

# A FUTURE FOR THE VANISHING PRESENT: NEW WORK FOR BASIC WRITING

*ABSTRACT: Current external and internal attacks on Basic Writing are in a metonymic relation to the entire field of composition studies, and thus bring up a number of justifiable concerns: original warrants for establishing the field are losing credibility; its sites are moving physically and being critiqued by its leaders, who question the motives, theories and the social results of curricula; its practices have become representations of a "new capitalism" that improves status and work for only a few, meanwhile inadvertently helping to disemploy many teachers. New "recognition work" is needed, directed at acknowledging anxieties about class status among composition professionals, which are projected onto students and divert the field from commitments to teach writing and research relations among writers, texts, and instruction. Developing the capacity to see local communities not as places to which composition might export its beneficence, but as the places whose interests and practices it shares, would create a new root metaphor for the field. The article exemplifies this possibility, describing sites whose origins and successful practices depend on averting the academic gaze on local constituencies in favor of taking on cooperative, interdependent projects.*

I'm reluctant to project a future for BW just now because many current disagreements in the field suggest that to project new goals is to have joined a debate. Like the strident claims about classroom practices in composition teaching after James Berlin asserted and Maxine Hairston criticized "ideology" as the field's content in 1988-94 (Berlin, 1988, 1989; Hairston, 1991, 1994), current arguments recast the field's assumed goals. Those root metaphors have long been taken to represent it as stable, certainly *professionalized*, and heavily invested in the future of its students as well as in academic progressivism. But new disagreement is not so focused on a shared subtext as was the Berlin/Hairston contest, nor is the field undergoing a broad paradigm shift that will end with unity about new course content, teaching methods, or assessment tools that, at last, fit our aims. Even were the academic

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success of inexperienced adults abandoned as the field's master trope, we would place quotation marks around any "new paradigm." I want to suggest instead that we face a post-paradigmatic future, one that assumes we can accept the naiveté of identifying an emerging contour as a settled "change," not as an intensification among already available ways of thinking and talking about any subject.

Nonetheless, there is important disagreement about the destinations of the paths we are on and of those we might follow. Only recently have public and academic attention to BW been simultaneously charged with defense OR critique, support OR attack. People dispute BW curricula, its appropriate pedagogies, its depiction of its students, funding and its curtailments, possible uses of technology in its classes. Most important, they question even the existence of the BW classes and students that David Bartholomae identified in 1993 as "expressions of our desire to *produce* basic writers" (my emphasis, 8), a definition that Ira Shor now intensifies by calling for an end to the BW "empire" ("Apartheid" 95). BW's histories and pedagogy have always been characterized by advocacy. But not until recently have public actions and academic conversations been so vividly strident and polemical. Consequently, it may be useful to explore why advocacy appears to be exhausted, at least as a unifying stance within the field. BW now appears to function as an academic instrument in a rephrased social agenda that may call "irrelevance" a virtue, a condition of articulation in the face of the vanishing present.

## 1. The Vanishing Present

It is easy enough to explain BW's bi-polar polemics as a product of material circumstances. The apparent devastation of its programs in New York, California, Texas, Florida, Georgia and elsewhere regularly mandates collective defensiveness. As Harvey Wiener points out in "The Attack on Basic Writing – And After," changes imposed in New York and many other settings will not abolish BW outright, but remake BW's self-identity. As he says, classroom spaces will rely increasingly on electronic systems whose physical presence may interrogate the immediate interpersonal exchanges that characterize BW pedagogy. Two-year colleges will provide more BW instruction, thus channeling many students away from continuous 4-year-college careers and severing the purposes of research in institutions that support it from the results of training in those that do not. No matter how excellent this instruction is, its isolation from other academic practices almost guarantees that its initially under-prepared students will, over time, remain in subaltern jobs. In addition, teachers will be excluded from the faculty bodies who govern their institutions. They will not, therefore, con-

trol curricula, class size and other substantive matters. Privatized sites of instruction like the Sylvan Learning System will offer preliminary skills instruction, denying to many programs coherently sequenced goals and to many students an initiative exposure to the situated nature of what it means to write. And support will more often depend on positivist interpretations of empirical data, the "results" that have little to do with studies of changes in texts (Wiener, 100-102).

