

Gail Stygall

POLITICS AND PROOF IN BASIC WRITING

Like boxers who are bleeding and winded but not yet ready to quit, basic writers reel into the freshman classroom each year. Somehow these students have maintained a sense of belief in their own promise and have enrolled in college. They come to college in spite of an educational system that often wishes basic writers would disappear. Their very presence reminds everyone concerned that the system does not support all students equally well. And once they reach college, these same basic writers may have yet another round to go with those who govern higher education at the state level: education versus political exigency. Remote executives of higher education and state legislators demand proof of effectiveness of basic writing instruction "or else."

In responding to a call for proof of the effectiveness of basic writing programs at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI), I conducted a quantitative examination of the historical records of the multisectioned basic writing course for which I had administrative responsibility. In so doing, I was able to document a marked increase in the success rates of basic writers after IUPUI had undergone a substantive, program-wide shift from a traditional product-centered course to a process course. A comparison of the two curricula is my first focus in this discussion. I also found the basic writing course was successful according to a

Gail Stygall, assistant professor at Miami University, teaches composition and linguistics. She was formerly coordinator of Freshman Writing at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI). She has published two essays on using Toulmin in argumentative writing classes and has an article on legal discourse, her current research interest, in the forthcoming collection Text and The Professions.

© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1988

number of statistical measures, thus offering strong preliminary evidence of the success of the process approach for basic writers, which I hope will speak usefully on behalf of the basic writers whose political voice is often silent. These statistical measures constitute the second part of my discussion.

Contexts for evaluating the effectiveness of basic writing programs are complex and often found in discourses foreign to the composition teacher. With education becoming politicized and usually accompanied by demands for teacher accountability, these public concerns remain a constraint on any major changes in approaches to basic writing. No matter how convinced I or my colleagues may be by the merits of teaching process or of putting grammar in context, a public official inevitably wants to know why he or she has just received a letter from a state university graduate filled with misspellings and mechanical errors. Once a particular group of students comes under public scrutiny, as basic writers often do now, the profession's internal discussion of the best methods for teaching those students is often lost in public demands for immediate action. With writing program evaluation still in its infancy, I found little guidance on how to conduct an in-house evaluation of a multisectioned basic writing course. Moreover, though writing program evaluation continues to move toward a rich array of qualitative methods, academic administrators and public officials often reject these methods as too anecdotal and diffuse, preferring instead quantitative data, all the better for calculating the ubiquitous "bottom line."

In Indiana, until recently my home state, legislators have asked if they are, in effect, paying for the same instruction twice when they fund college-level basic programs in reading, writing, and math. These state legislators and their counterpart political appointees serving on the Indiana Commission on Higher Education have little patience for what they consider esoteric explanations of college students' writing performance. Maintaining that standardized multiple choice tests at best measure only a small part of writing ability, writing faculty and administrators have few listeners when the Cassandras rise to indict education generally and English instruction in particular. Indiana legislative and Higher Education Commission response to underprepared college students was twofold: either abolish all college level basic courses or limit them to a single state-funded campus. In order to accommodate students who might not live near that single campus, preference was to be given to a campus developing composition by computer plans, thereby cutting the labor-intensive costs of teaching basic writing. Abolition or the single-campus solution were rather dismal alternatives.

Thus I undertook an initial examination with which I hoped to demonstrate that an administrator can respond to a call for evaluation which, while honoring a process approach to basic writing, can still provide concrete statistical evidence of the approach's efficacy, invaluable in the political arena. The measures of evaluation that I present here suggest that grading *process*, rather than single *products*, provides a better indication of students' progress. To grade *process* means to reconstruct the traditional construct of writing ability. As I am defining it here, I take a student's writing ability to be a construct composed of four aspects: a demonstration of a capacity to generate text; a facility for staying focused on a topic in a piece of extended text; self-understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses in the writing process; and, a recognition of various appropriateness indices so dominant in school-sponsored settings for writing. Beyond the construct itself, I examine the elements of the construct over time to provide a more accurate evaluation of a student's performance in other writing courses.

This construct is, of course, different from traditional approaches to grading and assessment in which the construct is composed of mechanics, style, organization, development, etc. The change in construct was a necessary consequence of the change in curriculum. With the change in the course came a change in how students performed on each of four measures. They improved their scores on a grammar exit examination, even though little or no classtime was devoted to grammar instruction. Grading in the basic class became an accurate predictor of grades in regular freshman composition. When matched with students who entered freshman composition directly, the basic writing graduates passed the regular required course at a higher rate than their counterparts. Finally, attrition in the basic writing course decreased as the course changed.

