

TRAINING BASIC WRITING TEACHERS: INSTITUTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

ABSTRACT: *The training of basic writing teachers, discussed in the past as an effort built on improved knowledge of linguistic, cognitive and other kinds of factors related to basic writers, has received less attention recently. With recent work emphasizing ways that basic writing gains definition in local contexts, training is here discussed principally as an institutional effort. Teachers might improve instruction, as well as institutional standing, of basic writing on local campuses by conceiving of training as occurring within and influencing institutional structures.*

When looking back at the history of American composition instruction, one discovers that the notion of writing instruction as remediation was present from the late 19th Century, when Harvard required incoming freshmen to take a writing course that would address weaknesses found in entrance exam essays (Connors, Berlin). Unfortunately, little exists in the archives about how the early teachers of these courses, usually graduate students, were trained. Betty P. Pylik, in a recent discussion of writing teacher training in this period, describes how awareness developed quickly in the emerging field of English that training was an issue that graduate programs would have to address, but one that few programs actually acted on (6-8).

The field of "basic writing," on the other hand, locates its beginnings, as Deborah Mutnick recently noted, in the era since the 1960's, when non-white working-class students of various ethnicities and races entered higher education in greater numbers (71). Partly as an extension of earlier sentiments about the need for training good composition instructors, but also as part of the move to create an informed view of teaching those writers labeled as "basic," discussions emerged fairly early on in this time over how best to carry out such training. Editor Sarah D'Eloia devoted the entire Spring/Summer issue of *Journal of Basic Writing* to this topic in 1981, a statement of how important training was considered to be by the relatively new field. Discussions have moved beyond, or away from, many of the concerns raised in

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1981, but what D'Eloia says in her introduction still holds up remarkably well:

While there are important similarities in the programs, we do not yet appear, as a profession, to have reached a consensus about that balance and synthesis of writing, critical reading, teaching writing, and hard information about various subjects which will best prepare the beginning teacher of basic writing. Nor do we seem agreed on the kinds of experience and information useful – and perhaps rather readily accessible – to teachers of writing in general and other kinds of experience and information in addition that may be necessary for those who will teach at the college level across barriers of dialect, language, and almost complete inexperience with writing (2).

D'Eloia's comment suggests a "consensus" that in significant ways has not come about in the last twenty years. Should training emphasize linguistic knowledge? literacy training? composition? writing within subject areas? all of this? – answers are difficult and depend on a great many factors.

Perhaps recent trends in the field toward local conceptualization of basic writing suggest that consensus around some of the major concerns of training basic writing teachers will not come soon, if at all. If, as Laura Gray-Rosendale has shown, even the ways that "basic writers" are identified has been persistently problematic (6-11), then it is difficult to imagine that a uniform approach to training will fit the different versions of instruction appropriate for these students. Like instruction itself, the training of basic writing teachers may be viewed productively as training for particular circumstances in particular institutions.

Still, in attempting to share knowledge across institutions, I believe that a productive framework for such a discussion can be provided by taking a look at where most basic writing teachers go to work each day. Our local institutions, although different in significant ways, may hold more common interests than are generally acknowledged when considering the importance of training basic writing teachers. Across institutions, training concerns a number of constituencies operating within an identifiable structure. Although no one structure is typical, a school might operate, for example, with top-level administrators concerned about retention of students, writing program administrators and faculty concerned with creating a program with a common vision of good instruction operative across sections, adjunct teach-

ers seeking decent, worthwhile employment while holding together often complex lives, and perhaps graduate teachers with varying levels of experience who seek knowledge and need training that will benefit them in a tough job market. Students, another major stakeholder in every institution, are generally uninvolved in teacher training, and should be more often. Admittedly, the interests of these groups are neither as unitary nor as easily divided as I've indicated here. Adjunct teachers, for example, are more often than not interested in scholarship that makes their teaching jobs interesting and meaningful for them. Different schools will have different constituent groups and interests that bring them to their work, but I want to suggest that effective basic writing teacher training involves recognition of the structures that we work within.

