability of remedial education. They conduct cost/benefit analyses weighing one variable (e.g., monetary expenditures, institutional prestige) against another (e.g., number of graduates). The degree to which remediation is deemed helpful or harmful depends on whether the "cost" is higher or lower than the "benefit."

This analytical approach has led policy advocates on both sides of the remediation debate to focus on a narrow range of predominantly quantitative questions: How many students who take remedial courses move up through the system to complete coursework at regular college levels? Do these students actually meet standards in academic courses? Or do instructors have to lower the bar to allow underprepared students to pass? Presumably, the debate over access and standards would be put to rest if research could prove that high percentages of initially underprepared students eventually go on to complete academic programs, meeting regular academic standards. A number of studies and research reviews (e.g., Adelman, Koski and Levin, Boylan et al.) have attempted to identify national patterns of student progress through and beyond remedial programs. Supporters and critics of remediation have thoroughly mined these works in search of evidence for their arguments.

Drawing on Bernstein's notion of vertical discourse, we might say that those engaged in the vertical debate have developed a "specialized language" for talking about open-door education. Particularly, in discussing basic writing, observers use "specialized criteria for (evaluating) the production of texts." In considering the viability of basic instruction, policy advocates use "specialized modes of interrogation" to weigh the costs and benefits of educating underprepared students. We might gather from Bernstein's terminology that the specialized nature of this discourse has had a homogenizing effect, limiting the ways that policy advocates view the challenges of open-door instruction. To put it more bluntly, discussions of open-door policy generally suffer from vertical tunnel vision – fixing one's gaze either downward or upward.

One consequence of this tunnel vision is that policy advocates across the political spectrum have not acknowledged some key limitations of their reforms. Conservatives have cast their attention downward to implement reforms below the university. The overwhelming conservative response to the "remediation crisis" has been to impose tighter admissions standards to keep underprepared students from infiltrating the university. Additional measures include offering remedial classes in satellite locations; paying private contractors to handle remediation; and pressuring high schools to "do a better job" preparing graduates for postsecondary education. The strategy in all of these "solutions" is to shift the pedagogical responsibility downward to sites that are sequentially lower and/or less prestigious than the university. These policies offer no new innovations as far as pedagogy is concerned. The lack of innovation reflects a narrow view of learning as the accumulation of skills taught in school. Advocates of downward-looking reforms fail to consider how extra-academic factors, such as employment or family responsibilities, influence how adult learners progress in college.

Progressive reforms differ markedly from conservative approaches but, ultimately, they too are limited by vertical tunnel vision. In the 1970s and early 80s, supporters of open-door education readily acknowledged that college students frequently had to contend with challenges in their lives, making it difficult for them to move through a conventional sequence of coursework. Sympathetic policy observers (e.g., Cross) advocated alternative instructional formats (e.g., learning modules, open-entry/open-exit courses, learning centers, peer tutoring) to accommodate individuals who were not well-served by traditional classes. Central to these first-generation reforms was the notion of “individualized instruction,” which had particular connotations. This did not necessarily mean that instructors customized the writing curriculum to suit the particular needs of each student. Rather, individualization usually involved offering several ways for students to meet a given set of literacy-related goals. In this respect, first-generation reforms were vertical and upward looking; remedial programs offered multiple, parallel pathways leading to the same destination – first-year composition. More recently, the emphasis on accommodating diverse student needs has slipped from the spotlight. Instead, policy reformers are focusing more intently on moving students expeditiously into the academic mainstream – a goal summed up in Levin’s notion of accelerated learning (see Levin and Hopfenberg). There is a certain irony in these developments. Progressive policy advocates have generally supported instructional configurations that accommodate diverse learning styles and needs. At the same time, they tend to accept the traditional premise that all students should learn the same form of essayist literacy, regardless of their interests or academic goals. Policy advocates generally have not taken into account how literacy practices vary from one discipline to another (see Street), let alone from academic disciplines to extra-academic areas (e.g., vocational programs). This is a subtle but pervasive form of upward-looking tunnel vision.

