Back to the Future: Contextuality and the Construction of the Basic Writer's Identity in *JBW* 1999-2005

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ABSTRACT: *Gray-Rosendale continues a project begun with "Investigating Our Discursive History:* JBW *and the Construction of the 'Basic Writer's' Identity" (*JBW *1999) in which she employed a Foucauldian archaeological perspective to trace the dominance of as well as the disruptions within the three major metaphoric allegiances of basic writing studies: developmental, academic discourse, and conflict. In this piece, Gray-Rosendale argues that three new constructions of basic writing student identity that have gained prominence in the journal from 1999-2005: the basic writer's identity constructed as in situ; the basic writer's identity constructed as a theory, academic discourse, and/or history reformer; and the basic writer's identity constructed as a set of practices in action. All are part of what she terms a "contextual" model. Identifying both beneficial and detrimental aspects of this contextual model, she calls upon basic writing teachers and scholars to work to combat some of the problematic elements within this latest metaphoric allegiance.*

KEYWORDS: *history of basic writing; student identity; developmentalism; academic discourse; conflict/contact zone; contextual.*

The *Journal of Basic Writing* has undergone many significant changes during its thirty-year history—shifts in general focus, editorship, theoretical allegiances, and pedagogical approaches. However, from Shaughnessy's original vision to its present form, the journal, its editors, and its readership have maintained a deep and sustained commitment to learning from and teaching

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our so-called "basic writing" students. Always encouraging an examination of the crucial interconnections between practice and theory, *JBW* continues to be one of the primary sites that call upon us to be better teachers, better thinkers, and better members of our intellectual community.

This history—*JBW's* history—is something that has long intrigued me personally and intellectually. So when I was invited to contribute to this important anniversary volume, while I considered tackling funding, mainstreaming, teacher training, online teaching, ESL, placement, and outsourcing concerns, my attentions were most captivated by how examining our recent past and present might illuminate the questions of our future. This essay might be considered a continuation of my 1999 *JBW* piece, "Investigating Our Discursive History: JBW and the Construction of the 'Basic Writer's' Identity." The original essay offered an historical study of the ways in which basic writing students' identities had been constructed in the discipline from the 1970s to the late 1990s, choosing the journal as my primary site of inquiry. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's view that the formation of identities and practices are themselves a function of historically specific discourses, I provided an archaeological account that I hoped could advance critiques of the present era, show the historical constitution of present modes of social domination, identify historical continuities and discontinuities, reveal progressive and regressive features of our history, and unearth the forces of domination and liberation therein. In an effort to resist the construction of history as a meta-narrative, I instead furnished readings of specific historical texts and their disruptive effects, examining how some discourses have shaped and created meaning systems that have gained the status and currency of "truth" while other alternative discourses became marginalized and subjugated. I reasoned that examining such a history might also foreground discourses and sites through which hegemonic practices could be contested, challenged, and even resisted.

Taking my cue from Joe Harris's research, my 1999 essay followed some of the main moments in the journal during which paradigm shifts in the basic writing students' identity constructions occurred. I made note of disruptions within the developmentalist metaphor in Louise Yelin's 1978 text; challenges to and the beginnings of the initiation metaphor in the Kogen-Hays 1986-1987 debate; and the creation of the conflict model in texts proposed by Min-Zhan Lu, Pamela Gay, and many others throughout the 1990s. My conclusion raised my growing concern that all of these approaches delimited the basic writing student's identity "according to a deficit theory model, an etiological 'problem' that the Basic Writer endures, be it cognitive,

discursive or social, in spite of professed efforts to work outside a diagnosis/ cure model" (126-27). Wondering about what the journal's next metaphoric investments might be, I mentioned the beginnings of some new patterns I was noticing—1) a growing attention to students' own interactions and self-presentations, and 2) a greater attempt to challenge the conflict model's dominance "through contesting and disputing how oppositional politics function, through suggesting the contextual nature of politics' functions, and through students' own construction of their politics" (129). In the end, I suggested that we continue to study our history—to look at its disruptions and contradictions, to examine changes in metaphoric allegiances, and to notice similarities in approach across paradigm shifts. I then closed the essay with the following sentence: "Increasingly, this is the path our research must explore, and the *Journal of Basic Writing*, given its complex and interesting history as well as its proclivity for self-reflection and self-historicizing, is precisely the territory within which this will continue to occur" (129).

