

Karen L. Greenberg

A RESPONSE TO IRA SHOR'S "OUR APARTHEID: WRITING INSTRUCTION AND INEQUALITY"

One of the problems in thinking about basic writing is that this term means nothing apart from its context. In "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality" (*JBW* 16.1 [1997]: 91-104), Ira Shor uses the term as a decontextualized and politically charged code word — "BW" — oversimplifying the term and demonizing it. In reality, basic writing differs at every school; at each college, administrators, teachers, and students all participate in the process of constructing basic writing and basic writers. Together they determine the basic academic skills that students must master to function in the intellectual community that college represents. These skills include increasing students' understanding of academic language and concepts; helping students develop more sophisticated ways of thinking, based on induction, deduction, generalization, and evidence; and increasing students' sensitivity to the beauty and power of language and strengthening their positive attitudes toward reading and writing.

Given his understanding of situated literacies, Ira Shor should know better than to detach his analysis from the day-to-day reality of basic writers, making generalizations about their "undemocratic and immoral conditions" so sweeping as to be misleading. As basic writing teachers — described by Shor as "teachers in the trenches [who] do heroic labor" — know, our courses are not "curriculas for containment and control," firmly entrenched "to divide and deter non-elite students in school and in college." Before Shor wrote his piece, he should have sat in on some of the courses that he advocates eliminating; he should have reacquainted himself with basic writing students and the reality of their struggles. There is no lumpen mass of "basic writers" who conform to the stereotypes in his essay. Most basic writing students are not "Blacks" and "the children of poor and working families." Just as basic writing students come from a broad range of socioeconomic situations, they are ethnically and culturally diverse. They are also heterogeneous with respect to the nature of their literacy skills. Some have done little reading and writing of an academic nature in elementary or secondary school, so what they face is first-time learning rather

than developmental mastery. Others read and write adequately when given enough time, but the timed nature of essay tests in college courses produces difficulties. And others—particularly transfer students—have taken reading and writing courses, perhaps even in college, and have certainly been expected to read and write throughout their education, but the application of their skills to new subject areas in a new setting has disrupted their proficiency.

The majority of basic writing courses are not “grammar graveyards” (as Shor describes them), nor are they ghettos. Most are integrated within English Departments, whose mission is the development of students’ abilities to appreciate language and to use it creatively and effectively. The basic writing course is the beginning of an integrated sequence of required English courses, all of which are based on similar theories of linguistic and rhetorical development. Students in basic writing courses understand that they will progress through a series of courses that present and re-present increasingly complex academic literacy skills. Basic writing courses present reading and writing as processes of systematic inquiry, in which students gather new ideas, attempt new perspectives, and internalize the conventions of academic discourse. The goal in these courses is often the same as the goal in upper-level courses: to empower students to use language fluently and authoritatively to transform their lives.

However, the pedagogy of most basic writing courses is unique. Teachers devote much time and energy to helping students gain confidence in their ability and their commitment to using writing as a vehicle for thought and self-expression. Students write frequently, and their writing receives multiple responses from classmates and the teachers. The stages of the writing process are explored through a variety of activities including journals, themes, double-entry notebooks, reports, essays, and practice essay tests. Most basic writing courses are workshops in which students plan, compose, and revise collaboratively in small groups. Students are active rather than passive learners, providing each other with multiple perspectives and responses and working together to negotiate knowledge and meaning. And with smaller class sizes than other courses, the basic writing course provides each student with individualized attention from the teacher. And basic writing teachers are quite distinct in their willingness to listen to and learn from their students and in their ability to value and validate different ways of thinking, doing, reading, and writing. Furthermore, teachers who choose to work with underprepared college writers are usually those who understand the developmental nature of academic literacy acquisition and the linguistic and rhetorical overloads and bottlenecks that occur as students master various language production skills and processes.

Moreover, basic writing courses, unlike most other college

courses, are places where students' ideas are taken seriously, regardless of the dialect or register in which they are expressed. They are "safe" contexts that provide multiple opportunities for students to participate in academic dialogues, reflect aloud on their realities, and try out a multiplicity of discourses and voices. These courses also introduce students to Standard English — not as the absolute standard of grammatical correctness, but as a mode of discourse within a particular social, historical, and political context. Linguistic choices are usually analyzed in terms of social situations and reader/writer role relations. In sum, basic writing courses help students acquire the knowledge and "tools" they need to empower themselves — the ability to write clearly and convincingly about issues that matter to them, to understand and respect other people's perspectives and points of view, to use writing to understand the world and to challenge ideas and people. But now, at schools across the country, funding for basic skills instruction is being cut; underprepared and inexperienced writers are being denied access to courses that prepare them to succeed by teaching them the linguistic, cognitive, and social components of academic literacy necessary to make the transition to college-level coursework. If these courses are slashed, where are students going to get the help they need? Does anyone really believe that students will be able to get this help in freshman composition courses, where the class size is larger, where dialect variation is often perceived as "error," and where the demands are for college-level conceptualization, organization, fluency, and mastery of English conventions?

