

Acceleration vs. Remediation: What's in a Name for Composition Studies?

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Entering college students are profoundly disturbed when placed in courses labeled “basic,” “developmental,” or “remedial.” Discouraged and often faced with pressing life problems, many of these students drop out of college before ever reaching first-year composition. Beginning in 2007, the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) renamed and reframed their basic writing program as ALP (the Accelerated Learning Program). Students enrolled in ALP take regular, credit-bearing composition along with a writing workshop taught by the same teacher and designed to help them succeed in the comp course. Now, ten years later, ALP has enabled thousands of students at CCBC to move into the college mainstream in a timely and cost-effective fashion. Efforts to disseminate the program have been wide-ranging and successful. Currently, the ALP model has been implemented at approximately 240 campuses nationwide. In this essay, Mlynarczyk argues that with the widespread implementation of innovative, student-centered programs such as ALP, Stretch, and writing studios, the time has finally come to end remediation as we know it.

What’s in a name? This question, originally posed by Shakespeare’s Juliet, is one that has also troubled the field of basic writing over the years. In the early days of composition, administrators and professors didn’t agonize before using phrases like “bonehead English” (Otte and Mlynarczyk) or “the Awkward Squad” (Ritter) to describe special courses for students whose writing was judged to be deficient in some way. But with the social upheavals of the late 1960s, much thought was given to the question of what to call writing instruction for students who were deemed not yet ready for regular freshman composition. “Remedial English,” with its sense that something was wrong and needed to be corrected, didn’t seem right anymore.¹ Searching, I suspect, for a more neutral and nonjudgmental term, Mina Shaughnessy came up with “basic writing,” the term she used when she founded the *Journal of Basic Writing (JBW)* in 1975. This term has lasted even though the editors and readers of *JBW* periodically struggle to update the name of the field and of the journal (Otte and Mlynarczyk).

In September 2015, William J. Macauley, Jr., a professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, and the director of the University Writing Center, raised the question of terminology on the CBW (Council on Basic Writing) listserv, saying that he was bothered by the fact that the education community in his state

still used the term “remedial” even though other terms were less problematic. He asked list members to respond to five questions:

1. Do you or your school/system use the word “remedial”?
2. If so, applied to what?
3. If not, how long has it been since it was used in your locale, if ever?
4. What term(s) do you use instead, if you don’t use that word?
5. What is the primary reason for the change to current terminology, if there was one?
 (“Remedial”)

A lively online conversation ensued. From the responses, it became clear that the designation “remedial” is still alive and well, especially in administrative and legislative contexts. Another commonly used term is “developmental,” which some see as more positive than “remedial” while others find it similarly demeaning, suggesting that students placed in these courses are in some way immature, undeveloped. Well-meaning professors and program administrators are still struggling with terminology, recently instituting designations that they feel are less stigmatizing, terms like “introductory,” “preparatory,” “foundational,” “underprepared,” and “emergent.” Pointing out that members of different educational communities use different terms to refer to these courses (and these students), Peter Adams, now an emeritus professor at the Community College of Baltimore County and a key developer and disseminator of the ALP model (Accelerated Language Program), stated on the listserv:

I used to really fret about these issues of terminology. Of course, those of us who frequent CCCC [Conference on College Composition and Communication] and TYCA [Two-Year English Association] regionals and WPA [Council of Writing Program Administrators] know that the approved term since Shaughnessy has been “basic writing.” But then I started going to NADE [National Association for Developmental Education] and discovered that a great many smart and concerned folks there didn’t know the word “basic,” but referred to our courses as developmental. And then I encountered some folks from the Community College Research

Center at Columbia [University] who have devoted their careers to improving the experience and the success rates of our students . . . [ellipsis in original] and they used the term “remedial.” And I have worked with some wonderful and very caring folks in various state level student success centers who also use 'remedial.'

I think the term we use does say something about us, but it's more about the crowd we hang out with. I don't think we should jump to conclusions about people based on their terminology. I think we need to listen to what they have to say. (Re: “Remedial”)

In responding to Adams's post, Macauley, who had posed the question in the first place, weighed in with his opinion (excerpted from a longer post):

I think you are right for the most part, Peter, but I think the terminology we use also determines in many cases what a student's options and experiences will be. . . . My worry, locally, is that the label can be used to segregate these students so they don't mess up other reporting numbers and to minimize responsibility for their progress. The effect may be that these students never have a fair shot and seldom shed the label. (Re: “Remedial”)

One thing this spirited discussion confirmed is that, as Kathleen DeVore, an English professor at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, put it in her post of September 25, 2014: “Language both carries and buries history, so you know, it does matter.”

