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INEQUALITY (STILL) RULES: REPLY TO COLLINS AND GREENBERG

Question basic writing and all hell breaks loose. Terry Collins accuses me of belonging to a "crazy" Left and Karen Greenberg says my ideas are "pernicious." Still, the problems of comp/BW are a longstanding dilemma in our field; not only have first-year writing courses served to sort students by race and class, but they are also of dubious intellectual merit. Does it make sense to have a course teach something like "General Writing Skills Instruction"? On this issue, I refer readers to Joe Petraglia's volume *Reconceiving Writing* and particularly to David Russell's extraordinary essay in it, "Activity Theory and Its Implication for Writing Instruction." Doubts about GWSI and first-year writing courses dog our field. If writing instruction has a future that makes theoretical and practical sense, it lies in discipline-based, field-oriented, project-situated, student-centered, critical social activities, not in the comp/BW service courses built on a "myth of autonomous literacy" as Brian Street called it.

Further, in terms of comp/BW being a cash cow, I made clear in my original article that I was referring not to Terry's BW program but rather to "the former comp program" at Minnesota whose much-respected director was summarily dismissed without apparent cause in 1996 and replaced by an 18th-century literary scholar, a scandal at that time. While in Minnesota then, on a visit, I met with Terry's General College writing staff and found them to be an impressive group. Terry has every right to be proud of his staff. But this pride is not the same as justifying the functions of BW there or elsewhere. In justifying the functions and outcomes of BW, one problem is that Terry speaks in generalities rather than specifics vis-a-vis how much revenue his GC BW program might be generating. His assurance that his writing program is not a cash cow for the university will be convincing when he provides data. Moreover, the racial makeup of General College's student body has to be clarified and compared to that of the University of Minnesota as a whole for Terry to deny my metaphor of educational apartheid. Are the colors and income-levels of the two student bodies equivalent? Lastly, is my proposed Labor Policy really in effect at General College? From Terry's own reply, I see that his BW staff includes only four full-time tenure-track faculty. The "others" on the

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staff include "four full-time academic professionals on annual tenure-track appointments at reasonable load and nine half-time graduate students" (97). Is this an equitable labor hierarchy? Seems like the part-time grad students outnumber the full-timers, and the full-timers are divided into two castes of teachers, real faculty vs. people mysteriously labeled "academic professionals" in Terry's own words. How is this different from the unequal division of labor in BW/comp in general?

In addition, Terry says that "100% of the General College students who successfully transfer into degree-granting colleges at Minnesota complete the Basic Writing sequence. . . . And we know that those who find a way to avoid the Basic Writing courses or who postpone enrolling tend to fail to transfer into degree programs, and they drop out at elevated rates" (97). To be honest, I'm not sure what this information means. It may be good news endorsing his BW program. I don't doubt that Terry and his staff labor prodigiously for the success of the students. But it's not easy to read what the data here means because of the paucity of detail and explanation. The 100% figure seems like a soft measure of "success" unless some questions are clarified: how many BW *grads* from Terry's program *don't* successfully transfer to a degree-granting institution? How many BW students don't finish the BW courses? To say that all successful "transfers" completed the BW courses has to be put in relation to the numbers of non-successful students who never reach the transfer stage. Terry does say that students who avoid BW or who postpone enrolling tend to fail to transfer into degree programs and also drop out at elevated rates, supporting the value of his BW. But, when they avoid BW, do they take other writing and academic courses which they fail or pass or do they take no courses at all? What exactly are they doing when they evade BW? Peter Dow Adams wrote about BW-evaders at his college who took freshman comp instead and did as well as or better than BW grads. At Terry's place, do BW-evaders drop out for academic reasons or for economic reasons? The information is simply too skimpy. Lastly, if Terry did publish the racial and economic makeup of BW students in GC compared to those of students in the University of Minnesota's College of Liberal Arts, that could help answer Karen's charge against me that "most basic writing students are not 'Blacks' and 'the children of poor and working families'" (90). From Terry and from Karen, I'd like to see their evidence that students from lower-income families and from communities of color are *not* over-represented in BW classrooms. The case at CUNY is clear enough (see David Lavin's research on the impact of new admissions criteria, with its appended statistical tables indicating the racial character of students who pass entry tests, BW, and graduate [CUNYTALK Digest, 15 March 1998-16 March 1008, #1998-72]).