The setting of this study is the main urban campus of IUPUI. Formed in 1971 from the separate city extensions of Purdue and Indiana, IUPUI has grown from fewer than 10,000 students to 23,000 students, making it the third-largest campus in the state. Its student body, older at an average of 26 years of age, IUPUI's students are often first generation college students. IUPUI does admit less-prepared students into a variety of support programs, though all these programs will be phased out by 1992. Students entering the currently active support programs are also enrolled in regular coursework. All students entering writing courses take the English Placement Exam, consisting of a one-hour grammar test and a one-hour essay exam. Raters from the English Department score

the essay, with the students' placement decisions weighting the essay more heavily than the grammar exam. Students' essays receive one of four scores, resulting in placement: basic, regular, honors, and exemption. Approximately 35% of the students taking the placement exam are assigned to the basic course, resulting in an enrollment of more than 2,000 students each year.

The Old Course

In order to provide a basis for comparing the performance measures of the original basic writing course and the later process-oriented course, I want to begin by establishing their curricular differences. The original course, born in the panic of nearly open admissions in the 1970s, was entitled "Fundamentals of English," and it was as traditional as its name. The course assumptions included faith in the part-to-whole paradigm, in which students had to know and apply knowledge of prescriptive grammar at the sentence level initially. The paragraph followed and had to be mastered before moving on to the complete essay. Students spent hours completing workbook exercises, with instructors generally believing that these grammar drills would create the discipline, if not the knowledge, necessary to train better writers. Assigned to the basic course, instructors shuddered and waded in, hoping that one more time over the same material would finally make it stick. A look at the "C" level of the old program's grading rubric is illustrative of how strong was the product orientation.

Old "C" Grading Criteria

GRAMMAR: Few errors in grammar, especially in formation of verb forms and tenses. Formation and placement of adjectives and adverbs. Usage of both coordinate and subordinate conjunctions. Subject/verb agreement. Pronoun/antecedent agreement.

PUNCTUATION: Proper placement of many kinds of punctuation. Evidence of knowledge of comma and semicolon usage in compound sentences.

USAGE AND SPELLING: Evidence of knowledge of appropriate word choice. Infrequent misspellings. Few misspellings of words on weekly spelling lists.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE: Primer style. Overreliance on compound structure. No comma splices, fused sentences, or fragments.

ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT: A central idea for the essay although it may be trite and/or unfocused. A central

idea in each paragraph although the topic sentence may be unfocused.

Even a cursory glance at these standards for grading students' work in the old course reveals a hyperconcern with prescriptive grammar. In fact, nothing in the criteria actually addresses the issue of development and detail, a category the placement raters later discovered had great consequences for basic writers. The collective tone of the document was unrelievedly negative. Choosing texts consistently, the basic writing instructors used a handbook, a workbook keyed to the handbook, and yet another workbook just for sentence errors. Understandably, both students and instructors thought grammar was the critical component of basic writing.

The grading criteria sheets and textbooks are also an accurate indicator of what was being taught in the classrooms. Four essays were required, but the largest part of classroom time was spent dissecting errors, filling out worksheets, and taking spelling and grammar quizzes. Program administrators, though well aware of research indicating little relationship between grammar instruction and improvement in writing, nonetheless did not see a viable alternative. Textbooks that spoke to basic student populations nearly invariably took the part-to-whole approach. Further, as many of IUPUI's primarily part-time instructors were drawn from the public schools in the metropolitan area, these instructors found the grading criteria similar to those used in their local schools, thus allowing the instructors to move between institutions with ease. For administrators, abandoning standards of grammar was to commit the writing program to endless faculty retraining.

Yet it was evident that the course was not as effective as it could be. For several years, the basic course graduates passed regular freshman composition at a rate of approximately 50%, using the flat "C" as the pass mark. The course did not appear to be helping its target population. Though in an occasional semester, basic writing graduates nudged their pass rate in freshman composition to 60%, neither the program nor the students made a significant breakthrough. Additionally, regular composition instructors complained that those grievous grammar errors had systematically reappeared in their classrooms in the work of the basic writing graduates. The basic instructors' gatekeeping function demanded that these errors and the students making them must disappear, and disappear they did by flunking out of regular composition.

If the basic writers' lack of success in regular composition did not mandate a change, a Writing Program Administrators' evaluation report in 1981 certainly indicated the need. After examining the

writing program, its administrators, its courses, syllabi, and texts, they made the following recommendation for the basic course:

As currently designed, the syllabus requires weekly exercises and instruction in both grammar and writing process. Current research into the development of student writing abilities shows that not only is drill in grammar not immediately transferable to one's writing, but also that in the early-draft stages of the writing process a student's concern for correctness inhibits him or her from generating ideas and developing them into clear sentences. (McClelland and Smith 15)

They recommended that the syllabus for the basic writing course be reviewed and changed, with individual grammar problems to be addressed in a writing center. Change, however, was slow to come.