The present essay—written seven years later—traces several new key approaches for constructing basic writing students' identities that I believe have gained prominence in the meantime, ones that now co-exist, co-mingle with, and sometimes contest one another. In order to do this project any sort of justice I have immersed myself in the excellent essays that have appeared in the journal since 1999. These essays appear to fall into three major categories—the basic writer's identity constructed as *in situ*; the basic writer's identity constructed as a theory, academic discourse, and/or history reformer; and the basic writer's identity constructed as a set of practices in action.

As was the case with my 1999 essay, such a study does not come without its obvious flaws. First, I cannot help but offer these thoughts *in medias res*. As a result, they are partial, interested, and themselves steeped in the metaphoric investments that now dominate basic writing studies. This is the case with most historical scholarship, especially work that reflects on the recent past. Second, while I cite essays as belonging to one category, many could easily be listed under several, and some take up elements of all three. Such is the nature of tracing themes and relationships—they may overlap each other in places and resist the very act of categorizing itself. Despite these problems, I think that examining the recent past and the metaphoric allegiances that dominate our scholarship can provide insight into the past, present, and future of the *Journal of Basic Writing* and basic writing studies as a discipline. And, at the very least, this kind of investigation may influence how my contemporaries and I think about our participation in this history

as well as the most fruitful directions for our own scholarship. For better, for worse, and for now—these are my views from here.

The Basic Writer's Identity As *In Situ*

During the last seven years the notion of the basic writer's identity as in situ—or context-dependent—has emerged more fully than I ever could have anticipated.[1] In fact, over this period it appears to be the intellectual project that has occupied the journal more than any other. This has been a critically necessary tactic used to combat the disease-cure models that earlier metaphoric approaches sometimes relied upon. Rather than providing developmentalist, academic discourse, or conflict model tactics, this new approach indicates that discussions of the basic writer's identity should be accomplished by exposing the local conditions of various basic writers and basic writing programs. Doing this will itself dictate the appropriate pragmatic and theoretical responses, this strategy suggests.

From 1999-2005 there are many examples of this approach in *JBW* to which we might point. I will briefly discuss some representative essays here. From 1999 into 2000 the focus on in situ examinations can be seen in interesting discussions about research universities and basic writing, mainstreaming, creating environments to foster student agency, understanding differences between basic writing taught at two and four year schools, finding new ways to teach grammar, and teaching basic writing in an electronic environment. Gail Stygall's "Unraveling at Both Ends: Anti-Undergraduate Education, Anti-Affirmative Action, and Basic Writing at Research Schools" examines the University of Washington as an example to argue that we should not discount the research university. Citing the emergence of these new intensive, stretch, turbo courses (5), Stygall expresses the conviction that we need to "participate vocally in the available university and political forums" (7), and we ought to be more involved with legislators, lobby professional organizations, and talk with reporters in local media. Likewise, Judith Rodby and Tom Fox's "Basic Writing and Material Acts: The Ironies, Discrepancies, and Disjunctures of Basic Writing and Mainstreaming" exposes the effects of mainstreaming students at California State University, Chico. They reveal the ways in which the category of basic writer disappeared at their institution and how students learned to write effectively by being part of a critical workshop involving writing and literacy learning. Next Mary Kay Crouch and Gerri McNenny's "Looking Back, Looking Forward: California Grapples with Remediation" argues that high school and college links can

reduce the need for remedial instruction. Using Freirean approaches, they view the California state system as a way to accomplish this, tracing its history and problems. Then Joan L. Piorkowski and Erika Scheurer's "'It's the Way That They Talk to You': Increasing Agency in Basic Writers Through a Social Context of Care" considers students associated with the Academic Development Program at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, contending that an ethic of care is critical in order to get basic writing students to seek out available resources.

Next Deborah Rossen-Krill and Kim Lynch's "A Method for Describing Basic Writers and Their Writing: Lessons From a Pilot Study" compares basic writers across two and four year colleges. They study students' backgrounds, respond to students' interpretations of the surveys, and analyze students' particular discourse features. Their research centers on three institutions, Cambridge Community College (two year); Minneapolis Community and Technical College (two year), and Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science (four years). Patricia J. McAlexander's "Checking the Grammar Checker: Integrating Grammar Instruction With Writing" investigates the use of grammar lessons and checkers to improve student writing and responsibility for student writing at the University of Georgia. Finally, Judith Mara Kish's "Breaking the Block: Basic Writers in the Electronic Classroom" explores how computers can help basic writing students to work on writer's block and discusses the "stretch" class at Arizona State University from 1997-1998. In answer to students' problems with genre and linearity, Kish draws upon hypertext theories.

