The Place of Basic Writing at Wedonwan U: A Simulation Activity for Graduate Level Seminars

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Buell describes a basic writing graduate curriculum and analyzes a simulation activity for which students adopt stakeholder perspectives on a college-wide debate about mainstreaming basic writing students or moving basic writing to community college.

Despite the potential value of graduate courses focused on basic writing, such courses rarely appear in composition studies graduate programs.[1] Moreover, students who enroll in basic writing graduate courses often want to focus primarily on learning how to teach: they may not readily understand how pedagogical possibilities depend upon material conditions or appreciate the importance of educational politics, theory and history. However, as Shannon Carter argues, graduate instructors should guide their students toward questioning terms (such as *basic writer*) and promote the study of political influences on basic writing program structures in socio-historical contexts ("Graduate Courses in Basic Writing Studies"). Because basic writing embodies a complex mix of social policy, institutional history, and cultural orientation, explicit instruction and repeated practice in analyzing social contexts and institutional issues afford valuable learning activities for graduate students preparing to teach basic writing.

In recognition of the need for professionally prepared basic writing instructors, I have developed a curriculum for an elective graduate seminar offered at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU).[2] This graduate course provides opportunities for students to learn about various definitions of basic writers and basic writing contexts, analyze basic writing program configurations, explore challenges to basic writing programs, and evaluate various pedagogical approaches. In order to encourage analysis of teaching and learning issues, I have developed a

simulation game that has proven especially effective for the diverse students (high school teachers, college teachers, and students without teaching experience) who have enrolled in my course. In this essay, I will outline my graduate course curriculum, describe a simulation/role-playing activity designed to foster critical thinking, and discuss the benefits of this curriculum for future basic writing instructors.

The Curriculum

The basic writing graduate course I've developed covers several broad and sometimes overlapping topics: definitions of basic writing and basic writers; historical contexts for basic writing education; evaluations of pedagogical approaches; theory and practice of response to student writing; and future directions for basic writing courses and programs. My students read several chapters of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* in order to explore ways in which uses of the term *basic writer* are relative to specific educational contexts. We examine Bruce Horner's analysis of tropes defining basic writers ("Mapping Errors and Expectations for Basic Writers") and discuss ways that writing abilities can be perceived differently in various contexts. We also consider samples of student writing that appear in David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" and debate alternative meanings of "good writing" (e.g., as technically correct prose focusing on safe or mundane topics or as writing that addresses complex, controversial topics, sometimes at the expense of technical correctness).

To challenge my graduate students' assumptions about good writing, I have recently required students to produce impromptu writing on the question of whether or not Japanese anime should be exported to Korea. This writing assignment challenged graduate students to write about a topic situated in an unfamiliar cultural context while encouraging them to examine their own assumptions about their own "writing abilities." They soon recognized the importance

of familiar topics and cultural contexts. Such discoveries allowed students to speculate on how cultural disconnects might similarly affect the writing of undergraduates enrolled in basic writing courses.

As we continued to consider our assumptions about writing abilities in that graduate course, we discussed the dangers of viewing basic writing students solely in terms of their deficits while contemplating the possibility that instructors might sometimes fail to recognize students' existing literate practices and cognitive processes. We also examined arguments advanced by well known scholars in widely read publications, e.g., "This Wooden Shack Place" (Hull and Rose), "Remediation as Social Construct: Perspectives from an Analysis of Classroom Discourse" (Hull, Rose, Fraser and Castellano) and "Cultural Dissonance in Basic Writing Courses" (Ybarra). Collectively, these scholars show us how student writing can be misread and how students' thought processes can be misunderstood when instructors fail to recognize their students' cognitive and verbal abilities.

