

STILL “STRANGERS IN ACADEMIA”: *Five Basic Writers’ Stories*

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2009/2010 DOUBLE ISSUE

← ... [A]s to the great mass of working-people, the state of misery and insecurity in which they live now is as low as ever, if not lower. The East End of London is an ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery and desolation, of starvation when out of work, and degradation, physical and moral, when in work. (12)

– Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1845

... The third group contained the true outsiders. Natives, for the most part, of New York, graduates of the same public school system as the other students, they were nonetheless strangers in academia, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them. (2-3)

– Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, 1977

A basic writing course I taught in spring 2009 reminded me of the difficult road many students at my university must walk in order to enter college and attain a bachelor’s degree. Of the 22 students in my class, at least a quarter of them at some point in the semester wrote or talked about personal problems or situations that adversely affected their academic performance. While some students had reasonably good skills, others were very under-prepared, and among those who seemed more capable of academic achievement many were overwhelmed by parental illness, job loss, and other life stresses compounded by strained financial resources and living conditions.

Their stories reflect material and socioeconomic realities that mitigate against educational success and are often, but not always, accompanied by weak literacy skills and/or a narrow knowledge base.¹ Crucial to understanding the construction and, in many places, the elimination of basic writing in higher education, these realities continue to raise vexing questions for us as teachers and scholars: What defines a “basic writer” and how can we begin to understand that term as it has come to be used across institutions from community colleges to Ivy Leagues? Do

¹ These social realities are rooted in the expansion of capitalism, colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow, and persistent imperialist, racist, anti-worker policies. One need only look at recent statistics on the recession’s impact: the *New York Times* reports that eighty-five percent of recent homeowner defaults occurred in Black and Latino neighborhoods (Powell and Roberts). With respect to skills and knowledge, some children in lower income families perform well in school but many do not because they lack exposure to mainstream literacy (see, e.g., Heath). Although they may become literate in communities to which they have access, they are far less likely than their middle class counterparts to have dominant literacy skills needed for mainstream academic success. According to the Nelson Denny Reading test, administered last fall to a cohort of 200 students at my university, basic writers are reading on average at a ninth grade level.

non-dominant primary discourses such as ethnic dialects or Black English impede literacy learning at the college level? If most speakers (at least in some parts of the world) are multilingual code-switchers, why do so many basic writers have difficulty learning academic discourse? How long should it take them? What should we expect of their writing at the end of one or two semesters? By the time they receive their B.A. degrees? Are we still mainly concerned about persistent errors, syntactical cohesion, awareness of genre and audience, and/or development and organization of content? How are these elements of writing related? To what extent do improved teaching methods result in academic success and higher retention rates among this population of writers, and how do we measure such success?

In our professional discourse about basic writers we have gone from studies of the logic of error (Shaughnessy) to critiques of essentialism (Lu) and apartheid (Shor), condemnation of the violence of literacy (Stuckey), research on extracurricular and “other literate” writing (Roozen; McCrary), new approaches to teaching grammar (Weaver), and theories of appropriation (Bartholomae), dialogue (Bialostosky), and literacy as a social practice (Carter). Post-process literacy theorists look to genre as a key to demystify the language of power for non-elite writers (Cope and Kalantzis). Linguists argue that literacy acquisition occurs in social contexts that place individuals whose primary discourse is farthest from secondary discourses of school and profession at a disadvantage to their counterparts born into the dominant culture (Heath; Gee). Critics of such theories, concerned about their implications for students historically oppressed along racial, ethnic, and class lines, cite examples of members of disenfranchised groups who have succeeded academically and professionally by dint of encouragement, hard work, and committed teachers who believed in their students’ capacity to learn and taught the “... ‘superficial features’ of middle class discourse—grammar, style, mechanics...” (Delpit 199).

