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THE REPRESENTATION OF BASIC WRITERS IN BASIC WRITING SCHOLARSHIP, OR WHO IS QUENTIN PIERCE?

ABSTRACT: This essay argues that basic writing research has focused on teachers' expectations and students' errors, leaving a curious void in our understandings of students' needs. It reviews research trends, arguing that researchers who directly concern themselves directly with what students' voices can add to our knowledge of the field will fill an important gap in the literature.

Introduction

In 1993, Wendy Bishop suggested that much of the research composition teachers rely on to shape classroom techniques is "student-vacant," (93), which is to say it fails to incorporate the perspectives of those most directly affected by our classroom techniques: students. This oversight, Bishop argued, is caused in part by an emphasis on scientific study and in part by the need to create teacher narratives in which professional expertise and intervention are necessary to help inexperienced writers. While Bishop's subsequent work has been part of a rising interest in ethnography, scholarly attention to teacher-centered issues has maintained a "student-vacant" focus, and this is particularly true in the field of basic writing.

Even as I write that sentence, I want to object to my own analysis. After all, I say to myself, what field is more student-centered than basic writing? Isn't our collective concern a desire to nurture students who might otherwise likely fail? Doesn't the oft-repeated assertion that Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* gave rise to basic writing scholarship[1] illustrate a long concern for making students central in our work? A glance through any volume of *JBW*, any visit to a Confer-

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ence on Basic Writing meeting or any workshop for basic writing instructors reveals an incredible commitment to basic writing students. But despite the dedication of many basic writing teachers and researchers, there is a curious gap in the ways students are represented in basic writing scholarship.

This gap, I argue, is at odds with how the field of basic writing generally conceives its mission—to support students who need extra help to succeed in school. In many ways, the title of *Errors and Expectations* laid the groundwork for how we have approached that mission. Students have long been the subjects of our thoughtful analysis. We have looked at students' errors and teachers' expectations and practices; we have refined our techniques, explored the effects of technology on basic writers, structured and evaluated programs, and so on. And we have been fierce advocates of entering students' needs. Both in our scholarship and in our classrooms, we have carefully interpreted students' texts (and thereby the students who write them). But in many ways, we know very little about the students who take our courses. I don't mean to suggest that as teachers we run student-vacant classrooms. But as researchers, we know very little about our students—something that Howard Tinberg has recently suggested impedes our politicking in response to attacks on basic writing as well as our ability to respond to students in class. That we know little about students has, in some ways, driven the development of basic writing programs. We have built programs to serve students whose needs were not anticipated by traditional programs of study. This essay addresses the ways in which our work has succeeded, while examining what we have learned about students along the way.

Searching for Quentin Pierce

David Bartholomae's "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum," an essay doubtless familiar to most readers of these pages, illustrates the way that students helped shape Bartholomae's early basic writing work. "Tidy House" seems worlds away from *Errors and Expectations*, although both are prominent pieces that arguably ushered in new trends in scholarship. While *Errors* guided many early developers of basic writing programs, "Tidy House" began a tradition of institutional critiques that have culminated both in curricular reforms and calls to eliminate basic writing programs. The political differences between the eras of *Errors* and "Tidy House" are many. But however much changed in the political landscape, one thing did not: how students are represented.

Quentin Pierce, an early student of Bartholomae's, figures largely in the narrative portion of "Tidy House," which explains how Pierce

got Bartholomae into the basic writing business. Bartholomae reflected on his interactions with Pierce in order to make a larger point: "I want to cast this moment as more than an isolated incident. I want it to be representative" (5). And it is a representative moment—many readers (including myself) read Bartholmae's dealings with Quentin Pierce and remember encounters with students that left us asking hard questions, questions which propelled us to teach or research differently. For Bartholmae, the moment in question concerned Pierce's submission of a difficult essay, written in response to the question, "If existence precedes essence, what is man?" As Bartholomae begins to tell us about Pierce's work, he pauses to parenthetically address us as fellow teachers: "(you can visualize the page—the handwriting is labored and there is much scratching out)" (6). Pierce's essay ended thus:

> I don't care.
> I don't care.
>
> About man and good and evil I don't care about this shit fuck this shit, trash, and should be put in the trash can with this shit
>
> Thank you very much
>
> I lose again (6)

When Bartholomae got this essay, he "did not know how to read it. [He] could only ignore it" (6). He was plagued with difficult experiences that semester, and finally approached his department chair to say that he would rather become a lawyer than endure another such class. Fortunately, the chair offered him a job setting up a basic writing program; the following year Bartholomae moved on to Pitt, where the evolution of the basic writing curriculum is familiar to readers of Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* and *Ways of Reading*. And the roots of a highly thoughtful, effective curriculum are evident in Bartholomae's early response to Pierce's work.

