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TEACHING LITERATURE TO BASIC WRITERS

In 1974, the College English Association called for curricular reforms designed to adapt the study of literature to the aptitudes and interests of “a new and unprecedentedly diverse student body . . . whose cultural and ethnic background would at an earlier time have precluded their attending college” (Foulke and Hartman 468–69).

In one sense, the CEA resolution arrived at a propitious moment in the history of English study. A few months after its adoption, the *Journal of Basic Writing* commenced publication—a development signaling agreement upon a term to describe a certain kind of nontraditional college student and the desire to establish a body of scholarship devoted to teaching such students. The decade between 1975 and 1985 also brought talk about “bridging the gap” between composition and literature by placing the two on an equal footing in college English departments.

On the other hand, 1975 also saw the beginnings of an ongoing assault on remedial education, partly in reaction to a period of activism that had brought, among other things, open admissions, the CCCC statement on Students’ Right to Their Own Language, and the MLA presidency of Louis Kampf. The political climate of the 1980s has, in fact, impeded the idealistic agenda of the CEA resolution, while confining basic writing instruction to what Mike Rose has

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called “the conceptual basements of English departments” (“Remedial” 126).

Rose’s indictment is validated by two recent studies (Trimmer, and Gould and Heyda) that show how basic writing courses continue to operate out of a narrowly instrumental conception of literacy—one long since discredited at more advanced levels of English study. According to the author of one of these studies, the single greatest obstacle to incorporating research into the pedagogy of basic writing has been “zealous teachers” committed to a regimen of grammar drills, workbook exercises, and minimum competency testing (Trimmer 7). Furthermore, a survey of recent scholarship shows that teachers who might be inclined to use literature in their basic writing classes will find very few published resources to guide and support their efforts. In their 1984 bibliographic essay on basic writing, Hull and Bartholomae list a variety of instructional resources “so wide and numerous as to require as many omissions . . . as inclusions” (284) but name only Ponsot and Deen as scholars who connect literature and basic writing. Andrea Lunsford, in her recent update of Mina Shaughnessy’s bibliographic essay on basic writing, detects a trend toward “reuniting the arts of speaking, writing, reading, and thinking” (224) but cites only E. D. Hirsch and Robert Scholes as theorists concerned specifically with the place of literary texts in writing instruction.

My own bibliographic survey¹, which addresses more directly the use of literature in basic writing instruction, reports:

1. An ERIC search (using the descriptors, “Basic Writers,” “Developmental Studies Programs,” “Remedial Instruction,” and “Basic Skills” in conjunction with “Literature Appreciation” and “Literary Criticism”) yields only four titles.²
2. No major publisher markets a literature anthology tailored to the basic writer, and only four of the dozens of developmental readers published between 1984 and 1986 contain even a few literature selections.
3. In the twelve years following 1974, there were but 42 articles relating literature and basic writing published in *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Journal of Basic Writing*, and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. This amounts to fewer than one article per journal per year.

Forty-two articles may sound like a lot. However, the theoretical foundations of these articles are inconsistent, even contradictory, and this impedes any effort to articulate a stable rationale for using

literature in basic writing courses. Furthermore, as I hope to show, most of these articles reflect philosophical assumptions likely to trouble many *JBW* readers.

Basically, the 42 articles fall into three categories based on theoretical orientation.

Basic-Skills, Folk Wisdom, and Cultural Literacy

Twenty-one titles fall under this classification. Though disparate in other respects, each of these articles reflects the familiar assumption that inexperienced writers benefit from “exposure to good literature.”

At one end of the spectrum are a few articles that recommend the teaching of punctuation and usage through passages extracted from literary classics. Two writers apply more sophisticated methods of sentence combining and error analysis to excerpts from literary texts. Others argue that literature is a more effective vehicle than expository prose for teaching literal comprehension (i.e., retention and recall of specific facts—what Bartholomae and Petrosky have called “information retrieval”). These articles share a conservative skill-and-drill vision of basic writing instruction. The use of literary readings is incidental—not really bound up in pedagogical theory.

By far the greatest number of articles (11) make a plea for assigning a specific work of literature usually considered too complex for basic writers (e.g., *Dubliners*, *Benito Cereno*, “A Hunger Artist”). While the motivation behind these articles is laudable, their authors do not articulate a theoretical rationale, offering only impressionistic evidence that basic writers enjoy the work in question and make impressive gains after studying it. It may be tempting to conclude, as one author (Fenstermaker) claims, that students who cannot read expository prose proficiently can learn to grapple with a complex intellectual issue when that issue is dramatized in literature (e.g., alienation in Hemingway). But without any better account of how and why this might happen, the only explanation for improvement is tied up in the folk wisdom of English study—specifically, the belief that reading the output of a creative genius enhances the performance of inexperienced writers. Since disproof of this belief has been a prominent feature of the critique of Current-Traditional rhetoric initiated by Young and pursued by many others, it should not be necessary to dwell on the shortcomings of this large subcategory of articles.

