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SELF-ESTEEM AND WRITING APPREHENSION OF BASIC WRITERS: CONFLICTING EVIDENCE¹

ABSTRACT: *The term "basic writer" has been assumed to point to a homogeneous group of students who are poor writers. But some studies have questioned whether their cognitive characteristics are really so similar. This particular study examines the affective characteristics of basic writers and questions the hypothesis that they suffer from high writing apprehension and low self-esteem. Indeed, the study offers evidence of a group of basic writers in a larger group who had both low writing apprehension and high self-esteem. Their variance from hypothesized expectations has important implications for composition theory and practice.*

The terms *basic writing* and *basic writer* have become well-established in the lexicon of writing. Calling students *basic writers* implies that they are writers who will eventually succeed in becoming more skilled and more accomplished with appropriate specialized instruction. Thus the notion of *basic writing* seems

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© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1991

connotatively and denotatively more acceptable than such earlier appellations as *bonehead English* or even the seemingly less pejorative concept of *remedial writing*.

Still, by its very existence, the term *basic writer* demarcates a subgroup of the writing population, sets this group aside for some special treatment, and, more importantly, implies that this group is, in some significant ways, very different from other writers. Since the validity and usefulness of a concept such as this hinges on the existence of well-established shared characteristics among basic writers, it is critical to examine the evidence offered to support such a notion. Generally, studies have focused on measured or hypothesized cognitive or affective characteristics which are supposed to differentiate basic and nonbasic writers. As we will show, it is by no means clear from the literature available that basic writers can be construed as a distinct group based on the dimensions that have been studied. Moreover, the results of an empirical study of self-esteem and writing apprehension in college writers carried out by the authors in 1987 will be presented to challenge the concept of basic writers as a homogeneous group.

It is important to note that basic writers have been found to come from a variety of backgrounds with distinct writing problems. Shaughnessy has pointed out that many are minority students who speak and write a nonstandard form of English or who have a primary language other than English (179). Others are what Troyka describes in "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980's" as *non-traditional students*, adults who have returned to school from the workplace, usually on a part-time basis and often with a background of marginal academic success. Still other basic writers may not differ from other students in any externally identifiable way except that their writing performance on specific writing tasks and in specific writing courses falls below that of the average freshman at that college—perhaps in grammatical, mechanical, syntactical, or organizational skills as determined by their teachers. (Interestingly, Richard H. Haswell has suggested that many basic or "bottom" writers exceed their better-graded peers in organizational ability, wit, and complexity of thought.) Despite these marked situational differences and the different causal bases for writing difficulties they imply, all of these students are likely to be labeled *basic writers*. Once identified as such, researchers and teachers alike will probably view them as a homogeneous group and will pay little attention to the important differences that might exist within the group.

We find similar instances of oversimplification and overgeneralization in areas where more sophisticated theories of behavior have

been applied to writing. In "Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism," Rose has described the tendency of American education to use dichotomies reductionistically to minimize cognitive complexity (268). He finds this same orientation to be a common feature in descriptions of basic writers:

We see it . . . in those discussions of basic and remedial writers that suggest that unsuccessful writers think in fundamentally different ways from successful writers. Writing that is limited to the concrete, that doesn't evidence abstraction or analysis, that seems illogical is seen . . . as revealing basic differences in perception, reasoning, or language. (267)

Rose's analysis also demonstrates how theories of cognitive style (field-dependence), brain research (left or right brain dominance), cognitive development (Piaget's theories), and historical literacy (orality-literacy) have been used in highly oversimplified ways to explain the behavior of basic writers. Jensen expresses a similar position in the "Reification of the Basic Writer." His composite characterization of the basic writer, is that of a gregarious person who "talks but does not think, who does not value planning, who has difficulty developing concepts, is overly concerned about correctness, likes to please the teacher, and prefers the basic five-paragraph theme" (54). But Jensen doubts that this composite is accurate. The *basic writer* comes to be viewed as an entity with a limited set of characteristics rather than an abstract concept referring to a wide variety of persons with diverse problems.

In support of his claim that existing descriptions of the basic writer are misleading, Jensen presents Myers-Briggs Type Indicator profiles of basic writers from Georgia State University and from the University of Illinois at Chicago. The profiles failed to fit the composite picture of the basic writer suggested by the literature and were found to be markedly different at the two schools. The typical Georgia State basic writer was an introverted-sensing-thinking-judging type, while the Illinois basic writer was an extroverted-sensing-feeling-judging type (58). Moreover, despite some overlap in the profiles, the Georgia State basic writers fell into all 16 Myers-Briggs categories (56-58).

Evidence of the cognitive reductionism and reification that Jensen argues against is also found in studies that relate more to the affective characteristics of basic writers. In this domain, there is a widely held belief that basic writers generally suffer from a high degree of writing apprehension (or fear of writing) and a poor self-image or low self-esteem. For example, Greenberg, in reviewing studies of basic writing, assumes the existence of high writing apprehension in basic writers (197), and that view does have some

empirical support. Faigley, Witte, and Daly found that apprehensive writers tend to score lower on standardized tests of writing aptitude and on such tests as the SAT and ACT. Daly and Miller also found that highly apprehensive writers had lower expectations of success in writing than other writers. Two other studies by Daly alone showed that "highly apprehensive" writers produce poorer quality writing than "low apprehensives," thus further strengthening the theoretical link between apprehensiveness and the basic writer.