Added to this mix of scholarly perspectives are heated political calls to raise standards for college-level admissions and increase standardized testing of K-12 students. The tacit assumption is that education is the locus of the problem of poor student performance to be rectified by curriculum revision, testing, and assessment. If only we develop a better method or create a better test, we will somehow eliminate the need for remedial instruction and close the “education gap” between middle class, predominantly white students and their working-class, poor, frequently nonwhite counterparts. In fact, the actual impact of raising admissions standards at state and city public universities has been to eliminate not the need for remediation but the students themselves, with steep declines reported in Black and Latino enrollment (See Arenson and Lewin).

The stories I share here by and about students in my basic writing class form the basis of a counterargument to the belief that their unpreparedness for college can be solved solely or even primarily by educators. Instead, I argue that the root causes of weak literacy and other academic skills are not located in the sphere of education—teachers, curricula, methods—but rather in oppressive social structures and growing economic inequality. Driving the reform of K–post-secondary education is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its regime of high stakes tests accompanied by corporate monopoly control of textbooks, electronic data collection, and a

national fixation with assessment. I frequently hear colleagues in higher education assert that unless we assume responsibility for outcomes assessment ourselves, someone else—Margaret Spellings in the Bush administration and now Arne Duncan in Obama’s—will impose it on us from above. To ensure compliance, the regional accrediting bodies have adopted the rhetoric of assessment as their primary evaluative tool, causing colleges and universities to place increasing emphasis on it and figure out how to “do” it in ways faculty will “buy into.” Despite the intrinsic need for evaluative practices in teaching, the current fetishization of assessment too often serves to conceal what Jonathan Kozol aptly called “savage inequalities”—a socioeconomic divide that is unlikely to diminish at this juncture of our nation’s history.

My purpose here is not to minimize the importance of teaching methods, curricular reform, or composition theory and research, nor to contest the value of multi-leveled assessment in education. Indeed, some of the external, political pressures on basic writing have led to exciting innovations such as the Stretch Program at Arizona State University (Glau) and the Accelerated Learning Project at Community College Baltimore County (Adams), both of which have demonstrated increased pass rates after integrating under-prepared students into regular first year composition courses and providing them with additional academic support. For the basic writing class in question here, I continued to explore a thematic focus on language and literacy which I initially taught several semesters ago and modeled in part on the “writing studies” first year composition course described by Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs in “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning ‘First-Year Composition’ as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies.’” Although further study is needed on the impact of the theme on learning outcomes for developmental writers, the preliminary results are promising, though uneven, in terms of improved student performance perhaps as a consequence of increased awareness of literacy as a social phenomenon and an ongoing process of development. In other words, I am not suggesting that academic unpreparedness is rooted in either macro or micro causes. Rather, I share the stories of these five students and their struggles to become educated as a reminder of how structural social issues, beyond the reach of academia, interact with teaching and learning. I argue that the stories demonstrate both the limits of education as a panacea to social problems and the students’ capacity to benefit from effective college-level instruction.

The need for basic writing courses that serve non-elite students stems from social structures of privatization, deregulation, deindustrialization, and entrenched racism, which in turn lead to increased poverty, job loss, geographical isolation, alienation and its effects, such as resistance to schooling, drug addiction, and crime, poor health, and grossly unequal funding for public schools. These material conditions will continue to produce large numbers of poorly educated high school students, albeit with some happy exceptions to the rules of failure and attrition, no matter how much we test them or how many times we revise our goals and methods. As teachers, we need to be able to explain these realities to the public, to advocate for the kinds of students whose stories I tell here and point out their promise. We need to make clear that the problem is neither *theirs* nor *ours* but rather stems from a social order that bails out banks rather than give all the people “an equal crack at the dough,” as Sugar puts it in Toni Cade Bambara’s “The Lesson,” one of the stories my students puzzled over last spring.

