"BASIC WRITING: END OF A FRONTIER?"

Review of *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, Mina P. Shaughnessy, New York: Oxford, 1977; *Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, Administrators*, eds. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoeber. Urbana: NCTE, 1980; and *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*, ed. Theresa Enos, New York: Random House, 1987.

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In 1977 Mina Shaughnessy described basic writing as "a frontier, unmapped, except for a scattering of impressionistic articles and a few blazed trails that individual teachers propose through their texts" (4). Today it is more familiar territory. Although hardly tamed and only partly settled, much of it has at least been explored and the broad contours of its terrain have been charted. Shaughnessy's book and these two collections of essays about the teaching of writing to underprepared college students are primary documents in the history of this exploration. Ten years separate the publication dates of the earliest and the latest of these works, and those years were rich in research and pedagogical experiment. Comparison of these books can provide useful insights into significant trends, past and present, in this area of English studies.

Such a comparison suggests a number of important developments in recent work on the teaching of basic writing. (1) The theoretical and practical differences between formalist and anti-formalist instruction have become clearer. (2) Shaughnessy's work has retained its seminal influence and indeed remains a common point of reference for scholars and teachers of widely divergent views. (3) Facile generalizations about basic writers—about their sociocultural, psychological, educational, or other characteristics—have become suspect. (4) Attempts to understand the phenomenon

of basic writing have paid increasing attention to the historical and sociocultural contexts within which it occurs.

FORMALISM AND ANTI-FORMALISM IN THE TEACHING OF BASIC WRITING

In distinguising among different philosophies of composition, Richard Fulkerson applied the term "formalist" to theories that judge the success of student writing "primarily by whether it shows certain internal forms" (344). The formalist rubric may embrace instructional emphases as diverse as the directed use of similes and metaphors, the structuring of paragraphs headed by topic sentences, or an exclusive focus on grammar and mechanics. We can observe the pervasive influence of formalism in traditional college writing programs which begin with remedial coursework centered on the mastery of a sequence of grammatical forms (or "skills") employed in highly restricted writing activities (sentence and paragraph "practice") and then move to freshman composition courses centered on the mastery of a sequence of rhetorical forms (narration, description, various typs of exposition, and argumentation). Programs of this sort often lead both teachers and students to regard the mastery of forms as a self-justifying activity divorced from the shaping of meaningful discourse. Fulkerson noted that "the most common type of formalist value theory is a grammatical one: good writing is 'correct' writing at the sentence level" (344), and indeed there is much evidence to suggest that formalism retains its strongest hold in basic writing courses because of basic writing teachers "error vigilance" (Rose 109-112).

As Anne Ruggles Gere has noted, the traditional approach has been perpetuated less by research, theory, or graduate training in the teaching of writing than by an "informal curriculum of ideas" shared among colleagues (58). For me this was exemplified by a tenured friend who advised, as I was entering college teaching about a decade ago, "Just tell the interview committee that you teach the sentence and the paragraph. Throw in a little [Francis] Christensen, and that should do it." Gere showed how such conventional wisdom has been largely shaped by the available textbooks (58), a point underscored in the Enos collection by Robert Connors' survey of basic writing textbooks. Distinguishing among "the simplified rhetoric, the handbook of rules, and the drillbook of exercises" (262), Connors concludes that:

Insofar as its practice is reflected in textbooks, basic writing in America in the 1980s has several atttributes: It assumes that writing is best learned bottom up, from isolated mechanical skills to purpose; it is based in drudgery and repetition of skill lessons and drills that teachers dislike and would rather lay off on simple texts and self-paced drillbooks: it pays lip-service to but seldom really acts upon what we currently know about the writing process and learning to write. (270)

For at least two decades, beginning with the work of Janet Emig, Donald Murray, and James Britton and associates, formalism has been challenged as an ineffective pedagogy resting on a distorted view of both language and learning. Yet the essays in Kasden/Hoeber's book frequently fail to make a clear differentiation between traditional remedial instruction centered on mechanical correctness and newer approaches centered on the shaping of meaning. This collection is heavily oriented to description of courses and programs, and Kasden notes in his introduction that some "separate writing into a set of subskills" while others "teach writing as a holistic process" (7). Rather than engage the difference between formalist and antiformalist approaches and explore the practical and theoretical implications of those differences, Kasden suggests a modus vivendi wherein "students who have severe difficulties with standard dialect, usage, and sentencecraft may best learn by studying one element at a time, while basic writers who have fewer problems may better profit from a more organic approach" (7). Milton Spann and Virginia Foxx take a similar approach in describing the eclectic array of basic writing programs among the colleges of the Western North Carolina Consortium. Describing the first, grammar-centered level of instruction at Survey Community College, they note that "the attention to grammar per se may run counter to current trends in English instruction" but argue that "the early emphasis on grammar is justified when students concentrate only on their specific areas of weakness, use individualized materials, and are made aware that their grammar skills will soon be employed in the development of composition skills" (54). In this regard the 1980 collection may be said to look back to the period (from which we are still emerging) in which a new term, "basic writing," became indiscriminately the term of choice for both formalist and antiformalist approaches.[1]