That basic writers suffer from poor self-images or low self-esteem is also a widely held belief, though the evidence for this notion is relatively weak when compared to studies of writing apprehension. In fact, many of the assertions about self-esteem are based on intuitive analysis. Roueche, for example, sees remedial or developmental students (whether in basic writing or in other courses) as lacking self-confidence and feeling inadequate and powerless (12). Kasden characterizes basic writers as having poor self-images, low aspirations, and feelings of powerlessness (3-4). Lederman, in analyzing a writing exercise in which basic writers pretended to be animals, found the most common image used to be that of a bird, a largely negative self-projection of a creature who was "alone, frightened, oppressed, limited" (686). Similarly, Andrea Lunsford, in analyzing the content of essays students wrote for entrance into a Canadian university, found that basic writers generally have poor images of themselves, picturing themselves as victims in a cold, dangerous world. Both Lederman (688) and Lunsford (284) suggest that helping students improve their self-images might help them become better writers. Some empirical support for this view comes from Daly and Wilson, who found that self-esteem was inversely related to writing apprehension. The prevailing view is that if basic writers are marked by high writing apprehension, then they must also suffer from low self-esteem. (Shaughnessy in her early review essay on basic writing did cite Geraldine McMurray Bartee's dissertation from 1967 that "found no support for the assumption that disadvantaged freshmen and by implication, basic writers, have lower self-concepts than other students" [184], but that study has not received much attention.)

Conflicting Evidence: An Empirical Study

Despite the evidence that basic writers are likely to be highly apprehensive and that they are likely to suffer from low self-esteem, we have data that casts some doubt on the validity of this characterization of basic writers. As part of a larger study on the impact of certain kinds of writing assignments on self-esteem and writing apprehension, we studied 19 sections of freshman writing at

Gannon University, 16 sections of regular composition courses, and 3 sections of basic writing. Students were selected for the basic writing courses on the basis of their scores on the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE), with those scoring below 33 being selected (unless other factors such as high school rank, average, or average in English or verbal SAT indicated solid language skills). Those scoring between 33 and 36 were selected if these other indicators were also low. Students were then invited but not required to enroll in basic writing courses. Of 85 invited, about half elected to enroll in basic writing.

Students were given pretests on the first day of class using the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS), a standard instrument to measure self-esteem, and the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test (WAT), the most commonly used instrument for measuring writing apprehension. They were then given posttests using the same instruments during the last two weeks of the semester (the exact day being at the individual teacher's discretion). Although it was not our central hypothesis, we believed that the basic writers would probably have the lowest self-esteem and the highest writing apprehension.

To this general hypothesis, there was one remarkable reversal of expectation. Based on the results of 337 students who took both the pretests and the posttests, we found that one basic writing section, contrary to any hypothesis in the literature, had the highest self-esteem and the lowest writing apprehension of all 19 classes in the study, both on the pretest and on the posttest. On the pretest of the TSCS, this class scored 350.67, which is above the national norm of 345.57 and well above the Gannon average of 333.34. In fact, the next highest class was a regular section of freshman English at 340.21. On the pretest of the WAT, this same basic writing class scored 62.11, well below Daly and Miller's mean of 79.28 and below the Gannon mean of 71.29. Since this testing was done on the first day of class, there is little reason to believe that teachers did much to affect these scores. Indeed, another section of basic writers with the same teacher had a TSCS score of 326.38 and a WAT score of 77.77. The third section of basic writers had a TSCS score of 333.08 and a WAT score of 85.92. Clearly, that one special class contradicted the claims that basic writers are highly apprehensive and lack self-esteem.

Closer examination of this unusual class of 11 students revealed that a number of students had extremely high self-esteem and extremely low writing apprehension. On the pretest, one student scored 37 on WAT and 400 on TSCS, while another scored 41 on WAT and 421 on TSCS. Clearly these students did not fit the profile of basic writers as apprehensives lacking in self-esteem. However, even within this class there was a good deal of diversity. On the

pretest, one student scored 256 and another scored 295 on TSCS. Nevertheless, there were no high scores on WAT on the pretest. The only score above Daly and Miller's mean of 79.28 was an 84. Likewise, on the posttest, only one student (a different one) scored above that mean with a 90. Thus, despite a few students with relatively low self-esteem, there were none in this basic writing class with an extremely high level of writing apprehension. (The other two basic writing classes averaged 329.60 on TSCS, below the norm, and 81.68 on WAT, slightly above the norm. But even that figure doesn't seem to indicate a high degree of writing apprehension compared to the Daly and Miller average. The TSCS figure does seem to be significantly below the norm for self-esteem.)

