

Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau
Gordon Brossell

FINDING BASIC WRITING'S PLACE

ABSTRACT: Recent questions about the value of basic writing ask educators to review what the authors claim basic writing does. The authors believe basic writing serves a vital function by providing writing support for at-risk students, basic writing serves the needs of a growing student population that universities accept yet feels needs additional writing instruction; while there may be problems with the name of this course and how institutions support these programs, the basic writing classroom is still the most effective educational support for these at-risk students and their writing.

The term *BW* [Basic Writing] *student* is an abstraction that can easily get in the way of teaching. Not all BW students have the same problem; not all students with the same problems have them for the same reasons.... The teacher must try to decipher the individual's code, examining samples of this writing as a scientist might, searching for patterns or explanations, listening to what the students say about punctuation, and creating situations in the classroom that encourage students to talk openly about what they don't understand....

—Shaughnessy *Errors and Expectations* (40)

Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau received her Master's degree from The University of Illinois at Chicago, where she now teaches. She has worked with basic writers while teaching writing at a New York City high school, composition at The University of Illinois at Chicago, and adult/workplace literacy at neighborhood literacy centers. Gordon Brossell is professor of English and director of English Education at The University of Illinois at Chicago. His articles have appeared in College English, College Composition and Communication, and English Journal, as well as in various books about writing pedagogy and writing assessment.

The essential challenge for basic writing teachers is to help inexperienced writers improve their writing, and their primary task is to provide extensive reviewed writing practice that encourages more student writing. As fundamental as this argument is, recent discussions of basic writing seem to discount it. While we welcome the critical reflection that recent discussions foster, we feel those who propose dismantling basic writing programs go too far. We believe that if a university accepts students who write below a defined level, it has an obligation to help them write better. Basic writing is, we think, the best way for a university to cultivate the success of these students.

Inherent in these discussions are the contested definitions of basic writers. Our definition emerges from reflecting on our students' essays. Inexperience is the common factor among basic writing students, and it causes difficulties that are more intractable than the struggles most students undergo as they define themselves within academic discourse. Basic writers have consistent trouble starting a piece of writing, expressing ideas clearly, and revising what they have written. Their writing often demonstrates what Shaughnessy called an "orchestration of error," her term for students' thoughtful and consistent nonstandard language usage. However, there is a tremendous range of problems among basic writers, and it would be dangerous to lump all basic writing students into one category. Some students feel they can write only one kind of essay, others feel they can write no more than a paragraph about their subject, and still others write essays that even they have difficulty deciphering. Understanding this diversity of student problems will help teachers engender learning that taps students' strengths.

In the process of defining basic writing, several people have tried to recast perceptions about this field and renegotiate basic writing's role within the university by proposing a name change. Basic writing teachers must lead the effort to define our field—that is what this issue of *Journal of Basic Writing* explores—but how basic writing is perceived depends on more than basic writing instructors. In part, it is the status the university gives to these courses that makes it clear to students how basic writing is valued. When was the last time a tenured faculty member taught basic writing on a regular basis? When was the last time extensive funds were allocated to bring in speakers on basic writing education (as opposed to speakers on a literary topic)? Whatever the name of a basic writing course, educators and

administrators need to reexamine the priority they give to basic writing not only within composition instruction, but also within the university's mission. Students respond to universities' cues.

At The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) where we teach, all students are required to take two composition courses, Freshman Composition and Research Writing, and growing numbers of students are also required to take basic writing. The extensive writing load may be a basic writing student's first consistent writing experience; in an attempt to address students' lack of preparation, basic writing courses often proceed at a slower pace. However, the texts and assignments of our basic writing courses maintain the rigor of university classes. Contrary to Bartholomae's claim in "The Tidy House," that basic writing "is necessarily prior to or lesser than the mainstream course" (20), we believe this curriculum makes basic writing necessarily prior to but in no way less than other writing courses.

The existence of basic writing courses is hardly an academic anomaly. Many disciplines—the sciences, languages, mathematics—require students to have a certain level of facility or to take a course that helps students gain that facility. As a discipline, composition has similar standards. Composition teachers expect students to achieve a certain level of writing proficiency so that they are better prepared to succeed in composition courses.

Not surprisingly, basic writing students who demonstrate a lack of writing preparation often have difficulty with other college courses. Since basic writers often do not connect their previous preparation with their present level of academic achievement, they find their difficulties mysterious or uncontrollable. For example, students report copying essays out of books as high school class exercises in the same breath they report failing their history essay exams even though they studied for hours. In one essay, a basic writing student whom we taught wrote the following: "While I was in high school we really didn't do much writing.... The last that I can remember writing would be in grammar school." This student almost failed his criminal justice research essay even though he loved the class and worked on the essay "forever."

