

# ILLEGAL LITERACY

**ABSTRACT:** *In this follow-up to previous essays, Shor proposes that BW be mainstreamed into regular composition, with provisions made for the tutorial needs of students (following the fine work of Soliday, Gleason, Grego and Thompson). He argues that a BW empire has been created and driven by bogus testing and by prejudice. BW, often non-credit but still tuition-bound, is a remedial "sub-college" depressing the aspirations of working-class and minority students especially who are stigmatized as cultural deficits. Shor then proposes that first-year college writing courses should evolve into what he calls Critical Literacy Across the Community. This program would place writing into real contexts, connecting literate development to community-based, project-oriented activities.*

*It is the vanity of educators that they shape the education system to their preferred image. They may not be without influence but the decisive force is the economic system.*

— John Kenneth Galbraith (238)

*My daily life as a teacher confronts me with young men and women who have had language and literature used against them, to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless.*

— Adrienne Rich (63)

*English teachers are inclined to exaggerate the seriousness of error. Since the birth of the composition course in American education, the English teacher has been viewed as the custodian of "refined" usage... This emphasis upon propriety in the interest not of communication but of status has narrowed and debased the teaching of writing. . . .*

— Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (120)

*Again, the fact that African-Americans who had been "remediated" foun-dered at a much higher rate than whites suggests that we may need to re-examine assumptions behind first year programs designed to help at-risk stu-dents succeed in college.*

— Eleanor Agnew and Margaret McLaughlin (49)

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*Ira Shor is Professor of English in the Ph.D. Program at the City University of New York and at the College of Staten Island. His most recent book is a tribute to Paulo Freire, Critical Literacy in Action (with Caroline Pari). For 1999-2000, he will be Distinguished Visiting Professor at William Paterson University.*

Driving in a snowstorm, my eyes studied the slippery road as the first blizzard of 2000 hit New York January 20. Through highway slush and a stiff wind, I drove from Brooklyn to the College of Staten Island, a low-rent campus where I taught BW for 15 years and still teach first-year comp. That cold January day, I was doing English advisement for Spring registration. The bad weather kept most students away so I had free time to prepare material for my upcoming comp courses. Then, around noon, a Black woman student wandered through the office door asking for help. Like many students (and like me), she was baffled at the unfriendly registration process – the closed courses, limited choices, numerous steps, complex financial aid, rising tuition, and frequently changing requirements. In the face of aggressive bureaucracy and the micro-management of public education, I usually follow Shor's First Democratic Rule-of-Thumb: When authorities change and impose rules faster than people can learn them, we're not obliged to pay attention. Our cluttered and clotted condition had to do with official control and with budget-cutting, not with the learning needs of teachers and students. Still, here was this student wanting help with a thicket of requirements and restrictions, and I was on duty. So, I began asking her questions.

In short, I found out that she was born and educated in Africa before enrolling at our college. She had failed the nefarious writing and reading entry tests originally imposed on us in 1978 after the early Open Admissions Wars at the City University of New York. Thanks to the latest war on CUNY, this woman who failed the writing and reading assessments was tracked into yet a new official arrangement called 'summer immersion' where she passed the remedial class but not yet the tests (one being a timed writing impromptu of 50 minutes offering two "agree or disagree" questions to students and the other being a reading comprehension of a supplied text). Apparently modest and seemingly harmless, these two tests produced immense failure over the years, generating the vast remedial empire that swallowed Open Admissions in the wake of 1978. This Black woman was one of the certified failures, but her case was not so simple.

You see, despite failing the entry exams, she had evaded the official prohibition against taking regular comp and had enrolled in the forbidden first-year comp course the semester before, where she managed a grade of B+, a respectable achievement. She was making progress despite the rules which specified that the only writing class she could legally take was remediation, our zero-level BW courses. But, by hook or crook, she found her way into the regular class, English 111, where she got B+ even though she was supposedly unprepared or unqualified. Now, in January, 2000, she wanted to register for our second required comp class, English 151, but had been finally caught and stopped by the counseling office, which blocked her registration according to

the rules, and sent her to the English Department for advice.