The 1987 collection, on the other hand, is animated by an antiformalist spirit which, according to Enos, regards the teaching

of basic writing as a "humanistic activity . . . that goes beyond drill-for-skill workbook exercises" and that encourages students "to become aware of their many rhetorical choices and to develop a rhetorical consciousness" (vi). Behind this antiformalist spirit is the assumption shared by most of the volume's contributors that students learn to write by writing whole pieces of discourse, not by studying rules, filling in the blanks of workbook assignments, or writing "practice" sentences. Behind that lie the further assumptions that writing is an intellectual process, that it is a powerful form of inquiry, not simply the transcription of preformulated ideas and information, and that good writing is far more than mechanically correct writing. At the same time, Enos' book also demonstrates that the rejection of formalism as a philosophy has not produced a clear consensus about the best way to teach basic writers. Its essays describe theories and pedagogies that focus variously on rhetorical concepts and strategies to guide the interaction of writer and audience, on learning to write in order to do the work of the academic community, on the writer's experiences and growth, and on the process of writing itself.

THE LEGACY OF MINA SHAUGHNESSY

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to speak of basic writing without speaking of Mina Shaughnessy. Although she died in 1978 and her work on basic writing is limited to one book, *Errors and Expectations*, and less than a dozen essays, her influence in this area can hardly be overstated. A glance at the citations in the two essay collections provides evidence. Five of the eleven essays in the Kasden/Hoeber collection and eighteen of the forty-two essays in Enos' collection refer to Shaughnessy's work, two of the essays in Enos are excerpted from *Errors and Expectations*, and another essay in Enos is based on a speech delivered at a memorial conference held in Shaughnessy's honor.

As a teacher and administrator at the City University of New York (CUNY), Shaughnessy documented and strongly influenced the response of English faculty to open admissions, specifically to the entrance of students guaranteed a college education by virtue of their high school diplomas but unprepared in terms of literacy or other academic skills. Her book firmly established the term "basic" writing in place of "compensatory," "developmental" or

"remedial" writing. Behind this term lay her assumption that basic writers

> write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes. (5)

Reading the two collections in light of Shaughnessy's work, it is remarkable to see how she anticipated so many of the issues and problems later addressed by other scholars and researchers: the types and sources of errors found in the work of basic writers, the influence of speech patterns on their writing, the effects of teachers' attitudes and classroom practices on students' motivation, the composing processes of basic writers, the rhetorical conventions of written academic discourse, the relationship between writing instruction in the English classroom and writing in other disciplines, and the potential contributions to research on writing offered by such disciplines as psycho- and sociolinguistics and developmental and cognitive psychology.

Errors and Expectations is primarily a study of the patterns and sources of errors in the writing of underprepared college students. Chapter headings employ such traditional categories as "Handwriting and Punctuation," "Syntax," "Common Errors," "Spelling," and "Vocabulary," and long sections explore possible ways for teachers to guide their students toward greater control over the mechanics of writing. This emphasis has led some scholars to reject Shaughnessy's work as formalist. John Rouse, for example, charged that she had disregarded "known facts of language learning" (2), that her "constant emphasis on order, on structure, on form implies that these young people lead formless, unstructured, disordered lives" (10), and that her pedagogy was ultimately a program intended to socialize students to kowtow to institutional authority, represented in the English classroom by prescriptive grammar rules (2-4). Such charges ignore Shaughnessy's caution that "the proportion of time I spend analyzing errors does not reflect the proportion of time a teacher should spend teaching students how to avoid them" (6) and ignore as well her strong rejection of the "college contagion ward" represented by typical remedial courses (290). Even more importantly, in the imputation of motive, Rouse's charges ignore Shaughnessy's principled defense of open

admissions students and their intelligence in the face of colleagues who viewed the new students as barbarians at the gate, a threat to the values and standards which have historically defined academic life.