After reading basic writing scholarship, my students demonstrated their ability to make complex interconnections among institutional histories and contexts, pedagogies, personalities and social factors during class discussions. However, when these same graduate students viewed a documentary film showing scenes of basic writing and remedial math classrooms (*Discounted Dreams*), they focused uncritically on pedagogy as decontextualized practice and intentional technique. For example, during a discussion of scenes in the film, some students remarked on the individual failures of specific teachers rather than commenting on institutional failures and social realities beyond the institution. During our discussion, we considered one case of notably disengaged teaching: while seated behind a desk at the front of the room, a basic writing instructor was pointing out semi-colons to three or four students while the remaining students

tuned out. During a filmed interview following the classroom scene, the teacher comments on not receiving training in the teaching of writing while being assigned remedial courses because senior colleagues avoid that teaching assignment. Despite this teacher's comments on institutional realities, what seemed salient for several students was the poor quality of the instructor's teaching.

Several members of the class expressed concern about instructors who unapologetically teach badly. One student wondered why such disengaged instructors fail to seek other professions. Such comments reflect these graduate students' earnest desire to become caring teachers dedicated to helping marginalized students who are often unwelcome in higher education. However, responses such as these also reflect adherence to the cultural myth of the hero teacher—that is, a mindset which honors extremely dedicated teachers who, despite "grotesque" material conditions (Horner 26) and limited professional preparation, teach so expertly that their students make remarkable progress. When other teachers cannot live up to this image, they are vilified as being uncaring or lazy.

There seemed to be a disconnect between these students' analytical practices while reading basic writing scholarship versus their analytical practices while viewing a documentary film portraying teachers and students at work. To foster my students' critical thinking, I developed a simulation game that would involve students in role-playing activities. For this in-class learning activity, graduate students were asked to speak through their own experiences while exploring the perspectives of more and less visible stakeholders in institutional debates about basic writing instruction.[3] Similar role-playing simulations can be found in urban planning graduate programs (Reckien and Eisenach), environmental planning, and educational evaluation

(Orr). These activities help participants learn about competing perspectives on social and institutional controversies while exploring various approaches to problem-solving.

For the simulation activity that I developed, stakeholders included writing program administrators, marginalized adjunct instructors, full-time composition professors, full-time faculty uninvolved in teaching writing but centrally involved in policy decisions, and students. These role-playing opportunities created a space in which different voices could come together in conversation about issues that are too often narrowly viewed as issues of good or poor teaching. I will first discuss how this role-playing activity was set up in my course and then offer suggestions for graduate professors who might want to adapt this learning activity to their own institutional realities and graduate courses.

Simulation Activity: General Background

The idea of using simulation games in basic writing classrooms was originally proposed in 1975 by Lynn Quitman Troyka and Jerrold Nudelman:

> Simulation-games originated years ago with the so-called 'Pentagon war games.' Like war games, simulation-games for the classroom are replications of a real environment that call for the participants to take action and make decisions as if they were actually operating in that environment. Social scientists have adapted simulation-games to the classroom to teach not only content . . . but also the underlying human, social considerations that help shape decision-making. (vi)

Like Troyka and Nudelman, Candace Mathews advocates using simulation games for classroom learning. In a textbook designed for college-level ESL students, Matthews presents general civic scenarios and invites students to debate issues as involved stakeholders. Because the dialogic format of simulation games allows different voices to come together, arguments can be

juxtaposed and directly responded to, instead of being examined in isolation. Simulation games allow into a debate voices that do not always communicate directly.

In the context of my basic writing graduate course, a simulation game allowed students to explore basic writing debates and the interplay of stakeholder perspectives with varied interests and positions of power. After we had discussed various approaches to defining basic writers and basic writing contexts, I introduced a simulation game that would consume about ninety minutes of a three-hour class meeting. First, I projected the following text on our classroom film screen:

Background

Wedonwan U is a small urban university. Within the past 20 years, demographics have shifted and it is now a multi-ethnic institution with students of all ages. Across the campus, some believe that writing and other basic skills seem to have weakened over the past decade to such an extent that it has become a major controversy for the university. Currently we run a two-semester composition sequence and a small two-semester pre-composition (basic writing) sequence. Students can test into either sequence. We also get many students from Soyathinkyacangota College, our local community college.

