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# Why Basic Writing Professionals on Regional Campuses Need to Know Their Histories

## Where is the Historical Scholarship?

Why in an age marked by regressive social policies and unchecked elitism within *all* levels of public education are practitioners and scholars of basic writing largely ahistorical? President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" Act provides perhaps the highest-profile iteration of regressive and elitist policy, with its emphasis on top-down federal mandates and high-stakes testing and its failure to engage with the social context of student underperformance. Yet "No Child Left Behind" is, of course, legislation regarding K-12 policy, so a question for those of us working in the context of colleges and universities might be: do we observe similar forms of systematic, policy-level elitism in the world of higher education? One notable policy trend with elitist overtones is the outsourcing of developmental learning from four-year colleges and universities to community colleges, for-profit providers, and other satellites. The example of this outsourcing that put the trend on the radar of many in the field of composition studies was controversial legislation in 1998 that ended remediation at all four-year branches of the City University of New York—long an iconic symbol of educational access. The assumption guiding this trend is that work in "basic writing" and "basic math" remains beyond (or rather below) the mission of institutions of higher learning. *Students should have learned this stuff already*, or so goes the collective lament of the university. And so developmental courses—and by extension developmental students— move to other physical spaces, making the university a markedly more homogenous site in terms of both race and class.

So the landscape of basic writing is a political one. Adler-Kassner and Harrington argue that given the political nature of basic writing's institutional status, instruction should foreground "how definitions of literacy are shaped by communities, how literacy, power, and language are linked, and how their myriad experiences with language (in and out of school) are connected to writing" (98). They propose *literacy* itself as a generative term for the "political" basic writing classroom, advocating a long tradition of using literacy narratives like Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* as jumping off points for students to contemplate their own relationships with cultural literacy, school literacy, and home literacy. Adler-Kassner and Har-


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rington's curricular proposal is a useful one, precisely because they insist that basic writing professionals and students contend together with the political nature of basic writing's status within the academy.

I am concerned, though, that the emphasis on literacy-as-generative-theme fails to contend with the outsourcing problem or the larger, inherently political question regarding where basic writing is and is not taught. Literacy *is* a social and political notion, but our discussions of literacy often become discussions about individuals, not about the broad social context of literacy. Literacy narratives, in the end, are most often stories about individuals.

"critical dialogue about the elitism of outsourcing is facilitated by historical narrative and historical knowledge"

We recall Mike Rose's own struggles with testing and assessment more than his critique of the systemic reasons for testing. Basic writing has engaged in its scholarship and in its classroom practice with the complex definitions of literacy since at least Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts: A Basic Reading and Writing Course for the College Curriculum*, their 1986 text about the basic writing curriculum they developed at the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1980s. The pages of journals like *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* and *Journal of Basic Writing* have taken up the complexity of literacy/literacies. And yet the subfield of basic writing has remained largely apolitical. While the *Journal of Advanced Composition* morphed into *jac*, a theoretically rich publication that engages the politics of higher education, the aforementioned journals made no such transition. So I'm skeptical about the literacy trope's ability to generate critical dialogue about the outsourcing question.

Instead, I believe that kind of critical dialogue about the elitism of outsourcing is facilitated by historical narrative and historical knowledge. And just as the realm of basic writing has remained apolitical, it has remained ahistorical. This is no coincidence. Many of the best-known luminaries in the field of composition studies—from James Berlin to Sharon Crowley to Robert Connors—have narrated numerous histories of college composition in the United States, yet a comprehensive history of basic writing does *not* exist. *An Historical, Descriptive, and Evaluative Study of Remedial English in the United States*, the dissertation Andrea Lunsford completed in 1977 at The Ohio State University, stands out as a rare scholarly exploration of developmental writing that employs historical methods, and history is not the primary concern of the study.

Other seminal texts in the world of basic writing as subfield also tend to eschew historical methodology. Scholars largely consider Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*—long an icon of a text within basic writing circles and beyond—as well as poet and teacher Adrienne Rich's practitioner account of teaching open-access students in New York City in the 1970s, to be *primary historical documents*, representations of a critical moment and a critical geographical locale. Certainly such documents cemented the City University of New York system as the academic and practitioner center for work in developmental writing. But even though these documents by now have a great deal of historical significance, the work of Shaughnessy and Rich also contains little or no historical methodology.