To confirm her story on the spot, I brought up her transcript from our Department computer and saw the B+ grade along with the F grades for the CUNY writing and reading tests. You can imagine my frustration and dismay. For two decades at CUNY, I had been opposing these bogus tests as illegitimate measures of student competence and as unfair obstacles to student achievement, but could not rouse faculty outrage against them, perhaps because many progressive junior faculty at CUNY had been fired in the fake fiscal crisis of 1976. Now, in glorious Y2K, the same old regime was leading us into the new century, declaring the student with me to be a cultural deficit while her transcript showed B+ in regular comp. As I just mentioned, she wanted now to slip quietly into 151 and continue progress towards her degree, but I lacked authority to override the University and College rules holding her back. I couldn't simply award her the passing grades she needed on the assessment tests to take the final level of regular comp. Her B+ in the first level of comp is not recognized as a substitute for passing the external checkpoint of the tests. She had been caught and detained, guilty of *illegal literacy and unauthorized progress*! Her small institutional offense of forbidden achievement loomed large enough to stop her registration. This ridiculous situation made me wish I had called in sick. As she stared at me waiting for relief, I couldn't face moving her backwards into another remedial course, so I advised her that she could take the tests again on her own instead of taking them through yet another non-credit, tuition-charging BW class. The testing office occasionally gives tests to extra-curricular walk-ins during the semester. I urged her to get whatever help she could at our tutoring center, do as much writing as she could in preparation for the tests, pass them come hell or high water, and then take the forbidden second comp class next term. She left the office polite but unsatisfied, thinking over what to do next, while I was thinking about early retirement.

I felt crummy and disgusted. I needed lunch and a break, but just then, another student came in for advisement, a white woman born in this country. I was astonished to find that she had the exact same problem as the African student who had just walked out! Can you believe that? I'm still marveling at the rotten coincidence. Her transcript showed her failing the writing and reading assessment tests yet getting into forbidden first-term comp, English 111, and earning there a B+ as well. She too was guilty of illegal literacy. Obviously, an academic crime wave was underway on our campus. For this new case of unauthorized achievement, I went through the same silly "advisement" all over again. Consider the resources wasted in producing such ridiculous academic experiences, for the students and for me. Our time is piddled away thanks to bogus testing and other repressive policies against Open Admissions at CUNY for the last three decades. I won't

call these repressive policies "pointless" or "absurd" or "wrong-headed" or even "irrational" because there are reasons to them—conservative authorities imposing tuition, testing, and remediation to undermine public education and to suppress cultural democracy at a working-class institution, with its large non-white and female student groups. It's no accident that rising tuition, declining budgets, severe testing regimes, and empires of BW descended on CUNY when campuses filled with working students of the "wrong" color and gender after 1970.

The bias against low-income and dark-skinned students will take on a new face in Spring 2001 when the CUNY Writing Test will be replaced by a new regime. Then, all applicants scoring below 480 on the SAT or below 75 on the New York State Regents will have to take the ACT usage exam(short-answer) as well as the ACT writing sample(a timed impromptu). Students failing these will be directed to no-credit, tuition-charging private or public remedial programs where they will have one year to pass or else be denied admission to CUNY. This new regime may sweep 22 years of scandalous in-house testing under the rug of big-name tests (SAT, ACT, NY Regents). Essentially, it is old wine in new bottles, a cosmetic fix to put a pretty new celebrity face on an old, ordinary problem—the exclusion and subordination of working-class and minority students through testing and language arts. White supremacy will be maintained by the new regime because minority students have difficulty scoring above 480 on the culturally-biased SAT or above 75 on the NYS English Regents(attending as they do grossly underfunded inner-city high schools). The moral of this January story is apparent: A pedestrian program to enforce inequality and to end Open Admissions at CUNY is being replaced by a more glamorous and restrictive one that may make it harder for students to achieve legal or illegal literacy.

So, add my January story to the many complaints against official language policies that have accumulated over the years. First-year college writing courses in particular have provoked a "tradition of complaint," as Leonard Greenbaum called it some years ago. One early complaint came from the first President of the NCTE, Edwin Hopkins, in 1912. Unhappy with the workloads of writing teachers and the outcomes of writing classes, Hopkins wrote the lead article in the premier issue of *English Journal*, "Can Good Composition Teaching Be Done Under Present Conditions?" He answered his own question with a single word that began his essay: "No." Unfortunately, Hopkins's complaint was never resolved, insofar as "overwork and underpay" continue in the field, which began in the 1880s with writing teachers "oppressed, badly paid, ill-used, and secretly despised," according to Robert Connors (108). From this foundation, as Jim Berlin points out, a formidable empire of writing instruction grew, after Harvard imposed

a written entrance exam in 1874 (failed by half who took it) and offered freshman comp in 1885 (which became the only required course there by 1897).