After much deliberation, the academic dean of Wedonwan U decided to call an open meeting to gather ideas about how to improve the writing skills of our university students. This has already been hotly debated in English department faculty meetings, so the dean decided to open a broader community meeting to discuss some new possibilities and get a better understanding of key problems. Right now, there are two broad proposals on the table. One is to expand the writing program, which could have good long-term results. The other is to move remedial and even composition programs out of the university and reduce admissions (a trade-off whereby fewer students would matriculate but retention and graduates rates might improve).

This scenario mirrored issues that had emerged in class discussions, such as the question of whether or not basic writing belongs in four-year institutions, and reflected policies being considered in nearby colleges.

The Simulation Activity

Before class, I cut each role description (below) into a separate strip of paper. Students each chose one role to play and then had to present arguments as stakeholders on the given

question or related issue. I advised students that sharing a stakeholder role did not mean that all

students would have to speak in a unitary voice or agree on strategy or goals.

After reading the town-meeting scenario, I projected these instructions:

Task
After reading your role, get together with people who are in the same category as you. (For example, those playing students should get together with other students; teachers should talk with other teachers.) As a group, try to articulate what should be done about either moving the basic writing program or expanding it, but do not worry about making a unified proposal. Beyond stating your case, plan some evidence to support your ideas. Use anything from this week's readings (or previous ones) to reinforce your ideas and bring them up in the meeting. (You can of course argue against the texts or take perspectives they argue against.) However, use your own ideas to bolster the reading. Also be ready to think on your feet. Some of what you hear from other groups may surprise you.

The roles that I created for my simulation game are composites gleaned from published

scholarship, from Council on Basic Writing (CBW) and Council of Writing Program

Administrators (WPA) listservs, from class discussions and departmental discussions; they are

not based on any one individual's viewpoint or statements. The specific roles reflect the local

considerations we discussed in class, but they are not exhaustive. For example, I did not present

the viewpoints of high school teachers or legislators among the possible roles although these

stakeholders can certainly be worked in to a similar simulation activity. Also, the number of

roles can vary depending on how many students are in the class.

Roles

The roles were written to offer some talking points but invited embellishment and individual

spins.

Writing Program Administrators
You are one of the writing program administrators.

There is a large two-semester first-year composition program and a tiny pre-composition no-credit program at the university. Although a few full-time instructors teach basic writing and college composition courses, these courses are primarily staffed by adjunct instructors who are "freeway fliers" (teachers who teach at several colleges to make a living). Most of the instructors teach 3-4 writing classes for you, with 25 students per class. Many also likely teach at other places, since
Wedonwan U is not known for paying high wages. Many of the students are underprepared and need far more writing support than can be given in the classes. If the pre-composition program were stronger, the composition program might be more effective. You want to propose an increase in staffing and suggest a way to alter the pre-composition program. Maybe add in a writing center. You think a stronger writing program in general will have better long-term effects down the line.

Writing Instructors
Instructor 1: You are an adjunct instructor at Wedonwan U.
To make a living this semester, you teach three courses for Wedonwan U, one at another university about 40 miles away, and a basic writing course at an adult education center in another town on Saturday mornings. You have over 110 writing students, so it feels like all you do is grade and commute. But you can't give up any of the jobs. Wedonwan U pays for half your benefits. If you were working full time, Wedonwan U would pay for all your benefits. Without the other courses, you wouldn't have the income you need. You want to teach effectively, but it feels like you never can. You have restructured your classes to have more exercises and little extended writing. This way you can at least recycle lesson plans from place to place.