If one mark of basic writing instruction is, as I believe, to be at the center of diverse interests looking to exercise control over access to higher education institutions, then training represents one of the more important considerations of this field. Whether we gain access to resources that allow us to go about training, how we go about it, how we conceive of its purpose, how it exists within larger structures, both institutionally and socially – these are difficult and important questions. Although we are pressed from within the field to make instruction relevant and affirming of student linguistic backgrounds and interests, we work within institutions that often continue to identify and either raise or lower the gate for students according to standards formed with the beginnings of the composition course in this country. However we, as college teachers, work out issues such as those posed by D'Eloia, we do so from positions within institutions.

Here I discuss training as a gesture made within institutional power structures that can be influenced in various ways in order to help bring about good basic writing instruction. Effective training of teaching assistants and other instructors for basic writing courses involves recognizing and working within the criss-cross of interests held by individual "players" in order to meet the needs of students. I write here from my fairly deep experience in one institution, the University of Minnesota General College, where I have worn the many "hats" (tutor, graduate teacher, non-tenure track teacher, co-coordinator, faculty member) of the well-supported basic writing program and participated in teacher training for over a decade. Although my discussion is heavily informed by this experience, I in no way wish to discount other models and environments for the training of teachers. Nor do I pretend to offer here a comprehensive approach to basic writing teacher training. Instead, I offer questions, observations and discussion with the hope that others will re-consider training as an institutional presence made visible through their own campus configurations of basic writing instruction, recognizing and acting on locally conceived

priorities.

How do we approach teaching and training?

Teacher training is likely to be viewed differently depending on how one fits into it – as a faculty trainer, as a graduate student teacher, or as an adjunct. We each bring our interests and needs to an effort that takes shape through the processes of involvement and learning that make up the training. In my experience, training works most effectively when addressing diverse interests under a common programmatic banner.

Honoring the diverse interests of all participants raises a primary question of how individual interests might be brought into balance with institutional concerns. One tendency that I have observed in many training sessions is for less experienced teachers to rely on the one thing that all academics hold in common, their own more or less successful institutional writing pasts. Although success may have come with great difficulties along the way, teachers have been achievers as writers in school contexts. How should we, as teachers of students who have been identified in wider college and university settings as “under-prepared,” value that experience? The question does not suggest a response that easily embraces the institutional term and reinforces the long history of condescending, unjust instructional practices that start and end with student “failure” as the operative term. Rather, a critical examination of our own writing history that places us in the position of teacher within this institution can play a part in developing more just conditions for writing instruction.

As a start, teacher training for basic writing courses might be thought of as a process of both engaging and dis-engaging one’s own history as a writing student. What do I mean by this paradoxical statement? Sometimes, when talking with teachers in training, there is a tendency (a natural, intelligent one) to fall back on the example provided by a favorite teacher or class in order to build an approach that will now work for us. Of course it’s great to remember and gain inspiration from excellent or heroic teachers. Mike Rose draws on such an experience in *Lives on the Boundary* when he recalls a committed teacher who took him seriously enough to discover that he was a misplaced vocational track student. Engagement with this kind of life-changing individual history can only make us better teachers. In many cases, mine included, looking at one’s writing instruction history is also a matter of acknowledging class and race privilege and factors that led to owning and participating in institutional practices. Providing instructors a way to place such history into dialogue with already-set program goals and assumptions seems necessary for a program’s growth and an individual teacher’s development of useful teaching

instincts.

More than merely an individual matter, however, teacher training might also be envisioned as a space where the history of the broadly conceived institution itself is held up to scrutiny, and so our individual histories become a matter of continuing, or interrupting that history. Similarly, Wendy Swyt, drawing on the work of Jennifer Gore and others, has written of the need for teachers to interrogate the ways that we create, and are created by, our "authority" as teachers within institutions (32). To approach teacher training with this idea in mind is to recognize the ways that privilege can unthinkingly become part of the teaching assumptions that are, in a sense, awarded with institutional teaching positions. For members of groups that have traditionally been on the "inside" of the project of higher education, examination of the ways that more advantaged writing histories have contributed to exclusionary practices may help to analyze and improve those conditions in the future. Gaining awareness that speaking and writing a home dialect that has been valorized in institutional literacy situations to the exclusion of others, for example, may help teachers conceive of teaching as an activity with different institutional responsibilities than if such knowledge were ignored or left unsaid.