Bartholomae, for all he says he knew only how to ignore the essay at the time, read it quite sensitively:

> I knew enough to know that the paper was, in a sense, a very skillful performance in words. I knew that it was written for me. I knew that it was probably wrong to read it as simply expressive (an expression of who Quentin Pierce 'really was'); I think I knew that it was not sufficient to read the essay simply as evidence that I had made the man a loser -- since the

> document was also a dramatic and skillful way of saying 'Fuck you—I'm not the loser, you are.' I saw that the essay had an idea—and that the writer called for the moves that could enable its elaboration. (7).

This text (or was it this student?) helped Bartholomae embark on the work that has helped so many of us learn how to help students succeed. But "Tidy House," like *Errors and Expectations*, is the story of a *teacher*, not the story of a student (not suprising, given that it was originally delivered as a keynote address at the 4th National Conference on Basic Writing). Bartholomae returns to some thoughts about Pierce at the end of "Tidy House," to address the question of what will serve students—and what served Pierce in particular:

> Do I believe in the course represented in *Facts, Artifacts, Counterfacts*—do I believe it is a reasonable way to manage his work as a reader and writer? Yes. The point is that while I believe in the course, I am not sure I believe in its institutional position as a course that is necessarily prior to or lesser than the mainstream course. Do I believe Quentin is served by being called a basic writer and positioned in the curriculum in these terms? I'm not sure I do. (19-20)

Here we see the mind of David Bartholomae at work—reading the text, reading his response to the text, reading this encounter with a student in terms of what it meant then, what it means now, what it meant for him, what it means for us. We see someone with a long history in basic writing critically re-assessing the term. We see a reflective teacher continuing to puzzle over the meaning of a challenging encounter with a student—more than twenty years after the fact. But what we don't see is Quentin Pierce at work, except as represented through his teacher's reading.

The essay, to be sure, is Pierce's mind at work—but as Bartholomae noted in his initial response to the essay, it's hard to know what Pierce intended with his text. Pierce offered a representation of thinking that requires interpretation—not just by a teacher, but by the author. And the traditional way that scholarship is framed often prevents us from seeing what students intend with their texts. We focus instead on what *we* see in their texts. Would Bartholomae have established basic writing programs differently if he knew Quentin's interpretation of that essay or that course 27 years ago at Rutgers? We don't know, but such questions are essential if we are to move ahead with the current project of reconceiving basic writing in a time of political crisis. We need to reach out to students as we work to define our field, especially in the current political climate.

My argument here is simple: in our research, we have largely represented students so we can represent ourselves. And we represent ourselves as creative, compassionate, flexible teachers and problem-posers—sometimes heroes, sometimes confused. This representation serves all sorts of good purposes, and it's an important element in the evolution of a field. But this representation has a cost: it elides space for students' voices to be heard.

Looking Back: The Journal of *Basic Writing*, Vols. 1-17

To look back at how our field has configured students, I turned to my library's collection of the *Journal of Basic Writing*. It's not my purpose here to do a history of *JBW* or even a complete content analysis of work presented there. Rather, I describe broad trends in basic writing scholarship, using the work published here as one important indication of how the field of basic writing has shaped itself. In many ways, *JBW* institutionalizes basic writing. It's housed at CUNY, where Shaughnessy worked. In its history and its mailing address, *JBW* is allied with the tradition of open-access institutions. Its evolution from a newsletter-type publication into a more professional-looking refereed journal marks scholarly advancement in important ways. *JBW* has also had a close association with the Conference on Basic Writing (CBW), an increasingly large special interest group of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (which has recently transformed its own newsletter into a refereed online publication, *Basic Writing e-Journal*[2]). As *JBW* and CBW have matured, so has our field, and to take *JBW* as a bellwether of our collective work both honors and interrogates our history.

