



## Journal of Basic Writing

"Root and Branch": Resisting a Basic Writing Legacy System

**Sean Molloy, Silvester Fonville, and Abdus Salam**

The Impact of Taking Basic Writing on Later Writing Course Performance and Graduation at a Career-Focused Four-Year University

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Back to Basics

**David Bartholomae**

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P.O. Box 465  
Hanover, PA 17331  
Phone: (717) 632-3535  
Fax: (717) 633-8920  
e-mail: [pubsvc.tsp@sheridan.com](mailto:pubsvc.tsp@sheridan.com)

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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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Editors' Column	<b>1</b>
"Root and Branch": Resisting a Basic Writing Legacy System <b>Sean Molloy, Silvester Fonville, and Abdus Salam</b>	<b>5</b>
The Impact of Taking Basic Writing on Later Writing Course Performance and Graduation at a Career-Focused Four-Year University <b>Justin Nicholes and Cody Reimer</b>	<b>36</b>
Using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra with Basic Writers and in a Graduate Course on Teaching Basic Writing <b>Laura Gray-Rosendale and Haley Stammen</b>	<b>64</b>
Back to Basics <b>David Bartholomae</b>	<b>90</b>

## CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 20-30 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 four to five 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, especially as it entails IRB review (which should be noted in an endnote).

Contributions should be submitted as Word document attachments via e-mail to: Hope.Parisi@kbcc.cuny.edu, and Cheryl.Smith@baruch.cuny.edu. You will receive a confirmation of receipt; a report on the status of your submission will follow in eight to ten 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 such fields as psychology, anthropology, journalism, and art. The journal is in active dialogue with the scholarship of new literacies, translanguaging, multimodality, digital rhetorics and online and social-media impacts as per intersectional writing identity formations.

The term "basic writer" is used with wide diversity today, and critiques the institutions and contexts that place students in basic writing and standardize academic language, as much as it may illumine the subtexts of individuals' writing practices. To help readers, therefore, authors should describe clearly the student population and settings 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 written in non-technical language; and collaborative writings which provocatively debate more than one side of a central controversy. A familiarity with the journal is the best way to determine whether JBW is your next venue for scholarship.

## EDITORS' COLUMN

Rarely before in recent history have so many people and communities felt the ground shifting beneath them so quickly and so radically. A pandemic that has killed more than a million people and wrecked our economies has gutted our social lives as well, distancing us from family, friends, neighbors, students, and colleagues. With the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Arnaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, and others, and the momentous upsurge of the Black Lives Matter movement, white and privileged Americans have begun to recognize the contingencies that have ensured the comfort, health, and safety of only some. As Black Lives Matter agents and allies are now leading the nation to realize, forcing consciousness, the embedded racisms of our institutions and systems work as an undertow at cross purposes with the flow of democracy—a democracy that has never been fully tried. Now is a time to willfully redirect these woeful insidious currents dragging us and the promises of equal access back and back.

Except in the case of special issues, the articles of any particular issue of the journal arise organically based on authors' time frames for writing and revision, coordinated with the journal's schedule for publishing. Fortuitous, however, is the way articles written independently of one another may come into dialogue in the current moment. This issue is yet another instance of that dynamic convergence at work.

Our first article, "Root and Branch': Resisting a Basic Writing Legacy System," by Sean Molloy, Silvester Fonville, and Abdus Salam, addresses Basic Writing at William Paterson University of New Jersey from a legacy standpoint: a BW system grounded in reactive policies around equal access as the college began to see an influx of students of color. Drawing correspondences to the potential for truly innovative outreach to the underprepared gaining college access through CUNY's SEEK program (which was also re-formed), Molloy and former-BW student co-authors Fonville and Salam recall a 1967 WP teaching initiative called SOUL, or Society of Unlimited Learning, "a bottom up, supportive, racial-justice program . . . provid[ing] financial, academic, and advisement support." SOUL stands in contrast to the retractive moves and conflicts of BW's eradication at WP during its final semester. Fonville and Salam had not known of the extra time and lack of credit their BW placements would entail. They drew hope from a project to acquire college credit for the course through an administrative appeal. In all, the authors convey the harms that people—actual students—experience waiting until "decades-old legacy systems" bearing inequities are "oppose[d],

reth[ought] and reimagine[d],” according to a metaphor taken from a 1968 school desegregation case, “root and branch.” As the authors argue, this approach may be the only real assurance of change, following Poe, Nastal, and Elliot, toward “What brings students most dignity?”

Rooting out the implicit racism and experienced harms of programs, policies, and curricula in English Departments, as is being done at WP and other places, means recognizing the possibility of harm even in well-thought out programs and reforms. It means going deep enough into systems to see disparate impacts as something nuanced and uncertain, yet demanding investigation. Our second article, “The Impact of Taking Basic Writing on Later Writing Course Performance and Graduation at a Career-Focused Four-Year Institution,” by Justin Nicholes and Cody Reimer, reflects the challenge to deeply explore established systems. On one level, Nicholes and Reimer’s study of retention and graduation effects of a Basic Writing stand-alone course appears to align with many previous studies, disaggregated by some of the most familiar demographics—gender, race and ethnicity, and first-generation status. The authors conclude that it barely registers whether students start out in Basic Writing or Composition 1; graduation rates are roughly the same, while grade outcomes align for these populations as well.

A social justice perspective incurs, however, as the picture expands upon further investigation. Basic writing students who make it to Composition 1 and 2 are “statistically significantly more likely to graduate within 4-6 years,” yet the authors acknowledge the study’s limited purview; BW students who don’t make it to Composition 1 and 2 are unaccounted for. Even this is not the final point. The authors elaborate the local context for Basic Writing’s actualization inside a “comprehensive, public, career-focused four-year polytechnic university with a reported student employment/place-ment rate of 98%” and in a “predominantly white university, with 86% of students institutionally categorized as ‘White/Caucasian’ and with 53% of its students designated as ‘male.’” In doing so, they offer a model for the kind of fine-grained observation and critique of Basic Writing contexts that is called for today, moving us towards a better understanding of the larger social justice imperative for setting out critical comparisons. Implicitly, the authors help us to recognize the question of who succeeds in Basic Writing in light of larger questions of who is Basic Writing for? Nicholes and Reimer thereby do more than report statistical outcomes within a unique setting for Basic Writing. They model research in Basic Writing for reinterpreting perceived purposes at a very crucial moment.

Our third article, “Using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra with Basic Writers and in a Graduate Course on Teaching Basic Writing,” by Laura Gray-Rosendale and Haley Stammen, similarly presages the current moment by addressing how educational access has shifted to prioritize learning online and at a distance. Written prior to the COVID outbreak, the article introduces a means for teaching and collaborating that, at the time of its composition, seemed novel—now its utilization must be seen not only as essential but also just. Since COVID, the disparate impacts around access to technology can be, and are being, equated with injuries to civil rights, and to the degree that Basic Writing advances or stymies that access, we play our part. Calls to take account of COVID’s disparate effects on Black and Brown communities and a paucity of racial justice make digital teaching and learning more crucial than ever, as immigrants, working-class students, first-generation, and students of color bear the largest share of COVID-inequity fallouts. Gray-Rosendale and her graduate student Stammen provide numerous structures for learning using Collaborate Ultra, an accessible and flexible affordance for video conferencing, screen-sharing, and dialoguing through the Blackboard Learn platform. As the authors demonstrate, the modality makes the difference for Basic Writing distance students, as well as for graduate students of Basic Writing Studies like Haley, across settings. Rather than replicate the distance of online learning, Collaborate Ultra for our authors increases engagement, renewing education, again, for *dignity*. Crediting Collaborate, the authors hold, “no longer are we anonymous people behind screens. . . . There’s an immediacy and a deep connection between us all as individuals. We have, in essence, become realer, fuller, and more whole to one another.” An era of more equality likely will be an era of fuller and deeper relationships.

Apropos of deeper visions and relationships in BW, in our fourth article, “Back to Basics,” David Bartholomae invites us to participate in his last semester at University of Pittsburgh in 2018 when he taught a rendition of Basic Writing, renamed, “Workshop in Composition.” Since his students were mostly from China, where he also taught, Bartholomae is inspired to reflect broadly on writing as a fluid, transverse activity, engaging the writer in the convergences of culture and experience. It is clear that Bartholomae appreciates his students as his teachers, as he recalls many favorite, long-regarded authors and students, including Min-Zhan Lu, for the lessons they taught him, now becoming fully realized in early retirement. Perhaps most striking is his view of Basic Writing as a source of strength and resilience for translingual composition. Ultimately, he concludes, translingualism is “an orientation,” one that fosters “a new way of conceiving the motives and

methods of what we used to call Basic Writing.” Grasping translanguaging in composition through the lens of “tolerance for variation, humility, and a willingness to negotiate meaning, letting ambiguities pass, a recognition that language is changing, not static,” resonates a point of return for Bartholomae, and suggests supportive democratic, anti-racist goals that we should now more than ever expect of our field—however “we used to call” it, or will call it in the future.

This issue also brings on board two new Associate Editors, CUNY professors who in the tradition of *JBW* editorships, have graciously agreed to take on the incessant labor (it is!) of dedication to a mainstay journal of a field that is changing, but which still centralizes our nation’s most vulnerable populations among students of writing. We welcome Lisa Blankenship (Baruch College, CUNY) and Dominique Zino (LaGuardia Community College, CUNY).

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

# “Root and Branch”: Resisting a Basic Writing Legacy System

Sean Molloy, Silvester Fonville, and Abdus Salam

*ABSTRACT: Since the 1970s, legacy Basic Writing systems have survived despite growing resistance grounded in an increasing awareness of their troubling roots and harmful effects. In this article, two 2017 basic writing students and their teacher conduct a mixed-method “postmortem” examination of the now eliminated zero-credit course and writing test placement system at their university. They combine a local desegregation history, an assessment validity inquiry, and a case study of growing resistance to Basic Writing for over a decade, including their own resistance in 2017. Adapting the “root and branch” metaphor from *Green v. County Board* (1968), the authors analyze reforms from 2007 to 2017 that significantly trimmed the branches of a decades-old, legacy Basic Writing system—but did not root it out completely. Finally, the authors examine their own failed efforts to obtain college credit for the work they did together in 2017 and the complex ways that Basic Writing has harmed each of them.*

*KEYWORDS: basic writing; desegregation; civil rights; college writing; disparate impact; harm; root and branch; testing; writing assessment; writing placement*

Sil and Abdus met on September 6, 2017—their very first day of college at William Paterson University (“WP”). That day, Abdus felt nervous and excited. He had no idea what to expect or whether he could succeed. Sil felt weird. He’s not a social person and he didn’t know anyone. It should have been a proud and happy day. Both had fought hard against long odds to earn their places here. But both had been enrolled into ENG 1080 Basic Writing, which at once cast a dark cloud over their entry to college. After admitting and recruiting them, WP had determined (based on a timed essay placement test) that Sil and Abdus were too “basic” to take WP’s mainstream writing course—unlike 98% of their peers. WP labeled them as “basic writers” and placed them into a pass-fail, zero-credit, “basic” course that carried no college credit and awarded no letter grade. It would remain on their permanent

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*A college writing teacher since 2003, **Sean Molloy** is Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at William Paterson University. His work has been published by the Journal of Basic Writing, College English, CUNY Digital History Archive, as well as on YouTube, and recently in two edited collections: Writing Assessment, Social Justice and the Advancement of Opportunity (2018); and Talking Back: Senior Scholars and Their Colleagues Deliberate the Future of Writing Studies (2020).*

college transcripts for all future potential graduate schools and employers to see. More subtly, Sil and Abdus understood that WP had already judged them as less capable than virtually all of their entering peers. Sean, a second-year assistant professor, taught both sections of Basic Writing offered that fall. He met Sil and Abdus on their first day of college.

### **A Local History, Validity Inquiry, and Case Study**

In 2018, English faculty and WP administrators discontinued both writing placement tests and our Basic Writing course; WP began to place all incoming students into mainstream writing courses. Sil and Abdus were in the last group of students labeled as “basic writers” at our college and Sean was the last Basic Writing instructor here. In this article, we combine three methods (a local history, a disparate impact validity analysis, and a case study of our own Basic Writing experience) into a larger postmortem examination of Basic Writing at WP from start to finish.

Our mixed methods here respond to calls for ecological and polyvocal programmatic assessment studies of first-year writing programs and writing assessment systems (Wardle and Roozen; Lee, 643-44; Mislevy, 265-68; White, Elliot and Peckham, 32). We agree with Asao B. Inoue that an anti-racist programmatic assessment must recognize that “all ecologies are associated with political activities” and should refer “to the political (or power) relations between people” (81). We join the 2019 call by Mya Poe, Jessica Nastal, and Norbert Elliot for new college writing course frameworks based on the belief that “*an admitted student is a qualified student*” (italics in original).

We also affirm that “[h]istories of writing assessment are invaluable in the analysis of practices viewed as deterministically objective” (Banks et al., 380). Our local history jumps back to 1968 and recovers the story of

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**Silvester Fonville** is a senior at William Paterson University who will graduate in May 2021 with a bachelor's degree majoring in Psychology and minoring in Criminal Justice. He currently works providing care and services for developmentally disabled individuals. He loves dogs, especially his bull terrier Dynasty. In September 2021, he plans to seek a master's degree in forensic psychology.

**Abdus Salam**, a senior at William Paterson University, will earn his bachelor's degree in January 2021 (with the highest distinction) majoring in Computer Information Technology. He currently works as a substitute teacher at all levels of the Paterson School District and plans to begin graduate studies in September, 2021. He hopes this article will help other college students to avoid discouraging, harmful, zero-credit, “basic” classes that make it harder to keep up with their peers and graduate in four years.

the first desegregation program at our college—led by two English professors. We trace the decade of expanding desegregation that included new, full-credit, writing courses here from 1971 to 1978. Then we examine how the imposition of Basic Writing here in 1978-79 was openly understood at that time to be a conservative reaction to desegregation at the direction of a new WP President, Seymour Hyman. Hyman’s plans were briefly delayed by vocal student and faculty opposition; but in 1979, WP implemented its first zero-credit, Basic Writing course/testing system. As such, we position the imposition of Basic Writing at WP within the myriad forms of overt and covert resistance to integration at all levels of American education.

In 1954, a unanimous Supreme Court recognized that feelings of inferiority inflicted on Black children could “affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (Brown, 347 U.S. 483, 494). Fourteen years later, the Court lost patience with Southern resistance to dismantling legacy apartheid school systems; it ordered Virginia educators to build a new “system in which racial discrimination would be eliminated root and branch” (Green, 391 U.S. 430, 438). We adapt the Court’s 1968 “root and branch” metaphor here as we jump forward to analyze reform efforts between 2007 and 2017 at WP that cut back the branches of our legacy Basic Writing system—but did not root it out completely.

Following Poe, Elliot, Cogan, and Nurudeen’s 2014 study of a placement system at another New Jersey university, we then conduct a disparate impact analysis of the 2017 system at WP that placed Abdus and Sil into Basic Writing.

Finally, we examine our actual experience in 2017 in this 38-year-old legacy system, including Sil and Abdus’s placement into Basic Writing, our efforts to obtain college credit, and the actual work we did together in the course—all of which exposed both the inability of a timed test to measure the content of our course, and the harmful consequences of this Basic Writing test/course system on actual students. In doing so, we affirm that “validity inquiries are not bloodless undertakings; the cares and concerns of people” and “student and teacher voices” must be included (Inoue and Poe 119).

In conclusion, we consider how Basic Writing affected us and how our study may help to guide social justice writing teachers and administrators at other colleges as they resist and reform old legacy systems.

## **Our Positionality**

Abdus grew up as the youngest of nine brothers and sisters in Kuna Shaleswar, a small village in northeast Bangladesh filled with mango, jackfruit, coconut, and betelnut trees—as well as big, brightly painted houses that held large families. As a boy, he crossed the Kushiara River in a small boat every day to go to his public school. He played cricket in the village's green, grassy fields. His family spoke only Bengali at home, but Abdus studied a little bit of English in all his school classes. In March of 2016, Abdus, his parents, brother, and sister emigrated to Paterson, New Jersey—seeking more opportunities and a better life.

Growing up, Sil was surrounded by a loving family in Atlantic City, New Jersey. They always pushed him toward the right path, but his friends almost pulled him into a dangerous life. Tourists view Atlantic City as a place to go and have fun on the boardwalk and beach. But they don't see the struggles. Sil's hometown is a place where kids' hopes get cut short again and again until all they feel is hate, where students strive to strengthen their talents but schools don't push them, and where violence and gangs are more looked up to than teachers. When Sil graduated from his high school in 2017, few of his friends went on to college. In 2017, only 80% of Atlantic City High School (ACHS) seniors graduated. Even worse, only 68% of African-American seniors graduated—15% lower than the NJ State average of 83%. Among ACHS graduates that year, only 37% were enrolled in any four-year college sixteen months after graduation (NJDOE "Summary Report," "Graduation Rates").

Sil almost joined the Navy and skipped college. But as an African American, he didn't feel comfortable serving under the current President. He also knew he wanted something better for himself.

Sean grew up in one of Brooklyn's working-class, outer-fringe, white neighborhoods in the 1960s and 70s. On Avenue L back then, racism was in the air and every child breathed it in. After working eighteen years as a lawyer, Sean started teaching college writing courses in 2003, including many sections that were labeled as "introductory" or "basic." Sean's 2016 PhD dissertation was a history that traced the connections between the racial desegregation at City College, City University of New York (CUNY) in the 1960s, and the birth of "Basic Writing" programs at CUNY in the 1970s ("Myopia"). He came to WP as a new Assistant Professor in 2016. On the first day of Sean's second year at WP, he met Sil and Abdus in our Basic Writing class.

## **1966 to 1972: Ending Racial Exclusion at WP**

In 1966, two young professors joined the WP English Department. Phil Cioffari and Fort Manno were soon troubled that WP (then called Paterson State College) was an overwhelmingly white institution, with only about a few dozen Black students within a student body of 6,300 (Manno).

WP had been born in 1855 as a few teacher-training classes in the City of Paterson, a silk mill town about twelve miles west of Manhattan. Across the next century, WP had slowly grown into a general college and then into a college for teachers. In 1951, “Paterson State Teachers College” moved to a new hilltop campus about a mile northwest of Paterson’s city limits (White). As Cioffari and Manno arrived in 1966, WP was just beginning to expand its degree programs to become a full liberal arts college.

Even though WP had deep roots in Paterson and sat on a hilltop just over a mile west of the diverse city, Manno and Cioffari saw that many of Paterson’s high school seniors were being excluded from its namesake college. Determined to end this racial exclusion, the two young English professors proposed a new Society of Unlimited Learning (SOUL) scholarship, admissions, and supportive teaching pilot program. Cioffari and Manno also wanted to activate student and faculty to join together to reshape the campus culture. In October of 1967, they held a SOUL organizational meeting attended by over 100 students and faculty. In November, they organized a “Love-Rock” fundraiser concert on campus. In December, SOUL held a holiday craft sale (Cioffari, Manno). Cioffari asked national bands to play scholarship benefit concerts. The Doors said no, but Little Anthony and the Imperials (“Hurts So Bad”) came and sold out 1100 seats (Cioffari). Cioffari and Manno also sought funding from the New Jersey Board of Higher Education; they eventually secured a \$40,000 state grant (Manno).

With their funding secured, Cioffari and Manno visited churches and local organizations in Paterson to recruit Black applicants. In the spring of 1968, SOUL awarded twenty scholarships to incoming African American students: ten men and ten women (Cioffari; Manno; Hutton). The incoming SOUL students all attended a free, non-credit, residential summer program with bridge courses in math, writing, and African American history. They received free books. They took many of their first- and second-year courses as a single learning community with supportive instructors carefully selected by Cioffari and Manno from the tenure-track faculty. These teachers offered extra tutoring assistance as needed. Cioffari and Manno regularly checked in

with the teachers; they also advised the twenty SOUL students throughout their four-year college careers (Cioffari; Manno).

As a bottom-up, supportive, racial-justice program, SOUL provided financial, academic, and advisement support. SOUL viewed all students as individuals who were capable of college success from their first day at college. It tracked their success and offered individual support as needed. It avoided creating any stigmatizing structures or barriers to success. There were no placement tests or zero-credit courses. Recognizing that diversity made WP a stronger and better community, Cioffari and Manno measured the SOUL program's success on actual student success through course grades and graduation (Cioffari; Manno). These direct programmatic assessments were more valid than indirect metrics (like timed writing tests) and they also aligned student and program success—ensuring that the SOUL program would serve as a bridge rather than a barrier.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, SOUL's founders could not easily have adopted any writing course barriers at WP—because such barriers did not then exist. In 1966, WP's mainstream required writing course was ENG 110 "Fundamentals of English," which trained students "in expository writing with due consideration to clarity, precision, and correctness." ENG 110 also focused on "unity, coherence and emphasis" as well as "library resources, choice and definition of subject, outlining, organization and authentication" (PSC, "1966-67" 73). From 1966 to 1970, WP also offered ENG 210 "Fundamentals of English," an "advanced course in written communication" with "an emphasis on literary form," and ENG 322 "Advanced Composition," a three-credit elective.<sup>2</sup> In this way, students could take three mainstream writing courses—all carrying three credits. None of these writing courses were labeled as sub-college, remedial, or basic. There were no placement tests.

After New Jersey passed a statewide "Educational Opportunity Act" in mid-1968, WP joined the state's new Educational Opportunity Fund scholarship/desegregation program, which took over for SOUL with EOP scholarships and support. SOUL did not recruit any additional incoming classes. Cioffari and Manno tracked their 1968 SOUL students through graduation in 1972. Shirley Chisholm accepted their invitation that year to be WP's commencement speaker (Cioffari). Ultimately, eleven of the twenty SOUL students completed their degrees (Hutton).

## **1971-1978: Supportive and Stretch Writing Courses With Full College Credit**

From 1966 to 1979, WP more than doubled in size. For example, in just the three years between the fall of 1967 and 1970, WP's student body grew from 6,100 to nearly 9,000 students (Puccio; “Student Enrollment”). During the 1970s, EOP and other racial justice programs admitted more students of color; nonetheless, WP remained a largely white institution. A 1979 ethnic census of WP's 12,500 students showed that 90.3% of WP's undergraduate and 92.9% of its graduate students were white.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1970s, the English Department developed several new writing courses for this growing and changing student body. In 1971, the Department created four ESL stretch courses with full course credit.<sup>4</sup> In 1973, the English Department also created ENG 108 “Approaches to Reading and Writing” and ENG 109 “Patterns for Prose” (WPC, “1975-77” 121-22). In a 1977 *Beacon* interview, English Associate Professor and WPA Virgie Granger explained that the English Department had created these “developmental” writing courses in 1973 in response to a 1972 student survey. ENG 108 and 109 were popular, voluntary electives: so many students signed up for them that struggling writers often could not find places. Granger estimated that half of WP's students needed “a good course in critical reading and all students [needed] help with writing” (quoted in Phillips 5).

The SOUL Program and the new 1970s writing courses were all bottom-up innovations that responded to students' needs with non-punitive and non-stigmatizing forms of writing instruction for WP's expanding and diversifying student body. This initial response to desegregation at WP built bridges to student success while preserving student dignity. These writing courses were based on student input, carried full college credit, fulfilled core requirements, and depended on voluntary registration with no placement tests.

## **1978-1979: Hyman Imposes the Zero-Credit Basic Skills CUNY Model**

In early 1977, two developments set the stage for WP to replace its stretch, elective, and full-credit writing courses with a Basic Writing model. First, in January of 1977, WP announced the selection of a new college president, Seymour C. Hyman. A chemical engineering graduate of City College, Hyman came to WP from the City University of New York where he had served as the system's Deputy Chancellor (Farah and McManus). The first

“Basic Writing” course had been created at City College in 1969, less than four years after City launched its first desegregation program. Between 1970 and 1972, Mina Shaughnessy developed the first City College Basic Writing course into a tiered writing test and sub-college Basic Writing course system, which she then exported across the CUNY system and beyond (Molloy, “Myopia”). Basic Writing soon grew into a distinct national sub-field of composition and rhetoric. Shaughnessy’s and CUNY’s indirect influence continued to dominate Basic Writing programs and discourse for decades after her death (Gunner 1998; Ritter 2009, 29-31). While it is usually not possible to trace the direct influence of the City College Basic Writing model on colleges beyond CUNY, Hyman’s arrival at WP forged a direct link.

The second development was that the New Jersey Department of Higher Education (NJDEH) set up a “Basic Skills Council” in March of 1977 “to design a basic skills test for the state college community.” In October 1977, the NJDEH approved the actual “Basic Skills Testing Program.” All state colleges were required to administer the test to incoming students starting in the fall of 1978. Colleges (and even departments) could set their own passing scores, but colleges were required to offer some form of “remedial” courses for students who did not meet their chosen cut-offs.<sup>5</sup> In the summer of 1978, WP administered the new NJ “basic skills” tests and about 40% of WP’s incoming Fall 1978 students failed some part of it. This was not unusual that year. About 43% of all incoming New Jersey state and county college students failed some part of the new test based on a 65% hypothetical passing score (Olohan, “Skills Problem” 3).

Looking back now, the impact of the new 1978 NJ testing system is astounding. In 1977, New Jersey’s incoming public college students could begin full-credit courses with dignity, pride, and excitement. In 1978—like Sil and Abdus almost forty years later—almost half of the incoming New Jersey public college students arrived to be told they were too “basic” to take entry-level college courses. (A few miles east across the Hudson River, CUNY also launched its system-wide, minimum skills placement testing program in the fall of 1978. Over half of its 22,000 incoming students failed one or more of those new “basic skills” tests [Molloy, “Myopia” 388].)