In a similar vein, remembering that we continue to learn, *as writers*, can also be a productive way to position oneself in relation to institutional assumptions. Sharing the struggle of writing, which always involves working through immediate problems and learning new ways to solve or deal with them, is a valuable part of the close connections we form with students in our classes. Lynn Bloom has captured the power of such sharing in her 1990 article, "Finding Family, Finding A Voice: A Writing Teacher Teaches Writing Teachers." Student comments to Bloom indicated that her frank sharing with her students over her own and their writing led to a powerful learning experience that was not achievable through mere reading about teaching (10-11). By making visible what the institution considers invisible work for teachers who are also writers, Bloom significantly interrupts the institutional status quo. Outside of the classroom, such moments might be found in teacher training sessions during which written work such as class assignments, conference presentations and notebook entries are shared and treated as writing.

Facing our institutional writing histories also includes those many idiosyncratic, non-systematic moments of learning that are not necessarily reproducible in our own teaching of writing. In my case, I'll always remember my freshman humanities teacher who was sometimes so involved with our text for the day that he found himself in the corner, lecturing to the wall. I found his unconventionality quite appealing and indeed inspiring for me as a person learning to read and write more effectively. Never questioning his method, and loving his

intensity, I knew simply that what this guy did *worked* for me. But is this an approach that I should adopt for my basic writing students? I don't think so. At least not without serious thought and discussion. I would want to discuss with colleagues how this approach, when taken out of my own experience and placed into my basic writing class, would create an institutional identity for me that might (would, definitely!) seem strangely remote and indulgent to a group of students, many of whom already find college a dislocating, remote experience.

Increasing our odds of success with learners of all sorts (basic writers) should also involve looking outside our experience and learning about what others have thought about and studied. As Susanmarie Harrington and Linda Adler-Kassner have documented, much research exists on the single trait, namely "error," that continues to mark students as basic writers. Harrington and Adler-Kassner convincingly argue that lack of engagement with such work or the work ahead of us is to block mobilization in professional and public forums (20). Training of basic writing teachers can effectively begin, or continue, the work of communicating our knowledge on such basic issues. Encouraging observation and study of such issues within a program gives credit to teachers who are participating, whether consciously or not, in a charged political and social effort to provide access to powerful literacy channels.

Focus on what others have studied is also a tacit acknowledgment that individuals and groups differ in their identity with, and participation in, the life of any college. Conceiving of training as an effort that connects teachers to texts that promote change of past institutional inequalities is parallel to the efforts that many basic writing teachers make with their students. In a recent article, for example, Tom Fox studies African American students at Chico who simultaneously embrace and change the institution by way of exposure to, and encouragement around the use of, texts and rhetorics that demonstrate resistance (79-85). Similarly, teacher training can encourage teachers to be aware of and make useful for their teaching those professional voices (like Fox's) that challenge unjust and non-productive literacy practices of the past.

In addition to recovering moments of past individual writing instruction that might be made meaningful for students, then, *disengagement* from our own histories and a turn to researched methods is an important starting point for training. It is possible, and I'd argue, necessary, when training to teach basic writing both to hold on to meaningful strands of personal institutional literacy history and also learn from researched methods and positions insofar as each plays a part in creating an institutional identity with which to approach teaching.

I also remember that encountering research as an inexperienced teacher can be a daunting experience that closes, rather than opens,

good possibilities for teaching. If a teaching approach appeared in print, then it must be worth a try in my classes, I probably thought at one time. I'm sure that such thinking has led to a few awkward, Andy Kaufman-in-the-ring (minus Kaufman's brilliance) type of teaching experiences for me when I did not run my "informed" thoughts by colleagues. On this level, a thoughtful practice of teaching involves some weighing of what has been researched against one's own inclinations to act differently. Training sessions, with both experienced and less experienced teachers collectively participating in this dialogue, can help us all to make good choices and take good chances. Sensitivity to the needs of different teacher training participants involves not only an engagement with past successes, but encouragement of innovative practices. Experimentation is always part of a teacher's development and encouraging teacherly imagination can aid already-tested methodologies. Placing our individual histories, impulses, and insights into conversation with existing knowledge about teaching basic writers will make training an exercise that also moves the field forward with better teaching.

How should (and can) training be positioned within any one institution?