There is an aspect of Shaughnessy's work, however, that opens it to the charge of formalism, namely her attempt to hold together perspectives and pedagogies which strain in opposite directions. In her chapter on syntax, for example, she examined three competing explanations for why basic writers "mismanage complexity":

> One explanation focuses on what the student has not internalized in the way of *language patterns* [emphasis in original] characteristic of written English, another on his unfamiliarity with the *composing process*, and another on his *attitude* toward himself within an academic setting. (73)

She noted that each explanation suggests a different pedagogy: one that stresses grammar, one that stresses process, and one that stresses "the therapeutic value of writing." Typically, she concluded: "A teacher should not have to choose from among these pedagogies, for each addresses but one part of the problem" (73).

Shaughnessy's eclecticism typified a period, referred to above, when distinctions between formalist and antiformalist instruction were less clear. It explains why teachers and researchers of widely divergent interests and allegiances still find common inspiration in her work. Thus, scholars such as Sarah D'Eloia and Mary Epes rely heavily on Shaughnessy's suggestion that nonstandard dialects "interfere" with students' learning standard English in ways similar to the interference of a first language in second language learning, and they extend many of her ideas for creating appropriate units of grammar instruction into curricular centerpieces. Sondra Perl, on the other hand, follows Shaughnessy's interest in studying the composing processes of basic writers and finds that a classroom emphasis on "examining the rules of the standard code" causes students to "conceive of writing as a 'cosmetic' process where concern for correct form supersedes development of ideas" ("Composing Processes" 436). Likewise, David Bartholomae, Glynda Hull, and others emphasize Shaughnessy's method of analysis, her close readings of students' papers, and advocate a discourse-based pedagogy that reserves a concern for correctness to a later

stage of proofreading and editing. Viewed from the perspective of Enos's collection, *Errors and Expectations* remains a wise and humane starting point for thinking about the aspects of our students' writing which most often account for their placement in basic writing courses, but further elaborations of its various lines of inquiry through research and pedagogical experiment have made Shaughnessy's eclecticism less tenable. Teachers of basic writing ultimately face a choice betwen a pedagogy based on learning a sequence of formal categories and rules for their use and a pedagogy based on shaping meaning through written discourse.

THEIR STUDENTS AND OURS

As a scholar of integrity, Shaughnessy advanced cautiously, testing her conclusions against the canons of evidence and sound reasoning. She established, as Lynn Quitman Troyka reminds us, a "tradition of talking about not only what we know but also what we do not" (13). Troyka argues that, despite all we have learned in the decade since Shaughnessy coined the term, we still do not have a satisfactory answer to the question "Who is and who is not a basic writer?" (4-5). It might in fact be more precise to say that we have many answers, each of them developed in local contexts. The reason for the multiplicity of answers is simple. "Basic writing" and "basic writer" are labels applied by the academy to types of writing and to writers that are not accepted for mainstream or "college-level" work. But what passes for college-level depends on the particular college and on the academic skills of the students it admits. As David Bartholomae observed, "We know that we give tests and teach courses and we know that this is done at other schools, but we know little else since there is no generally accepted index for identifying basic writing" ("Teaching Basic Writing" 100).

In an ingenious study, Troyka provided evidence for what Shaughnessy argued and what many of us know from experience: that a student labeled a basic writer at one college might be considered a regular or even advanced student at a different institution (6-13). The terms "basic" and "underprepared" are institutionally relative, which explains why the most selective colleges have, and always have had, courses in remedial English. This situation should make us hesitant about advancing too many generalizations about basic writing and basic writers on a national level. It

should make us hesitate to tout our courses and programs without sharing representative samples of the essays written by our students.

This situation also renders suspect attempts at blanket descriptions of the sociocultural, psychological, economic, educational, or other characteristics of basic writers. Kasden, for example, offered the following list, drawn from the work of K. Patricia Cross, of "principal characteristics" of "low academic achievers": "1) poor study habits, 2) inadequate mastery of basic academic skills, 3) low academic ability or low IQ, 4) psychological motivational blocks to learning, and 5) sociocultural factors relating to deprived family and school backgrounds" (2). To these he appended his own list: "1) lack of parental encouragement, 2) minority and/or sex discrimination, 3) occupational rather than academic preparation in the high school curriculum, 4) lack of motivation, 5) poor self-image, and 6) sense of powerlessness over oneself and one's environment" (3-4).