The local context interest can be seen in 2001 as well with thoughtful analyses of particular students' interactions, discussions about teaching students of color at a specific institution, and thoughts about how one instructor negotiates the feminization of composition within particular programs. Ann Tabachnikov's "The Mommification of Writing Instruction: A Tale of Two Students" looks at two students' work and her interactions with them at CCNY, determining how maternalism works in the teaching of basic writers. Raul Ybarra's "Cultural Dissonance in Basic Writing Courses" exposes how Latino and other disenfranchised basic writing students, particularly at California State University at Fresno, experience disparities between their own cultural backgrounds and their academic lives in composition classrooms. Wendy Ryden's "How Soft Is Process? The Feminization of Comp and Pedagogies of Care" uses personal narrative to reflect upon her own experiences teaching basic writing over a ten year period in both university and community college settings as well as in sciences-based and humani-

ties-based programs (particularly the humanities department of an institute of technology and CUNY), identifying the gendered nature of how she is constructed by students as a "hard" teacher and then a "soft" one.

The *in situ* approach continued to build momentum into 2002 with essays that focused carefully on creating public discourse models for specific students, examining particular teacher-student interactions, and providing an account of pedagogies at work in an intensive ESL Program. Eileen Biser, Linda Rubel, and Rose Marie Oscano's "Be Careful What You Wish For: When Basic Writers Take the Rhetorical Stage" examines the circumstances of one deaf student at Rochester Institute of Technology as she tries to produce public writing. The writers conclude that "we need to reframe and emphasize the purposes and practices of research when going public" (62). Contending that we need to create assignments and activities that "give our students the confidence to go beyond their comfort levels and to propel them into thorough research" (63), the writers caution against using electronic discourse as a mode of public discourse without critical reflection. Likewise, Shari Stenberg's "Learning to Change: The Development of a (Basic) Writer and Her Teacher" offers such a contextual approach from Creighton University. Stenberg asks not "Who is the basic writer?" but rather "How do particular basic writers construct their own identities?" (38). She studies her own interactions with her student Linda as well as the "pressure Linda exerted" on Stenberg's own construction of a basic writer. Stenberg's self-reflections about her student-centered teaching expose the ways in which dominant metaphors and ideologies can sometimes undermine our best intentions. Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk and Marcia Babbitt's essay titled "The Power of Academic Learning Communities" reveals how important active, student-centered learning communities have been in retaining ESL students at Kingsborough Community College and how they may have implications for retaining all students. As the authors state, it is crucial to create learning communities that are "both social and academic" in order to best aid our students (83).

The strategy of attending to local context can also be seen from 2003-2004 in crucial discussions concerning teaching basic writers about belief spaces and homophobia, case studies of basic writers in online environments, examinations of writing and healing in specific contexts, and investigations of a basic writing classroom environment in Japan. Tom Peele and Mary Ellen Ryder's essay, "Belief Spaces and the Resistant Writer: Queer Space in the Contact Zone," reveals that we often do not have the adequate tools to deal with receiving student arguments that may be troubling to us—whether

sexist, racist, or homophobic. They analyze two student essays from Boise State University, revealing the degree to which ambiguity is a problem in basic writing students' compositions. Peele and Ryder promote employing the idea of "belief spaces" or textual spaces "created by a writer that marks the content of that space as belonging to someone else's beliefs" (28). In the end, they assert that "helping students to identify their belief spaces allows us to talk about controversial viewpoints with which we might strongly disagree without silencing the student; it allows us to examine language from an apparently neutral position" (39). Peele and Ryder also disclose the ways in which "belief spaces" can be used as critical tools for revision. In addition, in "Issues of Attitude and Access: A Case Study of Basic Writers in a Computer Classroom" Catherine Matthews Pavia at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst contemplates the work of two basic writers and their interactions with technology. She outlines the students' attitudes toward computers and how this affects her pedagogy. Pavia also exposes how computer use reveals disparities in their backgrounds with regard to technology, closing with a discussion of how computer use will affect her pedagogy. Then Molly Hurley Moran's essay "Toward a Writing and Healing Approach in the Basic Writing Classroom: One Professor's Personal Odyssey" centers on her own experiences and the strength that personal writing afforded her—as well as her choice to bring personal writing strategies into her work with basic writing students at the University of Georgia. Moran advocates that this preliminary project has shown the degree to which "emphasizing personal writing in a basic writing course and encouraging students to explore painful personal issues can launch them on a journey toward psychological integration and academic success" (111). Finally, in "'Because We Are Shy and Fear Mistaking': Computer Mediated Communication with EFL Writers" Martha Clark Cummings describes her own work at several universities in Japan with computerized communication in two English as a Foreign Language writing classes, charting the various successes both students and teachers encountered. Cummings reveals that computer mediation can help to develop relationships between teachers and students that might not have otherwise been possible.