The recent history of BW takes its place in the legendary decades of complaint. I argue here and elsewhere that political conflict has shaped BW and first-year comp, creating oppressive conditions such as the phenomena of "illegal literacy" and "unauthorized achievement" reported above. Mainstream language arts with its punitive assessment and its correct usage model diverted literacy away from critical inquiry and democratic pedagogy, even though the patron saint of American education, John Dewey, weighed in on these questions early in the last century when comp and remediation were first settling into the landscape. Dewey's democratic and critical option was avoided as the field shaped itself around an elite correctness paradigm mentioned above by Shaughnessy. Facing this history, I contend that BW and the testing regimes that drive BW enrollments should be abolished by mainstreaming BW into untracked comp classes expanded with extra hours and tutorial services to meet all students' needs, based in the themes and idioms they bring to class (see Soliday and Gleason; Grego and Thompson; Glau; Elbow). Further, I propose that first-year comp evolve into what I call "Critical Literacy Across the Community," a field-based, project-oriented, ethnographic, community-action internship program which I outlined in a two-part interview with Howard Tinberg in *TETYC* (September and December, 1999). I won't reprise the Tinberg interview or my account of BW/comp from an earlier *JBW* (1997). Hopefully, readers will consult those sources for my arguments. Here, in this essay, to support my proposal for mainstreaming BW into untracked comp and for transforming comp into mentored writing internships in community-based projects, I offer four claims about the *traditional* courses dominating the field for the past century:

1. Writing instruction's focus on skills, correct usage, error, and the assimilation of students into academic discourse, actually represents a political process where the socialization of people into the status quo is at stake.
2. Writing instruction's vast and contentious terrain is dominated by practices which primarily serve the needs of an elite and not the majority of students and teachers despite notable resistance to and innovation against the predominant "correctness" paradigm.
3. Writing instruction's assessment instruments and remediation help reproduce inequality, which requires mass failure and illiteracy to preserve the unequal hierarchies now in place.

4. Writing instruction's "failure" ("the tradition of complaint") is actually its success, insofar as mass miseducation and illiteracy help maintain the unequal system which originated, supervises, and finances regular comp as well as basic writing and bogus testing.

The importance of formal language arts to human development in our society is obvious. Language arts are constant requirements for students from elementary grades through college, making language instruction the biggest and most closely-watched enterprise in mass education. From childhood through early adulthood, official language arts help to socially construct how students see the world and act in it (Pattison; Rouse). This socialization through curriculum (what Paulo Freire called "the banking model" of pedagogy) uses assessment and instruction as vast "sorting machines," to borrow Joel Spring's metaphor. Because human beings are not easily sorted into subordinate lives, classrooms of the official syllabus are sites of conflict and resistance (Horner and Lu). Thus, the tradition of complaint in first-year college writing is a product of the contention faced by the status quo in reproducing itself in each new generation.

For those writing teachers who want to teach against inequality and other regressive features of the status quo, I've been offering a number of books, such as *Empowering Education* (1992), *When Students Have Power* (1996), and *Critical Literacy In Action* (1999, with Caroline Pari). So, I won't detail here a critical pedagogy for questioning the status quo or for power-sharing in education. What I want to focus on at this moment is a central contradiction in mainstream pedagogy that helps account for its complaint-generating, conflict-making outcomes. As I see it, that central contradiction relates to an old Yiddish proverb, which says: "With one *tuchas* [behind], you can't dance at two weddings." Mainstream writing instruction is caught between two incompatible stories: the upbeat myth of opportunity and success for all through education versus the downbeat reality of unequal tracking and lesser results (especially for African-American students, as Agnew and McLaughlin noted, a racial outcome not examined by Baker and Jolly in their report on the effectiveness of BW). Literacy and schooling are officially promoted as ladders to success (as parts of the American Dream) but are unequally delivered as roads to very different lives depending on a student's race, gender, and social class. The majority of students in school come from non-elite backgrounds. Almost 60% of all American families live on \$50,000 or less each year; half live on less than \$42,300 (US Bureau of the Census, 1998, Tables 745, 746, 748, and 749). A student whose family is in the top fourth of the income bracket is 10 times more likely to graduate college by age 24 than is a student who comes from the bottom fourth (Mortenson).