The New Course

Though both the writing program administrators and instructors were beginning to develop and refine the uses of collaboration and revision in regular freshman composition, administrators found it harder to articulate how the basic course should be changed. Instructors tried tinkering, adding freewriting and looping, cubing, and journal writing. But grammar remained at the core of the course, with the handbook and single product grades weighted with mechanics accumulating to a course grade. A unique set of circumstances finally forced change. A growing realization on the part of the English Placement test raters about the critical value they placed on amplitude, as shown by development and detail, resulted in a change in the placement test rubrics. The raters, several of whom also served on the Writing Program's textbook committee, raised the issue of the focus on grammar when they asserted that amplitude predicted student performance in regular composition more accurately than grammar alone. The textbook committee refused to adopt another handbook or workbook, choosing instead Donald Murray's *Write to Learn*. Such a radical departure meant a highly speculative change in a course serving thousands of students. The literature was mixed on the results of a process course, one that encompassed expressive writing, when compared to a product-centered course. Moreover, most of that literature examined single sections. The instructors had just voted to change the nature of twenty-five to thirty sections each semester. But the faculty, both part-time and full-time, had come to believe only a substantive

change in the course would reach the students untouched and unmoved by the old course.

Much debate occurred over the summer following the textbook change and before the text change went into effect. Both the course structure and the grading standards would have to be revised.¹ Veteran instructors, intrigued by the change, volunteered to go back into the basic classroom. In many ways, the choice of Murray's text for a basic course alone turned conventional thinking about basic on its head. Though instructors were versed in current theorists and pedagogy, they hesitated to begin basic writing instruction with open-topic, expressive, personal experience texts—whole texts, not bits and pieces, not paragraphs, not context-free sentences. Having opted for expressive writing for the basic course, the writing program administrators went another step, deciding to require only daily writing in journals, daily classroom practice with invention, and outside reflection and evaluation of the merit of the heuristics for the first third of the semester. Moreover, instructors decided to read the journals and invention material, but to respond only to the students' evaluation of the usefulness of the heuristic, though not to grade any of it. The second two-thirds of the semester addressed drafting and revision, with three final products emerging from the second stage being given single product grades.

Just as the old courses' grading criteria revealed its central concerns, so too does the grading rubric of the later course. In some ways, the manner in which the students' work was to be evaluated was the most radical of all the changes made, a change in the central construct of writing ability. Once again, I use the "C" category as illustration, using two of the four categories as representative.

New "C" Grading Criteria

AMPLITUDE AND FLUIDITY: During the initial 'hands-off' period of journal writing, planning strategies and experimenting with heuristics, the instructor should expect the "C" student to demonstrate a noticeable increase in both amplitude and fluidity. Journal entries may progress from fairly brief one-page reports to relatively complete expressions of feelings, thoughts, incidents, values, beliefs, and significant people in students' lives. The student will also demonstrate the ability to use several of the invention techniques well, although he or she will probably not be equally effective with all. While the "C" student may experience some discomfort in translating ideas from heuristics and journals into drafts, the instructor should find,

by the end of the semester, that one or more of the final products are longer than the standard 500-word essay.

KNOWLEDGE OF ONE'S OWN WRITING PROCESS: Because the goals of [the course] require a high degree of personal involvement in the writing, the student's gain of self-knowledge about his or her own writing process and the application of this knowledge to the student's text become a factor in final evaluation. The "C" student should, at the end of the semester, evidence some knowledge of what writing strategies work best for him or her, what topics allow enough distance in time and emotion to avoid unresolved problems, and what writing tasks push the student without a high risk of failure. In short, the student knows what works for him or her. The "C" student will probably be a little short of the necessary distance and decentering of the [regular composition] expository or argumentative essay, but the instructor should find the student's texts are only a short distance from revealing an appropriate generalization beyond purely personal experience. Instructors should examine reflections on heuristics and strategy sheets over the course of the semester in evaluating this aspect. Reflections from early in the semester for the "C" student will probably be brief, cursory, and directed to the instructor. At the end of the semester, the "C" student will write more, will relate the heuristics and strategies to the text in question, and will be able to identify what he or she feels are critical decision-making points.