Throughout the semester, Peta-gay.² sat near the window of a depressing, crowded classroom with spitting steam pipes and flaking paint on the walls. In a first-year basic writing class at a private university, she is typical in several respects of its predominantly female, minority, working class, first-generation population. On the morning of the day she was scheduled to workshop her first essay, a literacy autobiography, she sent me an incoherent electronic draft. I was first perplexed by the odd spelling errors and fractured syntax, then relieved, if surprised, to discover that she had composed the essay on her cell phone while riding the subway. The first paragraph reads:

As a child growing up education was the number one rule in my household. Be for any my brother and sister started school we all the talk about how important education is the key to life to be successful. As a young child walking into elementary school, a place where I was told that you sit in one classroom the whole day, listen to what the teacher have to say, and move only when you was allow to. To me was not a place I really wonted to be. A especially at the age 7 when all I can think about is fun, fun, fun.

She seemed to listen thoughtfully to the gentle peer critique of her essay, met with me in my office to conference on the essay, and managed to get a passing grade on the final draft. However, her in-class writing continued to be illegible and incoherent—both qualities making it virtually unreadable—and I anticipated she would fail the course.

When we discussed her literacy autobiography in my office, I asked why she had found high school so difficult.

“Cause I got into fights.”

“What kind of fights?”

“You know fights. I would fight with other girls.”

“Why?”

“I guess I had to defend myself.”

In her second essay, in which she was asked to document one person’s perspective on life in New York City at the turn of the 21st century, an assignment that grew out of our reading the city as a text, she wrote about her history as a fighter:

² All students have been given pseudonyms and their writing is reproduced verbatim, including errors, following several revisions of first drafts.

My principal was telling them that he didn't want to take me back in the school, that I was not going to graduate and that I would have to go to a boot camp to control me because I was out of control. My mother made a deal with my principal to take me back in the school and promised that I was going to follow the rules or else I was going to go to Haiti. My parents always said those words to my brothers and sisters when we were doing badly in school but this time they sounded so serious I was really scared because the tone of their voices was not normal for them. The way people made Haiti sound, my brothers, sisters and I did not want to live nor even go there to visit.

When the fights continued, migrating from schoolyards, now off limits, to Peta-gay's neighborhood, her parents sent her against her will to live with an aunt in Poughkeepsie. There, despite her initial resistance, she found a more welcoming, accepting community in which her peers befriended her and she was able to lower her defenses. Of her new cohort, she writes:

They was nothing like my friends in Queen; they gave me the attention without me even working for it or fighting anybody. They accepted me for who I was and not for what I was trying to be. At first I found it very weird because I was not used to it but after a while I learn to love it because I was being me and not someone else.

In the conclusion to her essay, she reflects on her experience in Poughkeepsie:

I grew up to forgive my parents and accepted the decision they made for my life. I even forgave my aunty and explained to her how I felt the whole time I was living there and how I felt growing up. We shared some tears but ended with laughter in our heart for each other. Everything worked out for the best in my life; I made it to college, go to church and am happy how my life ended up for the best. I am a new person with a big heart, and big dreams, who is going to fight to get her way to the top. I have a lot in common with Audre Lorde's recollection of her childhood in "A New Spelling of My Name." Lorde explains that she just wanted to be loved; she wanted help but did not know how to get it until a children's librarian ask her what she good at and what she want to do, she just began to tell her feeling, the teacher help her to show her talent. Like Lorde, I wanted a way out but did not know how to go about it until my parents and aunty made a way for me and put me under there wing. Now I have a new spelling of my name.

To my surprise, Peta-gay succeeds here not only in narrating a story I find both poignant and enlightening but also in resolving the tension in the narrative with a reflective ending that circles back to Lorde's story, an earlier course reading. Peta-gay thereby claims her own authority as a reader and writer, substituting "a new spelling" of her name for the one already referred to in such strikingly different (though not on her part consciously compared) terms: "Fighting became my first, middle, and last name." I was so impressed by her accomplishment that I urged her to submit the essay to a departmental contest for the best essay written by a basic writer. Although I was pretty certain she would not win the award, I genuinely felt the essay had merit and wanted to encourage her to work hard to correct numerous grammatical and spelling errors in early

drafts and to draw more pointed conclusions about the meaning of her experience beyond her own sense of redemption and personal transformation. I wanted, in particular, to know more about what produced the conditions that made her so angry and out of control, and what specifically about her experience in Poughkeepsie had enabled her to graduate from high school and get to college, ready “to fight to get [her] way to the top” rather than pummel one of her classmates.

