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LITERACY EDUCATION AND THE BASIC WRITER: A SURVEY OF COLLEGE COMPOSITION COURSES

It is no secret that writing instruction varies widely from one educational setting to another. Certainly there are differences in curricular emphasis; it stands to reason that there are also disparities in the quality of teaching. Diversity is perhaps inevitable, and many consider it desirable.

But not every kind of difference is necessarily symptomatic of healthy academic pluralism. One particular criticism of college composition holds that an array of forces—e.g., pressure to increase class size and teaching load, the popularity of narrowly vocational degree programs, the relegation of Freshman English to the status of a service course—serves to preclude critical inquiry as a realistic instructional aim in writing courses that are part of the general-education curricula of most schools. Richard Coe, for example, has argued that increased access to higher education, along with the concomitant demand for college-educated workers in more and more lines of employment, really has not altered societal needs for a type of literacy quite distinct from the kind traditionally associated with a liberal education:

Increasingly hierarchical division of labor requires . . . many workers who can read for information, follow instructions, and (perhaps) write occasional short reports clearly and accurately; some workers with specialized reading, writing, and thinking

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abilities to write longer reports and handle the decentralized implementation decisions (which require the ability to make low-level inferences correctly); and a few real professionals with genuinely critical reading, writing, and thinking abilities to serve in (and educate) the centralized managerial elite.

Critics who pursue Coe's line of reasoning contend that disparities in literacy education reproduce established socioeconomic class lines by restricting the mastery of complex reading, writing, and thinking skills to a relative few scholastically well-prepared college students who either enroll in elite institutions or qualify for placement in writing classes for accelerated learners. More likely to be deprived of these skills are students with limited or inferior educational backgrounds: specifically, many poor, minority, rural, and other nontraditional students—those individuals often presumed to have benefited most from increased access to higher education.¹ Certainly these are the students whose numbers are concentrated in remedial or basic writing classes, whether those classes happen to be taught in research universities or in community colleges.

We wish to examine the claim that the fortunes of basic writers are influenced by a tacit social agenda upon mass education—one that reduces writing and thinking proficiencies, for many college students, to mere “functional” literacy. Consideration of this claim seems relevant to the current ferment in composition pedagogy, particularly with respect to the emerging view of writing as a means of learning, as an act of discovery that engages intellectual activity more challenging than that involved in producing five-paragraph essays with precisely placed thesis statements and topic sentences. If composition pedagogy is moving toward a more enlightened approach, one might expect to discern evidence of such change in writing courses tailored to the needs of students less than adequately prepared for Freshman English.

The question of whether advances in composition theory have found their way into the classroom already has been addressed by Maxine Hairston, among others. Hairston examines the consequences of a presumed “paradigm shift” from the teaching of writing as static subject matter to the analysis and modification of a complex form of behavior—from “current-traditional” injunctions that students should “think first, then write,” to a more cautious introduction of heuristic procedures that may lead to the discovery of outlook through the act of writing. Hairston (78-79) concludes that although “those in the vanguard of the profession” have either assisted or adjusted to such change, “the overwhelming majority of college writing teachers” cling to the current-traditional paradigm. The hallmarks of this paradigm, which underlies what we shall call “instrumental” pedagogy, are well-documented (see, for example, Young). They include emphasis of product over process, neglect of invention in favor of editing, a simplified linear model of composing, a conception of writing as an instrument for encoding an impersonal objective reality independent of the writer (as opposed to an in-

tellectual activity that generates new knowledge or meaning), the belief that good writing communicates this objective reality clearly and accurately, and the assumption that thought is separate from and antecedent to language.

Heretofore, analyses of current-traditional pedagogy, like those of Hairston and Young, have provided important functional definitions of a formalistic, instrumental version of writing instruction, while documenting its long-standing hegemony in the textbook and the classroom. We wish now to add to these discussions a neglected political dimension—a consideration of how the perpetuation of such instruction within basic writing courses may lead (whether by conscious design or not) to predictable social outcomes. Our thinking is influenced by a recent bibliographical essay by Henry A. Giroux, who delineates three pedagogical models for literacy education. “Instrumental pedagogy,” according to Giroux (342-343), “expresses itself through a purely formalistic approach to writing characterized by a strict emphasis on rules By emphasizing the transmission of information, the pedagogy used in this approach . . . removes the student from any active participation in either the construction of knowledge or the sharing of power.” On the other hand, “interaction” and “critical” pedagogies, according to Giroux (345), both demonstrate concern for “how students construct meaning.” We share Giroux’s conviction that an instructor’s vision of literacy is likely to engender a particular kind of pedagogy, and that this pedagogy, in turn, is likely to foster a particular kind of literacy.

