



Journal of Basic Writing

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Dan Melzer

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CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 15-25 pages, double spaced, on topics related to basic and ESL writing, broadly interpreted. Submissions should follow current MLA guidelines. Manuscripts are refereed anonymously. To assure impartial review, include name(s), affiliation(s), mailing and e-mail addresses, and a short biographical note for publication on the cover page *only*. The second page should include the title but no author identification, an abstract of about 150 words, and a list of 4-5 key words. Endnotes should be kept to a minimum. It is the author's responsibility to obtain written permission for including excerpts from student writing.

Contributions should be submitted as Word document attachments via e-mail to: hopekcc@aol.com and Cheryl.Smith@baruch.cuny.edu. You will receive a confirmation of receipt; a report on the status of your submission will follow in about sixteen weeks.

All manuscripts must focus clearly on basic writing and must add substantively to the existing literature. We seek manuscripts that are original, stimulating, well-grounded in theory, and clearly related to practice. Work that reiterates what is known or work previously published will not be considered.

We invite authors to write about such matters as classroom practices in relation to basic-writing or second-language theory; cognitive and rhetorical theories and their relation to basic writing; social, psychological, and cultural implications of literacy; discourse theory; grammar, spelling, and error analysis; linguistics; computers and new technologies in basic writing; assessment and evaluation; writing center practices; teaching logs and the development of new methodologies; and cross-disciplinary studies combining basic writing with psychology, anthropology, journalism, and art. We publish observational studies as well as theoretical discussions on relationships between basic writing and reading, or the study of literature, or speech, or listening. The term "basic writer" is used with wide diversity today, sometimes referring to a student from a highly oral tradition with little experience in writing academic discourse, and sometimes referring to a student whose academic writing is fluent but otherwise deficient. To help readers, therefore, authors should describe clearly the student population which they are discussing.

We particularly encourage a *variety* of manuscripts: speculative discussions which venture fresh interpretations; essays which draw heavily on student writing as supportive evidence for new observations; research reports, written in non-technical language, which offer observations previously unknown or unsubstantiated; and collaborative writings which provocatively debate more than one side of a central controversy.

EDITORS' COLUMN

The articles of this issue locate voice and influence for basic writers in a clearly public frame, assessing the potential of policy to shape the futures of BW students and institutions. All four contributors address the problem of basic writers' inclusion in the shared arenas of composition and academia, noting broad connections across language histories, institutional contexts, legislative policies, and civic engagements. Policy casts a wide and entangling net for us as basic writing scholars and advocates, but it is important that we see our work in line with the impulses for change on every level, from the classroom on up. Our authors each identify a different mainspring of change that has led our field to its current moment. *Understand these crucial aspects of our field's evolution*, they seem to say, to effectively shape the future's opportunities now. Considering the public broadly—linguistically, rhetorically, philosophically, logistically—we are more apt to resist ideas about our work that devitalize us and *disempower* our students.

In our first article, "Basic Writing and the Conflict Over Language," Tom Fox offers a key meta-perspective on the history of Basic Writing as it relates to language's standardization and its exclusionary, elitist effects. Referencing David Bleich's *The Materiality of Language*, Fox maps the correspondences between a longstanding language conflict within the university—linked historically to materialism and persecution—and a recent endeavor on the part of the California State University to similarly denigrate the vernacular and negatively classify its users. Fox calls out the English Placement Test as costly and unnecessary, arising in perceived need to redress the "growing" remedial population of CSU, but which showed only a "two percent increase [in number of students] over thirteen years." Much as Bleich points to the repression of materiality as the understory of the vernacular within the university, Fox reveals the real-life, real-time effect of the EPT on students. His goal, he says, is to "add intellectual juice to our work" of decrying such formalist judgements against students' writing, exposing "injustice and untruths" about language "as a form and not an action." Fox asserts, "we are the ones who [must] articulate the conflict and explain, to say what's in plain sight."

In our second article, "Basic Writers in Composition's Public Turn: Voice and Influence in the Basic Writing Classroom," a strengthened notion of voice emerges to contrast the silences of language conflict, this time offering theoretical and practical access to basic writers' rich civic lives. Christopher Minnix addresses the exclusion of basic writers from the

literature on public writing within comp-rhet, noting a basic writing “civic engagement gap.” As Minnix argues, basic writers have civic lives and “public incomes” worthy of recognition, proving a political currency around civics already in effect. Students’ agency as civic actors thrives in their awarenesses of lives apart from privilege as well as in many of their daily social media exchanges. Thus, a public writing pedagogy for basic writers might surpass typical civics curricula, including service learning, conceived narrowly as either substance or proof of engagement, and instead value basic writers’ politically-attuned experiences. The literacy narrative, according to Minnix, is one such socially potent means for expanding basic writers’ there-already investment in civic life.

Next, Patrick Sullivan’s “‘Ideas about Human Possibilities’: Connecticut’s PA 12-40 and Basic Writing in the Era of Neoliberalism” likewise deals with the material effects of restrictive language policy while evincing those “public incomes” of students designated as basic writers. Sullivan recounts the impact of Connecticut’s legislation PA 12-40 on the students of his open admissions community college, which limited writing support to one semester of remediation and (then only) to co-requisite, embedded support in Freshman English. Instructors found these two factors chilling: sharp cut-off scores and a time-limit for demonstrating success. Sullivan’s response was to lead the design and teaching of a pre-freshman, transitional “boot camp,” ENG 9000, for the first students put at risk under the new legislation, effectively decompressing the high-stakes environment of that one-course remedial opportunity. Sullivan shares that these were hardworking students, deeply impacted by the material realities that such restrictive agendas set in motion. Following, the centerpiece of Sullivan’s article is the voices of students themselves—their stories in their words—followed by an insightful finding of materialist themes that perfused these students’ lives. The standpoint from which Sullivan asks us to view our relationship to our work is another powerful mainspring: “Stories have power,” Sullivan quotes historian Tony Holt, “The power to change things. . . our collective memory is what provides the starting points for understanding our contemporary world.”

Finally, in our fourth article, “Remedial, Basic, Advanced: Evolving Frameworks for First-Year Composition at the California State University,” Dan Melzer returns the focus to California to help us again see language as endemic to the borders that define our field, tracing the influence of terms inseparable from its history. As yet another mainspring, the language of remediation has shaped how we and our publics conceive of basic writing,

foundationally. But as our understandings of student literacies and language politics have grown, we might welcome new conceptions of our work, re-terming/ refiguring it, in the interest of deep systemic change. Melzer takes on the evolution of frameworks around pre-freshman and freshman writing in the California State University, reminding us of the mission of access that must prevail beyond the discursive shorthands that simply label, not liberate. Progressing from “remedial” to “basic” to “advanced,” he supports CSU’s recent refiguring of writing instruction to move beyond the “discoursal limits” of Basic Writing’s past and present.

At this time, when numerous forces seek to determine the substance of basic writing discourse for constrictive impact, affecting policy within and beyond our institutions, we are especially pleased to present the work of these scholars so intent on resounding the voices and influences we most need to hear.

—**Hope Parisi** and **Cheryl C. Smith**

Basic Writing and the Conflict over Language

Tom Fox

Abstract: David Bleich's exploration of language conflicts in the university in The Materiality of Language: Gender, Politics, and the University helps explain the ongoing struggle over basic writing as between two radically different understandings of language. Progressive educators and writing teachers see language as rhetorical and contextual, "material" in Bleich's terms. Policy makers, large-scale writing assessment designers, and public discourse generally see language as ahistorical and decontextualized, involving ladders of skills to be mastered, or "sacralized." This article examines the struggle between these materialist innovations and repressive policy mandates and assessments as a manifestation of this root struggle over language. The ongoing nature of this struggle, having occurred in this country for over a century, means progressive programs must maintain a stance of constant vigilance, innovation, and subversion. The outcome critically affects efforts to increase access to higher education.

KEYWORDS: *basic writing; access; acceleration; assessment; policy; writing programs; mainstreaming*

Contemporary discourse around basic writing programs falls into two categories. First, time-honored complaints about student writing continue in this century, with disgruntled professors venting about sentences without verbs or nouns, accompanied by accusations that high schools aren't doing their job. Similarly, we hear hysterical accounts of tsunami-like waves of destructive student writing washing over universities, lowering standards and taxing budgets and resources. Less visible to the public is the proliferation of discourse around writing instruction that creates and supports accelerated learning, mainstreaming, directed self-placement, and other institutional innovations that facilitate access to the kinds of cultural capital that higher education offers. This back and forth between complaint and innovation is the way that we engage in conflicts about the very nature of language and its role in reproducing or, in fewer cases, challenging, social inequality.

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These conflicts around language—and their history—have been comprehensively examined by David Bleich in his recent book, *The Materiality of Language*, where “materiality” is contrasted with the Platonic tradition and its emphasis on what Bleich calls the “sacralization” of texts. Sacralization fixes texts and their meanings by assigning their origins and use to a powerful being: god, the priest, the law, the policy, the teacher, the test, the score, the accuplacer. Language is decontextualized and ahistorical with the consequence that power becomes opaque, masked. Approaches to language study that emphasize materiality contextualize language in history and situation, understand the dynamic nature of production and reception, and make plain and visible the *actions*, including political actions, of language. Since access to language opens the door to participation in communities, when access is masked by sacred texts whose meanings can only be determined by preselected members of the community, then access is limited. When, as is also the case, members of marginalized groups continually press for access through both direct and subversive means, the “elect” hold tighter to their power and institute policies and practices to insure that access continues to be limited. Articulating this struggle illuminates the cycles of innovation and repression in basic writing programs and helps explain institutional resistance to mainstreaming.

Bleich’s text joins a number of recent studies in composition that explore materiality, broadly conceived as the frequently unequal distribution and value of space, resources, and experience; the physicality of writing; and the consequences of the movement and meaning of language. This interest includes focused analyses of historical or cultural materialism, such as Bruce Horner’s *Terms of Work for Composition* or Tony Scott’s *Dangerous Writing*; labor studies such as Eileen Schell’s and Patricia Lambert Stock’s *Moving a Mountain*; Laura Micciche’s use of the new materialism in “Writing Material”; or the collection of articles in *College English*’s special issue on materiality guest-edited by Bleich. This scholarship turns our attention to language’s effects on the physical world of actual people, money, work, time, movement, and action.

Bleich’s focus on language conflicts in the university makes his work particularly apt for this article. *The Materiality of Language* discloses how historic conflicts between the sacred and the material, realized often by the suppression of the study of vernacular languages in the Church and in universities, continue to shape contemporary attitudes towards language use. Bleich comments on how the endurance of this conflict keeps “language in a community of privilege by resisting the vernacular, by maintaining

the superstition that a language can be intrinsically sacred or superior, by limiting access to universities themselves, and by declaring that authoritative knowledge can only appear in one language” (135). Recasting the last three decades of conflict around basic writing in these terms explains how vague and often uninformed tirades about remediation reveal understandings of language use that have excluded and continue to exclude people whose language differs from the academy’s. His analysis makes plain why work in our field is often contested, troubled, and difficult, even as it can be rewarding and productive.

Mainstreaming at CSU, Chico

Contested, troubled, and difficult accurately describe much of my professional life, particularly around issues connected with basic writing. I was hired in 1986 to coordinate California State University, Chico’s basic writing program, which had two courses, one for reading and one for writing. The curriculum that I inherited was based on language assumptions that were the very opposite of materiality: workbooks, decontextualized exercises, reading curricula, and assessment with the Nelson-Denny reading test. As with many basic writing programs in the early and mid-eighties, ours focused on discrete skills, tested students with standardized tests, and separated reading from writing, and ultimately, language from life.

That year, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky’s *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* was published and the faculty organized a collective reading of it. Its refreshing appeal was much about materiality: students wrote things that mattered to themselves and one other. The curriculum was not limited to personal narratives either; students took each other’s real language seriously as worthy of study. Following the faculty reading group, we revised the curriculum, making it more rigorous and eliminating the workbooks and Nelson-Denny reading tests; we integrated reading and writing instruction. Students responded well, producing interesting, important writing and tackling relevant academic subjects. The faculty noticed and continued to up the ante. Pretty soon, the “basic” writing classes were harder and involved more work than the credit-bearing first-year composition classes. Students began to complain, not about the classes, but about not getting baccalaureate credit for their work. They wrote protest letters to the Chancellor’s Office—real writing to real people—which riled people down there and got me into trouble with my Dean. No one needed to explain “materiality” to them.

In the early 1990s, my colleague at Chico, Judith Rodby, initiated a mainstreaming program. She began by successfully arguing for a pilot program that tracked a group of students who failed the CSU system's English Placement Test (EPT), mainstreamed them into the credit-bearing course, and required them to attend an adjunct workshop to support their success. Her argument combined institutional critique along the lines of Bartholomae's "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum" with Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger's theory of situated learning (Rodby). The pilot was successful. Instructors were not notified which students were in the workshops (that is, which students were "remedial"). The results were that students in the pilot program earned the same grades, and more than once, slightly *higher* grades, than students who passed the EPT. Consequently, we eliminated the basic writing classes altogether.

Mainstreaming and its Discontents

The elimination of separate classes for students who failed the placement test came at a time of cultural upheaval in higher education, both in the public sphere and in basic writing scholarship. The most vigorous attack on basic writing programs came from the trustees of City University of New York. Motivated by concerns over educational standards, particularly language and writing standards, and the cost of remedial programs, they proposed to eliminate basic writing programs at all four-year colleges and universities. Their proposals set off a storm of protests from students and faculty who argued that the Trustees' proposal cut off access to four-year universities for students of color. Somewhat later, at the University of Minnesota, the Board of Regents eliminated General College, reversing that institution's historic investment in diversity. These policy moves, and others like them, were not designed as mainstreaming, but as cost-cutting moves that would also have the benefit of returning the institutions to more homogeneous language standards by excluding students whose language differed from the academy's.

At the same time—the 1990s and early 2000s—scholarship in basic writing began weighing an opposite move, *increase* access by retaining admission standards and mainstreaming students. Both of these moves effectively eliminated basic writing programs, but differed radically in their understandings of the value of the students' language for academic work. Tensions around these questions emerged at the 1992 Conference on Basic Writing, which set off a flurry of soul-searching and innovation. Especially powerful was Bartholomae's keynote, "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in

the American Curriculum.” Bartholomae argued that basic writing as an institutional action reiterated “the liberal project of the late 60s and early 70s, where in the name of sympathy and empowerment, we have once again produced the ‘other’ who is the incomplete version of ourselves” (18). Such sentiments were responded to vigorously. Karen Greenberg’s response, published later in *JBW*, indicates the complexity of the times:

If reactionary political academics and budget-minded administrators and legislators join forces with composition “stars” like David Bartholomae to attack basic writing programs, then these programs are doomed. Students will have to “sink or swim.” Given the priorities of most universities, underprepared writers will not benefit from any of the tens of thousands of dollars that schools would save by ending placement testing and basic skills instruction. Most of the money will probably be spent on small senior seminars, on the library, on research projects, and on visiting professors. Indeed, if enough people subscribe to David Bartholomae’s views on basic writing, there won’t be any basic writing instruction in college much longer. (6-7)

Note how Bartholomae’s concern for respecting language diversity—advocacy for students’ vernacular—is transformed into an elitist position in Greenberg’s analysis. Such was the cauldron of competing views on basic writing.

The defense of mainstreaming touched the language conflict nerve locally as well. Colleagues in Chico’s history department circulated James Traub’s story in *The New Republic* accusing the 1992 Basic Writing conference of political correctness with the comment, “no wonder they can’t write.” A colleague in composition from another campus called our campus’s reasoning for mainstreaming “moronic,” rejecting the argument that if you don’t have a basic writing program, you don’t have basic writers. Another colleague, one actively involved in scoring the EPT, looked down the road and said, “The English Placement Test is our baby. Don’t kick the baby.” Our defense of mainstreaming, that there was nothing wrong with the language that our students brought with them to the university, seemed heretical to people both in and out of the academy. The analogy between contemporary university politics around language and the church’s history of treating heretics isn’t far-fetched. Bleich’s exploration of the conflicts over language study in the origins of the university shows repeatedly how advocacy of the

vernacular results in persecution. We argued that with strong instruction, students' vernacular could easily serve the purposes of the institution.

Nationally in the years that followed, there was a push-me/pull-me, back and forth between the repressive policies discussed above and new designs for basic writing programs. Scholars and teachers throughout the 1990s and early 2000s produced scores of successful and inventive programs, including mainstreaming experiments, directed self-placement, and stretch or accelerated programs. Important books such as Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu's *Representing the "Other"* (1999) and Geri McNenny and Sallyanne Fitzgerald's edited collection, *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* (2001), along with a succession of articles in this journal, challenged the profession to reconceive basic writing.

Basic Writing Innovation

In California, particularly in the last decade, campuses in the California State University (CSU) system and in the California Community College system have grappled with convincing research that shows that institutional structures of basic writing may do more harm than good. Thomas Bailey's series of articles on developmental programs, many of which were inspired by Peter Dow Adams' work in Baltimore, makes strong claims that the time and cost for students of developmental classes discourage students from completing the sequence and consequently achieving their college aspirations. Bailey makes clear (as do other researchers) that this is not necessarily a critique of the pedagogy of developmental programs. His well-known article, "Challenge and Opportunity: Rethinking the Role and Function of Developmental Education in Community College," concludes,

Many students who are referred to developmental education never enroll in it. Many who complete one remedial course never show up for the next course in the sequence. Overall, fewer than half of students who are referred to developmental education complete the recommended sequence. What is more, many students who complete their developmental courses do not go on to enroll in the associated college-level courses. (24)

Katie Hern, an instructor at Chabot College in Hayward, CA, co-leads the California Acceleration Project, which examines current research, including Bailey's, and recruits community college faculty to research the efficacy of their own programs. Hern's research findings mirror Bailey's:

Students who pass just one 4-unit course succeed in the [college transfer] course at exactly the same rate (82%) as students from the 8-unit two-semester sequence. It's hard to believe. We would think that more guidance and practice in academic literacy would result in better performance at the higher level. But four years of data, involving thousands of students, shows that it didn't. These four years of data also make clear the stark reality of exponential attrition: only 23% of students who began in the longer sequence went on to complete College English versus 45% from the accelerated track. ("Exponential" 6)

She also reiterates Bailey's point that these data do not support a pedagogical or curricular critique. The reasons for attrition are complex, having to do with a variety of issues, often with family and economic pressures that make going to colleges for long periods of time too costly in both economic and human terms. Hern argues that the greater number of "exit points" (those places where students need to sign up again, where they can opt out), the greater likelihood of students not completing the sequence.

Hern and many of her colleagues in the California Acceleration Project started a movement, with classroom and program innovations and experiments, workshops, and reading groups proliferating across California. The project critiques current placement systems and has worked toward designing better common placement tests. At the core of the project is a belief that students are more capable than the placement tests show. Hern argues that when "colleges accelerate students' progress into college-level courses, they're seeing that students are much more prepared than previously believed" ("Some College Students"). The California Acceleration Project's multi-leveled critique of remediation looks at classroom pedagogy, institutional practices, and ideological change. The group's beliefs around the value and suitability of students' vernacular language practices, their preparedness, have supported and extended the remarkable energy around these issues in California and have achieved results across the state, reducing the number of remedial courses and increasing accelerated models.

The four-year college systems in California, both the CSU and the University of California (UC), are somewhat behind the community colleges on this issue. In the CSU, however, the days of "moronic" seem to be over. The last survey of campuses in late 2012 revealed eight of twenty-three

campuses in the CSU system have fully implemented stretch, accelerated, or mainstreaming programs, five more are being piloted, and four more campuses are developing similar programs. Additionally, nine campuses have initiated directed self-placement programs where students can choose the stretch or the regular course ("Stretch Status Roster"). As is the routine, these efforts to honor students' languages and increase access are met with new responses that decrease access.

Materiality Repressed: Early Start and the EPT

In one of the most trenchant sections of *The Materiality of Language*, Bleich examines Ludwig Wittgenstein's insight into language study that "things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity" (qtd. in Bleich 109). Bleich extends Wittgenstein's point by arguing that the materiality of language is not just hidden, but repressed, not acknowledged and pushed out of sight (109n83). The materiality of language exists in plain sight; everyone experiences the materiality of language in their ordinary lives. We don't use language to abstract it, attribute it to God or some other origin; we don't imagine it has magic powers. When we want some salt, we say, "Pass the salt."