Sorting-out the elite winners from the ocean of losers is a con-

flict-ridden project for obvious reasons. In this undertaking, language instruction serves as one cultural practice among several which helps reproduce inequality. No system can take its own reproduction for granted, especially one with glaring inequities among the races, the genders, and the social classes. Such arbitrary hierarchies have to be normalized by ubiquitous institutions—like mass education and mass media—which occupy the time, space, action, and attention of everyday life. The arbitrary becomes ordinary by virtue of institutional routine and punished deviation, what Foucault (1980) spoke of as the daily “capillary” experiences of life in the system. In this routine regeneration of hierarchies, formal education in general and writing classes in particular help bond or capture students and teachers to a stratified status quo. This cultural capture—ubiquitous, routine, often messy, and certainly costly—works better in some times and places than in others, notably breaking down in the 1960s and notably ineffective in inner-city high schools at the turn of Y2K. In reproducing itself daily, any system certainly does not start from scratch, but rather from a history of accumulated assets and liabilities in directing the unequal order of things. In the case of writing classes, such curricula have evolved for more than a century as political assets or cultural tools or institutional weapons, which Bourdieu (1991) called “symbolic violence” and which Freire (1970, 1998) called “cultural action,” helping to construct self-in-society and society-in-self. The political issue here, from a Freirean point of view especially, is the contention between “cultural action for freedom” and “cultural action for domination.” The pedagogical issue, from a Deweyan point of view, is the difference between a teacher “pouring in” official facts and skills into students versus constructing knowledge and inquiring habits of mind with them.

As it happened, the spread of remediation and testing in the last few decades coincided with a substantial widening of the income and wealth gaps between the top, middle, and bottom sectors of the population (US Bureau of the Census, 1998, Table 747). In the context of this growing inequity in a period I’ve called “the conservative restoration” (see *Culture Wars*), public education and its writing classes have been disciplined to support more official control and more tracking. In the assault on equality after the 1960s, language arts were targeted by a top-down back-to-basics campaign that tilted policy toward correctness and testing, though notable dissent in the name of critical inquiry, collaborative learning, and process research took shape from the bottom up. If those dissident elements actually dominated the field of writing instruction, millions of students might be oriented to social inquiry in language arts instead of to skill drills, perhaps militantly questioning why family incomes have barely budged since the 1970s; or, why great wealth coexists with 45 million designated as “working poor”; or, why vast food production coexists with deep hunger now



affecting some 30 million Americans, including 12 million children; or, why American workers put more hours on the job than any other nation's workforce. All in all, then, I propose that a century of complaint against college language arts has largely missed the point because writing instruction *has in fact been working* from the top down to protect the elite and to maintain inequality but not from the bottom up to develop democracy and to level disparities. This suggests that the dominant writing pedagogy for the last hundred years—refined usage (as Shaughnessy observed above), basic skills, grammar drills, abstract forms like the 5-paragraph essay, bogus literacy assessment like fill-in-the-blank tests and impromptu timed writing exams, and teacher-centered syllabi—is a curriculum for producing failure for the majority.

Shaughnessy's original doubts about the traditional approach anticipated the critique of "general writing skills instruction" (GWSI) made later by various scholars in *Reconceiving Writing* (1995). Shaughnessy put it like this:

The term "basic writing" implies that there is a place to begin learning to write, a foundation from which the many forms and styles of writing rise, and that a college student must control certain skills that are common to all writing before he takes on the special demands of a biology or literature or engineering class. I am not certain this is so. Some students learn how to write in strange ways. ("Some New Approaches Toward Teaching" 103)

Shaughnessy went on to describe how one "weak" student followed an interest in medicine to do health research which led to a long report on Egyptian mummies. "The paper may not have satisfied a professor of medical history," Shaughnessy wrote, "but it produced more improvement in the student's writing than any assignments I could have devised" (103). If mass achievement and critical literacy were the desired outcomes, then a very different writing enterprise would occupy the center of the field, one not dominated by refined usage and GWSI (the notion that there are general writing skills that can be taught abstractly and then applied technically in other contexts—see Agnew and McLaughlin for one study of how "successfully remediated" students were unable to transfer their BW skills to other courses). Writing instruction for democracy and critical literacy would be built around small classes, close mentoring by instructors all paid at full-time rates, power-sharing and problem-posing in the classroom, portfolio assessment, composing in real contexts, peer feedback, interdisciplinary action projects on and off campus, student-based themes, experimental methods, and inquiry into the gender, race, and class conditions of the



students.