The most theoretically sophisticated articles that fall under this category are those that pursue E. D. Hirsch’s argument about cultural literacy. But in this case, although a theory has been

carefully articulated, there is, as yet, no praxis: we have yet to see a book or article explaining how basic writers might be led to cultural literacy.

Cognitive Development

The ten pieces that fall under this heading can be placed in two subcategories. First are three articles that pursue developmental theories of language acquisition, adopting the line of Thomas Farrell, who argues that “individuals . . . recapitulate the history of the race with respect to the development of the communicative arts, moving from narrative to rhetoric to logic” (50). These articles recommend initial emphasis of literature from the oral tradition. Though intellectually vigorous, Farrell’s views, which involve broader issues of language and literacy (specifically, whether or not standard usage can and should be taught), have aroused bitter controversy, with Farrell himself accused of ethnocentrism. (For a recapitulation of the debate between Farrell and his critics—biased, of course, in his favor—see Farrell’s “A Defense”; for a critique of Farrell’s views, see Bizzell, “Arguing.”) Regardless of the validity of such accusations, Farrell’s convictions remain a minority view, unlikely to engender any professional consensus about literature and basic writers.

A more mainstream adaptation of developmental psychology is pursued in another seven articles. Typical of these is Robert Bergstrom’s argument that students who fail to “understand” literature “are applying [Piaget’s] ‘concrete operational’ schemes to a problem . . . which demands . . . formal operational thinking” (746). Bergstrom concludes that the basic writing teacher needs to design a developmental sequence of reading assignments to help students acquire “the mental tools which will enable them to assimilate” literature (748). Instructors attracted to this approach are likely to accept the notion that basic writers are cognitively immature—an increasingly problematic assumption, for reasons that Myra Kogen and Mike Rose (“Narrowing”) have set forth persuasively. But even granting for a moment the validity of that assumption, it is interesting to note that scholars like Bergstrom have made little application of pertinent British and Australian research linking the development of reading and writing proficiencies in children.

A brief look at some of that research is instructive. On the one hand, Britton quotes Susanne Langer to show that literary response demands a “break with the reader’s actual environment”—a break that allows the young reader to move toward the detached,

cognitively mature role of “spectator,” and away from the childlike, “egocentric” role of “participant” (48). (It is exactly the reluctance of basic writers to adopt such a stance that has led to the diagnosis that they are cognitively immature—unable to “decenter.”) Literary response, Britton continues, asks the reader not to “APPLY [her] value systems,” but instead, acting as spectator, to “GENERATE AND REFINE the system itself” (51). Britton concludes that “poetic discourse [i.e., literature] is the form that most fully meets the demands associated with the role of spectator—demands that are met . . . by MAKING something with language rather than DOING something with it” (53).

The detachment of spectatorship is, of course, the intellectual stance privileged by academic communities. Likewise, the implied diminution of pragmatic concerns (“making something with language rather than doing something with it”) appeals to the residual aestheticism found in many English departments, including some that house basic writing courses. However, while suspension of values and pragmatic concerns may enrich the responses to literature of younger readers, it is a stance difficult for many basic writers, particularly those who are older nontraditional students, to assume.

On the other hand, radical critics of English education (e.g., Berlin, Ohmann, Roemer) raise another kind of objection to this manner of response, finding in it unexamined biases of liberal academic culture. Among those biases is the privileging of such attitudes as skepticism, moral relativism, and aestheticism—attitudes valorized by middle-class elites. (Many teachers of basic writing, on the margins of academic life, are themselves uncomfortable with this intellectual stance.) In short, it can be argued that theories of cognitive development carry the hidden agenda of leading basic writers toward an intellectual stance alien to the values and experiences of most working people and minorities. Putting aside the dubious morality of such an endeavor, teachers of basic reading and writing must still face serious doubts about the prognosis for success.

Reader Response

Of the 11 articles that fall into this category, four adopt an apolitical stance. That is to say the authors of these articles present reader-response techniques as a method of coaxing basic writers into the academic “discourse community,” but they do not examine power relationships that inhibit the free exchange of ideas—the ideal of academic discussion. For example, no one is likely to argue

that a lesbian feminist reading of a poem or short story will always be accorded the same respect as any other kind of reading or that the student who engages in such a reading is completely free to advance it on an equal footing with every other member of her class. Furthermore, blending into academic culture involves more than simply acquiring a particular dialect and conforming to a certain type of etiquette. As Patricia Bizzell explains:

[W]e can no longer see dialects or discourse conventions as mere conveyances of thoughts generated prior to their embodiment in language. Rather, dialect and discourse generate thoughts, constitute world view. ("What Happens" 297)

Whenever we talk about supplanting one world view with another, we need to confront the prospect of ethnocentrism, if not cultural aggression.