This *in situ* strategy is also exemplified in more recent 2005 conversations with crucial auto-ethnographic approaches to analyzing pedagogical structures as well as important assessments of innovative programs. In "It's Not Remedial: Re-envisioning Pre-First Year College Writing" by Heidi Huse, Jenna Wright, Anna Clark, and Tim Hacker, the writers examine their struggle with institutional difficulties as well as student needs at the

University of Tennessee Martin. They discuss building new courses, creating placement mechanisms, and integrating a writing center. The writers close by making an assessment of the program as well as providing commentary about how their program works: "Our hope and expectation is that by providing under-prepared students with college-level work in reading and writing rather than a more conventionally 'remedial' approach, the UTM pre-first year college-level composition program will offer these students the opportunity to achieve the academic, personal, and professional success they seek" (50).

While there are clearly many differences within and among these many essays—investigations of programs at specific institutions, debates about mainstreaming, discussions about how constructing basic writers' identities work in particular locations, overviews of pilot studies, thoughts about integrating technology, attempts to analyze how our students come from marginalized social groups as well as how they sometimes marginalize others, and assessments of specific programs—they depend upon and evidence an important development in our scholarship, the refocusing upon the basic writer's identity as *in situ*—or as context-dependent. Such significant attempts to reveal the local conditions of various basic writers and basic writing programs have effectively renewed our focus on our students and their immediate environments in critical ways.

The Basic Writer's Identity as Reformer of Theory, Academic Discourse, and/or History

In the last number of years we have also begun to concentrate our efforts away from developmentalist, academic discourse, or conflict model approaches in terms of how we research and potentially reform our theory— our discursive/terminological investments[2]—as well as our field's history. The basic writer's identity is not just context-dependent and thus resistant to broad theoretical analyses. It also begs for its own context-dependent theorization. As such, the basic writer's identity is sometimes represented implicitly or explicitly as holding the power to reform our theories, our discursive/terminological investments, themselves, as well as to solve problems within the representation of our field's history. These important texts contend that only in better understanding basic writing scholarship and politics can we fully enable changes in the construction of basic writing students' identities as well as our pedagogical options.

This trend toward viewing the basic writer as a theory, academic discourse, or history reformer can be seen in 1999 through a sustained focus on how academic discourse operates both in terms of its possibilities and problems, and also as an examination of our discursive history. In Jane E. Hindman's critical 1999 essay titled "Inventing Academic Discourse: Teaching (and Learning) Marginal Poise and Fugitive Truth," she suggests that transformative pedagogies are not yielding the expected results. Rather, Hindman contends that "breaking this cycle of institutional denial requires recognizing that the source of academic discursive authority is academic disciplinary practice" and thus we have to disrupt our professional disciplinary practice itself (24). Hindman also makes the point that, "illumination of the source of discursive authority of language does not, of itself, subvert that authority; it simply reveals the authority for what it is" (25). Instead, we need to keep a "watchful eye" on our own practices and approaches. We require an ethics for transformative pedagogy that makes students central to the task of challenging academic discourse and evaluation strategies such that basic writing students can be agents and curriculum builders. Likewise, my aforementioned 1999 essay "Investigating Our Discursive History: *JBW* and the Construction of the 'Basic Writer's' Identity" focuses on offering a reading of how we have constructed basic writers' identities historically (the developmental, academic discourse, and conflict models). The essay argues that revisiting this question of how basic writing student identities are constructed over time might itself proffer one critical avenue or solution to the problems of our history.

In addition, the focus on the basic writer's student identity as potentially reforming our theories and discursive/terminological investments can be witnessed in the 2000 Special Issue that gathered together some of the most thoughtful and vibrant voices within basic writing studies. This issue was dedicated to challenging the dictates of academic discourse and calling upon us to view basic writers as those who might best confront their own material barriers. In Patricia Bizzell's 2000 essay, "Basic Writing and the Issue of Correctness, Or, What To Do With 'Mixed' Forms of Academic Discourse," she argues for a rethinking of issues of correctness and, as a result, of academic discourse itself. Bizzell reassesses her earlier position validating "hybrid discourse forms" (which implied that academic discourse was static previously and may have ignored local structural inequities) and instead calls for "mixed" forms. In the end, Bizzell contends that "if basic writing pedagogy is to shift to fostering variant forms of academic discourse, I believe we will still be obliged to try to encourage these variant forms to be done