Another figure associated with the CUNY system, Ira Shor, has probably contributed more than anyone else in the field to conversations about the social and historical contexts of basic writing's institutional development—at CUNY and beyond. In the often-cited and extremely provocative 1997 *Journal of Basic Writing* article "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality," Shor traces basic writing's origins to the 1960s, situating the course as a reaction to campus radicalism. Shor writes, "To help secure the status quo against democratic change in school and society, a basic writing language policy producing an extra layer of control was apparently needed to discipline students in an undisciplined age" ("Apartheid" 92). Shor extended that research in the essay "Errors and Economics," tracing the invocation of the "correctness" trope. Methodologically, Shor's scholarship leans toward critique, a rhetorical move that facilitates provocation, reflection, and praxis—and also prevents the historical narrative from having a comprehensive scope.

Mary Soliday's recent book *The Politics of Remediation* offers a fascinating model of how productive histories of basic writing can be. Remedial English existed long before CUNY's open-access policy and Soliday traces that history from the 1870s to the present, describing early "conditioning" programs, which entailed delaying enrollment for a year so that students could make up for various "deficiencies." Other precursors to present-day developmental writing programs include early iterations of writing placement tests and other high-stakes graduation requirements, which Soliday points to as de facto "basic writing" programs. She proceeds to follow basic writing throughout the twentieth century, as colleges and universities responded to periods of literacy crisis rhetoric with programs stressing the politically attractive "back to basics" labels. Soliday also documents some of the trends Shor has written about throughout his career, such as the management of growth through "differentiation," the founding of mid-rent or middle-prestige university systems, branch campuses and two-year colleges with varying degrees of prestige. Soliday identifies a fascinating and important trope in the history of basic writing: the tendency to make decisions about developmental writing based on institutional needs such as profit, enrollment management, and

good public relations. In fact, Soliday presents a great deal of documentation that suggests institutional need trumps student need. Soliday explains that, ironically, agency (indeed, blame) for the existence of developmental writing tends to fall squarely on students. Each time we as a society fret about poor writing skills, the "always newness" (Soliday's phrase) of basic writing implies the problem is new, allowing the blame to fall squarely on students.

Soliday's work cries out (or ought to make us cry out) for greater attention to local histories. Her work focuses primarily on the City University of New York, a system with its own complex history and its own complex dynamics. Her CUNY narrative has a great deal to teach us about how institutions respond to the needs of community members—and the needs and imperatives of the institution itself. Yet New York City finds itself in a unique geographical locale with unique problems and a unique student body. The California State University system, similarly, has seen trends reflective of its own unique situatedness. The point is that each institution inevitably developed and evolved according to a particular set of social factors. Generalizing is difficult. Hence, we need to localize the history of basic writing and locate the origins of English remediation at our own institutions. This is particularly true on regional campuses and at two-year colleges, where "literacy crisis" rhetoric tends to be kicked up an extra notch or two, where the discourse of "student need" often goes unexamined, and where outsourcing is a trend that continues to shape institutional dynamics. Regional campuses in particular are the heirs of the programs in "differentiation" that Soliday describes—sites that remind us of movements to further the hierarchies of higher education that became a legacy of the twentieth century. In this article I'd like to look at how one basic writing course came to exist and then talk a bit about the broader implications of that history.

## Think Local

Since the regional campus where I previously taught was founded in the 1960s, the English Department has taught first-year composition and the Learning Assistance Center has offered a one-credit writing tutorial taken simultaneously with the standard composition class. It is not an uncommon scenario at two-year colleges and branch campuses to have a separate academic unit in charge of the so-called "basic skills" classes. In fact, an informal poll of members of the Conference on College Composition and Communication Basic Writing Special Interest Group suggests that at two-year schools, this is a *more* common practice than an arrangement in which the same unit teaches *both* composition *and* basic writing.

