Tearing Down the Walls:
Towards an Interdisciplinary Field of Basic Writing

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"Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" As a teenager behind the Iron Curtain in the German Democratic Republic, I thought this was one of the strangest things I had ever heard. My friends and I wondered where Ronald Reagan got his information. As far as we were concerned, Mr. Gorbachev did not have that much to do with building the thing in the first place. After the *wende* (change), I never thought I would think much about Reagan's quote, but it came back to me suddenly and without warning as I listened to the presenters of "Diving In, Diving Farther, Diving Deeper: The Future of Basic Writing" at the 2009 CCCC conference in San Francisco.

Being primarily concerned with the area of Basic Writing, this session looked like it would be one not to miss. I went expecting that it would provide an aerial snapshot of the Basic Writing landscape, and, in a sense, it did. It confirmed that Basic Writing, like other "remedial" skills courses were, indeed, political. It provided a picture of undervalued contingent faculty and increasingly dwindling resources. Additionally, it provided example after example of how best practices were not necessarily being instituted because of the inability to navigate institutional barriers despite our best intentions. Finally, and most importantly, it showed me that we may well have ourselves to blame for much of this. How can this be?

If you knew me, you would know that I hate conferences and I have tried to shake this hatred for years. Generally, I refer to conferences--all conferences, regardless of the discipline--as the "Sisters and Brothers of Perpetual Repetition." I find them boring. I find them unimaginative and uninspiring (and sometimes, more tragically, incorrect). Sitting in sessions often takes me back to my school days and rambling redundancies of my dear old schoolmarm, Mrs. Gafni, who had passed away ten or fifteen years before anyone bothered to tell her about it. This attitude shames me. How, after all, could I expect to get anything out of it if my mindset wasn't interested in giving it a chance in the first place?

This year, however, was different. Sure, I entered many sessions looking as if I had just emerged from a colonoscopy, but the cognitive wheels in my head were spinning in ways that a visit to an annual conference hadn't produced in ages. Not exclusively, but primarily through my experiences with this session on Basic Writing, I was able to make a resolution that I suspect, at least in some small way, I had been inching towards for quite some time: if we are going to change the current Basic Writing landscape and create a brighter future for our profession then we have to tear down discipline-bound walls and put the focus back on helping our students

acquire the skills they need to navigate the academy and the professional world, dispelling the darkness of institutional and legislative ignorance by doing what we claim to do best: teach.

The context in which Basic Writing finds itself presently can arguably be related to larger issues in the field of rhetoric and composition, and while these issues are certainly complex, our continual unwillingness to deal with them in a sustained and serious ways serves no good. Interestingly enough, the current state of affairs shouldn't at all be surprising. Many of us had seen this coming for years and were frustrated that others could not see it as well. Like the predictive texts of our students who are products of the age of digital literacy, the elements of the narrative of unfolding which leads us to our present situation lined up one by one, and now we find ourselves in a situation that might, at least on the surface, appear to be insurmountable. Basic Writing programs are being relegated to the community college level, administrations are applying immense pressures on composition programs to produce results, position lines are disappearing, and, most importantly, our students are still under-prepared to handle the writing challenges of both the academy and the professions. We know this because this is what employers and other faculty members tell us— and quite often. Susan Naomi Bernstein was absolutely correct when she said that the future is looking bleak. I have to wonder, however, what share of the current problem we, as members of the composition profession, are willing to shoulder.

Like the crazy, alcoholic stepsister, Basic Writing has been locked in the cellar by Mother Composition for years. Basic writing and concerns about Basic Writing have been relegated to the bottom of the proverbial ivory tower, and now that writing is becoming a more centralized and important issue, we are not quite sure how to handle it. As is the case in many disciplines, lower- level writing and developmental courses have been left to graduate assistants and faculty members with the least seniority. In some cases, Basic Writing courses were housed away from Composition programs all together. This, I would argue, was less a case of inability, and more a case of intellectual snobbery. Faculty simply could not be bothered with the burden of remedial skills courses because of other more "scholarly" endeavors— all the while the enrollments in these basic skills courses were increasing and students were still reaching the final year of their undergraduate programs unable to write.

This line of argument, it should be noted, is not meant to negate the impact of the Roses and Shaughnessys and others who did important work in Basic Writing early on. Their insights indeed changed the way people understood the myriad of issues surrounding Basic Writing. Nonetheless my argument that not enough people took notice still stands. The majority of people in Composition maintained that Basic Writing was somehow outside of their purview, and not enough people realized, or perhaps cared, that the issues were going to become more and more important, and those that did found themselves quite overwhelmed by the burden.

In response to this neglect, some Basic Writing programs found themselves housed in other disciplines. In some cases, separate "academic skills" or "developmental skills" programs were established to handle developmental issues in both basic writing and basic math. In other cases,

Basic Writing programs were housed in linguistics, applied linguistics, and education departments. Some, especially in education and literacy programs, saw this charge as a blessing and began training their graduate students to teach basic writing. Despite these efforts, there was an elephant in the room: basic skills faculty and composition faculty, by and large, were not communicating with each other. They were not able to work together for continuity and to ensure some measure of success when these basic writing students transferred into first year composition courses. Why not?