Hoping to gather some understanding of how teachers of basic writing perceive literacy and how their perceptions might guide instructional priorities, we decided to conduct a survey. Specifically, we wanted to determine what kinds of writing and thinking proficiencies teachers of basic writing stress, and we hoped to discover whether or not basic writers seem receptive to developing such proficiencies. We therefore designed a questionnaire that listed writing and thinking proficiencies (see Appendix), dividing them into the four general areas of competency posited by Haswell: Understanding Subject Matter (i.e., conceptualizing), Demonstrating Knowledge (i.e., casting concepts into language), Handling Language, and Influencing the Reader. Within each of these areas of competency, we randomly listed ten restricted writing and thinking skills ranging from the purely instrumental to the complex or critical. We have defined as instrumental those skills that presume a separation of thought from language; on the other hand, we consider those skills that accommodate an epistemic view of language (i.e., that acknowledge the potential of writing to create, rather than simply to encode, meaning) to be critical proficiencies.

Our questionnaire, then, consisted of four lists of skills, arranged in a completely random fashion. Those same four lists have been rearranged in a roughly hierarchical order, moving from instrumental to critical, in Figure 1 (see Appendix). Unavoidably, the precise order in which the four lists have been arranged in Figure 1 will invite dispute, as will the

rubrics, *instrumental*, *intermediate*, and *complex/critical*, to which we have assigned them. Presumably, we might have employed different terms, e.g., *formalistic* and *epistemic* or *analytic* and *holistic*. We resist, however, the notion that the lists shown in Figure 1, which contain all forty of the skills included in the questionnaire, should be viewed as developmental sequences, since to present these skills to students in such a fashion presupposes that critical thought can, indeed must, be deferred until inexperienced writers first have mastered simpler, atomistic competencies and, perhaps, have internalized the conventions of formal written English. Not only are we skeptical of such a mechanistic explanation of how people become literate, but also we see the empowerment of critical thought as a far greater motivation for adult learners. We believe, in short, that each of the lists in Figure 1 begins with three skills clearly integral to instrumental pedagogy and ends with three fairly complex skills that coordinate language and thought. We presume that a relatively strong emphasis of skills in the first category is likely to foster a more instrumental kind of literacy—one that is less conducive to critical inquiry—than a relatively strong emphasis of skills in the other category.

We asked respondents to use an ascending five-point scale to gauge basic writers' receptiveness to instruction in each of these forty skills (that is, their eagerness to develop and apply these skills, *not* their mastery of them). We then asked each respondent to indicate the emphasis assigned to the nurture and exercise of each skill in the course(s) for basic writers administered by the respondent's department. We mailed the questionnaire to 2,200 English departments (addresses were provided by a commercial list), asking that it be passed along to the instructor most concerned with the plight of the basic writer, whom we defined as "the student entering college whose difficulties with written communication leave him or her less than adequately prepared for the standard composition course(s)."

We received 221 usable questionnaires, admittedly a disappointing rate of response that necessarily must qualify any inferences to be drawn from the collected data.² Our sample is skewed slightly toward public institutions, 61.5% of our respondents, as compared to a national distribution of about 45%, probably because a greater proportion of public institutions offer basic writing courses. Also, two-year colleges are somewhat underrepresented (accounting for 31.2% of our sample, as compared to a national distribution of about 48%), possibly because the commercially prepared mailing labels that we purchased, consisting of the names and addresses of chairpersons of English departments, omitted two-year colleges that do not designate a single individual as coordinator of English courses. Otherwise, our sample seems to reflect the national distribution of colleges and universities by type: 35.3% of our responses came from four-year colleges without graduate programs in English (as compared to a national distribution of 29% for "general baccalaureate" colleges); 26.7% came from four-year schools offering only the master's degree in English (as compared to a national distribution

of 16% for “comprehensive universities”); and 6.8% came from doctorate-granting departments (as compared to a national distribution of 7% for “doctoral-level” universities).³ The representativeness of our sample as regards size of enrollment is slightly harder to assess. About half (51.1%) of the responding departments were situated in institutions with enrollments of fewer than 3,000 students; roughly another fourth (27.6%) were in colleges and universities with enrollments between 3,000 and 7,000. The combined figure, 78.7%, compares with a national distribution of 78% for colleges and universities with enrollments of less than 5,000 and 11% for schools with enrollments between 5,000 and 10,000.⁴ The remaining responses to our survey break down as follows: 14.0% from institutions with enrollments of 7,000 and 15,000, 5.4% from institutions with enrollments of 15,000 to 25,000, and 1.4% from institutions with enrollments of over 25,000. Eight respondents (3.6%) described the admissions policies of their schools as highly restrictive; 75 (33.9%) as somewhat restrictive; 48 (21.7%) as nonrestrictive but not open; 22 (10.0%) as open for all in-state students; and 68 (30.8%) as open for all students. In only 15 institutions was there no composition requirement (6.8%, as compared to 24% of the institutions responding to a survey of four-year schools conducted in 1974 by Smith); 73 required a single course (33.0%, as compared to 31% in 1974); 116 required two courses (52.5%, as compared to 45% requiring two or more courses in 1974); and 17 (7.7%) required three or more courses. Remedial work was required of at least some students in 171 (77.4%) of the responding schools.