The remaining seven articles, on the other hand, pursue the reasoning set forth by Nicholas Coles and Susan V. Wall, who explain the rationale for their basic writing course in the following terms:

[T]he tendency of "outer-directed" pedagogies so far has been to over-emphasize what it is that students must learn in order to become members of our community. The focus of metaphors such as "initiation" and "assimilation" is on what must change in our students, how they must become other than they are in order to accommodate our discourse. We feel the need to focus also on those motives and abilities that grow from our students' histories. (299)

Courses built on such a premise do not ignore the conventions of academic discourse; instead, they view these conventions as cultural artifacts, inevitably laden with their own biases and historical baggage. The pedagogy, as Bartholomae and Petrosky explain it, is represented by "the motive to 'counterfactuality,' the motive to alter those artifacts, to reject their apparent inevitability" through assignments that allow basic writers "to reimagine and reapproximate the classroom materials, the terms and structures that make those materials available for thought and discussion, and the situation that places them outside of the mainstream work of the academy" (8).

Literature is an important component of the basic writing courses described by Coles and Wall, and Bartholomae and Petrosky for two reasons. First, it provides basic writers the opportunity to respond holistically to a difficult text, thus offering an alternative to

the analytical procedures of workbook exercises, which construe literacy as a linear sequence of constituent skills (Bartholomae and Petrosky 12–13). Second, literature offers basic writers relief from one of the most alienating of academic tasks: reading for literal comprehension and recall of specific facts—“information retrieval.”

These ideas offer a seminal theory to support the use of literature in basic writing courses. There are, however, obstacles that impede implementation. For one thing, we need further ethnographic research into patterns of literacy among various groups of basic writers, including ethnic minorities and working-class teenagers and adults. For example, Shirley Brice Heath has shown that most working-class Blacks have little if any conception of private recreational reading. Heath concludes:

The meaning of whatever is read is interpreted jointly and socially: “What does it mean?” becomes “What does it say about me, or someone or something I know, and what do I do?” But such meaning is not built individually . . . because the community members share their experience to build interpretive bridges from print to practice. (232)

To view this conditioned manner of response as cognitively immature is ethnocentric, and a curriculum based on such views is likely to be simplistic and ineffectual. Therefore, we need further research into the practical applications of literacy among working-class Americans—the kind of investigation that Richard Hoggart undertook thirty years ago in Great Britain. Recognizing this need, Patricia Bizzell (“What Happens”) has called for a study of basic writers similar to William Perry’s survey of Harvard undergraduates: “a series of interviews to tell us how they mediate between their home cultures and the academic culture” (300). As Bartholomae and Petrosky point out:

[R]eading . . . is partly a matter of bringing forward an agenda that belongs not to the student or the text but to conventional structures of reading that the student is approximating . . . [some of which are] derived from the church or from the home or from any of the cultures outside our classrooms. (21)

On a more encouraging note, our profession has begun, at last, to recognize the achievement of scholars outside the academic mainstream—scholars who recognize and confront the political implications of mass literacy. Paulo Freire is a good case in point. As more of his work is translated into English, Freire’s name appears more frequently in composition journals, academic conferences, and other places where basic writing is discussed. Recently,

Freire's work has reached a wider audience through the publication of an anthology of Freirean approaches, edited by Ira Shor. Also, arguments in favor of opening the literary canon (advanced most recently by Armstrong, among others, in the MLA's *Profession 88*) are getting a better hearing than they were getting even five years ago.

Nevertheless, strong opposition impedes the implementation of more ambitious goals for developmental education. Critics of basic studies programs believe that features of a traditional liberal arts curriculum, including the study of literature, are infeasible, inappropriate, and possibly elitist encroachments on an inherently pragmatic enterprise. These critics continue to influence the allocation of resources. A state legislator from Wyoming, for example, recently condemned remedial programs as a waste of public money. Underprepared students ought to attend vocational school, the legislator declared, adding, "There are lots of things they can do. They can be secretaries or mechanics" (qtd. in Jaschik). Few teachers of basic writing would adopt so callous a view or argue it so crassly. However, if we accept uncritically the prevalent assumption that basic writers "don't need" literature or if we expect them to read and respond to it entirely on our terms, we risk depriving our students of one of the culturally enfranchising benefits of a college education.

Notes

¹ That essay, "Literature in the Basic Writing Course: A Bibliographic Survey," is more in the nature of a listing and classification of published scholarship and textbooks, rather than a critical appraisal. For the purposes of offering such an appraisal, I have employed a somewhat different taxonomy here.

² Needless to say, an ERIC search is only as good as the key words, or descriptors, employed by the searcher. I chose these particular descriptors on the advice of an ERIC staff member recommended to me by Lynn Troyka. If *JBW* readers can suggest any terms we may have overlooked, I'd be grateful for their suggestions.

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