Because some literature on writing assessment confirmed IUPUI raters' suspicion that length was a key value in evaluation (Brosnell 172; Breland and Jones 28), a reasonable hypothesis seemed to be that amplitude would be a necessary component of the repertoire of writing abilities brought to the regular freshman composition class. Students placing into the developmental course were often writing only 300 to 350 words in the one-hour essay exam, while students placing into regular composition apparently had little trouble writing 450 to 500 words in the same time. This ability to produce adequate detail, sustaining information on a topic, was not even a factor in the old version of the basic course. Knowledge of one's own process was even a more foreign category to the previous grading criteria, but such knowledge seemed equally important in the performance of school-sponsored writing tasks. The construct of writing ability now matched the new course demands, allowing instructors to grade what they were teaching.

Preliminary Evaluation of the New Course

From the enormous quantity of data available of multiple sections of this basic course offered each semester, I selected the Spring 1986 semester to provide data for four measures of course evaluation. The Spring 1986 semester was attractive for several reasons: the course revision had been in place for two full years; instructors were by then experienced with the course goals and grading; and the effects of doing something different should have diminished. Spring semesters at IUPUI see the largest number of basic graduates enrolling in regular composition. Of the 900 students enrolled in regular freshman composition in the Spring 1986 semester, 398 were graduates of the basic course.

The first measure I chose examined the entrance and exit examination scores for basic writing students who entered regular composition in that spring semester. For four years, the testing program used a locally developed and field tested one-hundred-question grammar exam. The instrument includes typical questions of sentence boundary recognition, verb forms, pronoun agreement, punctuation, spelling, editing, and error recognition. On this measure, all sections of the basic course show increases in exit examination scores, even when the scores of students who did not pass the basic course are included in the average. The rate of increase for all students is 15%. For students who successfully completed the course, the rate of increase in score is 16.8%.

One of the relevant evaluation issues for a basic writing course is whether or not the students leaving the course at the end of the semester are roughly similar to the students who directly enter the regular course. The entrance and exit scores provide one means of making that evaluation. Students testing directly into regular composition for Spring 1986 had an average grammar examination score of 77.4. After completing the basic writing course, graduates entered with an average score of 70.4. With a regular freshman composition essay rating, these students would now place into the regular course.

Table 1 in the Appendix at the end of this essay includes data for all sections of basic writing offered in the evaluation semester. The final average figures were weighted for the number of students taking the final examination in each section. Average entrance and exit pairings were included in all cases in which the data for both was complete. It is worth noting that the range of scores from exiting basic writing students is much narrower (14.9 points) than the range of scores for students who have entered regular composition directly (30.0 points).

The second measure I selected for examination was the pass rate

for basic writing graduates and for direct-entry students in regular composition. The average grade in the regular course for all sections of regular composition that semester was 2.30, a "C+," an average that has remained stable over the last six semesters. Basic writing graduates pass the regular course at a rate of 80.6%, while students who enter directly pass at a rate of 71%. Not only is the pass rate substantially different, but the ranking of grade frequencies is different as well. Table 2 in the Appendix provides all categories for both groups.

In his review of the Georgia system developmental courses, John Presley makes a strong argument for using this pass rate in regular composition as a key evaluation figure (50). That IUPUI's basic writing graduates passed the subsequent course at 80.6% compares favorably to the other studies Presley mentions (52). What is surprising, however, is the frequency with which direct-entry students fail the regular composition course. After I confirmed the original placement decisions for these direct-entry students, I discovered two factors contributing to the direct-entry failures. One factor is that students placed into honors composition often enroll instead in regular composition and fail. The second factor, more important for basic writers, is that an apparent indirect effect of success in the basic writing course is to socialize the students into college. Writing program instructors turn in a second internal roster with their official registrar's roster. The internal roster requires instructors to comment on unusual grades. Instructors have taken this requirement to include explaining grades below "C." From these internal records, regular composition failures seem to arise from missing class, and from not turning in or completing assignments on time. These are not the factors instructors note for basic writing graduates, whose failing grades cluster in the "C-" to "D" range, rather than "F."

As a third measure of evaluation, I examined the grades of basic writing graduates in regular freshman composition. Students' success in the basic course should be related to the regular course, at roughly the same grade level. Once again, Presley suggests some useful criteria, for he maintains some drop in grades between the developmental and regular course is inevitable (52). Using a linear regression calculation (*Trajectories*, a floppy disk statistical package) and assuming the basic course grades would predict the regular course grades, I found at each grade point a match between regular and basic grades, with a slight lag in basic graduates' grades.

