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THE REIFICATION OF THE BASIC WRITER

In *The Mismeasure of Man* Stephen Jay Gould initiates his masterful debunking of intelligence testing with an explanation of what he terms the reification fallacy:

The argument (against the current practice of intelligence testing) begins with one of the fallacies—*reification*, or our tendency to convert abstract concepts into entities (from the Latin *res*, or thing). We recognize the importance of mentality in our lives and wish to characterize it, in part so that we can make the divisions and distinctions among people that our cultural and political systems dictate. We therefore give the word “intelligence” to this wondrously complex and multifaceted set of human capabilities. This shorthand symbol is then reified and intelligence achieves its dubious status as a unitary thing (24).

As Gould outlines it here, the process of reification begins—not with biology—but with political and social pigeonholes. In part to explain—at times, justify—why certain ethnic groups were found predominately in the lower socioeconomic classes, psychologists developed the concept of a “general factor” of intelligence, which could not by any means explain the complex nature of cognitive skills. The abstraction, Gould feels, was the

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first step toward reification. Once the specious, conceptually mushy, and reductionistic abstraction was formulated, it was reified. Psychologists, exhibiting all the vigor of lunatics pounding square pegs into round holes, struggled to locate "general intelligence" at a particular point of the brain or tie it to what they felt were "racial genes." A spuriously conceived abstraction became a concrete, palpable thing.

Though the comparison should not be pushed too far, the field of composition may be developing its own reification fallacy. As with intelligence testing, the reification of the basic writer begins with our cultural and political systems. Though the "underprepared student"—also called subfreshman, remedial student, developmental student, and nontraditional student—has perhaps always been with us, current notions about the college basic writer date to the early 1970s. As a large number of underprepared students entered colleges and universities, primarily an effect of open admissions and desegregation policies, faculty were faced with teaching what seemed to be an atypical group of students. As Mina Shaughnessy reflected in *Errors and Expectations*, "the essays these students wrote during their first weeks of class stunned the teachers who read them" (3).

Since these underprepared students (whether at Shaughnessy's CUNY or at other institutions) seemed academically, socially, and culturally apart from their peers, teachers and researchers naturally wanted to understand how and why they differed. They observed and studied the students in their classes and reported their findings. Shaughnessy, one of the first to characterize basic writers, wrote that they equate correct writing with good writing and that they feel an urgency "to meet their teachers' criteria" (*Errors* 8–9). Such "folk psychologizing," which is ultimately reductionistic and may lead to reification, was not typical of her work; she preferred to focus on the wide range of "styles to being wrong" (*Errors* 40). Even in a basic writing class, which might at first seem relatively homogenous, Shaughnessy found a range of errors and a diversity in the processes that produced them.

Rather than amplify Shaughnessy's most consistent message, that basic writers are a diverse lot, those researchers who followed seem more intrigued by her characterizations. They continued to peg isolated personality traits to the basic writer. Lunsford studied a number of basic writers and concluded in "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer" that "they have not attained that level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions or concepts" (38). Perl investigated the writing processes of unskilled writers and felt in her report "The Composing

Processes of Unskilled Writers” that they frequently “began writing without any secure sense of where they were heading, acknowledging only that they would ‘figure it out’ as they went along” (330). They also, she found, tended to be so concerned about “error-hunting” that they broke the “rhythms generated by thinking and writing” (333). Pianko, after comparing ten remedial and seven traditional students in “Reflection: A Critical Component of the Composing Process,” concluded that the remedial students planned a shorter period of time before writing and paused less frequently (227). Sommers, after comparing the writing processes of an unskilled freshman writer and a skilled adult writer in “Intentions and Revisions,” stated that unskilled writers are most concerned about applying rules or filling in a set organizational structure while skilled writers are most concerned about the relationship between developing a structure and discovering meaning (48–49). More recently, in “Perspectives and Legacies and Literacy in the 1980’s,” Troyka tested nontraditional students, discovering that they, at least those in her sample, are field-dependent. They are holistic thinkers, highly gregarious and concerned about the social context or getting along with other people (256–261). Her article was unusual in that she actually tested her subjects for cognitive style, and, rather than point to their deficiencies as other writers had, she emphasized their strengths.

As can be seen from this brief overview of the literature, a gross characterization of the students in basic writing classes seems to be emerging. This composite characterization is of a gregarious writer who talks but does not think, who does not value planning, who has difficulty developing concepts, is overly concerned about correctness, likes to please the teacher, and prefers the basic five-paragraph theme. Such characterizations are dangerous in part because they lead to reification, which, as I will discuss later, can have adverse effects on how well we teach basic writers. Yet, the characterization of the basic writer should also be criticized in and of itself. It is simply too much of a portrait in broad strokes to account for the diversity among basic writers, and it too heavily emphasizes their faults.