The materiality of language is obvious to everyone who speaks. In order to sustain sacralized language study, materiality has to be continually repressed. A better example couldn't be invented than the CSU's Early Start program. In the midst of all the productive innovation discussed above, in 2010, the trustees of the CSU came up with one of the more convoluted and restrictive ideas in the history of basic writing. Concerned that the numbers of remedial students were growing, *from 47% in 1997 to 49% in 2010* in English (CSU Analytic Studies), "overwhelming" our campuses and resources, the trustees decided that they would implement Early Start, which requires *admitted* first-year students to begin their remediation before fall term or else they cannot enroll. The hysteria around this two percent increase over thirteen years is pretty astonishing, and evidence of the high-pitched forces that wish to inhibit access. For instance, a news article about Early Start from the *Contra-Costa Times* by Matt Krupnick was titled "CSU Overwhelmed By Remedial Needs." It begins with the sentence: "Wracked with frustration over the state's legions of unprepared high school graduates, the California State University system next summer will force freshmen with remedial needs to brush up on math or English before arriving on campus" and continues by calling the number of students "staggering" and diagnosing them as "woe-

fully unprepared” (Krupnick). Just to make it clear: this was in response to a 2% increase. Did the trustees know? Did Krupnick check? The huge fuss over a 2% increase is indeed bizarre, but a fact such as this one is only in plain sight when someone says it is.

Nobody on my campus was wracking with frustration, at least not more than usual. The remediation rate, as Mike Rose consistently points out, is relatively stable. Campuses across the system have been engaged in thoughtful innovation that reduces both the cost to campuses and the time spent by students. The grass roots, that is, faculty on local campuses, were taking care of business in progressive and helpful ways. And then, the trustees concoct an unfunded mandatory program?

The English Council of the CSU (representatives from English Departments and Writing Programs in the CSU system) passed a strongly worded resolution that noted that Early Start was discriminatory, punitive, financially burdensome to students, likely to be ineffective, and ignored the innovative work on the campuses that was successfully addressing the “remedial problem.” They cited the research about numbers of courses and noted that Early Start added yet another hurdle to completing first year composition. It spoke to the material consequences of the proposal. The resolution, and a similar one by the Academic Senate of the whole CSU, was completely ignored. Early Start costs students \$182 at a minimum. There were 18,690 students who were required to take Early Start in 2012, a number that has remained steady in the two years following. The math: \$3,401,580 was taken from the most economically poor CSU-bound students.

The clearest definition of remediation in English in the CSU is simple: those students who fail the English Placement Test. The EPT, originally, was one of the few large-scale assessments developed by faculty (in conjunction with the Educational Testing Service). For the mid-1970s (the test was first used in 1977), it was considered a progressive assessment in that it didn’t rely entirely on multiple-choice questions on usage, and included a 30-minute essay that was holistically scored. In a way, the EPT staved off more formalist approaches to assessment. The field of writing assessment and language study, too, has changed since the 1970s and what was progressive forty years ago stands in the way of change in the present. The entire house of remedial cards is held in place by this test, even though many of these new programs overwhelmingly challenge its validity.

I want to take a quick look at the kind of test it is, but not for a critique of the test—no need, it’s a terrible test—but to understand how the materiality of language is suppressed, making basic writing as an institutional

practice difficult to eliminate, despite evidence of its harm to students. The EPT has three parts, two sections of multiple choice questions on reading skills and composing skills, and one forty-five minute essay. The California State University English Success website has several sample questions, such as the following in the reading section:

Each year, millions of people visit the national parks of the American West, and they come for a variety of reasons. Some seek to explore the historical past. Others are looking for a short escape from the hot city or the crowded office or factory. Still others are trying to learn something about the mysteries of nature. Whatever their reason for visiting the parks, few leave disappointed.

1. People who visit the parks for the first reason mentioned by the author would most probably want to see

- (A) an animal preserve*
- (B) the ruins of a Pueblo Indian village*
- (C) a canyon with a variety of geological formations*
- (D) a geyser with a predictable pattern of eruptions*

I couldn't answer this simple question and had to ask my office mate. I skimmed it and thought "first" meant most important, and the passage didn't say anything about most important. Once I realized it was a *counting* task, I wondered if students were ever asked in a college class a question like this, and if so, why.

Here is an example of a multiple-choice composing skill question:

A clenched fist shows anger, and drooping shoulders indicate despondency; the first is an example of conscious body language, while the second is unconscious.

Rewrite, beginning with:

Body language may be unconscious. . . .

The next words will be

- (A) that shows*
- (B) the first example*
- (C) as when*
- (D) and, for example,*

I got this one right, but the feeling of bizarreness remained. I should note that Accuplacer, one of the most widely used placement instruments, which is owned by the College Board, has very similar questions. These tests are not good. They do not accurately predict success in writing courses and they mislead students about the content and practices of reading and writing in college. The Grand Canyon disconnect between the tasks required in college and the tasks required by the test obscures the functions and uses of writing. These tasks repress or obscure the idea that language is material because, in this context on this test, no one really cares what words come next when one starts a sentence about body language a different way. Most importantly, and most obviously, the consequence of answering the question does not have to do with body language, but with access to the university and with money.

These tests remain in place, some of the most stubborn practices to uproot, supported by trustees, professors in other fields, and tacitly—or directly—by public discourse that routinely laments the students' failure. The public, and many of our colleagues on our campuses, believe that students are "woefully unprepared" in writing and believe in the tests and programs that assess and remediate students. We are engaged in a prolonged ideological struggle over how we study, define, and teach writing. This struggle takes place primarily between those of us engaged in the discipline of teaching writing and those who are not. It is a consequential struggle. Students who get discouraged by the time and money spent in levels of remediation lose access to language practices and genres of the disciplines, practices that are useful for citizens as well as for students, important for participatory democracy as well as for improving education.

In Plain Sight

Bleich's argument that the materiality of language is in plain sight is no more obviously illustrated than on the CSU's very own English Success website, a website designed to help students through the bureaucracy of CSU's remediation system and encourage students to prepare for the test. The transcript below the video, which is meant to encourage students to take the EPT, illustrates one student's material understandings of language:



"My name's Cherise Arzaga, and I think my major's gonna be English. EPT, it's like you think you're over with your SATS and everything and you have to take another test. Actually I took the EPT on my birthday so it was one of those tests where I'm just like 'Ohh, I gotta get this done' and so on and you think you do fine and then you find out you have to take English 1 or a remediation class and it sucks, 'cause you've been in AP classes or, like, you've done the work and now you have to do the remedial classes. It's just, it's sad kinda. I didn't really know much about it. I just knew it's just gonna be another standard test to take it, write an essay. Get good sleep before! And just focus that day and just write an essay. Take it seriously cuz you pay for that and then if you don't take it seriously you have to pay for another class that you don't get credit for, but you do learn in the end, but still, you know, take it seriously. You have that time to save money and do it right."

This is not a ringing endorsement of basic writing, nor is it an endorsement of the English Placement Test, despite its being on the CSU website, apparently designed to encourage prospective students to pass the test. She locates the test in a material world: in time (her birthday), and most importantly in an economic system of actual dollars and credits. In fact, it's almost all about the money, echoing my point about Early Start, and undercutting the supposed educational purpose. Understand that during this time, California and much of the rest of the country were in the most serious economic trouble in decades, and tuition increased from \$1428 in 2001-02 to \$5472 in 2011. The cost of the test, the cost of the non-baccalaureate credit, and the cost of the extra time in the university all weigh hard on students. "If you don't take it seriously," she says, "you have to pay for another class that you don't get credit for." Rodby examines this same issue in "What It's For and What It's Worth":

It did not finally even matter how relevant, insightful, or provocative our curriculum was. No remedial courses in the California State University system carried credit, and our students were finally not able to accept the worth of courses that gave them no credit. They understood that they were in an economy in which literacy was a (if not the) medium of exchange. (108)

At the same time, Cherise recognizes the meaninglessness of the test. Her

understanding of language is decidedly material, and it undercuts the validity of the test, even in a video designed to encourage students to take the test seriously. It's a chore, a hoop, and it's part of a system of other standard tests. Get a good night's sleep so it doesn't suck.

Writing Assessment and Placement

The conflict between material conceptions of language and sacred, formalist, or transparent conceptions is a long one, one that program administrators and teachers of basic writing experience on a daily basis. What can articulating this conflict do to improve the lives of students and ourselves? Such a view of language conflict can inform policy decisions around basic writing, especially about large-scale placement or programmatic writing assessment. To the degree it's possible, we need to assess students' writing on its material value, on whether it gets the work done that it proposes to do and whether or not that work is of value. Recent studies of writing assessment have moved the field away from formalist assessments and towards more materialist approaches. These studies embrace language difference and variety and recognize the situatedness of language use. Asao Inoue, in *Antiracist Assessment Ecologies*, examines the connections between race and writing assessment (including a trenchant critique of the EPT) and by doing so argues for the value of students' writing that eschews formalism. His own classroom assessment practice is materialist, assessing students on the multiplicity of labor by asking them to document the number of hours they have worked and on the interconnectness of their writing in the local ecologies of their world. His assessment troubles formalist approaches by examining how the value of writing is embedded in dynamic ecological social networks.

The labor required for the human judgments for large-scale programmatic assessment often results in formalist assessments. The absence of money for the labor of materialist assessments is one of the ways that restricted funding keeps formalist assessments in place. Tony Scott and Lil Brannon's "Democracy, Struggle, and the Praxis of Assessment" describes large-scale assessment of a writing program that values the labor of students and teachers and understands language as materialist. Instead of seeking consensus about the value of student writing, they encourage dissensus, "which foregrounds unequal relations and continued struggle for power" (294).

Similarly, Chris Gallagher, in "Immodest Witness: Reliability and Writing Assessment," argues that current writing assessments "operate on assessment concepts and practices that demand highly controlled, arhetori-

cal approaches to reading and writing” (74). By adopting *witnessing* as the conceptual role for readers assessing student writing, Gallagher provides us with a powerful model to reconceive assessment, particularly reliability. Witnessing involves the assertion of a contested truth in an actual situation and requires not only an assertion but a response, one that either revises the truth or contests it. Using “witnessing” as a model, Gallagher argues that writing assessment is a “material and embodied rhetorical act” (77).

Gallagher’s, Inoue’s, and Scott and Brannon’s work, along with other progressive research in writing assessment, shows how materialist assessments of writing, though often labor-intensive, can support the democratization of the academy. Additionally, as these studies show, the material/formalist dichotomy is useful in arguing against bad assessments, such as the EPT. Inoue’s analysis of the EPT, grounded in his focus on local diversity, makes a strong *materialist* argument, showing not just that the test is somehow objectively racist or biased but that it clearly has racist effects, particularly on the multilingual Hmong students. Inoue argues that “the fact that failure (low scores that mean remediation) pool so cleanly, abundantly, and consistently in Hmong racial and linguistic formations in Fresno . . . shows us that larger structural racism is happening in schools and classrooms, as much as it is in the test itself. Good writing assessments should be able to identify such structural racism, not work with it to produce more racist effects” (74). While these studies of writing assessment radically change program and classroom assessment, they have not been widely employed in the placement systems that produce basic writing programs. If such concepts were applied to placement assessments, the binary sorting of writers—basic or regular—would end and basic writing programs would dramatically change.

Living in the Conflict

The conflict between Platonic approaches to language use and materialist ones will likely go on as it has: continued tactical innovations to programs that reduce the time and money students need to spend to receive a college degree by reducing the number of basic writing courses met by counter-moves that reduce access by requiring more time, more money. The work and high spirits of collectives such as the California Acceleration Project, the hard institutional work of progressive CSU faculty, and new approaches to writing assessment all demonstrate an irrepressible progressive impulse. It has been, and it will continue to be, met with opposition.

This article seeks to add intellectual juice to our work. Opposition will seek to deny the material uses of language through mandated tests, curricula, and other policies. These strategies will limit access to academic language and practices to our students. In turn, the authority of basic writing teachers, authority to design institutional practices and curricula that support our students, will be reduced. Our job in this dysfunctional dialogue is to be clear about what we know from our research, our experience, and our classrooms and not be silenced. Those of us with institutional security need to speak out against policy, interference in our curricula, and assessment mandates. While we may not be successful, we can at least make some noise, point out injustice and untruths, continue subverting mandates, and occasionally change some policy.

Finally, and not insignificantly, understanding this conflict explains our professional lives, in the sense of “Oh, that’s what going on,” providing a balm of sense on the often senseless abrasion of professional experience. Keeping the conflict in mind helps to defamiliarize the strange view of language as a form and not as an action. Understanding the continual repression of materialist views of language means that we are the ones who articulate the conflict and explain, to say what’s in plain sight. We need to not be surprised at what people say to us about our students’ language, not caught speechless at assumptions springing from a institutionally-manufactured understanding of language historically and currently designed to keep people (including or especially those people who fail a test and are named “basic writers”) from participating fully in institutions, communities, economies, and democracy.

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Basic Writers in Composition's Public Turn: Voice and Influence in the Basic Writing Classroom

Christopher Minnix

ABSTRACT: While basic writing has made a public turn by incorporating service learning and community literacy pedagogies, basic writers are not often discussed in the vast and growing research on public writing in composition studies. Scholarship on public writing in composition has produced important discussions of the outcomes of public writing pedagogy, but the “incomes” of public writing—the experiences, cultural and linguistic differences, and knowledge of and dispositions towards public life—that students bring to public writing classrooms have gone largely unexplored. Scholars and teachers of basic writing can productively challenge public writing pedagogy to attend to these incomes by expanding their research on socioeconomic and cultural difference and access to students’ writing in the public realm. I develop this argument out of current educational research on youth and civic engagement, beginning with a discussion of what Meira Levinson has called the “civic empowerment gap” among poor and minority students. I argue that the literacy narrative is a genre that provides students with rich opportunities to explore and negotiate the “incomes” they bring to public writing, as well as a genre that can be utilized and adapted for public persuasion.

KEYWORDS: civic empowerment gap; public writing; literacy narratives; basic writing

Over the past two decades, research in composition studies has called for a “public turn” (Mathieu xv) in composition, one that expands students’ understanding of writing in the public sphere, fosters their political agency, and engages them in writing for a variety of public audiences (Wells, Weisser, Mathieu, Welch, Ervin). For many of us who teach public writing, public writing assignments such as PSAs (Selfe and Selfe), zines (Farmer), news articles and letters (Gogan), community publishing projects (Parks), and political video remixes (Dubisar and Palmieri), become some of the most rewarding writing that our students do throughout the semester. The benefits of these assignments include increased facility in the outcomes outlined in the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition”—rhetorical knowledge, awareness of genre, multimodal composing processes—as well as an increased understanding of the civic functions of rhetoric and writing.

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Public writing pedagogy seeks to provide students with real-world rhetorical capacities for rhetorical engagement and to correct an imbalance that Douglas Hesse has described as the difference between writing “*about* the civic sphere, not *in it*” (qtd. in Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel 171). Such a pedagogy creates opportunities for students to write for audiences outside of the classroom and within the communities they inhabit. At the same time, many contemporary discussions of public writing have pointed to increasing opportunities for public writing in students’ virtual communities due to the availability of accessible and powerful digital media platforms. These platforms, as Kathleen Yancey has argued, contribute to a “new era in literacy” (5). Public writing scholarship and pedagogy have focused on a variety of print and digital genres; but, following Yancey, a significant amount of contemporary research in public writing has turned to the relationship between digital media and public writing (Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel; Selfe and Selfe; New London Group; Dubisar and Palmieri). Community literacy, service-learning, and multimodal public rhetoric expand the audiences of student writing and invest students with rhetorical knowledge that enables them to become more engaged and effective citizens.

While public writing research in composition has developed significant pedagogical strategies, theoretical frameworks, and outcomes, there is little discussion of basic writing students in this literature. Basic writing scholarship has, of course, made its own public turns, especially through efforts to integrate service learning into the basic writing classroom. Debates over the value of service learning for basic writing students have pointed to its importance in investing students with civic agency (Davi; Gabor; Arca; Pine), but have also pointed to specific curricular challenges to integrating service learning into basic writing classes (Adler-Kassner “Digging a Groundwork”), and to ways in which service learning might actually limit the agency of basic writing students (Kraemer). While I believe that public writing—in its many forms, including service learning—can bring many benefits to the basic writing classroom, my objective here goes beyond simply arguing for bringing the resources of public writing pedagogy and theory to bear on basic writing. Instead, I want to test a broader claim. Basic writing teachers and scholars can productively challenge public writing pedagogy to attend more fully to “incomes” of public writing—the prior experiences, attitudes, cultural knowledge, material differences, and rhetorical knowledge that students bring to public writing and explore how these “incomes” of public writing shape students’ inventional processes.

As teachers who work with students who often feel marginalized not only within the academy but also within public life, basic writing teachers are well-positioned to examine the incomes students bring to public writing courses and assignments. In their study of students' prior genre knowledge, Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi draw on Min-Zhan Lu's discussion of "discursive resources" to define their concept of students' "incomes" to writing in the university (313). Lu defines students' "discursive resources" as "the often complex and sometimes conflicting templates of languages, englishes, discourses, senses of self, visions of life and notions of one's relations with others and the world" (qtd. in Reiff and Bawarshi 313). By pointing to students' *public incomes*, I seek to expand this focus on incomes to the public writing classroom. Basic writing teachers are poised to explore strategies for fostering students' voices within contexts of inequality, develop pedagogical strategies that enable students to confront and critically approach those inequities, and help students negotiate the tension between the expression of their personal voice and public action. While the approach to public writing I develop focuses on the contributions of basic writing to public writing theory and pedagogy, this project also reflects recent calls in public writing research to redefine the relationship between public writing, public participation, and public influence (Gogan; Rivers and Webber). I argue that basic writing teachers and scholars can expand the idea of public participation even further by investigating how cultural, economic, and academic inequities constrain public participation for many of our students and how public writing projects in basic writing classes can work against these constraints.

Though public writing and civic education are distinctly different enterprises, research in civic education has pointed to how socioeconomic disparities significantly limit access to civic education programs in underfunded public schools. I touch upon this research in order to illustrate that, for many of our basic writing students, programs that promote civic engagement in secondary schools are absent. This point is especially important during a time when action-oriented civics education, often referred to as "New Civics," has drawn upon service learning and opportunities for public writing to redefine civics in American high schools. Many students from middle-class and wealthy schools could arrive in composition classes having benefitted from civic engagement programs and having developed a positive sense of their civic agency. However, students from poorer schools often have limited, if any, exposure to civic engagement in their K-12 education. This educational inequity creates what educational researcher Meira

Levinson has called a “civic empowerment gap” (316) based on race and class divisions in the American educational system. Acknowledging this gap in public writing courses is vital because it impacts the way we frame public participation and the efficacy of public discourse for our students. In practical terms, for public writing projects in basic writing classrooms, this gap can have a constraining effect on students’ perception of the value of public writing assignments, their understanding of their public agency, and their attitudes towards participating in public life.

Rather than simply lamenting this gap, however, I argue that it provides an opportunity for basic writing teachers to do the work of public and civic empowerment where it matters most. To do this work, we need to develop a public writing pedagogy that resists culturally homogeneous conceptions of students as budding public citizens and instead draws on students’ experiences and perceptions of public life as a rich site of invention and participation. A variety of different pedagogical strategies can help us understand the incomes of public writing. Here, I focus on literacy narrative as a genre of public writing that can enact this pedagogy. Though the literacy narrative is often described as a genre positioned between student voice and academic discourse, placing the literacy narrative in the context of public writing positions it within a space that a growing body of research on civic engagement has termed as a space between “voice” and public “influence” (Cohen and Kahne; Allen and Light). The literacy narrative has often been linked to a growing sense of civic agency and conceived as a genre that enables students to recognize the public agency of their personal experience and voice (Danielewicz; DeRosa; Soliday “Translating Self”; *Politics of Remediation*). I build on this understanding of the literacy narrative by acknowledging its role as a public genre, examining the analogous relationship of the literacy narrative to other genres of public discourse and exploring the literacy narrative not simply as a public genre itself but as a site of continued rhetorical invention and public engagement.

The “Civic Empowerment Gap” and Its Implications for Basic Writing

Though many public writing classrooms are designed to promote civic engagement (Ervin), there are distinct differences between civic education and public writing. Public writing pedagogy is most often rooted to the work of writing classrooms and often conceives of writing and rhetoric as civic action (Ervin), public activism (Mathieu; Wells; Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel),

or discourse in the public sphere (Wells, Weisser, Farmer). Contemporary civic education programs, by contrast, are often more broadly focused on initiating students into civic life and enabling them to understand the roles that they might play as citizens. Unlike earlier civic education programs, many civic education programs developed over the past twenty years are now action-focused rather than knowledge-focused and seek to cultivate students' abilities to engage in public discourse. Rather than pursuing the broader project of synthesizing these two pedagogies, we might draw on the research in civic education to explore how conditions of economic, cultural, and academic inequity shape students' perceptions of public participation and impact their attitudes and responses to public writing assignments.