Unfortunately this scenario is not atypical. Unfamiliar with and underprepared for fulfilling the university's writing expectations, basic writers are often exploring writing practices that more experienced writers may already be quite comfortable

with. More-experienced writers may have seen school-based literacy modeled at home more frequently, may have explored prewriting, composing, and reviewing strategies at school more regularly, or may have participated in extracurricular writing activities more often. In basic writing courses we have observed, teachers attempt to foster these same kinds of experiences. Both students and teachers model the processes that they believe successful writers do and explore writing styles that may be successful for them. At UIC, basic writing classes have additional benefits that allow teachers to review students' writing more often: Basic writing courses meet for more hours and have fewer students than other composition courses. By creating structured situations for extensive feedback on common basic writing patterns, basic writing teachers can address writing issues in ways composition teachers of larger, mixed-proficiency classes cannot.

Basic writing classrooms also frequently provide safe spaces where students are encouraged to address their writing difficulties within a supportive environment. This situation differs from many mixed-proficiency classes that assume a certain level of writing facility, a level basic writers often do not meet. "Best part of this class [basic writing]" wrote an anonymous mid-term evaluation respondent "is we... don't always feel like your an outsider or that you are alone there are people with the same problem in writing as myself." As this student says, too often basic writers feel their writing is inferior to others' more experienced writing.

With the added comfort of a community of writers who share similar writing experiences, basic writers are more likely than other at-risk students (students whose proficiency exams, class rank, and ACT scores make the university feel the students are at risk of dropping out of school) to write drafts that help them understand their writing and develop personal writing strategies, processes more experienced writers have already experimented with. Taking away the opportunity to receive reviewed writing practice with students at a similar level makes basic writers less confident and more likely to shut down. One of our basic writing students reported his feelings about a mixed-proficiency class that did not provide support for his writing: "Before I enrolled in English 152 [basic writing] I used to be afraid of writing. I think that fear came from ignorance. Since I didn't know how to write, I was afraid someone would find out I couldn't write and tell everyone else."

Some educators who oppose basic writing classes feel that

all students should take the same composition courses. In their classrooms, they often focus so closely on valuing diversity that the individual needs of writers can be overridden. Though we recognize that valuing diversity and attending to the needs of individual writers are not mutually exclusive, we remain convinced that the primary goal of basic writing is the practical improvement of student writing.

Furthermore, new teaching assistants may be unaware of how to handle mixed-proficiency classes. Teaching assistants [TAs], already attempting to tap the strengths of wonderfully diverse students like those at UIC, are the least-experienced teachers at the university level and are the most likely to be teaching freshman composition. Compounding this problem, more experienced TAs often teach discussion sections of literature courses or upper-level writing courses, leaving the newest of the new TAs to teach students who cut across ethnic, gender, age, and ability groupings. We question whether new TAs have the experience and knowledge to attend to the needs of a mixed-proficiency classroom, where students' diverse strengths and problems can overwhelm both TA and student. In such a classroom, we believe underprepared students will find their writing needs unmet.

Other critics believe basic writing courses "brand" students. However, university basic writing courses are not like high school tracks, which too often provide separate and unequal education. Quite the contrary, university basic writing courses precede but do not replace a student's matriculation into the general English curriculum. During the semester that students take basic writing, they are not prohibited from taking other courses within the university, they are not thrown off sequence (many freshmen do not take their English requirement their first semester), and there isn't a separate building for basic writing classes. Indeed, unless basic writing students tell others, there is no way to determine who is in basic writing. We've found that far from feeling labeled, basic writers often express their appreciation for having the chance to accomplish in basic writing classes what they could not in regular classes: improve their writing skills and develop a sense of comfort and confidence as writers.

We are not implying that one fifteen-week basic writing course can create a highly successful writer by itself, but we believe it can prepare a student to participate actively in future classes. The additional personal attention and reviewed writing practice allow a teacher to know the student well enough to

create opportunities for successful associations with writing. As one of our former students wrote in her journal, "I never thought in a million years that I would ever enjoy writing. Since I entered college I discovered my writing style... I found that everyone can write, people just have to find what kind of writing their good at." Once students become more comfortable with their writing, they are more apt to engage themselves in the tasks associated with it: they are more likely to think of themselves as writers, to imagine an audience, and to rewrite for clarity. These opportunities together with additional practice can help a writer become proficient.

Basic writing serves a crucial need for a growing group of underprepared students who come from schools that fail to provide the kinds of writing practice necessary for college work. Whatever we call it, the practical yet safe environment that offers underprepared students the writing experiences they need is the one to be honored. That environment remains, in our view, the basic writing classroom.