As a kind of qualifying note on this unusual class of basic writers, we wish to respond to comments made by several experienced writing teachers and researchers who inspected these results. These researchers suggested that the low WAT scores and the high TSCS scores were indications that these basic writers probably had not taken writing very seriously and had not invested much of themselves into their writing. This plausible hypothesis is weakened by the fact that these students actually increased their self-esteem and decreased their writing apprehension. This would seem to indicate that they took the course and their writing seriously and benefited from what the course had to offer, both in increasing self-esteem and in decreasing writing apprehension. They were hardly happy-go-lucky students oblivious to academic goals. Their self-esteem increased 7.33 on TSCS, and their writing apprehension decreased 6.23 on WAT.

Clearly the size of this study, at least insofar as it deals with basic writers, is limited. But the fact remains that a whole class of basic writers had lower writing apprehension and higher self-esteem than 16 classes of regular composition students in our study. Thus, it is evident that not all basic writers suffer from writing apprehension nor from low self-esteem. And this has implications for the way programs in basic writing are conducted. As Rose and Jensen have suggested, administrators and teachers must avoid oversimplification in defining the basic writer. Instead, they must be aware of Troyka's observation that basic writers have diverse personalities and skills, and they should perhaps follow her suggestion of offering individual pedagogies for these diverse types ("Defining" 2-3).

Implications

This study, like the studies of Rose and Jensen, suggests that the basic writer as an isolated entity may not exist. What seems like a convenient label may turn out to oversimplify a great variety of

persons with a wide variety of emotional characteristics, cognitive styles or levels of development, and social and cultural expectations. And, as Joy S. Ritchie suggests, the writing process itself is so complex that "we cannot describe the process of learning to write as a tidy, predictable process with predictable results. . ." (171). Moreover, we must be aware of the possibilities of reductive stereotyping. Shaughnessy cites an early study (1961), Gerald A. Silver's dissertation entitled "A Comparative Investigation of Motivation in the Achievement of Remedial and Non-Remedial Students at Los Angeles City College," that found no difference in motivation between remedial and nonremedial students but found that faculty rated better students as more motivated (184). Thus, in dealing with a cloudy issue of emotional response, teachers tended to equate achievement and motivation. This last bit of evidence ought to be a caution to all researchers that the psychological factors that relate to writing are complex and difficult to determine.

Do these findings indicate that teachers and administrators need not be concerned about writing apprehension and self-esteem in basic writers? That may be going too far. Studies with younger children certainly indicate a relation between self-concept and academic achievement (Felker 12-13), and a positive self-image may be more important than good grades in keeping a student in college (Kasden 2). Moreover, Wolcott and Buhr found in their study that students with "positive attitudes toward writing" improved more than students with neutral or negative attitudes (7). Furthermore, the dimensions of writer apprehension and self-esteem may contain important variables that cut across the classification of basic and nonbasic writers. Thus, the emotional atmosphere surrounding writers may be important at many levels of writing skill.

In viewing the emotions of basic writers, teachers may want to make some finer discriminations instead of simply labeling basic writers as apprehensive and lacking in self-esteem. As Rosenberg cautions, low self-evaluation in academics is often based on self-judgments about specific skills, not on low global self-esteem (279-80). And as Brand and Powell note, anxiety (or apprehension) may not be the chief emotion involved in writing, even for unskilled writers (284). Further, both Larson and Bloom suggest that the emotions are affected by other factors. Larson found that emotions may be either disruptive or facilitative (20) and that while an overarousal of emotion can produce excessive anxiety or writing apprehension, underarousal can produce boredom (21). Apparently there is a moderate level of emotion that is helpful in the writing process. Bloom, in studying the effects of anxiety on two mature writers, found that anxiety is complicated by such internal factors as intellectual, artistic, temperamental, biological, and emotional characteristics and by such external

factors as personal, social, and academic context (122–23). Similarly, Brand, in her recent book, *The Psychology of Writing*, has alerted us to the need to see the relationship between emotions and writing as a highly complex issue.

Finally, as far as specific strategies or pedagogies for basic writing classes are concerned, a few practical points can be made. First, teachers should test for writing apprehension early in the semester before they assume that overcoming writing apprehension is important for their students. Second, teachers should try to use appropriate strategies for individual students and not assume that criticism will severely damage the self-image of every basic writer. Third, in constructing assignments, teachers should not necessarily lean toward less-focused writing assignments than they would use in a regular writing class. Indeed, Brand and Powell suggest that students may be more comfortable emotionally with writing topics assigned by teachers than with self-sponsored topics (284); and Faigley, Witte, and Daly suggest that students are often more apprehensive writing about personal experience and feelings than about more objective content (20). Thus, to assign personal, loosely constructed assignments to basic writers may actually inhibit rather than encourage their writing. Finally, teachers ought to try to remember that basic writers are, as persons, just like other writers—only less skillful.

Note

¹ Professors Minot and Gamble wish to thank the Faculty Research Committee of Gannon University for funding this research, and their colleagues and students in the writing program for taking part in this study.

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