A 2009 report prepared by PACE (Philanthropy for Civic Engagement) documents how "increases in voting, volunteering, and other forms of civic engagement are driven disproportionately by young people from higher-income families and communities" (Zaff, Youniss, and Gibson 6). The report points to a range of educational studies that have shown that this distinct difference in civic participation is not driven by the "disinterest" of lower-income groups but by "an imbalanced distribution of educational, political, and/or civic resources and opportunities" (7). In *No Citizen Left Behind*, Meira Levinson terms this imbalance "the civic empowerment gap" (48). In contrast to arguments that lower-income students are less interested in civic engagement, Levinson argues "the civic empowerment gap is no more natural or inevitable than the academic achievement gap is" (48). For Levinson, this gap points to structural and material inequities that must be addressed, but it also points to the need to rethink and adapt civic education for students from different cultural and economic backgrounds. She argues that, "schools need to take seriously the knowledge and experiences of low-income youth and adults of color—to teach in ways that are consonant with and that even build upon their knowledge and experience, in ways that are engaging and empowering rather than disaffecting and disempowering" (54). Levinson's argument stands in stark contrast to the approach of traditional civic education, or "old civics," which presumed homogeneous understandings of students as potential civic actors and privileged knowledge of civic life and institutions over student experiences.

Instead, Levinson argues for "new civics" approaches, which she locates in the pedagogical project known as *action civics*. The methods of action civics are more closely aligned with the goals and objectives of public writing classrooms. Though action civics and public writing pedagogy are different projects, action civics uses rhetorical performance and reflection

as key forms of civic participation. Levinson presents the Mikva Challenge, a Chicago-based youth civic engagement initiative, as a key example. She argues that the “six stages of civic action” that the Mikva Challenge presents are representative of most action civics initiatives across the country: “examine your community; choose an issue; research the issue and set a goal; analyze power; develop strategies; take action to affect policy” (225). Such projects ask students to “learn through citizenship and not just about citizenship” while also asking students to “reflect upon the experience as a means of consolidating their learning and empowering them to take effective action in the future” (225). These stages of action will seem immediately familiar to many public writing teachers and point to an important connection between new approaches to civic education in K-12 education and many action-oriented approaches to public writing.

What is distinctive about Levinson’s approach, however, is her focus on how the perspectives, socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and prior experiences students bring to bear on civic life shape their visions of civic participation. Levinson’s work points to the importance of understanding how differences in race, class, and community shape students’ relationship to public life. For Levinson, cultural difference is not a pre-political condition to transcend, but a rich resource for developing pedagogies that draw on students’ experiences with power and participation. Levinson’s argument resonates with research on basic writing that has looked at how issues of race, language, economic class, and schooling shape basic writing students’ relationship to academic writing (Adler-Kassner and Harrington *Basic Writing*; Gray-Rosendale; Carter; Horner and Lu). At the same time, her action-oriented approach reflects what Victor Villanueva has characterized as a need to reconceive basic writers “as rhetorical power players. . .” (101), as rhetorical agents who can work with teachers to challenge and subvert institutional racism and inequity in higher education (103). Referencing Bartholomae, Villanueva argues that “inventing the university” is:

a mutually conscious decision, not just foisted on basic writers but encouraged as a jointly agreed upon strategy, not with the idea that students become like teachers but rather that students learn how to gain the trust of teachers so that a communal learning can take place, what Fanon calls “a world of reciprocal recognitions.” (103)

While this research has often focused on academic writing, both its insistence on bringing students’ voices, perspectives, and identities into discussions of

literacy and the strategies it provides for enabling students to develop a critical understanding of their literacies can be brought to bear on public writing scholarship. Basic writing research on the dynamic relationship between student identities and academic literacy can be utilized to unpack both the barriers to public engagement that our students face and the potential access points to public discourse that are rooted in their experiences.

Levinson's discussion of "action civics" provides for engaging students in reflective, critical acts of public participation and illustrates the necessity of pedagogical approaches that negotiate the continuum between personal voice and public influence in public writing. Recognizing students' public incomes is not sufficient to foster students' sense of public engagement and agency. To do this requires developing strategies that enable students to recognize how the attitudes, experiences, and knowledge of public life that they bring to public writing can serve as a rich source of rhetorical invention for public writing. Following Villanueva, we need to extend Bartholomae's formative understanding of how basic writing students' "invent the university" (4) by exploring how they also invent the public when they compose public writing projects. Such an approach can help us perceive how differences in class, race, and prior education present specific opportunities and barriers to public as well as academic writing. By attuning ourselves to how basic writers draw on their experiences, knowledge, and attitudes to invent the public, we can usefully complicate our understanding of how socioeconomic, geographic, linguistic, and cultural differences shape our students' perceptions of public discourse and their sense of public voice and agency. While this will require the development of a wide range of pedagogical strategies, the literacy narrative, a common assignment in many basic writing classrooms, offers perhaps one of the best opportunities for negotiating the relationship between students' public incomes and the outcomes of public writing classes.

Literacy Narratives at the Nexus of Public Voice and Influence

A rich body of work on the literacy narrative has pointed to the politics of the genre and its ability, as Mary Soliday has argued, to enable basic writing students to "translate" private experiences into public discourses (*Politics of Remediation* 150). In "Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narratives," Soliday explains that "in focusing upon those moments when the self is on the threshold of possible intellectual, social, and emotional development, literacy narratives become sites of self-translation where writers

can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds” (511). Soliday’s understanding of “self-translation” usefully locates the literacy narrative as a site of rhetorical tension and negotiation, one that captures the push and pull of students’ interactions with public discourse. Jane Danielewicz has argued that personal writing, like the literacy narrative, fosters public writing by investing students with authority and adding an element of risk to student writing: “Students become invested as writers when they realize that being articulate *when something is at stake* (when they feel personally vulnerable, not when they are secure) is what launches individuals into public life” (444). Such writing connects the concept of voice, which has been critiqued in critical readings of expressivism, to “social action and power” (423). Understood in this way, literacy narratives are positioned at the nexus between students’ private and public lives, and the construction of the literacy narrative serves as an opportunity for teachers and students to engage in the dynamic production of a public self.

In the same way that research on the literacy narrative has pointed to the narratives of academic access that often surface in students’ literacy narratives, teaching the literacy narrative in the context of a public writing classroom can orient us towards the narratives of public life that frame students’ conceptions of public participation and agency. In “Successes, Victims, and Prodigies: ‘Master’ and ‘Little’ Cultural Narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre,” Kara Poe Alexander has shown how students’ literacy narratives often contain both “master narratives” of academic success, access, and victimhood and “little narratives” that are “more individualized and situated” and that “critique and challenge the dominant master narratives” (611). Alexander notes that little narratives are “often told by marginalized groups, such as women and minorities, whose stories run counter to the dominant literacy myths” (611). Her analysis of these little narratives in student writing leads her to argue for the role writing teachers can play in helping students recognize the power of their little narratives and in critically confronting the literacy myths that they often invoke in their literacy narratives (625). The analytical approach that Alexander maps out can also be used to help students confront master narratives of public engagement and agency and attune teachers to the little narratives of public life and engagement in students’ literacy narratives.

Rather than beginning with public issues, specific sites of public discourse, or public policy, we can begin with students’ experiences and work alongside students to unpack the master and little narratives of public life we find in their literacy narratives and explore opportunities from mov-

ing from voice to public engagement and influence. We might think, for example, of a student whose literacy experience entails the feeling that she has been betrayed by her writing instruction after a low SAT writing score. Such experiences contain immense potential for public engagement, but for that engagement to take place students need to negotiate the barriers that often stand between their personal voice and their possibilities for public influence. Literacy narratives are not simply assignments that are an end in themselves but can also be seen as sites for further invention.

Soliday and Alexander have shown that the literacy narrative is a genre at the nexus of the private and public, but arguing for the role of the literacy narrative in promoting public engagement requires extending their arguments in two ways. First, we can conceive of the literacy narrative as an adaptive public performance, one that not only fosters students' perception of their public agency, but that should also be considered as both an act of public rhetoric and as a site of rhetorical invention where teachers can help students see critical connections between their literacy narratives and other public genres. Second, because literacy narratives operate at the nexus between the private and the public, they can offer teachers insights into students' dispositions and knowledge of public life, especially when they are conceived of as a site for developing public arguments out of students' own experiences. A good deal of scholarship on the literacy narrative has pointed to its role as a public genre, but arguing for the literacy narrative's place in the public writing curriculum requires understanding its relationship to the assignments and genres of the public writing classroom. This places the literacy narrative in the context of one of the key areas of conflict in public writing pedagogy—the debate regarding the authenticity of public writing assignments.

Advocates for the public turn in composition have pointed to the need to account for students' public or civic identities (Welch, Mathieu, Ervin), but this research has often begun with considerations of assignments and how they can embody particular conceptions of public participation and agency for students rather than the experiences, attitudes, and knowledge students bring to public life. This conversation has tended to focus on the authenticity of public writing assignments—their relationship to authentic sites of public discourse, their circulation through real-world networks of public discourse, and their power to generate public persuasion (Wells, Weisser, Welch, Mathieu, Farmer, Gogan). If we survey the literature on public writing pedagogy, we find a range of genres often thought of as "authentic"—zines and counter-public genres (Farmer), activist multimodal texts (Sheridan,

Baker, and Michel), street newspapers (Mathieu), community published texts (Parks), public service announcements (Selfe and Selfe), and genres found in service learning or community literacy spaces (Coogan; Heilker; Long). Each of these genres gains its authenticity through its “publicness”—its capacity for circulation and efficacy in a realm of public discourse outside of the classroom and its relationship to specific, interactive ecologies of writing (Rivers and Weber 190).

This emphasis on authenticity often leads to theoretical descriptions of the classroom’s relationship to the public that conceive of it as being closer to or further from the authentic public realm. Classroom publics are “micropublics,” which are part of the larger public discourse (Wells; Donnelly qtd in Farmer 9) or “protopublic spheres” (Eberly; Donnelly qtd. in Farmer 9) that conceive of the classroom as a preparatory public. Such conceptions of classroom publics are critiqued by arguments for service learning (Heilker), which promote placing students in the rhetorical ecologies of community organizations so that they can learn to take up rhetorical tactics and genres as participant-observers within the community, as well as develop a critical understanding of the role the genres play in constituting the work of the community. This key point of tension in public writing pedagogy underlines an important point: public writing classrooms project public space and conceptions of public agency for students, and public writing assignments, based on their authenticity or inauthenticity, can enrich or impoverish students’ public agency.

Recent contributions to this debate have begun to argue for a more expansive understanding of agency and public participation. Brian Gogan’s recent argument for the agency of the much-maligned “letter to the editor assignment” is one recent example of this ongoing debate over whether or not public writing assignments can capture realities of political participation. The letter to the editor, as Gogan argues, has long served as a lightning rod for critiques of inauthentic public writing throughout the development of public writing pedagogy, from its early critique in Susan Wells “Rogue Cops and Health Care” to its more recent critique in Frank Farmer’s *Beyond the Public Turn*. For example, Christian Weisser, in *Beyond Academic Discourse*, argues that while the letter to the editor “could *potentially* be a useful writing assignment,” it could also lead students to “come to feel that participating in ‘public discourse,’ if letters to the editor are indeed public discourse, has little effect on what happens in their world. They surmise that the public sphere is a realm where nothing actually gets accomplished—at least not by them” (94). Ultimately, this assignment has become the shibboleth of

public writing pedagogy largely because it is seen as an assignment that teaches students to value inauthentic public writing, or classroom writing masquerading as public writing.

Gogan argues, however, that such arguments tend to set up a rigid distinction between writing in the classroom and writing in real-world contexts: "To avoid this situational binary that fundamentally rejects pedagogy, public rhetoric and writing teachers need to supplement the definition of authenticity that is tied to location with a definition that connotes the practices by which a writer or reader might legitimate reality" (544). Gogan illustrates that arguments that hold authentic public persuasion as the end goal can actually limit our opportunities to introduce students to public writing. In contrast to public writing pedagogies that argue against assignments like the letters to the editor based on their inauthenticity and lack of real-world "efficacy" or change, Gogan argues for a public writing pedagogy "that emphasizes the premise of participation in addition to emphasizing the possibility of persuasion" (550). This approach recognizes that "an affirmative definition of efficacy must . . . begin with the initial step rhetors must take to attempt change, and that step appears to be participation" (548). Participation and persuasion are a continuum rather than a mutually exclusive binary (544). Gogan's argument for reconceiving participation is important, as it brings with it possibilities for exploring the variety of factors that engage students in public participation, shape the forms of public participation they choose, impact their understandings of their public agency, and prohibit their engagement.

Bringing participation into the debate over the efficacy and authenticity of public writing assignments opens up opportunities to expand public writing pedagogy in two important and interrelated ways: (1) by offering a greatly expanded sense of the assignments and genres that can be considered part of the public writing classroom and (2) by putting the incomes of public writing and public participation more squarely into focus in discussions of public writing curricula. Understanding participation and efficacy as a continuum greatly impacts the way that we understand the design of public writing assignments and curricula. Positioning persuasion as a possible end, rather than as the defining characteristic of public writing assignments, can enable public writing teachers to develop curricula and assignments that can more fully attend to the intersubjective processes of students' participation in public writing. We can, in other words, design assignments that put students' incomes—their experiences of public life, attitudes about public participation, and senses of public agency—more fully in dialogue with the

spaces and contexts of public persuasion. For students who have fallen into the civic empowerment gap that Levinson describes, this shift in perspective is vital. Concerns with publicity, authenticity, and efficacy (Gogan 537) are central to our understanding of public rhetoric, but overemphasizing these elements can lead us to ignore how participation in public discourse is viewed and enacted among students of varying socioeconomic and cultural communities. As basic writing teachers, we can challenge this tendency by exploring how experience, culture, and class shape students' perception of public participation.

The literacy narrative is an assignment that captures this understanding of public participation and its relationship to public persuasion or efficacy. If we use conceptions of public authenticity and effective public persuasion as criteria for the value of public writing, the literacy narrative may be read as having limited value as a public genre, as it is often written outside of the contexts of the publics and counterpublics described in public writing research. However, if we conceive of the literacy narrative as occupying a space between public participation and voice and public persuasion, we can begin to unpack its value for public writing curricula. As Anne Marie Hall and I have recently argued in the pages of this journal, positioning the literacy narrative in a curriculum where it is surrounded by powerful genres of academic writing can quickly diminish the agency students often gain from it by encouraging students to see the genre as a bridge to more important academic writing (75). We reconceived the literacy narrative as a genre that can be used to build an entire basic writing curriculum, rather than as a bridge to academic writing. Here, I want to suggest that the literacy narrative can also serve as the basis for developing a public writing curriculum for basic writing classrooms. However, I also want to take the argument a step further by saying that within such a curriculum the literacy narratives of our basic writing students can challenge us as educators to envision new strategies for teaching public writing to students whose conceptions of public life have been shaped by the economic, cultural, and academic inequities that Levinson has described as the "civic empowerment gap." Though not all of our students will fall into this category, a good many will, and their literacy narratives might teach us how, as Levinson has argued, to "build upon their knowledge and experiences, in ways that are engaging and empowering" (54).

Building a Public Writing Curriculum from the Literacy Narrative

Literacy narratives can be paired with the teaching of public writing in a variety of ways. In her study of the literacy narrative and “rhetorical awareness,” Susan DeRosa’s approach, for example, specifically links literacy narratives to public writing assignments, and in doing so argues that such projects promote a vision of “literacy in action,” in which “writers recognize their potential as writers to evoke change and to write for contexts beyond the classroom and in the public sphere” (11). DeRosa illustrates how pairing literacy narratives with public writing assignments can sponsor students understanding of their civic agency and their future public action. In the classrooms DeRosa describes, students use literacy narratives as a means of reflecting on acts of public engagement, such as service learning projects. This approach is highly valuable, but I want to argue here for reconceiving the literacy narrative as a genre of public participation that can be adapted *for* public persuasion or that can be utilized as a rich site of rhetorical invention that can *lead students to* additional genres and opportunities for public persuasion. To reconceive the literacy narrative in this way means, practically, reframing the literacy narrative as both the beginning point and centerpiece of a public writing curriculum.

In addition to providing basic writing teachers with key strategies for understanding how our students’ conceive of public participation and their public agency, understanding the positions that the literacy narrative can take on the continuum between public participation and persuasion speaks to what contemporary research on youth and civic engagement has termed the relationship between “voice and influence” (Allen and Light; Cohen and Kahne; Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen; Zuckerman). In their contribution to the recent collection *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in a Digital Age*, Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, and Danielle Allen argue that the expansion of opportunities for cultural participation brought about by new media is reshaping our understanding of civic participation (37). Based on studies of youth and civic engagement—some of which I will discuss below—they argue that youth are using new media to reshape our understanding of “participatory politics”: “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern” (41). To understand how youth develop public voice and seek to exert public influence requires “re-examining the kinds of socializing experiences that are likely to lead youth (and others) to commit to civic and

political engagement, clarifying the literacies that are necessary for success in participatory politics, and identifying the types of support that will be necessary for engagement of this kind” (47). Like the discussion of participation and persuasion above, this work recognizes participation and influence as a continuum and points towards an understanding of participation as an act of negotiating the relationship between personal and public identities.

I touch briefly upon this research here because it illustrates, I believe, the richness of exploring the literacy narrative in the context of public writing classrooms. This growing body of research brings us back to Danielewicz’s argument that despite a tradition of research that has questioned whether “voice is a legitimate concept,” personal genres can be understood as opportunities for students to cultivate a public voice (423). The published literacy narratives that many of us teach—bell hooks, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Malcolm X—have always underlined this point. A more recent development, however, is the role digital media and digital publishing platforms play in enabling personal narratives to circulate as public arguments. For example, in her study of the online storytelling practices of DREAMers, Cristina Beltrán has shown how the young Dream Act activists who created the website *Dreamers Adrift* have utilized social media to “create an alternative public sphere” in which they share personal narratives, or “cyber-*testimonios*” (91) of their own lives as undocumented youth to “queer the politics of immigration” (81). Such acts of public voice utilize new media as a platform for storytelling practices that enable DREAMers to represent themselves not “as a criminalized population who are simply spoken *about* but instead are *speaking* subjects and agents of change” (81). What research like Beltrán’s shows is that the cultivation of voice is central to our understanding of the public participation practices of youth in online spaces and that personal genres can be adapted and used for public participation and political change.

Seen in this context, literacy narratives have perhaps more civic potential than a range of other genres that we teach across the first year curriculum because they create rich opportunities for discussing public audience and ethos, circulation, delivery, kairos, medium, and even recomposition into other genres. When we compare the public voice and persona that students must construct as they develop and share their literacy narratives, we cannot help but notice that literacy narratives break the comfortable anonymity that so often characterizes the rhetorical audiences of many academic assignments, including the letter to the editor. In addition, in many of our classrooms, literacy narratives are not simply read by teachers, but are performed, enacted. Students do not simply “read” their literacy

narratives; they often, as one of my colleagues puts it, give “readings” of them.¹ Such performances do not simply have a political context, but can also be understood and fostered as an important entryway for students into civic life as well as academic life.

An example of a recent literacy narrative from my department's basic writing program illustrates how the assignment can offer an entryway for integrating public writing and civic education in the basic writing classroom. Working with a talented teacher, the student not only wrote her narrative but also developed and rehearsed its delivery for her audience so that she could ultimately upload a video of her reading the narrative to the *Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives*. Her literacy narrative, like so many in the archive, becomes less a classroom assignment and more a public performance. As she reads her narrative, her work on rhetorical delivery and connecting with her audience is fully on display as she modulates her tone and uses her distinctive voice to underline her main ideas. Her narrative, which focuses on the earliest literacy experience of learning to read, places us in a moment of tension between herself and her siblings, who joke and laugh at her inability to read. We are aware that while this experience is not unique, the author has something important to tell us about the relationship between family and literacy and the way in which familial discourses about our abilities and limitations can impact our sense of agency and ultimately shape our goals. At the same time, however, while her literacy narrative evokes a powerful public voice and serves as a moment of public participation, the move towards public influence or persuasion requires an additional process of invention. To understand the public potential of her literacy narrative we need to think critically about the public processes, knowledge, and conventions of the genre itself and the possibilities of circulation and impact that the genre might have.

When we compare the student's literacy narrative to the public writing projects in many of our courses, we find striking similarities—the ability to use narrative to develop a significant argument about public life and the political forces that shape it, the construction of a rhetorical ethos that creates identification with the audience, the ability to use voice and tone to deliver the argument in a compelling style, and the rhetorical savvy to use a digital medium to help the author connect with his or her audience and increase its chances of circulation. While the literacy narrative is sometimes considered out of place in academic writing, as a rhetorical performance it shares tactics and rhetorical processes that can promote further public discourse and circulation. We might conceive, for example, of a basic writ-

ing classroom where student literacy narratives are linked to the writing of public arguments in which students define themselves in relationship to the discourses of remediation that surround US higher education. Such a classroom could draw on the powerful ethos that students develop in their literacy narratives in order to create discourses that contest the view of remedial students as “underprepared” or “mediocre.” We can imagine how public audiences of university administrators and teachers might serve as a compelling audience for these projects.