In order to discover which proficiencies basic writers are most receptive to learning and which proficiencies teachers of basic writing are most inclined to emphasize, we computed mean scores. The proficiencies receiving the highest scores in each respect appear in Figure 2 (see Appendix). Correspondences between the two lists are evident: ten of the forty competencies appear in both. However, the apparent harmony between skills that instructors emphasize and those that basic writers seem receptive to learning may be deceptive. Apparently teachers believe that they place fairly heavy emphasis upon most of the forty competencies (average of all forty mean scores for teachers was 3.665), while their students seem relatively unreceptive to that instruction (average of mean scores for students was 2.721). In fact, in the case of only three of the competencies—“characterizing attitudes and emotional responses,” “narrating a sequence of events,” and “using technical devices (e.g., graphics, specialized terms, etc.)”—were students perceived as equally or more receptive to instruction in a particular skill than were their teachers inclined to impart it. These data may point to a morale problem in basic writing courses.

In fact, resentment of the basic writer's resistance to instruction was evident in a great many of the written responses placed at the end of the questionnaire. When asked to account for inconsistencies between what courses emphasize and what students seem receptive to learning,

many respondents attributed such inconsistencies to the basic writer's lack of motivation and persistence. Here are some representative comments:

—“By and large the differences result from the discrepancy between passionate instructors and lukewarm students.”

—“Inconsistencies . . . come from the teachers' zeal, which is greater than the students'.”

—“In general, basic (remedial) students don't recognize needs and fail to accept with enthusiasm strategies for improvement.”

—“They are freshmen and 'know it all.' They lack the intellectual discipline to really labor to achieve the effect.”

—“50% of our students seem to lack the ability to profit from the education available to them. College is not for everybody.”

Looking more closely at the specific skills most emphasized by basic writing teachers, we find that nine are skills that we have termed “instrumental,” while five fall into the “intermediate” category, and one is a “complex/critical” proficiency. Included are four items from the category of skills titled “Understanding Subject Matter”; another four come from “Handling Language”; and five others come from “Influencing the Reader.” From each of these three categories of skills, basic writing teachers seem to select for emphasis the competencies that we consider the most instrumental. The one apparent anomaly involves an item from the category of skills titled “Demonstrating Knowledge”: instructors reported giving considerable emphasis to “making and qualifying generalizations,” a skill that we believed to entail critical reasoning. The anomaly bears scrutiny.

At the time we designed our questionnaire, we regarded “making and qualifying generalizations” (placing unconscious emphasis, perhaps, on the word *qualifying*) as a relatively complex critical thinking proficiency—one usually applied by writers after they have synthesized data gathered from personal experience, observation, or research; have weighed evidence; and have drawn inferences. We suspect, however, that respondents associated “making and qualifying generalizations” with the cruder, more instrumental matter of formulating general assertions—thesis statements and topic sentences. Because, admittedly, we must operate largely on conjecture at this point (and because we view the overemphasis of thesis-generation as fundamental to the survival of instrumental pedagogy and thus to the neglect of critical literacy in basic writing courses), we wish to set forth the basis of our inference in some detail:

1. Four of the skills most emphasized by instructors directly involve the formulating of thesis statements and topic sentences. They are “deciding on a controlling idea or set of ideas,” “directing the reader's attention (with topic sentences, subject headings, etc.),” “making summarizing statements and giving examples,” and “formulating and qualifying generalizing sentences.” And while another four (“finding a focal point,” “discerning significant

details,” “focusing on detail,” and “retaining concepts and organizing facts”—relatively instrumental skills all) are connected more indirectly to the casting of thesis statements and topic sentences, they clearly are compatible with the kind of instruction that makes the generalizing assertion the conceptual staple of basic writing courses.

2. Of the four skills directly related to the formulating of thesis statements and topic sentences, those most emphasized are the ones we considered most instrumental. Furthermore, the less emphasized skill, “formulating and qualifying generalizing sentences” (again, note the presence of the word *qualifying*), was one to which teachers discerned much less receptiveness among students; neither it nor “making and qualifying generalizations” reappears in the student-receptiveness list of Figure 2 (see Appendix). Finally, in the single case where the word *qualifying* was not accompanied by the word *generalizing*, the skill in question (“qualifying a position or stance”), received a much lower mean score (ranking twenty-first in teacher emphasis), despite the fact that this skill probably should be exercised whenever a writer makes responsible, valid, mature generalizations. Respondents seemed to feel that they were more likely to make contact with basic writers when emphasizing thinking skills that lead to generalizing assertions—thesis statements and topic sentences—possibly to satisfy the rigidly dictated organizational schemes featured in dozens of remedial rhetorics, workbooks, and programmed texts.
3. Significantly, several thinking proficiencies that logically might be assumed to precede the formulating of general assertions, at least under ideal circumstances of critical inquiry, get comparatively little instructional emphasis. Each of the following skills ranked in the lower half of skills emphasized by teachers: “recognizing relationships among data,” “forming inferences,” “qualifying a position or stance,” “distinguishing between fact and inference,” “examining biases and judgments,” “coordinating sources,” “weighing evidence,” and “analyzing the validity of sources and questioning opinion.”