Equally important to the present discussion is Composition's own struggle for legitimacy within the academy. Composition teacher-scholars have long been plagued with identity issues and have often found themselves involved in turf wars with Rhetoric, Literature, and other sub-disciplines that generally make up English departments. In this battle for power and prestige, some teacher-scholars in Composition have come to believe that the field somehow owns writing and, therefore, they seem to feel entitled to question the ability of academics from related areas who work in writing.

These teacher-scholars have blamed shortcomings in the skills of basic writing students on the faculty (often unprotected faculty) that teach these courses, while at the same time ignoring how these students have been transitioned from Basic Writing into college-level Composition courses; most importantly, such teacher-scholars have ignored their own role in this transition. I cannot begin to count how many times I have heard students' shortcomings in other courses blamed on teachers of Basic Skills courses. When I worked at one university in the south, the daily mantra of the Director of Composition was to publicly blame every problem her Advanced Composition students had on the contingent faculty that taught the first-year and developmental writing courses. Part of this was certainly an attempt to secure permanent faculty lines for more Composition faculty. The result, however, was the anger of the contingent faculty (who made up the majority of the writing faculty there), which resulted in hard feelings, the unwillingness to participate in collaborative teaching and scholarship, and, however arguable, a severe decrease in this individual's effectiveness as the Director of the program.

Perhaps I am being unnecessarily harsh. Turf wars are not specific to Composition. Indeed many disciplines are burdened with them. Many teacher-scholars find themselves unable to do what they set out to do because they are so utterly encumbered with things that have little to do with their primary responsibility of teaching. Apologies notwithstanding, we have played political games in pursuit of personal gains, while at the same time compromising the learning potential of our students and damaging the integrity of the teaching endeavor.

The bottom line is this: Basic Writing has fared poorly under the yoke of Composition because Composition simply does not seem to consider it an important part of its mission. Why? Why has a field that prides itself on its desire to "make waves" been so utterly reluctant at helping our under-prepared students? The answer is frighteningly clear: many haven't been trained to. If you have trouble believing this, simply peruse the graduate programs of many of the "top" composition programs in this country and you'll find that most of them have no mechanism for

training their graduate students in issues of Basic Writing. I suppose that this is why it was unsettling when Stephen Frazier, however earnestly, stated that he, as an Applied Linguist, shouldn't be directing a basic writing program. While I cannot claim to have any knowledge of his particular situation, I must say that I couldn't disagree with him more. The fact of the matter is that Basic Writing, at its core, is an interdisciplinary endeavor. Furthermore, and however blasphemous, Composition, at its very core, is also an interdisciplinary endeavor.

It may be that I cannot wrap my brain around this type of disciplinary politics because of the manner in which I came to work in Basic Writing, and later Composition. I started out as an Applied Linguist working in the areas of second language reading and writing. In graduate school, my job was to teach international undergraduate and graduate students the conventions of writing in American English, as well as to prepare them for their roles as teaching and research assistants in a variety of disciplines. After graduate school, I was hired to teach foreign languages and applied linguistics courses at a small suburban campus that served as one of the satellites of the large, state-funded, urban university where I did my doctorate.

This campus was experiencing a problem which was, at the time, new for them. Of the seven or eight full-time English faculty, only one of them held a degree in Composition. Compounding this problem was the fact that the university mandated a three-course composition sequence for all students. This meant that all of the English faculty had to teach approximately three composition courses per term-- a reality that was met with a huge amount of resistance from much of the faculty that was primarily concerned with Literature. Meanwhile, the school was experiencing a tremendous increase in enrollment due to suburban sprawl and a large number of these new, incoming students were placing in Basic Writing courses. While these students could have taken these courses at the main campus in the city, it was not a logistic possibility. The students placed in Basic Writing would have to take those courses on campus, and there was no one in the English faculty, including the Composition specialist, who felt that they could handle this population of students successfully.

Through the contacts I had at the satellite campus, my name somehow got around to the Composition specialist and she asked me if I would teach some of the Basic Writing courses on our campus. The rest, as they say, is history. From there I continued to teach more sections of Basic Writing, and I began teaching Composition courses that were part of the regular three-part composition sequence required of all students pursuing undergraduate degrees. Additionally, I became active in the writing placement program and worked on normative practices for our process-based portfolio review. I was, in essence, a non-native English speaking applied linguist working in Composition-- quite happily and quite successfully.

It really should not be all that surprising. My doctorate, a doctorate in literacy and applied linguistics, included thorough training in the current theories not only of Composition, but other related fields such as education, cognition, and other social sciences. That, coupled with my understanding of the theoretical paradigms of second language reading and writing, made the transition a smooth one. In a similar vein, I realized that the switch wasn't at all difficult because

what I was dealing with wasn't really a separate theoretical entity, but a continuation of the same theoretical framework.