The plans that make Wiener's predictions plausible emerge in criticisms of specific sites of BW, which devalue universal access to *protracted* academic careers. Teachers, administrators, and researchers — often one-in-the-same — in the early 4-year sites of BW find themselves as disempowered as they once thought only these students were. Consequently, they highlight past achievements without reimagining the specific relationships that define a "higher" education. Increasingly, they are not confident of sharing the cultural capital of accomplished education, which Irving Howe's, Alice Trillin's, and many other friendships with a relatively self-reliant Mina Shaughnessy brought to early BW programs (Maher, 143m 236 ff.).

The changes Wiener projects will also shorten the time and reduce the funding needed to achieve academic equity for BW. Material deprivation mutes expertise. It suppresses motives to reflect on exchanges among instruction, student texts and student comfort in mainstream classrooms and cultures. Too often, those triangular links now appear only on margins around otherwise well-documented defenses of BW programs, like Baker and Jolly's "The Hard Evidence." And thus effectiveness, upheld in retention rates, student progress, grade point averages, and completion of later writing courses is less frequently analyzed or thought of as a function of expertise about writing and writers. But as Marilyn Sternglass's *Time to Know Them* and Wiener himself point out, this research is necessary to maintain the academic status of BW.

Status is controlling BW's future in specific ways. At least contemporary theoretical, post-process narratives like Thomas Kent's tell us "the writing act is public, thoroughly hermeneutic, and always situated and therefore cannot be reduced to a generalizable process" (5). This claim suggests that BW's future will most likely be characterized by increasingly infrequent encounters with basic, or any, student writers. Following Kent, their writing is easily abandoned as impossible to control, at least by teachers swayed by this post-process "hermeneutic dance that moves to the music of our situatedness," which "cannot be choreographed in any meaningful way" (5). In such a context, no one can assume that the field will renovate its collective ability to identify with those we teach.

In support of this claim, it is important to note that critiques of BW galvanized by material circumstances outside the academy are

more than matched in energy by this and other theories that axiomatically criticize the underpinnings of BW. Highly regarded scholars like Bartholomae, Shor, Min-Zhan Lu, Sharon Crowley and Bruce Horner participate, if in very different ways, in such theoretical dismantling of BW. New theory detaches itself, and composition, from acts of writing. These and other commentators describe BW and introductory instruction as inaccurately devised, or attempt to expose its politically motivated destructive social practices. Of course equally regarded scholars like Sternglass, Karen Greenberg, Terence Collins, Jeanne Gunner and Laura Gray-Rosendale are compelled to defend BW and its earliest discourses in counter-attacks. Formerly, these newly polemical edges on BW and all composition publications might have been blunted in close analyses that value practice according to the quality of its fit to discourse theories represented by socialist, postcolonial, linguistic, pedagogic and cultural theories. But in these and many other arguments, data and analyses fortify competing theses almost as often as they lead to them. It is thus fair to ask if something has gone wrong in the capacity of the field's root metaphors to maintain permeable, flexible boundaries around composition studies, and specifically around the BW that is always a metonym for it (see *Rescuing* 163-70).

This weakening of assumptions that have connected BW's warrants to its claims is exemplified in the rhetorical operations of the most recent winners of the Mina Shaughnessy/MLA book award. Sternglass's *Time to Know Them* and Crowley's *Composition in the University* assuredly further the goals that the prize symbolizes. But each advocates what are easily read as diametrically opposed views. In Sternglass's account, first year composition appropriately begins students' longitudinal development. It is a course that integrates critical reading with analytical writing based on evidence rather than examples (297-98). In Crowley's, "the required introductory course . . . as an institutional practice, has no content aside from its disciplining function" (10). It is of course possible to conflate these arguments by claiming that Crowley's elective vertical curriculum matches Sternglass's copious horizontal *and* vertical one. Nonetheless, markedly different subject positions must be assumed by cooperative readers of these texts. Sternglass's accepting reader appreciates pleas for increased *institutional* attention to developing sites of instruction, including provision of tutorials for inexperienced writers, while Crowley's consenting interpreter can agree that initiative instruction is a "hurdle" (244). Both readers, like these writers, in some measure expect empirical data and theorized analyses to verify some already normalized political positions, not to produce novel interpretative frameworks. Both also necessarily imagine any future for BW occupying contested terrain. Even omitting a close analysis of Ira Shor's direct labeling of BW as a form of "apartheid," it is obvious that the field readily debates the value of

adding, even maintaining, current sites of generic writing instruction for "novice writers" (Dickson, qt. in Sternglass, 5).