well" (11). Moreover, Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner's essay "Expectations, Interpretations, and Contributions of Basic Writing" inquires "how might the field of Basic Writing challenge the academy to turn its paper ideals into lived realities?" (44) They ask for "more research on the contributions of basic writers to the academy, not just in terms of body counts in statistics on racial, ethnic, gender, and age ratios, but more importantly, as writers and thinkers with experiences, ambitions, and perseverance for living in the kind of borderland the academy is vowing to become" (46). Lu and Horner also assert that "we need more research which treats basic writers as real historical agents and acknowledges the extent to which many basic writers are already living (out of social necessity and/or personal choice) in the borderlands of dissonant cultural sites when learning to read and write" (47). They call for critical self-reflection on the part of teachers and scholars of basic writing and encourage our students to challenge material barriers, to work from the "ground up."

Others added to this perspective by furnishing useful reflections on the current state of basic writing education, urging that we resist conservative forces while acknowledging both our many failures and the successes of our students. Deborah Mutnick's "The Strategic Value of Basic Writing: An Analysis of the Current Moment" argues that we need to understand such issues in terms of larger socio-political forces around open admissions. She states that "if we are committed to democratizing education, as I believe most basic writing teachers and scholars are, we need to fight back against conservative efforts to reverse affirmative action, end open admissions, eliminate academic support programs, and thus resegregate higher education" (78). In effect, Mutnick indicates that we should position ourselves strategically within our present political and historical perspective and choose our battles carefully. In addition, Lynn Quitman Troyka's open letter to George Otte and Trudy Smoke, "How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise," argues that we have failed the goals of basic writing—that we have not attended to public relations, did not make our case to the popular press, have not resisted our appropriation by traditional academic culture, did not get involved enough in the Black English controversy, have not dealt with research outcomes consistently, have not publicized our results enough, and did not have broad understandings of what classroom research should look like. Our major success, however, has come from our students and our roles as their teachers.

This notion that the basic writing student identity has the power to reform our theories themselves, our discursive/terminological invest-

ments, as well as to solve problems within the representation of our field's history continued through a series of strong essays from 2001-2003. Laurie Grobman's "(Re)Writing Youth: Basic Writing, Youth Culture, and Social Change" uses research in critical pedagogy to view how basic writers respond to rhetorical constructions of their generation and youth culture. Grobman asserts that we need to encourage our students to use their own knowledge to dismantle these constructions. Likewise, my essay, "Rethinking the Basic Writing Frontier: Native American Students' Challenge to Our Histories," works in this vein. My co-authors and graduate students, Judith Bullock and Loyola K. Bird, and I try to consider the situation of Native American basic writers in a Summer Bridge Program at Northern Arizona University. Weaving between academic and personal voices, we outline the language of frontierism, make note of the strange absence of many basic writing students in our research, and demonstrate how we are all still learning how much we do not know about how to best reach and teach our students. Examining and learning from the work and lives of our students may help us to rethink how Native American basic writers have yet to be addressed seriously by our scholarship. We close by contending that "teachers of Basic Writing need to become settlers on Indian lands, much as [Scott] Lyons encourages all Rhetoric and Composition scholars to do—challenging and disrupting the once comforting images of ourselves as pioneers" (100).

  This approach to the basic writing student identity as reformer of our theories, discursive/terminological investments, as well as problems in the discipline's history can also be seen during the more recent years from 2004-2005, especially in Jeffrey Maxson's compelling piece, "'Government of da Peeps, for da Peeps, and by da Peeps': Revisiting the Contact Zone." Maxson indicates that "when students create texts that don't afford easy subjectivities for their teachers to inhabit, these texts challenge some of the notions we as teachers and as engaged citizens hold most dear" (26). This has the possibility of shifting power relationships between students and teachers—thereby influencing basic writing studies altogether. Maxson reveals how he solicits oppositional discourse, encourages translation exercises that require students to examine academic prose in their own language, and asks students to parody academic language itself. He closes by stating that the "student texts more than fulfill any promise inherent in the assignments.... In them, students are seen to have written themselves into authoritative subject positions" (45). As a result, Maxson contends that these students end up critiquing the very ideology upon which the privileged discourse forms we teach them are premised. In doing so, Maxson asserts that a "teacher is

just as likely to be moved and changed as a student" and asks pointedly, "Oughtn't this to be the promise of a principled pedagogical endeavor in the first place?" (45).