Instructor 2: You're one of the lucky full-time composition instructors at Wedonwan U.
What an interesting mix of students. The students come from all over and have so much life experience. They have much to overcome, yet they come to class, despite jobs and family obligations. They work hard and support each other and even bring very welcome humor to their tasks. Every day is the kind of challenge that makes it a joy to come to work. Right now, in the composition class, they are working on a collaborative web page showing how grammar varies across dialects and even the pre-composition class is gung-ho on a community literacy project that involves translating slang terms into formal and informal Standard English.

Instructor 3: You teach writing at Soyathinkyacangota Community College, which feeds a large number of students into Wedonwan U.

Overall, you are pretty proud of the students who transfer into the program. They start out with next to nothing. By the end of the two-semester sequence, students can write a fairly decent 5 paragraph essay on a familiar topic, such as comparing community college to high school, and they can summarize short passages. Though the mission of your program is not only college preparation, you feel that those who go onto the 4-year college are well prepared. Not bad for a program which is full and bursting to the gills. You're not sure why you have been invited to the community meeting for Wedonwan U, but you suspect that your work will be recognized and your program praised.

Students (Depending on class size, some of these roles can be cut but use ones that can best tap the issues.)

Student 1: You are a disgruntled student at Wedonwan U.

You are frustrated with your composition class. You took Honors English in high school, but you still had to take the basic writing sequence. What a joke! You have to work on silly grammar exercises and then write goofy essays. You race through the exercises and then sleep while the slow pokes finish up the work. Couldn't the university have a better composition placement system and program?

Student 2: You are a first-generation college student at Wedonwan U.

Your parents have so much hope for you but such little understanding about what it is like to be in college. Not many of your friends came here, so you feel alone. You are struggling and may not pass your writing course. You do tons of grammar exercises and then have to write a few short essays. The grammar gets marked in red pen, and you get a few incomprehensible comments. You want to improve, but you don't know how. You have gone to see your instructor during office hours, but there is always a line. It seems like s/he has a million other students. You've worked so hard to be here. You want a quality education. You do all the class work, but the results are not good.

Student 3: You are a 1.5 Generation student at Wedonwan U.

You came here from another country about 10 years ago. You know there are some gaps in your writing ability, though you speak fine. You have been placed in a basic writing class, which seems both helpful and a bit of a burden. You get no credit for the course but you have to pay tuition. You have yet to start ENGL 101 because you placed in basic writing. Until you pass ENGL 101 you can't enroll in some of the courses required for your major.

Student 4: You transferred in from Soyathinkyacangota Community College.
In the community college composition course, you learned what you thought were very useful skills. You picked up the 5-paragraph essay form and wrote summaries that were praised. You even learned to put your opinion at the end of the summary where it belonged to clearly demarcate it from your summary. You became so interested in writing that you volunteered as a literacy tutor at your old high school. You're good at it too. The students you tutor really get what you are trying to tell them. But now, in your upper-level literature courses, you are failing. Your professor seems to write angry comments and questions if you know the meaning of analysis. You are kind of lost in the class, so you use techniques that worked before in the community college class. But something is wrong. You have overheard the professor say the students in the class are not college material and should learn to write before enrolling.

Literary Scholars
Literature Scholar #1: Renaissance scholar
You are frustrated. Your advanced Shakespeare class is required for graduation in the English major, but only about a quarter of the students enters with the necessary skills to analyze the texts and even fewer students can write in an articulate manner. Some students do not seem to understand the concept of relevant knowledge. Just last week, a Chinese student tried to make an analogy to Chinese poetry written around the time of Shakespeare. Okay, maybe that's interesting, but it's not relevant. Renaissance is European after all. Plus, your class size has crept up over the years. The department is short-staffed, and you hear there might be money for a new hire. It sure would be nice if they could get another scholar in Early British Literature to help with the burden.