Constructing such an audience, however, brings up questions of circulation and impact that can lead to rich opportunities for civic education. Students can be challenged to think of how their literacy narratives might embody a particular *kairos* that enables their argument to have more rhetorical impact. In addition, students seeking public audiences for their literacy narratives might also think about how their performances might be read in specific public contexts. Recently, Shereen Inayatulla has shown how, for example, literacy narratives can sometimes be read in ways that create troubling subject positions for their authors, such as the position of “model minorities” (7). There is every possibility that students’ narratives could be read in ways that diminutively characterize or exoticize them while ignoring their political agency. Students’ public performances could be read as students publicly performing the role of the underprepared student made good. This is certainly an authentic problem of public discourse, one that can be used to challenge students to think about how they might use their public rhetoric to confront this reading, whether in their literacy narrative itself or in future public discourse. Such an assignment can go far beyond the “inauthentic” public argument assignments that are often critiqued in the literature on public writing and offer our basic writing students not only an awareness that their writing can have impact, but also the rhetorical education to make an impact.

In this important sense, literacy narratives can enable us to understand public writing as a complicated, even agonistic site of writing where students seek to gain access to public discourse but also where they negotiate their own conceptions of their public selves. This means that while literacy narratives and other assignments might enable us to critically understand students’ public incomes, we should not reduce them to a pedagogical starting point, or a set of prior dispositions to be transcended as students’ gain access to the public sphere. At the same time, we should not hold students’ public incomes as an end point in themselves, which can create problematic identities such as “model minorities” (Inayatulla 7). Instead, we may glimpse

students' public incomes at various times and places in our public writing curricula, through literacy narratives, reflective writing, and other assignments and understand them as opportunities to work with our students to critically pursue opportunities for voice and influence.

Conclusion

This article has argued that basic writing teachers and scholars can challenge public writing pedagogy to attend to the incomes of student's public writing and develop a public writing curriculum out of students' experiences and voices. I would like to conclude by suggesting that this project can also play a role in helping teachers of basic writing challenge the frames of policy discourse (Adler-Kassner, *The Activist WPA*; Adler-Kassner and Harrington "Here and Now") that position basic writing students outside of public discourse. As Mike Rose has recently noted in an article for *Inside Higher Education*, "The de facto philosophy of education we do have is a strictly economic one. This is dangerous, for without a civic and moral core it could easily lead to a snazzy 21st-century version of an old and shameful pattern in American education: working-class people get a functional, skills-and-drills education geared toward lower-level work" ("Remediation at a Crossroads"). Rose's statement resonates with descriptions of remediation in national policy discourse on civic education. This discourse often refers to the education of remedial students as a "civic challenge" (Astin 130) that needs to be addressed in order to increase social and economic mobility rather than as a process of educating publicly engaged students. We need to develop arguments that draw on both the public writing of our basic writing students and our own studies of the public incomes our students bring to public writing.

I have pointed here to the necessity of bringing the voices of basic writing students into public writing, but to resist and alter the frame of "remedial student as civic challenge," we need to also conduct more research into the civic lives of our basic writing students. Such research will include not only their political attitudes and their conceptions of the political agency available to them but also the forms of political participation familiar to them, as well as the public genres and civic media that they have experience using outside of our classrooms. This research is important because without it we might run the risk of assuming what our basic writing students *don't know* about public participation and persuasion and overlooking what they *do know*. As Nancy Welch, Ellen Cushman, and others have taught us, the as-

sumption that social change cannot be successfully carried out by working class people is a form of “historical amnesia” (Welch 124). While acknowledging the civic empowerment gap, we should not construct a problematic vision of ourselves as public “missionaries” any more than we should portray ourselves as the literacy missionaries that Cushman critiques (Cushman; Welch 124). We simply need to know more about the prior civic experiences of our basic writing students, their prior engagement with political writing and genres, the discourse of their civic communities, and their conceptions of their own public agency.

One of the key areas of public participation we need to explore are our students’ use of social media. The *Youth & Participatory Politics Survey Project* (YPPSP), a recent national study conducted by Cathy Cohen and Joseph Kahne on the civic participation of American youth from 18-25, points to several compelling lines of inquiry. The project found, for example, that “interest-driven” participation, participation not driven by politics, in online settings can be a powerful predictor of political participation: “Youth who were highly involved in nonpolitical, interest-driven activities are more than *five times* as likely to engage in participatory politics and nearly *four times* as likely to participate in all political acts, compared with those infrequently involved in such activities” (ix). Such nonpolitical activities include sharing information on a variety of topics not normally considered political, engaging in online discussions, and many other daily uses of social media. When the authors of the YPPSP study broke their survey respondents into two groups, those with a combined household income above \$60,000 and those with a combined household income was below \$60,000, they had to conclude that “when we take note of income we find that it does not have an effect on interest-driven participation” (23). Such claims should encourage us to examine the types of public participation that our basic writing students have prior knowledge of and to draw on their experiences develop opportunities to support their public writing.

Cohen and Kahane also return us to a consideration of how voice becomes influence: “the promise of a democratic society is predicated on the belief that political actors have more than voice—they must also have influence” (xi). Influence, perhaps more than access, is the challenge of any public writing classroom and perhaps a central reason for the immense importance of public writing pedagogy. For our basic writing students, influence is perhaps even more politically difficult, as the discourse of social mobility is powerful at the policy and curricular level and has a tendency to diminish both students’ civic experiences and the opportunities for

students to engage in public writing in our classrooms. But basic writing teachers have often played a central role in confronting and permeating the borders of academic sovereignty created by educational policy, most importantly the border between students deemed worthy and unworthy of a college education. Basic writing teachers and scholars should extend this mission by confronting and resisting the borders of public access and influence—borders constructed by educational inequities that could limit the public participation of our students.

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Note

1. I am indebted to my colleague Melba Major for this concept and for introducing me to the literacy narrative of her student, which I discuss and which can be found in the *Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives* by searching the title, "It Says, 'Learn How to Read.'" While I have argued that literacy narratives can link to opportunities for public writing, even if they are not explicitly intended to advance a public argument, there are ample examples of literacy narratives in the DALN that take a specific public turn. See Keith Dorwick's "Getting Called Fag" in the "Editors' Picks" section, among others, for excellent examples.

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“Ideas about Human Possibilities”: Connecticut's PA 12-40 and Basic Writing in the Era of Neoliberalism

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ABSTRACT: In 2012, the State of Connecticut enacted Public Act 12-40, legislation that dramatically changed the way remedial education was theorized, designed, and delivered at community colleges and regional state universities in Connecticut. One of the most controversial features of this legislative movement was that it appeared to establish a “floor” for matriculation into open admissions institutions in Connecticut—thereby effectively abandoning students who scored below certain cut-off scores (at or below the 8th grade level on our standardized placement test). This essay reports on an ethnographic study conducted with individuals enrolled in one of the first classes designed for this cohort of students. This group of students provides professionals interested in questions related to access and higher education a unique opportunity to reflect on key questions for our profession and our nation, framed and embodied by very real people with unique life histories.

KEYWORDS: social justice; adult education; Public Act 12-40; neoliberalism; basic writing

Stories have power. The power to change things. Thus history is not dead but alive, alive in the sense that our collective memory is what provides the starting points for understanding our contemporary world. Alive also in the sense that through these narratives we make accessible certain ideas about human possibilities and foreclose others.—Tony Holt, *Thinking Historically* (11)

CONNECTICUT'S PA 12-40

In 2012, the State of Connecticut enacted landmark legislation that remade developmental education in our state. This new law, Public Act 12-40, dramatically changed the way remedial education was theorized, designed,

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and delivered at our community colleges and regional state universities (the University of Connecticut was not affected by this legislation). This legislation has drawn considerable national attention (Fain; Bailey, Hughes, and Jaggars), and it appears to have inspired similar legislation in Florida, Tennessee, and other states (Crandall and Soares; Hassel, Klausman, Giordano, O'Rourke, Roberts, Sullivan, and Toth; Turk, Nellum, and Soares). Impatient with very modest graduation rates among students who require remedial assistance in English and math, this legislation took the bold step of mandating an accelerated approach to developmental education, requiring all colleges in the system—twelve community colleges and four state universities—to offer a maximum of one semester of remedial work for any student requiring additional preparation for college. Furthermore, colleges were required to offer developmental students who were deemed “likely to succeed in college level work with supplemental support” the opportunity to enroll in a first-year composition class that provided embedded support, following the Peter Adams co-requisite model pioneered at the Community College of Baltimore County (Connecticut 1; Adams, Gearhart, Miller, and Roberts; Cho, Kopko, Jenkins, and Jaggars). As one might expect, there was considerable debate and controversy about this legislation, especially during the two years between the passage of the bill in 2012 and the required implementation date of fall 2014. During the two years given to college personnel before the required implementation date, English teachers at Connecticut’s community colleges and regional state universities set busily to work researching, designing, and piloting new remedial programs for students. We are now four years into this radical experiment of redesigning a state’s approach to developmental education by legislative mandate. Because of the complexity of this task and the many unanswered questions about pedagogy that have arisen during this process (some of which go back a long way in the history of basic writing), it appears that developmental curriculum in Connecticut will likely to be a work in progress for many years to come.

One of the most controversial features of this legislative movement was that it appeared to establish a “floor” for matriculation into open admissions institutions in Connecticut—thereby effectively abandoning students who scored below cut-off scores which were at or below the 8th grade level on our standardized placement test. (Community colleges in the state of Connecticut all use Accuplacer; regional state universities and the University of Connecticut use SAT or ACT scores. PA 12-40 mandates that all campuses must use “multiple measures” of assessment for placing students.) To many, this meant that we were, in effect, closing the open door

at Connecticut community colleges. As Chris Mullin reports in a recent brief for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), “In policy conversations, especially those concerned with policies related to access and choice, there is a silent movement to redirect educational opportunity to 'deserving' students” (4). The initial idea when PA 12-40 was enacted was to remand these underprepared students to regional remediation centers and adult education programs off campus. After considerable debate and much public outcry, this position was softened, and colleges have now been allowed to develop regional “transitional strategies” for such students (Connecticut State). By state law, these strategies must be offered at little or no cost and cannot involve a student’s financial aid.

As English teachers in the state of Connecticut got to work responding to PA 12-40, meetings and brainstorming sessions were conducted statewide over the course of two years as we talked about how we might operationalize this new approach to teaching basic reading and writing. During this time, community colleges across the state implemented a variety of transitional strategies courses for our most underprepared students. Some of these strategies relied on existing adult education programs in local towns. Some relied on software programs that focus primarily on the development of reading skills, with the goal of helping students earn better scores on Accuplacer and thus help them test into an approved developmental class. Others, like the one I eventually offered, were more ambitious.

The English department at my home institution, Manchester Community College (MCC), in Manchester, Connecticut, set forth designing, testing, and implementing a new developmental curriculum over the course of two years (2012 - 2014), and as it turned out, I designed the transitional strategies curriculum for our college. This class eventually became English 9000, a kind of boot camp course designed to help students transition into one of our basic reading and writing classes. The development of this course required a great deal of research and discussion, and it occasioned considerable debate among my colleagues in the English department at MCC. I offered this class, English 9000, for the first time in the fall of 2014. It was offered free to students. Required textbooks were also purchased for students, funded by a state grant to our town’s adult education program. The class had an enrollment cap of 20 students, and by the time the course began in late August, it was full. Students who earned a 90 or below on their combined Accuplacer Reading Comprehension and Sentence Skills tests and had taken our challenge essay were advised to register for this class. Each of

these students met with a counselor or advisor to confirm that this was an appropriate placement.

English 9000 was a fascinating course to teach. There were certainly many surprises, and the three of us who taught this class—myself plus two embedded tutors—greatly enjoyed the time we spent with the remarkable group of students in this class. It was a very powerful professional experience for me, bringing a deeply moving human dimension to all sorts of abstract academic questions about opportunity, access, and the ideal of open admissions institutions—even for someone like me, who has taught for many years at an open admissions institution and has taught a wide variety of developmental education classes during this time. The students were certainly very underprepared for college-level work, but they were also very capable of learning—and many did learn enough to move on to one of our two developmental course offerings (which are two versions of the same course: English 93, a traditional 3-credit basic reading and writing class; and English 96, a six-credit version of English 93, that offers students three additional hours of class time and significant embedded support). As readers may know, we have all kinds of research now—from neuroscience (Kandel, Schwartz, Jessell, Siegelbaum, and Hudspeth; Doidge; Healy), from studies of IQ and intelligence (Nisbett, Aronson, Blair, Dickens, Flynn, Halpern, and Turkheimer), from psychologists studying the power of social-psychological interventions (Yeager and Walton), from research on how people learn (Bransford, Pellegrino, and Donovan), and from Carol Dweck on “mindsets”—that has shown that intellectual and academic ability is not “fixed.” On the contrary, it can be developed under the right conditions. We also know that it is not easy to “untangle the complicated teleology of success or failure in higher education” (Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer 197). Students who test poorly on placement tests and enroll at community colleges typically bring with them rich and often “non-traditional” life histories that have helped shape both what they have learned and how they approach the academic enterprise. Much of this has been determined by class, economic inequality, and family resources. This does not mean, however, that students who score weakly on college placement tests can’t learn or that their cause is hopeless. Under the right conditions, all students can learn and make progress. The key concern for developmental educators, of course, is establishing the right conditions, which must take into account a host of variables—both in and outside of educational settings—that are often actively at work in the lives of very underprepared students.

Curriculum design for developmental courses is a crucial variable here (Hassel and Giordano “Blurry”; Hassel and Giordano “First-Year”; Hassel, Klausman, Giordano, O’Rourke, Roberts, Sullivan, and Toth). It is one of the key factors that can help establish the right conditions for students in developmental education classes. There is an emerging consensus in our profession that developmental students need a rich curriculum, full of interesting ideas, engaging readings, and some of the real work of college (Rose, *Back* 115-42; Hern “Unleashing”; Hern “Window”). Both Adams’s Accelerated Learning Program and Katie Hern’s accelerated curriculum in California—two curricular models that have become central to developmental education reform in recent years—are built around this principle. As Hern notes, too many basic reading and writing classes are “radically disconnected from the core purposes and habits of mind of a college education” (“Unleashing”). Perhaps most importantly, there is “no world of ideas in that classroom,” no sense of reading as “a way to join a larger discussion of issues that matter. No opportunity for students to climb into the upper reaches of Bloom’s taxonomy, weigh conflicting evidence, and develop their own well-informed viewpoints.” The tasks students are given in many cases bear “little relation to the kinds of reading, thinking, and writing they would see in a good college-level course.” Students encountering a reductive skill-and-drill curriculum three levels below college-level courses are, indeed, very likely *not* to persist and graduate. Their poor persistence and graduation rates should not surprise us. But it’s not the students who are failing—to a significant degree, it’s our curriculum. In his important essay, “Remediation at a Crossroads,” Mike Rose urges teachers of basic writing to make the most of this historic moment in our long engagement with developmental education to dramatically rethink our approach and pedagogy:

The big question is whether we will truly seize this moment and create for underprepared students a rich education in literacy and numeracy, or make some partial changes—more online instruction, shortened course sequences—but leave the remedial model intact.

Here and elsewhere (*Back; Possible; Lives; Why*), Rose works from a progressive democratic and economic model that will be important for us to consider as we think about community colleges and developmental education courses like this.

As we develop the next generation of developmental curriculum, we can build on the findings of neuroscience—and the link we can make

between Rose's understanding of the urgency of this moment and Carol Dweck's research on "mindsets." As readers may know, Dweck's research draws on "the revolutionary discovery that the human brain can change itself" (Doidge xvii). Much like a muscle, we now know that the brain can grow—developing new neural pathways and strengthening existing ones (Bransford, Pellegrino, and Donovan; Kandel, Schwartz, Jessell, Siegelbaum, and Hudspeth). Neural pathways can also decay and atrophy with disuse. These processes occur throughout our lifespan depending on what we ask our brains to do. Dweck has found that even what students *believe* about intelligence and the human brain helps determine how and what they learn ("Brainology"; Dweck *Mindsets*; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck). I began my English 9000 class with Dweck's "Brainology" essay and an additional article about neuroscience and brain plasticity in an attempt to challenge and displace what my students were likely to have believed about themselves and their potential. To borrow a phrase from Dweck, I was endeavoring to create "a different psychological world" for my students, who I believed had probably known mostly failure and frustration in English classes ("Brainology" 1). In general, taken cumulatively, this research by Dweck and others—in neuroscience, psychology, and intelligence—suggests that open admissions institutions shouldn't be turning students away simply because they have very low placement test scores. Instead, following Dweck and others, we should be theorizing our work as focused on "potential that can be realized through learning" ("Brainology" 1). Sharing this research with my students liberated them from restrictive and outdated understandings of cognitive development, and gave them reason to hope and work hard. The latest science and research outside of our discipline suggest that "potential" is what open admissions policies and developmental education should continue to be most fundamentally about.

JOURNEYS

So who were these students in English 9000? Where did they come from? And what might we learn from them about developmental education and community colleges? Since this class was among the first transitional strategies classes offered in the state under PA 12-40, there may be some value in pausing for a moment to examine this historic cohort of students. This group of students provides professionals interested in questions related to access and higher education a unique opportunity to reflect on key questions for our profession and our nation, framed and embodied by very real people

with unique life histories. Had the open door at Connecticut community colleges been closed, these students would have been turned away. Let's meet some of them at this historic moment in the history of Connecticut higher education—our first cohort of theoretically “undeserving” students.

Inspired by Betsy Bowen and Kathryn Nantz's work with GED students at an adult literacy center in Bridgeport, Connecticut, I designed and completed an ethnographic study with this cohort of adult education students, conducting semi-structured interviews with most of the students in this class.¹ My goal was to get a fuller understanding of the lives behind the statistics of our most underprepared developmental students. As it turns out, however, the most compelling data I gathered came not from my interviews, but from an essay assignment students completed as part of their coursework for English 9000, which invited them to talk about their family history and document their journey to MCC. I had hoped this assignment would allow students to tell a little bit of their family history and also help to position them in positive ways at the college. This assignment was also designed to give students the opportunity to write an essay using multiple paragraphs and get some practice quoting from assigned readings and discussing quotations from this work. The readings for this unit included two chapters from Ken Robinson's book about finding one's passion, *The Element*, and the illustrated children's book *Journey* by Aaron Becker. I wanted to give students in this class something beautiful to look at, and Becker's book also provided a powerful way to frame our “journey” theme for this unit. Students also read a story written by an MCC student, Sabina, about her journey from Russia to America and MCC, which was developed as part of another project I am working on, *The Community College Success Stories Project* (<http://www.communitycollegesuccessstories.org>).

The weekend I spent reading these essays was one of the most astonishing I have ever spent reading student written work. On a number of occasions, my jaw literally dropped open as I was reading them. Readers should know that we spent two weeks drafting these essays in class, and I spent a good deal of time during these weeks encouraging students to add additional depth and detail to their journey stories. The writing here represents finished, polished work. Of course, these samples don't show what my students can do responding to assigned readings, which we know is crucial for college-level writers (Sullivan “What”). Many of the students in this class were, indeed, eventually able to produce promising work in response to readings because they had become serious about improving their academic skills; they had committed to rereading, revision, and multiple drafts; and they

had embraced, following Carol Dweck, the idea that effort is an important part of success and produces learning and growth, especially if the challenge is significant, as it was here.

I invite readers to observe the rich diversity of lived human experience embodied in the excerpts from these essays below, and to consider what these stories may have to tell us about the value of open admissions institutions. We may also wish to consider what these excerpts might have to say about us—America, as a nation and a democracy. We have sought to democratize our system of higher education by creating open admissions institutions. We have provided opportunities to attend college to adult students regardless of their past history or academic record. These stories—this data set—communicate important information to us about who our students are and why they might be here—information that is very different than that communicated by raw numbers like placement test scores or program completion rates (Sullivan “Measuring”; Sullivan and Nielsen). These excerpts tell a very different, much more complex story about “democracy’s college”—one that is deeply embedded in global political movements, national and international history, economic realities for the poor and working class, and gender issues, along with more personal histories, aspirations, and ambitions (Bailey and Dynarski; Bourdieu and Passeron; Pickett; Reardon).