I chose attrition as a final measure of evaluation, assumed by many higher education researchers as a critical value in assessing a course or program. A 1977 Roueche and Snow survey of 300 institutions of higher education, for example, included four major

evaluation questions on attrition (38). Attrition within a single course is usually measured by the number of official withdrawals from a course. I was aware of attrition “F” grades, those failing grades given to students who quit attending class or who fail to turn in one or more required assignments. Though the second measure indicated the attrition “F” remains a problem in regular composition, the shift from the old course to the new course in basic is concurrent with a drop in attrition rates for basic writers. Table 3 in the Appendix displays the specific figures for two semesters, one under the old basic syllabus, the other under the new. Withdrawals in the regular composition course have remained constant at approximately 8% over the past five years, as have the number of official withdrawals in the basic course. What did change significantly over time was the number of unofficial withdrawals (students who left but never withdrew).

Conclusion

If those of us who teach basic writers or who have administrative responsibility for basic writing programs fail to publish and discuss the results of course and program evaluations, we lose some of the ability and flexibility we need to support our programs in the public arena. Legislators, professionals in another field, are not expert in current rhetorical theory or its pedagogical implications. Not having our expertise, those in the public discourse often turn to the general literature of education. What do they find? Let me offer two examples. The first, an article by William White, appearing in *College Board Review* in 1984, offers one type of program to support developmental students—comprehensive and intense counseling—employed successfully at Moorhead State College in Kentucky. English classes were a part of the developmental program and, without reference to current writing research, White posits language deprivation as a cause for students’ entering developmental English classes. White can offer a thoroughly discredited view of language development in part because few experts in developmental English enter the ongoing discourse of higher education. With writing theory unknown, White can easily claim that it is good counseling that makes a successful developmental program. The second example is an article appearing in *Community College Review*, also in 1984, by James Palmer, suggesting that on the basis of information collected from developmental programs across the country, “remediation” does not improve students’ reading and writing performance. Our voices are remarkably absent from this discussion. We need to join it before our students are out for the count.

Appendix

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF ENTRANCE/EXIT SCORES ON GRAMMAR EXAM

Section Number	Average Entrance	Average Exit All Students	Average Increase	Average Score-Students Passing Basic
B664	63.5	70.6	7.13	72.9
B665	61.7	68.8	7.19	69.1
B666	60.9	66.9	6.00	68.2
B667	61.6	74.3	12.70	79.9
B670	not available	68.4		68.9
B672	61.5	69.1	7.60	72.3
B674	52.5	75.5	22.90	70.8
B678	61.6	69.1	7.50	69.3
B680	60.8	70.0	9.20	73.3
B681	62.7	68.2	5.50	68.0
B682	63.6	66.9	3.30	67.1
B683	59.6	69.6	10.00	70.7
B684	61.6	67.2	5.60	66.4
B685	52.3	73.1	20.80	74.0
B686	62.3	70.1	7.80	71.3
B687	58.8	71.8	13.00	72.2
B688	60.8	72.5	11.70	72.5
B689	61.9	70.1	8.20	71.2
B691	60.8	64.3	3.50	65.0
	Average Entrance All Sections	Average Exit All Sections	Average Exit-Students Passing Basic	Average Entrance Regular Comp
	60.8	70.2	71.0	77.4

TABLE 2: COMPARISON OF REGULAR COMPOSITION GRADES OF BASIC WRITING GRADUATES TO DIRECT-ENTRY STUDENTS

Grade	Basic Writing Graduates		Direct-Entry Students	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
A	6	1.5	32	6.3
A-	8	2.0	43	8.5
B+	23	5.8	47	9.4
B	68	17.1	92	18.3
B-	63	15.8	53	10.5
C+	78	19.6	46	9.4
C	75	18.8	43	8.6
TOTAL PASS RATE		80.6		71.0
C-	23	5.8	38	7.5
D+	15	3.8	7	1.4
D	14	3.5	21	4.2
F	25	6.3	80	15.9
	398	100.0	502	100.0

TABLE 3: BASIC WRITING ATTRITION COMPARISON

Spring 1982	Total Enrolled	Official Withdrawals	Attrition Fs	Total Attrition
Number	755	55	133	188
Percent		7.3	17.6	24.9
Spring 1986				
Number	463	36	32	68
Percent		7.8	6.9	14.7

Note

¹ The original new course syllabus was written by Ronald J. Strahl, then Director of IUPUI's Writing Program, now Director of Basic Skills at California State University-Long Beach, and Rebecca Fitterling, now at General Telephone & Electronics. Without their insight, the new course would never have been offered. I wrote the grading rubric and subsequent course revisions, but all these activities were collaborative ventures to which all the basic writing faculty contributed.

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