Guiding Question: What is “basic writing,” really, and who are the stakeholders in the conversation on basic writing?


This article looks at the relationship between public policy debates about secondary education, the culpability of “the system” in the proliferation of below-average or unprepared students, and the responsibilities of educators at the secondary and post-secondary level. Specifically, Adler-Kassner and Harrington examine the language and attitudes of two reports on student preparedness, the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education Report and the American Diploma Project report, Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Works. The claim of both of these reports, according to Adler-Kassner and Harrington, is that the “system” of education is broken, and that the remedy can be found in systematic responses and overhauls of high school education. The authors argue that this framework argues away from a “discourse of student need” and ultimately points to public policy (at the state level) as the source of remedies to fix the system, especially in the arena of alignment between high school and university expectations. (The floor of the university needs to be the same as the ceiling of the high school, so there’s no gap in learning or need for “remedial courses.”) Both reports discussed also look at assessment and entrance exams as ways of aligning the two.

Adler-Kassner and Harrington take a close look at the suggestions of these policy documents, and ultimately conclude that more than anything, the documents speak to the need of real educators to research and propose reforms that are local, testable, and effective, rather than standing by and allowing policymakers to dictate solutions that sound good but may not be effective, or worse, may be counterproductive and work against student needs. They argue that educators and other stakeholders can and must “change the frames around these discussions” (39) in order to “move beyond academic discussion” into the public arena. Their approach is student centered, and they end their call for more educator-conducted research, data-collection, and decision-making with this plea: “Our students depend on us, and we must not fail them” (44).


The author is a trained linguist who specializes in ESL (L2) writing and is a Canadian scholar and researcher. Both of these positions contribute to a perspective on US American composition theories that resides outside the norm and offers insights into the process by which US American scholars have developed theories of writing that tend to exclude or grossly misrepresent L2 writers. Baker summarizes classical rhetorical theory, expressivist pedagogy, cognitive approaches, WAC, and social/critical theory and discusses each with an eye toward including L2 students’ needs and rights in the dialog. She argues that she has seen a growing convergence of L1 and L2 scholars’ perspectives on writing in general and on ESL/L2 in particular, and believes that the cross-pollination of ideas between specialists in both fields is
advantageous for students. She also argues explicitly against the “deficiency” theory of linguistic difference and against the unexamined conflation of ESL writers with economically challenged writers or writers who suffer from learning disabilities. Baker offers a review of some studies that have examined instructor attitudes toward L1 vs. L2 writing, and echoes T. Silva (“Differences in ESL and native-English-speaker writing: The research and its implications” in Writing in Multicultural Settings, ed. C. Severino, J. C. Guerra, and J. E. Butler, 1997), who remarks that “a credible general theory of writing must be based on more than research on the writing of native English speakers” (149).

This is a useful recap of some of the most prominent composition theories from the perspective of an outsider to the field who has positioned herself as a learner, not necessarily a critic. The insights are valuable and this is certainly pertinent for anyone who is studying language diversity and/or ESL issues in basic composition.


Bourgeois’s article seeks to answer the question, “Who owns writing?” as posed by Doug Hesse in a 2005 address at CCCCs. The answer, Bourgeois suggests, is that teachers and students both “own” writing, in the sense that they are stewards of writing. Bourgeois describes a publication of developmental writing students’ work, New Voices, which is composed of student writings from the basic writing program, and which is used as the primary text for basic writing classes. Bourgeois discusses the importance of a showcase for student work. Surveys show that students enjoy using the student writings as exemplary texts because they are more comfortable with student writing than with professional writing. New Voices provides a set of standard expectations, as well as examples of what students can achieve, and Bourgeois argues that students seeing other students’ work helps them to become more confident, authoritative, and invested in their writing. The writing program at Cal State Northridge is based on a portfolio model, and students can submit examples of their work from any genre to be included in the New Voices publication, whose contents are selected by a faculty committee.

The claims made by Bourgeois are interesting and encouraging, and her contention that students can learn better from unintimidating exemplary student writing than from inaccessible professional articles (or at least, learn better with some combination of the two than with only the latter) is somewhat commonsensical and thus comforting. Nevertheless, I marvel that this student publication is still exclusively judged by faculty, which is so unlike the student literary publication detailed in Fryberg et al. (below) that is served by a student editorial board. This is certainly a more hierarchical model and the comparison between the two models raises important questions.