In short, among the fifteen skills most emphasized by teachers, the nine that roughly might be classified as thinking skills (numbers 1, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14) suggest collectively the prevalence of the current-traditional paradigm in basic writing courses: instruction governed by the assumption that inexperienced writers should begin with a thesis, construct an outline (often consisting of topic sentences), and then finally search for supporting evidence. In other words, prescribed form regulates thought. The practical implications of this pedagogy were put nicely into focus by an incisive comment from a basic writing teacher in a small liberal arts college:

The student becomes conscious, on demand, of weighing (and selecting) evidence for a thesis; the teacher tends, once it is strongly emphasized, to move on, granting the student's gradual learning to do it. . . . The teacher emphasizes functional recall and organization. . . . The teacher makes detail an instrumental mode of writing.

Of the six remaining skills most emphasized by instructors of basic writing, five might be classified roughly as languaging proficiencies. (Our hesitant reliance here on a reductive dichotomy should not be construed as assent to the notion that language can be separated neatly from thought—a notion inherent to instrumental pedagogy.) Four of these five languaging skills (ranked 2, 3, 7, and 8) are essentially editorial competencies: “writing standard grammar and syntax,” “employing standard punctuation,” “exercising proofreading skills,” and “editing for coherence and economy.” Note that, again, the least instrumental of these, “editing for coherence and economy,” is also the least emphasized skill, as well as one for which instructors perceived very little receptiveness among students—it ranked twenty-ninth in that respect. The study of language in the basic writing courses that we surveyed, then, seems to emphasize editing written products to meet standards of formal correctness rather than generating new meaning or knowledge through rhetorical manipulations of language (e.g., developing voice through “establishing a persona” or “establishing and sustaining a tone”). Instruction seems predicated on the assumption that knowledge precedes language (and consequently can be retrieved and encoded in the shorthand of generalizing assertions), that it is a system or instrument for transmitting predetermined meaning or preexistent knowledge rather than a complex form of behavior that generates new meaning and knowledge.

Presented with the foregoing data, one might be tempted to blame the neglect of critical thought in basic writing courses on the oversimplified view of literacy held by many instructors. However, such an explanation fails to account for the common belief that basic writers actually prefer instruction in functional literacy—for the fact that of the fifteen skills in the student-receptiveness list of Figure 2, nine are skills that we have termed “instrumental.” Although we have only the perceptions of their teachers to rely on, we are not inclined to dismiss casually the claim that basic writers really desire functional literacy: we do not view this notion as mere rationalization of established practice. For one thing, comments placed at the end of our questionnaire suggest that at least some teachers of basic writing are committed to achieving more ambitious goals—to making better application of the current literature—yet recognize the resistance of most basic writers to such goals. Among those comments were the following:

—“As Perry dualists, [basic writers] *like* rules and regulations, surface details, correctness. That's not what they *need*.”

—“Students generally see some utilitarian value to. . . editing skills.

More sophisticated sorts of editing (such as working for a more concise, forceful style) do not carry the same sort of obvious utilitarian value, nor do the thinking skills that we stress heavily.”

—“Composition involves application of concepts. This is certainly not the same as most of the educational experiences these students have had in the past. For instance, this is not the same as giving the student facts which are regurgitated back on an examination. Applying compositional concepts is even different from giving the student a model algebra problem and then assigning similar problems. The students have not been prepared to perform the various mental processes necessary to write a thoughtful, organized paper. They are more receptive to technical matters (grammar, footnotes).”

—“Look at the nature of high school education in combination with the fact that this is, on the whole, a polytechnic and therefore practically oriented university. The students come to us thinking in terms of what the minimum knowledge and work necessary to get through the torture of composition are. This attitude is reinforced by many of the professors here who see the writing requirement as a necessary evil, barely necessary, which is required of their students but which is of no ‘practical’ value. The attitudes and expectations of the teachers who teach the composition classes are, as you might expect, that writing is important—for itself, as a way of learning how to think.”