These and other examples do not oppose excellent, even improved instruction or predictably better transitions from preparation to advanced college courses. Instead, it first appears that what is in dispute is the nature and governance of *sites* of any writing instruction. Scenes of teaching focus these arguments, not just in the attacks that appear to be motivated only from outside the academy but in discussions of value among academic conversants. Even Shor and many others who do not stress doubts about where and under what requirements inexperienced writers should study nonetheless articulate their concerns in spatial figures. For example, Horner and Lu's *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing* represents "levels of schooling and non-institutional *sites* of literacy learning" as "zones" that characterize relations between BW and literacy, between BW and globalization, between BW and history (my emphasis, 205). As Horner says elsewhere, "the success of BW in legitimizing the institutional *place* of basic writing courses and students cannot be separated from [how] it works within the *framework* of public discourse on higher education" (my emphasis, 200). Christie Friend pointedly asks, "What kind of public *space* is the writing classroom? What kind should it be?" (658). Myriad recent examples like Gesa Kirsch's *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research: The Politics of Location* reinforce this hypothesis: The "dilemmas" throughout the field are portrayed in spatial images, as are extra-academic criticisms directed at the feasibility, or lack of it, of actual instructional locales.

But address to internal and external anxieties about place is regularly oversimplified. It is not news, that is, that education always represents a spatial determinism that superimposes material on ideological forces and the reverse. In the United States, establishing educational institutions is equated with school-building/s, the cost, location and architectural style of which demonstrate local politics and its stratification of various constituencies. Education is also *theorized* precisely as a space. Debates about the relative quality of public, private and especially home schooling always allude to instructional settings, just as frequent analyses of classroom seating and teacherly "positions" are commonplace evidence in pedagogic theory. New places for teaching—a computer lab, a for-profit skills center—and Shor's imposition of the allegory of race-based quarantine on BW's goals—equally characterize norms whose locations appear to be at issue.

The current BW imaginary, that is, is now very uneasy about once upright towers of institutional power and production that I and many other early proponents of Open Admissions readily climbed to initiate new, additional, required, credited BW instruction that we expected to raise academic/cultural capital for abstract but nonetheless indi-

vidualized "students." Teaching behind closed doors that privatized classrooms, in carefully delineated Departments of English or in partially furnished subterranean Writing Programs, we offered formerly unlikely graduates experience in the isolated writing practices whose mastery informed our own value/s (see Horner, 200). Above all, we prized singular interpretation, yet distributed it across genres like narrative and documented essays, which we valued for their one-two imitations of literary writing and academic research. Our preparatory programs also fostered a "joy of language," a somewhat mysteriously presented appreciation of the humanistic universals of Hugh Blair's "Taste."

The subtexts of these "new" BW pedagogies were, that is, not at all new. They remembered time-worn mechanisms for reproducing privilege and hegemony, commonplaces that highlighted our own tolerance, not methods that would show new students how to affiliate with established elites. We fostered assimilation into a social role or vocation by teaching a personal transparency penned in process of thinking "for yourself." But we easily balanced these competing goals of socialization and individuation, domestication and emancipation, resolving their obvious conflicts as the inevitable attributes of an "educated public." That imagined personality would discuss its "self" versus "public interest," thereby enabling a civic discourse across various spheres of life. These quasi-personalized pedagogic spaces simultaneously housed a presumably individual student "disposition" and imposed its universalized expectations.

In addition, these symbolic spaces equally assigned teachers and students relations of age- and knowledge-dependency. Teachers held the acceptable individual *and* social meanings recognized in sanctioned structures of feeling and orientations toward authority. The classroom was (and unfortunately is still) idealized as an Oedipal scene. In it, even newly prevailing agendas for gender relations and agency become legible only when written on such domestic subtexts of pedagogy. As I've suggested elsewhere, this material/theoretical space of institutional writing is infantilized by a mother/teacher. But by idealizing the *content* of individualism/public interest, BW classes simultaneously promise access to a public standing that depends on *access to*, yet *check by*, fatherly authority. Students and teachers in this situation were imagined to enact, and then continuously reenact, a constitutive, constricting ambivalence about authority, without resolving that contradiction in signifying actions (Miller, *Carnivals* 134-38; Trimbур "In Loco").