As I began reading the stacks of *JBW*s, I approached this task with the general assumption that some articles would focus on classroom practices and others would treat broader issues. Other than that I did not bring a pre-formed set of categories to my reading. Rather, I wanted to group articles organically, letting connections among articles emerge as I started reading. Eventually, some major groupings appeared from my scribbled notes and diagrams. These categories allowed me to present the diversity of approaches in the first 17 volumes of *JBW*, while succinctly summarizing those approaches. I classified each article according to the following schema (cross-classifying articles when it was appropriate):

• **Teaching Techniques**. This is a rather broad category that refers to all aspects of the nuts and bolts of teaching—everything from curriculum or program design, vocabulary acquisition, teaching with technology, or teacher training, to specific teaching techniques or assign-

ments. These articles are written to guide other teachers in developing similar approaches. They provide valuable resources for those developing and evaluating programs. Detailed analysis of curricular innovations (both successes and failures) has enabled curriculum and faculty development to improve. Articles such as Brosnahan and Neuleib's "Teaching Grammar to Basic Writers," Beyer and Brostoff's "An Approach to Integrating Writing into a History Course," or Mische and Winslow's "The Hero's Performance and Students' Quests for Meaning and Identity: A Humanities and Writing Course Design" are categorized here.

• **Theory**. This category includes keynote addresses intended to motivate teachers as well as pieces about the nature of basic writing as a field, broad descriptions of literacy and its acquisition, and meta-analyses of basic writing research. These articles are intended to provide perspective on the field, to illustrate past trends and urge future changes. These broad critiques urge basic writing teachers and scholars to consider the philosophical underpinnings of our work, and the emphasis here is on the major trend and big assumption, rather than on particular syllabi or assignments. Like the teaching articles, they are designed to affect practice, but usually not at the level of the individual classroom. Bizzell's "Power, Authority, and Critical Pedagogy," Purves' "Clothing the Emperor: Toward a New Framework Relating Function and Form in Literacy," and Bartholomae's "Tidy House" are representative here.

• **Text Analysis**. This category refers to studies, such as Epes' "Tracing Errors to their Sources," or Otte's "Computer-Adjusted Errors and Expectations" which have as their primary task the close reading of student texts in order to draw conclusions about students' needs or the efficacy of teaching techniques. In many respects, the text analysis articles are closely aligned with teaching technique articles, since in most cases the analysis is conducted in order to guide the development of classroom materials. Marinara's "When Working Class Students 'Do' the Academy: How We Negotiate with Alternative Literacies" is a good example of an article that uses detailed text analyses as a foundation for a careful description of a course plan.

• **Student-Present**. This category includes articles with a serious attention to student voices. Yorio's work, discussed below, is representative here. *JBW* volume 11, number 2, contains a number of fine examples from this category: Agnew's "Basic Writers in the Workplace: Writing Adequately for Careers After College" and Carol Peterson Haviland and J. Milton Clark's "What Can Our Students Tell us About Essay Examination Designs and Practices" use methodologies that

make students' perspectives on their writing experiences central to the analysis. In student-present scholarship, the focus is on how students experience broad curricular trends.

• **Student-Qualities**. This category includes work where the teacher or researcher analyze students' attitudes or other personal qualities. Students are important in both student-qualities and student-present research. I distinguish the two categories, though, by what drives the research question. In student-quality scholarship, the researcher's notion of what student attribute is important drives the work; in student-present research, the students' notion of what factors are important drives the analysis. Studies of writing apprehension (Buley-Meisssner's "Am I Really That Bad?") or other studies that examine students' affect (Wolcott and Burh's "Attitude as it Affects Developmental Writers' Essays") are representative here.

• **Miscellaneous**. This category includes mainly the tributes to Mina Shaughnessy that have been published over the years, such as volume 11, number two's special section, "Remembering Mina Shaughnessy," which included short tributes from Shaughnessy's colleagues and two short pieces by Shaughnessy; the excerpt from Maher's biography of Shaughnessy, and also other difficult-to-classify works as Alice Trillin's interview with Calvin Trillin are also included here.