Literature Scholar #2: Literary Critic
You are a literary critic at Wedonwan U. Like some of your colleagues, you view your students' writing as atrocious. You ask for analyses and they give you back summaries. You introduce theories and ask for applications to literary texts: your students write papers with quotes but little interpretation. Sometimes their writing is pure plagiarism. And sometimes they write in that ignorant street talk. And yet (from your point of view), the bulk of the department budget goes to the composition program. Wouldn't it be better if Wedonwan U only accepted qualified students? Perhaps it would be less of a drain on the university to get rid of the composition program entirely and only let in qualified students.

The Class Discussion

The stakeholder roles that I created allow for exploration of the ecologies surrounding pedagogical approaches. For example, in contrast to adjunct instructors who were teaching in multiple institutions, the full-time instructor had more time to devote to a given class and could explore more labor-intensive, culturally validating activities, such as questioning particular

language practices in comparison to Standard English uses. Challenges to Standard English are somewhat at odds with the views embodied in the role of the literary critic and the Renaissance scholar, whose perspectives were deliberately written to place a low value on student language variation in academic contexts. While playing their roles and articulating different perspectives, course participants were able to recognize that definitions of good or appropriate pedagogies vary even within departmental borders. What might be seen as liberating by some teachers may be viewed as detrimental or counterproductive by other teachers.

In part, simulation activities are valuable because they allow students to influence the flow of conversation and the direction of their own learning, as was true in my own class. *Here is what happened:* Course participants worked together for about thirty minutes in particular stakeholder groups to determine their positions and key arguments. We reconvened as a whole class to discuss the broad question of whether or not the basic writing class should remain at Wedonwan U. At first, students needed some prodding to adapt to their roles and begin speaking extemporaneously (rather than reading prepared remarks). However, as the discussion proceeded, students gained confidence in their roles and in articulating their competing agendas from particular viewpoints as invested stakeholders.

As might be expected, a graduate student playing the role of a disgruntled first-year undergraduate complained about his placement in a mainstreamed college writing class and criticized his classmates' written work and poor writing abilities. This comment triggered complaints from graduate students playing senior faculty who wanted students to be admitted only after becoming academically prepared for written work assigned in advanced English seminars. An alliance was formed between the disgruntled mainstream student and the literary

scholar, who both called for removing the basic writing program and perhaps even first-year composition.

As we continued our discussion, a conflict of ideals was mediated by demands of practicalities. The graduate student playing a community college teacher commented on the problematic logistics of channeling students from a senior college to community colleges, noting how full community college classes were already and how adding more students would prevent them from teaching what they believed were the foundations that students needed. She also noted that she thought they were doing a pretty good job at teaching writing, reading and math but articulated those basics as traditional skill-based building blocks. At play here were notions of how pedagogy could be imagined and enacted through the material constraints of the situation and questions about writing curricula and learning objectives.

After focusing on incoming first-year undergraduates, course participants began considering the perspective of transfer students. A graduate student articulating that perspective noted that she had completed the community college coursework and worked as a literacy coach in her high school but was still failing her college English courses. She pointed out that she had taken the community college writing course and done well, but was still not succeeding in her college courses: her professors said she could not analyze texts. She also noted that she and other transfer students would not be served well by the proposed move of basic writing courses to the community college: she had taken a composition course at her local community college, learned the requisite skills and was still failing in her senior college classes. This commentary put a human face on the implications of moving basic writing and basic writers out of the university. Techniques in teaching were not challenged, but the value of what had been taught in a community college was being questioned. In addition to referencing past class discussions of

defining basic writers, these points also highlighted the questions of transfer across contexts, an issue that had been scheduled for in-depth discussion later in the term (Goen-Salter; Hassel and Giordano).

Students playing adjunct instructors noted that they would like to add more complexity into their assignments, but they did not have the time to do so when they had to teach up to a hundred students and commute for hours from one site to another. Because the debate involved many perspectives and issues, we did not resolve the question of whether or not to remove basic writing from Wedonwan U. Nevertheless, students left the class with greater levels of understanding writing program structures and the affordances underlying various ideologies.