I doubt that any English professor would argue with this statement. But even more important than the term we use to describe our field is its positioning in the academy, often described as “the margins,” “the periphery,” “a borderland,” and, sometimes literally, “the basement.” Most of us who have devoted our careers to this field and these students seem to have come to terms with this positioning. Hope Parisi, a professor of English at CUNY's Kingsborough Community College and co-editor of the *Journal of*

Basic Writing (JBW), refers to this tacit acceptance in her editor's column for the Spring 2013 issue of *JBW*:

One of the strongest definitions of basic writing in our field emerges out of Bruce Horner's exploration [in "Relocating Basic Writing"] of its location—institutionally, materially, and ideologically at the periphery. It is fortunate that basic writing practitioners are not easily daunted by such a location; we know to embrace it politically as a place for "refusing to settle for fixed designations of what is and isn't literacy, or illiteracy, fixed designations of who is and isn't educable or worthy of education, and fixed designations of what we do and don't know about literacy and its learning and teaching" (Horner 7). (Parisi 1)

Remediation: The Students' Perspective

I agree with Parisi (and Horner) that most professors of basic writing have come to embrace this field and its position on the margins and to see it as the site for some of the most important pedagogical and theoretical work in the larger field of composition. But students see it differently. For them, being positioned on the margins of the university in one or more non-credit courses, courses that may prevent them from taking credit-bearing courses in their majors, is profoundly disturbing. They are highly sensitive to designations such as "remedial," "pre-college," even, I suspect, "developmental" and "basic writing." Regardless of what the course is called, the students are aware of their status as second-class citizens in the university.

This perception was confirmed in the lead article of the Spring 2014 issue of *Young Scholars in Writing*, a refereed journal of outstanding writing by undergraduates. This article was written by five students at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) who had originally been placed in their university's "stretch" program, a three-quarter first-year composition course. They were among the 50 to 80 percent of students entering the 23-college Cal State system who are classified as "not yet proficient" and thus not ready for regular first-year writing on the basis of the results of the English Placement Test

(EPT), administered by ETS (Educational Testing Service). It turns out that although Cal State claims not to offer “remedial English” any more, the language and the concept of remedial writing is alive and well in the administrative structure, which gets communicated to students through official letters and during orientation sessions. The personal reactions to being placed in what they perceived as “remediation” were vividly described by the student authors of this article, which is entitled “Challenging Our Labels: Rejecting the Language of Remediation” (Galindo et al.).

Sonia Castenada: The word *remedial* hit me like a brick. . . . I didn’t have the courage to tell my parents that their daughter needed to take a “remedial” course. Just the word itself was disappointing and made me feel embarrassed. (6)

Esther Gutierrez: Already behind, and I had not even started? . . . Being labeled remedial shook my confidence as a student because all my life I had been told that going to college was basically not an option for me. Then once I finally made it, I had to carry with me this “remedial” label which shows people that I wasn’t good enough to be a regular college student, that I was underprepared and needed fixing. (6)

Arturo Tejada, Jr.: My first reaction to the orientation adviser’s warning about finishing our “remedial” classes within one year or being kicked out was shock. The next was shame. But then I began to feel afraid—afraid that he was right to segregate me, that I would never be good enough to fit in. (7)

All of these students ended up in the same developmental English course, where the professor announced on the first day “that she did not see any of us as ‘remedial students’” (11). Instead of focusing narrowly on teaching grammar and mechanics, she asked the students to read and grapple with difficult texts having to do with discourse and inequality. The authors included Michel Foucault, James Gee, Deborah Brandt, Jean Anyon, and many others. In the second quarter, with the same professor, the students began researching and writing about the concept of remediation, which led to conference

presentations (including one at the 2013 Conference on College Composition and Communication) and eventually the article published in *Young Scholars in Writing*. The students describe their research and writing as an act of “rebellion” against being considered “remedial,” which they came to see as an unfair label. Their act of rebellion proved to be transformative:

In rebelling we came to believe we do belong in college. We believe that our work shows how student-initiated and carefully theorized resistance to institutional language helped us, and our professors, to reexamine our own acceptance of institutional labeling as well as to challenge administrators and faculty to label students accurately: as writers. (14)

Fortunately, this group of students was able to transcend the stigma of the remedial label. Many others are not so lucky. Karen Pitt, a professor of composition and currently the coordinator of basic writing at CUNY’s Medgar Evers College, explains how she felt, many years ago, when, as an entering student, she failed the university’s Writing Assessment Test (WAT) and was required to take basic writing:

I passed all my English exams [in Trinidad and Tobago], so I *thought* I was a good writer. Beyond that, I was also an avid writer outside of class: I wrote entries in my journals, appeal letters to my mother (when she scolded me), and letters to newspaper editors. Writing, to me, represented reflection, exploration, and argumentation. To date, I’m not quite sure what my CUNY WAT exam indicated to its scorers, but whatever the reason(s), failing that test relegated me to a basic writing class, where the institutional objective of the course was to prepare students, whom they called *remedial* students, to retake and pass the WAT test so that they could be ready for “real” college courses. (2, emphasis in original)

Pitt passed the remedial writing class the first time around, but the stigma persisted throughout her college years: “The herculean effort it took to exhume my way out of the deficient label occupied most of my

undergraduate college experience, where I began to internalize that I was, indeed, underprepared—lacking” (2).

Renaming and Reframing Basic Writing

Perhaps the sense of shame, of being considered “not ready” for regular college work, of being remanded to the basement of academia, is one reason for the dismal rates of success in many basic writing programs across the country. What would happen if students, rather than being placed in “remedial” courses, were assigned to an “accelerated” learning program where they took regular, credit-bearing first-year composition along with a non-credit writing workshop directly tied to the comp course and taught by the same instructor? This, of course, was the question at the core of the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP), developed at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) in 2007. In the ALP model, students placed in the upper level of developmental writing do not have to take a non-credit basic writing course, or sequence of courses, *before* they can move on to credit-bearing composition. Instead they take it *while* enrolled in regular composition. Twenty students are placed in each composition class, eight of whom are also enrolled in the non-credit ALP companion course.² Both courses meet for three hours a week and are taught by the same instructor. The goal of the companion course is to provide additional, individualized support for the ALP students as they work to improve as writers. Pedagogically and psychologically, this is a powerful concept: the idea of tying the “basic” course directly to the composition course, with the assumption that this extra time and instruction will not just help students pass composition but do well in it (see Adams et al.; *ALP*).

In most cases, this is exactly what happens. But still, one wonders, isn't there a limit to how much can be accomplished in one or two semesters? This is a question I've often pondered, and it was raised in early February 2015 on the CBW listserv by David E. Schwalm, an emeritus professor and administrator from Arizona State University Polytechnic, who wrote in regard to the concept of acceleration:

The data gatherers have discovered that developmental courses are derailing a lot of students entering college not quite prepared to meet college math, reading, and writing expectations, especially if they are required to take a series of developmental courses in any particular area. Thus, in the push to get more college graduates, those who teach developmental courses are getting a lot of pressure to accelerate the development of college level competence.

Schwalm felt that this approach might well be successful for students who just needed a refresher in math skills or some other “skill” they had learned earlier, but he questioned whether it would work with something as complex as writing, where “we are trying to help students acquire complex competencies which they have never developed for whatever reasons.” He ends with a question: “It seems possible that acceleration might work reasonabl[y] well for relearning [in a subject such as math]. What do we know about how well it works or with whom it works for new learning combined with unlearning?”

Peter Adams promptly responded, writing from his perspective as one of the developers and disseminators of the ALP program. He began by pointing out that research clearly shows that multi-course “remedial” writing programs were not doing well in terms of retention and advancement of students. At CCBC they learned that students who were unsuccessful in their existing program usually did not fail the required developmental course but simply dropped out. One reason for this high drop-out rate was not academic, but rather the pressing life problems many of these students face on a daily basis. The second reason is more relevant to the issue under discussion here. Adams explains: “Many developmental students arrive unsure of whether they can do college; they tell us they don’t know if they are ‘college material.’ We give them the Compass or Accuplacer and then tell them we’re not sure they’re college material either. No wonder many drop out” (Re: “Reading Courses”). In developing the ALP model at CCBC, Adams and his colleagues not only *renamed* the existing program. More importantly, they *reframed* it:

ALP “shortens the pipeline” not by giving students less “time on task,” but by having them take their developmental writing course as a co-requisite with ENG 101, not a pre-req. This changes students’ attitude toward the course dramatically. They are in a college course, rather than being held outside college-level work, reducing their sense that they may not belong in college. They no longer see the developmental course as an obstacle standing in the way of the course they want to be in, rather they see it as really helping them to succeed in the credit course. (Re: “Reading Courses”)

Adams’s remarks in this online exchange are significant, demonstrating that while the name of a program may be important, the principles on which that name is based are even more important. This approach to reframing basic writing has been successful not only at the original site at CCBC but at many other colleges where the ALP model or other iterations such as Stretch programs (Glau) or studios (Grego and Thompson) have been adapted to fit local circumstances and accelerate students’ progress into the academic mainstream.

Institutional Perspectives on Acceleration

As mentioned earlier, numerous studies have shown that many students placed in developmental courses drop out of college before reaching the credit-bearing college-level course—not because they fail the developmental courses but because they never enroll in them (Bailey et al.; Hern). Katie Hern speaks of what she calls the “hemorrhaging” of students: “the more semesters of remedial courses a student is required to take, the more remote that student’s chances of passing college-level Math or English and being eligible to transfer or earn a degree” (1).

In an attempt to retain more students, many institutions have been adopting programs to accelerate students’ progress into the academic mainstream. What exactly do we mean by acceleration? According to the Community College Research Center, acceleration entails “the reorganization of instruction and curricula in ways that facilitate the completion of educational requirements in an

expedited manner” (Edgecombe 4). The structural goal of such programs is to shorten the “pipeline” of developmental courses required for certain students. Often, as in the ALP program, this means enrolling students in the required credit-bearing course along with a co-requisite designed to give them relevant support for the mainstream course.

In redesigning curricula to promote the retention of more students originally placed in developmental courses, institutions also need to consider the issue of academic credit. In addition to the shame and disappointment that students experience when they are placed in “remedial” courses, another reason they often choose not to enroll is that they resent spending time and money (or financial aid) on non-credit courses that do not count toward a college degree. Whether or not to give academic credit for the support courses designed to accelerate students’ progress was a subject of discussion on the WPA (Writing Program Administrators) listserv in the summer of 2016. A number of respondents described the systems that had been worked out at their colleges. Peter Adams explained that with co-req models such as ALP, the companion course is no longer a “remedial” class emphasizing basic skills but rather one that shares the same goals as the credit-level composition course, “perhaps with the addition of goals in the areas of non-cognitive issues or integrated reading” (Re: “Student Retention and Success”). Because the goals of the companion courses are college-level, Adams believes there is no longer any reason why students should not receive regular college credit, and he urges administrators to argue for awarding credit for the college-level work students are doing in these courses (Re: “Student Retention and Success”).

The developers of ALP have done a great deal to analyze and document the program’s success in ways that not only justify its pedagogical assumptions but demonstrate the cost effectiveness of the “acceleration” model.³ These arguments appeal not only to faculty members and students but also to college administrators concerned with keeping costs down. Since 2009, ALP has held an annual Conference on Acceleration in Developmental Education (CADE), where faculty and administrators from institutions across the country can learn about this approach and begin to think about how to adapt the acceleration model for use on their own campuses. These dissemination efforts have been extremely

effective. Currently, programs based on the ALP model have been implemented in at least 240 colleges across the United States (Adams, Re: “Developmental Writing at Small Schools”). At a time when support for higher education is being cut and so-called remedial programs are being eliminated without anything to replace them, this success is noteworthy as thousands of students receive support in writing while at the same time making progress toward their undergraduate degrees.