## **Horizontal Discourse, Qualitative Emphasis**

Since the inception of open admissions, composition faculty have moved simultaneously with and against the grain of the vertical discourse of institutional mobility. While we recognize the need to help students move upward to higher levels of the academy, we have tended to theorize this pedagogical challenge in horizontal terms, challenging vertical notions of academic ability. Consider how the terms “outsider” and “insider” are used to categorize students. The “insider” label connotes privileged status or knowledge. An outsider, then, is someone who occupies a less prestigious position. In one respect, the power relationship between outsiders and insiders is defined verti-



cally. Mina Shaughnessy tried to de-emphasize this vertical relationship – particularly the notion that the transition from outsider to academic insider is a step upward to an inherently privileged position. She pointed out that the academy is one of many social domains with particular conventions of language use. Anyone who moves from a familiar language-using setting to an unfamiliar setting necessarily goes from an advantaged position to a disadvantaged one. (So a composition instructor might have as difficult a time adapting to the literacy practices of livestock auctioneers, for example, as a returning adult student might have in adapting to the literacy practices of English majors.) Shaughnessy used this notion of sociolinguistic relativism to destigmatize the outsider status of basic writers. In what Lu called an act of “linguistic innocence,” Shaughnessy embraced a more neutral (i.e., non-hierarchical) definition of outsider as simply one who is on the outside. We can imagine an individual standing outside of a building and then stepping through a door to enter the interior. The conceptual movement, as Shaughnessy saw it, was horizontal. For better or for worse, this notion of horizontal progress has stayed with composition educators to this day.

Employing various horizontal lenses, composition educators tend to interpret the access-versus-standards controversy quite differently than policy advocates do. A statement by Lu illustrates this point nicely:

I want to articulate one ‘import’ of multiculturalism here by exploring the question of how to conceive and practice teaching methods which invite a multicultural approach to style, particularly those styles of student writing which appear to be ridden with ‘errors.’ And I situate this question in the context of English studies, a discipline which, on the one hand, has often proclaimed its concern to profess multiculturalism but, on the other hand, has done little to combat the ghettoization of two if its own cultures, namely composition teaching and student writing. (442)

It is useful to compare Lu’s statement and Manno’s, however unlikely this pairing might be. Their language and their political stances are so different that it is difficult to tell that both authors address similar issues. Where Manno discusses how educators must control access to the institutional hierarchy, Lu considers how writing instructors facilitate access to various sociolinguistic traditions within the institution. Both authors recognize that academic domains have different levels of prestige and that elite domains (e.g., literature courses) maintain exclusive entry standards. This is where the similarities end. Manno sees differences in standards as strictly hierarchical; in his view, academic criteria in basic writing are simply lower than those in regu-

lar college English. Lu, in contrast, points to categorical differences. In mapping the intellectual topography of English studies, Lu suggests that there are different disciplinary domains with different standards. To put it in Bernstein's terms, the horizontal discourse in English education is localized and segmentally organized. Lu touches on concerns held by many basic writing educators who, for the most part, do not see a binary choice between access and standards. Particularly for those of us who embrace multicultural notions of style, the question is not simply how do we promote access while enforcing standards, but rather, how do we acknowledge the diversity of text-using traditions within the academy and among our students while simultaneously promoting access to a system that presumes the existence of universal standards.

Like Fox, Lu uses a broad socio-political lens to contextualize and critique excessively restrictive definitions of academic competence. This is a common rhetorical strategy among advocates of basic writing – to counter the vertical tunnel vision of policy reform with what might be called horizontal panorama vision. Obviously, my terminology is biased. An observer who has a panoramic view presumably sees more than one who has tunnel vision. But panoramic views have blind spots, as well. Imagine a panoramic photograph: You get a wonderfully broad view left to right, but you don't see much above the horizon. This is a limitation of horizontal retorts to basic writing's critics: In defending the field, composition educators have said little relatively little about how students fare beyond the horizon of basic writing.

One work that moves in a constructive direction is *Democracy's Open Door* by Marlene Griffith and Ann Connor. A noteworthy feature of this book is that the authors (both veteran composition faculty) primarily address legislators and trustees, particularly at the two-year college level. Their intentions are unambiguously articulated in the first few pages:

We urge policymakers at all levels to recognize the uniqueness of the Open Door community colleges and to work to maintain their comprehensiveness, their low cost, and their ability to accommodate students who are learning on their own terms and in their own time. (xiv)

Like Fox, the authors argue that non-White/non-middle class students are generally ill-served by policies that restrict access in the name of upholding standards. They point out that any number of outside factors – work, family responsibilities, transportation, childcare – might prevent students from following a pattern of linear, continuous enrollment which is the traditional benchmark of successful progress. Here, again, we see composition educators employing a panoramic (hori-

zontal) perspective to complicate narrowly defined notions of access. In addition, the authors go a step further, using a broad lens to interpret longitudinal patterns of enrollment. Drawing on case studies of students and interviews with college leaders, Griffith and Connor suggest that college students may progress in circuitous or intermittent ways but, given sufficient time and curricular flexibility, individuals often move up to higher levels of education and employment. While this argument is not a new revelation to composition educators, it is significant in the way it is framed. Mindful of their audience, the authors strategically address policy-oriented concerns. For instance, they discuss issues of stop-out and reverse transfer – perennial topics among college leaders. We might assume that, being conversant in the discourse of institutional policy, the authors would gain a broad audience beyond composition studies.