Approaches to teacher training in any one location will pragmatically involve interests and concerns of faculty and instructors, administrators, and, most important, the students who will receive the instruction. Richard Miller has written about the need to recognize that we work within institutions with deep histories and administrative structures that we ignore at the risk of being defined by those forces. Participation in these structures can be "entirely unglamorous" and "utterly anonymous", as Miller indicates, but teacher training is one way that basic writing teachers hold power to influence that structure in order to improve conditions for students.

In my own setting, it has made sense to try to join training, where possible, to administrative interests or initiatives. In a field that is often viewed by others within the academy with suspicion, training of basic writing teachers, when conceived of as part of a viable institutional entity among others on campus, can function as cement that joins basic writing programs to larger, sometimes more permanent or powerful administrative structures.

Heads of basic writing programs, who in this sense are also administrators of sorts, need to take the lead and think carefully about what role training plays on campus. At the University of Minnesota General College, this has often meant pioneering training that other programs or departments might emulate, conducting at least part of

the training through a formal course offered to all interested graduate students, whether teaching in our program or not, and involving other college groups in our training. On this latter point, for example, the writing coordinators invite the writing center to join the teachers in training sessions in order to promote a functional, effective working relationship that makes sense to all involved. We also encourage the writing consultants who work in the writing center to be intellectual collaborators. Undergraduate students themselves, they often provide ideas and insights that we (teachers) need to hear and work into our sometimes more distanced observations and plans. In the exchange, otherwise distant institutional structures are given faces and voices that encourage collaboration. All these efforts hold value not only as good training but also as ways to make basic writing more integral to a particular school's institutional structure. Pointing out to college-level administrators that such work is also work on retention, since better instruction and support of students should result in higher retention rates, joins the interests of the writing program to those of administrators.

I also recognize, of course, that different campus situations have more or less contentious relations with administrators who would rather see basic writers disappear from campuses than help them succeed. In other situations, supportive administrators are forced into corners by legislative bodies. Working conditions in these kinds of situations do not always allow for the luxury of gathering constituents together and talking over their work. Ensuring survival of the courses themselves takes up time that might be spent planning and conducting training. Training itself suggests a certain well-preparedness and stolidity that can make a political statement about longevity (the program will improve over time), quality instruction (do administrators really want this?), and improved working conditions (at whose expense?, the question is often immediately raised). Denial of the possibility of conducting training likely places any basic writing program in a more tentative institutional position. It is the positioning within often contradictory institutional forces, always with an eye on program survival, that makes basic writing teacher training a complex effort. And one that immediately involves participants' political sensibilities.

How is training tied in with formation of community?

Teacher training works well when a community of basic writing teachers, with regular lines of communication and opportunities for sharing teaching strategies, successes, and frustrations become part of the work landscape. I've learned from teachers that I work with that training in our institution is welcome as an ongoing part of doing the

job rather than as a single how-to-run-the-dishwasher type training that might take place in a week-long pre-semester session. To this end, following up pre- or post-semester training with regular, informal meetings during the semesters provides our instructors a chance to develop as practicing teachers who talk to other practicing teachers. This is different, and often more effective, than gathering occasionally to read a common journal article or talk about a current method discovered at a conference. But these activities, too, might be fair game and provide a way to talk about what is *actually* working in our classes. Since received knowledge about basic writing is only made meaningful in its present application (is this something that will work here and now for my students?), communication about classroom moments, the moments of practice that are at the same time embedded with theoretical foundations, also improves teacher training efforts.

Debate of priorities and desired outcomes within a program plays a role in mediating these discussions. As a matter of institutional life, such talk provides the possibility that some propositions produced from it might then work their way (via faculty or support staff forums, for example) into other institutional structures and actively shape basic writing instruction. Who holds power to enter voices into certain institutional forums is of great consequence in this view, a point that faculty and administrators need to consider and act on. In our college, for instance, adjunct faculty are in the process of forming a standing college committee, partly as a way to improve access to such forums. Creating conditions for teachers that encourage participation in institutional life is important to creating a sense of a program working together toward improved instruction.