By attending carefully to stories like this—and data sets other than statistics—we help enact Stephanie L. Kershbaum’s recommendations about engaging diversity and difference. We can therefore be “*learning with*” our students rather than “*learning about*” them—“and thus always coming-to-know students. As its name implies, coming-to-know is a never-ending process, not a fixed destination; teachers never arrive at a place where they *know* a student” (57). Kershbaum suggests we have much to gain from this kind of orientation:

Recognizing the contingency of identity and remaining vigilant toward our own orientations to difference is important for us as teachers because our vantage points lead us to see our students in particular ways—some of which can be harmful and damaging. (9)

Kershbaum’s work related to how we choose to orient ourselves toward difference is supported by recent work on transitioning to higher education by Trevor Gale and Stephen Parker. Gale and Parker identify three distinct ways that a student’s transition to higher education is typically theorized in research literature: 1. transition as induction, defined as providing a

“fixed turning point” (739); 2. transition as development, defined as focusing primarily on identity development; and 3. transition “as becoming,” which essentially “rejects transition as a useful concept” (734) because “the concept of transition itself does not fully capture the fluidity of our learning or our lives” (743). Gale and Parker champion this third understanding of transition, which is newly emerging in the research literature, because it has the potential to generate “new thinking about transitions in HE [higher education] in socially inclusive ways” (735) and because it “emphasizes the complexities of life and the interdependence of ‘public issues’ and ‘private troubles’” (744). This is a theory of transition that could be of great value for individuals seeking to understand open admissions institutions and the students who attend them.

Here are some of the most powerful and moving moments from my students’ “Journey” essays:

Shernette

My name is Shernette Thompson. I was born in Jamaica in a small parish that is called St Mary. I am the baby of the five children. I attended school at age four until age fifteen. I did not get to attend high school because my mother could not afford to pay the fee. She needed us to help to take care of the farm. We had to go to the river to get water to water the vegetables. She planted cabbage, carrots, beans, and corn to bring to the market to sell to provide food for the family. On the land we had cows, chickens, and goats. In the morning we had to get up early to milk the cows before the calves got to their mother. After we get back we would had bring the goats out in the field before the sun get too hot and the grass get shriveled.

Nick

My family is from Van Buren Maine, which is a small town in the northern part of the state. One of the major ways of life is potato farming. My grandfather (PaPere), owned and managed one of these farms for many years. He sold the farm when potato prices fell and my great grandfather was very old and he could not assist with the farm because he had cataracts and became blind.

The family moved into the main part of town and PaPere got a job at the Air Force Base. He would plow the runways for the airplanes in the winter time and in the summer time, he was a painting contractor. Eventually he worked

year round at the Air Force Base. My other PaPere was a masonry worker. My other Mamere cleaned houses. My grandparents did not have a lot of money. PaPere Boutot grew vegetables and hunted so his family would have food. My Mom and Dad grew up in Van Buren Maine. After High School my Dad joined the military. My Dad was stationed in Germany on a radio relay station; he would relay messages from one site to another. . . . I went to school in Coventry Connecticut. I was able to see in grammar school. I knew how to read and write print. I lost my eye sight in middle school. I had a hard time dealing with it at first I am ok now. I am able to see when it is dark and light outside. I can see when there are lights on in a room. My retina cells died off that is why I became blind.

Octavia

My family is from North Carolina and Puerto Rico. My grandmother from North Carolina. My grandmother's name is Jacqueline Holmes. She was born in the south in 1952. She had work in the fields at an early age of twelve to help the family. She would get up every morning to go to the field to do whatever crop was ready at the time before she went to School. Then after school she had to clean, do homework cook, and help take care of her siblings. If her parents couldn't go back to the fields to work before it got dark, she would have to go. It was very hard growing up in the south, but her mother always taught that the "the family that prays together stays together." That is true in all walks of life. Besides working in the fields, there was little work for her father to do to make ends meet. He left the family behind and come up north to get a better job. Her mother and other kids where hard during this time. She of praying some nights her mother would go to bed hungry, So that the kids could eat. Finally her father got a job and saved enough money to send for the rest of the family. My grandmother drove the rest of the family to Connecticut, the day after she graduated from school. They were a happy family together once again. My grandmother always said, "There is nothing a person cannot do if they believe in themselves and mostly remember to pray."

Prama

My name is Prama Ro. I was born in a refugee Camp in Thailand in 1996. My parents were born in Burma, which is a country between Thailand and India and below China. In Burma, there are many cultures. My parents were from the Karen group. My family moved to Mae La refugee camp in Thailand because the Burmese soldiers burned down their village and were violent

toward the Karen people and they have to running from the Burmese soldiers. At that time, Burmese soldiers didn't care about people. They treated us the Karen like animals. They only wanted to be wealthy and they wanted to keep the power for them. They did not respect the Karen people. They used violence against the people. It took my family about a month to run from the Burmese soldiers. During that month, they had to live in the forest, find their own food and place to sleep.

My family got into the camp in 1984. They had a hard time living in the camp. My family lived there about 25 years. My siblings and I were born in the camp. I grew up in the camp. Life there was hard because we didn't have everything that we wanted. We had little education. To be able to go to school, we had to pay. My parents were lucky because they had jobs when many did not. The house that we lived in was made with bamboo and the roof was covered with leaves. At night, we used candles to read and study. The food, just rice, fish paste, oil, salt and Chile, was rationed every 15 days. Every day we ate the same thing. We carried water to our home in a bucket every afternoon.

We went to school in camp, but we didn't have everything that we needed so the education was poor. The school was also made of bamboo and leaves. We didn't have any power in school and we didn't have computers.

Javan

My journey started in a local town called Manchester it's in Connecticut. It's a small town nice very quiet and relaxing in life. I wanted things that I couldn't have and I would have to work hard for them. Growing up it was a struggle I was raised by my mom and it was only me and my little sister. My father wasn't there for us all the time but he would come around and help out with things. At a young age I would learned different responsibilities and becoming the man of the house. I couldn't believe that I would be in charge of everything like cleaning the house, help my mom out the best way that I can. Everything was a struggle not having your father around and being able to learn from your mother how to become a young man. Theirs things that your mothers can't always teach but sometimes you have to learn on your own. My mom is a brave woman who was always there for me when things wasn't always good.

Francisco

It begins when I was born in Hartford, CT, September 24, 1995. My parents came to Hartford [from Puerto Rico] to have a better life for me. Their life was crazy before then. They had to help their family in the farm and go to school. One day my grandpa, the father of my dad, was selling pigs next to a store when someone called my father saying that his father got shot. My dad got in the car and rushed to bring his father to the hospital. I don't know the whole story but from that day forward his childhood was hell. He had to quit helping his father out around the house because now grandfather was in a wheel chair. My father was like the man of the house at fourteen years old He was the 3rd oldest of seven children. The rest of them were young so my father had to do all the heavy lifting. He had to wake up at 4 in the morning to feed the pigs, chickens, and then run to the town to buy some bread, rice and fruit for the family. And then at eighteen, my dad met my mom and they left Puerto Rico to come to Hartford for a better job.

Yadira

This my story, between dealing with my parents splitting up, my brother joining the marine during the new start of war of Afghanistan and Iraq plus my personal school and relationship experience. This is truly a roller coaster of events. Beginning when my mother and father met in Panama City where my father was stationed in the military. My parents were married in 1985 a few months before my brother Junior (family nickname) was born. Then, shortly after, my parents moved to Texas where my dad was stationed for six months. They then moved to Connecticut to raise their family and shortly after that I was born. My parents were an average family living in Hartford. Hartford then wasn't as violent as it is now. Once my parents received great paying jobs, my parents decided to buy a house in East Hartford. . . .

During all this craziness, my big brother junior had joined the marines. It was the hardest thing for me and my mother to adjust to the idea of my brother possibly not coming home. This happened during the twin towers when America had announce we have been hit by terrorist and that America will be at war with Afghanistan and Iraq. The thought of my brother not coming home was the worst not only for the simple fact he was my only brother or sibling. During this time my mother and I would wait impatiently for my brother's phone calls and watching the news about the war; in which that was unbearable for the both of us.

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Another student, who was born and raised in New York and moved to three different parts of the city—Fort Greene, East New York, and Brownsville—lived in a shelter with his family for a number of years, and lost a close family member to street violence (a stabbing behind a local corner store near his house). Another student in this class was born in China, met her American husband there, and moved to the U.S. after getting married. Everyone in her family including her mother, father, brother, and grandmother still lives in China. In her journey essay, she acknowledged that leaving her family and friends and moving to a new country continued to be difficult: “A lot of times when I sleep I dream of all the happy times of when I was in China. When I wake up I realize that it wasn’t real and it was a dream.”

KEY FINDINGS

A. Working Hard in Class

Did my students honor the time and resources that were provided to them in this course, which was offered free of charge? Very much so. Figures 7 and 8, from my gradebook pages for this class, suggest that most of the students in English 9000 appear to have been working in good faith to pass this class. This data set suggests that as a group these students valued this opportunity to attend college.

Student	Grade	Student	Grade
1. A	A	16. A	A
2. A	A	17. A	A
3. A	A	18. A	A
4. A	A	19. A	A
5. A	A	20. A	A
6. A	A	21. A	A
7. A	A	22. A	A
8. A	A	23. A	A
9. A	A	24. A	A
10. A	A	25. A	A
11. A	A	26. A	A
12. A	A	27. A	A
13. A	A	28. A	A
14. A	A	29. A	A
15. A	A	30. A	A

Figure 7: My gradebook pages for English 9000, fall 2014

The image shows two pages of a handwritten data sheet, likely for a field study. The data is organized into a grid where each row represents a date and each column represents a different location or condition. The dates are written in the top row of each page, and the grid cells are filled with checkmarks (✓) or left empty.

Page 1 (Left):

- Header:** P24
- Dates:** 8/28, 9/12, 9/19, 9/26, 9/28, 9/29, 10/1
- Grid:** A grid of approximately 10 rows and 15 columns. Checkmarks are present in most cells, with some missing in the later dates.

Page 2 (Right):

- Header:** P25
- Dates:** 10/7, 10/9, 10/14, 10/16, 10/21, 10/23, 10/30, 10/31, 11/1, 11/3, 11/8, 11/20, 12/2, 12/4, 12/9, 12/11
- Grid:** A grid of approximately 10 rows and 15 columns. Checkmarks are present in most cells, with some missing in the later dates.

The handwriting is in black ink on lined paper. The grid lines are faint, and the checkmarks are clearly visible. The dates are written in a cursive style.

Figure 8: The attendance record for my English 9000 class, fall 2014

I see little evidence here of tax revenue being wasted. Instead I see students doing their very best to lift themselves up the academic and economic ladder by their own bootstraps—through hard work, effort, and personal responsibility. This is what Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill call “creating an opportunity society” (1-18; 189-90) by implementing social policies that “reward personal responsibility and enhance mobility” (1). Haskins and Sawhill suggest that “policies aligned with the value of helping people help themselves are likely to be politically acceptable as well as effective” (2). This is precisely what community colleges and developmental education programs are designed to do.

B. Working Outside of Class

Most of the students in this class had jobs. As we know, this is often the case with students who attend community colleges. What may come as something of a surprise is just how engaged so many of these students were with their jobs and how important the pressure to generate income was for them. This is not something that comes immediately to mind, of course, when we think of a typical college student, and this is part of the narrative about attending college in America that needs to be challenged and updated.

In fact, during the course of the semester, a number of students found it impossible to hold down their jobs and also make it to class and complete their work for school. To give readers a sense of the scope of my students' engagement with work and the kinds of jobs they had while they were in my class, here is a sampling of the data gathered from my interviews related to their working lives:

- Insurance corporation mailroom / 30 hours a week
- Retail clothing outlet / 22-28 hours a week
- Valet parking / 40 hours a week
- Fast food restaurant / 25-30 hours a week
- Staff assistant at a church / 15-25 hours a week
- Driver for a local delivery service / 10 hours a week
- Cashier at a farmer's market / 21 hours a week
- Certified nurse's aide / 32 hours a week
- Retail handler at Goodwill / 20 hours a week
- Fast food sandwich shop / 30 hours a week

Work was at the center of most of these students' lives. College was something they did *in addition to* devoting a great deal of time and energy each week to work.

C. Managing Scarcity

On a related note, it also became clear during the course of the semester that many of these students were constantly living on the edge of real financial crisis. As we know, seemingly “minor” events like an illness, reduced hours at work, problems with a vehicle, or other unanticipated events can have catastrophic long-term effects on the ability of less financially advantaged individuals to stay in college and pursue a degree and work toward earning an academic credential—a key variable that many discussions about measuring success at community colleges ignore or undervalue. I received a number of emails from students in English 9000 during the semester that brought this point home very powerfully. I share one of them here (with the author's permission), to help illustrate the kind of worlds many of these students live in—worlds that are perhaps more precarious than we might imagine:

From: Brendan

Sent: Monday, November 03, 2014 3:16 PM

Hey I am sorry I haven't been going to class I been depress and really been tie up with stuff going on in the family right now my situation is that I have no job at all to pay my bills and also helping out my mom out as well so I had to find a job to pay my bills I have no money what so ever I want to finish class but I can't cuz I found a job Monday to Friday 8 am to 4 pm I don't what to do cuz I really don't have a choices about it if next year comes around I wouldn't be able to apply for classes cuz I didn't had the money for it at all I don't if there any way to work it out with you

This email, composed following the genre conventions of the text message, certainly suggests that this student is much closer to financial and personal hardship than we might normally expect the typical college student to be. I received another email from a female student in this class that was one of the most heartbreaking pieces of correspondence I have ever received from a student. She was the mother of two young children and she was writing to tell me that she had been arrested on charges related to a domestic dispute. It took her longer than expected to post bail, so she had to spend a night in jail. She told me that she was determined to continue with the class but was hesitant to come to campus that week because she had some bruising that hadn't cleared up yet and she felt that would be embarrassing. She asked if arrangements might be made to submit her work another way.

Both of these individuals were among the most dedicated and hard-working students in the class. Both passed English 9000, and both went on to register for classes the following semester. Both of these students have the drive and the ability to be successful college students. It is important to note, however, that going to college for most of the students in this class is a profoundly different experience than the traditional model that students have followed in the past—spending four consecutive years right after high school at college, living on campus, and focusing full-time on earning a degree. Much of this difference is due, of course, to economic inequality and vastly different financial situations. Most of these students simply did not have the financial resources to spend four years at college earning a degree. It seems almost cruel to measure the success of these very different cohorts of students with the same simple graduation rates. Because of these challenges, earning a credential or degree will require extraordinary focus, perseverance, and determination, and also, of course, some degree of luck. Learning about my students' personal situations helped me understand exactly how difficult this journey would be.

Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir's work on "scarcity" can help us understand some of the psychological dynamics at play here. Mullainathan and Shafir have found that "scarcity captures the mind" (5-10) in powerfully dangerous ways: "Scarcity is more than just the displeasure of having very little. It changes how we think. It imposes itself on our minds" (7). Scarcity reduces cognitive capacity, willpower, and patience, creating a shortage of mental "bandwidth" (17) that complicates any task that requires focus, attention, and mental stamina, like completing a developmental reading and writing course. Scarcity impacts both fluid intelligence ("the ability to think and reason abstractly and solve problems independent of any specific learning or experience" [47]) and executive control (or self-control), and it has reduced functional IQ in clinical tests (52).

We must be very careful employing research like this to make generalizations about cohorts of students, of course, and I can only report what I found in my class. But it certainly appeared that scarcity was a significant factor in the lives of many of my students in English 9000. This scarcity impacted not only their ability to concentrate in class and complete homework outside of class, but also their ability to pursue a long-term course of study and complete a degree or certificate. Most of the students in this class were living much more tenuously than traditional college students, who are able to attend a residential college for four years. One English 9000 student, for example, came to class directly from his third shift job and simply could not stay awake in class. He needed to work full-time in order to help his family pay bills (his mother was seriously ill and unable to work). Our program also provided free bus passes for students, and when I announced this to the class, I was quickly able to give away all five of the passes I had available. I had assumed that only one or two students would need them. Taking the bus often added an additional hour each way to my students' days as they traveled to and from campus and to and from work. When the weather permitted, one student rode his bike from Hartford to Manchester to save money, a seven-mile ride each way.

Also, once students moved beyond this free English 9000 course, attending college got a lot more difficult and complicated for many of them. Scarcity played a decisive role here as well. Some deal-breakers involved what less financially strapped families might consider relatively minor amounts of money. One student was frozen out from registering for the spring semester until he paid his outstanding balance from the fall: \$502. He had to make a payment plan over the course of a number of months to pay it off. Another student, who did not qualify for financial aid, could not afford the \$982 she

would have to pay out of pocket for her next English class, our six-credit intensive readiness course, English 96. With tuition costs at open admissions institutions rising, this largely invisible problem related to access and equity is likely to become more pronounced.

D. Struggling with Reading

In the classroom, the biggest challenge my students faced was reading, and much of this had to do with the lack of vocabulary acquisition and cognitive development that comes with reading that Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley discovered in their landmark study. My students' struggles with reading, in fact, seemed to emphatically confirm Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's key insight about language acquisition and cultural capital:

language is not simply an instrument of communication: it also provides, together with a richer or poorer vocabulary, a more or less complex system of categories, so that the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic, depends partly on the complexity of the language transmitted by the family. (73; Bourdieu)

Most of my native speakers had reading scores so low, in fact, that Accuplacer—programmed to branch at a certain threshold for ELL students—began testing them as if they were still in the process of learning English. Here are two samples for two of my native speakers:

- Accuplacer Reading Comp. 038.0
LOEP Reading Skills 090.0
- Accuplacer Reading Comp. 027.0
LOEP Reading Skills 037.0

Note: LOEP (Levels of English Proficiency) is the ESL Reading Skills test. If a student's raw score is below 40 in Reading Comprehension, the computer-adaptive software branches them into the LOEP test.

As a group, the students in this class found almost everything they were required to read challenging, and most needed considerable discussion and careful supported work with each text we read before understanding it. Reading comprehension was a major challenge all semester long.

One aspect of this problem was that many students in this class were remarkably unconservant with a wide and diverse variety of cultural refer-

ences. A chapter from Mindy Kaling's book, *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?*, proved to be particularly vexing for them. The typical Kaling essay ranges freely across a variety of well-known cultural and pop-cultural reference points, and much of her humor and content is built around these references. Most college-level readers are going to be able to decode this material easily, employing acquired cultural literacy as part of their comprehension strategy. Most of my students were unable to do this—some because they were non-native speakers and did not understand the cultural references; others because they were native speakers who nonetheless were still confused by many of the cultural references that Kaling assumes her audience will understand. Decoding by using contextual cues only got my students so far.

A bigger problem was vocabulary. Contextual clues can be helpful to a degree, but vocabulary is a vitally important variable for reading comprehension. As Catherine Snow and Connie Juel note, “We now have reams of studies that show that good and poor readers differ not in the use of context to make better predictions, but in the swift and efficient identification of words” (507; Nation; Perfetti, Landi, and Oakhill). This certainly proved to be the case in this class. My students were often stopped cold because they didn’t know a single word (“catastrophe,” “conventional,” “assumption”). Sometimes this word was crucial to a passage we were reading. Other times it was incidental. But the effect was usually the same. One memorable, high-stakes example of this occurred at the end of the semester when students were writing their in-class end-of-the-semester essays (a required element mandated by our program; they took a pre-test at the beginning of the semester and this was their required post-test). Students were given a number of random essay prompts, and two of the best writers in the class were stopped in their tracks by the same prompt because of a word they didn’t understand. The prompt began with this sentence: “Americans are bombarded by advertisements every day.” Neither of them could figure out what “bombarded” meant. So the prompt looked like this to them: “Americans are _____ by advertisements every day.” Understanding the verb in that sentence is crucial to understanding the question that followed. When they raised their hands to ask me for help, I couldn’t tell them what the word meant, of course, but I did encourage them to use contextual cues. Significantly, both writers were ultimately unable to make much sense of the question and they each ended up struggling to write a good essay.

Skilled readers and experienced writers would probably be able to write a strong essay in response to this prompt even without knowing that word. They would likely be able to pick up from contextual cues in the rest of that

prompt that “bombardment” suggested all sorts of negative things similar to “an intensive and sustained attack by bombs or artillery fire.” Strong readers might also have recognized this as a standard, familiar, and much debated academic subject (many textbooks for writing classes include chapters that discuss the impact of advertising; others often focus on developing skills for decoding advertisements). This is the kind of question that students often get asked in junior and senior high school English classes.

What we may be seeing here, in terms of vocabulary development, is another manifestation of scarcity. My ethnographic research revealed that many of these students grew up poor, and as Hart and Risley note, children from poor families often develop a much more limited vocabulary than children who grow up in professional families, encountering on average 32 million fewer words than children from professional families (198). This means that some students in basic writing classes like this one will have heard 32 million fewer words than other students on campus—with corresponding implications for reading comprehension ability, cultural literacy, and “the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures.” Given what we know about the crucial link between vocabulary and reading proficiency, many of my English 9000 students will continue to face challenges with reading as they move into the mainstream college-level curriculum. This will be an important and perhaps largely hidden variable as they seek to complete a degree or credential.

