

Starting Over with Basic Writing

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McNenny, Gerri, and Sallyanne Fitzgerald, eds. *Mainstreaming Basic Writers: Politics and Pedagogies of Access*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. 2001. 256 pages. \$24.50 (paper), \$59.95 (cloth).

Fox, Tom. *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Boynton/Cook, 1999. 128 pages. \$21.00 (paper).

Over the years, many basic writing teachers have expressed discomfort with the “at-risk” designation applied to our students, but now the efforts of legislators and university officials have truly put students and the programs serving them in jeopardy. I am referring, of course, to the much-publicized assault on remediation occurring across the nation. Working as the coordinator of a basic writing program in the California State University system, I am reminded daily of the need to respond to the rhetorical and ideological battles raging in conference rooms and presidential suites up and down the state. Whatever contribution I might make to my campus by designing a basic writing program that is coherent, ethical, and pedagogically sound is routinely thrown into turmoil by mandated reductions in remediation time, new assessment procedures, revamped high school standards—all decisions made by others very far from the classroom.

The movement to “mainstream” did not begin with political efforts to eliminate basic writing, but it has attracted renewed attention because of them. Gerri McNenny and Sallyanne Fitzgerald’s *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* enters into this highly contested arena to provide “fair representation” of the differing perspectives and strategies that have emerged

from the remediation debate. Though there is ample evidence to make the case for mainstreaming, this is not the overall emphasis of the volume. The collection covers the spectrum of informed opinion among teacher-researchers in basic writing programs, as well as presenting several possible program models from the campus-specific responses that have emerged. The combination of endorsement and warning makes the book feel especially honest about the difficulties mainstreaming presents. In this way, *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* is an important guide to many of the issues we face in setting writing program curricula and policy.

Three central themes within the mainstreaming debate emerge in *Mainstreaming*: the political and social costs of remediation, the empirical data for and against mainstreaming, and the curricular innovations we might offer in response to external pressures. The range of concerns the contributors address will make this volume an important scholarly and practical resource, one that should be required reading for any graduate composition studies program. What's more, though the central subject is mainstreaming, teachers who direct and study writing programs at any level will find much of this volume very helpful for the questions it poses about teaching writing in general.

McNenny and Fitzgerald's collection shares the goal of rethinking issues of opportunity and writing instruction with Tom Fox's *Defending Access*. Fox's book seeks to change the terms of the debate over basic skills instruction by highlighting the rhetorical and ideological contradictions of higher education's commitment to both academic standards and open access. Placing historical standards movements alongside everyday administrative maneuvers that regulate students' movement in the university, Fox helps us see how administrative practices are political actions (76). Taken together, these two books guide us in reconsidering the motives and means of teaching developmental writing. Nothing will quiet the current political storm, but the work of these writers can help us influence the outcomes as we are forced to start over with basic writing.

The visibility of basic writers has always been a source of ambivalence. David Bartholomae initially remarked that the influential curriculum in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* was designed to make sure the students didn't disappear (9), only to overturn that proposition in his 1993 essay, "The Tidy House," in which he argued that basic writing programs have come to depend on identifying students *as* basic writers in order to justify our work. Students understandably often prefer to blend in without the stigmatizing mark of "remedial." Yet given so many endorsements of the value of diversity on campus, the students who overwhelmingly fill basic writing classrooms should be seen and be

welcomed for the perspectives they bring. Paradoxically, by their consignment to no-credit writing courses, they are hidden in the curriculum at the same time their presence makes them targets. Since Bartholomae's Tidy House argument, we have debated if basic writing programs might not harm students as much as they help them.

This ambivalence characterizing basic writing lies at the heart of the essays in *Mainstreaming Basic Writers*. The essays by Ira Shor and Mary Soliday speak most directly to the political causes for the damage. Shor presents remediation in its most common forms as a ceaselessly crippling mechanism of social struggle (the "no-credit, curricular reservation"). Shor's essay rebuts the now familiar "tradition of complaint" about writing instruction with the consistent asymmetry between economic power and writing instruction. Shor also cites recent studies that call into question the empirical value of placement to assert that "Writing instruction's social function is to help reproduce inequality...to preserve the hierarchies now in place" (30). A more concrete analysis of the economics of basic writing appears in Mary Soliday's report on higher education funding. Soliday shows how the ideological effort to equate remediation with people of color leads to a view of basic writing as a welfare program. I appreciate Soliday's effort to break us out of the mindset that our programs are *the* key to student success, especially when legislative defunding of public education has had a greater effect on students' access than the much-debated success of remedial programs. In a passage that is the central theme of this book, Soliday explains, "The real danger is not that we experiment with new programs, but that we contain our commitment to working-class, culturally diverse students within a single course or program" (70).

