

A Response to “[Toward Social Justice for Students Enrolled in Basic Writing Courses: A Conference on Basic Writing Policy Statement](#)”

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We are faced today with what are rival validities between what social science tells us and our preference for remaining comfortable within our current institutional frames and tasks. We prefer to ask “What are we doing?” (and hence talk about pedagogical tactics) rather than “What is college composition doing here – in this place in this institution and in its role in society?”

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The [Social Justice Policy](#) outlined by Susan Naomi Bernstein in the Summer/Fall 2008 issue of *BWe* raises important questions about basic writing’s role in the American university. As I understand the policy, it seeks to acknowledge educational disparities adversely affecting students enrolled in basic writing courses and to simultaneously reactivate support for implementation of NCTE’s 1974 position statement “On Support for Motivated but Inadequately Prepared College Students.” The 1974 resolution calls on university and college administrators and legislative bodies to allocate sufficient funds for programs such as basic writing that support students “motivated but inadequately prepared for success in colleges and universities to which they are being admitted” (1).

Much has happened since 1974, and the proposed social justice policy provides a welcome opportunity for new historically informed discussions about the efficacy of basic writing as a remedy for educational inequality. As the Executive Board of the Conference on Basic Writing considers this policy, spirited discussions have already taken place illustrating the complex, and often contradictory, relationship of basic writing to the goals of social justice. A common thread in these discussions has been the need to pay cautionary heed to basic writing’s conflicting historical record, not so that we may champion one narrative over the other (e.g., basic writing as defender of the educationally disenfranchised versus basic writing as an instrument of exclusion) but to resist thinking of basic writing in overdetermined or essentializing ways. Instead, these discussions underscore how critical consideration of basic writing’s history opens up the possibility for thinking about basic writing in ways that push beyond such either/or polarization to revitalize our conversations about equal access. My own reading of this history has led me to conclude that NCTE’s 1974 resolution is too narrowly focused to be of much more

than symbolic value. It casts support programs such as basic writing as the primary mechanism by which to secure these students' access to higher education and to sustain their progress toward graduation, a responsibility I am convinced that basic writing cannot effectively shoulder.

Beginning in the early 1990s, several important critiques of basic writing have been published (e.g., the *College English* 1993 "Symposium on Basic Writing;" Bartholomae, "Tidy House;" Fox; Lu, "Redefining;" Shor "Our Apartheid"), exemplifying two conflicting views that have dominated discussion about the role of basic writing in higher education. While both sides agree that basic writing (and the universal writing requirement) warrant serious reconsideration, one side advocates reform, while the other calls for abolition.

Scholars who urge reform argue that basic writing serves a democratizing and transformative role in American higher education and point to its strategic location and its historical roots in movements for social justice captured in the image of African-American and Puerto Rican students storming the gates of City College demanding free and open access to the City University of New York. From the point when remedial writing became "basic writing" under Mina Shaughnessy's iconic influence, it has represented the historically absent and silenced voices from the margin, those of socially marginalized students and their adjunct instructors. As such, basic writing is uniquely positioned to critique and transform hegemonic notions of academic literacy. As Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, who is in a better position to critique the significance of academic literacy than those who are dispossessed of it? And the cause of social justice has extended beyond the classroom as well; the basic writing profession as a whole -- its journals, its conferences, its dissertations -- have proven to be fertile ground for producing educational critiques and developing transformative educational theory and practice.

Basic writing reform projects have challenged traditional "deficit" or "initiation-based" pedagogies (see e.g., Lu, "Conflict;" Fox; Harris, "Teaching;" Kutz, Groden and Zamel; Shor, *Empowering*). In learning to read students' texts for meanings and intentions, for ways in which students position themselves discursively in the texts they write, these alternative pedagogies become less concerned with initiating students into a static discourse codified by what Mike Rose in "The Language of Exclusion" described as routine procedures and generic forms. Instead, these pedagogies see how language learning takes place in something akin to what Mary Louise Pratt calls a linguistic and cultural contact zone, where basic writing teachers and students come together to learn to read students' non-standard, non-native and/or non-conventional uses of written English for the ways in which they modify, interact, and conflict with what we traditionally think of as "academic discourse." At the same time, teachers and students critically reflect on academic conventions for the best of what they have to offer.

In such alternative pedagogies, literacy grows in a medium of uncertainty as students test their knowledge and ways of using language “within and against” those valued in the academy (Harris, “Writing” 15). What these alternative approaches have in common is that students are encouraged to use a variety of forms of reading and writing to “make sense of the world around them, to learn, to conceptualize, and inquire and then to communicate that sense to themselves as well as to others” (Kutz, Groden and Zamel 31). The forms their writing takes, how it looks on the page, are determined and assessed always in relation to what they want to communicate. Rather than learning rules for writers, or choosing sides in arguments, writers in these alternative classrooms are actively involved in generating hypotheses about how language works in context and then refining those hypotheses as they continually test themselves in new situations, both within and against the status quo. In such classrooms, writing and thinking are always necessarily contingent.

Scholars who would defend basic writing, and hence reform it in ways described above, worry as well about what will happen to students if it is eliminated. They worry about whether, on the basis of some tested measure of writing “skill,” students will be excluded, or sufficiently deterred, from any opportunity to get a college education. This worry is real, not only because basic writing programs are being eliminated across the country, but also because who basic writing shelters is a significant proportion of the undergraduate population. Karen Greenburg, Ed White and others have expressed concern similar to that voiced by Deborah Mutnick: “If we simply eliminate basic writing courses...I fear the margin will simply shift, in many cases outside the academy altogether, as we return to a pre-open admissions, whiter, more middle-class university” (46).