In addition to being very poor readers, many of the students in this class also had a very pronounced aversion to reading. On many days, especially at the beginning of the semester, it felt like what I was experiencing was fallout from what Kelly Gallagher has characterized as “readicide”—“the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools” (2; Jolliffe; Smith; we appear to have a similar problem with writing [Sullivan, *New* 121-45]). Readicide is caused, Gallagher suggests, by public policy that values the development of test-takers over the development of life-long readers (5). For Gallagher, there are some key educational practices that have contributed to this national problem:

What do teachers and curriculum directors mean by “value” reading? A look at the practice of most schools suggests that when a school “values” reading, what it really means is that the school intensely focuses on raising state-mandated reading test scores—the kind of reading our students will rarely, if ever, do in adulthood. “Valuing reading” is often a euphemism for preparing students to

pass mandated multiple-choice exams, and in dragging students down this path, schools are largely contributing to the development of readicide. (7)

Two recent reports about reading from the National Endowment for the Arts—*Reading at Risk* and *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*—provide disturbing evidence for this claim (see also American). A few bold students were determinedly and almost gleefully demonstrative about this aversion, too, obviously giving voice to years of frustration, disappointment, and hardship (“I hate reading”; “I never read”; “I hate books”). Many claimed never to have completed reading a full book. We must do a better job of making reading an appealing, enjoyable activity for all students, especially in grades 6-12. It is vitally important that we promote reading for pleasure in our classrooms. Michael W. Smith and Jeffery D. Wilhelm have made this case in two essential books about reading, *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys* and *Reading Unbound*, both of which highlight the importance of student motivation and engagement with reading. Thomas Newkirk also gives eloquent expression to this idea as well: “unless we can persuade students that reading is a form of deep sustained pleasure, they will not choose to read; and because they will not choose to read, they will not develop the skills to make them good readers” (117). Nancie Atwell has championed the importance of reading for pleasure her entire career (*In the Middle; Reading*; see also Miller). Important new longitudinal research by Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown—reported in their essay, “Social Inequalities in Cognitive Scores At Age 16: The Role of Reading”—has shown that reading for pleasure has important benefits across a variety of academic disciplines (including math) and that “reading is actually linked to increased cognitive progress over time” (37; Wolf). This work confirms the key conclusions by Hart and Risley and Bourdieu and Passeron about the link between reading and the development of a complex system of categories and sophisticated intellectual functions.

HOPE REQUIRED WHEN GROWING ROSES IN CONCRETE

How might we best develop a theoretical approach and a curriculum for this cohort of students unready for college-level work? Should we turn them away as “undeserving”? I would like to suggest we adopt a strategy built around Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade’s idea of “critical hope.”

All of my students’ stories about coming to college were about hope in one way or another. This is important to keep in mind because in addition to significantly increased public scrutiny of developmental education,

the very idea of open admissions at community colleges—a public policy whose most foundational principle is hope—has recently been called into question again. Recent essays by Ray Flores and Mike Rose in the online news and opinion website, *Inside Higher Ed*, provide a paradigmatic example of this ongoing public debate. Flores suggests in his essay, “False Hope,” that remedial education has been, by and large, an expensive failure, especially for our most underprepared students: “In summary, students testing into the lowest levels of developmental education have virtually no chance of ever moving beyond remedial work and achieving their educational goals. For those students and their families, developmental education is expensive and demoralizing.” Flores suggests that admitting such students is unwise and misguided, an ill-advised use of tax dollars, and “callous at best” because these students “have virtually no chance of becoming college-ready.” Of course, narratives about basic writing like this, to borrow a formulation from historian Tony Holt, make accessible certain ideas about human possibilities and foreclose others (11). Behind this kind of thinking is an economic theory that frames investment in developmental education on a business model that privileges return on investment and statistical probabilities. P.L. Thomas’s observations about neoliberalism and public education in the U.S. are important to keep in mind here:

“No Excuses” Reformers insist that the source of success and failure lies in each child and each teacher, requiring only the adequate level of effort to rise out of the circumstances not of her/his making. As well, “No Excuses” Reformers remain committed to addressing poverty solely or primarily through education, viewed as an opportunity offered each child and within which . . . effort will result in success.

Social Context Reformers have concluded that the source of success and failure lies primarily in the social and political forces that govern our lives. By acknowledging social privilege and inequity, Social Context Reformers are calling for education reform *within* a larger plan to reform social inequity—such as access to health care, food security, higher employment along with better wages and job security. (qtd. in Porfilio, Gorlewski, Carr, and Thomas 1)

A number of recent books have challenged neoliberal economic theory as it has been applied to higher education and have, instead, championed a more progressive, humanistic model, focusing on access and opportu-

nity—and the public good—to address growing concerns about inequality, entrenched power and inherited wealth, and building a strong democracy in America (Brown; Harvey; Kezar, Chambers, and Burkhardt). I am suggesting here, following Marc Tucker's recommendations about education in *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems* (2013), a book that examines the world's best ideas about education, that we “design for equity” (213-14).

Hope brought my English 9000 students to our campus, and the dream of a better future is what sustained them through the many challenges they faced during the semester. Instead of sending these students away, we gave them a chance to begin. Most of the students in this class honored that opportunity by working with great diligence and perseverance. As Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade observes in “Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete,” there are many different kinds of hope, including manifestations of what he calls “false hope” (hokey hope, mythical hope, and hope deferred). Countering this kind of superficial hope is a kind of complex hope that Duncan-Andrade defines as “critical hope.” I would like to see us theorize our work with basic writers as providing precisely this kind of “critical hope”:

On the flipside of these false hopes lies critical hope, which rejects the despair of hopelessness and the false hopes of “cheap American optimism” (West, 2008, p. 41). Critical hope demands a committed and active struggle “against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth inequality, group xenophobia, and personal despair” (West, 2004, pp. 296–297). (5)

Duncan-Andrade suggests that this kind of “critical hope” is most essentially about “control of destiny,” an “actively present sense of agency to manage the immediate stressors in one's daily life” (4; Sternglass). Community colleges might be said to offer precisely this kind of potential for agency and control of destiny.

Teaching this class was an inspiring experience for the two tutors who assisted me as well. One of these individuals, Yanira Hernandez, was an honors student at MCC at the time and was serving as a peer tutor in the class. She worked with me over the course of three semesters (spring 2014 [teaching an early version of English 9000], fall 2014, spring 2015). I was surprised to learn, after being asked by Yanira to complete an Academic Student Assessment form required for a Phi Theta Kappa scholarship application, that

working with the students in this class was her “most significant endeavor since attending community college.” With Yanira’s permission, I share her response to that question:

My most significant endeavor at Manchester Community College has been the work I did as a tutor for college readiness English classes. For three semesters I spent a great deal of time as an in-class tutor working with students from a variety of backgrounds and abilities. I was exposed to students from different age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicities. I also had the great opportunity to work with talented students with developmental and physical challenges. These students displayed a beautiful spirit to overcome challenges I had never seen before. They demonstrated a level of quiet determination for no reward other than their own self-growth.

In this role I was challenged by questions from students and worked with professors to help them learn some key skills to prepare them for college English courses. I also helped students with vital computer skills, time management skills, reading and writing, and helped them gain self-advocacy skills to help them after they complete this course. In this class I coached reluctant students and they gradually gained more confidence throughout the class.

After the first semester I began to realize how important my role as a tutor was. I saw students I worked with becoming involved in school functions. I ran into some of the same students working with the tutors in the Academic Support Center. Walking through campus, students I previously worked with stopped me regularly to tell me how well they were doing. I believe these students, who may not have this opportunity at a four-year institution, are going to make a positive impact in their community. While some of them were learning English as a second language, some of them were veterans and students who graduated high school without the adequate skills to succeed in college. It is critically important for colleges to keep programs like this going to help change the course of life for many that have the determination to improve their lives. When student leaders devote a semester or two to helping their peers,

they also learn a great deal from the experience. This experience has stretched my view on what success in college really means. This work as a tutor has made a difference in my life. It has made a positive difference in the students' lives, and it will help our school and our community. I believe that when struggling students get the level of support they need, and see what their hard work can do for them, it helps all of us.

A GREAT NATION IS A COMPASSIONATE NATION

Despite having to overcome a variety of serious academic and non-academic challenges, many students in this class significantly improved their reading and writing skills by the end of the semester. Some of this was dispositional. As students began to regard reading and writing as more enjoyable and interesting, they worked harder, focused more strategically, and were less likely to give up and stop. This alone made them better readers and writers. Some of it was also practice and modeling, so that they began to get a better sense of how skilled readers and writers work, what good reading and writing look like, and what kind of effort is needed to produce strong academic work. Some of it was developing a larger and more effective repertoire of reading and writing strategies. To be sure, each of these students had much more work left to do, and we need to acknowledge this fact even as we celebrate their successes.

As we know, and as the students in this class made abundantly clear, standardized placement tests (or, indeed, any kind of placement protocol, no matter how well intentioned or skillfully designed) can't predict or define potential or what students might be capable of learning or achieving. Or what students might be capable of becoming. Placement scores are not destiny. Rather, they provide only a momentary snapshot of a particular skill set, which can always be improved with effort and practice. This becomes especially crucial to keep in mind when such scores are used to determine access to higher education. As Dweck notes, "An assessment at one point in time has little value for understanding someone's ability, let alone their potential to succeed in the future" (*Mindset* 29). Despite these students' limitations and challenges, many did well in this class, earning the right to move forward with their education.

I finished this semester in English 9000 cautiously optimistic about this group of students. Most made substantial progress. Overall, thirteen of our initial twenty students graduated from English 9000, and twelve en-

rolled in one of our basic reading and writing classes in the spring of 2015. Of those who didn't pass, one student decided that college was not for him and indicated that he would not be returning. Two students had trouble attending classes regularly—both because of work obligations. Two other students—each with a significant learning disability—also did not pass English 9000. One of these students repeated English 9000 in the spring and passed. Another student came to college with serious behavioral and maturity issues. This student took a college success class in the spring and passed it with a final grade of “B.” Another student was advised to enroll in our ESL curriculum track. All the rest (twelve students) moved forward into one of our basic reading and writing courses.

I tracked these students to see how they did in their subsequent English classes in the spring 2015 semester. To my delight, seven of these twelve students (58% of those who took the next English class) passed these courses and within a year had become eligible for FYC and many other college-level courses. If we calculate these numbers using the entire class (twenty students), the percentage is 35%. As I reviewed those who didn't pass this subsequent English class, there were a few surprises (students who I expected to do well but didn't) and some that were less surprising (students who moved on but would have had to work very hard to pass).

As a group, the students in this English 9000 were mostly young, hard-working, and full of positive energy and optimism about their futures. Part of their optimism came from us—and the fact that our open admissions institution believed in them enough to offer this class and give them a chance to attend college. It would have been a shame to have turned any of them away. Certainly, some of them found out that college, for whatever reason, was not for them, at least at the moment. Many others, though, found themselves fully engaged and were inspired to move forward with their college career. I see most of the students in this class limited only by the things that limit us all, many of which are beyond our control—how supportive our families are, how much discretionary income we can devote to paying for our college education, how many hours a week we have to work, how much time we can devote to our schoolwork, what kinds of family responsibilities and situations we have, what kinds of support networks we can draw on, what kinds of neighborhood schools we attended, how safe our neighborhoods are, and so on. Given how complex these students' lives are—and how different their situations are from the traditional ideal of attending college at a residential campus and devoting four years full-time to earning a degree—we know for

sure, unfortunately, that many challenges await that will complicate and imperil their pursuit of a degree or credential.

As I have kept in touch with my students from this class over the last year and half, I have seen again and again how precarious many of their situations are and how difficult pursuing a degree is for many of them. Most of this difficulty is driven by limited family resources and economic hardship (Cahalan and Perna; Tough; Wilson). Some of these students have continued on at MCC; others have been delayed or frustrated by various challenges, which have mostly been economic. The key principle we must take away from this study is a profound one, related to equity, agency, and social justice: There is simply no way to predict the course of a human life, and educators and state legislatures should not be in this kind of prediction business. We must not let test scores or state legislators decide who gets the chance to attend college. Open admissions policies let individual students decide for themselves, and they are then free to make of this opportunity what they can. In order for this revolutionary policy to remain viable, we are likely going to be called upon to defend it. We must be ready and willing to do so.

As Martin Luther King observed in his Nobel Prize Address:

Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for “the least of these.” Deeply etched in the fiber of our religious tradition is the conviction that men are made in the image of God and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value, the heirs of a legacy of dignity and worth. If we feel this as a profound moral fact, we cannot be content to see men hungry, to see men victimized with starvation and ill health when we have the means to help them.

There are many ways one can be hungry. If we accept King's premise about compassion, there are few things we do as a society that are more compassionate than offering our citizens (even those who some might consider “the least of these”) the opportunity to build better futures for themselves and their families.

ACTIVISM

Unfortunately, an ominous and powerful new presence in basic writing has emerged in recent years—the activist, interventionist state legislature. We have clearly entered a new era where state legislatures feel emboldened to bypass disciplinary expertise and even common sense in order to man-

date public policy for developmental curriculum. This is a deeply troubling new development that we must actively resist (Sullivan "Two-Year"; Adler-Kassner). It is impossible not to feel emanating from this kind of legislation impatience and perhaps also a little anger at the slow pace some students take toward proficiency. Such an approach typically dismisses or discounts all the variables we have documented here that make completing coursework and earning a degree difficult for some students. Where PA 12-40 is informed by best practices and current innovations in our field, the committee that framed this legislation made good choices (mandating multiple measures for placement and embracing an accelerated co-requisite model). But the committee appears to have perhaps misread or misunderstood the Baltimore acceleration model. Peter Adams and his colleagues do not suggest that every student can be successful in an accelerated program—only that some can, particularly those close to current cut scores who have been underplaced (Scott-Clayton and Stacey).

There is also a significant element of what we might call wishful—or even magical—thinking embedded in PA 12-40. This is driven, I'm afraid, by a lack of experience with basic writers and developmental education. Basic writers in the state of Connecticut are now limited by law to taking only one developmental class. The state legislature has summarily decided that one course is all any student could ever need, and it has decreed, in effect, "by God, that is all they will get." There is a neoliberal economic model at work here suggesting that developmental education itself is the problem, rather than a host of economic, social, and cultural variables that can slow down or stop progress toward completion of a degree for some students. I am hopeful the research I report in this essay will help challenge this kind of thinking. As Katherine Mangan notes, "The way policy makers in some states see it, the biggest obstacles preventing students from completing college are the courses that are supposed to help unprepared students catch up" (Boylan and Goudas; Fain; Goudas and Boylan).

Developmental education reform and legislation like PA 12-40 has focused much-needed attention on students who don't need basic writing classes or who are likely to pass a college-level writing course with additional embedded support. A related trend that is emerging directly from this reform is that when we remove students who shouldn't have been in basic writing classes to begin with, this changes the make-up of developmental classes significantly. As a consequence, success rates for basic writing courses appear to be falling. This is an issue that has emerged at my home institution and has also become a topic of concern for a national committee of scholars, TYCA's

Research Committee, which recently completed a White Paper related to placement reform. (I am a member of this committee.) This problem may have always been with us, but the struggles of significantly underprepared students appear to have been hidden by the strong performances of underplaced or misplaced students, who made it seem like these classes were working reasonably well.

At a spring English department meeting at my institution this year (2015), as we were reporting out and discussing the first full year of implementation of our new developmental curriculum mandated by PA 12-40, this point emerged as a key topic of concern. Students in our accelerated courses were doing well, and we appear to have significantly reduced the number of underplaced students in our developmental courses. Unfortunately, our workhorse developmental course, which we now offer in a 3- and expanded 6-semester-hour format, appears to have significantly lower completion rates. What had worked previously—perhaps because of strong underplaced or misplaced students—no longer appears to work as well. We also face a quandary. By state law, students are only allowed to take one semester of developmental coursework. Are students allowed to repeat this course? What do students do if they don't pass the one developmental class they are allowed to take? At the moment, we don't know the answer to these questions. The law reads as follows:

Not later than the start of the fall semester of 2014 and for each semester thereafter, no public institution of higher education shall offer any remedial support, including remedial courses, that is not embedded with the corresponding entry level course, as required pursuant to subsection (b) of this section, or offered as part of an intensive college readiness program, except such institution may offer a student a maximum of one semester of remedial support that is not embedded, provided (1) such support is intended to advance such student toward earning a degree, and (2) the program of remedial support is approved by the Board of Regents for Higher Education. (Connecticut 2)

As Holly Hassel, Jeff Klausman and their co-authors note, in this new interventionist era, political concerns often supersede sound educational policy:

. . . some state legislatures bypass faculty input and appear to engage in political rather than research-based decision making. Florida's changed placement procedures in SB 1720 offer a case in point. By

signing the bill into law, the Florida governor mandated what might be considered a version of directed self-placement, declaring some students exempt from mandatory placement assessment and giving most students who are assessed as needing developmental instruction multiple remediation options (see "Case Study" above). The law also radically redefines "college ready" by decreeing that a Florida high school diploma for anyone who has been enrolled since the ninth grade earns automatic placement into college-level courses, regardless of other indicators. Finally, Florida is implementing a single placement test with a single cutoff score established by the state board, which ignores differences in student populations in different parts of the state and the varying curricular and institutional programs at different colleges (Florida Senate). (233)

As I listened to and participated in statewide discussions about implementation of PA 12-40 in the tumultuous months following passage of this legislation, I was alarmed by some of the language I heard being used about underprepared students and the seemingly punitive measures being discussed to deal with them. I spoke with one consultant who was assisting the state with implementation during this process, and he had a similar read on the situation. He said that it appeared to him that some of the framers of this legislation, and some of those who were providing leadership in the initial public discussions of this bill, "simply wanted underprepared students to go away."

The students in my English 9000 class came to our campus, took a battery of placement tests, and formally applied for admission to our institution. Almost all of them came to our college seeking direction, answers, or solutions—seeking different and better futures and lives, and sometimes different and better selves. There is no other place in America where adults can go to pursue this kind of personal transformation and reinvention, which almost always engages the heart as well as the mind. Community colleges provide citizens in our communities with the opportunity to rise above one's past choices, behavior, and history—giving practical embodiment to the proud and noble belief that anything might be possible for any given student. The open admissions policy is an idea that powerfully honors individual student dignity and agency. This is easy to accomplish when students are ready for college. It becomes much more challenging, however, when students are not well prepared and want to attend college anyway. Providing this kind of opportunity for our most underprepared adult learners is difficult and

challenging work, but it is where the ideals of open admissions—and our democracy—are tested and made most real and vital.

In some very powerful ways, this is an ongoing aspect of the political resistance work our discipline has engaged in now for many years. Our students depend on our activism and on our unwavering commitment to equity and social justice. There are powerful forces actively at work in America seeking to erode or turn back advances we have made in civil rights, access, and social justice. We must embrace our work as developmental educators with renewed commitment and determination—and a fresh sense of urgency. It is not just literacy that we are championing, but an inclusive vision of America and democracy. Following Franklin Roosevelt, let us understand that “the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” In this way, we follow Amartya Sen and his insistence that any understanding of justice “cannot be indifferent to the lives that people can actually live” (18), as the research documented here clearly suggests. Let us engage this important work in classrooms across America with hope—and determination—in our hearts.

Note

1. This research received IRB review and exemption. About halfway through the semester, when I realized that I would have to document my experience with this extraordinary class, the idea for this project began to take shape. At this time, I told my English 9000 students about the project I had in mind, and I respectfully asked for permission to interview them and use excerpts from their work. Most of the students in the class were eager to participate. I am using their work and their first names with their permission.

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Remedial, Basic, Advanced: Evolving Frameworks for First-Year Composition at the California State University

Dan Melzer

ABSTRACT: In this essay I conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis of the language surrounding the California State University (CSU) Chancellor's Office latest plan to curb remediation, the Early Start program. I consider Early Start in the context of what I argue is the evolution of three major frameworks for Basic Writing in the CSU: the CSU Chancellor's Office Remedial Writing Framework that focuses on deficiency and gatekeeping; the Basic Writing Framework that developed in the 1970s as a way for CSU's writing teachers to defend access for underserved students; and the emerging Advanced Writing Framework, which eliminates Basic Writing and redefines one semester of composition as advanced and a two semester stretch course as mainstream. I trace three themes in the "discourse event" of Early Start: Early Start's relation to historical discourse on remediation, replication of discourse norms by the media, and faculty complicity in the discourse of the Remedial Writing Framework. Based on my analysis of the ways that it disrupts the dominant discourse of remediation and basic skills, I argue the Advanced Writing Framework provides hope of changing the nature of the discourse.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; remediation; mainstreaming; critical discourse analysis

California has played a central role in the national discourse about remediation and Basic Writing. From Mike Rose's analysis of "the language of exclusion" in the institutional discourse surrounding remediation at the University of California (UC), to Ed White and the California State University (CSU) English Council's politicking to prevent the CSU Chancellor's Office from implementing a multiple-choice test for college writing equivalency, to Tom Fox's defense of access for the diverse CSU student population, to Jane Stanley's analysis of the rhetoric of remediation at UC Berkeley, Basic Writing teachers in California have fought against manufactured literacy

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crises and the discourse of students as “deficient” and in need of “remediation” of “basic skills.”