By contrast, entering students in New Jersey and New York City private colleges faced no similar mass shaming. (Of course, many of those colleges had already excluded most working class and students of color through admissions barriers.) That year, Sean graduated from a private Catholic high school in lower Manhattan. His working class, immigrant family knew nothing about American colleges. But his high school had marshalled all students

through PSAT and SAT tests. If Sean had entered a New Jersey or New York City public college that fall, he would have been required to take their new basic skills placement tests in writing, reading, and math. He might have been labeled “basic” and forced into “remedial” courses. But Sean entered a private college in Manhattan, and it had no placement tests. It did not label a single incoming student as basic. Instead, the college awarded Sean nine college credits for his high school AP test scores and also exempted him from taking any first-year writing class. Sean began college with his confidence intact—and almost a full semester’s head start.

The NJDHE mandated the new tests. But it did not dictate whether the newly mandated “remedial courses” would carry college credit. In 1978, other nearby colleges (Montclair State, Stockton, Ramapo, and Jersey City State) all gave full college credit for their supportive English courses (Olohan, “Hyman Okays” 1). WP had created and offered introductory reading, writing and math courses—with full credit—for several years. The 1978 WP catalog listed the same writing courses as the 1975 catalog.<sup>6</sup> But in the summer of 1978, Hyman stripped all graduation credit from four existing courses: ENG 108, ENG 109, MATH 101, and MATH 105. Using the new NJDOE basic skills test scores, Hyman forced 40% of WP’s incoming students into between one and four of the zero-credit courses.<sup>7</sup> As an additional new barrier, all these courses had to be completed before students completed their 43rd credit or they were subject to expulsion (Madaras 1).

Hyman faced strong faculty and student resistance (Olohan, “Basic Skills Policy Opposed” 1). Both the Math and English Departments objected. WPA Granger explained: “We’ve given credit. . . for three years—these are credited courses” (quoted in Olohan, “Skill Problem” 3). Although at least 75% of the students who failed the placement were white (they were at that time 90% of *all* WP undergraduates) some faculty and administrators immediately associated the new zero-credit courses with WP’s students of color. Hyman himself repeatedly referenced “minority” students when he defended removal of course credit: “We are trying to give an opportunity to the minority students. These students will not be able to succeed in life if we’ve faked them out by giving them credit for these courses” (quoted in Olohan, “No Remedial Credits” 1).

Hyman’s “student need” argument fooled few stakeholders in 1978; AFT Local 1996 President and WP Professor Irwin Nack responded that the “whole [Basic Skills] policy is just systemic class and race discrimination” (quoted in Olohan, “No Remedial Credits” 1). An October 31, 1999 *Beacon* editorial agreed with Nack that “the new Basic Skills policy is only a way

of ridding the college of minority students and offering the elite a proper education” (Madaras 1; “Editorial” 12). In early December, Hyman gave in to pressures to restore credit to the four courses—but only for one year (Olohan, “Hyman Okays” 1-2) and only after citing “inadequate” advisement as the reason (Olohan, “Board Approves” 2).

Hyman persisted. In the fall of 1979, WP did strip credit from the four mandatory “remedial” courses (WPC, “Volume VII” 6). The English courses were also altered in the 1979 Catalog, directly adopting CUNY’s Basic Reading/Basic Writing model:

**ENG/RLA 107 Basic Reading 3 credits** This basic reading and writing course is designed to develop the student’s reading vocabulary, comprehension skills, and study skills. The course will also stress flexible reading approaches applicable to various materials including the student’s college texts. *Credits for this basic skills course are not applied toward degree requirements.*

**ENG/RLA 108 Basic Writing 3 credits** The basic writing course is designed to emphasize the standard English sentence and the extension of a group of sentences into an organized unit. *Credits for this basic skills course are not applied toward degree requirements.* (WPC, “Volume IX” 60).

The English Department administered the new “Basic Writing” courses, offering around ten to twenty sections each semester (Rosen). Newly hired English tenure track faculty taught most of these course sections as the bulk of their 4/4 teaching load (Manno). Hyman led WPU for eight years until 1985; he retired to Florida and died in 2006 (“Paid Death Notice”). Governor Christie Whitman eliminated both the NJ Board of Higher Education and its mandatory placement testing system in 1994 (Elliot 210). But the basic skills system Hyman and the NJBHE created at WP long survived them.<sup>8</sup> The WP English Department administered and taught Basic Writing courses for 38 years, until we met in our Basic Writing section in September 2017.

### **2007 to 2017: Growing Resistance to Basic Writing**

Between 2001 and 2019, WP has had only two WPAs. They developed a first-year mainstream writing course pedagogy that focused on process, revision, and peer workshops. It was increasingly clear to them that the basic skills pedagogy in our Basic Writing courses (which still included a

high-stakes exit exam) did not align with their writing pedagogy—which led to their repeated efforts to reform or abolish Basic Writing.

For example, in 2007, our WPA and the administrator of the Basic Reading course jointly proposed that WP rethink, combine, or eliminate both courses (Marshall and Mongillo). But by 2007, the roots of the Basic Writing system had burrowed deeply into our institutional culture. Among its subtle harms were its impact on the teachers who had been required to teach and administer it for almost three decades. English faculty had taught thousands of students placed by the tests into Basic Writing courses; year after year, these teachers did their best to help students become better, stronger writers in those courses. English faculty had eventually redesigned the ETS placement tests into a local timed essay test and English faculty had graded them. The Basic Writing system had become part of English and English had become part of Basic Writing. In this way, any attack on Basic Writing also had become an attack on the English Department, its first-year writing program, and all the writing teachers who had taught the course. A powerful lore of “student need” also developed over time; concerned educators came to believe that students with low placement test scores could not succeed without the zero-credit Basic Writing course. These entrenched systemic influences made efforts to abolish Basic Writing—to eliminate it both root and branch—much harder.

Even so, opposition to Basic Writing grew stronger. In 2012, the English Chair (and former WPA) published a book in which he argued that “the project of Basic Writing” evidences both an institutional and American cultural inability “to fully and completely face the consequences of racism.... I am suggesting that it takes hard work not to see this” (Marshall 60). When efforts to abolish Basic Writing again failed in 2010-11, the English Department created a new layer of directed self-placement. In this new DSP system, all incoming students who failed to meet a cut-off score on the SAT Critical Reading test were required to take the in-house timed essay placement test. English faculty readers tentatively placed students with weaker test responses into the Basic Writing course.<sup>9</sup> The faculty then tried to contact all those students to consult about an option to opt out of Basic Writing. Students placed into Basic Writing could instead take and pass a free summer writing course. They could also simply request to transfer to mainstream writing courses. But students were required to affirmatively opt-out: if they missed email or telephone notices, or were accepted late in the summer, they stayed in Basic Writing. Our WPA knew that “there were always a certain number of students who fell through the cracks” (Weaver, “Interview”).

The DSP reform cut back the branches of Basic Writing in two important ways. First, it gave real opt-out opportunities and many students took them. But English faculty who reviewed the tests also began to place fewer students into Basic Writing in the first place. As reflected in Table 1, the number of actual Basic Writing students fell from 208 in 13 sections in 2008-09 (before the opt-out system), to 96 students in six sections in 2011-12, to only eleven in a single section in 2016-17. WP's populations of incoming

**Table 1.** Total WPU Basic Writing Sections and Students 2006-2018 (Drawn from Registration Records).

Acad. Year (Sep-Aug)	BW Sections	BW Students
2007-8	11	178
2008-9	13	208
2009-10	10	131
2010-11	8	143
2011-12	6	96
2012-13	7	81
2013-14	3	38
2014-15	2	17
2015-16	2	15
2016-17	1	11
2017-18	2	28

students did not change over these eight years—except that WP became more accessible and inclusive. In 2008, WP accepted 60.6% of its fall applicants; in 2016, WP accepted 75.9%; in 2017, 92.5%; in 2018, 93.5% (WPU, “Fact Book 2012-2013” Table 1.1, “Fact Book 2018-19” Table 1.1). But the English faculty test readers informally recalibrated their readings to judge far fewer students as “needing” Basic Writing in the first place.

For example, in 2016, English placement test readers tentatively placed only 32 students into Basic Writing. Only nine actually consulted with English faculty and eight of those opted out. Over the summer, a total of 21 opted out with or without any summer course. Only two students affirmatively opted in, one with an English consult and one without. Nine either didn't respond, were accepted too late in the summer for consults, or otherwise fell through the cracks; they were all placed into Basic Writing. In sum, the recalibrated placements and the DSP options together enabled 99% of incoming WP students to avoid the zero-credit Basic Writing course.

But of the 11 students who actually ended up in the single Fall 2016 Basic Writing section, nine had simply fallen through the cracks in the system.<sup>10</sup>

### **Spring and Summer 2017: Abdus and Sil are Placed into Basic Writing**

In March 2017, Sean asked to teach the Fall 2017 Basic Writing sections. He also approached the WPA and English Chair and proposed that he would teach them with exactly the same syllabus as his Fall 2017 mainstream writing sections, using a writing-about-writing model with four units: process theory, social constructivism, rhetoric, and digital composing/publishing. If the Basic Writing course students succeeded, WP would transfer them into Sean’s mainstream writing section; they would receive letter grades and course credit. Basic Writing would disappear from their permanent college transcripts. Both the Chair and WPA agreed; Sean planned his mainstream and Basic Writing classes with the same assignments and deadlines.

In the spring of 2017, time flowed like the current of a river for Abdus. He graduated high school. WP accepted his application and sent a recruiting package of brochures that encouraged him to visit the campus. Abdus decided to attend WP. Then another WP mailing advised him to come and take a placement test. All this was new to him; Abdus didn’t understand that he might have to take up to three non-credit classes based on the test scores.

Sil was planning to attend a private four-year college when he was accepted to WP on August 1, 2017. Everything felt last minute and rushed and put Sil under a lot of pressure. He wasn’t able to tour campus until the 10th of August. After being recruited on the WP tour, Sil changed his mind and enrolled at WP. A week later, he paid a \$125 enrollment fee and a \$150 housing fee. When he took his placement test on August 17, 2017, Sil did not understand its importance. He would have dug deeper and reviewed his essay more carefully if he had realized it could place him into Basic Writing.<sup>11</sup>

Having overestimated the number of the Fall 2017 incoming class acceptances, WP sent out a wave of August acceptances. These students (including Sil) were admitted too late for any summer courses or DSP consults. So, more students than in the previous three years slipped through the cracks into Basic Writing.

In early September, the English Department realized that it had not proposed Sean’s course credit idea to college administrators for approval. The Chair emailed the Dean in early September and proposed simply moving all the Basic Writing students over to mainstream sections at once. Our Dean

was supportive: she promptly responded that she was initiating discussions within administration, financial aid, and the registrar regarding possible means to meet the needs of our students. In the meantime, the students remained in Basic Writing.

### **September 2017: Stay or Transfer?**

In the first week of classes, Sean told the Basic Writing students they could still ask our WPA to transfer to a mainstream class. Most did not understand that the three credits listed for the class were not real credits that counted toward core requirements or graduation, or that the pass/fail grade would almost certainly not be transferable to another college. Many were slowly learning that 98% of their peers had not been placed into Basic Writing. Some were realizing that they were also placed into “basic reading” or “basic math” classes that also carried zero-credit.

The smart, sophisticated choice for all these students was to leave. Sean knew that the timed essay test scores was an incompetent tool to predict success in WP writing classes.<sup>12</sup> Even though he was seeking approval for course credit, Sean knew that he might fail. If the students did comparable work in a mainstream section, they would certainly earn college credit, satisfy a core requirement and earn letter grades. Moreover, if any student’s work didn’t earn the minimum “C” mainstream course grade, they would receive a non-punitive “N” grade that did not affect their GPA. If they struggled in the mainstream course, they could also drop it until mid-semester without academic penalty. In sum, the Basic Writing students literally had nothing to lose, and a good deal to gain, by jumping at once to a mainstream writing class.

As a new immigrant, Abdus understood that life in America is a constant struggle for survival. Everyone must battle here for food, shelter, and a life with dignity. While he was a full-time student, Abdus also worked a full-time job at a donut shop to help support his aging, immigrant parents. Still, the first week of college was a completely new and strange experience. When Sean told the students that the credit from this class would not apply to their degrees, they were all surprised and disheartened. Sil, Abdus, and everyone had thought it was a three-credit course.<sup>13</sup> Sean offered Abdus hope when he said they could jump to a writing class with credit and Sean would help them do it. But any transfer also raised a nightmare of failure because WP had told Abdus he was not ready. Abdus was too afraid to jump into another class. Many of his classmates were afraid too.

Sil was more confident; he already believed he was a pretty good writer. But, like any writing teacher starting a new semester, Sean tried to make all the students comfortable and excited about the course. In the very first class, Sil began to build friendships with other students. Some were his dorm-mates too and they all decided to stay in Basic Writing together.

In these ways, the 38-year old Basic Writing system powerfully pressed us all to accept our assigned roles—both making it scary to leave and comfortable to stay. A couple of students did transfer, and a couple more dropped out. But almost all stayed together in Basic Writing.

**Table 2.** Disparate Impact Analysis of WPU Fall 2017 BW Final Placements of Full-Time, First-Time, First-Year Students (Total FTFTFY populations drawn from WPU 2017 Data Book Table 1.6).

Category	All Students	Number Finally Placed into Basic Writing	% of Total FTFTFY in BW Course
Total Students	1311	27	2.06%
Total Men	659	19	2.88%
Total Women	652	8	1.23%
White Men	224	1	0.45%
White Women	191	1	0.52%
Hispanic Men (all races)	231	1	0.43%
Hispanic Women (all races)	263	3	1.14%
African American Men	117	9	7.69%
African American Women	135	3	2.22%
Asian Men	57	8	14.03%
Asian Women	42	1	2.38%

## **A Dramatically Disparate Impact**

When the Basic Writing classes first met, it was obvious that most students were Brown and Black men like Sil and Abdus. Timed essay tests have long been recognized as incompetent and harmful assessment tools founded on troubling monolingual and exclusionary assumptions about language resources.<sup>14</sup> But increasingly, critiques of these writing assessments have also focused on their consequences to actual students (White, Elliot, and Peckham 22). In 2019, Toth, Nastal, Hassel, and Giordano argue that this ethical turn in writing assessment necessitates critical interrogation “even for assessments that appear on the surface to be neutrally ‘meritocratic’” because these systems may enact “a ‘color-blind racist’ assessment paradigm that continues to reproduce structures of social inequality.”

Poe, Elliot, Cogan, and Nurudeen recently offered a model of such a critical interrogation in their disparate impact study of Basic Writing course placement tests at “Brick” university in New Jersey. Brick found that its timed-essay placement test did have a clear adverse impact on students of color. The test placed 10% of white students, 15% of Asian students, 22% of Native American students, 28% of Hispanic students and 48% of African American students into a “remedial” Basic Writing course rather than into mainstream writing (598). After conducting a three-step analysis of impacts, goals, and available alternatives, Brick elected to mainstream all writing students, and it “adopted the proposition that any admitted student was qualified to begin credit-bearing coursework” (603).

In Fall 2017, WP ultimately placed 27 full-time, first-time, first-year students into Basic Writing.<sup>15</sup> Two were white. Twenty-six were students of color. Twenty were men; eight were women. Fifteen were multilingual. Thirteen were immigrants. Table 2 breaks down the placement odds for different ethnic/racial/gender groups among the first-year students.

While this sample was small, the results were striking. All men were more than twice as likely as women (2.88/1.23%) to be assigned into Basic Writing. Black men were over fifteen times more likely than white men (7.69/0.45%)—so it is obvious to Sil that color was being targeted. The fact that Asian men were over twenty-eight times more likely than white men (14.03/0.45%) to be assigned to Basic Writing tells Abdus that this system also targeted bilingual students and immigrants.

## **September and October 2017: Equal Work for Unequal Credit**

The third part of our study here is a case study of our Basic Writing semester together. The first assignment Sean gave was to watch and respond to a video in which Anthropologist Michael Wesch described how one can be “knowledge-able” instead of “knowledgeable.” Abdus was excited that Wesch focused on adapting to changes of modern technology and the complexities of linking to and using digital sources. Sil found that the group work produced enlightening conversations among his classmates and the professor. The class made him feel comfortable, seeming like a small family. It was nice meeting people from different backgrounds.

Sean also told the students in the first week that he was asking for a way for them to earn college credit by doing the same work as students in the regular classes. Abdus, Sil, and most of their fellow students started working hard for this Basic Writing class. In early October, Sean saw that 24 of 28 students were attending almost all class sessions. (Eight would end the semester with perfect attendance.) The Basic Writing students were completing the same assignments, and most were producing comparable work to Sean’s mainstream writing class students. The class studied Peter Elbow (1973), Donald Murray (1972) and Sondra Perl (2015). Abdus and others learned why most of them were afraid of English writing. Most of the time they worried too much about how their essays were going to look when they were finished, and they wanted to fix every mistake from the beginning. When they did this, their brains stopped, and they felt as if they could not write. Elbow suggested a process that used writing to grow and rethink ideas: “Make the process of writing into atomic fission, setting off a chain reaction, putting things into a pot to percolate, getting words to take-on a life of their own” (Elbow 25). Abdus started writing anything he had in his mind without worrying about making mistakes.

Although the entire Basic Writing class itself was very interesting and challenging for Sil, he began to notice that he was doing just as much work—possibly more—than other students he spoke with from the regular writing classes. It was not fair he was doing as much work but not receiving a letter grade or any credit. Some students began to feel the class was a waste of their time. Why work hard for a class with no credit? And, as the semester progressed, being called a basic writer started to take its toll on Sil. He felt deeply disrespected. Sil was not basic. He was not dumb. He could write as well as other students.

Abdus began to see himself as a “basic writer.” Responding to Sondra Perl’s 2015 oral history encouraged him because she proved that students labeled as basic writers “did have and do have composing processes, and they’re [as] rich and as full as ours” (Perl; Salam, “Process”). Perl gave him confidence to write without any fear. Perl also explained about counterproductive loops where students became trapped into “editing at a surface level” and “would get worn down.” Abdus used to get stuck in those unproductive loops—but now he learned how to keep writing without worrying about making mistakes.

### **We Write to the Deans**

In mid-September, we still did not know if the students would be able to earn real credit for our class. Some students proposed writing a letter to the deans. Students in both Basic Writing sections worked together on the letter over four weeks, dividing research, drafting, revision, editing, proofreading and citation checking. (Abdus revised the letter’s MLA citations and workshopped the draft at our Writing Center.) They sent a draft to the English Chair who approved it and joined in their request. They then sent the final version to the deans. In their letter, the students explained how they were already doing college-level work:

We have the same. . . essay drafts, readings, group discussions, group class notes, freewriting, prewriting, reading responses, journals, collaborative reading annotations, peer review, class presentations, independent research projects, movie essays, and websites portfolios.... In only five weeks, we have produced about thirty-five pages of writing. We have learned about process theory from Peter Elbow, Sondra Perl and Donald Murray. We formed thesis questions, practiced revising, and cut out fat to make our work more powerful. We are now learning about rhetoric by reading Laura Carroll. (“Successful” 1)

Observing that WP’s goal was for students to graduate in four years, the students quoted WP’s published core values: “We judge our effectiveness, progress and success in terms of how well we provide a platform for [students’] personal, intellectual and professional development, enabling them to transform their lives and become civically engaged” (WPU “Mission”). But Basic Writing conflicted with those values: “We get no credit for this class. In addition, some of us are required to take noncredit math and reading classes.”

The students explained how being placed into basic courses made them feel insecure and unable to succeed, even as the basic courses cost extra “money that’s hard to get” and pushed them further from earning their degrees.

The students also noted “that many universities have eliminated their noncredit writing classes.” In particular, they cited “all twenty-three campuses in the California State University [which had] eliminated all non-credit writing classes two months ago....(CSU)” (2). They quoted Tierney and Garcia’s findings that students “who start in remedial coursework often do not complete a baccalaureate degree, citing extra courses, time, and money as reasons contributing to noncompletion” (Tierney and Garcia; “Successful” 1).

### **November and December 2017: Research Projects, Movies, and Websites**

As in Sean’s mainstream writing sections, the Basic Writing students designed, conducted, and reported on their own individual independent research studies. They composed three-minute movie essays and published them to YouTube; they built website portfolios. Being a donut shop employee, Abdus saw that most of his customers choose unhealthy, sugary drinks. He conducted an experiment to see if providing health information in the form of survey questions at the point of purchase would persuade them to choose healthier options. Fifty customers took his survey. Thirty switched to ask for bottled water, ten wanted juice, and ten still chose soda. In summary, 80% opted to switch to a healthier drink after taking the survey (Salam, “Sugary Drinks”). Abdus then made a YouTube movie version of his experiment asking viewers to take the same survey and think about healthy drink choices (Salam, “Bitter Truth”).

Growing up in Atlantic City, Sil had seen some of his closest friends become part of a violent life that would affect them forever. He decided to do case-study interviews with four young men about their experiences in gang life (Fonville, “Negative Influences”). Three agreed to video record the interviews for a movie essay to warn kids about joining gangs. All three had family members already in gangs. Friends had recruited them. It felt like they had no choice. They knew they could have made better decisions but now maybe it was already too late. Sil made a YouTube movie from the interviews so that their voices could be heard by young people, parents, and public officials (Fonville, “Gang Life”).

## **November and December 2017: The Challenge Test Offer**

In late November, we heard back from the deans about our requests for course credit. They could not agree to it because of a technical barrier. Our accreditation rules would not allow WP to transfer students at the semester's end from a zero-credit course to one with credit. We could not give letter grades or course credits to students (like Sil and Abdus) who earned them. We could not erase "Basic Writing" from their permanent transcripts. The deans offered the only possible relief that was available within the constraints of our Basic Writing system—which, ironically, was a timed essay "challenge" test. Those who passed the test (as well as completing mainstream-level work in the Basic Writing course) would receive three credits and would skip the mainstream class. But those credits would come with no grade; they likely would not transfer to another college. For Sil and his classmates, the challenge test offered far too little. The letter grade they had earned was important. They had worked hard in our course and had earned it. Some students now saw the Basic Writing class as a waste of hard work and a setback in life.

Abdus was the only student from either section who took the challenge test and he passed it. But then Abdus realized (like everyone else) that the "A" grade he had earned was too important; he withdrew the challenge test score and took mainstream writing (with Sean and Sil again) on top of a full course load in the spring.

## **Resisting Basic Writing "Root and Branch"**

So, what did we learn from the history of the Basic Writing system at our college and from our experience together in 2017? First, whatever conscious or unconscious racism motivated the creation of the Basic Writing system in 1978 and 1979—all that was long gone by 2017. For at least ten years before Abdus and Sil were admitted here, many English faculty and college administrators had questioned Basic Writing, called for its abolition, and/or sought ways to shrink and reform it. In 2017, every faculty member and dean we contacted tried to support and empower the students who had been placed into Basic Writing. But legacy systems sink deep roots; they exert enduring power over the educators and students pulled into them. Eventually, we forget how and why they were created. Decades later, because they are so hard to uproot completely, they continue to distort education and "reproduce structures of social inequality" (Toth, Nastal, Hassel, and Giordano).

As we write now, Abdus and Sil have finished three successful years at WP and will soon graduate. Like most of their Basic Writing classmates, they

took mainstream writing in the spring of 2018 and passed. Over the last five semesters, they have completed more writing courses, including our mandatory “writing about literature” course. Their self-confidence has grown as they have built college credits, selected majors (Sil in psychology and Abdus in computer information technology), and compiled strong GPAs. But the harms of WP’s basic skills system followed them after the class ended. Sil was also required to take a zero-credit algebra class. In order to catch up with the six credits he lost in those “basic” courses, he paid for summer school courses and worked fewer hours one summer, a substantial extra financial burden for his family. Recently, Abdus applied to become a substitute teacher. In order to prove he has sixty college credits, he had to send his official transcript to a board of education, and he was disheartened to see clearly written on the first page that he had taken a pass/fail Basic Writing class in his first year here. Abdus realized that Basic Writing is literally on his permanent record. He got the substitute teaching job; but he wonders if he will be rejected from other jobs for his whole career because he was labeled as a “basic” writer here.

What guidance can other social justice writing teachers, scholars and program administrators draw from our experience here at WP? How can we reimagine writing course systems to ensure that we completely root out the assumptions and effects of our troubling legacies? We think our Basic Writing experience argues for five conclusions. First, we agree with Poe, Nastal, and Elliot that all incoming college students “deserve the dignity of credit-bearing coursework.”<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Mlynarczyk taught and administered “non-credit basic and ESL writing classes for almost forty years” within the CUNY system and she served as JBW’s co-editor. But Mlynarczyk now squarely joins a growing chorus of voices of those who recognize “a racial element” to the exclusionary cycle of testing, labeling, and tracking at the heart of Basic Writing, which leads her to call for the elimination of all “standalone, prerequisite [basic writing] courses” (Mlynarczyk). College systems like the California State University System and the City University of New York are already embracing that goal; but zero credit writing course tracks remain embedded in many two-year colleges. We believe such courses must be completely rooted out.

Second, we know that individual student, teacher, and administrator voices often carry limited weight within large, complex college systems. Sometimes the best we can do is to fight for partial reforms. Resistance to Basic Writing here at WP from 2007-2017 greatly reduced the number of teachers and students who were trapped into it. Looking back now, it is clear that severely cutting back the branches of this poisonous tree also weakened its

roots. As fewer and fewer students were placed into Basic Writing, it became easier to see that we did not need it at all.