In making this argument about the structured inequality offered to the majority of students, I am certainly not the first to put forward such an analysis but follow a group of "revisionist" scholars whose work during and after the 1960s reevaluated education as a product of an unequal status quo. Even before revisionists like Katz, Spring, Greer, and Bowles and Gintis gained attention, sociologist Burton Clark (1960) offered his famous analysis of the "cooling-out function" in higher education. Clark examined how one community college "cooled-out" students it construed as "latent terminals." On the campus he studied, Clark found an elaborate and unacknowledged "cooling-out" process downwardly managing student goals through testing, counseling, and courses:

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. (572)

Note how entry-level assessment initiates "cooling-out" and how remediation continues the pressure on students to accept lesser options like vocational training or even dropping-out. In this famous early work, Clark detailed how "cooling-out" was a bureaucratic process of gatekeeping, diverting non-elite students from upwardly-mobile liberal arts to downward choices. Later on, Clark (1978) eventually made peace with the dubious practice of "cooling-out" because he saw the mass denial of college degrees as necessary for social stability in a system promoting and denying majority success at the same time, encouraging high ambitions while distributing limited rewards. Clark's accommodation to cooling-out was partly echoed in Brint and Karabel's study of mass higher education, *The Diverted Dream* (1989):

A more democratic community college would not, it should be emphasized, be a place where the "cooling-out" function has been abolished. As long as American society generates more ambition than its economic structure can absorb, the community college will be actively involved in channeling the aspirations of students away from four-year colleges and universities. Yet this said, there is something deeply troubling, especially in a society that prides itself on its openness, about

the covertness of the cooling-out process as it now operates.  
(231)

Brint and Karabel called for “transparency” rather than subterfuge, suggesting that each college should publish its attrition, transfer, and graduation rates so students know what to expect. (Perhaps this would also mean that colleges publish the number of students who make ‘illegal progress’ — that is, those students who fail the official assessment exams but evade BW for regular comp and do well there anyway.) This openness is certainly a good idea, but still too accommodating to the unequal provision for mass literacy, where the standard curriculum rewards the already-privileged and miseducates the majority, as Dewey and Freire observed in separate times.

Actually, cooling-out was underway before Clark named the practice in the late 1950s. By 1900, colleges used first-year writing as a gatekeeper to university degrees (Crowley, 1991, 1995). First-year courses evolved remedial and regular tracks, testing regimes and textbook protocols, skill-based approaches to curriculum, producing the mass educational failure functional to a system that promised more opportunity than it could deliver. To make matters only worse, the dual writing empires of First-year Composition and Basic Writing not only “work” ironically insofar as they downwardly fail the non-elite, but they have been built through the gross labor inequity mentioned earlier, that is, the exploitation of adjunct writing teachers whose pay and status are woefully below those of full-time faculty (Trainor and Godley; Schell; Leatherman).

Where does this leave the future of BW? First, we have to teach for democracy and equality and against the status quo. Choosing democracy and equality means language arts that explicitly challenge the unequal order of school and society, disrupting the testing and tracking regimes that have captured writing instruction, experimenting with alternative pedagogies based in student idioms and conditions while sharing power with them. Parts of our field have already been implementing some critical alternatives to the BW and comp now predominant. What remains to be done are big jobs — eliminate bogus testing, mainstream BW into an expanded, untracked form of comp, then transform comp into “Critical Literacy Across the Community” — so that students write in the context of real action projects, like producing newspapers, or doing ethnographies of worksites, homeless shelters and food pantries, or chronicling how a community organization developed the child care services needed by local parents, or producing informational pamphlets targeted for groups without their own research facilities (see Odell; Flower; Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters; Claus and Ogden).

We learned important things about writing instruction in the last

30 years, so we're better equipped now than ever to develop community-based critical literacy for democratic change. From the bottom up, in alliance with students and other groups, full-time and part-time teachers can invent new curricula and can build on the best practices in a field still dominated by bogus testing, tracking, correct usage, skill-based dead-ends, and exploitation of adjunct labor. Harvard's 19<sup>th</sup> Century model of comp controlled college teachers and students in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It will control us in 2100 unless we make other plans.

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