Ending Remediation as We Know It

More than thirty years ago, in an influential *College English* article entitled “The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University,” Mike Rose called for abandoning the problematic concept of remediation. The article begins with quotations of four statements that were commonly heard in the university in those days—and, sadly, still are today—about such subjects as “errors,” “skills,” student “illiteracy,” “standards,” and “remediation.” Rose goes on to carefully deconstruct each of these concepts, showing how the language reveals flawed thinking and, ultimately, limits the opportunities of students who are judged to be “underprepared” for college work. Rose concludes with these words:

Remediation. It is time to abandon this troublesome metaphor. To do so will not blind us to the fact that many entering students are not adequately prepared to take on the demands of university work. In fact, it will help us perceive these young people and the work they do in ways that foster appropriate notions about language development and use, that establish a framework for more rigorous and comprehensive analysis of their difficulties, and that do not perpetuate the raree show of allowing them entrance to the academy while, in various symbolic ways, denying them full participation. (357)

Obviously, much more is involved in transforming a program from a “remedial” model to one that welcomes its students into the university as full participants than just changing its name. Almost ten years ago, faculty at CCBC took on this challenge in a serious way, working together to develop a program, eventually known as ALP, based on the notion of “acceleration” rather than “remediation.”

In her article “Stuck in the Remedial Rut: Confronting Resistance to ESL Curriculum Reform,” Shawna Shapiro recounts the complexities involved in a similar effort at transforming a university ESL program. In this case, reimagining the program involved “a paradigm shift from deficiency to diversity” (41). As she points out, “discursive changes alone” would not have been enough to bring about real and lasting change (41). But part of the mission of reform does involve reconceptualizing how we describe the program’s students and how we formulate its goals. For the program Shapiro studied, this meant talking about students as “multilingual” rather than “ESL” and characterizing the program as providing “support” rather than focusing on students’ “linguistic deficits” (41). As she expresses it, “. . . language matters—not just the academic language we teach in our courses, but the language we use to talk about our programs” (41).

As with any serious effort at curricular reform, the efforts at CCBC required a great deal of its faculty, administrators, and students. Much time and effort have gone into curriculum development, faculty development, scheduling, and staffing. But the ultimate success of the program speaks for itself. One of many reasons for this success is the way ALP reframes basic writing as “acceleration” rather than “remediation.” Instead of assuming that students must be “remediated” before they can handle college-level writing, ALP begins with the much more positive assumption that, with appropriate support and individual attention, students will be able to succeed.

Of course, no single approach will be able to ensure the success of every student who is unprepared to deal with the kinds of thinking and writing needed to cope with college-level work. But in the nine years of its existence, the ALP model has established an impressive record of success at its original location in Baltimore and in many other institutions around the country. One reason for this success is the individualized attention to the needs of specific students that is structured into this model. When faculty members are able to work with a small group of students who are also enrolled in their regular composition course, they are able to really get to know these students—their strengths, their needs, their life challenges—and they are able to address problems by connecting students with sources of

support available within the institution and the wider community (Adams et al. 58-63). Not only are students helped by this more personalized approach to learning but faculty often find this to be “the most rewarding teaching they [have] ever done” (Adams et al. 58).

Now, nearly ten years since ALP was initiated at CCBC, the program has been expanded to serve many more students. In fall 2016, the ALP courses at CCBC also began to include reading as well as writing, further shortening the pipeline of required developmental courses. Students with placements into upper-level developmental reading and writing can now meet both requirements by taking the ALP companion course while simultaneously enrolled in credit-bearing composition taught by the same instructor. Separate sections of upper-level developmental reading or writing are no longer being offered (“Important Change in the ALP Model”).

The program has also been widely disseminated across the country, partly through the annual Conference on Acceleration in Developmental Education. One of the highlights of the most recent CADE conference, held in Baltimore in June 2016, was a panel discussion on “Equity and Acceleration.” After nearly an hour of discussion, each of the three panelists was asked to conclude with a brief piece of advice for conference attendees. Mark Williams, Director of Career Services at CCBC, said: “Words have power. How we have framed developmental education to our students is important.” This statement emphasizes the importance of renaming *and* reframing remedial programs. With the continuing success of acceleration programs such as ALP perhaps there is finally hope for ending remediation as we know it.

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Notes

1. In his 1985 *College English* article “The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University,” Mike Rose examined the history and connotations of this term at some length and concludes: “... the

notion of remediation, carrying as it does the etymological wisps and traces of disease, serves to exclude from the academic community those who are so labelled. They sit in scholastic quarantine until their disease can be diagnosed and remedied” (p. 352).

2. In recent years, the number of ALP students in each composition course has been increased to ten with the total enrollment remaining at twenty (*ALP*).

3. The ALP website has many charts documenting different aspects of student success at CCBC. One especially compelling statistic is that, based on three years of data, 74 percent of ALP students pass the credit-bearing composition course the first time around (Adams “The Human Side”).

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