Unfortunately, this may be only partially true. *Democracy's Open Door* has been widely acknowledged among two-year college faculty and administrators (as evidenced by an enthusiastic session at most recent Conference on College Composition and Communication convention devoted to this work). I suspect, however, that readership is lower among the intended audience of policymakers, who rarely cite this work. The relative lack of response in policy circles contrasts with the hoopla surrounding Traub's *City on a Hill*, which also presents the open-door controversy (albeit from a very different perspective) to broad audiences. Perhaps this is not a fair comparison. Traub's work was published at the right place at the right time – just as opponents of open admissions were planning their assaults. Tensions in community colleges are less volatile and less visible outside of two-year college circles. Still, the publication of *Democracy's Open Door* was timely. I would argue that the research is no less rigorous than Traub's, and the examples are no less compelling. Why, then, didn't policymakers – particularly those concerned with community college issues – come flocking?

To understand this phenomenon, we must consider, not only the timing of publication in relation to political developments in academe, but also how readers perceive the evidence provided. Griffith and Connor use virtually the same qualitative methodology as Traub – embedding individual case studies within a broader institutional analysis, including a review of institutional history and interviews with key leaders. Ethnographers (e.g., Miles and Huberman) recognize a variety of ways that descriptive methodologies such as these gain perceived validity – through triangulation (i.e., deriving similar findings from different data sources), multiple/extended observations (i.e., documenting a phenomenon many times or over a long period of time), large sample size – to name a few possibilities. Griffith and Connor or Traub may have used some or all of these techniques in

gathering data but, in their published texts (probably for reasons of readability), they chose to include only brief vignettes of a few individuals or programs. Even without extensive methodological documentation, the descriptions in *Democracy's Open Door* seem reasonable to me (and, I suspect, to many other composition educators) because we have spent enough time around college writers to judge the representativeness of Griffith and Connor examples. However, policy-oriented critics of basic writing – people who are not sympathetic to Griffith and Connor's argument and who generally have not spent much time in writing classrooms – are likely to view their descriptions as free-floating anecdotes, not as hard evidence. Ironically, the same critics (Manno, for one) often embrace *City on a Hill*, even though it offers no more factual evidence than *Democracy's Open Door*. The difference is that Traub's work neatly affirms critics' preconceived assumptions about what is "wrong" with liberal admissions and basic writing. Traub's accounts of burned-out instructors and befuddled students serve as convenient sound bites that are easily inserted into ideological attacks on basic writing. It would seem that the burden of proof is substantially greater for proponents of basic writing to influence skeptics.

## Across the Divide

How, then, do we span the two-fold divide between pedagogy/policy and supporters/critics? It would be naïve to suggest that clear argumentation would sway ideologues who categorically oppose the principle of open-door education. However, I believe it is possible to foster dialogue with critics of basic writing who are sympathetic to liberal admissions and who are open to considering evidence. This possibility is evident in remarks by policy analyst Henry Levin, principle organizer of the Conference on Replacing Remediation in Higher Education:

Although there are examples of reportedly successful remedial courses, the evidence on the efficacy of remedial courses in terms of student achievement, persistence, and graduation rates is mixed. This lack of evidence concerning the efficacy of remedial coursework suggests that such coursework has not, in some instances, achieved its goal of preparing students for later college coursework.... (1)

In one respect, it would be a fairly straight-forward matter to assemble the statistical evidence that Levin mentions. Studies of persistence and outcomes already exist. But simply pointing to favorable numbers

would be a tacit endorsement of vertical/linear notions of access and standards that composition educators have so vigorously contested. The challenge for basic writing advocates is to assess the significance of quantitative research (what it reveals or doesn't reveal) and to scrutinize the theoretical assumptions underlying this methodology.

I am reminded of Ira Shor's challenge to composition educators to produce "hard evidence that BW courses shelter more than they shunt" (96). Shor's statement stands out in my mind because he speaks from a hybrid position. He is a critic of remediation and an advocate of equitable access; he is a composition educator who takes interest in policy matters. Considering some of his concerns might help us to take a transitional step toward addressing policy-oriented critics. This step is not direct. Shor's radical stance is a far cry from the conservative and centrist politics embraced by most reformers. However, he and moderate critics, such as Levin, have at least some theoretical ties. Like other radical educators (e.g., Apple, Freire), Shor directs his attention to material conditions and political practices that enforce or disrupt structures of power. Central to his critique of basic writing is the work of organizational theorists, such as Burton Clark, who argue that the structure of open-door education "cools out" the aspirations of non-elite students. This analysis meshes well with a neo-Marxist view of social reproduction, and it provides the theoretical basis for mainstream critiques of basic writing (see, Shaw). This is a common thread linking Shor's argument with the vertical discourse of remedial policy reform. Participants in this discourse focus on how institutional practice facilitates or hinders upward movement through higher education and, more generally, through boundaries of social class.