Third, wherever legacy systems survive that continue to label students as less able than their peers, we urge careful study and awareness of their history, operation, validity, and harmful effects. Our DSP system could not eliminate the harms of Basic Writing here because no sophisticated student should have chosen our stigmatized, zero-credit course. Indeed, when students both fully appreciated the consequences of taking Basic Writing and really understood in advance that they could opt out (unlike both Sil and Abdus) almost all chose to do so. In effect, our DSP option largely trapped the students with the least sophistication about college systems, and/or the most damaged self-esteem, and/or simply those who were accepted at the last minute and had no time to question their course placements.

We did not study the impact of mainstreaming here and we do not argue that it is the only solution.<sup>17</sup> Other forms of summer programs, learning communities, holistic support, DSP systems, stretch courses (with full credit), and student support can replace old Basic Writing and Basic Skills models with far fewer harms and stigmas. These courses and programs have been valuable bridges to success since the 1960s. Indeed, since 1968 here at WP, the SOUL Program and then our EOF Program have offered summer bridge programs, counseling, and holistic support. From 1971 to 1978, WP developed fully credited stretch courses and an informal DSP writing course elective course system— until mass placement tests and zero-credit, basic-skills writing, reading, and math courses were imposed here in 1978-79.

Fourth, we learned that old legacy systems can harm us in both obvious and subtle ways, even as we resist them. Three years later, Sean can see how his request for college credit for only *some* students (and only *after* they proved they had already earned it) actually reinforced the Basic Writing system's premise that some students do not deserve the dignity of trying to earn college credit from day one. And even as Sean advised the Basic Writing students that they could jump to mainstream courses back in September of 2017, he also reinforced the doubts already implanted by our testing system that maybe they were more "basic" than almost all their peers. Old systems survive by slowly, quietly shaping us. They make us doubt ourselves. They numb us to attacks on dignity. They seduce us to believe the lies of incompetent and biased assessment tools. They provoke fears that lead us to disregard the complex and often amazing capabilities of students who have overcome unjust systematic barriers to reach college.

Fifth, so long as college writing programs and teachers define their work by searching out and measuring student deficits—by finding ways to argue that some incoming college students (like Sil and Abdus) are more “basic,” less able, less likely to succeed, and less valued than others, colleges will fall short of their missions to fight for racial and social justice. The poisoned trees planted four or five decades ago will not be fully rooted out. In the end, partial fixes always leave something broken. Students like Abdus and Sil still fall through the cracks. Poe, Nastal, and Elliot advise that colleges ask a simple, key question: “What brings students most dignity?” Old and deeply rooted systems that disregard this key question continue to poison us all, even when we fight to trim them back. Reduced harm is still harm. Reduced indignity is still indignity. In the end, we must oppose, rethink, and reimagine these biased old legacy systems until the day sometime soon when they are all “eliminated root and branch.”<sup>18</sup>

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### **Notes**

1. These direct student success metrics were a simple version of the same programmatic assessment model adopted by SEEK, The City University of New York’s hugely successful, affirmative-action admissions, and supportive teaching program beginning in 1965 (Molloy, “Human Beings”). However, at CUNY these direct assessments were gradually replaced by high-stakes writing placement, course-exit, and certification tests as CUNY developed its Basic Writing Program from 1969 to 1978. The tests quickly developed into powerful barriers to success (Molloy, “Myopia.”)
2. (PSC “1966-67” 73; “1968-69” 85-87; “1969-1971” 64, 97-98). All three 1966 writing courses survive at WP today. ENG 110/1100 (with a number of title and description changes) has remained WP’s mainstream required FYW course. ENG 210 was renamed “Writing and Literature” in 1969. It survives today as a required writing about literature course,

ENG 1500 “Experiences in Literature.” ENG 322 continues today as ENG 3300 “Critical Writing” (Manno).

3. WP does not publish ethnic census data prior to 2001. But a surviving 1979 WP ethnic census listed 10,324 total undergraduate students, as follows: white 9,326 (90.3%), African American 669 (6.5%), Hispanic 263 (2.5%), Asian 57 (0.5%), and Native American 9 (0.09%). WP also reported 2231 graduate students, as follows: white 2072 (92.9%), African American 90 (4.0%), Hispanic 62, (2.8%) and Native American 1 (0.0%) (WPC, “Enrollment” 6, 13).
4. These four new “English as a Second Language” courses each carried three credits. (WPC, “1971-73” 82). The 100-level ESL courses satisfied the mainstream ENG 110 writing requirement (49). The 200-level ESL courses satisfied WP’s humanities course core requirement (49-50). ENG 101-02 and 201-02 were both structured as non-punitive “stretch” courses that gave multilingual students more time to fulfill core writing course requirements while also earning full course credit.
5. (Chabra, “Basic skills approved” 1; Olohan, “Skills Problem” 3. For an overview of the development of the New Jersey Basic Skills Placement Test system in partnership with ETS, see Elliot, 209-12.
6. In addition to ENG 108 “Approaches to Reading and Writing” and ENG 109 “Patterns for Prose,” the English Department continued to offer four ESL courses with credit. The Math department continued to offer Math 101 “College Arithmetic” and Math 105 “Preparatory Algebra,” both also with credit (WPC, “Catalog 1978-79-80” 166).
7. Students who failed the “reading comprehension section” were required to take both ENG 108 and ENG 109. Students who passed the reading test but failed the timed essay section were required to take ENG 109 only. Students with low math scores were required to take Math 101. If their major required algebra, they were also required to take Math 105 (Madaras 1).
8. Basic Reading soon moved to the Education Department where it became BRI 1090 “Basic Reading Instruction.” The two basic math classes were eventually combined into one zero-credit course, MATH 1060, which was renamed in 2019 as WPS 1060 “Foundations of Math.”
9. Our methods here were limited to the data and methods we described to the WP IRB. We could not examine records of the actual placement test scores or any individual student directory data. We did not attempt to divide students into any sub-groups or evaluate their subsequent success in this study.

10. Beyond the 2016 and 2017 students, we do not know how many students affirmatively opted into Basic Writing. The experience of those two groups suggest it was very few.
11. Our WPA recalls that Sil's experience was a very common one. Over the years, WPA Chris Weaver talked to many students when their Basic Writing teachers suggested transferring them to mainstream writing sections. "The orientation day in the summer when they had taken multiple placement tests had been exhausting, and their hearts and minds were not fully committed by the time they produced their writing sample. If they had only known how much was at stake for the placement tests, they would have taken them more seriously" (Weaver, "Placement").
12. Lacking "construct validity," the timed test could not possibly measure how WP writing teachers (who stress robust revision and writing process) would judge students' body of writing over the semester (Poe, Nastal, and Elliot; Isaacs and Molloy). More broadly, the test also lacked "use validity" because it could not predict the additional complex realities of success and failure in any three-month college writing course, where tenacity, finances, emotions, competing commitments, trauma, and the "roles of schools and teachers" play huge, but often unacknowledged roles in actual success and failure (Inoue, "Theorizing Failure" 333-35; Berger 383). In addition, as discussed below, the entire DSP process also lacked consequential validity.
13. The credit was hard to figure out because WP had always listed Basic Writing as a 3.0 credit course. As the WP website obliquely warned: "Note: Credits for this basic skills course are not applicable toward degree requirements. Credits: 3.0" ("Degree Requirements").
14. (Huot; Mlynarczyk; Isaacs and Molloy; Molloy "Myopia") Mlynarczyk weaves together the increasingly critical body of recent scholarship finding that structural racism has infected Basic Writing systems in various ways, including work by Nelson Flores, Tom Fox, Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Karen Pitt, Jonathan Rosa, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Nicole Stanford, and John Trimbur.
15. The 28th student was a sophomore who was required to take Basic Writing by his business college adviser.
16. The combined ideas that 1) timing writing exams are incompetent placement tools, 2) writing classes should focus on students' abilities rather than deficits, and 3) all college writing courses should carry credit are not new. For example, see Adler-Kassner (2008) at 13 and her sources dating to 1991.

17. For the past several years, WP has developed new summer bridge programs, first-year student success courses, orientation events, and increased forms of support to increase retention and encourage student success for all students. Those efforts were beyond the scope of our study here.

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# The Impact of Taking Basic Writing on Later Writing Course Performance and Graduation at a Career-Focused Four-Year University

Justin Nicholes and Cody Reimer

*ABSTRACT: In the context of ongoing discussions about student costs of non-credit developmental writing, this study reports on the affordances of Basic Writing as a traditional, stand-alone course at a career-focused, four-year university. Participants were students who took Basic Writing and Composition 1 between Fall 2011 and Spring 2013 (N = 2,693) in order to give them 4-6 years to graduate. Binary logistic regression analysis indicated that students whose first class was Basic Writing graduated at a rate not significantly different from that of students whose first class was Composition 1. Additionally, students who passed Basic Writing received grades in Composition 1 and 2 not significantly different from those received by students placed directly into Composition 1. Once Basic Writing students reached Composition 1 and 2, however, they were statistically significantly more likely to graduate within 4-6 years. Covariates of gender identity, ethnic identity, first-generation status, and grades were accounted for in predictive models and are discussed in relation to localized Basic Writing program assessment at four-year and especially career-focused contexts. While Basic Writing remains under review across the U.S., this study indicates that, at the present research site, the additional time and experience students gain through successful completion of an additional writing course may contribute to timely graduation.*

*KEYWORDS: Basic Writing; curricular assessment; first-year writing; persistence*

The cost of Basic Writing for students who take it remains a topic deserving sustained attention in writing studies and, specifically, in BW scholarship. To underscore a portion of ongoing discussions in the field, consider two back-to-back sessions at the 2019 College Composition and Communication Conference (4C2019). At a panel titled “Performing Rhet/

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**Justin Nicholes** is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. His research concerns the role writing plays in constructing academic identities, enhancing learning, and supporting college-student persistence and has appeared or is forthcoming in *The WAC Journal*, *Across the Disciplines*, *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, *Journal of Teaching Writing*, *Scientific Study of Literature*, and elsewhere.

**Cody Reimer** is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. He has directed its composition program, and currently chairs the system’s English Placement Test committee. He also serves on the Editorial Board for *Communication Design Quarterly*.

Comp for Fifty Years: A Roundtable of Senior Scholars," senior scholars in writing studies discussed BW as often affectively detrimental and as financially unjust to students (Brereton et al.). Senior-scholar panelists generally supported a position similar to that of Mya Poe et al., that students deserve the dignity of credit-bearing coursework. Meanwhile, in the next 4C2019 session, taking place, incidentally, in the same conference room, the Council on Basic Writing SIG (Special Interest Group) convened to discuss the affordances of BW in the face of threats to funding and misunderstandings of BW's possible value. Discussions at the CBW SIG centered on how BW from teacher-scholars' perspectives provides students with an early ally and supports students' rhetorical skills, writing know-how, self-efficacy, and persistence to graduation. In the end, while the senior scholars at "Performing Rhet/Comp for Fifty Years" might be said to have presented BW as costly in terms of impeding and discouraging students, the CBW discussed BW as a potential investment.

As reflected in the present study, we were motivated to assess one aspect of the cost of BW at one career-focused, four-year, open-access public university in the U.S. Midwest in terms of timely graduation. What, we asked, was the graduation rate of students starting with the research site's traditional, stand-alone Basic Writing course compared to that of students who started in Composition 1? Was there a statistically significant difference between these rates? At what rate did Basic Writing students, once they reached Composition 1 and Composition 2, graduate compared to that of students who did not take an extra semester of (albeit non-credit) writing?

We realized while carrying out this large-scale quantitative assessment study that, though a third of U.S. college students test into developmental college coursework (*Diploma*), developmental coursework, indeed, remains controversial (Evans). Evidence of the impact of taking a developmental course (whether it be reading, math, or writing) on college-student graduation rates has been somewhat mixed (Attewell et al.), and failing a developmental class has been strongly linked to dropout (Cholewa and Ramaswami). Supporters of developmental education have argued that criticisms are based mostly on myths: Specifically, they argue that developmental education potentially boosts retention rates, prepares students in critical areas, and benefits society (Boylan and Bonham; Otte and Mlynarczyk). Recent research has also suggested that placement into developmental reading, writing, or math coursework has no impact on students' academic self-concepts or self-efficacy (Martin et al.)—although Mlynarczyk has argued that college students feel discouraged when placed into "remedial" writing (5) and, more

recently, that Basic Writing should end (Brereton et al.). Still other research has reported that students who successfully navigate developmental college coursework are more likely to graduate than equally prepared peers at two-year colleges (Attewell et al.). With a great deal of the overall controversy of developmental coursework pertaining to taxpayer and administrative cost (*Diploma*), and legislation looking gladly to cut fought-for resources for incoming students who may benefit from additional support (Miller et al.), no clear signs exist of the controversy soon being resolved.

As mentioned above, the controversy, as it pertains to BW studies, still largely centers on how to carry out developmental writing instruction (Evans), how to address equity and disparate impact on students especially at two-year institutions (Mya Poe et al.), and what to call it (Mlynarczyk; Otte and Mlynarczyk). Ed White offers a possibly helpful theoretical point when arguing that BW coursework supports students as they enter academic discourse communities (“Revisiting,” “The Importance”). Likewise, Attewell et al. reported that students at two-year colleges who took BW as a stand-alone course graduated at higher rates than students who never took it, although BW lacked this statistically significant relationship at four-year colleges. Meanwhile, Peter Adams has reported results from Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) instruction, in which students engage in developmental writing coursework while enrolled in credit-bearing Composition 1 rather than before it. At two-year colleges, accelerated models of developmental reading and writing have been reported as benefiting short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes of students, including their transferring to four-year colleges, and have often involved reducing the number of exit points between multiple non-credit developmental-education courses (Edgecombe et al.; Smith Jagars et al.). Successful outcomes of co-requisite ALP have applied to numerous colleges and contexts with similarly positive outcomes for student retention and cost-effectiveness (Adams). Mlynarczyk has drawn on this ALP data to argue for an end to remediation as peripheral to the institution in favor of acceleration.

### **Career-Focused Institutions, Stand-alones, and Basic Writing**

We entered this provocative issue with the intention of assessing some of the outcomes of a current BW model at a four-year, open-enrollment, career-focused university. We did so to better understand how the research site’s BW course was functioning, to explore what interventions might be devised to address issues related to its functioning, and to model research

methods for the present type of institutional context for the consideration of the field. Retention-studies research has suggested that a career-focused context is potentially unique, illustrating that (a) curricula enriched with career focuses have increased student graduation rates (Conner et al.); (b) students forming career goals in relation to their major and institution have been found to have higher GPAs (Nakajima et al.) and to be more likely to persist (Ozaki); and (c) curricula without clear bridges to careers have been linked to humanities-student dropout (Mestan). It might be expected that institutions with clear career focuses would encourage a greater level of persistence. As noted, earlier foundational studies report that students who take BW coursework persist in college longer than students of similar backgrounds who do not (White), while other, more recent research has shown ALP models help students earn grades in later writing courses higher than they probably would have had they taken traditional, stand-alone courses (Adams). However, more research seems necessary to explore further what advantage, if any, successful navigation of a single BW course confers to students in contexts such as the present research site (four-year, career-focused) compared to students placed directly into Composition 1—especially when the *cost* of BW (in terms of timely graduation) is explored in regressive models that also account for various other student factors, such as gender identity, ethnic identity, and first-generation status.

The present study accounted for all students who took Basic Writing and Composition 1 between Fall 2011 and Spring 2013 at the research site in order to give students 4-6 years to take Composition 2 and to graduate, a common timeframe used to measure timely graduation (ACT). Results of binary logistic regression analysis, among other significant findings, indicated that at this career-focused research site,

- The variable of taking either Basic Writing or Composition 1 as a first class was not a statistically significant predictor of graduation in regression models. In other words, the cost of starting college with Basic Writing was no greater than the cost of starting with Composition 1 when the outcome was graduation within 4-6 years.
- Basic Writing students received grades in Composition 1 and Composition 2 not significantly different from those received by students placed directly into Composition 1. That is, results here suggest the possibility that Basic Writing adequately prepared

students in ways beyond the scope of this study to succeed in Composition 1 and 2.

- Once they reached Composition 1, students who had taken Basic Writing were statistically significantly more likely to graduate within 4-6 years than students placed directly into Composition 1. Likewise, once they reached Composition 2, students who had taken Basic Writing were significantly more likely to graduate within 4-6 years than students placed directly into Composition 1.

According to binary logistic regression models (detailed in Methods and Results below), at the present research site, the cost of starting with BW in terms of timely graduation was no more significant than the cost of starting with Composition 1; however, navigating and passing an additional writing class—in an interconnected, rhetorical skills-based sequence of general-education writing courses—significantly increased students’ odds of graduating by the time they reached Composition 1 and Composition 2.

Importantly, we note here that it remained beyond the scope of the present study to compare outcomes of Basic Writing to the impact of an ALP model. It also remained beyond the scope of the present study to conclude how much more helpful it might have been if some students placed into Composition 1 had also engaged in additional writing support. We hope, above all, to present “replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD)” scholarship (Haswell 210). We urge additional research teams to replicate and build upon this study to determine if these results are site-unique or more generalizable to other four-year institutions whose BW courses are conceptualized as scaffolding students into Composition 1 and Composition 2.

In earlier foundational literature, BW has been discussed as assisting students’ entry into academic discourse communities (e.g., White, “Revisiting,” “The Importance”). If every class that students encounter represents its own unique discourse community, which students are tasked with understanding and navigating (Melzer), then the additional social practice of managing a class and writing assignments, in an interconnected writing course sequence, may confer an advantage to Basic Writing students once they reach Composition 1: Additional time to practice writing with support, after all, is a main justification for stretch program models (Glau). Yet for this advantage to follow Basic Writing students to Composition 2 as well suggests the possibility that successful navigation of Basic Writing, in addition to giving student simply more time to practice and gain skills in college-level writing, also requires a level of determination and perseverance, or *grit*

(Duckworth). Some evidence already exists that students in developmental coursework, nationally, report higher levels of motivation (*Diploma*).

Retention and writing studies research, of course, has described the complicated picture of interrelated factors impacting college students' success. Variables of importance in institutional data traditionally, and in research and writing studies research particularly, include among other variables *gender identity*, *ethnic identity*, *first-generation status*, *grades* as a measure of course performance, and *persistence* in remaining in college from semester to semester until graduation (Tinto). The present study used a regression analysis that included these variables as covariates in predictive models of student performance and persistence. We include these variables to help contextualize the impact of taking Basic Writing with respect to these complex and interrelated factors.

These variables have proven important both in retention studies, as well as in BW specifically and writing studies generally. For instance, students institutionally labeled as female have been described in earlier research as entering BW coursework already disadvantaged by patriarchal, oppressive social systems, necessitating the modeling of gender-inclusive language in BW (Cochran). Research into textbook representation may indicate progress in terms of the field of writing studies having worked to create learning materials that support increasingly sophisticated discussions of gender issues (Marinara et al.). Still other research into how students are graded when graders are aware of or infer a student's gender have suggested a pro-female-label bias (Haswell and Haswell). Meanwhile, graduation rates have often indicated that students institutionally labeled as female are graduating at significantly higher rates than students labeled as male (Peltier et al.). So while we are reluctant to report in gender-binary ways, we include the institutional labels (female, male) available in the current set of institutional data.

In addition to gender identity, the variable of ethnic identity remains one of importance in assessment research. Asao B. Inoue, for instance, has pointed out that students of color and multilingual students are “historically [...] closest to failure in writing classrooms” (332). Complicating racist consequences of grading systems is that issues of race have in the past been absorbed by the label *basic writer*, which affects how writing studies may understand race in relation to writing processes and assessment (Prendergast). While first-generation students self-identified as African American have been reported as being more likely to persist to graduation compared to other first-generation college students (D’Amico and Dika), overall, students of color have been reported to leave college at significantly higher rates than

students categorized as white (Peltier et al.).

Students' first-generation status has also represented a barrier to college performance (D'Amico and Dika). Karen Bishop Morris has argued that experiential learning can be more effective for first-generation students than traditional classroom experiences since these students may be more capable of navigating such learning experiences. Meanwhile, Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano have questioned whether four-year colleges suitably meet the needs of many first-generation college students compared to two-year colleges. Historically under-served and vulnerable (Kester et al.), first-generation college students have been reported as significantly more likely to leave college than students who have one or both parents who graduated from college (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al.). Even students whose parents attended college without graduating have been reported as being more likely to graduate than students whose parents never attended (Padgett et al.).

Finally, the grades that students receive in college, and particularly in developmental writing courses, must be taken into consideration. Cholewa and Ramaswami reported that failing a fall developmental class was a significant predictor of dropout. Inoue has described grading systems as often racist in their consequences since they hold standard-edited English, or a dialect of English most associated with and within closest reach to white Americans, as the standard against which all students are ranked. If we accept Joyce Olweski Inman and Rebecca Powell's observation that first-year writing courses can represent a kind of institutional microcosm where students' academic self-concepts are forged, then grades do much more than reflect writing and classroom performance: They become material, however subjective, with which students construct academic selves.

Given the importance of the issues and variables described, we asked the following research questions to shed light on the impact that taking Basic Writing seemed to have on students as they moved through a writing sequence when covariates of gender identity, ethnic identity, first-generation status, and grades were joined in predictive models in this public four-year career-focused site:

1. Are the odds of graduation impacted by students' first writing class taken (Basic Writing vs. Composition 1)?
2. Are the odds of getting an A or B in Composition 1 and Composition 2 different for students who first took and passed Basic Writing?

3. Are the odds of graduation different for students who first took and passed Basic Writing compared to those of students starting with Composition 1?

## Methods

This study was reviewed and determined to be exempt by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Student-record data came to us, the researchers, as already anonymized, and it was institutionally collected from a comprehensive, public, career-focused four-year polytechnic university with a reported student employment/placement rate of 98%. The university reports a student body of approximately 9,500, with 2,100 first-year students enrolling each academic year. Approximately 8,200 students are undergraduates, and the other 1,300 are graduate students. The university is a predominantly white university, with 86% of students institutionally categorized as "White/Caucasian," and with 53% of its students designated as "male." Finally, the university reports an overall graduation rate of 55.5% for its White/Caucasian students, and 42% for its students of color and students categorized as "Two or More Races." The national persistence-to-degree rate for similar institution types is,  $M = 36.9\%$ ,  $SD = 20.6$  (ACT 7).

The course sequence that was investigated included Basic Writing, Composition 1, and Composition 2. Course outcomes for the first-year composition program were derived from the outcomes described by the Council of Writing Program Administrators and pertained to knowledge and performance of (a) rhetorical knowledge, (b) critical thinking, and (c) composing processes/writing strategies. Basic Writing focused on source integration and rhetorical metalanguage, critical reading and writing, and lower-order assistance pertaining to writing accuracy. Composition 1 placed additional emphasis on academic research and evidence-based argumentation, and Composition 2 emphasized the entering of ongoing academic discourses. The university allocated funds to enable limiting the cap of Basic Writing to 15 students while Composition 1 and 2 had enrollments capped at 25 students.

The research site, as part of the University of Wisconsin system, used a system-wide, instructor-developed test to determine student placement in first-year composition courses. To ensure that the test mirrors the curriculum in introductory English composition courses throughout the system, a committee exists that includes one representative from each institution, as well as one state high school English teacher. This committee convenes twice each year to write and revise test items and discuss issues pertaining

to test content and university curricula. The committee works closely with a psychometrician to ensure the instrument's reliability, which is above .90. Writing program administrators at each institution within the system determine what cut scores will place students into which class.

Additionally, the English department delivering instruction at the research site practices a policy of "diagnostic" first-week writing in Basic Writing, which has been noted as one way (though perhaps not the only or even most ideal) of checking if any student has been misplaced in BW (Klausman et al.). The department nonetheless has attempted to put into policy the recommendation that multiple pieces of writing and forms of evidence be used in determining BW placement (Hassel et al.). The Director of Composition at the research site had the discretion to adjust the placement test cut scores based on how frequently diagnostics indicated students were misplaced. In this fashion, each institution within the university system was meant to be agile in ensuring students are appropriately placed. It is worth noting, however, that the site's cut scores had remained the same since 2002: The frequency with which students had been identified as misplaced (by diagnostic tool or other means) had been too low to warrant adjusting the cut rates.

Concerning data analysis, three main conditions for binary logistic regression were met: The dependent variable was dichotomous with mutually exclusive values in all cases (in other words, each variable contained only two possible values, 0 or 1), sample sizes were large, and multicollinearity of predictor variables was checked and determined not to be an issue that could create misleading results (Leech et al.).

## **Results**

### *1. Are the odds of graduation impacted by students' first writing class taken (Basic Writing vs. Composition 1)?*

Students who took Basic Writing or Composition 1 as their first writing class between the Fall 2011 and Spring 2013 semesters were included in the analysis to give students 4-6 years to graduate (see Appendix for crosstabulations). Odds ratios suggest that the odds of graduating within 4-6 years are increasingly greater for students categorized as female, students who were continuing-generation, and students who received an A or B in that first class. Though the graduation rate of students who started in Basic Writing (46.1%) was descriptively lower than that of students who started in Composition 1

(49.5%), this difference was not statistically significant in the model.

**Table 1.** Logistic Regression Predicting Who Graduates After Their First Writing Class

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Odds ratio (95% C.I.)</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender Identity	.273	.058	1.31 (1.17, 1.47)	< .001*
Ethnic Identity	.100	.084	1.11 (.937, 1.30)	.237
First-Generation	-.297	.058	.743 (.663, .833)	< .001*
Grade Received	1.15	.066	3.15 (2.77, 3.59)	< .001*
Took Comp 1 (versus BW)	-.058	.111	.944 (.760, 1.17)	.603

\* = statistically significant at the <.05 level.