What is Shor's alternative to basic skills courses for students who may not have read a book or written an essay during their twelve years in elementary and secondary schools? He would put them in college-level "Critical classrooms [that] would invite students to focus on their everyday life in the system causing our problems." There are two problems with his recommendation: First, Shor and his colleagues are really not part of this "our"; they have little in common with these students; thus, his assertion that what these students really need is a curriculum focusing on political empowerment and cultural democracy is suspect. Second, I doubt that most basic writers would agree with the statement that their "everyday life in the system" is what is causing their problems. Most of the basic writers I have taught, advised, and observed believe that the cause of their problem is the inadequacy of their reading and writing skills. Political enlightenment may help these students want to improve their "local conditions"; however, the academic literacy instruction that they get in basic skills courses will help them achieve their potential in college and help them find and use their voices in the world beyond school.

Students who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the academic community that college represents need practice in arguing logically

and sounding credible in writing. Unlike Shor, they cannot rely on their status in this community to convince others of their beliefs, nor can they use pathos and inflammatory language to support their assertions; these may help sell Shor's books, but they don't help students. Let's address the fact that the demands and costs of higher education in this country are rising much faster than funding and that students who cannot pay full tuition are being denied access to a college education. Calls for a "farewell to basic writing" and recommendations that underprepared students be mainstreamed directly into college-level courses sound exactly like the recommendations urged by the national panels on the future of higher education. The RAND Council for Aid to Education recently issued a report urging college administrators to reexamine their missions and "streamline" their services to serve those missions (Commission on National Investment in Higher Education, *Breaking the Social Contract: The Fiscal Crisis in Higher Education* [New York: RAND Council, 1996]). Will mainstreaming basic writers and ESL writers lead to their being "streamlined"? "BW-advocate Greenberg" — who has been teaching basic writing "in the trenches" for twenty-three years — thinks so.

And if Mina Shaughnessy were alive today, I believe she would think so too. Here is what Mina had to say to colleagues who were calling for the elimination of basic writing courses twenty-one years ago:

These are discouraging times for all of us, most particularly for the teachers who have been working with underprepared students on basic skills. Both students and teachers are already discovering that they are expendable, and the programs they have helped to build over the past five years to remedy the failure of the public schools (and the society of which those schools are an extension) now begin to shake and fracture under the blows of retrenchment. . . . But they [basic skills students] cannot go back. CUNY extended a right, six years ago, that has been revoked, and we appear to be back where we started in 1970, only much poorer. But no one can revoke what has gone on in us and in our students. ("The Miserable Truth," *JBW* 3 [1980]: 114).

If colleges accept for admission students with serious basic skills deficiencies, then they are morally obligated to provide them with the developmental instruction that they need to succeed in their college courses. To deny this instruction implies a "right to fail" — that students should have the freedom to take college-level courses of their choice, even if there is a low probability of their succeeding in these courses. This philosophy — which Shor advocates — translates into ef-

fective policy only under two conditions: (1) when students have an appropriate understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and of the standards and requirements of the courses that they plan to take and (2) when college "content area" courses are taught in small sections by teachers willing to give extra assistance to underprepared students and willing to include literacy development activities in their curricula and pedagogy. Neither condition exists in most American colleges, nor is there much likelihood that either will. I believe that Shor's "sink or swim" approach is pernicious: It ignores students' problems and allows them to revolve right out of our open-admissions door. The instruction provided by basic writing courses enables students to acquire the academic literacy skills, motivation, and self-confidence to persevere and to succeed in college. Until there is a marked improvement in the academic skills of high school graduates, transfer students, and adults returning to school; basic skills instruction will continue to be necessary to improve students' success in college. The majority of new and continuing college students need careful, continuing attention to developing literacy skills, not only up to but beyond minimal competency.

Suppose Shor's vision came to pass; suppose that there were no entrance standards and no testing to place and exit students in developmental courses leading to college-level work. If this were the case, at least half the students now entering the university where Shor and I teach (CUNY) would be barred. The University, far trimmed down in size, would probably return to the elite institution it was before 1970, when open admissions began. Of course, there are reactionary political forces currently trying to achieve precisely this barring of access and precisely this reduction in size in colleges across the country. Eliminating testing would, in fact, justify the curtailment and the consequent reduction or elimination of basic skills programs. Students would either fail admissions standards or, given the appearance of open access, would fail college-level courses because of inadequate academic writing skills. No one should make the mistake of believing that the current atmosphere of draconian cutbacks would not operate in this way if opponents of basic skills courses are successful in their goal.