On another note, Karen misrepresents my "mainstreaming" position as a sink-or-swim policy, something I never advocated, and which my support for Soliday, Gleason, Grego, and Thompson contradicts. I join others in the field who propose abolishing remediation and replacing it with effective alternatives; I despise and reject the conservative politicians, pundits, trustees and think-tankers who want to abolish the students. This is the crucial distinction missed by Terry and Karen: some progressives want to abolish bogus testing, remediation and disembodied writing instruction; the right wants to expand testing, abolish non-elite students, and end open access.

Karen and Terry, can you imagine a mass college that does not test and sort its incoming students? We did that at Staten Island Community College from 1971-1976. On this crowded, low-budget, working-class campus of the City University of New York, we developed a BW program that had no formal testing mechanism. Anyone who would like a description of our entry process back then should contact me for details. Let me say here, briefly, that we did just fine in those days in our writing classes and felt no need for a testing regime. In fact, our experimental BW unit was hailed as one of three nationally successful programs by the NCTE in 1974. I taught BW there for fifteen years until 1986, by which time the dogs of the culture war had cannibalized the promising Open Admissions project, imposing tuition in 1976 for the first time and restrictive entry exams in 1978, including the infamous City University of New York Writing Assessment Test (WAT), which led to a huge failure rate, a large testing office, and an empire of remediation with ten or more courses where we originally had one. About WAT-style placement tests, Mina Shaughnessy wrote that

> Without strategies for generating real thought, without an audience he cares to write for, the writer must eke out his first sentence by means of redundancy and digression, strategies that inevitably disengage him from his grammatical intuitions as well as his thought. (*Errors and Expectations* 82)

More recently, Barbara Gleason said this about the WAT at CUNY:

> the WAT's numerical score itself fails to capture the complex potential of the students. The timed writing test and its interpretative scoring mechanism cannot begin to assess a student's history, motivation, ingenuity, creativity, work habits, sense of self, interpersonal intelligence, or sheer courage in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. ("When the Writing Test Fails," 322, in *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, eds. Carol Severino, et al., MLA: New York, 1997, 307-324)

Gleason reported that "whites consistently pass the test more frequently than do Asians, blacks, and Latinos and Latinas," suggesting that the apartheid function of remediation and its testing regimes is a reasonable metaphor. (See also Hazel Carby's "The Politics of Difference" for one African-American scholar's application of the apartheid metaphor to American education and society, [*MS. Magazine*, September/October 1990, 84-85].) About the depressant effects of remediation, Mike Rose said that

> the curriculum in developmental English breeds a deep social and intellectual isolation from print; it fosters attitudes and beliefs about written language that, more than anything, keeps students from becoming fully, richly literate. (*Lives on the Boundary*, 211)

Forty years ago, Burton Clark discovered how writing courses and testing were useful to the "cooling-out function in higher education":

> In one junior college the initial move in a cooling-out process is pre-entrance testing; low scores on achievement tests lead poorly qualified students into remedial classes. Assignment to remedial work casts doubt and slows the student's movement into bona fide transfer courses. The remedial courses are, in effect, a subcollege. The student's achievement scores are made part of a counseling folder that will become increasingly significant to him. An objective record of ability and performance begins to accumulate. ("The Cooling-Out Function in Higher Education," 572 *American Journal of Sociology*, 65 [1960], 569-576)

My respect to my hard-working veteran colleagues Terry and Karen, and to others who labor in writing classrooms. Smart people with good intentions often find ourselves working in structures with bad functions. Intelligent people sometimes invent the wrong structures for the right reasons, which is how I feel now about the experimental BW program I helped build with my gifted colleagues at Staten Island. We didn't know then what we can know now about language, literacy, learning, and teaching, thanks to 25 years of research and debate in our field. The wrong thing to do is to dig in our heels, nest in our positions, and make ourselves only more vulnerable to conservative assaults by defending weak turf rather than transforming it into something strong in theory and practice. Unfortunately, many folks feel that there are no better alternatives to the courses and programs now predominant. But, fortunately, others are already testing alterna-

tives based on democratic theories of literacy and learning. It's time for our field to move past the conundrum of our first-year writing courses which have served inequality well but have served students and teachers poorly from their inception at Harvard over a century ago. Disembodied language arts—writing for no particular purpose—writing without a meaningful content or context—the myth of autonomous literacy—the notion that "academic discourse" or "basic skills" or "critical thinking" can be taught in special writing classes segregated from social practice or from the rest of the curriculum—comprise a grandly deluded edifice built on the sands of bogus testing, a race and class hierarchy of undemocratic language arts vulnerable to the tsunami of conservative authorities, clearly the dead-ends of our still-evolving history.