In order to argue that basic writers are a diverse population, I will need to explain the personality theory behind the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a personality inventory used previously to discuss individual writing processes. The MBTI is based on Carl Jung’s belief that, at an early age, each individual begins to prefer and more rapidly develop one of a pair of opposite but equally valid and useful psychological processes. For example,

an individual may prefer to live actively rather than contemplatively, or vice versa. As Jung developed and Isabel Myers later refined the theory, four bipolar dimensions emerged, each of which reflects a set of equally valid, yet opposing, processes:

- Extraversion (E)Introversion (I)
- Sensing (S)Intuition (N)
- Thinking (T)Feeling (F)
- Judging (J)Perceiving (P)

Here is what the terms mean: Extraversion is dealing with the outer experience; introversion is dealing with the inner experience of contemplation and reflection. Sensing is concrete perception through the senses; intuition is an abstract perception through the imagination. Thinking types strive to make decisions objectively; in order to be objective, they tend to base decisions on a general principle or an objective criterion. Feeling types are less concerned about objectivity and more concerned about the personal issues in making decisions; they are more likely to base decisions on the personal values of those involved or on how to promote group harmony. Judging is approaching tasks with the primary concern of getting things done; perceiving is approaching tasks with the primary concern of doing them thoroughly. Individuals, the theory holds, have a preference on each of the four dimensions. Since these preferences interact dynamically, we can speak of sixteen possible personality types, each of which has talents and gifts.

In "Personality and Individual Writing Processes," DiTiberio and I reported our emerging observations about how personality type as defined by the MBTI relates to individual writing processes. Extraverts tend to generate ideas best when talking and prefer to leap into writing with little planning; introverts, on the other hand, need solitude to think best and prefer to plan extensively before writing. Sensing types tend to prefer prescribed organizational patterns, detailed directions, and factual topics; intuitive types prefer original organizational patterns, general directions, and imaginative, abstract topics. Thinking types have very patterned organizational structures, while feeling types tend to write best when they just follow the flow of their thoughts. Judging types tend to be overly exclusive writers, often writing very short essays, but perceiving types tend to be overly inclusive, often writing rambling, expansive essays. One of the pleasant outcomes of our investigation was that we began to appreciate the latent strengths associated with all-too-apparent weaknesses. For example, sensing types may, especially when still immature,

write essays that are full of nothing but factual data and concrete observations. Intuitive types, on the other hand, may write essays filled with vague abstractions. By viewing these writers through the lens of a personality construct, it is easier to see the strength and weakness of each approach to writing. The sensing type excels at accurately reporting factual data and concrete observations, which generally form the support for propositions, but they may fail to include inferences from the data, or the propositions themselves. Intuitive types naturally include the propositions but they may fail to explain or support their ideas.

Since the researchers who have characterized the basic writer have dealt with isolated personality traits rather than a humanistic personality construct, they frequently, with the exception of Troyka, see the faults but not the strengths associated with particular traits. The basic writer, as described in the literature, seems to be an extraverted-sensing-feeling type. Extraverts, when still immature, as basic writers often are, may be less reflective than introverts (Pianko to remedial students), but they are quite good at generating ideas by talking about their topics. Extraverts also tend to figure out what they want to say as they are writing (Perl to unskilled writers), a trait that, when applied to mature writers, Murray calls "writing as a process of discovery" (85-103). Sensing types, especially those who are cognitively immature, tend to have more difficulty developing concepts than intuitive types (Lunsford to the basic writer). They are often very concerned about following directions or fulfilling the teacher's expectations (Shaughnessy to the basic writer), and, when inexperienced as writers, they tend to equate correct writing with good writing (Shaughnessy). They also prefer prescribed organizational patterns, which help them to know what the teacher expects, over original patterns (Sommers to unskilled writers). If these descriptions were slightly reworded, they might describe a good technical writer. Sensing types usually stick to the facts, rather than make flighty hunches, attempt to follow directions accurately, and try to produce grammatically correct prose in a widely accepted format. Finally, feeling types, especially extraverted feeling types, are more likely to attend first to the social context, which Troyka saw as a personal strength. Even though it is unfortunate that most researchers characterize basic writers by their weaknesses alone, it is interesting that all of these isolated traits form a relatively accurate description of the faults of an extraverted-sensing-feeling writer. But does this composite personality of the basic writer accurately describe students in a basic writing program?