In this examination of the multiple meanings of literacy, Carter introduces her “pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity” (94), a teaching strategy that encourages students not only to use, but also to think critically about, and apply their multiple literacies to academia and to writing. Carter argues against an “autonomous” view of literacy that is “neutral, autonomous, and completely portable” (95). Instead she argues for a theory of literacy that recognizes the situated nature of literacy. Further, Carter argues that standardized tests of literacy (such as those required by law in Texas, where Carter teaches) are antithetical to theories of multiple literacies and in fact
allows testers and decision makers to remain “at a safe distance” (96) from the realities of why students may not have acquired the literacy “skills” they “should have” acquired by the time they enter college. Much of the first part of the article is dedicated to providing a theoretical framework for rhetorical dexterity. In the second half of the article, Carter discusses the basic writing curriculum at Texas A&M-Commerce, which involves students in writing activities that require them to investigate their communities of practice (Carter’s more open formulation of the discourse community idea) and connect their multiple literacies to the literacy learning they are doing in the classroom.

Carter’s notion of rhetorical dexterity is practical and seems like common sense to me. It takes the best of theories that espouse students’ multiple literacies, and combines it with the idea that students are in fact capable of examining their own learning processes and literacy development. It not only builds on what students know, it, as Carter says, gives students “a new understanding of the way literacy actually lives—a metacognitive ability to negotiate multiple literacies” (119). Nevertheless, as encouraging as this article is, Carter acknowledges in a footnote the extra resources that go into this English 100 class, an additional hour each week that the students spend with a tutor—so it’s not only the pedagogy, but the time investment, that helps students navigate the new community of practice that they find in the university.


Center looked at race as presented (or not presented) by the authors of “student-present” articles that appeared in the Journal of Basic Writing in volumes from 1999-2005. “Student-present” is a term coined by Wendy Bishop that refers to articles that pay close attention to student voices and that foreground students’ own perspectives on their writing and classroom experience as a critical part of the analysis (20). Center’s contention is that certain discursive practices encourage authors to make race invisible in the narratives they present concerning their student-centered research. She contends that race identification (of teachers and students) has a place in research for several critical reasons. Primarily, she argues that “colorblindness” is a practice rooted in white privilege and that not identifying race neither makes it go away nor makes it easier to deal with in classroom dynamics. She argues that race, though socially constructed, is also socially real, and therefore contributes to student-teacher interactions, classroom politics, as well as being a part of students’ and teachers’ identities that should not be ignored. She also argues that white students should be identified as such in part to tear down the myth that all basic writers are minority students, a conflation that she says is dangerous in scholarship and in the classroom.

This article focuses mostly upon the representation of race on scholarship, but I think a deeper reading may also have implications for pedagogy itself, because the article encourages teachers to take note of the differences afoot in their classrooms, and not to shy away from engaging these differences as compelling and important sources of tension and growth. While Center argues for a greater use of race as a marker of identity in research, she doesn’t offer a vocabulary or a guide for how to constructively use race in drawing conclusions or in reporting findings, and it seems that these are both necessary. Researchers, according to Center, do not engage race primarily because it is an uncomfortable subject to talk about, and white researchers and teachers may feel incompetent to talk about race and difference constructively. Therefore more discussion may be needed to help those who feel uncomfortable or inept to enter into a potentially useful and revealing dialog.

The author investigated the effect on freshman composition (including student performance, attitudes, and retention beyond the first year) of the inclusion of a basic writing course in a pilot Learning Community at the Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW). As stated in the abstract, Darabi’s findings indicate that the basic writing class was enhanced when it was included as a part of the learning community, as measured by qualitative and quantitative indicators. Darabi observed all 14 writing sections and spent extensive time (18 class periods) observing one composition class during the second year of the pilot program, and also interviewed the instructor (a tenured veteran of the writing program and a man who had taught both years in the LC pilot) periodically about his observations about his students in the LC. Darabi’s evidence from observation and interviews suggests that student engagement was higher than in a typical first year composition course at IPFW, that they interacted constructively with each other and with the instructor, and that they are “getting in touch with their writing process” (64). The numbers supported the observational data. Fewer students in the LC sections received Ds and Fs; the retention rate for LC students was greater than for non-LC students; attendance was higher in LC classes (as reported by teachers across sections); consistent completion of assignments was higher in LC classes (as reported by teachers).

In many ways, this is a case of a study that seems to affirm the assumptions that compositionists, WAC supporters, and writing teachers, generally, make about the writing process and the process of student engagement. It also fits with my own experiences of learning and writing—that writing has come more easily to me than to others precisely because I consistently seek connections among different subject matter and writing has facilitated the process of making those cognitive connections. It seems common-sensical that facilitating that process for students would lead to a greater sense of engagement and improved writing products.