*2. Are the odds of getting an A or B in Composition 1 and Composition 2 different for students who first took and passed Basic Writing?*

Odds ratios suggest that the odds of getting an A or B in Composition 1 are increasingly greater for students institutionally identified as female and White or Caucasian. Alone, being a first-generation student or taking Basic Writing were not significant predictors of getting an A or B in the equation.

**Table 2.** Logistic Regression Predicting Who Will Get an A or B, or a C and Below, in Composition 1

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Odds ratio (95% C.I.)</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender Identity	.685	.083	1.98 (1.69, 2.33)	< .001*
Ethnic Identity	.418	.122	1.52 (1.20, 1.93)	.001*
First-Generation	-.137	.082	.872 (.742, 1.03)	.096
Basic Writing	-.159	.136	.853 (.653, 1.11)	.243

\* = statistically significant at the <.05 level.

Next, the odds of getting an A or B in Composition 2 are shown to be increasingly greater for students institutionally identified as female and significantly lower for first-generation students.

**Table 3.** Logistic Regression Predicting Who Will Get an A or B in Composition 2

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Odds ratio (95% C.I.)</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender Identity	.435	.096	1.55 (1.28, 1.86)	< .001*
Ethnic Identity	.166	.144	1.18 (.891, 1.56)	.248
First-Generation	-.226	.095	.789 (.662, .962)	.018*
Basic Writing	-.164	.157	.849 (.624, 1.16)	.299

\* = statistically significant at the <.05 level.

3. Are the odds of graduation different for students who first took and passed Basic Writing compared to those of students starting with Composition 1?

*Basic writing students in Composition 1.* For analysis of whether taking Basic Writing conferred any significant advantage *once students reached Composition 1*, students who took Basic Writing and Composition 1 between the Fall 2011 and Spring 2013 semester were included in the analysis to give them 4-6 years to graduate.

The odds ratios suggest that the odds of students in Composition 1 graduating within 4-6 years are increasingly greater for (a) students institutionally identified as female, (b) continuing-generation students, (c) students who received an A or B in Composition 1, and (d) students who took Basic Writing. Alone, the variable of ethnic identity was not a significant predictor in the equation once students reached Composition 1 regarding odds of graduating within 4-6 years. Once students have reached Composition 1, having taken Basic Writing confers a statistically significant advantage in terms of students' odds of graduating within 4-6 years (60% graduation rate for students in Composition 1 who started with Basic Writing; 56% for students in Composition 1 who started with Composition 1).

**Table 4.** Logistic Regression Predicting Who in Composition 1 Will Graduate Within 4-6 Years

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Odds ratio (95% C.I.)</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender Identity	.202	.084	1.22 (1.04, 1.44)	.016*
Ethnic Identity	.119	.128	1.13 (.876, 1.45)	.355
First-Generation	-.395	.084	.673 (.572, .793)	< .001*
Composition 1 Grades	1.42	.087	4.14 (3.49, 4.90)	< .001*
Basic Writing	.345	.144	1.41 (1.07, 1.87)	.016*

\* = statistically significant at the <.05 level.

*Basic writing students in Composition 2.* For analysis of whether taking Basic Writing conferred any significant advantage *once students reached Composition 2*, students who took Basic Writing and Composition 1 between the Fall 2011 and Spring 2013 semesters were included in the analysis to give them 4-6 years to take Composition 2 and to graduate.

Odds ratios suggest that the odds of students in Composition 2 graduating within 4-6 years are increasingly greater for (a) continuing-generation students, (b) students who earned an A or B in Composition 2, and (c) students who had taken Basic Writing. Alone, gender identity and ethnic identity were not significant predictors in the equation once students reached Composition 2 regarding odds of graduating within 4-6 years. This again suggests that, once students have reached Composition 2, having taken Basic Writing confers a statistically significant advantage in terms of students' odds of graduating within 4-6 years (74% graduation rate for students in Composition 2 who started with Basic Writing; 67% for students in Composition 2 who started with Composition 1).

**Table 5.** Logistic Regression Predicting Who in Composition 2 Will Graduate Within 4-6 Years

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Odds ratio (95% C.I.)</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender Identity	.158	.098	1.17 (.967, 1.42)	.106
Ethnic Identity	.237	.148	1.27 (.949, 1.69)	.109
First-Generation	-.331	.098	.718 (.593, .870)	.001*
Composition 2 Grades	1.24	.101	3.45 (2.83, 4.20)	< .001*
Basic Writing	.539	.177	1.72 (1.21, 2.42)	.002*

\* = statistically significant at the <.05 level.

## Summary of Results

1. Students placed into Basic Writing do not experience statistically significantly lower odds of graduating than those of students placed directly into Composition 1. Additionally, ethnic identity did not significantly predict graduation. What did significantly predict graduation were the variables of first-generation status and gender identification.
2. When it comes to who receives an A or B in Composition 1, taking Basic Writing predicts neither success nor failure significantly. Being a first-generation college student likewise predicts neither success nor failure significantly. Being institutionally categorized as white or female, however, does significantly predict receiving an A or B.
3. When it comes to who receives an A or B in Composition 2, taking Basic Writing predicts neither success nor failure significantly. Ethnic identity likewise predicts neither success nor failure significantly. Being a first-generation college student, however, does significantly predict receiving a C and below while being categorized as female significantly predicts receiving an A or B.
4. When it comes to who in Composition 1 graduates, passing Basic Writing significantly predicts success. Likewise, being categorized as female and earning an A or B in the class predict success significantly. Being a first-generation college student significantly predicts lower odds of graduating. Ethnic identity, meanwhile, predicts neither success nor failure significantly.
5. When it comes to who in Composition 2 graduates, passing Basic Writing significantly predicts success. Likewise, earning an A or B in the class significantly predicts success. Once more, being a first-generation college student significantly predicts lower odds of graduating. Ethnic identity and gender identity, meanwhile, predict neither success nor failure significantly.

## Discussion

To recap, the purpose of the present large-scale quantitative assessment study was to report on the impact of BW at one four-year, career-focused polytechnic university. The research process included an exploration of the student cost of taking BW in the form of a single, traditional stand-alone course called Basic Writing on student performance in Composition 1 and Composition 2 as well as on graduation—when other covariates were taken into consideration, including grades and institutional labels of gender, ethnicity, and first-generation status. Results of binary logistic regression analysis indicate that the cost of starting with BW is no greater than the cost of starting with Composition 1 when the outcome variable is timely graduation. Surprisingly, analysis also indicates that students who pass the research site’s BW course are statistically significantly more likely to persist to graduation within 4-6 years once they reach both Composition 1 and Composition 2 compared to students who did not have an extra semester-long writing class.

On a theoretical level, the findings here may support the usefulness of two central positions in writing studies generally and in BW particularly. The general position that BW instruction has the potential to assist students’ entrance into academic discourse communities seems worth exploring and possibly applying here (White, “Revisiting,” “The Importance”). Basic Writing, taught according to what Deborah Mutnick and Steve Lamos would perhaps describe as an “academic initiation approach” (29), sought to prepare students with rhetorical knowledge as well as active reading skills to, in part, enter academic conversations. That writing is both a social and rhetorical activity has been categorized as a threshold concept in writing studies (Roozen), and it seems worthwhile to consider how fruitfully this concept explains the findings here. The value of having an extra semester of writing has been underscored by stretch-model outcomes (Glau), and perhaps the benefits of the extra time of writing for students who need it as well as an additional institutional ally, in spite of the course not being credit-bearing, in certain respects outweighs costs.

The potential impact that the research site’s career-focused, polytechnic status has on the results is also open for debate. As noted earlier, retention-studies research has illustrated that (a) curricula enriched with career focuses have increased student graduation rates (Conner et al.); (b) students forming career goals in relation to their major and institution have been found to have higher GPAs (Nakajimaa et al.) and to be more likely to

persist (Ozaki); and (c) curricula without clear bridges to careers have been linked, at least, to humanities-student dropout (Mestan). An assumption might be entertained that institutions such as the one considered here, with clear career focuses, can encourage greater levels of persistence and perseverance. This is a claim that requires more analysis, and answering it beyond speculation lies outside the scope of the present quantitative-design study.

A second theoretical implication here concerns the concept of perseverance, or *grit* (Duckworth), perhaps interpretable in the data by the students who successfully navigated Basic Writing at this research site. Earlier research has already reported that students who enroll in developmental education are among the most motivated in the U.S. (*Diploma*). The findings here add to our knowledge by suggesting the possibility that students' grit may characterize their performance through Composition 1 and, hearteningly, even through Composition 2 toward graduation while the grades students earn in these sections are not significantly different from students placed directly into Composition 1. Again, the potential relationship that the university's explicitly career-focused, polytechnic mission and identity had with these outcomes warrants additional research.

Yet complicating these overall findings on the impact of BW is the impact of covariates included in predictive models developed and reported on here. Being institutionally categorized as white predicts getting an A or B in Composition 1 but not in Composition 2. If students categorized as white in general find themselves within closer reach to academic discourse-community features (Inoue), what is it about advancing to Composition 2 that relates to this advantage beginning to wane? Being institutionally identified as female, too, is shown in this sample to confer an advantage in terms of grades in both Composition 1 and 2, as well as graduation, a finding perhaps reflecting earlier studies suggesting that writers labeled as female may be producing—and/or may be stereotyped as producing—more effective college writing and may be graded as more capable as well (Haswell and Haswell). Being a first-generation college student, too, does not predict grades in Composition 1 but does predict lower grades in Composition 2 as well as lower graduation rates overall, suggesting that first-generation college students, as college-writing coursework expects greater entrance into academic conversations, perform at a disadvantage. This seems to reflect that, in this study as in earlier ones, being a first-generation student poses an especially formidable barrier to college performance (D'Amico and Dika) and that four-year colleges may need to continue to explore ways to suitably meet the needs of first-generation college students (Hassel and Giordano).

What, then, might composition instructors and researchers consider in light of these large-scale findings?

The findings here, we argue, have important pedagogical implications. BW being clearly linked to Composition 1 and Composition 2, at least in course objectives, seems vital. Jason Evans, for one, has discussed the importance of “framing the Basic Writing course more strongly as a stepping-stone to [students’] transfer composition course” (9). For the department where this study took place, rhetorical knowledge and active reading as a means of entering ongoing academic conversations were meant to be emphasized with increasing sophistication, at least as reflected in course-sequence objectives. Additionally, writing sequences may do well to continue to provide additional support to students who may enter college with ground to make up to approximate rhetorical moves associated with academic conversations. It is also possible that the research site’s having a single BW course—rather than several—already reflects the accelerated model of, for instance, Chabot College, which found that trimming down its number of developmental courses from two to one significantly boosted student performance and persistence (Edgecombe et al.). Maybe a single non-credit course at four-year and/or at career-focused universities is not a significant impediment to students’ timely graduation.

Unanswered questions abound, and the present study must be considered in light of its limitations. For the value of exploring trends among a representative sample at one four-year polytechnic, we traded insight into the experiences and dispositions of the students involved. While our study reports clear statistical advantages conferred to students who successfully navigate BW in terms of graduation rates, vital research remains to be done. We may want to explore further the question of what writing studies as a field expects students to carry with them through first-year writing course sequences if we want aggregable and replicable answers to how students accumulate discourse-community social practice and know-how, particularly at career-focused institutions where students and stakeholders may expect general education to support the career-focused institutional mission and identity. Liane Robertson and Kara Taczak recently referred to writing studies as an “un-discipline,” meaning that “we are a field without a consistent content in the introductory course representing our area of study, without consensus about research-based curricular approaches to FYC, and often without expertise behind the delivery of our FYC courses” (186). Additionally, we call for qualitative-design approaches. How might we characterize the motivation of students who successfully navigate BW, and to what degree is

it helpful to ask whether this success is based on self-efficacy, academic identities, rhetorical knowledge, grit, or other knowledge-based or dispositional factors? What roles, if any, do career-focused instruction and career-centered institutional messages play when it comes to students' persistence through BW and general-education writing coursework?

As BW coursework and developmental education weather scrutiny (Mutnick and Lamos), it seems vital that the field continues discussing the cost of BW affectively, academically, and timewise. When a student enters BW and asks why the course they are in does not count toward their degree, at least at the research site featured in this study, instructors may find it motivating to let students know that passing Basic Writing significantly raises the student's odds of graduating within 4-6 years compared to students who did not have an extra semester of writing. While the affordances of large-scale quantitative analysis include the ability to consider large-scale trends, qualitative studies perhaps in the traditions of case-study and phenomenological designs are needed to give individual voice to the limitations and affordances of developmental writing coursework.

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## APPENDIX

### Crosstabulations and Percentages for Statistical Tests Run

**A.** Persistence to Graduation for Students Whose First College Writing Class was Basic Writing (Based on 395 as the total number of BW students who entered any time between F11 and S13 and 182 as the total number of BW students who graduated in 4-6 years)

Variable	Category ( <i>n</i> )	Graduation Within 4-6 Years ( <i>N</i> = 395)	
		Yes 182 (46.1%)	No 213 (53.9%)
Gender ID	Female ID (162)	88 (54%)	74 (46%)
	Male ID (233)	94 (40%)	139 (60%)
Ethnicity ID	Person of Color (103)	48 (47%)	55 (53%)
	White or Caucasian (292)	134 (46%)	158 (54%)
First-Gener- ation Status	First-Generation (215)	89 (41%)	126 (59%)
	Continuing-Gen (180)	93 (52%)	87 (48%)
Basic Writing Grade	A (93)*	54 (58%)	39 (42%)
	B (141)	75 (53%)	66 (47%)
	C (101)	47 (47%)	54 (53%)
	DFW (60)	6 (10%)	54 (90%)

\*Of the 93 students who got an A in Basic Writing, 54 (58%) graduated within 4-6 years of taking that class.

**B. Crosstabulation for Predictors and Outcome—BW Students Persisting to Composition 1 by S13**

Variable	Category ( <i>n</i> )	Persisting to Composition 1 ( <i>N</i> = 395)	
		Yes	No
Gender ID	Female ID (162)	128 (79%)	34 (21%)
	Male ID (233)	167 (72%)	66 (28%)
Ethnicity ID	Person of Color (103)	75 (73%)	28 (27%)
	White or Caucasian (292)	220 (75%)	72 (25%)
First-Gener- ation Status	First-Generation (215)	166 (77%)	49 (23%)
	Continuing-Gen (180)	129 (72%)	51 (28%)
Basic Writ- ing Grade	A (93)*	83 (89%)	10 (11%)
	B (141)	117 (83%)	24 (17%)
	C (101)	81 (80%)	20 (20%)
	DFW (60)	14 (23%)	46 (77%)

\*Of the 93 students who got an A in Basic Writing, 83 (89%) persisted to Composition 1.

**C. Crosstabulation for Predictors and Outcome—Composition 1 Grades**  
 (Based on 2,100 as university-reported enrollment average of new students per year and 2,693 as total number of students taking Composition 1 over the two years of F11 to S13)

Variable	Category ( <i>n</i> )	Composition 1 Grades ( <i>N</i> = 2,693)		
		A	B	C
Gender Identity	Female (1,262)	427 (34%)	482 (38%)	192 (15%)
	Male (1,431)	305 (21%)	507 (35%)	334 (23%)
Ethnic Identity	White or Caucasian (2,368)	654 (28%)	889 (38%)	453 (19%)
	Person of Color (325)	78 (24%)	100 (31%)	73 (23%)
First-Generation	Yes (1,231)	301 (24%)	470 (38%)	253 (21%)
	No (1,462)	431 (30%)	519 (36%)	273 (19%)
Basic Writing	Yes (260)*	63 (24%)	90 (34%)	59 (23%)
	No (2,433)	669 (28%)	899 (37%)	467 (19%)

\*Of the 260 students who took Basic Writing and persisted to Composition 1, 63 (24%) got an A in Composition 1.

**D. Crosstabulation for Predictors and Outcome—BW Students Persisting to Composition 2 by S13**

Variable	Category ( <i>n</i> )	Persisting to Composition 2 ( <i>N</i> = 395)	
		Yes	No
Gender ID	Female ID (162)	107 (66%)	55 (34%)
	Male ID (233)	130 (56%)	103 (44%)
Ethnicity ID	Person of Color (103)	66 (64%)	37 (36%)
	White or Caucasian (292)	171 (59%)	121 (41%)
First-Generation Status	First-Generation (215)	124 (58%)	91 (42%)
	Continuing-Gen (180)	113 (63%)	67 (37%)
Basic Writing Grade	A (93)*	70 (75%)	23 (25%)
	B (141)	97 (69%)	44 (31%)
	C (101)	58 (57%)	43 (43%)
	DFW (60)	12 (20%)	48 (80%)

\*Of the 93 students who got an A in Basic Writing, 70 (75%) persisted to Composition 2.

**E. Crosstabulation for Predictors and Outcome—Composition 2 Grades**  
 (Based on 2,116 as number of students from original N of 2,693 who made it to Composition 2 after enrolling any time between F11 and S13)

Variable	Category ( <i>n</i> )	Composition 2 Grades ( <i>N</i> = 2,116)			
		A	B	C	DFW
Gender Identity	Female (1,020)	358 (35%)	395 (39%)	167 (16%)	100 (10%)
	Male (1,096)	257 (23%)	454 (41%)	224 (20%)	161 (15%)
Ethnic Identity	White or Caucasian (1,862)	542 (29%)	756 (41%)	339 (18%)	225 (12%)
	Person of Color (254)	73 (29%)	93 (37%)	52 (20%)	36 (14%)
First-Generation	Yes (944)	258 (27%)	372 (39%)	174 (18%)	140 (15%)
	No (1,172)	357 (30%)	477 (41%)	217 (19%)	121 (10%)
Basic Writing	Yes (205)*	60 (29%)	73 (36%)	43 (21%)	29 (14%)
	No (1,911)	555 (29%)	776 (41%)	348 (18%)	232 (12%)

\*Of the 205 students who took Basic Writing and persisted to Composition 2, 60 (29%) received an A in Composition 2.

**F. Crosstabulation for Predictors and Outcome—Graduation Within 4-6 Years after Persisting to Composition 2 before End of Spring 2013**

Variable	Category ( <i>n</i> )	Graduation within 4-6 Years ( <i>N</i> = 2,116)	
		Yes	No
Gender ID	Female ID (1,020)	715 (70%)	305 (30%)
	Male ID (1,096)	710 (65%)	386 (35%)
Ethnic ID	Person of Color (254)	1,265 (68%)	597 (32%)
	White or Caucasian (1,862)	160 (63%)	94 (37%)
First-Generation Status	First-Generation (944)	597 (63%)	347 (37%)
	Continuing-Gen (1,172)	828 (71%)	344 (29%)
Composition 2 Grades	A (615)	493 (80%)	122 (20%)
	B (849)	621 (73%)	228 (27%)
	C (391)	226 (58%)	165 (42%)
	DFW (261)	85 (33%)	176 (67%)
Basic Writing	Yes (205)*	152 (74%)**	53 (26%)
	No (1,911)	1,273 (67%)	843 (33%)

\*Of the 205 students who took Basic Writing and persisted to Composition 2, 152 (74%) graduated within 4-6 years.

\*\*This number does not reflect an additional 30 students who took Composition 1 and Composition 2 beyond Spring 2013 but before the 4-6 years time to graduation. 152+30=182.

# Using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra with Basic Writers and in a Graduate Course on Teaching Basic Writing

Laura Gray-Rosendale and Haley Stammen

*ABSTRACT: Two authors, a professor teaching graduate students in an online class about Basic Writing history, theory, and practice (Laura), and a graduate student tutoring basic writers online (Haley), share their experiences using a real time video component, Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, to work with distance students. They explain how they have witnessed this online tool aid teachers of basic writers as well as basic writers in online tutoring situations, contending that such a tool creates learner-centered engagement, collaboration, and connection between online students and their teachers/tutors as well as among online students themselves. They also provide a link to a video in which they show how Collaborate Ultra works and how they employ it with their own students, as well as offer feedback from their own students about their experiences with Collaborate Ultra.*

*KEYWORDS: Basic Writing; Blackboard; Collaborate Ultra; online education; technology*

Laura has been teaching her “Teaching Basic Writing” graduate class at Northern Arizona University (NAU) for twenty-two years. Haley is a graduate student in the online Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies (RWDMS) Program in which Laura teaches. Talking one day about the problem of community-building in online environments, Haley mentioned her experiences using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra to conference online with basic writers and other students in NAU’s University Writing Commons (UWC) and Interdisciplinary Writing Program (IWP), our writing center, explaining how helpful it had been to those students to see her in real time and to

**Laura Gray-Rosendale** is a professor in Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies at Northern Arizona University and a President’s Distinguished Teaching Fellow. She directs the S.T.A.R. (Successful Transition and Academic Readiness) English Program, a curriculum that addresses the needs of students who are first-generation and/or in economic need. She has published a variety of books including *Rethinking Basic Writing*, *College Girl*, and *Getting Personal: Teaching Personal Writing in the Digital Age*. She was recently the guest editor on two special volumes (on graduate education and basic writing) for the *Journal of Basic Writing*. Currently **Haley Stammen** is the Writing Center Director and English Faculty at Wilmington College. Her research has appeared in an award-winning issue of *Eastern Oregon Social Science Journal*, and she has an upcoming presentation at *Conference on College Composition and Communication* in 2021. She was a Graduate Teaching Assistant & Lead Graduate Writing Assistant at Northern Arizona University from 2018-2020.

discuss their writing issues. Laura listened to Haley’s excitement around this tool and decided that she would try it out in her graduate class that focuses on Basic Writing Theory and Practice, a course Haley completed as part of her RWDMS coursework. In this article, we describe the value of this online tool for helping both basic writers in online tutoring situations as well as teachers of basic writers, arguing that, in spite of some challenges it poses, it can foster learner-centered engagement, collaboration, and connection among students and between students and their tutors/teachers. We also provide a link to a video in which we show how Collaborate Ultra works and how we employ Collaborate Ultra with our own students.

### **Understanding Blackboard Collaborate Ultra**

Before we get into the questions of how we have each utilized the Collaborate Ultra feature in Blackboard, we first offer some thoughts about what it is, how it works, where and why it can be effective, and the challenges and opportunities it presents. Collaborate Ultra is a video conferencing software that allows individuals to communicate in “real time” within this Learning Management Software (LMS). Using audio and video technology, users can see and speak with each other. It operates much like Skype or Google Hangouts, but is designed specifically for academic use and is contained within the LMS our campus utilizes, Blackboard. There is a whiteboard feature that is useful during appointments. Using the whiteboard tool, writers can upload their work as well as other sources into Collaborate Ultra, and we can review these texts together. Writers can use the pen or text tool to mark up the document. While the whiteboard feature does not allow users to save the marks permanently, writers can edit their documents using Word, Google Docs, or a hard copy throughout the session. Collaborate Ultra has a recording tool that captures audio and video, including document or screen sharing, during the session that can be downloaded by the writing assistant/instructor and shared with the student after the appointment. This can be quite useful, enabling the student to review the appointment and hear discussions again.

Of course, we have found that this tool poses some challenges as well. We outline these briefly here and then return to them in more detail at the end of our essay. Technology literacy in general can be challenging for students unfamiliar with new technologies. Collaborate Ultra does not allow edits on the screen to be downloaded as a document, so the feedback that students receive on their work has to be assimilated in real time as well. If the writing assistant/instructor records the session, the writer can view the

edits being made on the screen, but will still have to apply feedback to their own work. This can be difficult for L2 students or students who struggle with visual processing, though the audio component of the tool does help with this. Students with weaker internet connections may struggle with using Collaborate Ultra, as the software requires a large amount of bandwidth. Collaborate Ultra is also too powerful a program for a student to use with data on mobile phones in most situations. Additionally, as these conversations happen in real time, outside factors, such as children, pets, noise, or other disruptions, need to be negotiated. Finally, as with any real-time tool utilized for online students, often their schedules can make it hard to meet, especially in larger groups. Finding a common time when everyone is free can be difficult, and students may have other life and work obligations that keep them from taking part as regularly as they might like.

In our experience, however, the potential opportunities that Collaborate Ultra presents far outweigh these challenges. It offers an increased community within online courses, as online students are better connected with faculty, peers, and other components of the campus community. It can help to support online basic writers and other students with their writing through Writing Center Services. Collaborate Ultra is contained within Blackboard, so there is no additional cost to departments or programs who already utilize Blackboard. There is also 24/7 technology support for the program. The tool is relatively easy to use even for those who may not interact with technology on a regular basis. In addition, there are very helpful online tutorials that can aid online writing assistants and teachers should they encounter problems while using the various options offered by Collaborate Ultra. All these factors make Blackboard Collaborate Ultra a crucial tool for online tutoring and online teaching both at the undergraduate level with basic writers and other writing students, as well as for working with online graduate students.