Today's polemical discussions around whether and "where" to teach BW still install that ambivalence. But a new incongruity is also vivid. The "old [pedagogic] capitalism" I've just described is now overlaid on a contemporary turn to the social, exemplified by current theo-



ries of epistemology, language theory and collaborative pedagogy, and the ideological analysis of literacy in Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. As James Paul Gee says in "The New Literacy Studies: From 'Socially Situated' to the Work of the Social," a "new capitalism" arises from such turns to the "social." This formation demonstrates that little connects constructivism to social progressivism. Instead of a new egalitarian politics, we see global connections between wealth and a self-defined group of technologically-linked *symbol analysts*. They produce new knowledge and hereby create themselves as a new class that is demarcated as a class only by its simultaneous *affiliations* to wealth and knowledge, not by its own status. In addition, this corporate social construction includes members of new *teams*, the *enchanted workers* who add value to production when their dedication to *projects* results in their presence at creations of new knowledge. But the *service workers* outside are neither wealthy, symbol analysts, nor enchanted insiders. They are not at home in the necessarily circumscribed team command centers on which this sociable capitalism depends. This group, who some project to be two-fifths of the employable, will with difficulty find any work at all (188).

This explanation immediately recalls the computer industry, whose enchanted workers increasingly notice their only-adequate compensation for limitless hours spent pursuing "performance excellence" (see Hayes; Gee, 189). But it also glosses the ambivalence of the energetic yet conflicted contention around BW. Those contests, that is, arise from a realization that socially turned composition studies has not realized egalitarian agendas. This disappointment is realized as the field's professional parallels with new capitalism become increasingly clear: theorists and administrators (symbol analysts) affiliate with faculty members who teach writing, other secure teachers and temporary teams of graduate assistants. With these enchanted workers, those connected to institutional wealth by hard-won disciplinary respect and governance powers fabricate knowledge-producing, value-adding writing curricula ("projects"). These socially turned insiders enact the new composition whose status rose, in fact, largely from successes gained from Shaughnessy's justifiably powerful reputation on the old capitalist market. But as they attempt to affiliate with that power while maintaining a supposed new ethic, these new insiders take up causes fraught with contradictions. In sum, their projects actually mourn the social turn's increasingly visible failure to enhance social progressivism.

For instance, in this situation, we can consider doing away with requirements, either by "mainstreaming" BW students or by providing for them composition courses only as part of an array of electives. Either tactic obviously undermines the inauguration of BW to create *additional* sites of writing instruction to supplement already grudgingly provided FY courses, which have been generously tolerated in the acad-

emy only because they are mandatory. Either project would lift the status of many, including some students. But new-capitalist elevations of symbol analysts and enchanted workers can already be seen to disemploy and render ancillary dedicated BW teachers who were once integrated into 4-year institutions. Gee's projected two-fifths of employable people are here represented by former graduate-student team members and many who were unofficially but customarily secure adjunct instructors. Doing away with the requirements that sustained them, no matter for what motive, will undermine the prestige of the field's original dedication to help beginning students and simultaneously remove some teachers entirely.

In composition and BW, then, faculty members who are totally committed to introductory courses and their value-adding contributions do shore up the projects of their collaborative teams. New capitalism expects these dedicated professionals to make knowledge, affiliate with theory, become entrepreneurs of credit hours and friends of legislators. But the value produced by graduate-level teaching, electronic know-how, juried publications and administrative power, new measures of socialized economic productivity, ironically excludes much of the teaching undertaken outside these lines. Old capitalism, that is, recognized those irregularly assigned to teach its independent yet publicly invested student writing. But new capitalism may require that such outsiders resign unprofessional desires to teach the attractive but professionally "useless" initiative classes where they could engage in "assessing human worth, status, and community outside of financial rewards and markets . . ." (Gee, 189).

## 2. The New Work

I've outlined here external attacks on the sites of BW that may result in the changes Wiener predicts, as well as internal contests over the value of BW, and their implications in two cultural models, old and new capitalism, which appear to be breaking down with equally destabilizing effects. This sketch may appear to describe a one-two punch to BW: material *and* theoretical displeasure aimed to destroy its *habitas*. But that inference does not reveal that it is interactions among academic and extra-institutional agendas, not their separate operations, that now rearrange its sites. Together, the workings of society and the academy move BW to high school, two-year, and private places of instruction, leaving more prestigious intellectual leadership within a new capitalist configuration. So BW, having successfully established and given credibility to its sites over the last twenty-five years, now paradoxically takes up the project of eliminating its *practices*. In the name of the new capitalism's emphases on expertise and knowledge-mak-



ing, that is, BW (and certainly all of composition studies) is ripe both for both old and new arguments against writing instruction. Old arguments had already dismissed its intellectual interest in non-canonical writing; new ones say it is neither well-grounded in a theory nor socially responsible.