In other words, I wanted her to interrogate her own text—her own assumptions. In accord with the assignment’s requirement “to reflect on the larger meanings of the story in relation to city life in the 21st century,” I pushed her in my response to her first draft to reflect more critically on her personal narrative:

The only part of the draft that seems to suggest an idea or ideas is the first paragraph in which you discuss change. Let me try to clarify them for you by paraphrasing your own writing as follows: At certain points in life, change is inevitable and may be positive or negative. Attempts to change for the better may be hindered by peer pressure and a lack of “help” or role models. Some individuals choose to continue to act “for the worse” because they think it suits them. You were one of those children who did want to change but kept that desire a secret because the way you behaved seemed to be your only choice given your environment.

I went on to restate my sense of the narrative intent of Peta-gay’s essay in more interpretive language that she could appropriate or contest.

Is that more or less what you want to say in that paragraph? If so, go on to figure out your focus in this essay. If not, what do you want to communicate? What have you “come to say” to your reader? What insights do you have about your experience? How can you help other people, who would tend to view your behavior as very bad indeed, to understand the causes of that behavior and why it was so difficult for you to change?

Although subsequent revisions showed improvement in grammar and spelling, Peta-gay was not able to move much beyond the first draft in response to my request for clarification and elaboration of her ideas. She did, however, express enormous pleasure at having been encouraged to submit her essay to the contest, which she predictably did not win, and she passed the course with a C+. Despite considerable progress in these respects, she continued to lag behind in course readings and participation in class discussions. Whether she will be able to channel her fighting spirit into intellectual pursuits and stay in college remains to be seen.

Another student, Shari, could be personable and engaged, aware of and able mostly to play by the academic rules; yet she also resisted authority when it irked her and was unapologetically critical of the system that had placed her in a remedial English course. One day she walked into class ten or fifteen minutes late in the middle of a discussion, stopped short, waved, hands on her hips, and said, “Hi everyone.”

“Shari,” I said, “What are you thinking? Don’t do that. It’s disruptive enough that you’re late but please don’t make a grand entrance, too.”

Our eyes met, she registered that she understood my annoyance with her, nodded, and sat without a fuss. I liked Shari and so did her classmates. She bonded with many of them, including Zopa, a slender young Tibetan man whose family had fled to India when the Chinese invaded Tibet, and several young women who all kept track of each other’s whereabouts with cell phones and text messaging. In her literacy autobiography, Shari wrote that her kindergarten teacher was “the most caring and patient woman” she had ever encountered and that her mother “wasn’t as kind or patient so it was a ‘breath of fresh air.’” When she came to my office for a conference about her draft, I pointed out that the negative comparison of her mother to her kindergarten teacher raised questions about her mother’s character that she had to address somehow either by eliminating the reference altogether or giving more information in the essay. I tried to make clear that I was not prying into her personal life and that as a writer she needed to choose what and how much to reveal. She waved my concern away and said, “It’s okay. My mother’s crazy. I don’t mind talking about it.”

I must have communicated through a gesture or facial expression that I thought she was using the word “crazy” in the vernacular because she corrected me: “No, I mean she’s really crazy. She’s been in and out of institutions all my life. She’s schizophrenic and bipolar and she’s really mean and nasty.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s all right. I learned to deal with her a long time ago. She don’t bother me. It’s just something I gotta live with.” With her usual aplomb, she dismissed my concern at the same time she acknowledged the burden she had carried all her life. I could also see that she had understood what I had said and was considering how to handle the rhetorical problem. In the final draft, she omitted any mention of her mother. Not long afterward, she was uncharacteristically absent for several classes in a row. When she did return, I learned that her mother had refused to pay the rent, they were facing eviction, and Shari had missed class in order to go to court to settle the matter.