All of these essays tackle different content issues that encompass acknowledging the limitations of our political approaches, revisiting the history of the discipline, rethinking academic discourse, calling for an examination of basic writers' material realities, investigating our current historical moment, observing basic writers and youth culture, considering our disciplinary history and Native American students' absence, and rethinking the contact zone; however, they share a common thread. They indicate directly or indirectly that basic writers' identities need their own context-dependent theorizations. In addition, in various ways they point to basic writers themselves as a force that can help us to reform our theories, our discursive/terminological investments, as well as to solve problems inherent within the representation of our field's history. This attention to refocusing on our students not just as students we teach but as people who should inform our theories as well as give rise to new theories is very significant. It provides a return to the idea that students themselves should dictate our theories rather than theories dictating how we view our students. Importantly, each of these contributions considers the basic writing student identity as capable of aiding us in these efforts.

The Basic Writer's Identity As A Set of Practices In Action

Thus far I have argued that the basic writer's identity has been newly constructed as context-dependent and as holding the power to reform our theories themselves, our discursive/terminological investments, as well as to solve problems within the representation of our field's history. It should not be surprising, then, that the final construction of the basic writer's identity that I have noticed over the last seven years appears not to be about identifying who the basic writer is but rather watching her/his actions as a set of practices to be studied. Recently the basic writer's identity has been constructed more and more in terms of students' own approaches. In resistance to the sense that we have over-theorized the basic writing student's situation—perhaps a backlash against the poststructuralist and postcolonial turn of the conflict metaphor's dominance in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s—this model looks for the most part at what basic writing students do and what they say about what they do.

In 1999 two crucial essays worked in this vein, aiming toward a more

student-centered scholarship—the first by calling upon us to look more closely at basic writers' own writing practices and the second by asking us to realize that while we claim to care about our students, we know far too little about them. Linda Adler-Kassner's "Just Writing, Basically: Basic Writers on Basic Writing" traces history of basic writing research and contends that we need to return to the question of who our students are, looking at the role of being a basic writer in specific institutional contexts (72), and privileging students' own reflections on themselves and their identities. In her "Modest Proposal" Adler-Kassner argues that we should unpack what we mean by basic writing to our students as well as have students look at the actual documents that landed them in such classes in the first place. This can lead to the beginnings of a crucial dialogue, she asserts, though she warns us against using this method to produce a view of the basic writing student as a "typical 'client' (or set of clients) to which we market" (85). Likewise, Susanmarie Harrington's "The Representation of Basic Writers in Basic Writing Scholarship, or Who is Quentin Pierce?" exposes the gap in our scholarship between our professed care for basic writing students and how little we really know about them. She looks back at earlier issues of *JBW*, categorizing our research according to various types: teaching techniques, theory, text analysis, student-present (attention to student voices), student-qualities (analysis of students' attitudes or other personal qualities), and miscellaneous (96-97). Harrington contends that while over time our greatest focus has been on teaching techniques, this category and student text analysis have become less common, instead giving way to a greater focus on theory. Harrington calls for even more of what she terms "student-present scholarship" and "student-present case studies."

A number of essays from 2000-2005 continued this trend in the journal by arguing on behalf of centering attention upon students in action. In "Meanness and Failure: Sanctioning Basic Writers" authors Terence Collins and Melissa Blum state that they "fear the focus of this set of essays—the 'state of Basic Writing'—may be alarmingly beside the point" (13). Rather, they concentrate on looking at their students' experiences and practices, instead examining the "state of access to higher education among disenfranchised students" (13). They note how impoverished women are falling away from higher education under the banner of welfare reform at the University of Minnesota, indicating that we can no longer rest at the level of "abstract argument"—but rather speak about students as they are—as "twelve distinct people with aspirations, children, sweet writing voices, and no place in our university" (20). Similarly Anmarie Eves-Bowden's "What Basic Writers

Think About Writing" involves observing and recording what basic writers have to say about themselves and their own writing processes. After surveying and interviewing basic writing students, she indicates that a structured writing process model can be helpful to them as can crucial reflection upon their own writing processes.

Each of these essays—though rather different in strategy (calling for examining what it means to be a basic writer here and now through an examination of their own thoughts and practices, asking for more student-present scholarship, suggesting that we focus our energies not on abstract arguments but on particular students and their own lives, and indicating that we need to discover what basic writers have to say about themselves and their own writing processes)—appears to concentrate on studying the basic writer's practices in detail. The concentrated focus on what basic writing students do as well as what they say about what they do has further reinforced the contextual model's goal of putting the student at the forefront of everything the discipline does. Rather than making the basic writer incidental to how we consider her/his practices, these essays assert emphatically that the basic writer's thoughts, ideas, and practices themselves are perhaps the most significant sites worthy of inquiry.