### **Bringing Collaborate Ultra to the Writing Center (Haley)**

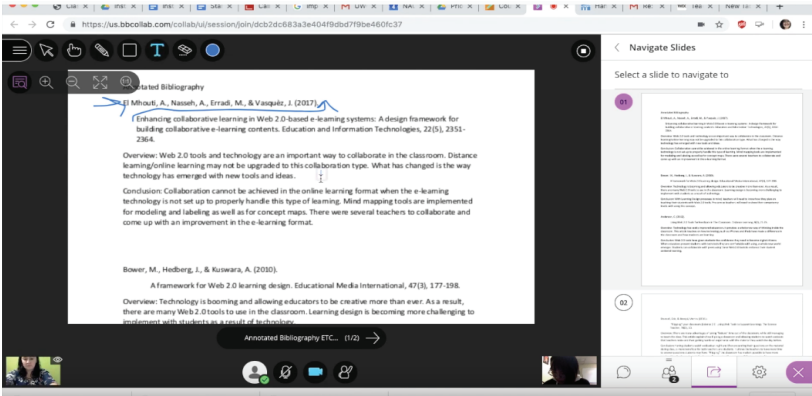
I will begin by discussing the work I have done to incorporate Collaborate Ultra into my efforts with Writing Center students and in training other graduate writing assistants to do so. At Northern Arizona University in Fall 2017, 26% of enrollment came from online and extended campus offerings. At that time, neither NAU's Interdisciplinary Writing Program nor the University Writing Commons offered writing support for off-site and distance writers. The UWC and IWP received requests from a variety of departments to aid their undergraduate students. Graduate students from

across the university also requested online appointments. Both the UWC and IWP wanted to expand their offerings to include online appointments to address this unmet need on campus. We began a pilot program for on-line appointments during the 2018-2019 academic year. There was some funding available to support this project in NAU’s UWC and IWP budgets, enabling graduate writing assistants to be paid per hour for appointments and scheduling. Five online graduate writing assistants tutored an average of four hours per week with one hour of continued training for the semesters. In order for online tutoring at NAU to expand beyond these offerings, the UWC and IWP is currently seeking additional funding.

With limited funding, selecting a program with no or limited additional cost to the department was important. Graduate writing assistant Megan Brown and I tested out several different software options; we ultimately decided that Collaborate Ultra was the ideal tool for the online writing center appointments that we were trying to conduct, since writers and writing assistants are able to see and hear each other, as well as share writing. We favored Collaborate Ultra over similar software programs, such as Google Hangouts or Skype, because of the ease of document and screen sharing, the ability to use a cell phone for audio, and the recording feature to save and download videos of a completed session. Google Hangouts, for example, required that a student open Google Docs in a separate browser and share the document with the writing assistant, which felt clunky compared to the more streamlined Collaborate Ultra (see figure 1). Another benefit to using Collaborate Ultra is that we have access to 24/7 Blackboard technical support and online LMS support through our campus at no departmental cost.

Since the pilot effort was on a smaller scale due to budget constraints, there were twenty one-hour appointments available per week for Fall 2018, Spring 2019, and Summer 2019. The only cost included the wages for graduate writing assistants. For this pilot, all online appointments were piloted in one-hour slots; most of NAU’s UWC and IWP appointments are thirty minutes, but we felt this extra time would be important to account for potential technological issues. During the piloting process, however, I found that many students had limited technological disruptions and used the entire hour to discuss their writing, and they often scheduled another appointment to continue working with their writing assistant. Going forward, appointments will continue to be scheduled for one hour.

Using Collaborate Ultra requires training graduate writing assistants to use this software and work with online students. Throughout the pilot program, the importance of training became increasingly clear. I created a



**Figure 1.** Collaborate Ultra has a streamlined interface that allows users to discuss writing while utilizing the audio and video components, unlike comparable software.

series of training materials as a project for one of my Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies graduate courses at no cost to the UWC and IWP. The training that I developed required that online writing assistants go through ten hours of initial training (including writing center theory, shadowing appointments, sample scenarios, and training with Collaborate Ultra), and an hour of reading per week throughout the first semester of working online. I allocated one hour for writing assistants to learn to use Collaborate Ultra. During this time, the writing assistant and I conducted a mock appointment from the student's and writing assistant's perspectives. We also discussed and used the document sharing, screen sharing, mobile audio, and recording features. We realized that one hour is plenty of time for this training to be completed. Additional training materials, including a handout that I made that provided an overview of the basic functions of Collaborate Ultra, are housed in Blackboard and designed so that on-campus and distance graduate students can serve as online writing assistants (see figure 2).

We added graduate writing assistants to a non-credit course dedicated to online appointments and training. Students receive an appointment confirmation email with instructions and a link to the session the day before their appointment. To access Collaborate Ultra, a student will click on the link in their appointment confirmation and enter a video-conferencing session dedicated for their appointment (see figure 2). Writers are prompted to turn on their microphone and webcam as well as enter their names. Since the writers are all enrolled in different courses, they receive a guest login link

## “Using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra”

unlike writers in Laura’s class who are able to access Collaborate Ultra directly through Blackboard. This guest link removes the need to enroll writers in a course to conduct one-time appointments, which I found to be incredibly useful, and it eliminates administrative work for UWC and IWP staff.

### Instructions for Accessing Blackboard Collaborate for Online Writing Commons Appointments with Haley

#### **Before your session:**

Your computer must be connected to the Internet.

You must have Adobe Flash installed on your computer and grant access to your webcam and microphone.

#### **At the start of your appointment time:**

*Important: Do not enter BB Collaborative before the start of your appointment time unless invited by your writing assistant to join early. Another session may be concluding.*

Go to: <https://us.bbcollab.com/quest/d1fa75943bd341fe917a964aeace9a61>

Join with browser.

Enter your name.

Follow the prompts to share audio and video, if you desire. Sharing video is optional.

If your computer says you don't have permission to share audio/ video: Click "learn more" on the pop up. Scroll to Audio and Video Issues. Follow directions. Refresh after changing computer settings.

#### **If you do not have a microphone or audio doesn't work, you may use your cell phone for audio.**

Click the black icon with three lines in the upper left corner.

Click use "Use your phone for audio"

Dial the number and use the pin number (the phone will ask for a conference number: this is the pin number provided to enter the Blackboard Collaborate shell).

You should be able to hear your writing assistant and respond through your cell phone.

#### **To chat/ instant message:**

Click purple arrows in bottom right corner.

Click everyone.

Click the moderator's name.

Type your message and hit enter to send.

#### **If you are using a tablet and need to flip your camera,**

Purple arrows

Setting

Audio Video Settings

Set up your camera and microphone

Use drop down menu to select proper camera settings.

#### **To upload your assignment,**

Save your assignment as a .PDF

**Figure 2.** Haley created a handout that students receive prior to their online writing appointments with basic information about how Collaborate Ultra works. Using the blue hyperlink, writers are able to access Collaborate Ultra when they are not enrolled.

## **Using Collaborate Ultra in an Online Writing Center Environment (Haley)**

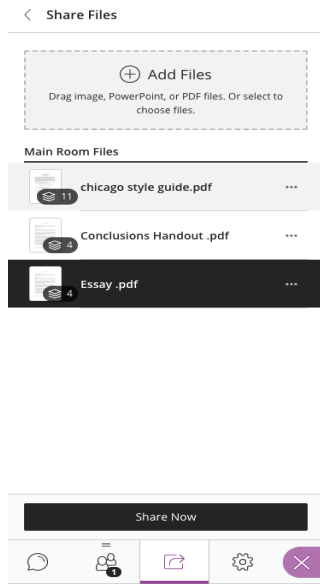
As these appointments took place during the course of an entire academic year, I learned that Collaborate Ultra is an ideal tool for this type of collaboration. Online writing center work facilitated by Collaborate Ultra incorporates the same practices as f2f appointments. Since Collaborate Ultra includes both audio and video technology, my students and I communicate synchronously. For example, in my f2f appointments, I always begin by asking students when we work together for the first time where they are working from, what program they are in, and a little about their lives (family? employment?). By communicating synchronously using Collaborate Ultra, I am able to ask clarifying questions and get to know my students much as I would in a f2f appointment. For basic writers, sharing their work using a new technology with a stranger can be daunting, so establishing rapport is very important to conducting a successful session.

As part of f2f and online training, writing assistants read excerpts from ecocomposition, literacy studies, multicultural/feminist studies, and writing center pedagogies as well as discuss how these concepts impact their work prior to and while taking appointments. I emphasize an ecological approach based on works by Marilyn Cooper, Lisa Ede, and Bonnie Devet. In “Redefining the Writing Center with Ecocomposition,” Devet uses the term *ecocomposition* to identify factors that influence student writing, such as place, environment, and social categorization, including race, age, gender, ability, and the like. Devet draws upon the work of Ede and Cooper to show the importance of social interaction between students and writing assistants. Due to the fact that these writings tend to focus on f2f interactions, writing assistants are trained to examine the environment within which writing is generated and to adapt their tutoring practices accordingly so as to situate writing within the diverse “ecosystems” in which online students write. This approach is particularly important for basic writers who may still be negotiating and defining their places within academic discourse while not being fully immersed in academic culture.

After getting to know each of my students, I move to a conversation around what an individual student is working on and how this student is doing with their assignment and the course. Being able to share files and documents such as prompts, rubrics, and drafts is an important element of f2f appointments; Collaborate Ultra’s document sharing tools facilitate this for online appointments. Students can upload PDF versions of important

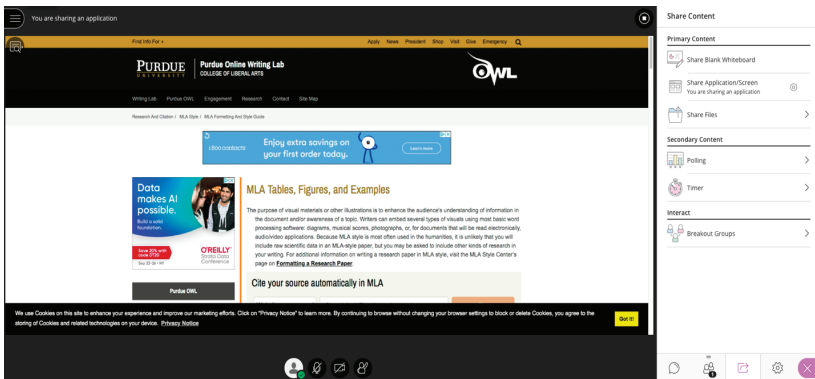
documents to be reviewed with their writing assistant. Online basic writers often reach out for help after they have had negative experiences, such as receiving a failing grade or negative feedback from their instructors. Reviewing important documents for the assignments, a crucial element of a f2f meeting, can be replicated in Collaborate Ultra.

For example, Faith<sup>1</sup> was working on a criticism of readings from her criminal justice textbook and struggling with this new genre of writing. In her first assignment, Faith received a failing grade due to not understanding the directions and conventions of this style of writing. During our appointment, Faith shared the directions/ rubric, her first assignment with instructor feedback, and her in-progress draft of her second assignment. The only text associated with her project that I was unable to view was her print textbook. Being able to contextualize Faith’s assignment fully helped me to facilitate her learning process. Using Collaborate Ultra, Faith and I were able to alternate among the three documents (see figure 3) to talk about her second assignment while paying careful attention to the instructor’s directions, expectations, and feedback. Meeting with Faith over three sessions, I saw a significant growth in her ability to evaluate texts critically and compose a stronger argument.



**Figure 3.** Using Collaborate Ultra, writers and writing assistants can examine a variety of documents together.

Using Collaborate Ultra to discuss instructions with basic writers, like Faith, helps support the writing process, which can be really helpful for writers who are struggling. For example, I worked with Frankie who had a lengthy writing project and, about twenty pages into it, she began to doubt if she was completing her assignment correctly. I always encourage online students to reach out to their instructors. In some situations, we draft an email together using the screen share feature on Collaborate (see figure 4). To do this, I give a student a few minutes to draft an email independently, though I am happy to answer any questions that have emerged during the composing process. Then, the student reads the email they wrote out loud to check for any errors in syntax or clarity. In a f2f appointment, this exercise would run the same way; with Collaborate Ultra, the only difference is that the interaction is mediated by the software. Encouraging writers to reach out to their instructors can also help students to be more successful in their coursework. There are online students who have never met their instructors; for me as an on-campus writing assistant, there are times that I may know their instructors and am able to tell the writer a little more about them, which further helps connect online writers to campus.



**Figure 4.** Students and writing assistants can share screens to review websites and discuss writing during appointments.

I learned from Chase Edwards, UWC coordinator for the first year of this pilot project, not to go into appointments with an agenda or expectations; I’ve found this advice particularly important with online appointments and working with basic writers. A difference between f2f and online environments is the control over the environment. Since f2f appointments are conducted in a dedicated environment, there are limited distractions from children, pets, etc. Due to the fact that Collaborate Ultra has audio and video components, a writing assistant gets a more intimate glimpse at students’ personal lives. Working with a basic writer who has children playing in the background, who is squeezing a quick appointment in during their lunch break, who is struggling to get Internet access at home, or who has had a negative experience with past online coursework, can be daunting for both novice and experienced writing assistants. These writing students are simply trying to get help with their writing in a way that fits within their lifestyles, and by expanding online tutoring offering using Collaborate, the UWC and IWP have reached over 40 students than otherwise would have been possible during the first semester of our pilot program.

With online writing center appointments, adapting tutoring practices and helping students negotiate situations that arise are key approaches. Collaborate Ultra can be utilized to aid almost any writer in any situation. I’ve worked with a writer who got stuck in traffic and was unable to make it home before our appointment time and had an essay due the next day. This student emailed me in a panic, worried that she would not do well on her assignment because she had to cancel. I emailed the student back and had this student find a Starbucks near her location. She used their free Wi-Fi for our appointment.

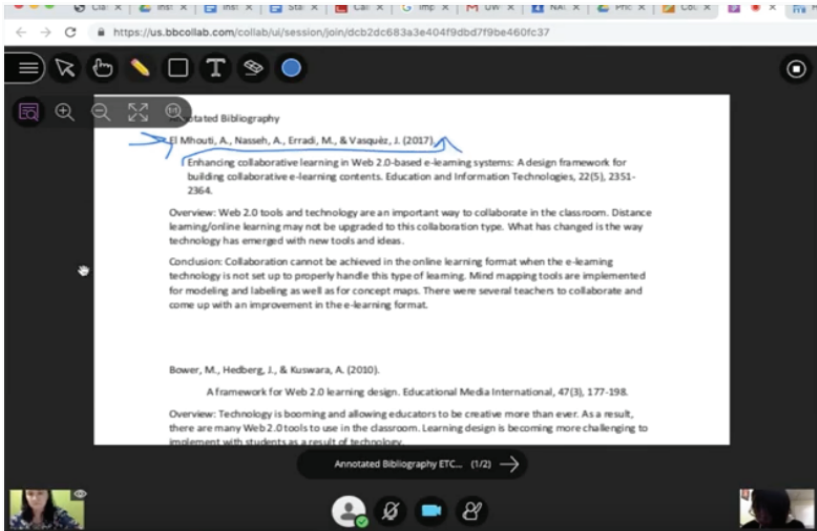
### **Optimizing Collaborate Ultra—Some Take-Aways (Haley)**

Before beginning to use Collaborate Ultra at NAU, I had also worked with online students through the Disability Services Office at Eastern Oregon University. I conducted these appointments largely over the phone and would often provide students with written feedback, usually in a Google Doc or Word Document. Collaborate Ultra makes conducting appointments more streamlined and structured. In the past, I spent a significant amount of time reading and reviewing student work before our meeting time since sitting through and reading someone’s work without seeing that person felt awkward for me. While I did often speak with students directly over the phone, the majority of the assistance I was offering students was asynchronous, since

I did not want them to sit in silence while I reviewed their work. I've found that using Collaborate Ultra significantly reduces the workload for me as a writing assistant. The document-sharing tool on Collaborate Ultra allows me to review a student's writing and synchronously offer them feedback, which mimics a f2f appointment. Writers upload their work at the start of a session, requiring no preparation time for me since we read through their work together. In f2f appointments, writing assistants do not review a student's writing before her or his appointment. While a comparable program, such as Google Docs, will allow a tutor to offer feedback synchronously, the audio and video tools of Collaborate Ultra mimic a f2f appointment and add an important human element that using Google Docs simply does not. Online appointments, though mediated by Collaborate Ultra, operate similarly to f2f appointments. I have found this to be successful throughout my experiences: my workload was significantly reduced while adding in a synchronous component to benefit students. Each appointment time was an hour without adding additional time for providing written feedback. This also allows more students to be served by the online UWC; as NAU offers limited appointments, this is an important consideration for our program.

I've found that online students enjoy being able to communicate with writing assistants, particularly appreciating the writing assistants' ability to look through their writing and give instant feedback using a synchronous tutoring model. Faith, the writer whom I mentioned earlier, said, "I enjoyed using Bb Learn Collaborate [because] it was extremely convenient and easy to use! I found it beneficial to have the ability to upload a writing document, and see the edits being made on the screen." Using Collaborate Ultra, students can see any marks or revisions that I suggest for their papers since we are both able to mark and view their documents (see figure 5). I am also able to assist writers with formatting since the screen sharing feature allows me to watch writers as they edit their papers. Another basic writer, Charles, noted this as well, describing that being able to see his work on the screen "has helped me catch errors or formatting mistakes I would have not caught by myself." I can direct students how to format MLA and APA papers properly in "real time." Another basic writing student named Heather said, "Not only did I received [receive] feedback on my paper, I was also taught a few things about formatting my paper the proper way and more. I would recommend Collaborate to anyone whom [who] needs someone to proofread your paper, edit and give feedback." Writers reported that they were highly satisfied with the ability to see their edits appear on the screen in Collaborate Ultra.

## “Using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra”



**Figure 5.** Writing assistants can use pen, shape, text, or pointer tools when working with students.

In addition to seeing edits, writers are also able to see their writing assistant and seem to enjoy being able to communicate with members from the NAU campus community. Heather also noted that “I like that Collaborate allows me to have a private one on one session. I also like the fact that Collaborate enables the option of having an online session for those who don’t live in Flagstaff. This really helped me because I decided to move back home to finish my last year off campus.” Charles had a similar view, and said, “I like how personal it is and the 1-on-1 time you get with a tutor is very helpful for learning how to not only improve your writing for that specific paper, but all future papers as well!” One student reported that working using Collaborate Ultra felt similar to being on campus and working face to face. In this initial pilot, the UWC and IWP met a major goal for this project since students noted that our online writing tutoring feels similar to on-campus tutoring, despite being mediated by technology.

NAU’s UWC and IWP offer recurring appointments for writers needing assistance on a weekly or biweekly basis. My graduate writing assistant colleague Megan reported a positive experience working with Enrique on a weekly basis for a semester and noticed a significant growth in his writing. Using Collaborate Ultra, Megan and Enrique were able to communicate in real time. Megan said, “Throughout the semester, Enrique had slowly been implementing my feedback into his writing, and I noticed [his growth] all

at once. Since then, we've been able to shift our focus from sentence-level meaning to overall ideas, and his organization and paragraph structure have since improved." Megan noted that "consistent online meetings using Collaborate Ultra have really made a difference in his writing skills." Using Collaborate Ultra, as well as meeting consistently, allowed Megan to support Enrique's growth and address global and local errors in his writing using the document sharing, screen sharing, and audio/ video technologies. Another graduate writing assistant, Fain Robert, worked with Diana for the duration of the semester, despite Diana's preference for working without the camera feature. Diana said, "[Using Collaborate] has been very helpful. I like how I *talk* to my tutor using the Collaborate" (emphasis added). There may be students or even writing assistants who do not have a webcam or prefer not to use the camera feature. All Collaborate Ultra features work even in the instances in which a student or writing assistant is unable to or chooses not to utilize the video function. Of course, the writer and writing assistant will not be able to exchange nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions or gestures, factors that can be important when working with basic writers. While not necessarily detrimental to the session, encouraging writing assistants and students to use the video feature will help them most closely replicate the f2f environment.

Overall, I have enjoyed using Collaborate Ultra to work with basic writers over the course of the pilot program. I'm looking forward to seeing NAU's UWC and IWP continue to expand the use of online tutoring to more writers across more programs and geographical locations. As Blackboard updates fairly regularly, it will be interesting to see how this software develops over the next several years. One update that I would like to see is for document sharing to become more interactive and to contain more of the features of word processing; the ability to add comments or track changes within Collaborate Ultra would help writing assistants and students to engage comments in a more collaborative manner. Had it been available to me when I was an online undergraduate student, this resource would have been invaluable in connecting me with campus from a distance.

### **Future Considerations and Final Impressions for Online Writing Center Help (Haley)**

In the future, it would be interesting to study how online tutoring impacts retention and student satisfaction with their experience of online learning. One area of retention that warrants further study is how infrastruc-

ture can serve as a gatekeeper for writers needing to access online writing center services. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks discusses how class status can be a barrier to success in higher education, as students from lower-economic categories and the working-class must overcome additional barriers to success. Time is one of the biggest constraints for online writing students. Most students who take online courses do so for a reason—the flexibility offered by distance courses fits into their lifestyles. I’ve worked with a teacher during her preparation period, only for great work to be interrupted by the bell releasing her forty second-graders back into her classroom. Another student did not get to eat lunch since she scheduled our appointment during her lunch break because she works full-time as a respiratory therapist. Another writing assistant reported to me that a student was falling asleep during a session because he worked twelve-hour night shifts and scheduled an appointment before going to bed for the day. When offering Collaborate Ultra meetings to online students, it is imperative for those who handle scheduling for appointments to take working students’ situations into account and to offer hours outside of a traditional 9-5 workday. Over the course of the academic year, the majority of the appointments that I held were between 4-7 p.m. Most of the writing assistants taking online appointments at our institution are graduate teaching assistants, who teach and take classes during the day. Having hours outside of the typical work day provides graduate students with the opportunities to work five additional hours outside of the obligations of their assistantships or fellowships. Having evening hours has made writing support available when many students are especially in need of assistance.

While sessions should operate similarly to f2f sessions, writing assistants conducting these appointments need to be independent, quick thinkers so as to adapt to technological challenges and writer needs when they arise. Writing assistants also need to be attentive to how a particular student is negotiating the technology and provide direction as needed. Additionally, writing assistants need to commit to using Collaborate Ultra, as writers pick up on apprehension and doubts towards the interface. For example, one of the writing assistants who was a part of the pilot program chose to use Collaborate Ultra for audio and video while working with his student in a Google Doc and using the screenshare feature to locate research material. It can be frustrating for students to navigate between three different programs during one appointment, as the student’s feedback on the session reflected. Writing assistants should instead make full use of Collaborate Ultra, as all of the technologies are available in one interface versus attempting to recreate

the same experience using other software. Since writing assistants often work remotely, a thorough and careful training is of the utmost importance to ensure that writing assistants are comfortable and confident working with online writers using this program. Through the use of Collaborate Ultra, distance basic writers can become connected to campus and receive invaluable support for their writing endeavors.

### **Teaching Teachers of Basic Writers and Other Graduate Students Using Collaborate Ultra (Laura)**

In an online tutoring environment, students want and need to feel a deep connection with their tutors. The same holds true for our online graduate classes. Collaborate Ultra can help build that sense of connection within online graduate seminars as well.

As Anthony Picciano notes in *Online Education Policy and Practice: The Past, Present, and Future of the Digital University*, “During its Fifth Wave (2021-2029), online education will mature . . . Students will come to expect every course to have online components that provide access to content and tools for interacting with faculty and fellow students. Colleges and universities that carefully plan, develop, and integrate online education will do well in this environment. Those that do not will struggle” (181). Understanding how to use online tools effectively will become increasingly more essential. I teach in the RWDMS online graduate program at NAU. Our graduate program went completely online fifteen years ago. It is now recognized as one of the strongest online MA Rhetoric and Composition Programs across the United States. We place our students in teaching jobs in the U.S. and internationally, in professional writing jobs of various kinds, and in top doctoral programs around the country.

In this program, students take several introductory courses on Literary Criticism and Theory, an Introduction to RWDMS, and an Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition Theory. Then they take topics courses at the 600-level—Topics in Historical and Contemporary Rhetoric, Topics in Narrative Studies and Creative Rhetorics, Topics in Public and Disciplinary Writing, and Topics in Digital and Social Media Studies. They also enroll in a 500-level class called Introduction to Research Methods in Rhetoric and Writing Studies as well as a 600-level Research Projects or Capstone class.

I outlined my 7.5 week online graduate course in Teaching Basic Writing—which I teach as a 600 level topics course—in a recent special issue of *JBW* (Volume 37.1) in an essay titled “Re-examining Constructions of Basic

Writers' Identities: Graduate Teaching, New Developments in the Contextual Model, and the Future of the Discipline." For those of you interested in a fuller overview of the class than I briefly describe here, I orient you to that article and/or invite you to contact me directly. But, suffice it to say, I have been perfecting this class for over twenty years in different iterations—face-to-face, online, blended, full-semester and half-semester versions. Now, of course, the Teaching Basic Writing class is only taught online. The students in the class are increasingly RWDMS students as well. Some students live on campus and have Graduate Teaching Assistantship positions and Writing Center appointments like Haley. These students will take most of their RWDMS classes online but may take a couple of required classes or electives face-to-face.<sup>2</sup> Other students live across the country or around the world and are totally online. Increasingly, these students include those who have taught Basic Writing students for some time in community colleges and high schools and are only now getting a chance to take a class in Basic Writing Theory and Practice. As I note in that essay published in *JBW*, I have designed my Teaching Basic Writing graduate course around a series of specific shifts that I have witnessed in constructions of basic writers' student identities over time. These shifts include developmentalist and grammar-based models (1970s), academic discourse models (1980s), conflict models (1990s), and contextual models (2000s).

In the main, I have been quite happy with the history and theory we cover in the class as well as the opportunities students have to apply what they are learning to teaching situations they may be encountering. I update the readings and the assignments each year as new publications come out and as I want to shift prompts and ideas. The course is composed of discussions, short writing responses, a Final Project Proposal with a literature review, and a Final Project. I respond carefully via written responses to everything that the students write. The students respond to each other in the discussions through written responses as well, often with very detailed feedback.