In this unfortunate situation, the academy can simultaneously condemn attacks on entry-level programs by a legislature, insist that writing teachers are exploited *and* argue that composition professionals are too *valuable* to teach writing classes. Enchanted workers can realize that personal value in curricular laboratories, by supervising service-worker teachers who may have ample experience and long personal histories of successful teaching, but not the time to read and write themselves into enchantment. In effect, professionalized sites of BW, insofar as they are preserved at all, can easily parody themselves, becoming Pickwickian, two-dimensional allusions to involvement in student writing and the changes instruction makes in student texts. A good example of such a parody of substantial attention to writing occurs in prominent emphases on the "identity" of students. Tangible local adult BW students in such programs can be safely exoticized, assigned to categories that skirt their lower middle-class status and their familiar attachments. Negative conversations about students do portray novice writers as members of that discomfiting *petit bourgeois*, the lower middle-class that scholarly writing presents "as provincial, narrow-minded, even racist," but not as a now-fashionable hybrid (Felski, 42).

This class has "nothing to declare," no characteristic public discourse, no matter how fragmented, that is digested by symbol analysts on its own terms (Felski, 43). Its members may be nominally assimilated to a middle-class status they can appear to share with their self-declared middle-class teachers. Or, they may be identified by various theories of identity politics that replace studies of discourse, language, and rhetorical invention, arrangement or style—the instruction long preserved for powerful elites but denied to this class. In this process, female experience and sexuality become known as "gender," ethnicity becomes an immigrant's deficit, and contemporary African Americans of any history stand in for ex-slaves. In almost desperate attempts to stay untainted by ordinary non-prestigious groups, this process of avoidance even subsumes the usually unmarked category of white males under faulty/false consciousness. We cannot, of course, discount parallel discrepancies between the actual identities of teachers and parodic two-dimensional possibilities. They may share the origins and tastes of their students, the same popular diets, sports, music and movies, but nonetheless conceive of the students they might discuss them with as deprived of cultural advantages and political sophistication.

A commitment to forego such defenses against this least power-

ful but evidently most threatening class would provide a way to step outside such productions of a pedagogic *habitus* based on avoidance. Evasion is not necessarily a permanent nor even temporarily logical way to handle emerging conditions around BW and composition studies. Nor will it protect our new capitalist identities as symbol analysts and enchanted workers whose prestige is based on affiliations, not intrinsic or inherited qualities. To forgo this avoidance would primarily mean acknowledging the only partial access and always provisional inclusion in established traditions that is represented by the ambivalent status of two-year colleges, computerized classrooms and respectable middle-class liberalism. While it is no wonder that thoughtful theorists suspect apartheid and coercion, they might also note the growing number of vivid examples of those who do accomplish equality among constituencies. This is not to say, of course, that relatively open frameworks for academic action are purely intended or absolutely realized. It is to emphasize that the righteousness of both old and new forms of academic superiority needs testing, not just commitment to either self-annihilation or to holding the earliest BW forts. We should hope for more than shifted discourses in stable sites.

Gee suggests the alternative work on which we might focus, an engagement in what he calls "recognition work" that undertakes the on-going task of getting a "set of people, deeds, words, settings, and things recognised[sic] as a particular configuration with each of its members recognised[sic] in a certain way" (Gee, 189). This "*work*" would allow institutions to recognize unprepared students in ways most beneficial to their academic progress *and* most likely to encourage their recognition of and work to foster conditions that protect and enlarge the scope of the academy. But such mutuality necessarily dissipates if academics fear a petit bourgeois and therefore portray students as surprisingly "interesting" recipients of know-how and empathy, not as new constituencies in schooling. As recipients only, that is, the communities around writing programs see clearly that "the public face of the humanities . . . is deeply disdainful of petit bourgeois values. . . . [T]he intelligentsia may choose to align itself with the culture of the most oppressed but must constantly [also] differentiate itself from the culture closest to it" (41). In sum, universities and those who want to thrive within them have normally viewed Hegelian disembodied intellectual purity as a form of superior cultural status. They do not see it as the simple condition of adventuresome intellectual speculation and experimentation. But this self-isolating celebrity is now ignored by its former audience, which is currently constructed as *essentially* different from many who claim to prepare it to live well, not to write its own immediately situated social and professional stories. Students, not their preparation for such actions, hereby become the content of our courses.