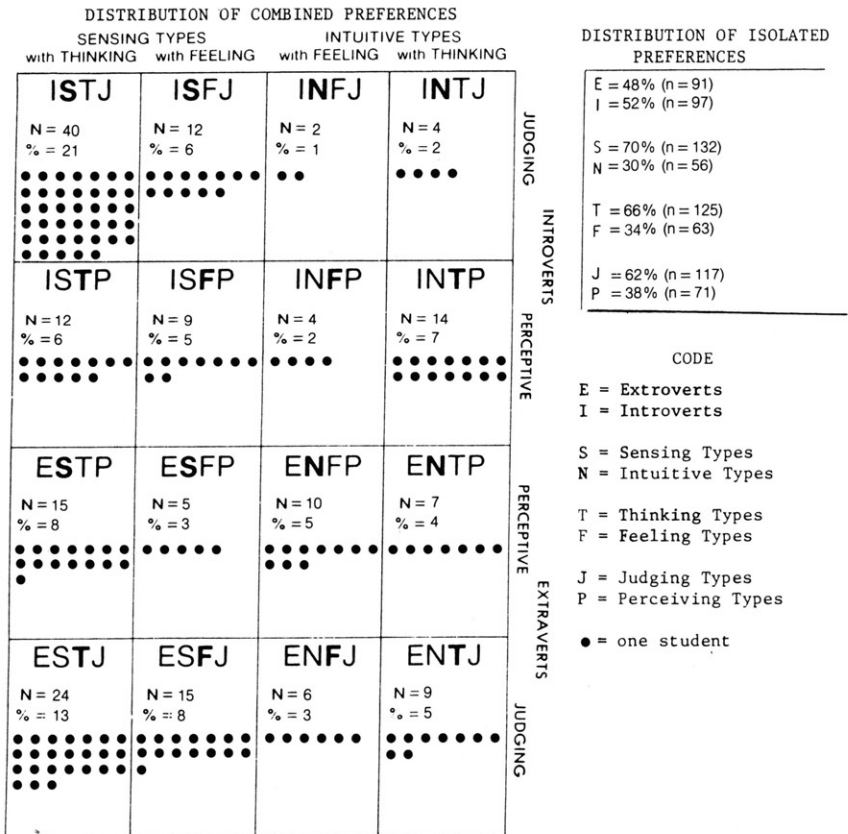
Figure One is a type table of 188 students in eleven composition

classes of the Developmental Studies program at Georgia State University. The type table illustrates how the four bipolar scales of the MBTI can combine into sixteen different personality types. It is especially useful as a visual depiction of the distribution of the personality types of individuals on a particular sample. Only a glance at Figure One will reveal that the sixteen possible personality types described by the MBTI are not equally represented in this sample. Introverts only slightly outnumber extraverts, but sensing types, thinking types, and judging types outnumber their opposites by about two to one. Given the preponderance of certain types, it is easy to understand how a teacher or researcher might characterize the group, rather than

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

Type Table

FIGURE ONE
STUDENTS IN DEVELOPMENTAL COMPOSITION
GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY
(ELEVEN CLASSES, FALL 1982 TO WINTER 1985)
N = 188



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appreciate their diversity. Some of my colleagues have described the basic writer at Georgia State as being a concrete and very structured learner, which is typical of introverted-sensing-thinking-judging types (ISTJs) and grossly accurate of this population. It is also a description that would roughly, in a gut-level, first-impression way, fit what the literature reports as current notions about the basic writer. The only striking difference that a casual observer may notice would be that the typical Georgia State student—an introverted thinking type—would tend to be less social than the basic writer found in the literature—an extraverted feeling type. If, however, we demand more accuracy, the characterization of the basic writer found in the literature—an extraverted-sensing-feeling type—describes only those students in the ESFP and ESFJ cells of the table, or eleven per cent of the sample.

Figure Two is a type table of another population, students in a remedial composition class at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The rather small sample is somewhat different from the sample in Figure One. This class has slightly more extraverts than introverts and a predominance toward feeling types. The typical student in the Georgia State sample would, to a casual observer, seem more like an introverted-sensing-thinking-judging (ISTJ) type, and the typical student in the University of Illinois at Chicago sample would seem more like an extraverted-sensing-feeling-judging type (ESFJ). It is difficult to say, from this limited amount of data, whether or not the differences between the two tables reflect differences between the two programs. The class illustrated in Figure Two may simply be atypical of that program. With the limited data available, we can only say that differences exist, that it is unlikely that all basic writing programs will draw the same kinds of students and that all classrooms in each program will be exact microcosms of the program.