Longer training sessions at the beginning and end of each year can also be effective when they stem from our teachers' classes and discussions, some of which have already been started in earlier small-group sessions or hallway discussions. As teachers of our particular program's students, we tackle concerns such as dealing with assignment sequences and reading strategies, addressing the problem of challenging all of our incredibly different students in our sections, grading student work, and making our classes inviting multicultural spaces for learning. Creating larger workshop spaces for more thoughtful, engaged reflection during a time when classes are not in session encourages teachers to take the time to make improvements to their courses.

Our training sessions have become increasingly conscious of institutional conditions enacted by training procedures. In our program, training is almost always interactive, as often put together by graduate or adjunct volunteers as faculty, around issues arising from the

teaching in the program. When working out responses to such issues, creating an environment that recognizes the ways that teaching load, rank, identity issues, and power, generally, play a part is important for maintaining a sense that we are a group not only working toward the goal of good instruction but also a group that performs this work with differences. Our discussions include such immediate concerns as who is paid for doing what, and who has time and resources for getting certain tasks done. Although attention to this kind of concern can add to meeting times, it helps to externalize institutional considerations that can otherwise lead to hidden resentment and outright hostility.

We do not always arrive at common approaches or solutions to problems – consensus is difficult to achieve on this level, as it is across institutional realities. One recent discussion in our program, for example, of a classroom problem involving what constituted “free speech” and “respectful speech” resulted in different teachers siding with various ethical, legal, and pragmatic analyses. Inconclusive discussions are, however, brought within the range of propositions that our institution works with as providing instruction to our group of basic writers. It also helps us that we have written a collective mission statement for our program that we may refer to as we contend among ourselves. We agree to disagree at times, but with the understanding that our discussions have aired issues that will continue to be worked on with a focus on our own student writers.

How can training provide opportunities for professionalization?

Professionalization opportunities are also important for renewing and improving the collective local knowledge that shapes our program. Above I mentioned community—I know how hard it is to create a local community in some cases because there is only one person teaching basic writing on campus or because other circumstances work against it. Like many adjuncts, I have held part-time work in a college where I never had the opportunity to meet other teachers in the program. Fortunately, at least in my experience, the active national community of basic writing instructors welcomes and values the contributions of instructors of different academic ranks. Informing instructors of the Basic Writing Special Interest Group at 4C’s, the listserv devoted to basic writing (CBW-L), and the journals in the field (most directly, *Journal of Basic Writing* and *BWe-Journal*, but also composition journals, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *Journal of Developmental Education*, *Research in the Teaching of Developmental Education*, and others) provides ways for folks to enter and become involved with the field on

a level beyond the local campus.

Involving publishers, too, can put folks in touch with editors and authors of textbooks and hopefully influence future approaches. McGraw-Hill's recently implemented listserv discussion, for which a shorter version of this piece was first conceived, is a good example of a forum connecting people from around the country who otherwise would not have the chance to talk to each other. Extending conversations held in these kinds of venues to local institutions via training gives a sense of timeliness and often a feeling of confirmation that many issues do cut across institutions. Funding trips to conferences in order to learn more with peers might also be considered training, especially for those in isolated campus situations. Although such connections might not substitute for same-campus collegiality, establishing connections and holding conversations with people of like institutions can serve some of the same purposes.

Closer to home, professionalization opportunities can include helping teachers appreciate and get credit for their expertise within the institution. Our teachers document their teaching practices and other activities with a teaching portfolio that is read annually by supervisors. Innovative assignments, course syllabi, classroom observation letters, teaching philosophy statements, and other documented activities form the basis for the portfolio. Besides providing a good way to collect and document their work and growth in the job, instructors rely on their portfolios for job searches and setting new goals. Portfolios provide a way for individuals to show how their training activities and individual efforts have had an impact on their teaching and so on the institution.

How does training participate in creating literacy conditions for instructors and students?

Complicating the picture of what to tackle on a micro level with teachers is our field's knowledge that whatever we end up doing participates in re-creating (or changing) institutional conditions of students seeking to gain literacy that will help them in material ways. Good leadership in training can function as a signal to teachers that a well-considered direction is being set by administrators, and that the training itself represents an effective first step for overall goals to be met by the entire program.

Training efforts often benefit from finding ways to make program work visible as part of larger literacy processes, an effort that involves gaining a window on non-institutional sites of literacy. One way that this can happen is through talk to literacy researchers and

workers outside of our own institutions. I remember how, when Shirley Brice Heath made a visit to our campus and talked about one of her ethnography projects, I began to see the work of our program as significant within a larger framework but also in need of a better understanding of our students' reading backgrounds. Moments like these are important to the foregrounding of close-by contexts within a larger, connected field of literacy.