Also in her literacy autobiography, she describes her struggle to retain her elementary school reputation as one of the “smart kids” in middle school, where she was placed in an “average” class. Initially told by a guidance counselor that she wasn’t “good enough” for an honors class, she persevered, got good grades, and was finally invited in eighth grade by the assistant principal to join honors. She continued to be in honors English in high school only to be devastated by low scores on the New York State Regents and SAT writing tests. In response to being placed into an “accredited remedial” English course this past semester, she declares, “Again, feeling ‘stupid’ because last I remember we worked through High School to get to the college level, and even as part of the Top 15 percent of the graduating class, I managed to be somewhat inadequate in my writing abilities.”

For David, a recent Haitian immigrant with a thick accent and a relatively good education indicative of middle class status—his grandfather, he mentions in one essay, was a coffee and cocoa grower—it is the English language that presents him in the short term with the toughest challenges. But he is also the product of violent political conflict in Haiti and now, in the U.S., an economy that is likely to undermine his chances of success in college and the workplace. In an essay titled “The Terror Regime,” a response to the threat depicted by Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451* of a world in which books are deemed dangerous and burned and houses are inflammable, David writes:

Not long ago the world was covered by the darkness. The thoughts were controlled and the mind and the voices were no longer part of the human body. People were becoming like a robot, programmed to do what it said to do. The dictatorship was fierce and the government was controlling everything and everybody. This is in this period of time that I first touch the world, that I first started to breathe but I knew that I will be born in this period I would ask my mom to put me back in for another twelve months. As I started to grow up I noticed that the world around me was not happy. Everybody were struggling, the feeling of freedom was taken by the government ... This period was Haiti in the twentieth century, the country were governed by the dictatorship of the Duvaliers (Father then Son) “Papa Doc and Baby Doc.” They ruled Haiti with brute force and terror, with a ruthless security force the “Tontons Macoutes” acting as real life bogeyman who routinely executed his opponent.

Weaving the historical realities of Haiti together with the futuristic dystopia imagined by Bradbury, David goes on to describe the impact of the “terror regime” on his own family:

As a child I did not really care about what was going on around me. That became a real matter to me when my big brother was suddenly disappeared. All my family was shock and they could do nothing than accept the fact their son is dead. My brother named Franck was a militant, he was against the system and he started to fight against it since he was 20 years old. The government discovered that he was sending anonymous letters to other fellows and persuade other people to revolt against the government. One night around 11PM they sent the Macoutes to my house and arrest my brother, since then I never see my brother again. His soul and his body were transformed into smoke. His death make me realize how it was important for him to fight for freedom, he knew the dangers that he risked but he did not care, it was like going to suicide. I decided then to finish his work but my family never wanted me to because it was like accepting to loose another child but nothing could not stop even the fear of the death. I was just 17 and I was ready to fight for what I believe is right, ready to put people out of their cage and stop the process of robotization.

Throughout the semester, in his writing and his participation in class discussions, David demonstrated his capacity for academic achievement and intellectual growth. In his literacy

autobiography, he recalls not only top levels of academic attainment in Haiti but also ease of learning that in some cases made him slough off on his studies or earn faint praise such as that given him by a high school math teacher, irked by his behavior: "I can't understand that. You're always sleeping in the class but you always do well on the exams." Nevertheless, despite his academic prowess, his prospects in Haiti were bleak:

I was a little traumatized about my future because I knew in Haiti it is very hard to get a diploma with these entire politics crisis, as I noticed in the first place Haiti had a lot of political issues: kidnapping, insecurity and poverty.

Able to immigrate to the U.S. because his father had established residence in New York City, he writes: "Now I have a new life, a new departure. Being in a different culture I have to adapt to my new life and learn anything possible in this society. English is not my first language, sometimes I feel really down because of that." Thus for the time being, this new life constrains as much as it liberates him: "I used to be a good speaker and writer in Haiti but for now because of a lack of English I can't really express myself as I want to in a conversation. I am so uncomfortable with this situation"

Zopa, the Tibetan student who grew up in India after his family immigrated there in the late 1950s, has the ability to succeed academically but his writing lacks polish and often seems to have been dashed off at the last minute. In his essay based on "reading" the city, he writes movingly about a demonstration at Union Square protesting the fiftieth year of Chinese rule in Tibet.