Despite this continued resistance to the language of exclusion and despite the growth in the 1970s of extensive Basic Writing programs to support underserved students, writing teachers at the CSU have not been able to change an enduring remedial framework of deficiency and basic skills that to this day shapes the discourse of the CSU Chancellor’s Office, the Board of Trustees, the media, and even many CSU teachers. As Mary Kay Crouch and Gerry McNenny conclude in their overview of remediation in California, “Looking Back, Looking Forward,” “Looking historically at the CSU’s attempts to grapple with what it views as the ‘problem’ of remediation, we see that the solutions proposed during each cycle of concern have rarely varied” (64). Crouch and McNenny share my concern regarding the CSU’s history of top-down mandates that label students as deficient based on timed tests, but they stop short of arguing that much of this history has been shaped by a discursive framework that has endured despite the rise of Basic Writing programs. The latest effort of the Chancellor’s Office to curb remediation, the Early Start program, exemplifies the endurance of a remedial framework of deficiency and basic skills, the recycling of the same misguided solutions to the “problem” of remediation, the inability of CSU Basic Writing programs to change the discourse, and the unintentional complicity of CSU teachers in the language of exclusion.

The idea for Early Start began with the CSU Board of Trustees, and in 2010 Early Start came down as a mandate from the Chancellor’s Office and was implemented in 2012. Early Start forces students who score below the cut score of 147 on a timed writing test—the English Placement Test (EPT)—to engage in a “remediation” activity before their first semester of college. As Crouch and McNenny reference, at most CSUs nearly half of incoming students are placed into non-credit bearing “remedial” or Basic Writing courses, and now these students are being asked to take even more coursework at their own expense before the start of the regular semester. The Early Start activity that is required of students who score below 147 on the EPT can be a summer course at a CSU campus, a community college basic writing course, or a brief online course—all paid for by the student.

Through a Critical Discourse Analysis, I contrast the remediation and basic skills discourse of Early Start—what I refer to as the Remedial Writing Framework—with the discourse of an approach to first-year composition emerging in the CSU that involves replacing testing and tracking with Directed Self-Placement (DSP); shifting from a series of non-credit bearing Basic

Writing courses to a mainstream, two-semester cohorted stretch course; and relabeling the one-semester composition course as “advanced.” I refer to this emerging mainstreaming approach as the Advanced Writing Framework. The Advanced Writing Framework acknowledges that *most* CSU students will need more than one semester of composition to succeed, and it disrupts the discourse of remediation while retaining support for underserved students. I argue that the Advanced Writing Framework presents the best hope for CSU writing teachers of disrupting the discourse of the Remedial Writing Framework that has endured despite the rise of Basic Writing programs. Although my focus is the CSU, the endurance of the Remedial Writing Framework, the complicity of Basic Writing teachers and other allies in this framework, and the emergence of the Advanced Writing Framework connects to national narratives on remediation, Basic Writing, and mainstreaming, as well as current scholarly discussions in the field of Basic Writing.

These scholarly discussions about the state of Basic Writing and basic writers often focus on the endurance of the language of remediation and basic skills—what Bruce Horner refers to as “a debilitating sense of having to keep fighting the same fights, making the same arguments, over and over again” (“Relocating” 6). Like Horner and Rose, I am interested in tracing the replication of the institutional discourse of remediation and the ways that discourse reduces students’ complex and fluid literacies to a static set of deficiencies in basic skills. I argue that Early Start is evidence that the language of remediation and basic skills will continue to endure and replicate despite the resistance of Basic Writing teachers and despite the support provided to underserved students by Basic Writing programs. I am especially interested in turning a spotlight on Basic Writing teachers’ unintentional complicity in the language of exclusion, since this complicity speaks to the pressing need for imagining alternatives to Basic Writing programs and the discourse that inevitably attaches to the Basic Writing enterprise, despite our best intentions.

In their article “In the Here and Now: Public Policy and Basic Writing,” Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington argue that “we need to develop rhetoric and action that will change the nature of the debate” (37) and work against the naturalized frames of students as deficient and remediation as a temporary problem to be solved. One way to change the naturalized frames of students as deficient is to consider models of mainstreaming alternatives to Basic Writing, as scholars such as David Bartholomae, Ira Shor, Mary Soliday, and Kelly Ritter have encouraged us to do. The Advanced Writing Framework is a unique model in that it has helped CSU

writing teachers disrupt the language of exclusion not by mainstreaming “basic” students but by reframing the “mainstream” composition course as “advanced” and what is now labeled “basic” as mainstream—a move that I argue has the potential to change the nature of the discourse.

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR FIRST-YEAR WRITING AND REMEDIATION IN THE CSU

Before I contrast the discourses of the Early Start and Advanced Writing Frameworks, I want to offer a brief history of the evolution of Basic Writing in the CSU. The tone for the gatekeeping approach of the Remedial Writing Framework was set in the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education in California. The Master Plan mandated that students’ writing abilities be tested before entering a UC or CSU and argued that standards should be high at the UC and the CSU since “the junior colleges relieve them of the burden of doing remedial work” (66). To help further relieve this “burden” of remediation, in the early 1970s the Chancellor’s Office and Board of Trustees began working on a plan to use a multiple-choice test designed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) as a college writing equivalency that would have resulted in a large percentage of incoming students testing out of composition entirely. Ultimately, the Chancellor’s Office goal was to replace the teaching of composition with a test. This targeting of composition was met with outrage by the CSU English Council, a group of English Teachers across CSU campuses who rallied against the test and worked to persuade the Chancellor’s Office that the test was reductive and invalid. However, even when the Board of Trustees relented on the multiple-choice equivalency test after the public outcry of the English Council and granted permission for a placement test into Basic Writing courses, they retained the discourse of the Remedial Writing Framework, proclaiming in 1975 that the new test and curriculum will involve “basic skills and remedial improvement” (CSU Task Force on Remediation 2).

Ed White was a faculty member at CSU San Bernardino at the time the Chancellor’s Office was planning to implement the ETS multiple-choice test, and he played a central role in persuading the CSU to instead adopt what was to evolve into the EPT, a placement test created by CSU writing teachers. The EPT, which combines indirect and direct assessment of student writing, was originally scored by CSU writing teachers and used to place students into either Basic Writing or mainstream courses based on cut scores. The rise of Basic Writing programs throughout the CSU system in the 1970s connects

to the implementation of the EPT as a placement tool. As White points out, “until the placement program began, the CSU was not authorized to offer writing courses below the regular freshman level” (79). The implementation of the EPT and the growth of Basic Writing programs in the late 1970s mark the emergence of what I am referring to as the Basic Writing Framework, a framework that works in opposition to the Chancellor’s Office Remedial Writing Framework and which is still the norm at most CSUs. Under this framework, Basic Writing teachers have been able to defend access to the CSU of underserved students by using the EPT as a tool to place students into one of a series of “basic” or “developmental” courses. Although White and other CSU writing teachers argued that Basic Writing courses should be credit-bearing, the Chancellor’s Office felt that this would lower CSU standards, and Basic Writing courses at the CSU remain non-credit bearing to this day—as they do at many institutions across the U.S.

Despite the victory of Basic Writing teachers in protecting access for underserved students, the Chancellor’s Office and Board of Trustees have continued their attempts to eliminate remediation. A report published in 1983 by the California Postsecondary Education Commission, *Promises to Keep*, bemoans the “decline in basic skills” (10) and recommends reducing remediation within the next five years. The 1987 review of the Master Plan creates a taxonomy of college writing where “pre-college” remediation is equated with “skill deficiencies,” and the plan recommends phasing out remediation at the CSU and UC. A 1995 report by the Committee on Education set as a goal that by Fall 2001 all entering CSU students would possess “basic skills.” Another report by the Chancellor’s Office and Board of Trustees aimed to reduce remediation to 10% by 2007 (LAO 2). These attempts reflect what Mike Rose refers to as the “myth of transience”: “if we can just do x or y , the problem will be solved—in five years, ten years, or a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work” (355).

A group of CSU WPA’s began to grow frustrated with both the misguided assumptions of the Chancellor’s Office ideology and the inability of Basic Writing programs to change this ideology, and in conversations at English Council meetings and their local campuses, they began to search for an alternative that would eliminate the stigma of remediation without denying support for underserved students. This alternative to the Remedial and Basic Writing Frameworks, which I refer to as the Advanced Writing Framework, has been implemented at a handful of CSU campuses that have replaced the EPT with Directed Self-Placement (DSP) and have eliminated Basic Writing by turning what was once considered the mainstream course—a one-semester

option—into an “advanced” writing course, and turning what was once labeled “basic” or “remedial”—a series of non-credit bearing courses—into a two-semester cohorted stretch course that is considered mainstream. The stretch course has the same outcomes and assignments as the advanced course, but a smaller class size and a slower pace. The Advanced Writing Framework changes the discourse associated with both the Remedial Writing Framework and the Basic Writing Framework by replacing the term “mainstream” with “advanced” and replacing the terms “basic” and “remedial” and “developmental” with “mainstream.” Because the Advanced Writing Framework relies on DSP, it also presents students and the general public with a more sophisticated definition of college writing than the multiple-choice “basic skills” assessment and formulaic timed writing of the EPT.

When considered in the context of the evolution of Basic Writing in the CSU, Early Start is of special interest because of the way it brings all three of the frameworks I outline into conflict: the recycling of the Chancellor’s Office Remedial Writing Framework; the response to this recycling from the teachers who developed the Basic Writing Framework; and the beginnings of a disruption of the discourse of Early Start and the Remedial Writing Framework by the emerging Advanced Writing Framework. A critical analysis of the discourse of Early Start reveals that despite the rise of Basic Writing in the CSU and the good intentions of Basic Writing teachers—and sometimes *because* of those good intentions—the discourse of remediation and basic skills remains dominant.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND BASIC WRITING

Critical analysis of public discourse has been a focus of a number of scholarly critiques of remediation. In addition to the work of Rose, Fox, and Stanley in California, Basic Writing scholars have focused on the ways that terms like “basic” and “remedial” have caused negative perceptions of underserved students and the programs developed to support them. Bruce Horner analyzes the ideology that informs the discourse surrounding Basic Writing, and especially its history at CUNY, in “Discoursing Basic Writing.” Horner warns against naturalizing basic writing and basic writers, and instead argues for a view of basic writing as a set of social practices, occurring in historical and political contexts, and not merely skills acquisition. Steve Lamos also looks at CUNY and the early discourse surrounding open admissions and uses a critical race lens in his analysis. Lamos encourages us to pay attention to the ways basic writing students are racialized in the open admissions debate

and how that racialized discourse maintains white power structures. Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington analyze the dominant narratives surrounding basic writing in *The New York Times* and *Minneapolis Star Tribune* in *Basic Writing as a Political Act*. They argue that these narratives, which include the portrayal of literacy as an autonomous set of skills, are frames controlled by administrators and the media rather than teachers.

Another important critical analysis of remediation, and the one that most clearly paves the way for the Advanced Writing Framework, is Kelly Ritter's analysis of the discourse of Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard in *Before Shaughnessy*. Ritter questions definitions of Basic Writers and argues that basic writing is an institutional construct. Ritter argues for the "erasure of the label *basic* altogether" (129), and she proposes instead sequences of credit-bearing courses that are labeled only by numbers such as 1, 2, and 3. Each course in a sequence is considered "introductory" in the sense that all the courses are helping prepare students for complex academic literacies, and are not labeled "basic" or "developmental." Ritter's goal is to encourage a "model that eliminates the stigma, as much as possible, from different levels of preparedness in first-year writing" (141).

None of these authors who critically analyze public discourse on Basic Writing explicitly use a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, but all of them conduct a close analysis of the language we use to describe remediation and Basic Writing programs and students in order to focus on the problems with public perceptions and beliefs regarding these terms and concepts. CDA, with its central aim to "explicate abuses of power promoted by [texts] by analyzing the linguistic/semiotic details in light of the larger social and political contexts in which those texts circulate" (Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon 107), is an ideal approach for thinking about Basic Writing and remediation. Ruth Wodak describes the focus of CDA as analyzing "structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control when these are manifested in language" ("Critical Linguistics" 53). Along with Norman Fairclough, Wodak outlines a number of principles of CDA, including the assumption that discourse constitutes society and culture and always does ideological work, that discourse is historical, and that discourse is a form of social action ("What CDA is About" 271-80). With its focus on power and ideology, a CDA lens forces us to look at the language of remediation with a critical eye and consider the social and cultural consequences of the labels we use to describe college writing courses and college writers. Teun A. van Dijk asserts that the ultimate goal of CDA is to resist social inequality and push towards alternative paradigms for social problems (352-53). From

Rose to Horner to Adler-Kassner to Ritter, Basic Writing as a profession has been taking a critical perspective on the discourse of remediation in order to resist social inequality. Rarely, however, have scholars taken an *explicit* CDA approach to remediation and Basic Writing. It is also rare that scholars have included the language of Basic Writing teachers themselves in this critical analysis of the discourse of remediation.

I turn a CDA lens on Early Start with the ultimate goal of resisting the social inequality of the Remedial Writing Framework and showing the limits of the Basic Writing Framework's success in challenging the discourse of remediation of basic skills. An analysis of the discourse of Early Start reveals that only a change in the nature of the discourse will move us beyond the enduring Remedial Writing Framework.

CDA ANALYSIS OF EARLY START: HISTORICAL DISCOURSE AND THE REPLICATION OF DISCOURSE NORMS

The documents from the Chancellor's Office promoting Early Start, the reaction to Early Start in campus and city newspapers, and the response to Early Start from faculty represent what discourse theorists such as Fairclough and Wodak refer to as a "discourse event." In the case of Early Start, the discourse event involves a series of intertextual executive orders, policies, press releases, newspaper articles, and resolutions that shape how students from socioeconomically marginalized groups are portrayed and that replicate norms from prior discourse surrounding remediation in California as well as the national discourse on remediation. A discourse analysis of Early Start reveals three primary themes: 1) Early Start as historical discourse, 2) the replication of discourse norms in the media reporting on Early Start, and 3) teacher complicity in the Remedial Writing Framework.

CDA often focuses on a corpus of interrelated texts (Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon). To illustrate the ways that Early Start reinforces the Remedial Writing Framework, I collected public documents associated with Early Start that I located through searches of the Chancellor's office website, CSU campus websites, and city and school newspapers. This corpus of texts includes the Chancellor's Office Executive Order implementing Early Start, press releases regarding Early Start from the Chancellor's Office, resolutions against Early Start from CSU academic senates, and twenty-three articles from campus and city newspapers across California published from 2010-2013.

I focus my analysis of these documents on the language of exclusion of the Remedial Writing Framework, and especially the familiar and enduring

language that points to the “semantic macrostructures” that dominate the discourse event: *remedial*, *deficient*, and *skills*. In discourse analysis, semantic macrostructures are the global meanings of discourse—the key words and concepts that point to broader themes (A. van Dijk “Multidisciplinary CDA” 99). As I traced the semantic macrostructures of *remedial*, *deficient*, and *skills* throughout the texts in my corpus, three themes emerged. Discourses are “always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier” (Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 372), and one CDA theme that emerged in my research is the connection of the language of Early Start to prior Chancellor’s Office executive orders and reports, as well as national reports on alleged literacy crises. Wodak emphasizes “the mediating and constructing role of the media” (7) in discourse events, and another theme in the discourse event of Early Start is the way the language of the Chancellor’s Office press releases was uncritically replicated in campus and city newspapers.

The language of exclusion of the Chancellor’s Office was also replicated by CSU teachers. Allan Luke argues that communities both resist and become “complicit in their own moral regulation” (9). Luke says about this complicity, “When and where these discourses are internalized by the subject as her or his own constitute the moment of noncoercive discipline par excellence” (9). CSU teachers and activists were often unintentionally complicit in the replication of the Remedial Writing framework, and this complicity—this “noncoercive discipline”—is the final theme I trace in my discussion of Early Start. Teacher complicity is also the most troubling theme, since a change in the discourse is unlikely to occur if even Basic Writing teachers reinforce the Remedial Writing Framework.

Early Start as Historical Discourse

The language of Early Start, Executive Order 1048, is what CDA theorists refer to as “historical discourse” in that it echoes the discourse of earlier executive orders. The semantic macrostructures of the language of exclusion of the Remedial Writing Framework is prominent throughout EO 1048. EO 1048 states that “incoming freshmen who have not demonstrated proficiency in English and/or mathematics will be required to begin remediation prior to the term for which they have been admitted.” In the discourse of Early Start, as in the language of exclusion in the UC system that Rose critiqued, remediation is a “scholastic quarantine” for entering first-year students “until their disease can be diagnosed and remedied” (Rose 352). That diagnosis is the EPT, and it is assumed by EO 1048 that a timed impromptu test is a

valid measurement of “proficiency in English.” EO 1048 highlights the fact that “Deficiencies in mathematics and/or English are to be determined by test scores.” Students who are not considered proficient are to be segregated into a remedial activity so that they can begin “addressing deficiencies in mathematics and/or English.”

This discourse of EO 1048 echoes the ideology of deficiency and basic skills of earlier executive orders, such as EO514, passed in 1989, which states that “students who do not demonstrate the requisite competence are required to enroll in a CSU Writing Skills program to correct deficiencies before undertaking baccalaureate English courses.” EO665, which was passed in 1997, requires students to complete remediation in one year in order to “ensure that deficiencies in student writing skills are corrected as efficiently and expeditiously as possible.” This discourse of deficiency also echoes prior reports involving the Chancellor’s Office, such as the “CSU Plan to Reduce Remedial Activity, 1985-1990,” which recommends diagnostic testing in high school to “alert students to their deficiencies,” and the 1987 California *Master Plan Renewed*, which describes remedial students as, “Students who are nearly college ready, but exhibit serious multiple skills deficiencies that require instruction at two levels below the Freshman level in English” (52).

The discourse of Early Start is not only a replication of the historical discourse of Chancellor’s Office executive orders and reports, but also a replication of national metanarratives about remediation. In recent national reports that manufacture literacy crises such as the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s *A Nation at Risk*, the Spelling’s report *A Test of Leadership*, and the Education Commission of the States’ *Blueprint for College Readiness*, declining scores on standardized tests are cited as evidence of the failure of students to learn basic skills in K-12, and remediation is portrayed as a waste of taxpayer dollars. *A Nation at Risk* cites the need for “remedial” courses in “basic skills” in English as one indicator of risk for American education, while at the same time calling for more standardized testing to track students into “remedial interventions.” *A Test of Leadership* bemoans the decline in literacy and the number of college students wasting taxpayer dollars in “remediation” mastering English “skills” that “should have been learned in high school” (viii). *Blueprint for College Readiness* cites the “alarmingly high” number of students with “academic deficits” who are in “remedial” courses (31). The historical discourse of the CSU Chancellor’s office is shaped by the semantic macrostructures of the national discourse on remediation that has remained virtually unchanged since the first college writing “remedial intervention,” English A at Harvard, in the late 1800s.

Replication of Discourse Norms in the Media

Following the establishment of EO 1048, the Chancellor's Office released a series of press releases that contain the semantic macrostructures of the language of exclusion: *remedial*, *deficient*, and *skills*. The goal of Early Start, according to the Chancellor's Office press releases, is to "begin the skills-building process before students arrive on campus for their freshman year" (par. 1). The press releases say that Early Start is designed for students "who need to improve their skills in English" with the goal of "addressing deficiencies earlier." In the discourse of the Chancellor's Office, echoing the national narratives of *A Nation at Risk* and the Spelling's report, the writing "deficiencies" are located within the student, not within the socioeconomic circumstances of the CSU's primarily working-class population. These deficiencies can be addressed by improving "skills," which can somehow be accomplished once and for all in a shortened summer course.

The discourse of EO 1048 and the Early Start press releases was replicated throughout articles in campus and city newspapers, either through direct quotations or paraphrase by journalists who adopted the language of the Remedial Writing Framework as the "common sense" (Luke 12) discourse on the subject. For example, the word "remediation," and the attendant concept that students labeled remedial are deficient, was replicated in many of the titles of the articles:

- CSU Launches Program To Alleviate Remedial Student Issues (Addison)
- Cal State Campuses Overwhelmed by Remedial Needs (Krupnick)
- California State University Wants Struggling Students to Take Remedial Courses Prior to Freshman Year (Krieger)
- University to Force Remediation (Bailey)

These titles reinforce the idea that the problem resides within the students—they are "struggling" and "remedial." The CSU system is portrayed as "overwhelmed" by these remedial students, without any acknowledgment that underserved students are the norm at an institution whose alleged mission is to serve working-class Californians. As Horner argues, basic writing students' "location on the periphery is ideological, obtaining even in institutions where basic writers constitute the statistical norm" ("Relocating" 9). At some CSU campuses, the EPT places nearly 70% of students in remediation, making them peripheral in name only.