I can't easily dismiss Shor's call for professional self-scrutiny. I think it is appropriate that Shor challenges us to look more closely at the relationship between pedagogical practice and socio-economic mobility. It is worthwhile reminding ourselves of the need to document how instruction affects students after they leave our classes. This point (regarding the study of socio-economic advancement) has been obscured in the last decade, in part, due to poststructural and socio-cultural theories, which have shaped how we think about student mobility. These theories have led observers to steer away from static models of social structure and cultural reproduction, to focus instead on how individuals negotiate various social terrains. But this theoretical orientation has also contributed to the blind spots of horizontal panorama vision. Trimbur warns that it is possible to take the deconstructive enterprise too far. In de-emphasizing the solidity of social structures, we run the risk of underestimating how material conditions influence students' lives. Trimbur urges literacy educators to re-introduce a "dose of vulgar Marxism" into the professional discourse"—to reconsider physical and political factors that contribute to

social inequity. This is Shor's point, which has become even more relevant in light of postsecondary reforms of the late 1990s. Material conditions, like the tightening of admissions criteria, have ominous implications for the life prospects of non-elite students.

Still, I'm not entirely comfortable with the way Shor and other critics frame their evidentiary expectations. My concern has to do with the ways postsecondary observers use structural critiques like Clark's to design and interpret research. Structuralist models generally assume that students normally progress in a continuous and linear manner through an academic program until they graduate. This is considered the benchmark of successful matriculation. Many policy analysts further assume that deviation from this pattern (particularly dropping out or switching to a less prestigious program) is evidence that the educational system has done something to discourage students from their original plans. So if a study were to find high dropout rates among current/former basic writers, structural critics would most likely conclude that basic writing caused them to drop out— a classic *post hoc* fallacy. Shor's argument is not this simplistic, but it can easily be misappropriated by opponents of remediation who have linear/vertical assumptions about student progress.

There is an immediate need, then, for additional inquiry into issues raised by Griffith and Connor and Fox, who question linear/vertical notions of access. One step is to evaluate the findings of existing longitudinal studies. Lavin and Hyllegard, for instance, provide compelling statistical evidence supporting the efficacy of open-door education at CUNY. Their analysis of student outcomes supports Griffith and Connor's contention that unconventionally prepared students have reasonably high rates of success in college if allowed extra time for program completion. We also must conduct more of our own longitudinal research. I'm thinking particularly of Marilyn Sternglass's landmark study of how a cohort of CUNY students developed writing and thinking skills. Nancy Sommers also has a multi-year study of literacy development among students at Harvard. While her findings are not necessarily generalizable to basic writers, her methodology might serve as another model for longitudinal studies of non-elite students. Such fine-grained, qualitative studies at the program level would be a powerful complement to large-scale, multivariate analyses examining how curricular and extra-institutional factors influence the long-term trajectories of underprepared students. Clifford Adelman and other researchers at the National Center for Educational Statistics have conducted work along these lines. In principle, a combination of research methodologies could indicate how effectively basic writing moves students into the academic mainstream. Research might also suggest the extent to which institutional practices are responsible for unconventional enrollment patterns. Whatever methodologies we employ, we

should ask some fundamental questions about the design and purposes of the research: What populations should we study? What contexts should we consider? How long should we follow students? How should we approach the notion of standards? What are reasonable benchmarks of academic success? What constitutes sufficient evidence of success?

I realize that, for writing faculty who have lost programs and students, this call for inquiry-based dialogue is woefully little and late. Many educators have tried to use evidence and rational argumentation to fend off institutional reforms that restrict access to higher education. Meanwhile, universities continue to raise hurdles. As discouraging as the situation is, I believe the tumultuous changes in our field make it as important as ever for us to document how basic writing instruction serves the needs of students.

## Note

1. I use the terms “policymakers”, “policy advocates”, and “policy observers” to describe those who determine or analyze policies across a given a university or postsecondary system. These groups include trustees, state legislators, presidents, and faculty who study higher education. For purposes of this article, the “policy” rubric does not include individuals (e.g., department chairs, deans, faculty) who administer policies at the departmental or programmatic level.

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