Fearn and Farnan conducted a five-week study with three tenth-grade classes to investigate the effects on writing and grammar knowledge of using a functional (prescriptive) rather than a traditional (descriptive) approach to grammar. Two classes were “treatment” classes taught by university professors who taught “grammar in writing” twice a week for five weeks. The third was a traditional grammar class taught by a high school teacher who agreed to the conditions of the study and taught “grammar for writing” to his students. The study concluded that both traditional and functional grammar improved students’ ability to identify parts of speech in grammar tests, and that neither technique had any effect mechanics—that is, errors produced in timed writing samples. Both about equally improved students’ fluency in timed writing samples—defined as number of words produced in five minutes. Significantly, however, students exposed to the functional grammar instruction had higher holistic scores than those who received traditional grammar instruction. From this study, Fearn and Farnan are prepared to argue that grammar can be taught in writing, not as a separate entity, and furthermore, that traditional grammar instruction may actually preclude students from understanding how grammar works as a part of written expression, even as they are able to spout of textbook definitions of verbs and nouns.
I find this study intriguing and include it in this bibliography because so much of what Basic Writing at the college level seems to focus on is how to get students to learn to write in spite of the poor grammar that they seem to bring with them from high school instruction. I wonder about the repeatability of a study that has as its sample size only 57 students total, and especially about the implications for teaching grammar (or reteaching it) at a college level. Nevertheless, the study does present greater possibilities for presenting grammar to students than through the monotony of sentence-diagramming, and that is certainly a positive development.


Floyd, McGrew and Evans looked at writing ability in students aged 7-18 years. Following the CHC theory for differentiating cognitive ability, they looked at several factors and performed statistical analysis to determine the effects of these factors on particular skills associated with writing ability. The cognitive abilities tested for their contribution to writing achievement are: Comprehension-Knowledge, Long-Term Retrieval, Visual-Spatial Thinking, Auditory Processing, Fluid Reasoning, Processing Speed, Short-Term Memory, and Phonemic Awareness. Writing skill was tested with measures of Spelling, along with Punctuation and Capitalization (which make up “Basic Writing Skills”) and Writing Samples and Writing Fluency (which make up the “Written Expression” measure). Results showed that Comprehension-Knowledge measures were the strongest predictors of Writing Achievement across age groups. Processing Speed affected the results most strongly in written expression. Auditory processing and phonemic awareness, along with Visual-Spatial thinking, were not even moderately correlated with writing ability. The other factors fell somewhere in between.

In all honesty, this is almost as impossible to wade through as it seems interesting. It is certainly a case of this reader being a part of the wrong and unintended audience. Nevertheless, the implications of the study, and further of the authors’ conclusion that “future research should include more comprehensive measures of written expression and include influences outside the cognitive realm as predictors of writing achievement,” are encouraging. I’m not willing to gander what exactly the influences that the authors have in mind are, but the study does imply that over time, particular skills are more important for developing writing skills in children and young adults, and that good writing practices must be encouraged early. Interestingly, the final statement of this study implies that writing may help psychologists look for cognitive constraints or issues in children, but the implication for writing teachers might be just the opposite—to consider the effect of cognitive constraints (and the contexts in which they arise, even as early as elementary school) that might effect students’ writing.


Forell argues forcefully for the inclusion of texts, especially (and almost exclusively) hip-hop, that are culturally relevant to basic writers. Forell provides several examples of other instructors who have used hip-hop in their classrooms and published their myriad success stories of greater student engagement and enthusiasm. Forell also articulates the need for the academy to revise its understanding of literacy from one focused merely on reading and writing to an operational definition that incorporates an understanding of literacy “as a complex social and cultural practice that can be used to transform thoughts and experiences, as well as challenge
structures of power and privilege at work within the university and society at large” (28). The article includes many arguments along these lines about the transformative power of hip-hop and its ability to transcend academic discourse to engage students in social and rhetorical commentary. Many examples of how hip-hop can be employed in the classroom are provided.