These arguments are, of course, familiar: students with weak scholastic backgrounds are not often attuned temperamentally to the traditional aims of liberal education; prior schooling has conditioned basic writers to seek algorithmic approaches to thinking and problem solving; many instructors and academic advisors in vocational programs dismiss general-education requirements as service courses at best, as mere hurdles to be cleared at worst. Yet the fact that each of the respondents quoted above apparently strives, in the face of frustration, to foster something beyond mere functional literacy leads us to suspect that students’ genuine resistance to learning many critical proficiencies has helped to shape the instrumental priorities of many basic writing courses.

We recognize at least some evidence, however, that basic writers are more open to other kinds of instruction than commonly is supposed, just as their teachers seem not entirely content with established instructional practice. On the one hand, basic writers seem relatively receptive to instruction in a few noninstrumental skills (items 4, 12, and 14 in the student-receptiveness list of Figure 2), even though their teachers do not emphasize these skills. On the other hand, teachers, for their part, say that they emphasize heavily a few other noninstrumental skills (items 8, 10, 14, and 15 in the instructor-emphasis list), even though they do not believe their students are very receptive to learning these skills. The consequent difficulty to find a mutually acceptable way to transform the basic writing course into a more rewarding undertaking for both parties is, no doubt, painful and frustrating for students and teachers alike. In despair, many of the instructors who responded to our survey seem

resigned to teaching the most instrumental kinds of proficiency, believing that basic writers are probably no less receptive to learning these skills than they are to learning any others. One respondent described the self-perpetuating stalemate that results in these terms:

Whereas students usually identify lack of mechanical and graphic skills as 'the problem,' these matters are also those in which they evince the least interest. I see also a reluctance in students to address problems of validity of sources, examining bias, whereas we regard these matters of content as paramount.

We hasten to observe at this point that the resignation we find typical of our respondents differs sharply from the view that prevails in the current literature devoted to basic writing. Nevertheless, we feel safe in reaffirming Maxine Hairston's distinction between "those in the vanguard of the profession" and "the overwhelming majority of college writing teachers." Because the former are more active professionally, their views are reflected in journals, monographs, and conferences. The latter, less successful in juggling the constraints of heavy teaching loads, inordinately large classes, and disproportionate salary scales, do not read the literature or attend professional meetings. Of course, we cannot assert with unqualified assurance that our limited sample of basic writing teachers reflects the views of the overwhelming majority to which Hairston refers. We hope it does not. Nevertheless, we believe our survey reflects the attitudes of a substantial number of basic writing teachers who seem, often halfheartedly, to emphasize skills that they believe basic writers *want* but may or may not actually *need*. The failure of basic writers to demonstrate mastery of these instrumental skills, upon which they themselves presumably have placed priority—or even to evince much enthusiasm for trying to achieve such mastery—seems to invalidate any claim that basic writing courses should address more complex skills. Consequently, students and teachers must often try to make contact on highly inhospitable territory—the study of skills that students are not particularly eager to learn and that many teachers deem unworthy of serious attention in higher education. Whether this depressing stalemate can be blamed on the failure of teachers and students as individuals or whether it reflects a systemic problem inherent to American mass education, we must leave the reader to decide.

While we recognize that, due to its response rate, our survey hardly constitutes an unqualified indictment of developmental composition programs in general, we do believe that it portrays the basic writing course, as it is taught on a good many campuses, as a theoretically impoverished enterprise, sustained by a narrowly instrumental vision of literacy—one that has been challenged successfully at more advanced levels of English study.⁵ More specifically, the following assumptions seem to prevail in these courses:

1. Thought precedes language and can be neatly separated from it; epistemic or heuristic applications of language are diminished or ignored. One respondent remarked tellingly: "The emphasis is on grammar rather than rhetoric."
2. As a consequence, successful writing is writing that communicates clearly and accurately preexistent information or knowledge, external to the writer. Operating on this assumption, one instructor attributed the shortcomings of basic writers to the fact that "they have not yet acquired enough knowledge to write material demanding discrete powers of intellect or observation." Such thinking exemplifies the "banking" concept of education (whereby students are seen as vessels to be filled with preexistent facts) to which Paulo Freire has attributed the failure of traditional remedies to adult illiteracy.
3. Writing can be approached as a rule-governed activity—an approach that basic writers actually prefer, whether they are able to articulate that preference or not. Remarkd one basic writing teacher: "We teach a structured, rather rigid approach to basic writing—our goal is to get students to write a five-paragraph theme in standard English, using accepted conventions of punctuation. . . . Our students seem to be as practical minded as we are, although their enthusiasm is less than ours."
4. Writing courses "cover" subject matter rather than foster proficiency at process; basic writers' shortcomings can be attributed to their failure to master this subject matter. According to one instructor: "I think *receptivity* is the wrong word. We need to focus on *deficiencies* in the students' preparation and then try to cover the most essential topics before the semester is gone."