I offer these categories to draw a broad picture of the field, recognizing that each category captures a wide range of scholarship within it. The categories themselves are heuristics, rather than fast labels, and there are overlapping relationships among the categories. One reviewer of this essay wondered whether these categories represented differences of degree rather than differences of kind. It's certainly the case that student-present and student-qualities might usefully be represented as different points of a continuum of research on students, and it is also true that virtually everything published in *JBW* has as a general aim the improvement of instruction.

The text analysis category might itself be considered an extension or sub-set of the teaching techniques category. My analysis separated it from teaching techniques in order to highlight a method for reflecting on student learning. In this set of articles (only 12 over the volumes examined), teacher/researchers are closely reading students' texts, searching for patterns that will help improve instruction. The close reading is designed to elicit a deep description of the texts, either in form or content, and it introduces a carefully structured analysis of student performance into classroom assessment. While many articles in *JBW* include examples of student texts, I have used this category only for those articles where the formal description of the texts was an

important aim of the author. "Tidy House," for instance, would not be included in this category, despite its close reading of Quentin Pierce's text, because Bartholmae's focus there was on his own reaction to the piece, rather than on features of the student text.

The emphasis on student text is important, for close readings of what students actually do when they write begin to offer a route for students' concerns to affect the development of curriculum. George Otte's "Computer-Adjusted Errors and Expectations"(the homage to Shaughnessy in the title will not be lost on most readers, indicating part of the history of this type of reading) is a text-analysis article which demonstrates a way of using student work to plan and evaluating teaching technique and curriculum. Otte focuses on what kinds of errors students produced in their texts, and what features of the texts changed (or didn't) over the course of the semester. He ends the article with reflections about what his students' writing experiences say about how to teach about error. Otte's approach to error and grammar uses students' texts as a lens, which is very different from Brosnahan's and Neulieb's broad discussion of why and how to teach grammar to teachers and students. Their discussion, while rooted in their teaching experience, does not offer a close view of students' performance in writing.

Overall, while the categories offered here may be broad or messy, they do offer a snapshot of basic writing research over time (for a broader recent review of basic writing literature, see Harrington and Adler-Kassner). The categorizing of articles is summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Teaching and Theory

Category	Number (Percent of Total)
Teaching Techniques	144 (53%)
Theory	72 (26%)
Student-Present	17 (6%)
Text-Analysis	12 (4%)
Unknown*	12 (4%)
Student-Qualities	10 (4%)
Miscellaneous	6 (2%)
Total	273

Table 1: *JBW* Articles, by Code
**unknown articles from missing issues in the library collection*

Table 1 shows the total number of articles in each category, which shows the overall dominance of articles about teaching techniques. 144 of the 261 articles published between volumes 1 and 17 discuss teach-

ing techniques—an appropriate focus, given the the overall mission of the journal and the field. *JBW* has naturally had an interest in the classroom (curriculum, assignments, ways to teach particular skills). *JBW* has functioned a bit like a long-distance teachers' lounge, providing a space for the thoughtful consideration of what works in what contexts, what doesn't, and why. This teachers' lounge doesn't dismiss theory, however, and in dividing teaching technique and theory articles, I don't mean to divorce the two. *JBW*'s own call for papers makes clear that good discussions of teaching practice must be rooted in pedagogical theory. *JBW*'s teaching articles are different from the old CCC "Staffroom Interchange" in that the teaching techniques are described at length and grounded in theory. My distinction here merely highlights the immediate focus of the article.

	Vols.1-4	5-9	10-13	14-17
Teaching Techniques	61	40	24	19
Theory	8	12	28	24
Student-Present	0	6	5	6
Text Analysis	2	6	1	3
Unknown	9	2	1	0
Student-Qualities	4	4	1	1
Miscellaneous	3	0	0	3
Total	87	70	60	56

Table 2: *JBW* Articles by Volume and Code

Taken together, the teaching technique and text analysis articles—which comprise close to 60% of the total publications in *JBW*—offer a variety of approaches to basic writing instruction, and they model teacher reflection in myriad ways. Over time the percentage of publications in this categories has been falling, as illustrated in Table 2. While most articles in the early volumes of *JBW* addressed such concerns, in more recent years only about a third of articles have done so. This evolution mimics the progression of composition publication more generally, but the consistent attention to teaching-related concerns reflects the close connection between basic writing and teaching practice. Yet Table 2 demonstrates that in both volumes 10-13 and 14-17, theory articles edge out teaching technique articles in frequency. Theory articles have long been represented in *JBW*: early volumes contained pieces like Smith and Hirsch's keynote addresses. The number of theoretical pieces is highest in volumes 10-13 (rather than the most recent volumes), something that surprised me given the professional rewards associated with theory rather than practice. On the whole, however, an increasing attention to theoretical concerns seems to have reduced somewhat the number of articles devoted to teaching techniques.