The simulation activity that I used in my basic writing seminar engaged students in meaningful experiential learning and facilitated their critical thinking about pedagogy, institutional structures, stakeholder perspectives, and the influence of material constraints on decision-making. The activity also paved the way for discussing the transfer of literate practices from one context to another. To introduce that topic, I invited students to read Sugie Goen-Salter's "Critiquing the Need to Eliminate Remedial Writing." We then discussed Goen-Salter's analysis of students' literacy needs during their first year of college, the potential transfer of literate practices from one context to another, and students' literacy needs in courses that follow a first-year reading and writing course. In that same essay, Sugie Goen-Salter probes issues related to communication between community college faculty and faculty in senior colleges and universities. A few students referred to their simulation activity experience when discussing the concern of a transfer student's question about the value of her community college writing courses. While these graduate students may have reached similar conclusions without participating in a simulation game, the issues and possible solutions became more salient as a

result of the simulation activity. It also created a common point of reference for subsequent class discussions.

Applications for Other Graduate Classes

Teacher educators who want to use a similar simulation activity in their graduate courses will need to modify the activity for their own contexts. And while I presented it fairly early in the term, it could also work later in a course, when students can refer more directly to ideas and arguments that they have read about in their course. The activity could even be used as a capstone project that would help students make connections between concepts and theories introduced all through the semester. Use of the simulation activity early in the semester enabled me to introduce the complexity of upcoming topics on literate practice transference and the roles that institutional stakeholders play in decisions about basic writing courses.

When guiding students through the simulation activity, I suggested that they draw on the readings, but reference to published texts was not required since the preparation and simulation took place during a single three hour period. Some students did choose to make textual references such as "This is similar to the student in Hull and Rose" or "As Barthalomae says about…"; other students spoke through their own understandings and imaginings of the situation. Because the students came in with different levels of exposure to writing theory, more advanced students could readily discuss issues through a disciplinary lens while others could draw on experience from different contexts, such as relationships between high school teachers and principals.

An alternative approach would be to present the simulation activity in one class period and then implement it in a subsequent class meeting in order to allow students

time to gather evidence from assigned readings. For my class, the simulation was a non-evaluated activity designed to generate discussion and open up issues that would be examined throughout the semester. However, it is possible to make the stakes a little higher and bring in writing after the simulation. One option would be to require individuals or groups to write arguments for increased funding of the writing program and arguments for moving basic writing out of the university. This argumentative writing could rely on supporting and opposing arguments articulated during class discussions, which might even be videotaped. A multimodal approach to composing arguments could be used in place of or in addition to a print-based writing assignment.

When I presented a variation of this simulation at the 2011 WPA CBW session, one audience member suggested that graduate students could be provided with or asked to search for institutional documents addressing policy. Graduate students could also be encouraged to engage in active research: they might, for example, contact deans or other policy makers and interview them about how funding or hiring decisions about basic writing are made. Alternatively, writing program directors and other college administrators could be invited as guest speakers who would address questions raised in a simulation activity. All these possible extensions can further help graduate students transition into classroom teachers and possibly WPAs by giving them practice in weighing considerations that are not always apparent when we read and discuss published scholarship in graduate courses.

The simulation also makes space for students to learn about competing views on the role of basic writing in higher education. For students at all levels, it is difficult to develop arguments that meaningfully incorporate opposing views. By allowing those

views an audible, tangible voice in a role-playing activity, we can encourage graduate students to test arguments in a competitive verbal environment, to learn about the influence of situated interests on stakeholder perspectives, and to discover the complexities of institutional decision-making and policy formation.

Notes

[1] For a discussion of basic writing graduate seminars, see "Reasoning the Need: Graduate Education and Basic Writing" by Barbara Gleason.

[2] The MA in English at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) offers a concentration in composition and rhetoric with two required courses (a composition theory course and an assessment course) and a menu of electives, including a Seminar in Basic Writing Theory.

[3] I have also used simulation activities in composition and advanced composition courses to explore social or educational issues.

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