What is significant is that this separation between basic writing and first-year comp tends to position basic writing as further apart from the intellectual and disciplinary work of writing studies. While it may be desirable in terms of focus to have a unit dedicated specifically to developmental education, I believe it is undesirable to relegate basic writing to a

place easily forgotten by the academic knowledge-makers. And here, too, is where historical understanding and historical context becomes crucial. Without context, it is easy to look at my own institution's separation of first-year composition and basic writing as a simple and isolated case of situating instruction within the unit with the most expertise. The English Department has composition experts. The Learning Assistance Center has experts in secondary, special, and developmental education. History tells us that such a schism is neither isolated nor simple. Rather, institutions of higher education have a long history of setting up institutional roadblocks to student success. Sociologist Burton Clark famously analyzed back in the late 1950s the "cooling out function" of higher education—the tendency to depress the aspirations of students. Now I'm not advocating blindly adopting monolithic and overly deterministic concepts like the "cooling out function" and applying those concepts to our own institutions. On the contrary, I'm suggesting that only through localized histories can we interrogate the extent to which these historical forces may be in effect locally.

"a place easily forgotten by the academic knowledge-makers"

For years students at my former institution received a recommendation for the one-credit tutorial based on shifting assessment procedures including timed impromptu writings and performance on the Compass Test. The tutorial, which consisted primarily of worksheets and sentence-level exercises, was optional and even students who scored below the designated cut-off could elect to simply not take the tutorial.

In the mid-1990s, the then-director of Learning Assistance and a faculty member in the English Department decided to respond to what they saw as a lack of writing proficiency among students and proposed a new, stand-alone "basic writing" course to be taken *before* composition. Their goals included the institution of a full-three-credit-bearing course that would count toward graduation, count toward full-time status for financial aid purposes, employ a pedagogy that emphasized sentence-level "correctness" within the context of real student writing, and be subject to mandatory placement—all unlike the tutorial.

The proposal for the course laid out a pedagogy that foregrounded—but was certainly not limited to—attention to grammatical and sentence-level concerns. The proposal read, "Fundamentals of Writing offers regional campus students developmental work in grammar, mechanics, diction, and the writing process. Students enrolling in English 007 will focus on both form and content in developing essays in preparation for English 111." The stated objectives include, "To develop students' sense of grammatical precision." And later, it reads:

> A number of students arrive on our campus with weak writing skills. Their knowledge of the conventions of written English is deficient even among the more well prepared students. A three-hour course will allow instructors the time needed to present elements of grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and usage in addition to the writing process as a whole. When students have the opportunity to learn from their own work rather than the "grill and drill" approach and achieve meaningful improvements in presentation, they will be more confident in their writing and better prepared . . . (*New Course Request*)

In many ways this course description resists simple characterization. On one hand, the framers of the course resist *worksheet pedagogy* and do not shy away from condemning the "grill and drill approach." On the other hand, this articulation of course purpose emphasizes concern for sentence-level correctness and mentions "the writing process as a whole" almost as an afterthought. This is a curious juxtaposition of the global and the local, with the local garnering more emphasis. At any rate, accounting for student deficiencies and surface errors appears to be the central concern.

Since the campus is a branch of a larger public university with a "one university" personnel structure, new course approvals must go through the administration of the main campus. The Composition Program and Composition Committee—both seated on the main campus—devoted little time to discussing the new course, despite the fact that they are charged with supporting the teaching of writing at all campuses of the system. Leadership within composition studies had a different pedagogical philosophy than the pedagogy articulated within the new course proposal, and so decided to give the branch campus autonomy, essentially rubber stamping the course. Once again, localized decision-making can be a good thing, but on the other hand, autonomy came with a price: namely, basic writing instruction's virtual invisibility among units (namely, the English Department and Composition Program) that materially and institutionally have more power than Learning Assistance. Even though the university system had by this point created a well-known program in rhetoric and composition, including a thriving doctoral program, strong faculty with much disciplinary knowledge about writing, pedagogy, and literacy, and resources for ongoing support for curricular change and innovation, virtually no articulation between campuses took place as the new basic writing course went through the proposal and approval processes. Several members of the Composition Committee—members of the committee whose primary appointment was on the regional campuses—attempted on several occasions to convince the Composition Program and English Department to intervene and influence the shape of the proposal. Ultimately, though, the Department concluded that attention to developmental concerns was not within its scope or mission.