I am obviously not alone in imagining alternative *work* within this goal for BW (see, e.g., Grego and Thompson; Gere, "Kitchen Tables"; Herzberg). Yet I want to focus the project of "getting to recognize" as an alternative to prevailing "import/export" models that alienate BW, composition studies, and the academic "estate" from their own human and geographic contexts. It is possible, that is, to counteract the recipient/patron model that *imports* and *exports* symbolize, by imagining and helping to create differently represented places that encourage language alliances in projects undertaken by mingled students, their home communities, the institutions they enter, and the cultural and social interests to which they continuously return. Such places do not privilege but are aware of expertise; they count its worth in contributions to community-building, not in credit hours, research data, or grateful admiration. They may enable linguistic transitions out of familiar settings. But they more importantly join familiar and unfamiliar existing social texts, within which movement "out" is not necessarily a goal. They highlight mutual interests that are embodied encounters among indigenous professional, social, and academic literacies that are *already* performed.

Certainly traditional institutionalized programs that appear to undertake this recognition work do not in fact take their missions to be establishing mutually managed and productive curiosity that can set aside academic and community awkwardness about class, gender and race identities. They may acknowledge very specific local foundations on which writing and reading stand. But these foundations are not necessarily highlighted in the many admirable and multiplying service learning courses nor the proactive promotion of "intercultural discourse" represented by Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center and others like it. For all their precocious sense that universities are *in* communities, such outreach projects only slowly, and as yet not very effectively, set aside their export models. Few can *take for granted*, not exoticize, the important religious, work-related, political and social affiliations that comprise the elements of student and faculty lives.

Nonetheless, students at any "level" are closely affiliated with their families. They remain involved in local churches and high-school friendships, and engage in familiar literacy practices like those that have always contributed to, if not constituted, particular emphases in local academic sites. As yet, however, the many academic initiatives toward cooperation have done little to create conditions that *require* mutuality, nor have they been intended to do so. Diversity, preparatory academic courses, targeted financial support, dedicated old *or* new capitalist teaching, and address to consciousness through imported critical pedagogy have all been delivered to local constituencies. BW teachers take it as a principle that students and their language might "change." But they do not readily accept that whatever their class, stu-

dents are like history: they accumulate identities and terministic screens. As do their teachers, they move among variable positions and discourses according to the situations, not the cultural absolutes and privileges, which they perceive to be pertinent.

The most salient characteristic of the spaces of recognition I am imagining is precisely this premeditated purpose, to join active interests in a locale to create various mutual, not "service," projects. Certainly the academy's acquisition of students and their credit-based tuition, of funding, and of community advisors and recognition remains important. So also does the export from the academy of prestige, expertise, applied research benefits, and political and civic participation. But a differently realized desire for mutuality finds similarities, not oppositions, in schooled and unschooled groups. It defines not the category of "student" but various productive relationships with the writing, reading, discourses and communications regularly engaged by and around any participant. Such programs should ease recursive movement into and out of schooled standing. But as of yet, the academy's participants have done little to address their class-based ignorance of other indigenous literate practices or of the pragmatic structures they manifest.

Many reports and proposals over the last decade highlight the possibility of this form of recognition work within an expanding mission for post-secondary education, which must increasingly connect its teaching and research to the day-to-day lives of the fluid local publics around it. Not just financial survival, but the ability to compete with rival educational sites depends on it. This emerging contour is palpable in enforced movements of writing curricula from one to another institution in public systems, as I've said. But it also shows itself in positive steps like those of the Kellogg Foundation, whose higher education funding initiatives include "increasing access and academic achievement for underrepresented students," "institutional transformation and change" and "linking the intellectual resources of colleges and universities to community needs" (Kellogg initiatives).

These abstractions, which still retain import/export overtones, nonetheless offer commonplaces with which to invent diverse sites that might assure the recognition of existing and developing literate practices in any community. They make it possible to portray these practices as normal ways of testing and forming identities within circulating discourses. These practices include the "creative" and "artistic" along with those undertaken by children and other age-related or special interest collectives. They include expressions and communications that may be collectively performed, showcased, and shared across class and neighborhood boundaries under the auspices of sites we can help create. As my context for this proposal already demonstrates, academics participate in such interactions with difficulty. They are often un-

comfortable when situated realities require them to avert the gaze of their conventional subject position in favor of more convergent goals, such as mutual understanding, conjoint teaching, and cross-class sharing. Lines drawn by old and new educational capitalism now surround all of composition studies. But a different, community-oriented aspect might see stories and plots, proposals and advocacy, diaries and family histories, and the manifestos of diverse groups without taking up mandatory enrollment, damaging stratification and even characteristic local insistence on the prestige of high-cultural displays.