At the most fundamental level, the characterizations of the basic writer found in the literature are inaccurate because they are overgeneralizations from what seem to be biased samples. Perl's and Pianko's samples seem to have been predominately extraverts, Lunsford's and Sommers' predominantly sensing types. Since these authors are working with students at different institutions, each of which probably has its own criteria for placing students into basic writing programs, we should not assume that any abstractions of the basic writer generated from a biased sample will be an accurate description of the writers in all programs. Pianko's and Perl's comments about the basic writer cannot be generally applied to the students at Georgia State, who are more typically introverts. Rather than being unreflective, as Pianko found with

FIGURE TWO
STUDENTS IN REMEDIAL COMPOSITION
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO
(ONE CLASS, FALL 1984)
N = 14

DISTRIBUTION OF COMBINED PREFERENCES						DISTRIBUTION OF ISOLATED PREFERENCES			
SENSING TYPES		INTUITIVE TYPES							
with THINKING	with FEELING	with FEELING	with THINKING						
ISTJ N = 0 % = 0	ISFJ N = 4 % = 29 ••••	INFJ N = 0 % = 0	INTJ N = 0 % = 0	JUDGING INTROVERTS PERCEPTIVE PERCEPTIVE EXTRAVERTS JUDGING		E = 57% (n=8) I = 43% (n=6) S = 64% (n=9) N = 36% (n=5) T = 35% (n=5) F = 65% (n=9) J = 57% (n=8) P = 43% (n=6)			
ISTP N = 0 % = 0	ISFP N = 0 % = 0	INFP N = 1 % = 7 •	INTP N = 1 % = 7 •			CODE E = Extroverts I = Introverts S = Sensing Types N = Intuitive Types T = Thinking Types F = Feeling Types J = Judging Types P = Perceiving Types • = one student			
ESTP N = 0 % = 0	ESFP N = 1 % = 7 •	ENFP N = 1 % = 7 •	ENTP N = 2 % = 14 ••						
ESTJ N = 2 % = 14 ••	ESFJ N = 2 % = 14 ••	ENFJ N = 0 % = 0	ENTJ N = 0 % = 0						

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her sample, the Georgia State writer may be so reflective that he or she is distant from experience and produces a lifeless prose. Rather than leaping into writing with little planning, as Perl found with her sample, the Georgia State basic writer may plan too long.

At another level, the characterizations are inaccurate because they cannot adequately account for the diversity found in even a single program, class, or sample. Even though seventy percent of the students in Figure One are sensing types, thirty percent of them are intuitive types. Even though introverted-sensing-thinking-judging types—the program’s model personality type—comprise twenty-one percent of the population, every one of the

sixteen possible types is represented. Even when dealing with a single population, or a single class, it is dangerous, and more reductionistic than descriptive, to characterize basic writers.

Reification can naturally—almost unavoidably—occur when we begin to believe that our characterizations are accurate descriptions, when we begin to believe that our notions about the basic writer are more significant than individual differences among students, or that these notions embody a salient characteristic that separates them from their peers. Pianko, for example, seems to believe that basic writers are less reflective than traditional students. As stated before, I believe that her characterization of basic writers is reductionistic, just as Gould feels that the concept of a “general intelligence factor” fails to account for the wide range of human capabilities. Reductionistic abstractions are, Gould feels, dangerous in and of themselves, but, when they are reified, when they become a concrete thing, as when intelligence was tied to “racial genes,” the faulty abstractions assume more power over how we think and act (24). In the following passage, Pianko takes that extra dangerous step; she reifies the basic writer:

Although it is unlikely that a single teaching strategy or several strategies in concert will be able to immediately alter behavioral patterns already embedded in a student’s writing habits, there are certainly a few basic shifts in teaching emphasis which could simply and organically alter a student’s writing sense and consciousness (278).

Pianko seems to be saying that the basic writer (or, in her study, remedial writers) are innately, organically different from their peers. She suggests that teachers “organically alter a student’s . . . consciousness.” I believe that it is important for writing teachers to help their students to develop as writers, but it seems to me that organically altering their consciousness is a bit overzealous.

The reification can be more subtle, as in Sommers’ study. She compared one unskilled writer with one skilled writer. The assumptions behind her research design is that the differences between any basic writer and any professional writer are more significant than differences between their personality type or cognitive style. In the context of the MBTI, the two writers that Sommers describes seem to have different personality types. Rita, the unskilled writer, seems to be extraverted-sensing-feeling type, and Walter, the skilled writer, seems to be an extraverted-intuitive-thinking type. If this conjecture is accurate, Sommers may be describing the differences between a sensing-feeling writer

and intuitive-thinking writer, rather than the differences between an unskilled and skilled writer. Would her conclusions be the same if she compared an unskilled ESPF with a skilled ESFP, or an unskilled ENTJ with a skilled ENTJ?