Clearly, these questionable assumptions have not held sway in more advanced levels of English study for a long time. Perhaps their presence accounts for Mike Rose's severe assessment of basic writing courses as "intellectually substandard, placed in the conceptual basements of English departments, if placed in the department at all, ghettoized" (126).

Do our findings point to any feasible improvements in the climate of basic writing classes? Perhaps. It is encouraging to see that some teachers of basic writing are receptive to change. For instance, one respondent from a small state-supported institution remarked:

The problem . . . is that surface amenities are given far more attention than the actual writing process. For example, the departmental syllabus is directed towards the error count for comma splices, misuse of semicolons, and the like. . . . However, the department now has in its employ several specialists in the field who hope to turn the program into one more appropriate to the twentieth century.

Another basic writing teacher, apparently disenchanted with purely formalistic instruction, reported: "Our developmental course focuses upon

letting students experience success at communicating from personal experience.”

While we may find such sentiments laudable, the proposed remedies (turning to a new generation of technicians or “specialists” for relief, subordinating the mastery of skills to the fostering of “self-expression”) are, at least in themselves, sadly inadequate, because the problem is not purely technical nor purely therapeutic. Rather, the full political implications of an increasingly vocationalized curriculum with unequal access to critical literacy must be examined. To put the matter more succinctly, we believe that the decision to teach instrumental literacy to basic writers entails more than purely pedagogical issues. A substantial body of scholarship (e.g., Freire, Giroux, Lentricchia) argues that such instruction inhibits the growth of critical reasoning and reinforces authoritarian modes of thought, while, perhaps, restricting access to more desirable lines of employment. Others may insist that because many basic writers wish only to survive in a world that demands functional literacy, college English departments are obligated to provide them with such skills. However, such reasoning—apart from ignoring historical evidence, documented by Levine, that purely functional literacy cannot be taught effectively to adults—assumes a purely vocational model of higher education, wherein curricular decisions are routinely governed by the laws of supply and demand. Further, we feel that it signifies uncritical assent to the mythology of bourgeois liberalism, more precisely to the belief that the value of literacy resides chiefly within its enablement of academic and business success. We do not wish to cast scorn upon this mythology nor to challenge the privilege of instructors to decide, finally, that they want to teach functional literacy to basic writers. We suggest only that there are political issues entailed in such a choice, just as there are political issues entailed in the decision to produce and market big cars, sugary breakfast foods, or violent TV shows. Those political issues merit examination and debate.

Undeniably, the apparent resistance of basic writers to critical literacy (or at least their teachers’ perception of it) remains an obstacle to more ambitious objectives for remedial writing courses that serve the current needs of mass higher education. However, if some of those needs are not examined critically and challenged, at least they must be recognized as a force that shapes instructional priorities, consciously or otherwise.

At least two avenues of inquiry still might be pursued in surveys similar to ours. First, would a comparison of remedial, standard, and honors composition courses reveal important differences in assumptions about literacy? Second, might there be some more reliable way to gauge basic writers’ receptiveness to instruction in critical literacy skills? It seems plausible that the teachers we surveyed unconsciously may have underestimated their students’ receptiveness to kinds of instruction precluded by departmentally mandated syllabi or textbooks.

Before any investigation of literacy education for the basic writer can effectuate improvements in pedagogy, however, we must dispel the

notion that basic writers are “cognitively immature” and consequently incapable of critical thought.⁶ Such a view was expressed frequently in written comments at the end of our questionnaire, perhaps most vigorously by one respondent from a community college, who wrote beside the skills listed beneath “Understanding Subject Matter”: “Skills referred to below demand high-level cognitive development, not an attribute of basic writers anywhere.” Similar sentiments were voiced by an exasperated instructor in a four-year college: “I quit marking your questionnaire. In our remedial classes we teach spelling, sentence structure, grammatical correctness, etc. The items you list belong in advanced courses.” We do not wish to excoriate the typically capable, sincere teacher of basic writing who, often lacking the autonomy to redefine curricular objectives, clings to such dubious assumptions about learning; however, we do believe that basic writers are entitled to a type of instruction that is more ambitious and politically alert.

Appendix

Questionnaire Mailed to 2200 English Departments

Dear Department Chair:

Would you please pass along this questionnaire and the enclosed return envelope to the member of your department you believe to be most concerned about the plight of the “basic writer” in your composition program. By “basic writer” we mean the student entering college whose difficulties with written communication leave him or her less than adequately prepared for the standard composition course(s) offered in your department.

Dear Respondent:

We are undertaking a survey of instructional and administrative practices in college composition programs. We are particularly interested in examining the ways in which composition programs (and the English departments in which they are housed) have responded to the new type of student who has made so unsettling an appearance in composition classes over the course of the last ten to fifteen years. This type of student—variously described as the “non-traditional,” “career-oriented,” or “underprepared” student—has had a considerable effect on composition teaching, not to mention current administration of writing programs. New approaches to the teaching of writing and rhetoric have been initiated to encompass the needs of such students. New programs and courses have been established to accommodate the presence of these students on campus.