The turn toward the theoretical is important. As Jeanne Gunner

notes, the field of basic writing has always been defined through theory. Theory first enabled the establishment of a paradigm (shaped by iconic visions of Shaughnessy and CUNY); more recently, Gunner argues, we are in the midst of a struggle to shift (or defend) that paradigm. Theorizing has also enabled us to establish professional legitimacy in the wider profession and to take a critical perspective on our common undertakings. But in that push toward the theoretical, basic writing students have become increasingly absent. As Linda Adler-Kassner and I have recently argued, it is widely acknowledged that basic writing students are a diverse lot—but that argument itself begins to backfire pragmatically. When basic writers are seen to be everywhere, they are also nowhere. If basic writers are constructed so that we understand them to be students who simply don't know academic conventions, then it is difficult to distinguish them from any other group of students—and that lack of definition itself makes it difficult to have coherent programs. A crucial element in our efforts to serve students in an increasingly politicized climate must be a concerted effort to find out more about who our students are.

What Students Will Tell Us If We Will Only Ask

Finding out who our students are is, in some ways, an easy task: we can ask them. We can ask students to tell us about their literacy experiences, about their schooling, about the ways they encounter written texts in their lives. Linda Adler-Kassner and I (working with other colleagues at IUPUI and the University of Michigan—Dearborn) have recently begun a research project that takes such questions out of the classroom and into a broader realm of scholarly discourse (see Adler-Kassner's essay in this volume for an early report of one facet of this project). To some extent, Adler-Kassner and I may be calling less for a change in practice than a change in public discourse among practitioners. As teachers, many of us already tap into our students' senses of identity.

I often begin the semester with an assignment that asks students to write me a letter about their previous writing experiences and their impressions of writers and writing. The profusion of work on literacy narratives (see Fox for one example) suggests that I'm not alone here. Many textbooks also have introductory exercises or even whole focuses on students' exploring their literacy backgrounds (for some examples, see the sections on assessing one's writing background in Gay, *Developing Writers*, and Rich). Other examples of such assignments can be found in *JBW* articles describing assignments about literacy. Morris Young, for example, uses his students' work to illustrate their "very personal connections with writing and its power in helping them

enter the world of public discourse" (55). Using three students' work to explore issues of identity and public discourse, Young argues that these students—all participants in a University of Hawai'i bridge program for underprepared students—"theorize their roles as writers and their place in the Nation because they recognize that they are cultural workers and already live literate lives" (70).

In a very different vein, Eric Miraglia advocates bringing self-diagnostic assessments into the basic writing course, as a way of implementing Ann Berthoff's advice to "Begin with where they are." The traditional diagnostic essay which teachers use at the start of the semester to gauge whether students are in the right course or not rests on various wrong assumptions about students and writing. Miraglia offers an elegant critique of these assignments, the most compelling being evident even in the term *diagnostic*. Nowhere else in writing assessment do we find the assumption that a one-shot assignment can lead to an accurate "diagnosis" of student needs in a situation that so clearly paints the student as suffering from some sort of disease that Dr. Teacher can cure. Simply asking students to assess their own writing abilities and needs leads to writing that can be evaluated in terms of both content (the students' areas of expertise) and form (the teacher's) (Miraglia 52). Miraglia—offering one form of student-present research—tested the students' writing samples against their own perceptions of their needs in interviews.[3] In interviews, the students revealed more complicated goals than were explained in their samples. The work of Young and Miraglia demonstrates that individual teachers are, indeed, using their students' self-assessments to drive classroom techniques and teachers' analysis of student needs.