However, as Whiteside et al. write in *Social Presence in Online Learning: Multiple Perspectives on Practice and Research*, "Many online instructors feel disconnected from their students, and many online students feel disconnected from their classmates, and this perceived separation leads to disengagement and loss of learning" (3). In order to fight this, they suggest among other things that we ought to "Design an intuitive, organized learning environment, cultivate connections to build community, connect content to applied and authentic learning experiences, understand a variety of tools and media, harness reflection and prior experience, provide early

and continuous feedback, design with assessment in mind, [and] encourage change in small steps” (181-82). My course keeps these things at the forefront of how the course operates.

As Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt assert in *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*, community in online classes also needs to include the following:

- Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication
- Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily student to student than student to instructor
- Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning
- Sharing of resources among students
- Expressions of support and encouragement exchanged between students, as well as willingness to critically evaluate the words of others. (Palloff and Pratt 31)

The graduate student instructor’s role online becomes one of carefully facilitating and fostering collaboration, not one of mainly directing students’ learning. The sorts of concerns about fostering online communities that Palloff and Pratt mention are pre-built into the assignments I construct as well as the discussions we have and the projects students produce. When utilizing the asynchronous elements of an online classroom, for example, I am able to create intriguing discussion prompts about Basic Writing theory, history, and practice that encourage collaboration and interaction such that multiple students are responding to one another’s posts. This enables crucial dialogue. Of course, though, this dialogue does not happen in real-time so there can understandably be lags between students’ comments, and certain elements of comments and lines of questioning might get missed as a result. I also take seriously Marjorie Vai and Kristen Sosulski’s suggestion in *Essentials of Online Course Design* that “collaboration encourages the sharing of information and perspectives, and requires both independent responsibility and cooperation” (87).

In this course, the Final Project Proposal and Final Project should relate to some aspect of Basic Writing theory, history, and/or teaching. The student’s project will likely have relevance for Rhetoric and Composition, generally speaking, too. Ideally, it centers around a topic that students feel very passionate about. As a result, there is quite a bit of latitude in topic

selection. In some cases, what my graduate students develop in this course will tie directly into what they do for their capstone project in the larger RWDMS Graduate Program. In this course, this semester, Haley herself is working on a project involving basic writers, utilizing art and multimodality to best reach them. Other projects coming out of the class this semester include examinations of basic writing students and plagiarism, analyses of how the concept of “contact zones” has functioned in Basic Writing Studies historically, vertical alignment of writing in a K-12 school based on Basic Writing theory and practice, how to use social media literacy to teach basic writing students, establishing voice in the writing of basic writing students, and the like.

Historically, I have been pleased with how the short assignments in the course function. And I have thought that our discussions worked well asynchronously given my graduate students’ busy schedules and the time differences we encounter working across time zones. However, the class was always missing the real-time, collaborative function that we can find in face-to-face classroom settings as well as my full presence as a teacher. I enjoy what a face-to-face environment affords us as teachers and feel that there is a dynamic aspect to real-time learning that has been missing from this course, and I simply have not known how to approximate this. Beginning to use Collaborate Ultra in this course is filling in this missing piece. Since Collaborate Ultra is a relatively new tool, there are just a few studies available about its effectivity and most of them have been conducted about courses outside the humanities. But, as Louisa Hill notes in her article “Resource Review: Blackboard Collaborate Ultra: An Online, Interactive Teaching Tool,” it can be a particularly helpful tool for increasing students’ engagement, enabling student-centered learning, and creating greater flexibility that further aids students’ knowledge and “can be applied to different types of online teaching methods including lectures, seminars, tutorials and drop in sessions” (2). My hope is to integrate Collaborate more fully—as it continues to develop and becomes a yet stronger tool— in the future.

### **Future Considerations and Final Impressions for Instructors of Graduate Students (Laura)**

For the first time since I began teaching this class online, I am watching graduate students think through their project ideas with one another fully, get real-time feedback from each other about their ideas as those ideas occur to them, arrange ways to share sources and trade papers to offer feedback,

engage in light banter, laughter and spontaneous thought, as well as see each other and hear each other's voices. These Collaborate sessions have also served to shape and inform the online discussions, making students feel more comfortable with one another. With the use of Collaborate, no longer are we anonymous people behind screens (see figure 6). There's an immediacy and a deep connection between us all as individuals. We have, in essence, become realer, fuller, and more whole to one another. Our online presences have essentially expanded in multiple ways.

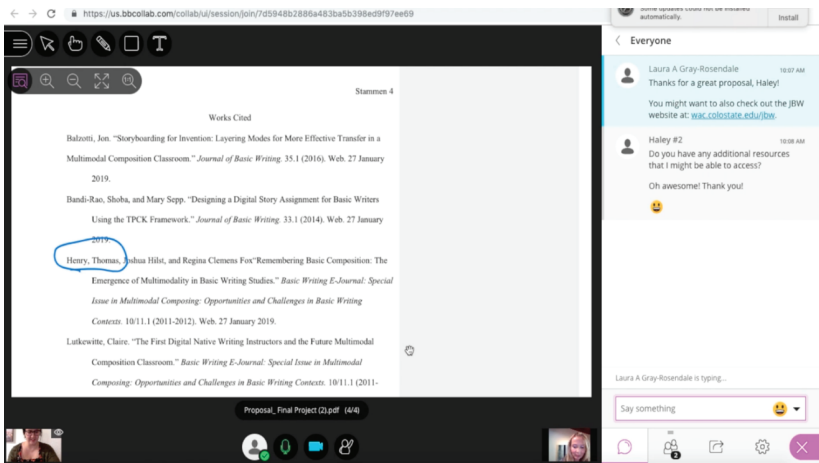
This first time trying Collaborate I have made these sessions voluntary because I see this as an experiment. About a half to three-quarters of the students in the class chose to engage with Collaborate in some capacity. In the future, I will certainly offer more such sessions to better accommodate people's schedules and make them part of the course grade as well. One problem that may still arise is that oftentimes not everyone can participate because coordinating schedules is nearly impossible given where everyone lives and how busy everyone is. But having multiple sessions throughout the semester at different times gives more students a greater chance of being able to do this and connect with one another. And many of my students who cannot participate are watching the recordings at their leisure so that they get to see our exchanges at a time that works better for them.



**Figure 6.** Using Collaborate Ultra, students and instructors can communicate synchronously, which builds community in online classes.

## “Using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra”

I have also been experimenting with using Collaborate to do one-on-one conferences with the graduate students about their Final Projects, much as Haley does with her students in the Writing Commons. Again, I have been piloting this approach and it seems to be working well. It gives us a chance, not only to talk through their project ideas, but also to articulate next steps that need to be taken in the drafting process. Not only do they see my written feedback on their papers. We get the opportunity to go through this feedback in real-time together as we would in a face-to-face conference, and they can ask me questions about it as they occur to them. In addition, I can offer additional feedback as more related issues occur to me on the whiteboard feature (see figure 7). I can share resources that will help them in moving to the next steps in their projects, not only in written form, but also through real-time conversation and through sharing materials in the chat feature (see figure 7). All of these tools help to foster a one-on-one conferencing experience that it is often lacking in online graduate classes.



**Figure 7.** Instructors and students conference in “real time” which allows for instructors to offer feedback and share resources with their students.

As a result, I am witnessing a high level of student-centered learning and student collaboration. In particular, graduate students often use the chat feature to share resources for each other’s research as well as to share their Final Projects with one another. Though students did mention running into some technology issues and occasionally having scheduling conflicts that prevented them from taking part in our Collaborate sessions, by and large

the feedback has been very positive. To complete my considerations at this point, I will share the actual impressions of my graduate students:

- Katie Anderson: “As I progress in my online MA program, I realize the part I miss the most about traditional classes is the sense of community that’s established by weekly face to face interaction with other students. Collaborate allows us to have a common experience, which creates that sense of community, in a way that feels authentic. I especially enjoyed the real-time aspect of it and the ability to put faces to names. I think, too, that sometimes when we’re writing in discussion posts, we tend to use a more formal tone. It was nice to have a more relaxed conversation about our content. I liked that you were there to facilitate the conversations too - that kept it organized and focused.”
- Vance McCormick: “I have really appreciated having the opportunity to use Collaborate as a learning tool. The conversational aspect of Collaborate made me feel more connected to and engaged with my classmates. Since the class is online and we don’t meet face-to-face, the chance to bounce ideas off of each other in real-time is very valuable. It can be difficult to find a time that works with everybody’s schedule, but the chance to use Collaborate has been a great learning opportunity.”
- Rachel Spangler: “The advantages of online classes are well-known: convenience, flexibility, discussion boards where every voice is heard. I chose to take courses in the RWDMS program for those reasons, along with the unique focus this program has to offer. However, academia—especially online—can be a lonely pursuit. Typed names on a screen are so impersonal. And even the professor’s name can be intimidating. Using Collaborate personalizes the course and makes it much more meaningful. Laura’s emails and announcements have been warm, but seeing her face and speaking with her on Collaborate makes her human and certainly more approachable to me. I feel much more likely to seek her out with questions. I’m a visual learner and it helps seeing a person’s face in my mind as I type my discussion posts and responses.”

- Stacy Pierce Tejel: “Online learning has opened up new possibilities to enhance my education; however, I have missed interacting with classmates as well as my professor. There is an element of camaraderie and collaboration that cannot be reproduced via email or exchanging posts on a learning platform. Thankfully, Dr. Gray-Rosendale realized there was a way to fill this need and she incorporated Collaborate into our class. Being able to see other students and talk to my professor in real time has heightened my focus and given me more structure for my work. There is a certain aspect of seeing someone’s facial expressions and hearing their voice that adds to the learning experience. Also, having a discussion in real time allows for much more ground to be covered and is definitely more efficient.”
- Haley Stammen: “Utilizing Collaborate Ultra in the Teaching Basic Writer Course has really developed a community within the Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media program. As a graduate teaching assistant on the Flagstaff campus, having the opportunities to interact with experienced teachers and professionals across the United States and even the world, is amazing for professional development and networking. Meeting with Laura online was great as well, as coordinating our schedules can be difficult, even being on the same campus. Throughout online courses I took as an undergraduate at another institution, I was able to interact with peers and my instructor only through discussion boards and emails. Getting this feedback in real time versus negotiating them through email exchanges seems more effective for the teacher and us, as students. Being able to ask questions to clarify assignment expectations is one of the most difficult parts of being an online student for me and many of the online students I tutor. I also enjoyed sharing materials and information with classmates. Using Collaborate added a richness to online courses that I have been missing.”

## **Overall Recommendations for Online Writing Assistants and Instructors of Graduate Students of Basic Writing (Laura and Haley)**

More and more, working with basic writers as well as teachers of basic writers requires that we utilize technology—whether online conferencing, online workshops, or online classes—because our students can be anywhere in the country or the world and may not have ready access to educational opportunities near them or a community of other students.

While we've both seen a lot of advantages to using Collaborate Ultra to work with basic writers and teachers of basic writers, it's important also to close our essay by revisiting some challenges that need to be negotiated, especially in regard to document sharing and addressing varying levels of technology literacy.

One challenge with using Collaborate Ultra is that edits on writers' papers are not permanent using the interface. Since Collaborate Ultra is set up as a teaching interface versus tailored for more individualized work, the document sharing functions as a "white-board" where edits using the pen or text tools are erased when moving to the next page. Some of our student writers have expressed frustration with this. While this can be a challenge for some writers, there are opportunities associated with this as well since not having permanent written feedback requires writers to take on a more active role in sessions. If writing assistants and instructors make a point of encouraging their students to take notes and make edits as they receive feedback on their writing, this can lead to increased engagement. When working with students, for example, Haley instructs them to take notes about their papers while talking about their writing. She presents this as an opportunity to engage during their appointment and revise during the session rather than as simply a limitation of the software.

Another challenge is negotiating a new form of technology in a short period of time. For some writers, Collaborate Ultra was fairly straightforward to navigate, but others reported challenges navigating this software initially. This was particularly the case with undergraduate basic writing students. For example, one writer with whom Haley worked struggled to discern what the icon symbols meant throughout the software. To address this challenge for future appointments, Haley adapted the instruction sheet writers receive before their appointments to include images of the icons, so that writers

could more easily identify them during their appointments. Another one of Haley’s student writers said, “The first time I had used Collaborate, I would like to have known more about navigation before my session.” As a result, Haley plans to incorporate this feedback into training materials she continues to adapt as she gets more experience working with online writers using Collaborate Ultra. Also, Haley discusses the importance of familiarizing writers with the software during their first meeting when training new writing assistants.

Some writers—both at the undergraduate and graduate levels— also noted that sometimes Collaborate Ultra can cut out or be a little spotty in areas with weaker internet connections. On occasion, audio can be challenging. However, Collaborate Ultra has a terrific feature where a writer can use her/his cell phone for audio by calling a phone number listed within the software. The rare, but peculiar, audio issues we have experienced were addressed by using a cell phone rather than the typical computer microphone.

Special considerations and adaptations should be made to enable Collaborate Ultra to be more accessible, including closed captioning for recorded sessions and an ability to screen capture within the program, but our experience does not show such options within the whiteboard feature or negotiating new technology to be detrimental to the effective use of the software for online tutoring and teaching purposes. Overall, Collaborate Ultra worked effectively for both our basic writing undergraduate students and our graduate student teachers of Basic Writing.

### **Closing Thoughts (Laura and Haley)**

In writing this essay, we wanted readers not only to learn about how we use Collaborate Ultra with basic writers and teachers of Basic Writing. We also wanted to *show* readers exactly what this looks like in action. If you would like to watch a video that features us both interacting with students using Collaborate, please follow the this link: [youtube.com/watch?v=4axucil--vw&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4axucil--vw&feature=youtu.be). In addition, if readers are interested in discovering more about our graduate program in which Laura’s graduate course on Teaching Basic Writing discussed in this essay is taught, you can go to the Northern Arizona University website and look for our online English Program in Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies. Please see [nau.edu/english/programs/masters-degrees/ma-rhetoric-writing-dms](https://nau.edu/english/programs/masters-degrees/ma-rhetoric-writing-dms).

Collaborate Ultra will inevitably continue to grow and develop in the upcoming months and years. As it does, we very much look forward to trying out its new features and incorporating them into our tutoring work with basic writing students as well as into our teaching of graduate students who are training to teach Basic Writing.

### **Acknowledgments**

We would very much like to thank Marcia Buell, Barbara Gleason, and Linda J. Stine for their invaluable feedback on earlier drafts of this article. Thanks also to Hope Parisi and Cheryl Smith for their support of this project.

### **Notes**

1. All student names are pseudonyms.
2. Since even our on-campus RWDMS graduate students (a relatively small number of students) take mainly online classes, they too benefit a great deal from our classes utilizing Collaborate Ultra. While our on campus RWDMS students are more likely to also seek us out during office hours and have face-to-face meetings that way, they have also found it helpful to use Collaborate to interact with one another in real-time across substantial geographic distances. They have also appreciated watching me interact not only with them but also with them and their classmates.

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# Back to Basics

David Bartholomae

*ABSTRACT: I retired from teaching in August, 2018. In the fall semester of that academic year, I taught a section of Basic Writing (now called “Workshop in Composition”), one of the courses I taught in the fall of 1975, my first year at the University of Pittsburgh. This essay is a documentary account of that course, including writing assignments and student papers, but it is also a reflection on some of the people, courses, and concerns that have shaped and sustained a long career as a teacher of writing.*

*KEYWORDS: Basic Writing; Cambridge English; language difference; ordinary language; travel writing; translingual composition*

I sensed that I simply couldn’t judge the students for anything they thought, at least in the beginning. Their backgrounds were too far removed from what I had known before coming to Fuling, and, like all young Chinese, they were surrounded by the aura of a troubled past. It was easy to forget this—it was easy. . . to smile at their childlike shyness, and it was easy to dismiss them as simple young people from the simplicity of the countryside. But of course nothing was farther from the truth—the Sichuan countryside is not simple, and my students had known things that I never imagined. Even if appearances were deceiving, the truth always came through in the ways they wrote about their homes and families.

-Peter Hessler, *Rivertown: Two Years on the Yangtze* (2001)

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**David Bartholomae** is Professor of English and the Charles Crow Chair of Expository Writing, Emeritus, at the University of Pittsburgh. He has served as the Chair of CCCC and on the Executive Council of the MLA. His honors include a Chancellor’s Distinguished Teaching Award, the ADE/MLA Francis Andrew March Award, the CCC Exemplar Award, the Richard B. Braddock Award (for “The Study of Error”) and the Mina Shaughnessy Award (for Writing on the Margins). He has published widely on composition and teaching. With Jean Ferguson Carr, he edits the University of Pittsburgh Press book series, *Composition, Literacy, Culture*. This essay will be a chapter in his new book, tentatively titled *Like What We Imagine*.

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## **Back to Basics**

I retired from teaching in August, 2018. In my last year, I taught two of the courses I taught in 1975, my first year at the University of Pittsburgh. One of them was Basic Writing, now titled “Workshop in Composition.”

In 1975, my Basic Writing students were almost all working class, most were Black. They came from Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and small towns in between. In the Fall Term, 2017, my students were all Chinese. Many, but not all, came from privileged families. Their lives as students of English were demanding. I admired them greatly for their courage and resolve. All had sacrificed to be where they were in the US., and they struggled with the course, which presented challenges beyond differences in language and culture. Still, this group struck me as possessing a deep sense of entitlement, with the confidence that ensued. They came from families with power and influence. Most were smartly dressed. The room looked like an ad for J. Crew, but for the exception of two persons: the rumpled professor, and the young man sitting next to him who wore a t-shirt, rolled at the sleeves, and who had a hammer and sickle tattooed on his bicep. (The others, perhaps jokingly, said he was a mole, planted at Pitt to report back to the Chinese Communist Party.)

Why did I choose an ESL section of Workshop in Composition for my final semester? Perhaps the most compelling motive for teaching the ESL section was that I wanted to repay a series of favors. Once I stepped down as Department Chair in 2009, my wife and I became deeply involved with Pitt’s Study Abroad program. This included two extended (5 week) stays with students in Beijing (at Capital Normal University). We were warmly received. We loved our time in Beijing. When I returned to Pittsburgh, I began to regularly sponsor visiting scholars from China.

We have also been travelling and teaching all over the world (Argentina, Brazil, India, South Africa, Ecuador, Cuba, Spain, the UK) where I had watched my students (and myself) struggle with our limited command of the language and, in spite of our best efforts, a limited sense of local culture and history.

One of these programs (called “PittMap”) had a focused curriculum that relied on field work. In Argentina, South Africa, and China, the faculty team included an epidemiologist from the Medical School and an Economist. During a full semester, at three sites, we were investigating local and national programs in public health, with a focus on HIV/AIDS. In South Africa, for example, we met with clinicians, government boards of health, the children

and teachers at an orphanage (for children whose parents had died from AIDS), and the pharmaceutical company that was first to produce low cost retrovirals (thanks to an intervention by Bill Clinton), among other sites.

Students made their own contacts with South Africans; this was the expectation of the writing course. The students were to be reporters. They had to find stories out in the field. Some found access to the townships, the shanty towns outside the city; some worked with a group producing Spaza Rap, a hybrid rap, English and Xhosa; some volunteered in an AIDS clinic; some worked out with sports teams from the University of Cape Town; one made close contact with the Jewish community and dined each week with a different family. (She wrote on the actions and inactions of the community during Apartheid.) Another stood in a long line at the Cape Town Medical School for AIDS testing, and this when AIDS testing first became a public initiative and, under the administration of Jacob Zuma, extremely controversial. He wrote a ground-level account of AIDS and its place on the Cape Town campus. After graduation, one of the students went on to work as a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal. Several went on to programs in public health with an international focus.

At every site there were challenging and unforgettable moments of contact and encounter, but also, of course, challenging and unforgettable moments of misrecognition and misunderstanding. All became crucial to the work we did together, as students wrote weekly about where they were and what they were doing.

In my eight years with study abroad, the challenges were invigorating; the work felt pertinent and urgent and important. It seemed an extension of my early days teaching Basic Writing. And, in teaching the ESL section on our campus, I was eager for a chance at a semester-long reflection on language learning in a global context, within an already proven curriculum, and in the company of students who were good at this, who were experienced and successful at working in translingual/transcultural settings. The teaching assignment gave me the opportunity to work closely with a course designed by Marylou Gramm, my colleague at Pitt, an inspired and inspiring teacher whose commitment to translingual composition I admired. I knew I would learn something.<sup>1</sup>

The essay that follows is not organized as an argument. And I want to make it clear from the outset that while I was teaching a course marked as ESL, it is the only ESL course I have ever taught. I claim no expertise in that

field. I am speaking from inside the experience of one course to those who might be interested in the long trajectory of my career as a teacher.

This essay, then, collects a set of interesting examples and puts them in conversation, one with the others. I like this as a model for the essay as a genre. "Ordinary language philosophy teaches us how to think from within. It teaches us to think through examples." That's Toril Moi from *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell*.

I was both pleased and surprised by the stories and examples that pressed themselves on me as I began writing this essay, some coming from a documentary instinct (to report on my final course, to think back on my career), but others popping up unexpectedly from the reading I had been doing over the last ten years in support of a graduate seminar on Ordinary Language, a course that had become focused on Cambridge English, the early attempt to create a university-level English curriculum that has served as the foundation for the modern English department in the English speaking world. The key figures were I.A. Richards, William Empson, F.R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams. Wittgenstein was lurking in the wings. Of the group, Empson and Richards had spent a substantial period of time in China, teaching Basic English. The key term that will bring these examples together at the end of this essay is "translingual composition." Or so I believe. Translingual composition is represented at the outset by the example of Chinese students writing in English in a required first-year course at the University of Pittsburgh.

The course I taught in 2017 was structured exactly like the course I taught in the late 1970s. There were weekly writing assignments, drafts and revisions, usually two of the latter, where the work of revision was initially the work of supplement and addition, later a questioning of key terms, so that two to three-page essays (single spaced, double spaced between paragraphs) became six to eight-page essays. These essays were prompted by assigned readings, but more on that later.

There were also weekly language exercises. I would present typical sentences from their papers, "common errors" we once called them, model sentences with a grammar common to this group of writers, one that varied from what, following Suresh Canagarajah, I called "Metropolitan English." I'm not sure this label is any less problematic than the old one, Standard Written English, but since most of my students aspired to using their English in metropolitan settings, it seemed strategically useful to name it so.

As a profession, and with colleagues in our institutions (willing and recalcitrant), we have learned over time to finesse and refine the ways we name exercises in proofreading and grammar, to find terms other than Error and Correction. If I had called these weekly exercises *Corrections* my students would have known exactly what I was talking about, and so there was an advantage in renaming and reframing examples of language differences, and in thinking and talking about the source, context, and usefulness of these paired sentences without resorting to a simple binary—correct and incorrect. This is one of the important arguments of those who have been working to establish the notion of a translingual composition. Min-Zhan Lu provides a classic example of this exercise in “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone.”

Although there were changes in the terms I used, and they are not unimportant, and most certainly changes in the grammatical patterns I was highlighting, I was teaching proofreading and sentence-level revision just as I had in a Basic Writing course 42 years ago. Why proofreading? Here is how we phrased it in 1975. Students don’t make all the errors the English language allows. They make a predictable set of errors. They have their own “style of error,” as Shaughnessy used to say. A personally tailored list allows for focused proofreading. And proofreading itself is a difficult skill to learn. Adult readers don’t read each word on a page. They anticipate and fill in the blanks. A writer must *learn* the odd form of reading that is proofreading, paying attention to all the words, sentence by sentence.

Below is a language exercise from the fifth week in that 15-week term. Creating a handout like this is common practice wherever ESL is taught. There is nothing original or exceptional in what I am offering.

### **Language Exercise: Proofreading Guide**

*Here are student sentences (your sentences) that vary from what we might call “Metropolitan English,” the English that circulates and serves as cultural capital in the world’s great cities. When you proofread, I want you to set aside time to hunt for sentences like the ones I’ve indicated below. When you find one, I would like you to revise—and to revise with a Metropolitan reader in mind.*

*And, and this is important, I would like you to be prepared to talk about the changes you make—why you made them, what was won or lost in*

the bargain.

**1. Sentence boundaries—marking the beginning and end of sentences.**

- *I consider myself a very **patriotic person**, **I am** so patriotic that I even love the countries like Pakistan and Russia which are good friends with China.*
- *China’s education environment is more competitive than the **U.S.A**, **students** have to get a high grade before they enter into a better school in next level.*

**2. Simple mistakes and typos—these tend to be hard to spot but easy to correct.**

- *Even in this small town where **I was barn**, learning a foreign language has become an important thing for current students.*
- *A few weeks before the first day of school, I started **loosing** sleep.*

**3. Shifts in verb tense—if the speaker, scene, or the action are set in the past, keep the verbs in past tense.**

- *My parents weren’t rich enough to move into a better district for a living, so they **have** to choose a second-hand apartment as a transitioning shelter.*
- *My father was born in a rural place in Chongqing province. His family was poor, and he **has** two sisters and one brother.*

**4. Other errors with verb tense**

- *The article said Chinese students **has been teach** these patriotic content, but these patriotic materials also help students to build their*

*views for students' life.*

**5. Plural nouns—plural nouns normally take a final S.**

- *Our English festival always started by watching English **movie** and reading English books.*
- *“Why is a raven like a writing desk?” Alice asked. The show Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland was performing and drama is one of the traditional **program** in our English festival.*

**6. Definite article—“The”**

- *Now, considering what Chinese government has done to Chinese kids as a bystander, I have my own point of view. \_\_\_ Chinese government utilizes different means to infuse red ideology into children and tries as much as possible to fetter their minds in order to create unity.*
- *Though the show did shape my views towards \_\_\_ Long March and the Communist Party, it became meaningless when I was repeatedly forced to watch it.*

**7. Relative pronouns—blurred patterns**

- *In the recent couple years, there are increasing number of students in **China do not know** about the past history at all. (There are an increasing number of students **in China who do not know** about history at all.)*

As I did in 1975, I used class time for students, alone and in pairs, to reread (or proofread) their weekly essays and to revise sentences. I would circulate and help. Later, we would talk about individual instances and examples, particularly when a revision seemed particularly inspired or particularly unsatisfying. I would ask students to add examples to their personal lists and to let me know if they saw examples I should add to mine or that might suggest a new numbered entry on my handout.