Yes, my friends, however blasphemous it may sound, Composition theory was not handed down to scholars from Mount Sinai. It did not suddenly appear one day as some groundbreaking, earth-shattering new idea written in granite. As many scholars in rhetoric and composition have argued, elements of current Composition theory can be traced to theories from other disciplines, going all the way back to Plato. Take, as examples, the studio models, stretch models, and plus-one models which have attracted the attention of Composition scholars in recent years and which can be traced to Krashen's second language acquisition models developed in the seventies (see Krashen). Similarly, almost all of what we know about learning comes from the fields of education, psychology, and cognition. In fact, I would go so far as to claim that much of what we know about the teaching of writing does not come from Composition at all, at least originally. This leads directly to my bottom line: writing, a cognitive process whose functions rely on the theoretical underpinnings of a multitude of disciplines, cannot be claimed by one. Of course this very point has been argued by our earliest scholars in the field, and I do not mean to suggest that Composition should cease as a separate discipline. However, we do often do not give enough attention to what disciplines like Applied Linguistics have to contribute to teachers of writing. Similarly, while those of us concerned with Basic Writing should continue to look to Composition, we should also commit ourselves to a broadening of how we define this field. In other words, we should strive to deconstruct the artificial barriers we have constructed and make the teaching and studying of writing truly interdisciplinary--again.

While I was in San Francisco I would have loved to have been able to survey CCCC attendees, especially those primarily interested in Basic Writing, about how many attend the annual meetings of related disciplines such the International Reading Association (IRA), the American Association for Educational Research (AERA), Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and others. Furthermore, I could expand my survey to ask how many CCCC attendees keep themselves current in the theories and current practices of related disciplines, but, again, I'm afraid that most would have said that they did not.

To be certain, the map is bleak, the terrain treacherous, but this should not be understood as meaning that there is no hope. Indeed teacher-scholars of Basic Writing have begun, within the last couple of years, to consider some of the issues presently described in this paper. Indeed, Barbara Gleason (2006) underscored the need for better and increased training in both pedagogy and scholarship at the graduate level. Her well-crafted argument situates the current lack of graduate programming largely within the context of historical bias as to the nature of graduate education.

Similarly, Shannon Carter (2007) provides crucial methods for teacher trainers in educating graduate students in the complexities of Basic Writing as a discipline. Her four-pronged approach (scholarship, people, political, and pedagogical) provides concrete notions of what future Basic Writing teachers can anticipate in the classroom. I will even go as far to suggest that perhaps questions which she describes in the section on scholarship, questions pertaining to

the very nature of basic writing, are precisely those questions which we would all do well to visit and re-visit on a consistent basis.

These teacher-scholars illustrate that attention to Basic Writing in graduate coursework is important, nuanced, and relevant. Furthermore, they have identified areas lacking within the discipline and ways in which those issues could be remedied. Indeed these teacher-scholars offer areas of brightness on the bleak terrain. I maintain, however, that we have, by and large, been so concentrated on boundaries and arbitrary lines of demarcation that we have been largely unable to look outside of the proverbial box. Furthermore, we've fought so bitterly with one another about ownership that we've all but lost it. If we want a brighter future for the field of Basic Writing, we simply have no other choice than to decrease our dependency on the field of rhetoric and composition and turn instead to what, in the perfect world, should really matter: the teaching and scholarship of writing.

If teacher-scholars in Basic Writing want to really change the current map, then we have to do several things. We have to fight for an interdisciplinary understanding of what writing is and what its place is in the academy. We have to take seriously the contributions to the area of Basic Writing from teacher-scholars outside rhetoric and composition and, more importantly, challenge scholars in rhetoric and composition to show us how they can advance writing in the academy without a strong conception of Basic Writing. Additionally, while we should continue to encourage graduate programs in rhetoric and composition to develop strong programs in training their students properly in issues of Basic Writing, we shouldn't forget those who have been working in the vacuum for years, especially from other disciplines. These people have worked hard, they have sacrificed, and yes, they absolutely deserve to be recognized. After thirteen years of working in Basic Writing, I can say, unequivocally, that I am more than qualified to work in, and even direct, Basic Writing programs— even though my doctorate is not from a composition program. Basic Writing as a discipline must advocate for all professionals in the field, not just those who emerge from composition programs. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we have to fight. No one ever made change without struggle. Making nice and playing safe will only continue to serve the status quo, and what our Basic Writing students need right now is anything *but* the status quo.

I want to leave you with something to think about: indeed Basic Writing programs (as well as First-Year Composition programs) in some areas of the country are under attack, but they won't disappear from the scene entirely. While the Fingerhut plan and others call for all "developmental" programs to be moved to the community college level, the move should be seen as temporary at best. I believe, in short order, that these plans will be proven ineffectual simply because they will not solve the problem. If the last decade or so of entering freshmen is an accurate indicator, and I believe it is, the need for Basic Writing in American higher education will, across the board, only increase. In this sense, my call for an elimination of these artificial and arbitrary discipline boundaries, at least in terms of the field of writing, is all the more timely and crucial. Our students will need us--*all* of us-- to help lay the foundation for true academic success.

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