There was more than 3,000 Tibetans who came to the protest. It gave me goose bumps seeing so many Tibetans at the same place at the same time. During the protest, I met my friend from high school so we decided to tag along. She was very dedicated and she was screaming her lungs out. She was shouting, "Tibet belongs to Tibetans!" "China out of Tibet now" and "We want human rights". Seeing her motivated me to shout "Free Tibet" too. I attended the protest because I was representing my country and my people who died fighting for their rights and who are still fighting for their rights in Tibet. I shouted for more than five hours straight.

Later in the essay, he explains his deep sense of personal connection to the protest:

My grandmother was the one who experienced running away to India. She had told me about her journey to India from Tibet so many times that I remember the whole story. Later on I found out that my grandmother skipped some parts of the story because she gets very depressed when I ask her about her voyage. Therefore, I asked my mom and she told me some parts that was not mentioned to me by my grandmother. My mother had told me that grandmother was pregnant when she had to leave Tibet and she had already two kids. My mom wasn't sure about the kid names, on their way to India my

grandmother lost her baby and two of the kids. I now understand why my grandmother was not willing to tell me those parts of the story because it is very depressing.

Zopa's writing was uneven throughout the semester and I felt he did not fully develop his ideas or engage in meaningful revision of drafts to the extent that he might have. However, more than inadequate literacy skills and English as second language challenges, it is the historical and social forces with which he must contend daily that are likely to derail his college education: the effects of deficient schooling in India, where he lived with his uncle in impoverished conditions, the multiple familial and cultural displacements he has experienced, and the tough economic future he faces as a young, immigrant college student without many resources to draw on. The foremost lesson Zopa remembers his uncle teaching him—the same dominant narrative of class mobility so familiar to us in the U.S.—is this: to avoid the lot of a poor farmer with no opportunities for improvement, Zopa needs to pursue his education. As he puts it:

Education is one of the most significant parts of human's life. Without education one is worthless. Growing up in a poor community, where education is not as important as earning your bread to survive was a discouragement to strive for education. Living in India was a great experience to recognize the importance of educations, people manage to live there life by farming or working for others.

Of these students, the most tenuously positioned to succeed in college is Peta-gay. While all four would be considered “basic writers” in most institutions, lacking sufficient control over language, knowledge of conventions, and analytical depth to survive first year composition, each of them, as Shari puts it, “somewhat inadequate” in their writing abilities, it is only Peta-gay whose shaky grammatical, syntactical, and critical thinking skills seriously jeopardize her *academic* progress. Given tolerable living conditions and continuing opportunities to attain a college education, Shari, David, and Zopa *can* succeed. Even Peta-gay, with a great deal of support and encouragement, has the potential to develop the skills she will need to remain in college and keep afloat, assuming the nation can do so as well, in an increasingly turbulent economy. However, learning never occurs in a vacuum, and the real challenge for these students as we enter the second decade of the 21st century will be to surmount the social deracination and economic misery that sadly echoes conditions not unlike those in my epigram of Engels' description of 19th century England. Indeed, notes Mike Davis in his devastating 2006 book *Planet of Slums*, we can “ponder the excremental and existential continuities” (138) of the urban poor from the world Engels knew to that depicted in Meja Mwangi's novel *Going Down River Road*, set in Nairobi in the 1970s.

Nor have conditions in higher education changed for the better since Ira Shor described the phenomenon of “warehousing labor in colleges” in 1980. Shor's trenchant analysis of the structural need for a “cooling-out” process for unemployed high school graduates, shut out of a rapidly shrinking work force, is even truer now as unemployment rates top ten percent and job prospects diminish for even the most qualified college graduates. Likewise Jean Anyon's empirical study in 1980 of five elementary schools bears out theories of the role social class

plays in determining the goals, methods, philosophies, and outcomes of education in different social strata. Patrick Finn's 1999 reprise of Anyon's study, (2nd edition 2009), concludes that these same structures are very much in place today. Meanwhile, the tension between vocational training and liberal arts education intensifies as schools, teachers, and students dealing with unchanged or poorer conditions and dwindling budgets struggle to meet federal, state, and city legislatures' demands for educational reform. In the name of improving education for all students, the Obama Administration appears to be pursuing an even more aggressive role for federal regulation of education than Bush's No Child Left Behind legislation, awarding \$4.3 billion grants to states that comply with its school reform agenda, including support for charter schools and the expanded use of standardized test scores to evaluate teachers.