When I try to apply these lists of characteristics to the basic writing students I teach at a suburban community college, I find some points of correspondence, but overall my students are so diverse in socioeconomic background, cultural experience and outlook, academic preparation, attitude towards self and school that such an attempt at categorization lacks much credibility or usefulness. Troyka's research makes me suspect that other basic writing teachers—at institutions as diverse as urban community colleges, small religious colleges, and Ivy League universities— would have similar difficulties in fitting a uniform list of descriptors to their students. Moreover, because basic writing and basic writer are terms associated with academic gatekeeping, it is inherently difficult to describe those students who do not meet our standards (whatever these may be) without recourse to the sorts of deficit theories or hints of sociopathology which underlie terms like "low academic ability," "derived family and school backgrounds," or "lack of motivation."

One value, however, of attempts like Cross's and Kasden's to characterize basic writers is that they call attention to the broader contexts within which we and our students live and work. Once we pose questions about our students' academic, economic, and sociocultural backgrounds, we must ask how they see themselves in relation to the academy and how the academy sees them in relation to itself. We then must inevitably situate the phenomenon

of basic writing in the context of what David Bartholomae calls "institutional processes of selection and exclusion" ("Writing on the Margins" 68).

Most of the essays in Kasden/Hoeber can be said to represent the situation of the basic writer as an individual drama of a student attempting to acquire certain writing competencies. These competencies are identified variously as monitoring and managing the different aspects of the writing process (Perl "A Look at Basic Writers"), using correct grammar and sentence structure (Dixon), or communicating ideas and information effectively (Crosby). Recent studies, however, tend to place greater emphasis on the contexts within which basic writing occurs. Many essays in Enos represent the situation of the basic writer as a social drama involving larger patterns of language use and social organization. Kenneth Bruffee describes writing as "essentially and inextricably social or collaborative in nature" (571) and challenges us to attend to the social organization of knowledge in our writing classrooms and to create possibilities for collaborative learning. Mike Rose focuses on the larger institutional context that relegates remedial coursework to a kind of vestibule cut off from real academic reading, writing, and inquiry. Orlando Patterson places the question of minority students' acquiring academic literacy in the context of ethnic identity and the varied, shifting relationships between ethnic cultures and mainstream culture. Thomas J. Farrell, Walter J. Ong, David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, E.D. Hirsch, and others contextualize the question of basic writing in relation to competing theories of literacy.

Bizzell distinguishes two main schools of thought on literacy. One "sees the acquisition of literacy as a stage in human cognitive development" (127). In this model literacy is an autonomously functioning technology which changes cognition in ways that are predictable, inevitable, and uniform across varied sociocultural contexts. Bizzell counterposes to this "Great Cognitive Divide" view a model of literacy as social practice: "Literacy does induce changes in thinking, in this view, but these changes cannot be generalized across the varied social contexts in which literate abilities are employed" (127). Advocates of the "Great Cognitive Divide" model (Farrell and Ong, in particular) tend to equate the form of literacy taught and used in colleges with literacy in general. In this view basic writers are illiterate (or residually oral), their thought pro-

cesses are consequently inferior, and their teachers are part of the campaign to eradicate the disease of illiteracy, hence the ubiquitous medical terminology: remediation, diagnosis, prescription, etc.

Within the model of literacy as social practice, academic literacy is seen as a particular form of language use that has its own dialect and discourse conventions and exists alongside multiple nonschool literacies. Various analyses of the relation between academic literacy and other kinds of literacy are possible. Some scholars and teachers (little represented in either of these collections) regard academic literacy as a threat to students' own language. In one version of this position, academic language (especially as represented by traditional writing instruction) is portrayed as a verbose, passionless code which can only stifle the unique, authentic voices of young writers.[2] In another version, academic language is the dialect of privileged white people who demand the displacement of the language and other cultural forms of poor, working class, and minority students as the price for their assimilation into middle class society.[3] For scholars like Bartholomae, Bizzell, and Rose, academic literacy (or more commonly "academic discourse") is the medium by which college professors and their students participate in a joint enterprise of teaching, learning, and research. Regardless of its inferiority, parity, or superiority in relation to other forms of literacy, academic discourse belongs to and defines the academic community as much as does the language of any other community, and teachers of basic writing perform the essential function of assimilating new members into full-fledged participation in this community.