Put in conversation with both Heaney’s and Center’s pieces (in this bibliography), Forell’s articles is both instructive and problematic. In many ways, the argument is similar to Heaney’s, that students in Basic Writing courses need different ways to engage with material and texts that help them self-identify as writers and critics capable of producing thoughtful and meaningful works of their own. However, I find that the assumption that introducing hip-hop into Basic Writing classrooms provides students with “voices like their own” (30) to study is an unfortunate instance of conflating Basic Writing with minority status, and furthermore, conflating minority status with a particular form of social expression that may serve to further alienate students whose lives don’t fit neatly within the black and white constructs of race and marginalization. That is not to say that hip-hop is all black, but the artists cited in the article are, and hip-hop, as generally associated with African American culture (and as presented in the article) is not a text that speaks to all minorities. I think we need to be very careful of assuming that all Basic Writers are attenuated hip-hop aficionados. That said, I think the call to introduce non-traditional texts that speak to writers’ experiences and cultural backgrounds is an important one that must be heeded, though thoughtfully. Hip-hop, therefore, cannot be a panacea for diversifying the classroom.


This short article focuses on the need for transforming developmental writing students’ perceptions of themselves. Specifically, the authors argue that “In writing courses, specifically, [students] need to perceive themselves as authors not only of written texts but as the authorial voice of their academic experiences” (4). This idea fits nicely with Bartholomae’s idea that students must invent the university—and thus must invent themselves as students. The article then goes on to describe the ways in which the creation of a literary magazine, whose editorial board comprises faculty and developmental writing students, has led to greater student engagement (anecdotal evidence, not statistical) and has helped those students who participate in the literary magazine gain confidence in their ability to remain in college and speak for and about themselves.

I found it interesting that the program turned to such a focus on poetry and self-expression in the first years of basic composition—the idea was that students first needed to find their voices before they could have the confidence to stay in school and develop as writers and authors in charge of their own education. Nonetheless, the authors still noted the importance of working with faculty in a professional setting (on the magazine’s editorial board) to developing students writing skills beyond the creative writing genre.


The overall thrust of Gleason’s piece is that teaching the principals of basic writing instruction is a legitimate enterprise for graduate schools of English Language and Literature to undertake. She argues that BW scholarship may itself be on the road to becoming a distinct...
discipline and that with all of the legitimate scholarship and the need for trained BW (and Adult Literacy) teachers, graduate schools of Rhetoric and Composition can and should add courses related to BW pedagogy to their curricula. Gleason offers a hefty list of the available texts for teaching BW pedagogy in MA programs, as well as an overview of the various shifts from remedial to developmental frameworks that thinking about BW has undergone. She argues that BW instruction is both globally important and locally rooted, noting that the institutions that have BW courses at the graduate level are generally open-admission or close to open-admission universities with large numbers of non-traditional students and a good deal of cultural diversity. In her overview of 10 courses being offered at institutions around the country, Gleason notes the instances in which professors of MA BW courses capitalize on the resources available for study in their home institutions. She notes, also that the context and needs of a particular university undoubtedly will and should dictate the kind of BW instruction offered for graduate students.

In arguing that BW instruction should be offered to graduate students, Gleason does the field a favor by legitimizing the study of BW pedagogy, not just to improve teaching by graduate students, but also to improve and widen the scholarship in that particular field. Implicitly, then she also argues for the legitimization of the classes that BW and AL writers enroll in, thereby encouraging the field to take seriously the call to correct the further marginalization of already at-risk students.


Heaney describes in depth the Synergy program that the University of Wyoming has instituted for its at-risk, basic writing students. “Conditionally admitted” students, those with lower-than-average GPAs and ACT scores, may participate in the Synergy program, though they are not required to. Those that do are generally the most at-risk, with the lowest of the low scores, and the worst attitudes in general toward academia and especially toward academic writing. The Synergy program consists of linked courses that provide the basis of a learning community environment where teachers work together to design complementary curriculum, class sizes are reduced, and students move through the first year’s courses together. Heaney’s intent in describing the Synergy curriculum and the ethnography project that provides the backbone of the Composition and Critical Thinking courses in the fall semester is not merely to introduce a successful alternative writing curriculum, but also to posit that the success of the curriculum comes from a marked revision of faculty thinking about what it means to be a basic writer.

Heaney postulates that many of the Synergy students’ poor attitudes toward writing come from deep emotions of anger and marginalization, both personal and cultural, that dates back to the students’ earliest academic experiences. Furthermore, Heaney states that many students have a fear of entering into an academic discourse because they see it as an attempt to efface their other strong identities. The Synergy curriculum is based on readings that look critically at issues of identity, and ask students to engage in personal reflection. While heavy on the description of two of the Synergy courses, the article offers insight and validation to an alternative view of basic writers that does not construct them as unable to think critically, but attempts to situate resistance to writing and academia in general in a social context that students themselves can take charge of and examine.