Understanding training as an act of opening up for, rather than "clamping down on," teachers, serves to open conversations that lead back into the program's work, as I've suggested above, but also outside of the program. Jeanne Gunner, in a 1999 *WPA* article called "Identity and Location: A Study of WPA Models, Memberships, and Agendas," raises the issue of program administrators needing to break out of the "insularity" of their own programs. For basic writing programs, the work of establishing orientations to outside forces that affect our work such as technological trends, legislative directives, and community socio-economic realities, as well as making inroads into other professional conversations (one of Gunner's primary concerns), starts with training that values an openness to what lies beyond our own programs. Training provides an opportunity to discuss and begin to conceive of influencing the conversations that shape basic writing instruction. Helping instructors see that their local work really does mean something in the larger debate about access and definition of education and literacy gives a sense of the importance of the project of teaching basic writing.

Sally Barr Ebest has found that writing program administrators across the country, when surveyed about graduate school preparation for their jobs, recommend internships and a course in writing program administration for students intending to become writing program administrators in order to fully prepare them for WPA work. Ebest herself points to an internship with Marilyn Sternglass in a basic writing program as an important part of her own training (81). As far as composition and basic writing overlap, this recommendation also makes sense for graduate students seeking employment as basic writing teachers. Training teachers for basic writing courses involves an education in how to work effectively within local institutional structures. Much of the work that training does relies on experience in a particular locale and a sensitive reading of the possibilities within the institution. Can such knowledge be taught in a classroom or through internship at an institution that might be unlike the one where they will hopefully find more permanent work? I think it can be a good start. I end with some questions that I hope will aid people who perform this work.

Possible Discussion Questions About Teacher Training

Facing Our Own Writing Student Pasts

What worked for us as students and why? What might be carried over?

Where can our past teachers and their methods be placed among possible approaches?

How did our own relative institutional privilege, or lack of privilege, play a part in achieving success as writers/college students?

What beliefs about writing and literacy instruction have we developed through our own student experiences?

Training Within Local Institutional Structures

What do our campus administrators (at various levels) expect from the basic writing program or classes? How much of this kind of knowledge is available and visible?

What kind of training will improve overall instructional climate, not only for writing teachers but for all?

What alliances with the basic writing program are possible/desirable within the institution (Writing Center, Special Programs for 1st generation students, Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives, retention initiatives)?

What alliances are possible outside of the institution?

Creating a Community of Basic Writing Instructors

How is training perceived by instructors? Do they have a stake in what happens?

What are the regular lines of communication established for the discussion of basic writing instruction on the campus (within the program and beyond)?

How are power differences among instructors acknowledged and managed?

Is there a central on-line location for basic writing instructors?

Do instructors have knowledge of, and support for entering, professional communities?

How can the sense of community extend to non-writing class instructors who also teach basic writers in their courses?

Organizing Training Sessions

What topics matter to instructors? What do they say they want to discuss?

What topics, if any, need to be included (Approaches to student error? Dialect issues? Classroom workshop techniques? Approaches to reading for writing? Accommodating students with disabilities? Teaching with available technology?)?

How are sessions organized and run? Who gains *de facto* expert status?

Viewing Training as Part of Larger Literacy Processes

How does the training on any campus contribute to current debates within the field?

How does the training on any campus contribute to current national/international literacy debates?

How does training value difference?

How can training extend to learning about larger literacy processes?

Professionalization

Do instructors have ways to see their work as valuable and themselves as experts?

What kind of mentoring channels exist?

Do research projects extend to non-tenure track faculty?

How can graduate students join the work of teaching basic writing to their graduate studies?

Note: As has been indicated, a shorter version of this article appeared as a position statement prompt discussion on a new listserv for BW teachers sponsored by McGraw-Hill and overseen by Laura Gray-Rosendale. To subscribe to that list via the World Wide Web, visit http://mailman.eppg.com/mailman/listinfo/teaching_basic_writing – or, via email, send a message with subject or body ‘help’ to teaching_basic_writing-request@mailman.eppg.com

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