We hope you will recognize that, unlike some questionnaires, ours is not principally concerned with finding out how well students exhibit

mastery of the final stages of putting together a polished written product. Given the difficulties the basic writer has in mastering skills at all stages of the composing process and how little presently is understood about how best to confront such difficulties in the classroom, our effort is to gain insight into precisely who this student is and how he or she responds to instruction in skills and tactics applicable to all stages of writing. In Part I, we ask you to evaluate your students' receptiveness to instruction in the areas listed. In Part II, we ask you to determine which of these areas currently receive the greatest attention in your department's teaching. Part III provides the opportunity to comment on any perceived problems in teaching composition to the basic writer which may have been brought to light by your answers to Parts I and II. We are interested particularly in comments you might have concerning any inconsistencies or incongruities in your responses.

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Part I. Please indicate the degree of receptiveness among basic writers in your composition courses to instruction in the following areas of writing competence. We ask you to rate students' receptiveness to instruction on a scale of one to five, where five signifies a great deal of receptiveness and 1 signifies very little. The four general categories of writing competence are identified by Richard H. Haswell in "Tactics of Discourse," *College English* 43 (1981): 168-78.

UNDERSTANDING SUBJECT MATTER

Characterizing attitudes and emotional responses	12345
Discerning significant details	12345
Forming inferences	12345
Recognizing relationships among data	12345
Examining biases and judgments	12345
Distinguishing between fact and inference	12345
Finding a focal point	12345
Deciding on a controlling idea or set of ideas	12345
Retaining concepts and organizing facts	12345
Qualifying a position or stance	12345

DEMONSTRATING KNOWLEDGE

Narrating a sequence of events	12345
Weighing evidence	12345
Defining terms and concepts	12345
Making and qualifying generalizations	12345
Isolating details and recalling specific facts	12345
Focusing on detail	12345
Coordinating sources	12345
Recognizing and using transitions	12345
Finding the appropriate word or expression (e.g., metaphor)	12345
Using technical devices (e.g., graphics, specialized terms)	12345

HANDLING LANGUAGE

Combining and coordinating sentences	12345
Using a dictionary (to solve problems of usage, spelling, etc.)	12345
Editing for a forceful style (e.g., writing for concision)	12345
Employing idioms and other conventional expressions	12345
Formulating and qualifying generalizing sentences	12345
Establishing a persona	12345
Establishing and sustaining a tone	12345
Writing standard grammar and syntax	12345
Employing standard punctuation	12345
Defining and explaining rhetorical problems	12345

INFLUENCING THE READER

Analyzing the validity of sources and questioning opinion	12345
Establishing priorities among topics developed	12345
Using appropriate appeals to reason, ethics, emotion	12345
Directing reader's attention (with topic sentences, subject headings, etc.)	12345
Anticipating and simulating reader's response	12345
Making summarizing statements and giving examples (moving back and forth between abstract and concrete)	12345
Creating emphasis (with transition, subordination, parallelism, connotation)	12345
Editing for coherence and economy	12345
Using footnotes and bibliographical sources	12345
Exercising editing and proofreading skills	12345

Part II. Please indicate the degree of emphasis given to the following areas of writing competence in instruction provided the basic writer in your composition program. We ask you to rate emphasis on a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 signifies great emphasis, 1 little or no emphasis. [Questionnaire lists again, in the same order, forty competencies arranged under four separate headings.]

Part III. If you recognize any inconsistencies or incongruities between responses to Parts I and II, how would you account for them? (Also, if you would care to comment on our questionnaire, please feel free to do so.) We ask that you use a separate sheet of paper.

Figure 1

Understanding Subject Matter

Instrumental	Deciding on a controlling idea or set of ideas
	Finding a focal point
	Retaining concepts and organizing facts
Intermediate	Discerning significant details
	Recognizing relationships among data
	Characterizing attitudes and emotional responses
Complex/Critical	Forming inferences
	Qualifying a position or stance
	Distinguishing between fact and inference
	Examining biases and judgments

Demonstrating Knowledge

Instrumental	Narrating a sequence of events
	Isolating details and recalling specific facts
	Focusing on detail
Intermediate	Defining terms and concepts
	Using technical devices (e.g., graphics, specialized terms)
	Finding the appropriate word or expression (e.g., metaphor)
Complex/Critical	Recognizing and using transitions
	Coordinating sources
	Weighing evidence
	Making and qualifying generalizations