More recently, arguments for mainstreaming (see e.g., Adams; Grego and Thompson; McNenny; Rodby; Soliday, “From the Margins”) have attempted to solve the problem of exclusion. A typical mainstreaming strategy abolishes the separate, non-credit bearing, basic writing track and places basic writers directly into regular freshman composition. In many cases, placement tests are still used to identify low-scoring students who are then required to attend an adjunct writing “workshop” or “studio” attached to the freshman course. Results from different mainstreaming projects (e.g., Glau; Adams) indicate that students succeed in regular composition at a rate higher than or equal to students who begin college with a basic writing course. Meanwhile, there is some convincing evidence (e.g., Adams; Agnew and McLaughlin) that basic writing, with its attendant testing mechanisms, may be a harmful deterrent, obstructing students’ progress as they pay full tuition for non-credit courses that don’t count toward the degree while simultaneously barring them from taking regular, credit-bearing classes.

To my mind, a promising outcome of the mainstreaming debate, not at all unlike the opportunity afforded by the Conference on Basic Writing’s current discussion of the social justice policy, is that it has pushed discussion about the role of basic writing to matters beyond the curriculum. Certainly curricular alternatives to deficit and initiatory

models of basic writing, and the challenges they pose to status quo notions of academic literacy, could just as readily be housed in a basic writing course as they could in a freshman composition course that included mainstreamed basic writers. An argument could also be made that mainstreaming is a convenient fiction, a new name for basic writing. After all, students may still be tested and sorted and sent to non-credit “workshops.” But that is precisely the point: the mainstreaming argument brings to the table discussion of the ways in which basic writing is tied to institutional functions beyond the curriculum – such as placement and exit testing and other forms of evaluation and assessment. In other words, the mainstreaming argument underscores the fact that redefining the curriculum does not necessarily do away with the institutional necessity to guard the gate, to distinguish deficiency from proficiency, to separate standard writing from that which is considered non-standard, to let some students in and keep other students out.

It is on this very basis of how basic writing has been tied to these other institutional necessities that some critics have rejected reform projects and called instead for abolition of the introductory writing requirement, and by extension, its prerequisite basic writing course. Sharon Crowley, for example, has decided finally that the required introductory course, with its procedures for placement and evaluation, what amounts to an “instrument of exclusion” (89) is simply too tied up with the maintenance of educational, cultural, and linguistic inequality for curricular reform to be of much good. Basic writing may have started at New York’s City College as a call-to-arms on behalf of the educationally disenfranchised, and those of us who teach it can speak of the numbers of students, otherwise excluded, who have made their way into the university mainstream to achieve a college degree. But ultimately, these discussions propel us to also grapple with basic writing’s regulatory, and hence exclusionary, function.

To that end, the abolitionist argument is couched not in curricular or pedagogical terms, but in terms of rethinking basic writing’s role in normalizing student writing, in bringing it into conformity with the standard, in excluding that which is non-standard, non-conventional, or non-native, and thereby maintaining a system of educational inequality. Crowley argues convincingly that only by getting rid of the introductory writing requirement can we get rid of its instruments of exclusion: admissions, placement and exit exams, and its lower track, the basic writing course.

More recent critiques have asked us to put basic writing in larger systemic contexts, and in Soliday’s words “to abandon our sense of exclusive responsibility” for the social justice project of open access (“Ideologies” 60). Soliday further warns that seeing the role of basic writing as equivalent to equal educational opportunity blinds us to other factors affecting students’ access to and success in college, factors such as pervasive racism and a market economy that depends on certain students being routinely “cooled out” (see Clark) of higher education (70). From this critical standpoint, underpreparation on the

part of students who come from non-elite backgrounds is the inevitable and necessary outcome of under- and unequally funded public education.

For critics such as Ira Shor however, basic writing does not get a free pass on matters of social justice. It's not simply that basic writing cannot remedy these social and educational injustices by taking sole responsibility for sustaining equal access; rather, basic writing is implicated in this system of injustice. According to Shor, basic writing conveniently "transfers blame from the system to the individual, encouraging students to internalize fault, to blame themselves for their own failures, especially on entry exams and in first year writing classes where their errors are legion" ("Errors" 40). Shor ultimately concludes that basic writing, and entry-level testing and tracking, do little more than produce student failure and slow students' progress toward graduation, which in turn "stabilizes and justifies economic inequality" (41).

It is from this current critical vantage point that I have reached my conclusion that NCTE's resolution "On Support for Motivated but Inadequately Prepared College Students" is overdetermined. While I am not yet ready to call for the abolition of basic writing (in part because I fear that abolition is being driven more by institutional need rather than a radically transformed notion of student need), I do believe that we are obligated and challenged to move beyond overt manifestations of injustice (which can be ameliorated by reform) to strike at the root of educational inequality. This requires us to abandon our claim to basic writing's innocence and the equation of basic writing to equal educational opportunity. It requires instead that we continue to interrogate the complex ways that basic writing interacts with vested institutional, economic and political interests. A first step might be to draft a new social justice resolution that calls upon colleges and universities to dismantle their exclusionary mechanisms of entry- and exit-level testing and tracking, with their attendant codification of written English as a set of skills to be mastered.

While these discussions of basic writing and social justice may inevitably (and uncomfortably) lead us to continued debates over abolition and mainstreaming, I take heart in that they challenge us to consider curricular alternatives in the context of institutional change. From such discussions, we learn that curricular transformation, however liberatory and egalitarian its intent, does not necessarily lead to institutional or social transformation. While we may yet prefer to ask, "what are we doing here (inside classrooms,)" these discussions urge us to become active agents in shaping new, local answers to the question "what is basic writing doing here in its role at this particular institution?" In our search for answers, we will surely take on issues of alternative assessments, alternative standards, and alternative models of staffing and teacher preparation as we continue to articulate and explore alternative pedagogies and curricula.

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