## Writing in the Contact Zone

As has been the case throughout my teaching career, the writing assignments in this course were all prompted by readings, readings chosen because, although difficult (first year college students are not the assumed audience) the writing is exemplary, and the essays touch upon subjects that, I believed, could engage both me and my students at our best. In this course, I wanted to provide my students with ways of thinking about where they were geographically and intellectually, and I wanted them to have interesting references they could bring into discussions beyond my classroom.

I opened the course with Min-Zhan Lu's much travelled 1987 *College English* essay, “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle.” Lu writes about her youth and young adult life in Shanghai, about learning English, about schooling under Mao Tse-tung, and about her family's persecution during the Cultural Revolution. It is a complicated and moving essay (an unusual combination, in my experience). I have taught it often and it has always been a challenge.

I also drew from two books I admired, both by former Peace Corp workers in China: Peter Hessler, *Rivertown: Two Years on the Yangtze*; and Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*. I have had the pleasure of meeting and talking with both. My students and I spent an evening talking with Osnos in Beijing, and I helped to host Peter Hessler when he came to my campus for a reading at the invitation of my colleague, Michael Meyer, also formerly in China with the Peace Corps, and whose books I regularly teach in my course on Travel Writing.

I am not going to give an extended account of my use of these two books. I taught the opening chapter of *Rivertown* (including its brilliant account of teaching English composition in China). Here is an excerpt from the opening assignment:<sup>2</sup>

### ***Peter Hessler, “Downstream,” from Rivertown***

*In “Downstream,” Hessler provides his view of the Chinese students, teachers, and administrators at the college in Fuling, Sichuan Province, in 1996. Imagine that you are writing to his American readers, including students here at the University of Pittsburgh.*

*Where, in your opinion, is Hessler most accurate? Where is he at his*

*best? Where does he show that he has a deep understanding of China and Chinese people? Be precise and provide details.*

*Have things changed since he published his book in 2001? What would an American reader need to know to be up to date? Be precise and provide details.*

*And where, in your opinion, does he miss something important or misinterpret what he sees and hears? What preconceptions does he bring with him about China or about the Chinese? Where, in his writing, do you sense or see this preconception And how might that preconception be said to distort his vision or get in the way of understanding? Again—be precise and provide details.*

Notes:

- *I'd like you to quote briefly from Hessler's writing and think about the precise words in that quotation. That is, your reader will need to "hear" Hessler. This means that you will need to provide at least two good examples of the way he thinks and writes.*
- *When you quote from Hessler's work, please include the original page number (in parenthesis) at the end of each sentence that contains a quotation.*
- *Don't quote or summarize too much; otherwise Hessler, not you, will be writing this essay. Give plenty of time to your commentary.*
- *I'm looking for at least two pages, single spaced, with a space between paragraphs.*
- *Proofread when you are finished.*

Osnos came last in the course. The chapter we chose, "A Chorus of Soloists," was about individual ambition and youth culture in relation to Chinese revolutionary history and ideology. As with the other readings, the assignment sequence took the essay through a first draft and two revisions. In the

middle was an exercise in summary and paraphrase. Here is the opening Osnos assignment:

***Evan Osnos, “A Chorus of Soloists”***

*In the chapter from Age of Ambition, “A Chorus of Soloists,” Evan Osnos tells the story of Han Han and his phenomenal presence in Chinese popular culture as a novelist, a blogger, and a media superstar. He was, Osnos says, “a seductive spokesman for a new brand of youthful defiance” (169). (Did you read Triple Door? Do you know people who did?) Han Han, according to Osnos, did not “reorder the political life of Chinese youth, or force the hand of policymakers, but he was a powerful spokesman for the joys of skepticism” (175).*

*And Osnos also tells the story of Michael, the student from Li Yang’s Crazy English who perfected his English by listening to American advertisements. Michael, he says, “framed the study of English as a matter of moral entitlement.” He told his students, “You are the master of your destiny. You deserve to be happy. You deserve to be different in this world” (180).*

*I would like you to write an essay of about four pages. You’ll have two weeks to finish it and one week to revise.*

**Week one** (two pages, single spaced): *I would like you to hear your account of some area of youth culture that has captured the attention of your generation. What is it? What are its attractions? What needs and desires does it serve? How might it have spoken to you? How and when might you have chosen to be “different in this world?” (These questions are meant to get you thinking. Please do not use this list of questions to organize your essay.)*

*Whatever you choose as your subject, you will need to describe it in close detail. And you will need to pay close attention to its reception—to your interest, but also to what you have heard others say. It would be helpful to have more than one person speaking in your essay.*

*You can imagine a thoughtful, interested American reader. Your reader, however, knows nothing about Chinese popular culture.*

Several students wrote about video games (of course), several about TV shows (*The Voice*, *Happy Camp*; *FeiChengWuRao*, a match-making show; *Where are We Going, Dad*, a weekly family travel adventure). One wrote about *Wei Bo* (like Twitter); and one about the *Monkey King*, a folk figure who has re-emerged in digital form.

To vary the pace and rhythm of the course, I also provided some shorter exercises in reading and writing. I would clip articles about China from the *New York Times*, and I introduced students to a new genre, the Letter to the Editor. I reprinted a short column by Didi Kirsten Tatlow (NY-Times, 9/2/2016), “For China’s Children, a Resoundingly Patriotic Return to School?”, for example. Here is how it opens:

Sparkling red stars and bloody tales of military sacrifice accompanied 200 million Chinese children into the new school year this week, with the Education Ministry requiring them to watch a television show extolling the spirit of the Communist Red Army as it escaped its enemies on the Long March.

“Be unrelenting!” was the message of the 90-minute event, “Flag of Our Ancestors,” broadcast on CCTV, the state broadcaster.

In a sign of how wide-ranging the government’s propaganda efforts are, the Education Ministry asked schools to instruct parents to ensure their children watched the show, at 8 p.m. on Thursday, the first day of classes. Some asked parents to send photographs as proof that their children had complied.

And it concludes:

Since 1949, Chinese schools have sustained a diet heavy in patriotism and Communist Party propaganda. But the annual back-to-school show, which began in 2008, has moved more sharply in that direction with the ideological tightening under President Xi Jinping, as he has cracked down on corruption and freethinkers alike and deployed the language and symbolism of a purist form of Communism to unify the country.

I received many spirited responses in defense of propaganda. Some sounded like prepared responses; some sounded more halting. Here is one that sounds practiced; it very skillfully brings US history into play:

I am not an expert of politics or history, but if there is one thing I know, it's that patriotism is not a bad thing. Countries are carriers of people's culture. In a world which has 193 nations, the idea of patriotism is the last bunker to protect country, people and culture. Look at the people who didn't have their own countries: the Jews were slaughtered before they built their own country; native Americans lost their home because they did not fight back when outsiders stepped on their lands. That's why China is “brainwashing” its children with patriotism, because we've been bullied for too long. We were first invaded by Western developed countries around 1900s and forced to “rent” out our territory; then the Russians and Japanese came and took over half of China. After the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China, we were still despised by other more developed countries, even India and Vietnam can step on us. . . .

And now, we are finally powerful enough to protect ourselves against invasions; we can finally say we are proud to be Chinese; our government can tell the children: “Hey kids, remember, the deeds done by our ancestors did not go to waste, we didn't let them down.”

But I also received several letters to the editor, equally spirited, that while they appreciated the government's initiative said, in effect, “Give us a break. Do you think Chinese students have no sense of irony, no sense of spectacle—that, as young people, we can't both be in school and out of school all at the same time?!” Here are three brief excerpts.

Like students in the United States or students in any other countries, students in China have their own opinions towards the government they have, towards the educational system in which they ‘suffered’ a lot, and even towards tiny ‘society’ like their schools.

When I entered the middle school and was asked to write about the show again, I got bored. I knew exactly what was going to be in the show, but I had to write an essay to tell how moved I was and how meaningful the show was. Later in high school, the tradition went on. I could write an essay about the show without watching

it. All I had to do was to tell the greatness the Community Party had achieved.

It does seem that the government has achieved great success—almost everyone is following the instructions and requirements. However, is it true success? For me, I reckon, what the government is doing is a ritual. That is a superficial meaning of success. Deepen inside the surface, are students really affected or really touched by what they are doing? In my heart, those over glorified programs or events will not affect me anymore. While a few very innocent students, who I was one of them once, indeed accept and embed the red ideology in their minds without further thinking, I believe nowadays Chinese students will not be moved by the show, the speech or the movie; rather, they regard these as onerous tasks, just as homework, to undertake.

The trope of irony is slippery, difficult to manage in the play of language as it crosses boundary lines—the teacher’s desk, national borders, local languages, divisions of power and authority. This is Empson’s argument in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, where he argues that irony (which often cannot be “pegged out in verbal explanations”) “can, often magnificently, show us what there is to be looked at, prove there is a crossroads where we so far have seen only a single, well-trodden track.”

Later in the semester I took students to visit the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, just across the street from the Cathedral of Learning. (I love this building, the Cathedral; it is, itself, a test of irony and its management.) The Carnegie is a nineteenth-century museum and features rooms full of dead animals, stuffed and posed in dioramas. Each tells a story. A mother grizzly bear protects her cubs while catching and eating salmon. They are threatened from above by eagles, and from in front by a male grizzly, skillfully placed beyond the glass, out in the hall next to the spectator.

One student wrote about a display of a mother leopard and her cubs. It was touching, she said, until she thought about who shot them and how they arrived at this spot in Pittsburgh, PA. She wrote,

the scene was superficially a harmony one, but deeply a ferocious one. I even thought I was guilty to stand there and watch them happily without thinking about their pains. Maybe this was the Americans at that time. They believed they could conquer the

nature; they could get anything as long as they and the other Americans wanted it. I knew Americans had a tradition of moralism. With the feeling of exceptionalism and righteousness, they believed they were moral example for the rest world. But it seemed to me that it was so contradictory.

This is skillful writing, and part of its achievement is represented in the way she (correctly) imagines what it is I hope to hear. What do I write at the bottom margin? Good job? Or, "why do you put those last two sentences in past tense? *Americans had a tradition of moralism? . . . they believed they were a moral example for the rest of the world.* That would be a grammar lesson with an edge. Is she putting me on? Am I putting her on? I had an easier time knowing where and how to push with my US students.

This is the odd conundrum of teaching, one that haunts a book like Bill Cole's *The Plural I*, one of the books that inspired this essay. When is one's writing a step forward in thinking and in living the world, and when is it not? When is it just submission? Themewriting. Stock Response. Here is I.A. Richards on stock responses (from *Practical Criticism*).

A stock response, like a stock line in shoes or hats, may be a convenience. Being ready-made, it is available with less trouble than if it had to be specially made out of raw or partially prepared materials. And unless an awkward misfit is going to occur, we may agree that stock responses are much better than no responses at all. Indeed, an extensive repertory of stock responses is a necessity. Few minds could prosper if they had to work out an original, "made to measure" response to meet every situation that arose—their supplies of mental energy would be too soon exhausted and the wear and tear on their nervous systems would be too great. Clearly there is an enormous field of conventional activity over which acquired, stereotyped, habitual responses properly rule, and the only question that needs to be examined as to *these* responses is whether they are the best that practical exigencies—the range of probable situations that may arise, the necessity of quick availability and so forth—will allow. But equally clearly there are in most lives fields of activity in which stock responses, if they intervene, are disadvantageous and even dangerous, because they may get in the way of, and prevent, a response more appropriate to the situation.

The danger or disadvantage of the stock response. To be sure, these play out differently in the People's Republic of China than in the U.S., and hence I had no good instincts for where and how to push in the ESL course, but the concern to move beyond stock responses has been the guiding principle of my teaching for 45 years.

### **Writing as Struggle (1)**

I opened the course with Min-Zhan Lu's essay, "From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle," first published in *College English* (1987). From the late 1970s through the 90s, I taught our "Teaching Seminar," a required course for new Teaching Assistants/Teaching Fellows. The course was not an Introduction to Composition as a field; it was a semester-long reflection on the course everyone was teaching (and we taught from a shared syllabus), with a few readings from key sources (Richards, Burke, Shaughnessy) meant to provide context for discussion, much of which was devoted to student essays, writing assignments, and possible new readings for the following semester.

Because I wanted the course to be centered on actual practice (rather than the usual fantasies of who writers are and what writers do), for the opening writing assignment I asked students to write about an important writing lesson, in school or out of school, a time when they learned something meaningful, when they took a significant step forward as writers, and to do so from the inside, as memoir.

Min Lu's essay for the seminar was an early draft of "From Silence to Words." There were, in fact, two essays from that course that were published and that went on to wide circulation, including publication in composition textbooks. The other was "From Outside, In" by Barbara Mellix, a writer in our MFA program. Her essay was first published in the *Georgia Review*, also in 1987. Mellix, an African American, wrote about the language of home and the language of school, about taking Basic Writing as an undergraduate and now being in a position to teach it.

I want to take time to summarize "From Silence to Words" in detail. The essay is a classic, I know, and widely read, but classics tend to lose their edge. This one benefits from rereading. Here is how it opens:

My mother withdrew into silence two months before she died. A few nights before she fell silent, she told me she regretted the way she had raised me and my sisters. I knew she was referring to the way we had been brought up in the midst of two conflicting worlds—the world of home, dominated by the ideology of the

Western humanistic tradition, and the world of a society dominated by Mao Tse-tung’s Marxism. My mother had devoted her life to our education, an education she knew had made us suffer political persecution during the Cultural Revolution. I wanted to find a way to convince her that, in spite of the persecution, I had benefited from the education she had worked so hard to give me. But I was silent. My understanding of my education was so dominated by memories of confusion and frustration that I was unable to reflect on what I could have gained from it.

The essay is the occasion for that reflection. You can trace her further thinking through many of her publications, including “Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?” (1992), “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone” (1994), “Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation” (1999), “Living-English Work” (2019), and her memoir, *Shanghai Quartet: The Crossings of Four Women of China* (2001). The latter, I believe, is not as widely known as it should be.

“From Silence to Words” turns first to the several languages of her early upbringing, each connecting her to a different world of experience, thought, and feeling. She grew up speaking a Shanghai dialect, something later shared only with her servants. In school, she learned to read, write, and speak in Standard Chinese, “the official written language of New China.” And at home, she spoke English with her parents, her sisters, and their tutor, a Scot. This she thought of as private, a family language. She says, “While I was happy to have a special family language, until second grade I didn’t feel that my family language was any different than some of the classmates’ family dialects.”

As she grew older, and as China “was making a transition from a semi-feudal, semi-capitalist, and semi-colonial country into a socialist country,” the family’s English identified them as imperialists, enemies of the people. Her father was a physician. His practice served a wealthy, English-speaking community in Shanghai. He (and the family) would become a target during the Cultural Revolution, 1966-76, when she was in high school and beyond. She learned to use English only when she was at home.

And in school, she learned to master Standard Chinese and, through it, to identify as a proper working-class subject. She says,

As school began to define me as a political subject, my parents tried to build up my resistance to the “communist poisoning” by expos-

ing me to the “great books”—novels by Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Bronte, Jane Austen, and writers from around the turn of the century. My parents implied that these writers represented how I, their child, should read and write. My parents replaced the word “Bourgeois” with the word “cultured.” They reminded me that I was in school only to learn math and science.

She says,

I learned a formula for Working-class writing in the composition classes. We were given sample essays and told to imitate them. The theme was always about how the collective taught the individual a lesson. I would write papers about labor-learning experiences or school-cleaning days, depending on the occasion of the collective activity closest to the assignment. To make each paper look different, I dressed it up with details about the date, the weather, the environment, or the appearance of the Master-worker who had taught me “the lesson.”

She tells a chilling story of her first day in junior high school:

... we were handed forms to fill out with our parents’ class, job, and income. Being one of the few people not employed by the government, my father had never been officially classified. Since he was a medical doctor, he told me to put him down as an Intellectual. My homeroom teacher called me into the office a couple of days afterwards and told me that my father couldn’t be an Intellectual if his income far exceeded that of a Capitalist. He also told me that since my father worked for Foreign Imperialists, my father should be classified as an Imperialist Lackey. The teacher looked nonplussed when I told him that my father couldn’t be an Imperialist Lackey because he was a medical doctor. But I could tell from the way he took notes on my form that my father’s job had put me in an unfavorable position in his eyes.

The defining moment comes when she is assigned a report on *The Revolutionary Family*, a novel that represented an appropriate working-class consciousness.

In one scene the [mother] deliberated over whether or not she should encourage her youngest son to join the Revolution. Her

memory of her husband’s death made her afraid to encourage her son. Yet she also remembered her earlier married life and the first time her husband tried to explain the meaning of the Revolution to her. These memories made her feel she should encourage her son to continue the cause his father had begun.

She was, she says, “moved” by this scene. And “moved” was a word her mother and sisters used to talk about what they valued in the English novels they were reading, novels like *Jane Eyre* or *David Copperfield*. The genre of the book report, she knew, required her to emphasize the mother’s revolutionary spirit. She chose this scene to illustrate the point.

The next morning, however, she knew that she could not turn in this book report. “I had dwelled on [the mother’s] internal conflict, which could be seen as a moment of weak sentimentality,” a virtue in one context but a sign of weakness in the other. She rewrote the report, “taking care to illustrate the grandeur of her Revolutionary Spirit by expanding on a quotation in which she decided that if the life of her son could change the lives of millions of sons, she should not begrudge his life for the cause of the Revolution.”

Writing this book report, she says, “increased my fear that I was losing the command over both the ‘language of home’ and the ‘language of school’ that I had worked so hard to gain.” One way of thinking and writing “interfered” with the other. To a writer for whom words matter, and in a context where identity is taken seriously, “code-switching” is not an easy fix. And the rest of the essay considers the difficulties Lu had managing the competing languages of family and school, defined in terms of liberal humanism and revolutionary commitment. There is a short final section that proposes a writing class that will allow, even promote, competing voices within a single text.

Although I feel that I know Min Lu well, I know very little about the period in her life between the middle-school girl, writing a book report on *The Revolutionary Family*, and the woman in her mid-30s, a wife and a mother who arrived alone at the University of Pittsburgh in 1982 to study for a PhD in English, writing first on Theodore Dreiser and later on Mina Shaughnessy and Basic Writing.

The US didn’t establish full diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic until 1979, just three years before her arrival. Min Lu arrived long before there were well established protocols for student and faculty exchange, and long before the steady flow of students from China into graduate pro-

grams at U.S. universities. Lu's trip was an extraordinary step across time and place, one requiring great courage, inventiveness, resilience, and resolve.

In *Shanghai Quartet*, she says, "Most immigrants know how to package their life according to the standard expectations for a straight story." I understand Lu's writing (and teaching) as an effort to avoid the traps of the standard narrative, pastoral or heroic. There is no straight story in this writer's formation, but there is a clear line of effort and imagination in her work as a teacher on behalf of writers who share a sense of always being out of position, who hear the "dissonance among the various discourses of one's daily life." This is the program she outlines in "Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone":

... I am most interested in doing three things: (1) enabling students to hear discursive voices which conflict with and struggle against the voices of academic authority; (2) urging them to negotiate a position in response to these colliding voices; and (3) asking them to consider their choice of position in the context of the sociopolitical power relationships within and among diverse discourses and in the context of their personal life, history, culture and society.

I deeply admire the commitments in thought and action throughout this exemplary career. I admire Lu's determination to "stay on line with the voices that matter—that is, voices which can bring us the intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect, and will to meet the challenge of hanging together as we work to end oppression in the twenty-first century."

Although I do not have the time and space to treat him at length, I cannot help but recall another great teacher/traveler, I.A. Richards, also determined, I believe, to stay on line with the voices that matter.

Richards taught English in China during several extended stays between 1927 and 1979. He was in China for a total of 52 months between 1927 and 1938; he was in China for 6 months in 1950 and 3 months in 1979. After publishing their first book, *The Meaning of Meaning*, Richards and Charles Ogden began to work on a program of instruction which they called Basic English—that is, the English language reduced to 850 words and a simplified grammar.

Richards held a professorship at Cambridge and had recently finished a visiting position at Harvard. He had emerged as a leading figure in English studies, and he would quickly be identified (wrongly, many believe)

as a founding figure in a group that, in the US, came to be called the “New Critics”. Yet his next career move was to put it all aside to move to China, where he would work with middle school teachers, preparing them to teach a new, experimental entry-level curriculum designed to make the learning of English more manageable.

I can’t be alone in finding this decision to be remarkable. And Richards did this at a time of war (the Japanese had invaded China), and at a time when widespread poverty meant that the conditions of living and of travel were difficult and primitive. At one point, he and his students had to move from Tsing Hua National University in Peking to the “University in Exile,” Liana, in the mountains of Hunan province, to avoid the bombs and pitched battles on the streets of the city.

Basic English is often condemned as an imperialist project. It lost its momentum with the Second World War and with the Communist Revolution in China. Richards’ primary motive had always been to improve basic instruction, although it is true that Richards (and Ogden) believed that a simplified English might become a global means of communication, as it has. The first world war had been a defining experience for Richards. In developing and promoting Basic English, as in the teaching of English to English speakers, Richards’ stated motive at this early stage of his career was to improve communication, avoid misunderstandings, and prevent the conditions of war.

It was also the case, however, that Richards was fascinated with the difficult meeting of the two cultures and the two languages. Travel suited him. His time in China provided material that would enable further thinking about reading, writing, and the difficulty, even the impossibility, of interpretation and translation. Below is a story that Richards liked to tell. It is one of my favorites. I’m taking this account from John Paul Russo’s excellent biography of Richards. Although there was not so much at stake for Richards, it speaks to Min Lu’s story of the two book reports, one for home and one for school:

[Richards] taught *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* to a class of about 40 Chinese. At the end of the novel, the black flag is unfurled, signaling that Tess has been hanged for child murder. When Richards read the climatic lines, “The President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess,” the class burst into spontaneous applause for the only time in the course. In a state of amazement, Richards passed out

protocols, and back came the universal response: Tess had shown disrespect to her father at the beginning of the novel. The students had been waiting for the just punishment that a great artist like Hardy would surely mete out.

This is the Richards of *Practical Criticism*, a book built around the initially unpredictable readings of poems by students and colleagues at Cambridge in the 1920s, gathered through written responses (“protocols”). There, as here, his response to difference, to ways of reading and thinking that are initially distant from his own, is to make those differences a matter of consideration, of discussion, part of the course and part of his research. It was not to correct them or to make them disappear. As I said earlier, Richards is often considered a founding figure in the American New Criticism. His practice, however, was far from theirs. The American New Critics had little interest in how students read. Whatever student responses might emerge, they would be quickly replaced by the brilliant example of a Professor reading a poem before a group of silent admirers.

In the 1930s, while teaching in China, Richards wrote *Mencius on Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition*, as a way of thinking about how a mind might hold two systems of thought without, he said, “reciprocal disturbance.” His last visit, just before his death, was in 1979, and it included a lecture in Shanghai on “sequenced language learning.” I take delight in thinking of Richards and Lu crossing paths somewhere on a sidewalk in the French Concession. Between sequenced language learning and reciprocal disturbance, they would have had something to talk about.

## **Writing as Struggle (2)**

Below is a shortened version of the assignment I gave to my students. It was their opening writing assignment. There was much buzz and consternation among the students over my suggestion that they need not necessarily start at the beginning or end with the end.

### **Writing Assignment #1: due 9/12**

*For your first assignment, I'd like you to begin your work on a brief literacy narrative. For this first draft, I would expect 2-4 pages. Here are some suggestions to help you to begin:*

“Back to Basics”

- *You can use “From Silence to Words” as a model. I would you like you to write about an important recent lesson as you have been learning to read and write in English, to do the kind of advanced work that is expected of you here as a student at the University of Pittsburgh. You do not, however, need to write about something you learned in class or directly from a teacher.*
- *You are preparing a first draft. You don’t have to begin at the beginning and you don’t have to finish. You will return to work on this document in the following week. We will be working together to find a sense of shape and direction. You can draw upon anything you included in your in-class essay.*
- *My advice is for you to begin not with a generalization but with some specific scene or scenes. Begin with a story (or stories) rather than with an argument. If people are speaking, you can, if you choose, let them speak as characters speak in fiction. You can, obviously, write in the first person.*

The first set of papers were a real disappointment. All told the same story—about hard work, rigid teachers, late nights doing homework, and the tyranny of the GAOKAO, the national SAT-like exam used to direct students to their slot in higher education. I later learned that this is essentially the approved narrative of high school education in China—survival in the face of parental pressure, young lives drained of fun, students who learn to follow the rules. Here is a sample from a first draft: “Fortunately, I learned how to make my paper be ample and how to make my argument be strongly supported the same time with struggling to meet the minimize requirement of my assignment.”

And I said, “No. Please. I want you to reread Min Lu’s essay and, when you write, I want you to think *in the manner of* Min-Zhan Lu. Yes, of course she was formed at a different moment in the history of your country, but what was it like for you? I used this exercise in class:

### **Lu Exercise 1: “future proletarians”**

In “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,” Min Lu recalls this scene from her schooling:

One of the slogans posted in the school building read, “Turn our students into future Proletarians with socialist consciousness and education!” For several weeks we studied this slogan in our political philosophy course, a subject I had never had in elementary school. I still remember the definition of “socialist consciousness” that we were repeatedly tested on through the years: “Socialist consciousness is a person’s political soul. It is the consciousness of the Proletarians represented by Marxist Mao Tse-tung thought. . . . It is the task of every Chinese student to grow up into a Proletarian with a socialist consciousness so that he can serve the people and the motherland.” (440)

Let’s assume that all schools in all countries (including the US) are designed to turn students into future *somethings*--if not working-class heroes, then characters who can occupy some ideal or acceptable social role. What was it like for you?