Here we observe a fascinating move toward professionalization. The teaching of writ-

ing, within this University system, becomes a legitimate discipline, signified for example by a doctoral program. Yet who is benefiting from this newfound disciplinarity? The academics themselves? Certainly. Students on the regional campus? Not necessarily, as attention to their pedagogical needs becomes the concern of a still non-professionalized body like the Learning Assistance Center.

## Historical Relationship to Developmental Work

My sense is that the Department historically has been confused about its role vis-à-vis the work of developmental writing. Consider the following two paragraphs that appeared in a 1977 report issued by a University subcommittee studying the teaching of writing:

> Primary responsibility for the development of writing skills lies with the Department of English, which has the expertise to educate the majority of students in English composition. Therefore, much of the burden for correcting whatever deficiencies exist must be carried by the Department. *(Report)*

Notice that by speaking of the correction of deficiencies here the subcommittee explicitly places remediation under the auspices of the Department. Less than a page later, the report reads:

> Remedial programs are a third area of responsibility. To deny that some students will require remedial instruction is to force the better prepared students to operate at a level below their potential. Within the structure of our University, the responsibility for remedial instruction is assigned to the Office of Developmental Education. *(Report)*

This passage is fascinating on a number of levels, not the least of which is the emphasis placed on how remedial students might affect (negatively) the "better prepared students." But what I'm most interested in is looking at this passage next to the previous one. The committee first states that developmental writing *must* be the responsibility of English Departments, and then says the responsibility exists elsewhere. Now you could argue that the committee was contrasting the ways things are and the way things ought to be. But the fact is, the report made numerous recommendations of a large scope, so the committee *could* have recommended that the Department assume the work, or share the work, or lend its disciplinary knowledge to those doing the work, of developmental learning. But the extent of the recommended department contribution is that it *encourage* the University to provide material resources to Developmental Education (which, incidentally, is a department that no longer exists). Yet again, a confused articulation of the relationship between "basic writing" and "composition writing."

Back to the 1998 proposal for the new basic writing course. From what I can gather, one critical, multi-campus conversation did take place during the proposal process—though it's significant to point out that the two campuses represented in this conversation were the two

regional campuses, *not* the main campus. That conversation took the form of a series of memos between the faculty member who proposed the basic course, and a faculty member on the other regional campus concerned about the pedagogy of the new course—both members of the University's Composition Committee. This exchange, though not an official part of the activity of the Composition Committee, was an intellectually engaged discussion of competing pedagogies. Both sides offered well-reasoned, sound apologia for their classroom approaches.

Both sides supported what they saw as "democratic practice" and yet their notions of egalitarianism were quite different. The basic skills proponent worried that denying grammatical skills translated into a kind of elitism. In what seems to have been a spirit of critical collegiality, she asked her colleague, "Would it have been acceptable for you to have even one error per page in your dissertation? Don't you take great pains to edit carefully before you submit a manuscript for publication, your annual report, a committee report, or even a memo?" She continued, "I think we owe our developmental and first-year students much more than syllabi and classes based on politically- and theoretically-correct jargon" (unpublished correspondence). She eloquently speaks of the desires of students on the campus and alludes to students who had expressed to her that they wanted more instruction in formal grammar.

The critic of the skills course also offered an engaged, informed defense of what he calls a pedagogy rooted in "writing as a social act." He writes:

> [T]he overemphasis on skills will interfere with higher order concerns . . . I think that you can get to skills through concentration on subject matter, development, etc., but that you'll have trouble (for a variety of reasons) getting at the higher order skills from the other direction. I just know too many students who'll obsess on grammar without ever having developed the ability to orchestrate complex ideas on paper. True, given the current order of things (in my classes, we also talk about the politics of language, about the gender, race, class of the market's language), every student writer needs to be concerned with correctness (for all the reasons you state), but not if they'll never get to all the other stuff that constitutes good writing.