Past, Present, and Future: Some Reflections From Here

As we can see, this move away from developmentalist, academic discourse, and conflict model approaches of the past has been quite necessary and positive in many respects. These models, as mentioned earlier, have sometimes risked delimiting the basic writer's identity according to a deficit theory model, a "problem" that the basic writer endured, be it cognitive, discursive, or social. Sometimes this occurred in spite of professed efforts to work outside a diagnosis/cure model. Likewise, even when such work purported to be motivated by a desire to de-center the classroom or to shift privilege, the teacher's expertise and pedagogy were frequently suspiciously central to the answer provided to solve this "problem." Theoretical and metaphoric investments risked not only being instrumental in constructing basic writers' student identities, but also in providing the solutions to the very "problems" these identity constructions occasioned in the first place. The deficit approach gave basic writing students far too little say in the construction of their own identities or the kinds of assertions we made about those constructions. Similarly, the dependence upon narrow theoretical investments obscured how students themselves deployed their own constructions of their identities through their composing processes.

Since then the contextual approach has become the new dominant paradigm. It has done much to challenge the deficit theory model and to encourage caution about the ways in which our metaphoric and theoretical investments that constructed basic writers' student identities also, interestingly enough, provided solutions to their problems. The work of many of my contemporaries and my own work have certainly in many ways conformed to this new model—and the benefits have been important to all of us engaged in such study.

However, our strides to revise the deficit model and to challenge broad theoretical investments—to move away from developmentalist, academic discourse, and conflict model approaches—have not been without some significant drawbacks. As we mark the twenty-fifth volume of the *Journal of Basic Writing* it is equally important that we take stock of what we have lost in adopting such a contextual approach.

First, our very understandable desire to turn away from applying theory to basic writers' situations has meant something of a compromise— we may have lost some of our ability to describe relevant institutional, political, and social trends in broader, general terms within basic writing scholarship. This increased difficulty in conceptualizing and connecting across interests and discrete student populations, while the understandable fallout of adopting the contextual model, may unwittingly reinforce a sort of insularity amongst people and programs. As a result, the contextual approach has the possibility of making it rather hard to form crucial coalitions, coalitions that are increasingly not very positive in terms of relationship-building but may also be utterly necessary to basic writing's livelihood and continuation in the face of what we are all experiencing right now—drastic cutbacks to education, the overwhelming growth of outsourcing and edu-prise, and the too often unreflective push to technologize.

Such attempts to work across institutions and interests as well as to launch innovative programs, design curricula in concert with one another, or effect larger political, cultural, and policy changes often do not get examined as much as they could be and may well need to be right now. While focusing on the minute specifics of basic writers' situations has allowed us to gather a great deal of crucial local knowledge, focusing so much of our energies on these projects may leave us in danger of abandoning the important national and global concerns that have defined our discipline for many years and have been fundamental to making successful arguments on behalf of our students.

Second, in implicitly or explicitly constructing the basic writing stu-

dent identity as the entity capable of overhauling our theory, the problems within academic discourse, and our troubled history, we may inadvertently risk putting too much burden on our students to make basic writing effective and too little on ourselves. In contrast to times past, one might argue that now the teacher/researcher has been recast somewhat as the flailing victim in need of rescue—our students in this new narrative now acting as our figurative, if not our literal, saviors. This flip on the typical formulation may do little more than reverse the terms as opposed to challenging and disrupting the very idea that our theory, problems within academic discourse, or troubled history can indeed be finally solved or rescued by the student-teacher relationship alone. It may keep us from seeing how history, politics, and cultural changes are impacting, shaping, and even changing that relationship.

Instead, we might consider also turning our attention to creating theoretical approaches, new understandings of academic discourse, and new formulations of our history that expose their partial, contingent nature and yet make consistent attempts at broad connections in ways that will further inquiry across institutions, theoretical investments, and different student populations. I acknowledge that such an awkward approach may feel rather unfamiliar. We have familiarity with both a focus on broad issues and a focus on local issues—but perhaps too little practice with the combination. But maybe this uncertainty about approach is indicative of where we find ourselves at this historical juncture right now as much as anything else—at the edge of one model (the contextual) and yet not quite seeing the shape of the next on the horizon. Still, there might be some good in beginning to stretch the limits of this model, to push its boundaries a bit, and to move into territory that seeks inventive—even if ultimately failed—approaches to working on local and global issues simultaneously.

Third, the turn to students' own practices as the site of knowledge in basic writing research and teaching runs a significant risk that we should not ignore. In sometimes unreflectively privileging direct student voices, actions, practices, and perspectives, we may seem to assume their transparence. Our research sometimes elides the notion that such voices, actions, practices, and perspectives are never simply just that. They are always mediated by our students' previous experiences, their oftentimes incredibly complex and conflicted cultural positions, the multi-layered institutional spaces within which their discourses are produced, and their generational affiliations, as well as the investments informing how we frame our questions and how our students interpret those investments and questions.