Sommers asserts that her two case studies are “representative” of each cohort, but she goes on to state that the differences between the two writers are illustrative of “the fundamental differences between the revision strategies of unskilled and skilled writers (42–43). Yet, does not the fact that she can find what she feels to be a typical case to study imply that she has already reified the basic writer? Is not Rita, her unskilled writer, the concrete embodiment of her notions about how unskilled writers revise? Should we assume that all basic writers will write as Rita does? Should we teach all of our basic writers as if they were Rita?

My intention here is not to single out Sommers, whose research I respect, but to raise some questions about general research practices in our field. Other researchers have, like Sommers, used comparative designs to study the difference between high-apprehensives and low-apprehensives (Selfe, “The Predrafting Processes of Four High- and Four Low-Apprehensive Writers”) and high-blockers and low-blockers (Rose, *Writer’s Block: The Cognitive Dimension* 44–69). Researchers have also investigated the distinctive writing processes of advanced writers (Hairston, “Working With Advanced Writers”), good student writers (Stallard, “An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Student Writers”), and an engineer (Selzer, “The Composing Process of an Engineer”). These studies would have been far more valid, and I believe more interesting, if the authors better understood the heterogeneity of their samples and populations. If a researcher were comparing the writing process of, for example, one Eskimo to that of one WASP, the probability that these two writers will have different personality types, and thus different cognitive styles, is quite high. If personality type affects how one writes, then a researcher would be uncovering the differences between the writing processes of two personality types rather than the differences between the typical Eskimo and the typical WASP. Even when researchers are using relatively large samples, the chance that these samples are biased in regards to personality type or cognitive style must be considered. We could compare the writing processes of thirty Eskimos to thirty WASPs, but, even if randomly selected, the samples would likely be biased. As data that Mary McCaulley presents in *Applications of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to Medical and Other Health Professions* illustrates, it is rare for any

group, whether it be nurses or surgeons, to have an equal representation of all personality types. For example, nurses are predominantly sensing-feeling types, and surgeons are predominantly sensing-thinking types.

Researchers may argue that a bias in their sample that reflects a bias in the population offers no threat to the validity of their studies. And they might be right if we taught only entire samples or populations. We do not; we teach individuals. We might, for example, want to determine what kind of topics are best for basic writers. We could then have a group of basic writers, who might be seventy percent sensing types, write on a selection of topics and find that the group wrote significantly better and with less anxiety when given concrete, factual, and detailed topics. We could then administer nothing but concrete, factual, and detailed topics, and about seventy percent of the population would be pleased with our decision. The intuitive types, who constitute thirty percent of the population, would be less pleased. They would probably prefer to write on more open-ended, abstract, and creative topics. If researchers would control for personality type, we would be able to understand better how the individual students in our classes tend to write best and how we might help each student develop.

Using personality or cognitive style theory to appreciate both the biased distribution and the diversity of basic writing classes may help us to avoid faulty inferences, but it also holds a danger. It may lead to yet another kind of pigeonholing and reification. We may begin to believe that the MBTI can explain all human behavior, which it cannot, or that those students who are called sensing types are somehow a different biological creature than those who are called intuitive types. The theory of the MBTI posits that people prefer certain psychological processes, not that they possess certain innate and unalterable personality traits. Sensing types may prefer concrete perception through their senses, but they also, like intuitive types, use their imagination to make hunches and explore possibilities. If misused, personality and cognitive style theories can be as reductionistic as "folk psychologizing." We certainly need to understand basic writers, but what we need to understand about them is more than their faults and limitations. What we need to understand far better are their individual strengths and potentials.

This plea for an appreciation of the diversity and strengths of students in basic writing classes is more an echo than a manifesto. In "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980's," Troyka

emphasized the strengths, rather than the faults, of basic writers. In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy asked that teachers treat their students as individuals when she wrote about the different styles to being wrong. In "Basic Writing," Shaughnessy also warned that just because "teachers use the word 'remedial,' we cannot be at all certain that they mean the same thing by it" (137). Within one program, students will differ from class to class, and the composition of students in different programs will vary with admission and placement policies. We should not believe that there is any one way to define, signify, label, identify, or teach those students who are called basic, remedial, or developmental writers. Though, as Gould says, "the temptation to reify is powerful . . . , it is a temptation we must resist, for it reflects an ancient prejudice of thought, not a truth of nature" (252).

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