Clearly, these two scholars had very different ideas about what egalitarianism might mean. The basic skills proponent saw grammatical correctness as a means to cultural capital, academic success, and earning potential. Indeed, mechanical skills, in her view, had the potential to put students in the new class on a more equal footing with more prepared students. The proponent of "writing as a social act" saw egalitarianism much in the vein of Adler-Kassner and Harrington, who in advocating a pedagogy of literacy awareness, hoped to impart on students a sense of writing's relationship with issues of power in the culture.

The two found common ground. After several letters back-and-forth they realized they both emphasize process and start with global concerns in early stages of revision, pro-

gressing to more local concerns in later drafts. And the initial contentiousness of the exchange slowly waned. As the two considered each other's points of view, here are some phrases that appeared in their memos:

- " . . . we tend to be polarized into the 'correctness matters' and 'correctness doesn't matter' camps—and I don't see either side making the first move toward compromise. Perhaps we could come up with a new approach that integrates both views."
- "we can agree that, ideally, we want students to do a lot with their writing: write clearly, creatively, learn through the process, change the world, etc."
- "I know how hard it is to articulate all the complex motives/theories/histories behind our teaching (how hard it is for me, anyway), and one of the good things I see coming out of this exchange is that we can start dealing with each other rather than with dueling theories."
- "AHA! . . . I see a point where we are in complete agreement (can you believe it!). I too address problems with conventions after drafting to revise content and when I see a pattern developing with a particular problem. I totally agree that problems with conventions need to be addressed later in the process."

Some of these comments indicate that not only did the two scholars begin to find common ground, they had the opportunity to clarify their own positions and transcend simple dichotomies: the dichotomy between correctness matters vs. correctness doesn't matter, for example, the dichotomy between theory proponents and critics of theory.

It's also impossible to examine this exchange without placing the dialogue in the context of the 90s. With some frequency, there are allusions to the decade's political correctness debates. The skills proponent continually equates composition theory—and theory in general—with neo-liberal notions of political correctness and multiculturalism, expressing fear of how the "why can't we all get along" mentality is eroding higher education. For instance, she references grade inflation as a natural outgrowth of the touchy-feeliness of theoretically informed composition. Looking back at the 90s with hindsight, I wonder if she should have feared something more dangerous as an outgrowth of the decade of political correctness: the ineffectuality of 1990s liberalism in promoting real, material social change. For as the writing curriculum increasingly came to reflect composition's "social turn," the Composition Program failed to respond to the elitism inherent in disregarding basic writing—and basic writers—as a component of the teaching of writing within the University system.

The last line of the last letter reads, "I truly believe that we can and will learn a lot from each other—even if we never come to an agreement." I don't just quote this line because of its feel-good quality. I see a genuine and mutual respect in this exchange and can't help but wonder what might have happened if this level of critical and creative dialogue had taken

place in a more formal environment, with a wider cross section of agents involved with writing and teaching on the three campuses. In short, it was the kind of conversation that might have taken place in a more public arena, that could have had implications for practice, and that perhaps should have informed lively debate at the Committee meetings. Perhaps with a broader conversation, the course could have synthesized some of the positions articulated by these two faculty members.

It's also too easy to say that the rubber stamping of the basic writing course was a case of the main campus disregarding the regional campus because that would be oversimplifying things. In actuality, the regional campus—thinking of its own distinct identity and its own needs—*wanted* autonomy on the issue. Then-Director of Composition explains, "The [Composition] Committee seemed interested most in making the basic writing practices of the two campuses appropriate to their staff and students" (Dautermann). Then-Learning Assistance Director on the regional campus concurs, explaining that the two campuses have wildly different needs and approaches; she joked that the main campus is concerned with "discourse analysis" while the regional campus is working on "its and it's" (Krafft). The critique of the basic writing enterprise—like that offered by Ira Shor in "Our Apartheid"—frequently places all the agency on the part of administrators and other powerful players, but this institutional context saw the process of differentiation as a kind of a mutual decision more than a top-down mandate. Constituents on the main campus decided to give the regional campuses autonomy on the issue. At least some of the constituents on the regional campuses wanted to proceed without main campus intervention. There was agreement—with some dissenting voices of course—that remediation was a matter best left to the regional campuses.