Replication of the Remedial Writing Framework's discourse norms occurred in many newspaper articles, reinforcing the notion of Early Start as a discourse event with limited and limiting semantic macrostructures. The italics I added in the following excerpts from campus and local newspaper articles indicate language lifted directly from or paraphrased from the Chancellor's Office press releases:

Approximately half of CSU's regularly admitted freshmen are *not proficient* in math and/or English and are required to take *developmental courses* during their initial year of college.

Wracked with frustration over the state's legions of *unprepared* high school graduates, the California State University system next summer will force freshmen with *remedial* needs to brush up on math or English before arriving on campus.

The Cal State system's *remedial* pressures have, for the past few years, led many students to take *basic* classes at community colleges.

Instead of combining *remedial* courses with normal courses during the student's first year, the goal is to have the student take those courses beforehand during the summer.

In addition to replicating the semantic macrostructures of the language of exclusion, the media replicates the Remedial Writing Framework's contrast between "remedial" and "developmental" and "basic" courses with "normal" courses. This basic/normal distinction is both informed by and reinforces the portrayal of "the legions of unprepared high school graduates" as inherently deficient and in need of quarantine until they can learn basic skills to "brush up" on their "remedial needs."

Bartholomae argues that this basic/normal distinction is what we have "learned to think through and by" in the field of Basic Writing (8), and although most CSUS Basic Writing teachers resist this way of thinking, in California the media has certainly learned to think of college students in terms of this dichotomy. When CSU composition teachers created "basic" and "developmental" writing programs in the 70s, they intended, like Mina Shaughnessy at CUNY, to replace the language of "remedial" and "deficient" with less oppressive terms. However, the discourse event of Early Start reveals that basic and developmental writing have been coopted by the Remedial Writing Framework. The names of CSU's "basic writing" and "developmental

writing” programs reinforce a basic/normal dichotomy—an issue that leads us to consider teacher complicity in the language of exclusion.

Complicity of CSU Teachers in the Remedial Writing Framework

Luke argues that complicity in oppressive discourse is not “simple top-down ideological manipulation” (9). Communities participate in discourse in ways that involve both working against the discourse and becoming complicit in their own oppression. Luke explains that when discourses are internalized, then noncoercive discipline has been achieved by those in power (9). The problem of complicity in dominant discourse and internalization by teachers of the language of exclusion is illustrated in the voices of faculty quoted in articles about Early Start. A few faculty members quoted in the articles, for example, simply reiterate the Chancellor’s Office view that students are deficient. In this section of the essay I once again italicize the language of the Remedial Writing Framework to highlight the ways CSU teachers are caught in this historical discourse.

One composition instructor was quoted in an article as saying, “Obviously, there are an awful lot of entering students who do need *remediation*” (qtd. in Carmona). A remediation director at another college was quoted as saying, “We’re all trying to figure out how to handle these students who are woefully *unprepared*” (qtd. in Krupnick). The use of the term “remediation” and the idea that there are an overwhelming number of students that need remediation was not just stated by faculty who spoke in favor of Early Start. Other faculty quoted in newspaper articles offer strong critiques of Early Start, but do so using terms from the language of exclusion of the Remedial Writing Framework. One educator and activist who has been a staunch defender of the CSU’s mission to serve diverse, first-generation college students was quoted as saying, “*Remedial* students did not fail to prepare for CSU. *Remedial* students are the majority. *Remediation* can be seen as a social justice remedy because if *remedial* education was not available in the CSU then many fewer students would have access to a college education in California” (qtd. in Bordas). Another teacher known for her leadership role in composition throughout the CSU was quoted as saying, “I do not believe this program will be effective. I definitely don’t think it will be more effective than what we already do....If we don’t have it our students would be fine. They aren’t going to improve in any way that’s measurable and that’s going to reduce their time in *remediation*” (qtd. in Kernes).

The language of exclusion was also replicated by faculty in resolutions against Early Start. Consider this excerpt from the CSU Academic Senate's resolution against Early Start:

The Academic Senate of the California State University (ASCSU) recognizes the value of diverse campus approaches to moving fully qualified first-time freshmen (FTF) who require additional *skill acquisition (remediation)* in English or mathematics to achieve *proficiency* either prior to, or during, their first year of enrollment.

In this resolution, composition is conceived of as "skill acquisition" and students are expected to become proficient in these basic skills by the end of their first year, as if writing is a finite set of skills that can be completed in a few semesters. The sentence above was repeated verbatim in a number of CSU campus Faculty Senate resolutions against Early Start. The resolution against Early Start passed by the Faculty Senate at San Jose State University contains sentences that reproduce the language of the Remedial Writing Framework:

In particular, there is a disproportionate percentage of underrepresented students requiring *remediation* and the Early Start requirement further reinforces the message that they don't belong at the University; and San José State already has effective *remediation* programs directed and taught by experts in the field.

Many in the *remedial* education community feel that there is an eternal existence of *remedial* students despite manifold attempts to "fix" them. *Remediation* has always had more to do with how these students are labeled and perceived than who they actually are. (2)

The discourse of these resolutions reinforce the concept of the internal remedial student, and it speaks to Victor Villanueva's argument that it is time "to move away from the concept that basic writers are in need of remedies" (97). Part of moving away from this concept of students perpetually in need of a remedy is getting beyond the language of remediation that teachers as well as administrators and the media continue to replicate. Even as they work against Early Start, faculty are trapped in the semantic macrostructures of the language of exclusion of the Remedial Writing Framework: *basic*, *remedial*, and *skills*. The language used by CSU faculty to critique Early Start supports Rose's point that "we end up arguing with words that sabotage our argument" (342). What the CSU needs to truly disentangle itself from the

Remedial Writing Framework is new words, and a new discourse framework.

THE ADVANCED WRITING FRAMEWORK: DISRUPTING THE DISCOURSE

The required first-year composition course has its roots in remediation, and the language of exclusion is not unique to courses labeled “basic” or “developmental.” As Mathew Pavesich argues, “Built into the very fiber of composition, and its *raison d’être*, is the notion of remedial normalization as crisis response” (91). Sharon Crowley’s abolitionist argument—that first-year writing will not lose its remedial status until the requirement itself is eliminated—presents one alternative to the Basic Writing Framework. A possible abolitionist solution for the CSU would be to eliminate both Basic Writing and first-year composition and encourage campuses to see writing as a shared responsibility through writing across the curriculum or writing in the disciplines programs. Another way of framing the issue, however, is to make the argument that most students need more than a single semester of focused, integrated reading and writing instruction by a composition specialist to help prepare for the complexities of academic literacies. A handful of CSUs have persuaded their campuses that a single semester of composition should not be considered mainstream but advanced.

There are five campuses that have made this shift away from the EPT and the basic/normal dichotomy. These five campuses—San Francisco State University, Fresno State University, CSU Channel Islands, CSU San Bernardino, and CSU Sacramento—ask students to complete a Directed Self-Placement (DSP) survey rather than using their EPT cut score for placement. Students may choose to take either a one-semester course that is considered an advanced writing experience or a two-semester cohorted stretch course which is considered the mainstream option, with additional adjunct tutoring options for students in either path. Fairclough argues that an important part of critical discourse analysis is finding “resistant texts” and “alternative representations” (134), and I argue that the Advanced Writing Framework presents alternative semantic macrostructures that disrupt Early Start and the Remedial Writing Framework and help CSU teachers break from historical discourse norms of deficiency, skills, and testing.

The curriculum structure of the Advanced Writing Framework combines a variety of the models that William Lalicker outlines in “A Basic Introduction to Basic Writing Program Structures,” and the inspiration for the approach at these five CSU campuses certainly comes from Basic

Writing theory and practice. It is critical to note, however, that none of these campuses perceives of or labels the stretch course as Basic Writing. Lalicker is not alone in associating stretch courses with Basic Writing. Adler Kassner and Harrington in *Basic Writing as a Political Act*, George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk in “The Future of Basic Writing,” and Greg Glau in his articles about the stretch program at Arizona State University, all associate stretch with basic writing. This is not a criticism of these authors: most stretch programs are associated with Basic Writing and “basic” writers. Pavesich argues that DSP and remediation alternatives like stretch and studio are problematic when they lead students to place themselves in courses that are not considered “normal,” and this is where the reframing of the one-semester course is key.

By introducing discourse that defines the one-semester course as “advanced” or “accelerated” and the stretch course as mainstream, these five CSU campuses have accomplished what Ritter calls “a shift in program design that does not eliminate necessary assistance for these writers but also does not rhetorically separate them from other writers in the university” (13). To discuss the effects of the shift from the Basic Writing Framework to the Advanced Writing Framework, I cite the language used on the DSP and first-year writing program websites and brochures of these five campuses.

The Discourse of the Advanced Writing Framework

At both CSU Channel Islands and CSU Sacramento, the dominant discourse that the EPT is a valid way to measure writing ability and place students into composition courses is explicitly disrupted. The welcoming letter that the CSU Channel Islands writing program includes on their DSP website lets students know that “at CSUCI, we don't believe single timed essays can reliably predict how students will perform in writing classes. We believe students and writing are far more complex than any single score can suggest.” The letter goes on to assure students, “You'll certainly do a better job of placing yourself than a single timed test would.” The CSU Sacramento DSP website explains that “Sac State students used to enroll in first-year composition courses based on their scores on the English Placement Test (EPT). We do not, however, believe that a multiple-choice, timed exam is the best way to determine a student's skills and placement.”

In addition to challenging the validity of the timed impromptu test, the discourse of mainstreaming at these CSU campuses challenges the “normal/basic” dichotomy and instead introduces the terms “strong” and “average” to

define the differences between the one-semester course and the two-semester stretch course. This is evident in the DSP placement survey instruments of Fresno State, Channel Islands, and San Francisco State. All three institutions use the phrase “I think of myself as a strong reader and writer” as the first criterion for self-placement into the one-semester course, and “I think of myself as an average reader and writer” for self-placement into the two-semester course. The literacy self-survey that is a part of the CSU Sacramento DSP instrument asks students if they have “more than average” experience reading and “more than average” experience writing. The one-semester composition courses at these CSU campuses are for “strong” students, and the two-semester option is the average. Otte and Williams Mlynarczyk say of DSP: “With this model, entering students are advised of the availability of basic writing courses and left to make their own decision as to whether to take BW or regular composition” (17). In the Advanced Writing Framework, there is no basic/regular dichotomy for DSP. As the DSP brochure of CSU Channel Islands states: “There are no remedial writing courses at CSUCI, so whichever choice you make, you’ll be in a course that counts toward graduation and in which you will be expected to produce college-level writing.”

This distinction of “strong” versus “average,” as opposed to “normal” versus “basic,” is reinforced in the titles of the first-year writing courses. At Fresno State, the course title of the one-semester composition option is “Accelerated Academic Literacy.” In their DSP brochure, Fresno State says of their stretch course: “Unless you really excel in English, we suggest this option.” The brochure warns students that the one-semester course “is an advanced class, and to choose this option you need to be a very competent reader and writer, ready to read complex essays, develop research supported analyses and complete assignments at a faster pace.” The course title of the one-semester composition option at San Bernardino is “Advanced Composition.” On the DSP website, it is labeled as the “most aggressively paced first-year writing option.” The one-semester course is described as “intended for students who are confident, flexible readers and writers, have familiarity with academic conventions and habits of mind, and are self-directed and self-motivated.” It is important to note that despite the similar language used, this kind of reframing is quite different from Peter Adams’ Accelerated Writing Program, which involves accelerating Basic Writing through a specific kind of mainstreaming but does not focus on redefining the one-semester course as accelerated or advanced for all students and does not necessarily use DSP.

The DSP survey instruments and websites from all four institutions do recognize that mainstream first-year writers at an institution such as the

CSU, which has an explicit mission of access to college for first-generation students, will not always have the same literacy backgrounds as the students entering the University of California system or private institutions like Stanford. The stretch courses are for students who are “unsure what to do when confronted with difficult texts,” “have trouble coming up with good topics and ideas,” “need to learn how to use outside sources,” and “could use some brushing up on grammar and punctuation.” These are not the qualities of “remedial” or “basic” students but of typical CSU students. CSU San Bernardino describes the stretch course option that lasts three academic quarters as:

Intended for the typical entering college students who may feel somewhat nervous about reading and writing at the college level and/or whose previous writing experiences have focused primarily on forms of writing, like the 5 paragraph format, Schaffer paragraphs, and other systematic approaches to writing development.

Despite this acknowledgment that the expectations of college-level writing will be a challenge for *most* entering students at the CSU (and not just those labeled remedial by a timed test), DSP recognizes the assets students bring with them to college writing. The DSP website at CSU San Bernardino states that “students who are admitted to CSUSB have successfully met expectations for high school writing; they are college-ready students.” CSU Sacramento emphasizes that “students enter the university already having a variety of writing skills and strategies. It is our mission to build upon these to prepare students for the complex reading, thinking, and writing tasks that will await them in their university classes and beyond.” The CSU Sacramento DSP website also makes an effort to discuss multilingual students’ assets. It states that the multilingual versions of each course “focus on the experiences and languages that multilingual students bring to the classroom—using them as a resource for learning and refining students’ academic reading and writing.”

Unlike the basic skills language of the discourse of Early Start, the language of DSP and stretch composition presents a more nuanced view of college reading and writing, in large part because the terms are in the control of composition specialists rather than ETS or the Chancellor’s Office. With the discourse in the control of writing teachers, students who were once labeled “remedial” or “basic” can now be more accurately labeled as “typical,” and what was once wrongly labeled mainstream—a mere one semester

of composition instruction—can be more properly labeled as “advanced” or “accelerated.”

Table 1 outlines the ways in which the discourse of the Advanced Writing Framework disrupts both the Remedial and Basic Writing Frameworks. It summarizes the evolution in the teaching of composition in the CSU from indirect assessment to direct assessment to self-assessment; from testing and tracking to choosing; from composition as a remedial basic skills course to composition as an advanced course in complex academic literacies; and from a separate writing curriculum for remedial and mainstream to an integrated writing curriculum.

Table 1: Comparison of Writing Frameworks in the CSU

Remedial Writing Framework	Basic Writing Framework	Advanced Writing Framework
Indirect assessment of writing ability through a multiple-choice test designed and scored by ETS	Direct assessment of writing ability through a timed writing test designed and scored by CSU writing teachers	Self-assessment of writing processes and habits through DSP activities designed by CSU writing teachers
Testing to exclude	Testing to sort	Self-assessment to choose
Targeted population of students labeled “remedial” writers	Targeted population of students labeled “basic” or “developmental” writers	All students labeled “college writers”
One-semester first-year composition course as “normal,” preparatory courses as “remedial”	One-semester first-year composition course as “mainstream,” preparatory courses as “basic” or “developmental”	One-semester first-year composition course as “advanced,” stretch course as “mainstream”
Different curriculum in “normal” and “remedial” courses	Different curriculum in “mainstream” and “basic” courses	Different pacing in one-semester and stretch courses but the same curriculum

Table 1 reveals how the Advanced Writing framework disrupts the discourse of the Remedial Writing framework in ways that the Basic Writing Framework was not able to: by eliminating the semantic macrostructures “remedial” and “basic” and “skills”; by eliminating high stakes timed testing as a tool to track and label students; by erasing the basic/normal dichotomy; and by

making two semesters of composition the mainstream and one semester advanced. Composition teachers who are concerned about being complicit in the discourse of remediation and basic skills can reflect on Table 1 to consider which column their own programs align with and what steps they can take to move their programs away from testing, tracking, and the normal/basic distinction.

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD AGAIN: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My argument for the Advanced Writing Framework is not a criticism of the work of the first generation of CSU Basic Writing teachers; nor is it a dismissal of what has been the strategic benefit of the term and the concept of “Basic Writing” in protecting resources for underserved students in the CSU. Shaughnessy’s relabeling of remediation as “Basic Writing” was a savvy rhetorical move away from exclusionary language that CSU writing teachers were wise to adapt at the time. Shaughnessy’s intention was to avoid both the term “remedial” (with its emphasis on personal defects) and “developmental” (with its implications that students are cognitively stunted). Deborah Mutnick argues that “basic writing, for all its internal contradictions, has played a vital role in increasing access to higher education” (72), and the creation of Basic Writing programs in the CSU system in the 1960s and 70s was a savvy move to protect access for socioeconomically disadvantaged students and provide them the support they needed to succeed in college writing. The recent creation of alternatives to non-credit bearing remedial coursework under the Advanced Writing Framework has been a savvy move as well, and one that has helped save the resources garnered by Basic Writing programs from right-wing attacks on access and entitlement and from budget cuts that have decimated state support for remediation in the past decade. I believe Basic Writing programs across the country can take away a number of lessons from the current evolution in first-year composition in the CSU, and I believe the Advanced Writing Framework represents more than just a rhetorically savvy move; it represents the possibility of escape from the “political-semantic web” (Rose 342) of the language of exclusion.

Changing the Nature of the Discourse

Based on my analysis of the emerging Advanced Writing Framework in the CSU, I feel there are strategies WPAs and writing teachers can use to help change the nature of the debate and disrupt the discourse of the Remedial

Writing Framework that endures not just in California but across the United States. The most important of these strategies is to avoid labeling college writing courses or programs “remedial,” “developmental,” or “basic.” There are times that it may be strategically necessary to use these terms and concepts to ensure the survival of a program, but it is up to composition teachers to remove these semantic macrostructures from the discourse norms. The discourse event of Early Start reinforces that if we continue using these terms, the Remedial Writing Framework will endure and replicate in the language of administrators and the public.

I believe it is also important for WPAs and writing teachers not to be complicit in labeling students “remedial,” “developmental,” or “basic” when discussing college writers and college writing courses with faculty, administration, and the media or when designing writing assessment and placement. As the CSU faculty quoted in campus and city newspapers reporting on Early Start and the faculty senate resolutions against Early Start reveal, as long as teachers use the language of exclusion, we unintentionally replicate the dominant discourse of the Remedial Writing Framework even as we argue against it. In an Advanced Writing Framework, the current writing assessment best practice that works against labels that stigmatize college writers in the minds of the public is Directed Self Placement. The history of Basic Writing in the CSU reveals that regardless of who designs the content of a timed writing test, who scores the test, or what the placement nuances are, administrators, faculty, students, and the public will associate a timed test with passing or failing, and with sorting the “normal” students from the “deficient” students. As my analysis of the emerging Advanced Writing Framework in the CSU emphasizes, DSP helps ensure that writing teachers control the discourse of assessment and placement. It can be a challenge to argue for DSP in the context of national and local discourses that assume that timed writing tests are valid indicators of college readiness and that “remedial” students won’t be capable of making decisions about which writing course is best for them. At the CSU it took decades of politicking through English Council and at local campuses to persuade the Chancellor’s Office to allow DSP to replace the EPT. WPAs who are working to change a remedial framework that dominates both nationally and locally at most institutions cannot expect change to happen overnight.

At most institutions of higher education, a one semester composition course is considered mainstream, and typically more than one semester of preparation in first-year composition is labeled “basic” or “developmental” or “remedial.” The Advanced Writing Framework makes the case that one

way to disrupt the normalized discourse of alleged literacy crises and legions of underprepared students draining taxpayer money is to rethink how much coursework in composition *most* entering college students will need to prepare for complex academic literacies. Rather than defining one semester of first-year composition as “mainstream” or the “norm,” we should define it as “advanced” or “accelerated.” We need to disabuse administrators and the public of the normalized discourse that fifteen weeks of reading and writing instruction from a composition expert is enough for most students to make the transition from high school to college literacies. Connected to this recommendation is the strategy of labeling anything beyond one semester of composition—whether it is stretch or studio or some other configuration—as “mainstream” rather than “basic” or “developmental” or “remedial.” By defining the stretch course as the mainstream option, the CSU campuses in my study have worked toward eliminating the discourse of the Remedial Writing Framework without eliminating the amount of instruction and support most students will need to succeed in college reading and writing.

The experience of the CSU system shows that we can change the discourse of our curriculum, our professional identities, and our disciplinary and public conversations. We can stop using terms like “remedial” or “basic” or “developmental.” We can frame our research on the assets diverse students bring to college writing and less on the challenges and problems the students we label “basic writers” present. We can resist the urge to track and separate the “basic” from the mainstream—in our curriculum, in our research, at our conferences, and in our journals.

The shift from the Remedial Writing Framework to the Basic Writing Framework in the 1970s was important and necessary, and this shift protected access for underserved students, but the discourse event of Early Start further emphasizes that what this shift failed to do was change the nature of the discourse of remediation and basic skills. To truly disrupt the discourse of the Remedial Writing Framework, we need to recognize our own complicity in this discourse and work to move beyond the discursive limits of the Basic Writing Framework. Replacing the language of exclusion and the discourse of the Remedial Writing Framework will not be easy or fast. But if administrators, politicians, the media, and our fellow faculty can so quickly and easily adopt and replicate the language of exclusion that we ourselves have at times been complicit in supporting, there is reason to believe that they will adopt new assumptions and a new discourse if we lead the way.

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