The upshot of this shell game is that teachers at every level from kindergarten through graduate school are under mounting pressure to demonstrate improvement in students whose potential for academic success is undermined not by native intelligence or lack of good classroom instruction but by social conditions ranging from fragmented families and homes without books to the stresses of immigration, second language acquisition, low-income, crime-ridden neighborhoods, and a consumer-driven culture. While scholars like Delpit and Gilyard argue persuasively that most of us, given sufficient motivation and support, have the capacity for academic success, students who are deeply alienated are more likely to go on what Shor calls a "performance strike" (x), resisting an educational system that has often damaged rather than nurtured them even while they continue to see college as their ineluctable destination after high school. This catch 22 is obscured, Shor points out, by the widespread belief that the expansion of higher education to working people, minorities, and women reaffirms America's commitment to democracy. But the appearance given by recent education policies of inclusiveness and stricter standards conceals the impact of neoliberal policies like privatization and austerity, and effectively shifts the "locus of failure from the institution to the individual" (Shor 17). Thus students along with their teachers are blamed for poor academic performance, perpetuating a relentless search for pedagogical solutions to problems outside the province of school and sharpening the contradiction between the avowed aims of curricular reform and the complex ground on which they play out.

The progress of one other student, Daphne, over the course of the semester, shows the potential for authentic learning and personal growth despite the contradictions of mass education. I would put the questions her success raises as follows: To what extent can we expect undergraduates with poor to mediocre K-12 educations, working toward a devalued college degree for jobs that once required only a high school diploma to dedicate time and energy to study? Can someone like Daphne, who not only worked assiduously all semester long but also pushed herself and was able to make the critical leap in Bloom's taxonomy from learning factual content to deeply processing and generalizing what she learns, become the rule rather than the exception? If so, how can she serve as a model? What conclusions can be drawn from her success? A quiet, eager young woman, Daphne soaked up instruction in writing from peer critiques and my comments on her essays as well as knowledge of the course theme of language and literacy. By the end of the semester, she understood the difference between primary and secondary discourses, and

decoding and interpreting a text, and was able to go on to extrapolate from her own experience to a theory of literacy development in general. She writes in her last essay in response to Bradbury's novel:

When we can master the language of our discourse we begin to learn other discourses more effectively. Reading and writing is no longer a struggle when we have the language sealed... or is it? Some may say when they read a book it's useless because they do not remember anything they've just read. Maybe they were daydreaming the whole time or they weren't reading at all, but is this really what it is? When reading a book, it all comes down to detective work, reading word for word, annotating, analyzing and interpreting each sentence and paragraph so that the focus is much clearer. In the essay "Close Reading," Francine Prose says "Reading a masterpiece in a language for which you need a dictionary is in itself a course in reading word by word" (145). This means that requiring a dictionary to interpret the meaning of a word shows that one is closely reading and redefining the text all over again. To be able to give the analytical view of a story rather than giving its summary is being able to see the story from a different perspective; that is a bigger theme evolved from the theme already given.

Daphne concludes:

Now I speak through my writing and express my feelings through metaphors. Reading a book is based on a technique I call microscopic learning because I am closely observing the language and its content. Gathering more information from a text and subconsciously asking questions is a way that I teach myself. In a book, the narrator tells the story but the author sends a message that he or she wants the reader to understand. Understanding this message allows one to communicate back to the author and take a position or reflect on the text. I've cracked the code now. I understand what I've always misunderstood: how to decode the message in books takes skill and strategy, but we can only get better through immersion into reading. I now have the answer and no longer need to find out the purpose of books or what they're meant for. Now, I am able to sit down and read a book without feeling stressed that I won't be able to finish, intimidated by its secret code. We must save books because they make us more knowledgeable about the deeper meanings of life. They educate and make us noble about the world. We can now master the language and travel. These places in books help one to become a literate reader like me.