The dreary portrait of social meanness and institutional hegemony provided by Soliday and Shor is counterbalanced by accounts of success in basic writing against these odds. Acknowledging the trend toward elitism, Ed White presents empirical data to resist the "new abolitionists" who would eliminate basic writing in favor of entirely elective writing programs. The actual achievements of basic writing programs, White argues, can be seen in retention data from both California and New Jersey. White offers strong correlations between testing, remedial coursework, and student persistence as a clear indication that basic writing works: those who take placement exams and pass required preparatory classes are less likely to transfer or drop out. What White cannot show is that students remain enrolled *because* they took a remedial course. White's analyses may suggest that writing abilities strengthened by developmental classes translate into success in subse-

quent coursework, but it is equally possible to argue that persistence, in an academy that makes poor use of writing, is less dependent on literacy than our rhetoric of needs asserts.

Sharing White's positive view, Terrance Collins and Kim Lynch "argue caution" because they feel we are misled by the "homogenizing" tendency many discussions of mainstreaming draw upon (73). Worried that the ideological warrants of mainstreaming may unintentionally make successful basic writing programs and the students they serve disappear, Collins and Lynch resist the idea that mainstreaming is always good. Citing the *unusual* circumstances of the University of Minnesota-General College—credit-bearing, two-term coursework; small class size bolstered by current technology; humane placement—Collins and Lynch question the very idea of a "mainstream." Instead they propose that local circumstances should dictate whether or not mainstreaming is appropriate. This respect for context also guides Trudy Smoke's essay on the implications of mainstreaming for ESL students. Smoke cautions that our lack of clarity about how best to help ESL writers could hurt students if we treat mainstreaming as a cure-all for writing pedagogy.

These are important warnings. But Collins and Lynch never seem to question if success itself can be failure. This is, for me, the great insight of Bartholomae's Tidy House argument (an argument Collins and Lynch strongly denounce): namely, that basic writing programs over time actively "maintain the distinction (basic/normal) we have learned to think through and by" instead of questioning it (Bartholomae qtd. in Collins and Lynch 8).

The curricular innovations in the second half of *Mainstreaming* inherently question the basic/normal distinction. There is a compelling array of curricular experiments presented here, and anyone seeking mainstreaming options would be wise to examine these different approaches. I would like to mention a few specifically. Barbara Gleason's chapter outlines a curriculum for returning students that uses ethnographic assignments to connect students' oral communication skills with practice in "academic ways of knowing, persuading, and communicating" (124). Rosemary Winslow and Monica Mische describe a course that examines cultural representations of the "hero quest" to help students see themselves as making choices about learning. Studying heroes isn't mere content: the authors designed the course to be sensitive to "the ways matters of the heart affected learning" (151). The rich intellectual experience of the course is designed to create a sense of "higher purpose" for learning and since it draws on all students' experiences, "distinctions in writing skill are not central to students' contributions to the class" (151). Mark Wiley reports on a similar experiment using cohort-based learning communities to create a coherent intellectual and social experience

for students. Though he helpfully identifies what specific institutional structures and relationships made this program succeed, Wiley does not offer this arrangement as an ideal. Instead he portrays the bumpy road he and his colleagues traveled as a model for “curricular inquiry” that should guide whatever alterations we might make (187).

The gains reported in these disparate studies are inspiring and consistent enough to warrant more of these efforts. But a nagging problem remains: among the experiments reported here, researchers decided which students were good candidates for the programs and which were not. Obviously Wiley and Gleason were being ethical by not exposing extremely unprepared students to undue risk in the absence of adequate support systems. Still, selective admission into these studies could imply that it is policy these writers oppose (placement as the consequence of testing) rather than the diagnostic impulse and its apparatus that too often isolates students under the guise of helping them succeed. Is this merely a relocation of the basic/normal line?

Mainstreaming Basic Writers is marked by a deliberate modesty that I appreciate, taking as one of its foundational assumptions that each situation varies enough from others to justify caution in generalizing about all students and all programs. Some of the writers in this collection (Wiley, Soliday, Winslow and Mische most notably) take care to remind us that our programs, as important as they might be, are only one part of students’ college experience. Despite what we believe about the importance of literacy, our classes may not be the primary reason students succeed. This is the sort of modesty that I find helpful because it forces us back to the larger issues of what higher education is for and how our programs, mainstreamed or not, support those larger purposes. One rule for starting over is to make sure we do not exaggerate the effects of our programs, mainstreamed or not. If we are to begin again, it cannot be with the same uncritical faith that we alone make a difference in students’ lives.

This recognition that teaching literacy is never done in isolation (no matter how much our programs actually are isolated) requires that we connect classroom contexts with cultural pressures. The ambivalences of *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* need to be situated in broader analyses of the function of basic writing programs in higher education. Tom Fox’s *Defending Access* (1999) provides exactly this wider social and institutional context and complements McNenny and Fitzgerald’s book. Fox’s analysis of the juxtaposition of standards and access raises the level of the debate, clarifying the consequences that follow from our immediate programmatic decisions. Fox requires us to understand our commitments to the entire enterprise of which our programs are only a small but contested part. Fox not only addresses the argument about

standards within the ideological arena where it gathers its force, but he also shows its manifestations and consequences in the lives of students most at risk.