Handling Language

Instrumental	Writing standard grammar and syntax Employing standard punctuation Combining and coordinating sentences
Intermediate	Employing idioms and other conventional expressions Using a dictionary (to solve problems of usage, spelling, etc.) Formulating and qualifying generalizing sentences Editing for a forceful style
Complex/Critical	Establishing and sustaining a tone Establishing a persona Defining and explaining rhetorical problems

Influencing the Reader

Instrumental	Exercising proofreading skills Establishing priorities among topics developed Directing reader's attention (with topic sentences, headings, etc.)
Intermediate	Making summarizing statements and giving examples (moving back and forth between abstract and concrete) Creating emphasis (with transitions, subordination, parallelism, etc.) Editing for coherence and economy Using footnotes and bibliographical sources
Complex/Critical	Anticipating and simulating reader's response Analyzing the validity of sources and questioning opinion Using appropriate appeals to reason, ethics, emotion

Figure 2

Proficiencies That Basic Writers Seem Most Receptive to Learning

1. Narrating a sequence of events (3.916*)
2. Deciding on a controlling idea or set of ideas (3.280)
3. Finding a focal point (3.168)
4. Characterizing attitudes and emotional responses (3.068)
5. Combining and coordinating sentences (3.005)
6. Directing reader's attention (with topic sentences, headings, etc.) (3.005)
7. Retaining concepts and organizing facts (2.991)
8. Writing standard grammar and syntax (2.977)
9. Employing standard punctuation (2.972)
10. Discerning significant details (2.882)
11. Focusing on detail (2.874)
12. Recognizing and using transitions (2.864)
13. Employing idioms and other conventional expressions (2.840)
14. Using a dictionary (2.823)
15. Making summarizing statements and giving examples (2.790)

*Degree of receptiveness on an ascending scale of one to five

Proficiencies Most Emphasized by Teachers of Basic Writing

1. Deciding on a controlling idea or set of ideas (4.592*)
2. Writing standard grammar and syntax (4.384)
3. Employing standard punctuation (4.373)
4. Finding a focal point (4.364)
5. Combining and coordinating sentences (4.134)
6. Directing reader's attention (with topic sentences, headings, etc.) (4.102)
7. Exercising proofreading skills (4.065)
8. Editing for coherence and economy (4.009)
9. Making summarizing statements and giving examples (3.995)
10. Making and qualifying generalizations (3.958)
11. Discerning significant details (3.940)
12. Focusing on detail (3.935)
13. Retaining concepts and organizing facts (3.931)
14. Formulating and qualifying generalizing sentences (3.907)
15. Creating emphasis (with transition, subordination, parallelism, etc.) (3.903)

*Degree of emphasis on an ascending scale of one to five

Notes

¹Ohmann's critique of freshman composition is well known. Disparities among educational institutions are addressed more directly by both Abel and Lazere.

²Although the ten percent response was disappointing, we believe our sample compares quite favorably with that of Witte et al. in the FIPSE-funded Writing Program Assessment Project, undertaken about the same time as our survey. Researchers involved in that project received 127 responses from more than 550 contacts made with members of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA). However, since questionnaires were mailed only to the 259 individuals who previously had signified their willingness to participate in the survey (by responding to the initial contact), the forty-nine percent response reported in the project's published reports actually represents a substantially smaller sample than the one we received.

³Percentages are based upon data cited in *Standard Education Almanac*. Distribution by character of institution (public vs. private) is based on all 3,280 colleges and universities surveyed in *SEA*. Distribution by type of institution (two-year college, etc.) is based on the 2,508 institutions that fall into the four categories named; omitted are institutions listed as "professional" and "new."

⁴The percentage is based upon data collected by the American Council on Education. The remaining percentages reported by the Council are as follows: 10,000 to 20,000, 7%; 20,000 to 30,000, 2%; over 30,000, 1%.

⁵The situation may not be much better in most standard composition courses, however; see, for example, Burhans. The findings of the Witte et al. also seem to suggest that standard composition courses provide an environment inhospitable to the nurture of critical literacy. For example, more than two-thirds of all directors of composition surveyed listed "writing mechanically correct prose" as a "real goal" in courses under their administration, making it the most frequently cited "real goal." "Reading critically and insightfully," on the other hand, ranked tenth among seventeen goals; "connecting writing and thinking" placed fourteenth. "Thinking critically" was cited only as an "ideal goal," and even then only by twenty percent of the directors of composition and ten percent of the other instructors surveyed.

⁶Addressing this assumption, Rose asserts:

All too often these days we hear that remedial writers are 'cognitively deficient' These judgments are unwarranted extrapolations from a misuse (or overuse) of the developmental psychologist's diagnostic instruments, for as Jean Piaget himself reminded us in one of his final articles, if we are not seeing evidence of formal operations in young adults, then we should either better acquaint them with our diagnostics or find more appropriate ones. . . . We must assume, Piaget warns, that in their daily lives our students can generalize and analyze, can operate formally (127).

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