"[A]dministrators agreed to put the course on the books, as long as the course didn't literally appear *in* the books."

## Admininstration Consider the Prestige Factor

Higher level administrators on the main campus offered a similar rubber stamp—but for different reasons. Because they were concerned with maintaining the system's prestige, administrators agreed to put the course on the books, as long as the course didn't literally appear *in* the books. Fearful that various public audiences would see the course in the university's catalogue, they quietly added the class to the curriculum and gave the regional campuses latitude to

decide on logistics like placement, pedagogy, and staffing. Revealing the course's existence to public audiences such as alumni and benefactors would have run the risk of damaging the institution's credibility and prestige. Administrators also approved the proposed course number: English 0-0-7, thereby inspiring more James Bond jokes than Timothy Dalton. Actually, keeping a basic writing course under the proverbial radar is not a new concept. Andrea Lunsford reports that prestigious schools like Wellesley and Yale—the earliest colleges to offer "remedial English" classes during the literacy crisis not of the 1970s but of the late-nineteenth-century—frequently omitted course descriptions of remedial classes from their catalogues (40–41).

Once approval on the main campus was complete, the course's founders turned their attention to local administration, which supported the notion that less-skilled writers needed further support on the campus. The only roadblock at the campus level was mandatory placement. Campus administrators were also acutely aware of the prestige factor and feared that mandatory placement into the basic writing class would make the campus seem more like a community college (an association they feared) and less like a university branch. Ironically, campus administrators also feared that mandatory placement would make it difficult for the campus to compete with local community colleges for prospective students. An interesting juxtaposition of concerns, no? On one hand, we do not wish to be equated with community colleges. On the other hand, we do wish to compete with community colleges. Finally, administrators refused to institute a mandatory placement policy because they felt they could only mandate enrollment if the course had demonstrable value as shown by subsequent student achievement in the regular composition course. Administration decided that since GPAs in Composition I differed widely based on instructor (unlike math courses, which *do* utilize mandatory placements, and which show no statistically significant difference in section GPAs), they could never obtain useful statistical evidence about the positive effects of the new basic writing course (Krafft). Since administration was convinced that nobody could "prove" the effectiveness of the basic writing course using quantitative measures, they felt unjustified in instituting mandatory placement but justified in offering the course as a recommended option.

So in Fall, 1998, the campus began offering the three-credit, recommended-but-not-required basic writing course and has steadily offered the course ever since, with an average of twelve sections in the Fall, six in the Spring, and one in the summer. Like the one-credit tutorial, the course is administered by the Learning Assistance Center, so most of those sections have been taught by "academic professionals," (mostly part-timers and the Learning Assistance Center's one full-time writing specialist) not tenure-stream faculty, although the faculty member who co-proposed the course taught three sections, and I taught one during my tenure there. The course continues to operate in a nearly invisible fashion, not appearing in the University's catalogue, not acknowledged by the main campus, and barely acknowledged

by the regional campus. These unethical labor conditions illustrate another reality of regional campus basic writing: the gulfs between main and branch campus, intellectual and grunt work, are not only cultural but also material. In this system, increased public moneys were earmarked specifically for remediation in the 1970s; that is *not* the case today (Burgoon). This material reality provides yet another reason for basic writing to fly under the radar. As Soliday suggests in her own narrative, institutional need trumps student need and an essential component of institutional need is the imperative for cost-effectiveness. Staffing the courses with part-time faculty on the regional campus as opposed to tenure-track faculty on the main campus is cost effective. Obscuring remediation in an era when public moneys are not being earmarked for remediation is good business. But what happens to student need? Student need, as Soliday suggests, becomes a trope to be paraded out when beneficial for the institution.