Defending Access is as much a case study of institutional change as it is an analysis of historical standards rhetoric. Fox and his colleagues set out to eliminate the non-credit, prebaccalaureate writing track well before the conservative campaign to reduce remediation got started. It is easy to see the assault on remediation as a new form of elitism. Fox indicates it is more important to understand why conservative arguments are effective now and what social forces lend them power. Those who choose to elevate the status of basic writers on their campuses will appreciate Fox's insight about negotiating the structural and rhetorical "strategies of containment" that impede these efforts (45). As much as local contexts may dictate different strategies, Fox's analysis identifies some near-universal features of institutional life, such as "when access threatens change, standards are always one of the tools to resist that change" (8).

Fox studies the political valences of the term "standards" as it appears in a constellation of conservative texts by William Bennett, Dinesh D'Souza, and Allan Bloom. What Fox finds in these educational jeremiads is a dialectical pattern in which standards, invoked by these writers as universal, are consistently linked to the presence of multiculturalism in the academy, arriving with Open Admissions in the 1970s. By this logic, standards were compromised when access was granted to unprepared people of color. This is reasoning with which we are familiar. Where Fox catches us by surprise is by implicating those of us who think of writing as a means of gaining entry by meeting standards (empowerment), asserting that "we fall into the trap of imagining that language standards and social boundaries are one and the same" (6).

Focusing on the writing experiences of students of color, Fox insists we have to "abandon the notion that skills alone provide access" (17). To illustrate this point, Fox examines the historical tradition of African American literacy outside of formal schooling and joins it to writing by African American students from his own classes. In contrast to the story most of us know by heart about the rise of composition at Harvard to enforce linguistic manners, the communal use of literacy among ex-slaves is an example of how writing has been used as a genuine means of access to dominant society. Of course, the Harvard narrative won. For African American students today, this typically means being denied full access out of an erroneous "belief that large gaps exist between what students know and what students need to know" (69). Fox argues that

as long as writing is seen first for its ability to reveal whether a student meets our standards for belonging, we will continue to “underestimate” the literacy that students outside dominant society bring to college (69).

The mainstreaming issue cannot be framed as primarily a matter of student preparedness and only secondarily about our institutional response. Fox makes it clear that our assessments of what students need are never separate from the decisions we make about the solution. Local actions at any level always provoke historical and institutional prejudices. Fox proposes we need to extend institutional action in support of access well beyond basic writing. Access is also threatened above and below the first year of college, so Fox describes how multi-level intra-institutional efforts like WAC and the National Writing Project can resist the exclusionary effects of language standards and social politics wherever they occur.

Fox goes to great lengths to insure that readers understand he is unambiguously in favor of high expectations; he says early on that “teaching without challenging standards is usually bad teaching” (10). The disingenuous battle over standards is always framed in terms of what we lose in our institutions by admitting students with differences in preparation. As an alternative, Fox proposes contingent standards that take advantage of the various literacies that come with access, rather than standards that predetermine who will have the chance to meet our expectations (91). The fact is there is no reason we cannot be equally committed to wide access *and* high standards. Whether we mainstream or retain basic writing programs, Fox’s book makes it obvious that the forced new beginning of basic writing must assert the value instead of the costs of creating and preserving opportunity.

The significance of the approaches to basic writing in *Defending Access* and *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* will be felt differently by literacy scholars and WPAs. As a student of literacy, I find these arguments illuminate the unrealistic social burden writing ability is expected to carry in our culture. As Fox observes, “To shout with urgency that students don’t know science is to argue for science education, to claim that students are illiterate is to argue that they are unfit for college” (43). WPAs may well see these texts differently. Every WPA will have to address these issues, publicly, before provosts and trustees who sometimes expect easy answers to complex problems, and more privately, in matters of program design and administrative research. I know the discussions in these two books will lead me as a program coordinator to make different choices.

Bartholomae's skepticism about basic writing programs tried to raise in us a restlessness that might have made us more prepared to respond to the problems we now face. It is arguable that more of us should have been following the lead of Gleason and Soliday or Fox and Rodby and should have been studying new ways to address the educational needs of students in basic writing instead of spending all our time refining one response to the presence of beginning writers on campus. What I find most encouraging in the debate over basic writing presented in *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* and *Defending Access* is that discussions of what students need to succeed in college—the ways to estimate their readiness, the strategies for teaching and aiding them—apply to all students in all programs, not just basic writers. The mainstreaming discussion forces us back to clarifying what we want to accomplish with all student writers irrespective of the distinctions we have felt compelled to make between them.

Work Cited

Bartholomae, David. "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum." *Journal of Basic Writing* 12.1 (Spring 1993): 4-21.