Unless one is already engaged in ethnographic indexing of indigenous writing practices (e.g., Pimentel), it is difficult to accept that unrecognized yet persisting literate production regularly occurs outside schooling. Reading groups are now well publicized, not only by historical exposition like Ann Gere's *Intimate Practices*, but by the power of Oprah Winfrey's book lists. But few professionals accept that *writing* groups also regularly gather, for recreational and for-profit writing of not only fiction, but memoirs, diaries, family histories, and special-interest proposals that address youth and aging, housing, schooling, the homeless and other civic concerns. Existing sites include the national Community Writers Association; the Lake Superior Writers Community Outreach (which offers a Creative Prose Group, a Memoir Writing Critique Group, and a Fiction Writing Critique Group); and the Boise, Idaho, Log Cabin writing center, which holds weekly meetings about such topics as "Developing the Habits of a Writer who Actually Writes" and "Copperplate Calligraphy," and which sponsors a summer camp for young writers funded by a local law firm and the Idaho Arts Council (Log Cabin Projects).

Individual academics already participate in similar undertakings among local groups who may not feel entitled to such "hobby writing," as many also volunteer in literacy action centers. But such action does not enact the embeddedness in local physical and ideological space that new recognition work highlights. Few with academic standing who are not "creative writers" have conceived or led such projects, undertaken *with*, not about, such local interests. Such a project is exemplified, however, in Salt Lake City, where a non-profit community development corporation, Artspace, houses inexpensive children's summer writing programs that are staffed not by expert professional writers or researchers, but by mothers and community-college faculty members. They meet in a strategically chosen, socially equivocal location that is convenient to the neighborhoods, poor and posh, whose children participate.

Another site that exemplifies the work for BW that I am projecting is in an urban Salt Lake City high school. It was jointly conceived by the school's teachers, faculty members, English Education majors and members of the families of students. The West High School/Univer-

sity of Utah Family Literacy Center now thrives after a year of the *work* that I am appropriating from Gee's nomenclature. Weekly, it receives numerous requests to join with local service organizations and with other school districts and post-secondary institutions. The key to this success is not only the energy of teachers in the school, of English Education faculty members and of the families and students who participate. It is recognition among all who are invested in this setting that schooling is only a very small part of the (often happily) unassimilated students' indigenous support systems—their family, church, work, club, even gang affiliations. (See Kaufman; Lane)

Schooling may withhold comfort and growth in favor of judgment and stalled promises when it does not recognize those who are not already comfortable among its discourses. But schooling recognizes only with difficulty that those outside its habits of thinking and talking are precisely, and only, that: those without experiences that fluently connect their home/civic worlds to alien, often physically distant, imposing post-secondary settings. This axiom is often asserted in research into literacy and its teaching. But that research rarely takes up the partial quality of schooled literacy experiences, which contribute to deeply grounded structures of feeling, but do not control them. Those structures do not, in fact, always foreground conflict, deprivation or the outsider status projected by many within the academy, even when our firmly positioned observations persuade us they do. Suspending such conventional hierarchies of knowledge and comfort among academic and extra-academy interests might invent more useful and more accurately ambiguous spaces like those I've sketched here.

As I acknowledged early on, I realize how irrelevant this suggestion about a future for BW may appear in light of contingencies that intrude on any such hope. But unfortunate belief systems are the most common obstacles to this recognition work and other ways of reimagining preparation as local places, not as social and institutional placements. Those now celebrating the new capitalism deploy belief systems that extend the privileges of equally competitive precedents. They contend and criticize within and outside BW, often covertly appreciating most the social turn's ability to categorize groups while appearing to create a falsely participatory professional atmosphere in which reading and writing are nonetheless specializations. But these limits, hard-won professional categories that appear now to be placemarkers in a vanishing present, do not allow BW and all composition studies to identify with the rich interests and extant, already active linguistic cultures of those they claim to improve, but cannot easily join.



## Note

The title alludes to Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present*.

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