This is not to cast aspersions on my former campus or the larger university system it is part of. On the contrary, this short history is illustrative of trends much larger, not the least of which is the persistence of institutional elitism and parochialism. And I think the latter in particular rears its head at regional campuses in an acute fashion. Soliday's thesis about basic writing's service to institutional needs is instructive here. Soliday writes, "The unselective institution exists in order to maintain democratic access without damaging selectivity in a hierarchical system" (13). In other words, the institution can make claims about service and access while also maintaining prestige. My previous institution illustrates Soliday's notion of "differentiation," as the main campus managed to erase its own remediation by outsourcing to a different physical space: the regional campuses. Soliday explains that the 1990s in particular (the decade that saw the birth of my former school's stand-alone basic writing class) saw middle-prestige schools toughen admissions standards while federal education budgets decreased, resulting in students and parents pledging even greater allegiance to the rhetorics of competition and high standards. Soliday suggests that the middle class *wants* higher education to be a site of rigor and even exclusion so that they can feel more secure—and "exclusive."

## The Imperative for Articulation

Basic writing professionals ought to be acutely aware of social and political context. We ought to maintain a kind-of class consciousness, an awareness of social position—the social position occupied by ourselves and our students within the academy, and the social position occupied by our differentiated institutions within the hierarchy of higher education. In "'Where We Are Is Who We Are': Location, Professional Identity, and the Two-Year College," Karen Powers-Stubbs and Jeff Sommers model the productive value of reflecting on our place within the academy. I want to intensify their call for that awareness of place and add

that *historicizing* one's local "place" is a key to praxis. Marxist critic Georg Lukacs posits that a dialectic between past and present that foregrounds social position and power is a *step toward practical action*. That level of dialectic method—that critical examination of the material conditions of the past and present—helps us avoid looking at the present as a fixed reality.

> "*historicizing* one's local 'place' is a key to praxis"

Basic writing professionals on regional campuses can institute this dialectic method *in the classroom*. Interrogating literacy, as suggested by Bartholomae and Petrosky and later Adler-Kassner and Harrington, stands out as one generative strategy for making the basic writing classroom a reflective and critical space. Though, as I've said, literacy awareness strategies often become ahistorical. Tom Fox proposes an intriguing alternative to this ahistorical approach. In *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*, Fox suggests that students and teachers together take up the work of institutional critique. Fox deserves to be quoted at length. Here is the curriculum he proposes:

- writing that interrogates cultural/political commonplaces, that refuses to repeat clichéd explanations of poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and all the other diseases of our society;
- writing that willingly explores and embodies conflicts, that isn't afraid to enter into the messy contradictions of our world;
- writing that critiques institutional inequities, especially in the immediate context of the classroom, the writing program, the department, the university, but also in the institutions that have played an important role in our students' lives;
- writing that demonstrates successful practices of resistance, that seeks historical evidence for possibilities and promise;
- writing that complexly addresses complex issues, that doesn't seek safety in simplicity;
- writing that seeks a wide audience by respecting the dignity of others, yet has the courage to stand against those who are unjust;
- writing that self-consciously explores the workings of its own rhetoric;
- in short writing that seeks to reduce the violence of inequality—the social forces that prevent access. (Fox 92)

In the context of basic writing on regional campuses, I would add to Fox's useful list the notion that writing ought to also reveal the specific—hierarchical and elitist—dynamics of cross-campus relationships and historicize local conditions both on campus and off campus.

Outside of the space of the classroom, those of us who work as basic writing profes-

sionals on regional campuses need to do a better job drawing on mutual strengths and resources. I want to argue that that process starts with two things. Number one, better articulation. Regional campuses can provide rich sites of knowledge production that account for race and class diversity. Main campuses can provide sources of funding and good libraries. Most importantly, we can come to think of scholarly work as encompassing the mission and the ethos of regional campuses. Without romanticizing regional campus work, Cindy Lewiecki-Wilson and Jeff Sommers summarized their survey of two-year campus writing professionals with this concise call-to-action: "[Although open-admissions work] may sometimes feel as though it is waged on a battlefield, our interviews asserted repeatedly that it is intellectually satisfying, although that aspect of our work remains invisible to the public and to the profession" (442). Number two, more historical awareness. By creating broad, contextual histories of remediation and open-admissions education, as well as local histories that attend to the unique dynamics of our home institutions, we who work at two-year colleges and regional campuses can build a usable past the way that composition studies writ large has.

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