Mlynarczyk revives the debate between Elbow and Bartholomae over the use of personal vs. academic writing in composition classrooms. She first outlines the tenets of each type of writing: personal as expressivist, process-driven and academic as rhetorical approach, mimetically structured. Mlynarczyk further backgrounds the debate between personal and academic modes of writing by bringing into play Bruner’s terms: “narrative” and “paradigmatic” and Britton’s terms: “expressive,” “poetic,” and “referential.” Ultimately, she locates Elbow’s and Bartholomae’s two modes of writing as congruent with Britton’s poetic and referential language, respectively, and argues, further, that expressive writing, deeply personal in nature, is an important tool for helping Basic Writers acquire competence in both personal and academic language. She says, “students first need to explore ideas encountered in academic work in language . . . that feels comfortable, not strained, in order to work toward the goal of being able to write convincingly about these ideas in more formal language” (5).

Mlynarczyk also presents case studies that show her deep understanding of the problem of trying to use “personal” writing in the classroom—since by default all classroom writing is essentially public, to the extent that it is shared with a teacher. This author more or less conflates basic writers with ESL students, and to that end the treatment of cultural difficulties in using personal writing is sensitive and informative. The remapping of the debate between personal and academic writing and the importance of self-reflection in all writing is a valuable read for anyone interested in composition and especially basic writing.


Responding to Adler-Kassner and Harrington’s call for academics to enter public discourse about basic writing in a more proactive and vocal way, Rigolino and Freel describe SUNY New Paltz’s reaction to state and public pressures to get rid of remedial writing programs and increase academic standards. The authors first describe four responses to these kinds of external pressures, and then present the solution adopted at SUNY New Paltz as a fifth, “more thorough re-modeling of the traditional remedial approach” (51). The first four approaches described are self-placement, where students opt to place themselves into basic writing courses; mainstream, where “the composition program declines to identify any accepted student as a remedial writer”; stretch, where what is normally one semester of composition is stretched into two semesters—worth 6 total credits, 3 in composition and 3 elective; and studio, where basic writers are required to attend special workshops outside of class that consist of tutoring or supplemental instruction. The “seamless support” model offered by the authors seeks, like the aforementioned models, to “eliminate the stigma attached to the labeling of students as ‘remedial’ as well as to address the problems associated with granting some students credit for writing courses while denying credit ... to others” (51), but offers a more structured plan that includes regular composition instruction, one-on-one tutoring, and workshopping sessions. These 3 different spaces allow students to interact with teachers as teachers, teachers as tutors, tutors as peers, and fellow students. There is an element of community building that the authors compare to the successes reported in Learning Community structures used for first year students in many universities. After a ten-year run, the authors report that the success of the program is such that students who go through this revised version of “basic” writing graduate at comparable rates to and with comparable GPAs to their non-SWW (Supplemental Writing Workshop) peers.
This article details how a successful program grew out of programs that were already extant at the university. The SWW program drew from peer tutoring and the writing center and a workshop model that was already in place. Their remarks about the different roles that the teacher plays—as instructor and as tutor—are intriguing, and they regard this role-changing dynamic as part of the success of the program.


This article details the learning community collaboration between the two authors. Tai is a history instructor and Rochford an instructor in the “remedial” program, which here mostly refers to ESL students who test into remedial reading and writing courses and must then test out. Their thesis, and the impetus for creating their learning community format is: “Remediation, if presented in a manner consistent with college-level academic rigor, can improve the long-term prospects for students to complete 2- and 4-year degrees” (104). They argue that learning community formats can help to contextualize writing and reading skills within other subjects, and therefore help students to transfer their skills between writing contexts with greater ease. They also advocate for the link between history and writing/reading remediation: “Focusing upon history, rather than on another of the humanities or social sciences, allowed instructors to address a secondary aim of this learning community: the cultivation of moral reasoning skills necessary for civic membership in the American polity” (107). Indeed, the curriculum focused on political discourse (including Machiavelli and Saint Augustine), as well as study skills such as note taking, group work, and critical reading. The authors hoped that their students would begin to “contemplate the use and abuse of power in history” (114) as well as move “beyond mere test preparation and isolated skills development to one of metacognition” (115). Ultimately, they found that 75% of their students managed to pass the skills tests that allowed them into credit-bearing courses, despite the reduction of skills-specific/test-driven focus.

I thought that the aim to move beyond “test preparation” was interesting, primarily because the authors described a system that was controlled by tests, including the standard ACT. They also used the word “remedial” rather than developmental, even though they seemed to be moving away from a “remedial” (that bad R word) vision of writing and reading as merely skills or tools.