But how can we take this careful classroom work and use it to inform our programs and our scholarship? How can students' self-assessments of their positions in educational systems, and of their own writing, affect the way we teach? And how and when can we listen to students? In "Dialogizing Response," Pamela Gay argues that the move towards increasingly collaborative classroom approaches has not necessarily affected the way we talk to students about their work. Our responses and interactions with students still reinforce the notion that the teacher is the central authority figure in terms of curriculum and student work; student-teacher relationships are hampered by this exercise of institutional power. Gay quotes an Andrea Lunsford keynote address that urged "we've got to start looking at the 'between'—the relationship between teachers and students" (10). Gay elaborates: "We need to find various ways of dialogizing response—of de-privileging as best we can, teacher commentary—we need to find more ways of making the process of revising more interactive" (10). Gay's recent essay demonstrates how inviting students to respond to teacher response is one way of building dialogue into our classes, and it offers a

way of building dialogue with students that does not depend on the content of a curriculum (many examples of exchanges with students about the nature of literacy come in courses where the curriculum makes literacy the subject matter studied, which is the case in Young's class). Even when our curriculum is not specifically about literacy and citizenship, we should draw upon students' assessments of their experiences, their abilities, and their goals. We must learn how to share what we learn from our students with each other.

Student-Present Scholarship

Student-present scholarship challenges us to address these issues. As is clear in tables 1 and 2, there are examples of student-present scholarship running through the history of *JBW*. The earliest example of such scholarship I noted was George Jensen's "The Reification of the Basic Writer" (in volume 5), which starts from the assumption that students' real needs can sometimes ignored by research that overdetermines views of students' deficiencies. Jensen responds to this problem with pedagogical practices, advocating use of the Meyers-Briggs Personality inventory to identify different "types" of students in a class. Jensen sees the diversity of basic writers as something that should drive us to look at the individuals in our classrooms and tailor our curriculum to those specific students. At the classroom level, such flexibility is essential, but student-present research should have a broader agenda.

How can we approach the diversity of basic writers at a programmatic level? How can we come to understand "basic writers" in order to best design curriculum and to demarcate a field of scholarly inquiry? There is little evidence that students' perceptions of themselves drive how textbooks are written, or how writing programs are constructed. Instead, there is a preponderance of evidence that suggests we paternally or maternally assume we know what's good for students—often because we have carefully looked the situation over, using our broad experiences to guide our analysis—and then figured out how to deliver the curriculum. We study students, but we rarely ask students to evaluate our programs in any meaningful way. And in so doing, we have condoned the very characterizations of students that we say we fight against. If our program assessments and our curricula are not designed to permit students' voices to interact with our materials, we promote a stultifying position for student writers in our classes. This is not to say that students' voices are always right, but student voices deserve more of a place in our discourse.

Case Studies and Student-Present Research

Students' voices are clearly heard in one genre of basic writing research: the case study. This genre has allowed basic writing teachers to pursue the stories of challenging students. In Hull and Rose's "That Wooden Shack Place," for instance, we meet Robert, whose unconventional reading of a poem drives his teachers' analysis of curriculum. Sally Barr Reagan's "Warning: Writers at Work" introduces Javier, a student with a troubled relationship to school, and Vivian Zamel's "Through Students' Eyes" takes us inside the minds of ESL writers. Zamel's case study followed three students over two semesters, in their basic writing and first-year composition courses. Zamel's work looked at the ways in which the very different philosophies of two writing teachers led to very different classrooms. Her careful research into the students' attitudes and experiences created a rich portrait of their experiences, and raised interesting questions about the ways two different teachers' assumptions created different learning environments for students. Zamel, unlike Bartholmae in telling of Quentin, cautions about broader interpretations of the case study:

> Thus, while the "stories" of Carlos, Mohammed, and Nham may not have been representative, may even have been idiosyncratic, the significance of this study lies in the realization that, as teachers, we are always dealing with the unique and individual realities and interpretations of students and must take these into account. (94)

Exploring the mismatches between our goals and our students will help alleviate some of the frustrations these students described.