The kind of student whose responsiveness to instruction endears her to her professors, given the chance, Daphne has the potential to go on not only to complete her bachelor's degree but also to pursue further studies and a successful career. Her level of engagement is rare among any cohort of undergraduate students I teach, even the most highly skilled and brightest. She demonstrates what a student placed—correctly, I think—into a basic writing class can accomplish. Although she still bears the traces of an inexperienced writer's missteps with diction, syntax, and interpretation, she has internalized a sense of her own authority as a writer and a thinker and she is curious and eager, as she puts it, to "crack the code" of the various discourses she is likely to

encounter. Interestingly, she was visibly displeased with some of my critiques of her writing. In particular, she defended her language when I called its clarity into question.

For example, she resisted a suggestion I made to change the title of her literacy autobiography from “A Success in Progress” to “A Work in Progress.” She refers to herself in the title and her own evolving identity as a reader and writer, and understandably, names herself a “success” even though the phrase “success in progress” is less resonant than “work in progress,” leaving her with a last sentence that, however poignant, doesn’t quite cohere: “I am not the best yet and until I become the best that I can be in my education, my success will still be in progress.” In general, however, she was skeptical of my suggestions for revision and politely challenged my comments on precision and diction throughout the semester. She writes in her literacy autobiography:

Eventually, I ventured into the rhythm of rap and discovered that I had style. It wasn’t the style that everyone lost touch with after a month or two wearing the same sneakers. No, I spoke the truth; put words into metaphors that made people interested; changed the English secondary discourse and empowered discouraged illiterate minds; challenged those who thought I could not write well and left traces of inquisitive faces.

Daphne’s ability to resist and embrace instruction further enabled her to engage seriously in critical reading and writing as she internalized new techniques and approaches to invention, revision, and craft. Not every student has this capacity to engage in productive acts of resistance that foster rather than derail learning. But we can help them develop it by nurturing their talents and fostering genuine interest in word and world at the same time we press them to sharpen their thinking, acquire new discursive skills, and appropriate conventions that enable fuller participation in the discourse communities in which they study, work, and live. Gee’s theory of the complementary roles of practice in developing such skills on the one hand and meta-cognitive knowledge about the systems governing them on the other is a key to achieving these goals. In keeping with Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs’ report on their success in focusing on writing studies to “improve students’ understanding of writing, rhetoric, language, and literacy” in first year composition instruction, this dual focus on practice and knowledge of literacy in a basic writing course promises similar gains for so-called basic writers.

Each of the students whose stories are included here sat in the same basic writing class. Although their situations, capacities, and performances vary widely, together they portray the realities of masses of students in the U.S. whose everyday lives are fraught with social and economic hardships, not unlike the “ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery” Engels describes in 19th century England and far beyond the reach of educational reform. We can test these students in elementary and high school, remand them to community colleges for remediation, invent boot camp for them, as Peta-gay suggests, and continually reinvent the curricular wheel. But these measures, however legitimate they may be in the narrower context of methods, curriculum, assessment and standards, fail to address underlying social structures of displacement, poverty, unemployment, and racism that account for the disproportionately high numbers of working class and poor students of color who test into remedial classes or community colleges. Until

these structures are transformed politically, such students will continue, at best, to be placed in basic writing (or the equivalent) or, at worst, once again become “true outsiders ... strangers in academia.”³

³ Fiore and Elsasser’s hopeful 1982 *College English* article, “Strangers No More: A Liberatory Literacy Curriculum,” reflects the opening in higher education created by basic writing instruction and open admissions. We appear now to have gone full cycle so that Shaughnessy’s words “true outsiders ... strangers in academia” resonate once more with national trends remanding basic writing to community colleges and noncredit programs.

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