At first glance our failure to adequately address the already always mediated nature of students' actions and practices adequately may seem slightly odd. After all, the conflict model (informed by Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone"), an approach particularly concerned about the perils of essentialism, is part of our very recent past. One might reasonably wonder how we could even chance treating our students' commentary in essentialist ways. However, the reason why this may be occurring makes a great deal of sense: we believe that our students' approaches need to be more central to our theorizing. The problem is that in trying hard to honor students' self-constructions of identity we now may be in danger of relying upon a new view of the basic writer—a person whose pure practices can be read transparently as significant. We can and should applaud these new efforts to expose the ways in which external theoretical or political lenses have negatively shaped our understandings of basic writers' student identities historically. But, in doing so, we cannot ignore the fact that any representation of basic writers' student identities—even their own—is still always highly mediated.

These three problems in the contextual model are crucial to consider. In mentioning them, however, I want to be absolutely clear on one point. I make no pretense to having adequately thought my way through these concerns myself. As much as any (and perhaps more than most!) my own contributions to our discipline have been shaped by and been in concert with this contextual model. Simply put, I am guilty as charged. My goal in relaying these cautions is to encourage greater reflection amongst all of us (including my guilty self) engaged in basic writing research about our current historical moment and our future. Our contextual approach has done much to put the basic writing student at the center of our inquiry and to help us focus our energies on issues of local context—but it appears to have done much less to help reinforce some of the crucial dialogue necessary to maintaining cross-institutional as well as larger political connections, to help create new approaches to linking local and global basic writing concerns, and to help us understand both the importance of students' practices to all we do as well as the always-already constructed nature of those experiences. And these issues remain as important today as they have ever been—perhaps even more so given our increasingly conservative educational and political climate.

It was the case thirty years ago, seven years ago, and it remains so today—the *Journal of Basic Writing* is the key location that exemplifies Shaughnessy's vision for basic writing inquiry, one of the most critical spaces where we can all write and rewrite our collective pasts, presents, and futures. I thank the readers of the journal and the journal's editors for allowing this

writer—basic as she was once categorized to be by various educational institutions and basic as she most surely remains with regard to the preliminary thoughts raised here—the chance to try to do a bit of this with her intellectual community and with herself here and now.

In drawing this piece to a close, I will not attempt to leave us with answers to the concerns raised here. I believe that any such endeavors at closure would ring false and be far too premature. Likewise, I admit to being much too wrapped up in and influenced by this model myself to have much more to contribute on the question of solutions. In short, I mean my comments to begin as well as to facilitate dialogue—not to offer anything like the last word on any of the subjects raised. I choose instead to leave us all to look at these curious, messy, loose ends. As we examine them together, I have every confidence that graduate students and professors reading this will have far more fully formed thoughts than I do about how we might best work as a group to pull them apart, reorganize them, and/ or integrate them. I very much look forward to hearing others' ideas related to the issues I have raised here—whether in agreement, disagreement, or various combinations. I also welcome related and much more far-reaching conversations about these issues than the one I have begun here, conversations that will surely be had among *JBW*'s pages.

In the next thirty years we will see just how the contextual model's various strands grow and develop as well as what other models begin to supplant this approach. And, I very much look forward to watching these changes—as well as building whatever these new approaches may be—as we always have, together.

Notes

1. In Latin *in situ* literally means "in place." Here I mean to echo the use of this term in two disciplinary spheres—biology and archaeology. *In situ* in biology suggests the examination of a phenomenon exactly in the place where it occurs without removing it from its medium. Similarly, *in situ* in archaeology references an artifact that has not been moved from its original place of deposition so that it can be interpreted accurately in terms of the culture that formed it. An artifact that is not discovered *in situ* may be considered out of context and incapable of providing an accurate picture of its associated culture.

2. By "discursive/terminological investments" I mean to suggest those discourses that have shaped and created meaning systems in our scholar-

ship and have gained the status and currency of "truth," dominating how we define and organize our research, our understandings of the discipline, and our relationships to our students. I am also referencing the fact that this phenomenon operates at the level of our specific language choices. For example, in "Terministic Screens" Kenneth Burke indicated that "any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention to some channels rather than others" such that what we take to be "observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" (45-46). The very words we utilize, Burke cautioned, often necessarily limit and constrain our ability to pursue our intended agendas.

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