Another excellent case study explores the relationship between student and teacher action. Gesa Kirsch's study of Eugene's revising habits in "Students' Interpretations of Writing Tasks" illustrates the ways in which students themselves are effective guides to their work. Kirsch's thorough study of one student's work over the course of the semester created an equally thorough picture of her own work. She focused on the ways in which Gene interpreted writing tasks:

> Only when Gene broadened his interpretation of writing tasks did he learn to expand his repertoire of writing strategies, his depth of analysis, and ultimately, his ways of knowing. While Gene's drastic change in interpreting writing tasks is not typical of most freshmen writers, it does suggest a potential for growth that lies dormant in many students until they master the skill of interpreting writing tasks and assume authority over their writing. (83)

Kirsch explores the ways her discussion of teacherly authority helped Gene find ways to take risks with his writing, and thus interpret tasks in ways that explored his own authority as a writer. Journals, self-assessment, and conferences helped him achieve this growth.

As thorough as these case studies are, though, they are limited by their genre: as Zamel noted, it's difficult to generalize from them. How can we move beyond the case study to acknowledge the wide diversity of our students in a theoretically sound and pragmatically meaningful way as we set up programs and classrooms? If a case study is always idiosyncratic, valuable for what it teaches us about one individual (or a small group of individuals), how can we learn to generalize about basic writers in meaningful ways?

Such questions were anticipated by Carlos Yorio in studies he did with students at CUNY's Lehmann College and the University of Michigan. Yorio, the first to raise questions about the ways students are absent in our research, opens his story with Alice's encounter with the talking flowers in Wonderland—the flowers which told Alice what they thought about all sorts of things. Yorio noted:

> Our students, like Alice's flowers, *can* talk; they have opinions about what we do and what we make them do. Like Alice's flowers, our students will not always agree with each other and may not always be right or even sensible. But, I will argue, they cannot be ignored. Native language, culture, social behavior, and previous experiences both in educational and noneducational settings have shaped them as people and as learned. They are not a tabula rasa. . . . At some level, we know all this. And yet, over and over again, my own students and those of other colleagues amaze me with comments, questions, and complaints which clearly show that some of them, at least, do not agree with what we are doing and feel a terrible sense of frustration in classes where techniques are used which they consider a waste of time. (33)

Yorio's work focused on ESL students' perceptions of teaching techniques. His work demonstrates that students have plenty to say, if they are asked. All told, in one survey Yorio describes, 711 respondents chose "I don't know" less than 2% of the time (in more than 17,000 total questions) (34). Yorio concluded that we need to tell our students more about why we do what we do, since students were not perceiving common teaching elements—group work, homework—as very important. In using a survey of students, and repeating his questions at multiple institutions, Yorio was able to illustrate both the indi-

viduality of students and some common features in response.

Howard Tinberg recently illustrated the ways in which reflections from one class of basic writing students provided him with evidence of how much they were eager for challenging academic experiences. Both Tinberg and Yorio, using very different methodologies, suggest that students' perspectives on literacy and learning are essential to teachers and administrators seeking to define and protect programs. Linda Adler-Kassner's essay analyzes the ways basic writers' understanding of the composing process can be usefully incorporated into curriculum revision. Our students are the chief audience for our writing programs, and for our programs to be rhetorically effective, they must understand their audience. Adler-Kassner's interviews with the basic writers at University of Michigan—Dearborn suggest that the students' assumptions about writing and the curriculum's assumptions about writing have not always been in line with each other; addressing this disjunction should make instruction more effective.

I would end this essay by urging further attention to our students' voices, particularly in projects that enable us to make meaningful comparisons between student populations. Only by looking carefully at our local context, and then comparing local contexts, can we build a discourse about students that celebrates their diversity, without allowing that very diversity to turn the students as a group invisible. Such research will allow us to come to know the Quentin Pierces in our classrooms, and to use our acquaintance with Pierce and his colleagues to meaningfully discuss basic writers as a group. In this political climate, we need the anecdotal, deep knowledge from individual classrooms and case studies, but we also need broader alliances. Research that brings students into our research will help serve that purpose.

Notes

1. There is a strand of basic writing scholarship that problematizes the consistent association of the birth of basic writing with *Errors and Expectations*, CUNY, and Mina Shaughnessy. See, for example, Gunner, "Iconic Discourse" or Horner.

2. The *Basic Writing e-Journal* (as well as more information about the Conference on Basic Writing)is available at http://www.asu.edu/clas/english/composition/cbw/.

3. He also interviewed teachers to look at their perceptions of students' needs.

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