Please prepare brief answers to these questions—one or two sentences. I won’t collect these, but I *will* ask you to read aloud in class.

1. What ideal role was presented to you and your friends once you moved beyond elementary school? How was your experience different from you parents’ experience?
2. Did you find it easy to assume that role? Does it make sense to think of education as a “struggle.” If so, why?
3. Was English necessary for that role?
4. Was learning English a struggle? Was it in any way a *Min Lu*

*like struggle*—that is, a struggle over identity? A struggle to reconcile a Chinese point of view and an American or Western point of view?

5. Min Lu says that she spoke (and thought) one way at home and another way at school or in public. Would you say this was true for you? If so, can you provide an example?

These were pressing questions for me. My children had each spent two full years in a small-town Spanish school—first elementary school, and then high school. No one spoke English. And, as I have said, I had spent six semesters with Pitt students studying abroad. I was trying to imagine the extraordinarily complicated set of forces that had shaped these young Chinese lives—turned them to English and, then, to a 4-year undergraduate program in the city of Pittsburgh. They didn’t make these decisions on their own. Private fantasy was at play for sure. (What will I do? Who will I be? Where will I go?) But there was a complicated array of other interests at play here—state and local ministries or boards of education (or whatever they might have been called), family, and certainly some areas of youth or popular culture, among others.

Hessler said of his students, “I brushed against people just long enough to gain the slightest sense of the dizzying past that had made them what they were today.” I wanted the students to understand that I was not just setting an exercise. I wanted to learn something about China and about their generation of young Chinese men and women. They were my primary sources.

The essays, in the end, were mostly predictable, partly, I think, because of an unwillingness to leave anything behind that could get a person into trouble, or slow him or her or them down on their chosen path. I had the sense that writing in English was always and only a move on the chess board, a way of writing whatever they needed to write in order to move on to something more important. It was hard to spark a sense of joy or passion or confusion. But this is old news to anyone who teaches composition. Still, the conditions of restraint must be different for Chinese students (and in ways I will never understand).

It was also the case that, with the very substantial amount of time I needed to devote to sentences, my students could not give much to revision. Or perhaps this is what I want to say: they were very good at and interested in additions, in searching around for more and more interesting examples; they weren’t as willing or able to pick away at the key terms governing the search.

These essays were long. I've chosen from those that seemed the most ambitious and surprising. I've cut them to show the range of examples (and the willingness to linger with examples), but not the general shape of the essay. I've not made any other changes. The essay below was the first to break the pattern of thesis and conclusion. It sent a buzz around the room when I read it out loud, slowly, trying to honor its tone and rhythm:

I consider myself a very patriotic person, and I am so patriotic that I even love the countries like Pakistan and Russia which are good friends with China. There were three "Russians" in my high school's class. I called them "Russians" only because they spoke Russian, but actually one of them was Ukrainian and the other two were Greeks with Ukrainian/Russian lineage. I liked to think of them as Russians because I like Russians, and I liked them, so I tended to combine them with the characters I liked, which I am sure was a very natural thing for humans to do.

Despite their feelings, I kept calling them "Russians", "comrades" or "the Red Children". They've expressed some negativities toward these names, but I ignored them, since as far as I could see, they were just like all other nicknames, like Timmy, Matty, Sasha and Vladya. Eventually, they asked me formally to stop calling them like that, and I stopped, but that came later.

When Russia sent its troops to Crimea, it became a big topic in our social study class. Of course I was on the Russians side because I love Russians. In my opinion, Crimea belonged to Russia, and actually, even Ukraine should belong to Russia. Since Russia was the biggest power in the Soviet Union, all the small countries around Russia should belong to it. From my now perspective, that idea was very foolish, probably even Vladimir Putin himself would not think like that. But I was young and naive. I told my thoughts to my "Russian" friends: "Putin is not invading, he is just taking back the land his fathers used to own." Unexpectedly, the Ukraine girl went nuts after she heard this. She started yelling to me that Crimea is not part of Russia. Ukraine is an independent country and so on. Then I realised what a giant mistake I've just made. I might even break our friendship by saying that. Luckily, after I apologized to them, they still treated me as friend. . . .

Until recent, I just noticed how wrong it is to think someone as what I would like them to be. After I moved into college, I met some new people and made some new friends. One of a new friend I made has a Taiwanese roommate. When he told me about his roommate’s nationality, I tried to correct him by saying: “Hey, Taiwan is part of China, you know that?” and he said: “Yeah, I know, but he want to be known as Taiwanese.” I suddenly understand why my friends were not happy when I called them “Russians.” Though they speak Russian, that does not mean they are Russians. I should not put tags on them. I need to treat people in the way of how they want to be treated. I think of myself, I don’t want to be called as “the god dam commie” (although I am a steadfast communist). Just like Confucius said: “Don’t make others do things you don’t want to do.”

Still, the idea of racial identity confuses constantly. I asked my Hispanic friend: “When you think about your self, do you think of your self as an American first, and then Hispanic? Or is it the other way around?” He looked at me and said: “It depends.” “What about right now?” “Hispanic.” Then I asked his roommate who was laying on the bed: “What about you? American comes first or White?” “Definitely American.” He said. I am very confused about their different answers. One seems care more about his ethnic identity than his nationality, and the other one seems think the opposite way. For me, I always think myself as a Chinese and then a communist. . . .

So yesterday was Sam’s birthday. Everybody on my floor was saying happy birthday to him in GroupMe. (In case you don’t know, that’s a group chat app.) Then, a Chinese guy texted him happy birthday in Chinese characters and all the sudden, people started saying happy birthday in their own languages. At first, there was Russian, and then Arabian, Spanish, German, Japanese, Korean, and a native Nigerian language called Bohop or something.... There were in total of 10 different languages!

I didn’t know there were so many different language speakers on my floor, and I was shocked. What’s funny was that the Nigerian guy didn’t actually say happy birthday, instead he said something about Sam’s mother. We knew that because Luke, another pretty funny guy on our floor who texted happy birthday in Spanish, translated all the languages into English.

I don't think the essay would be improved by some final discussion of diversity. I told the writer that I would love to see him write another section, of equal length, this one turning to the different languages, peer groups, and political affiliations within the group of Chinese students on our campus. But we were at the end of the cycle of draft and revision, and it was time to move on.

What all the students admired in this piece, as did I, was its energy and sense of fun. There was a recognizable person in here rather than a stock figure. My composition classes almost always are defined by an early moment where a writer appears as a compelling character with a "real" voice. That was how this essay was read by the class, but there were not many who followed suit in their revisions.

This next student paper was remarkable, to me at least, for its length and range, and for its straightforward (neither melodramatic nor overly self-conscious) account of what seemed to me to be the crushing cost of making the passage to Pittsburgh. It is also a wonderful reading of Lu's essay. At one point, the writer defines herself as "unobscured and adventurous," what a lovely phrase!

"Unobscured" became a term of use for me in that class. In this essay, the writer was writing about her parents, and it is the stories of their lives that allows her to become "unobscured." This coining is proceeded by another interesting pair of terms. Their age and her travels to the US ("geographical craziness") all led, she said, to "concurrence and controversy." In these pairings (and in the precision of the terms) she is searching for a third term, a somewhere in the middle that can't be found, as it shouldn't. But the searching for terms and the unusual coinings, like "unobscured," are signs of a writer at work trying to make her language do something new, something important, something other than stock response (what the language is prepared to do, or used to doing).

There are moments in the essay where she enacts (and not just narrates) her version of the "conflict and struggle" of Min-Zhan Lu's learning to write in Shanghai. I think it is brilliant. And I said so. And to frame the discussion I asked, "Where else in this essay, on the page, do you see this writer as 'unobscured'?"

My father was from a small town in Henan, the middle east of China; my mother was from a little village in Inner Mongolia, the most northern part of China; I was born in Henan, then I lived in Georgia for three years before moving to Pennsylvania. On top of

the geographic craziness, the age difference among the three of us were quite drastic as well. My father is fifteen years older than my mother, and they had me when she was thirty. This variation of our experiences lead to both concurrence and controversy. We could have profound discussions on the topics from literacy, medicine, to policy during afternoon tea. My father and mother would always have something fascinating to say, and I brought the youth's and western thoughts to the table. Their experiences helped me to be unobscured and adventurous.

My middle school was a boarding school, the top one in Henan Province. Because it was a province school, it was in the capital of Henan, which was a two-hour drive from where we lived. It was my first time living away from home and away from my mother and father. A few weeks before the first day of school, I started losing sleep. I did not understand why I would have trouble falling asleep since I considered myself being one of the best sleepers in all of the people that I know. My mother told me that my sleep problems were caused by a thing called “excitement.” “Ha! Now it makes sense!” I was excited to potentially start a new life at this new place with all those new people. But I was nervous at the same time, especially about living at a dorm with six other girls.

Move in Day was literally a race to get to the room and claim our territories, so that we could get the “good” spot. The room was approximately ten square meters. It was set up with four sets of gun metal lockers standing against the wall near the red metal door; two sets of bunk beds with wooden boards as the “mattress” on each side of the room; a small glass door to our washing area where we had three sinks, one toilet, and one shower. I was a little bit let down by the fact that as many as seven people were shoved into this little tiny space. I could not help to complain, “this place is terrible, how can I live here for three years?” Then I saw both of my parents laughed, and my mother said, “honey, back in the days when I was getting my associate degree, it was so much worse than this.” My mother had not told me a lot about her college life, and my reaction to her comment was, “you lived in a dorm too? I thought... well, I don't actually think about life way back then. So what was it like, mom?” She and my father both chuckled, and then sat down on the naked

wooden board, and started telling the story from her youth years –

“Your grandfather was in the army, so he and your grandmother moved to Inner Mongolia under the order of the commander to help exploit desolate areas there in October 1954. Then your aunts were born, I was born, and your uncle was born last. We grew up in that little village. Oh, the one you visited last time when you went back.” “You mean the one that we drove up the mountain for two hours to get to and we did not see any human being or any types of transportations on the way up there?” I interrupted with great inconceivable, “I mean, they weren’t even houses, they were [made of grass] bricks! How does that work? It gets super cold in the winters there.”

My mom nodded undeniably and continued with her story. “Your grandfather used to make these trousers with cottons for us. Those trousers were so thick that they could stand on there own! Your grandparents had one room, and the rest of us had the other. I didn’t like sleeping in the same bed with four other people. But what could I do? Nothing. So I told myself everyday that I had to get out of that poor little village. When I was about ten, my sisters and I started working as mushroom pickers in the mountains to get some extra money for stuff that we wanted really badly. For me, I wanted a pair of white sneakers, and they cost 0.5 yuan. I finally worked my hours and got the money to buy these wonderful shoes.

But guess what your grandmother did? She beat me the second I walked into the house. She blamed me for spending money on useless things and accused me of being too much of a vanity. All she wanted us to become were good students at school, and obeying children at home. That was when I swore to myself that I would become the best mom if I ever have a child.

I worked extra hard at school, because I wanted to get out. And I succeeded! I achieved my goal by getting the top scores and came to Henan for high school and then college after that. Speaking of residential life, we used to have a bed that was as wide as the room, which probably was about eleven meters long, and twelve girls slept in the same bed. Although there were disagreements about snoring and showering here and there, I enjoyed it. We would turn

off our lights and all be in bed before the RA comes to check on us, and then chat about everything, classes, friends, fashion, boys, all kinds of stuff, until really late. I think it was a unique experience, and taught me how to be around people. Don’t complain, and never give in without a fight.”

....

The entire family on my father’s side was Hui Chinese, thus they were all Muslims. I did not believe in the Islamic faith. My grandparents were pure Muslims. My grandfather had a big white beard just like Muhammad. My grandmother married my grandfather when she was fourteen and had been a virtuous wife as the Islamic culture set her to be since. Both of them grew up in a small village where everyone were Muslims; everyone had the same last name; everyone was related to everyone. However, there were never any sparkles or clicks between my “family faith” and I.

My father used to tell me bedtime stories from the Quran. I enjoyed them, but they were simply entertainments to me. Celebrations to traditional holidays on the Islamic calendar were just exciting parties that had amazing food. I did not like the Islamic faith, and I was glad that my father allowed me to not like it. I disliked it because of the forceful element to it. It is difficult for me to accept my identity to be a Muslim strictly because my father is one. In my opinion, the freedom of thoughts and beliefs should be a necessity to human beings. I should be able to choose what I believe in and no one can put me a group based on my family history. Maybe I valued freedom more than many Chinese due to the American novels I read and movies that I watched. I never liked it, let alone believing this faith of my family’s.

My father had always wished that I could believe in something. He wanted me to learn more about other cultures and faiths, so that I would one day have a spiritual sustenance. My father did not agree sending me here to the US. when I first proposed it. He thought that Americans discriminated Asians, and it was not as safe as China due to the problems with gun controls. The drugs and alcohol at American high schools and college he saw from TV shows or movies made it even more challenging to convince him to let me study in the US. Finally, he gave in, but under one strange condition, that

was for me to go to a Christian school. I took this offer with great pressure because I was eager to learn anything new.

....

I arrived in the US in August, 2014. My host family was Christian. We went to church every Sundays. Most of my classmates were Christians. I had a bible class everyday. We celebrated Christian holidays instead of Islamic ones. Everything was different. The first bible class was full of confusion. Everybody but me in the classroom got the biblical references the Mr. Wilson, my bible teacher, made. I did not know what “Roman 6:15” meant; I did not know when or where Jesus was born; I did not know who Abraham was. On top of all the previous knowledge that I lacked, my vocabulary seemed to vanish when I read the bible.

There is no rush here toward a Conclusion and the detail comes from within the scene. The turn to her parents and grandparents was, perhaps, inspired by the example of Hessler’s students, who also located themselves in a family history. But you always believe (or the students and I were quick to believe) that she was writing about people and places and ideas that mattered to her. Part of this is in the loving attention to detail, which *unobscured* the scene, the place, and the time:

[The boarding school room] was set up with four sets of gun metal lockers standing against the wall near the red metal door; two sets of bunk beds with wooden boards as the “mattress” on each side of the room; a small glass door to our washing area where we had three sinks, one toilet, and one shower.

But the writer’s achievement is also in her willingness to bring forward the terms of an unconventional life. The Hui Chinese are one of the 55 ethnic minority groups in China. While they are not actively persecuted, as in the case, for example, of the Uyghurs, they remain marginalized. This is what I meant when I said that she wrote about something that mattered because it mattered. Her subject was not determined by a standard narrative. She struggles that it be unobscured. And when she succeeds, you want to say, “Wow.”

I tried very hard to move students away from the sorts of conclusions that sum everything up, speak in a loud voice, and leave the world a happy

place, part of the drill of Chinese (like American) writing instruction. I have had pretty good success with this in other courses. Here I couldn’t make much of a dent. The biggest change came with the ways students gathered and considered examples—slowly, thoughtfully, and at length, as something other than props, support, or proof. And Lu’s essay was exemplary in this regard.

Here is part of the conclusion of the second essay, above:

Luckily, I have two sets of family on each side of the planet. My American parents would explain to me phenomena in the US, and they were always excited to listen to me expressing my Chinese point of view. My father was surprisingly supportive when I presented him with my interest in Christianity. We talked about the similarities and differences from the Bible and the Quran regularly. His perception on America became weaker after getting to know this country. My appreciation toward my diversified and accepting family grew stronger as I acquired more knowledge from other languages and cultures. The opinions and experiences my parents shared with me were precious. They helped resolve the struggle that I had with discourses of Chinese and English.

### **Some Versions of Pastoral**

In the opening chapter to *Rivertown*, Peter Hessler tells a story about his friend and colleague, Adam, the other Peace Corp volunteer in Fuling. In a moment when he needed to usefully fill classroom time, Adam turned to his students and, in a phrase familiar to us all, he said, “Write about anything you want.”

At the end of the hour, Adam collected their papers. They had written about anything they wanted, and what he had was forty-five shopping lists. I want a new TV, a new dress, a new radio. I want more grammar books. I want my own room. I want a beeper and a cell phone and a car. I want a good job. Some of the students had lists a full page long, every entry numbered and prioritized.

In the 1970s, when I started teaching, stories like this would often begin or end a conference paper at CCCC. They provided the punch-line or the pivot, a demonstration of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, evidence of the impossible task of teaching composition in the era of open admissions. *We inhabit different countries, different planets*—that was

the subtext. *I could be a good teacher if they would just send me good students, students whose writing I can read.*

Hessler, however, uses the story to set up the passage I placed as my epigraph.

I sensed that I simply couldn't judge the students for anything they thought, at least in the beginning. Their backgrounds were too far removed from what I had known before coming to Fuling, and, like all young Chinese, they were surrounded by the aura of a troubled past. It was easy to forget this—it was easy. . . to smile at their childlike shyness, and it was easy to dismiss them as simple young people from the simplicity of the countryside. But of course nothing was farther from the truth—the Sichuan countryside is not simple, and my students had known things that I never imagined. Even if appearances were deceiving, the truth always came through in the ways they wrote about their homes and families.

*It was easy to dismiss them as simple people from a simple countryside.* Both the invitation to dismissal and the speech act to provide cover were the subject of William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1931), where he considers the "trick of language," the form of "magical thinking" that allows us to construct simple binaries, like complex and simple.

Empson, following Richards, taught Basic English in China in the late 1930s, and then again from 1947 to 1953. (He taught in Japan in the early 1930s. He posthumously published a book on *The Face of the Buddha*.) Empson had difficulty finding a permanent position at an English university, and he was restless. His first full time appointment was at the University of Essex in 1955.

Empson had spent his early career seeking out the thorniest, most difficult passages in all of English literature in order to do the work he wanted to do. His first book, written while he was an undergraduate at Cambridge (and studying with Richards), was *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. The title was an Empsonian joke, demonstrating the craziness of any precise account of imprecision, of words, sentences and passages that had multiple meanings. And, as I said, each chapter is built around readings of some of the most difficult passages in all of English literature: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Pope, Hopkins, Eliot. How should (or might) readers (or writers) locate themselves in moments where meanings are multiple, where the language is slippery, when passage or utterance defies paraphrase, defies all attempts at under-

standing? He is interested in moments where readers and listeners (writers and speakers) stumble; when they stumble and when that stumbling cannot (should not) be attributed to a failure of education, class, will, or attention.

And so, of course Empson would take the opportunity to live and teach in China. His interest in travel was, like Richards', part of his interest in the limits of language, the problems of knowledge, translation, interpretation, "the structure of complex words," to use the title of the book that followed *Some Versions of Pastoral*. Empson's argument, following Richards, was that meaning was always contextual and contexts were changeable and unpredictable. With language, verbal or written exchanges were always fraught and contingent; someone was always out of step; misunderstandings were inevitable. Knowing this was the proper preparation for a life in the world.

The opening example in *Some Versions of Pastoral* is Thomas Grey's poem, *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*. In it, the poet reflects on rural labor and rural laborers—one of them buried here in a country churchyard, forgotten and unheralded, perhaps a "mute inglorious Milton," an example of opportunity wasted.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Empson is always quick to pull the curtain on the wizard. He says, "What this means, as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system. . . . This is stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it."

The trope of the pastoral, what Empson calls a "trick" of language, erases difference in order serve the needs and desires of power. But the power he is concerned with is not rooted in class or capital. It rests with the tropes deployed by a writer or reader. That is, Empson considers the trope in the context of working-class as well as high-brow literature. He argues that these speech acts conveniently represent the difficult, unequal relations between, say, rich and poor—or, in later chapters, the wise and foolish, adults and children, life and death, spirit and body, conscious and unconscious, gardens and heath, the "best" and the worst. And, we might add, teacher and student. Pastoral (as a trick) allows these unequal relations to be fixed in image and phrase and, so, to appear "beautiful," "natural," inevitable, part of nature or god's plan. It is a way of ignoring difference as though such ignoring were a

generous thing to do when, in fact, the gesture (or the trick of language, as Empson has it) is a way of pushing others aside, erasing them, placing them in the standard narrative of high and low, ignorance and experience, and so on.

The Hessler of my example does not fall for the trick. He doesn't settle on "simple," nor on its complement, "complex," which would be equally dismissive and patronizing (the "inscrutable oriental"). He wants to know things he has never imagined, and so he turns to the singleness of the cases before him—presenting one student paper after another and, later, one instance after another—all from his teaching and his life in Fuling.

And, in doing so, he enacts what I understand to be both the methods and the ethic of "translingual composition," which I take to be a new way of conceiving the motives and methods of what we used to call Basic Writing. I'm drawing, now, from Bruce Horner's definition of translingual in the chapter, "Language," in his most recent book, *Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange* (2016), but I'm referring broadly to the publications of a larger group of colleagues. Translingual composition locates writing temporally as well as spatially—always in process, always in motion, always a negotiation. Translingual composition is an orientation rather than a specific set of practices. Translingual composition produces and requires a "set of dispositions"—tolerance for variation, humility and a willingness to negotiate meaning, letting ambiguities pass, a recognition that language is changing, not static.

Perhaps the founding document for translingual composition is the *College English* essay, "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach" (2011), written by Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. Here are some of its resolutions:

- The translingual approach we call for extends the CCCC resolution [on "Students Rights to their Own Language"] to differences within and across all languages. And it adds recognition that the formation and definition of languages and language varieties are fluid.
- The translingual approach encourages reading with patience, respect for perceived differences within and across languages, and an attitude of deliberate inquiry.
- The translingual approach asks of writing not whether its language is standard, but what the writers are doing with the language and

why. For in fact, notions of the "standard English speaker" and "Standard Written English" are bankrupt concepts.

As the term "Basic Writing" once opened up new possibilities for thinking about English in use, and about composition as a school subject, so, I believe, *translingual composition* has that power now. It reanimates all forms of writing as a negotiation across languages. It speaks equally to Basic Writing, to all forms of first year composition, to WID, to introductory courses in journalism and non-fiction, and, as I note, to study abroad.

In this essay I've wanted to account for a Basic Writing course I taught in my final semester, and I wanted to think back to where I began as a teacher and a writer.<sup>3</sup> And in thinking about where I began, I couldn't help but make connections to Cambridge English, here represented by I.A. Richards and William Empson.

Why Empson and the trick of the pastoral? Because, as I continue to read this odd and difficult book, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, I always find myself thinking about the problems central to what we are talking about when call up a term like Basic Writing. From a certain humane perspective, it is tempting to assume that language differences don't matter. That they can be overlooked or overcome. This is one of the tricks of pastoral. To celebrate a common humanity, differences must be erased. The shepherd and the lord of the manor can/should speak, think, and feel as one. One must be consumed by the other.

What Empson shows is how very difficult it is to think otherwise, to productively, for example, inhabit and engage diverse ways of thinking, speaking, and feeling. And to do so without resorting to hierarchy, where one utterance, one sentence, for example, must be replaced by another in order to be acceptable. Empson's argument is that neither sentence is fully expressive on its own.

Composition courses are ground zero in these struggles. What I have learned late in my career is to see the importance of bringing our energies to the fundamental problems of writing in a global context, and there is no better testing ground than undergraduate courses that combine travel and travel writing, where the opening assignment, for example, may be to write about South Africa, to write about South Africa without being South African. And even if you could inhabit such a position, Empson asks, which South African might you then be? Or which and what kind of North American do you become? Or might you become? Empson doesn't solve the problems of

Basic Writing (or travel writing), but he is brilliant at showing all their forms and manifestations. And he does so with great delight.

Perhaps the simplest and most elegant statement on language diversity comes from Raymond Williams, whose writing and teaching defined some of the finest, but also the final moments of the Cambridge project. Williams was a Professor at Cambridge; he was also Welsh, working-class, the son of a railway signalman. He was a distinguished academic; he also devoted 15 years to teaching adult education courses through the Workers' Educational Association. He was closely and deeply aware of language difference—of different “structures of feeling” as well as the different habits of thinking and writing. A culture, he said, “is always both traditional and creative.” It is composed of “both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings.” And the problem of having to choose between an “educated” or a “customary” style, he would say, is that neither is sufficiently articulate.<sup>4</sup>

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## **Notes**

1. Some who read an early draft of this essay wondered if there were another story to tell—of a shift in priorities on our campus. Had we diverted funds that once went to American students in order to attract and serve international students who could easily pay full out of state tuition and who did not rely on local scholarships or financial aid? So far as I can tell, the answer is no. It is certainly not the case that the University of Pittsburgh (or its English department) has abandoned its traditional commitments to Basic Writing. We continue to provide a range of support for US students who seek these courses or who are required to take them.
2. All student writing is used with permission.
3. I finished this essay in mid-September, 2019, when our Pittsburgh campus was truly an international meeting place, and when our Study Abroad program was booming, developing both new courses and new sites. I could never have imagined the Pittsburgh campus now, under the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic and nervously awaiting the

2020 General Election. Our national politics has been determined to isolate us from the rest of the world, in spite of the best efforts of those in opposition. It will be some time, I suspect, before we can again present convincing arguments to re-engage. I believe that we must, and I trust that we can, and it is in that spirit that I send this essay out into the world.

4. To see Richards thinking through the relationship between "ordinary" and "creative," or "customary" and "educated," I would recommend two essays that have been important to me and that I have used often in my teaching: "Culture is Ordinary" and "Notes on English Prose: 1780-1950."

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