These different versions of the multiple literacies model have a common way of counterposing the basic writing student to the academic institution. The student may represent a unique, creative self or the ways of a community: in either case, he/she must give up some essential part of his/her identity in order to acquire a college education. Some students will resist these institutional demands; others will do their best to accommodate them. Sympathetic teachers may attempt to aid their resistence or to make their assimilation as painless as possible. Viewed in these terms, the educational process is inevitably fraught with conflict and ambivalence. In fact, Bartholomae finds a similar ambivalence running through Shaughnessy's work:

At times writing is in service of 'personal thoughts and styles,' and at time it is in service of the institution, an institutional way of thinking and being present in the world. She [Shaughnessy] is, at best, ambivalent in her role as mediator between the world of the student (which is outside the conventional language of academic discourse) and the world of the university (which is inside). ("Released into Language" 83)

Bartholomae's answer to this ambivalence is the rather traditional one of championing the gain of a college education over any loss in individual voice or identity:

I do not find the model of competence represented by academic writing (including the academic writing done by undergraduates) to be 'barren,' at least not if the assignments are carefully written and if students are given real work to do. In fact, I think that the styles and projects of academic discourse can be exciting, creative, and liberating, even at the point at which they confine students to work that is, at least for undergraduates, ours and not theirs, and even to the degree to which that writing does not 'change reality' or reshape the university and its disciplines. There are reasons, I believe, for students to learn to work within our community that are more important and more powerful than the dream of preserving their freedom. ("Released into Language" 84)

I think that both the champions of academic discourse and the champions of students' language move too quickly to eliminate the ambivalence or tension inherent in this situation. Each side embraces a single pole in a dialectical opposition, thus simplifying and falsifying the complexity of the situation. The champions of academic discourse highlight the ways in which basic writers, to use Bartholomae's words, have been "shut out from one of the privileged languages of public life" ("Inventing the University" 9); they emphasize the reality that some students, because of class, race, or other factors, have been denied full access to the cultural capital (not to mention the credentials) represented by a college education. The champions of students' language highlight the idea that no language or culture is inherently superior to another, that all can express the full range of human experience; they emphasize the reality that language and cultural differences should not be equated with language and cultural deficits.

In emphasizing a single pole of this dialectical opposition, each side must ignore or de-emphasize a crucial aspect of the total reality. Champions of academic discourse must downplay the ways this language constrains plain speaking and passionate advocacy and the ways in which academic literacy privileges cultural expressions of the dominant social classes from the literary canon to the standard dialect at the expense of the cultural expressions of other classes.[4] Champions of students' language must downplay the ways that social oppression operates to limit people's options and must overlook the fact that the language-using practices of many basic writers are a complex mix of cultural resources (vivid slang and well-honed communicative strategies, for example) and the results of inferior education.

That questions of classroom practice seem to have been overshadowed by questions of political analysis and social equity is not, I would argue, the result of the perversity of overly ideological scholars eager to politicize more manageable concerns about "what works" or doesn't. If we are truly to know and understand this frontier of our profession, we must know and understand the forces that have shaped it, the territories from which the settlers have come, the resources at our disposal, and both the dangers and the potentials in this enterprise. Our knowledge has grown significantly, as the Enos collection demonstrates, but its growth has forced larger questions on to the agenda.

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NOTES

[1]Throughout this article I represent the Enos' collection as superior to Kasden/Hoeber because its essays present more recent research and theory, cover a broader range of concerns, and explore them in greater depth. In making this comparison, I should in fairness note that 12 of the 42 essays in Enos in fact predate the 1980 publication date of Kasden/Hoeber, that Kasden/Hoeber contains a useful section on evaluation and testing (an issue not treated in Enos), and that Kasden/Hoeber does include some valuable work, just as Enos includes several essays worth at best a quick scan. Having made those qualifications, I stand on my initial evaluation of the relative merits of the two collections.

[2]I have in mind here the work of scholar/teachers such as William Coles, Peter Elbow, and Ken Macrorie, who advocate a pedagogy that seeks to liberate each student's personal style from the weight of academic conventions.

[3]The classic statement of this position is in a special issue of CCC "Students' Right to Their Own Language," and can be found as well in the work of James Sledd and Geneva Smitherman.

⁴While I have grouped Patricia Bizzell among the "champions of academic discourse," I must note that her analysis of the issues involved is in many ways a model of dialectical analysis which seeks to understand the complex interactions of both poles of the dialectical opposition; basic writers (or more generally open admissions students) and the academy and the ways that both change through this interaction.

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