

Conflicted Brokers: The Local, Historical, and Political of Basic Writing

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Carter, Shannon. *The Way Literacy Lives: Rhetorical Dexterity in Basic Writing Instruction*. Albany: SUNY P, 2008.

Mlynarczyk, Rebecca and George Otte. *Basic Writing*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2010.

Stanley, Jane. *The Rhetoric of Remediation: Negotiating Entitlement and Access in Higher Education*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2009.

Nearly twenty-five years have passed since David Bartholomae first published “The Tidy House,” in which he voiced observations about the institutional discourse that sutures together in a crazy quilt underprepared writers, the stigma of failure, and the faraway promise of socioeconomic advancement through literacy. Scores of pieces of writing have been published that build upon Bartholomae’s concerns, including those that focus on access and literacy, and contest the core definition of “basic” writing (and writers) in broader ways (Horner and Lu, Fox, Mutnick, Gray-Rosendale, among others). Yet, we still use the stratified terminology describing basic writers—at all levels and in myriad locations, I would argue—to justify, segregate, and often malign them in the service of what James Conant Bryant, President of Harvard University from the mid-1930s through the early 1950s, unashamedly called the necessities of “academic sorting” in higher education.

Academia continues to be rooted in a system by which nomenclature rules the day, in which the “other” is named against the norm—even though as Sullivan and Tinberg have pointed out, in *What is College Level Writing?*, we do not necessarily know what the “norm” (i.e., “standard” first-year writing) really is. In other collections, such as Hansen and Farris’

College Credit for Writing in High School: The "Taking Care" of Business, college and high school teachers alike agree that there exist numerous troubled and slippery definitions of "college-level" and "preparedness" within the efficiency-structured paradigms of dual-credit, AP, and CLEP programs. These slippery terms and up-ending of the location of first-year writing, in turn, make it difficult to locate the proper place and populace for *basic* writing—if, indeed, students are taking college-level courses, sometimes without proving their ability through placement or other means, when they are 14, 15, and 16 years old, in order to "take care" of the (pesky) composition requirement. Basic writing only "means" when set against what it is *not*. This definition-by-lack, in turn, has consequences for the scholarly study of basic writing, which "has always seemed unusually new, exposed, and challenged to justify itself" (Mlynarczyk and Otte xv). Perhaps Gail Stygall said it best when she observed, in 1994, that the mere definition of "basic" was itself contested, noting that it is "shot through as the term is with local contexts, different approaches, and standardized grammar tests." Stygall argues that "'basic writers' are equally elusive" given that their demarcation may be based on perceived intellectual deficiencies, economic lack, or even psychological problems (320). In short, our own terms betray and befuddle us; as such, scholars such as Stygall have argued that we should be highly judicious in their application(s).

But are we in any real position to even *make* high-stakes judgments about what writers are called—judgments that mark these writers and carry with them an identity that is sometimes hard to outrun, despite later accomplishments? Those of us teaching writing at all levels in academia are sometimes-reluctant gatekeepers, and are reliant subsequently on a structure of expectations, including standardized outcomes and exams—both at the undergraduate and graduate levels—that sets up particular types of writing, particular types of discourse, as the mainstream, the acceptable, and that necessitates a sounding of the alarm when those expectations are not met. This system, and we as purveyors of it, can provide little cushion for the shock students feel when entering it for the first time—when experiencing new types of writing and discourse conventions and feeling the sting that comes with comments like *What do you mean here, exactly?* and *Proofread better next time, please*. Faculty need only recall their first rejected article submission, or poorly received book proposal, or conference presentation—in sum, recall their own initial entry into the discourse community of academic publishing—to understand how this shock feels.

As authors Jane Stanley, Shannon Carter, and Rebecca Mlynarczyk and George Otte argue, this shock faced by new writers cuts across all economic classes, geographical spaces, and modern American historical periods, and

deeply affects the ways in which we approach “remedial” writing instruction as an enterprise differing sharply from, for example, remedial math or introductory foreign language instruction (other areas of academe with their own General Education-assigned gatekeepers in place). These four authors elegantly illustrate, through three distinctly different books, how our lack of consensus concerning “preparedness” makes for an impossible, elusive standard to meet for writers in disparate locations and academic settings. In these books on the identity, history, and positionality of the Basic Writer (and, by extension, of Basic Writing), I see compelling arguments for a field-wide rethinking of what “basic” means in historical and local/geographical contexts. Basic writing has been affected by institutional standards, governmental testing and oversight, and community action; advocacy and representation in and for basic writing has come to shape this field, still articulated as “sub-” but growing in strength and volume with each significant study such as these.

To organize my discussion in the context of research and inquiry in Basic Writing studies, I consider three emergent issues that seem to loom over, or emerge from, these three individual books: First, the rhetorical agency (or lack thereof) of the basic writing instructor and basic writing student; second, the locale/geography of the basic writing student, as defined both socially and geographically; and finally, the institutional methodologies and rationales guiding (or hindering) literacy instruction. Each of these concerns, addressed in some way by the authors whose works are under review here, plays a critical part in further defining—and refining—what basic writing means to composition studies, and further, to the much broader pursuit of literacy in higher education.

THE BASIC WRITING INSTRUCTOR: TROUBLED POSITIONALITIES

We in composition studies have no problem, in general, asking what role basic writing students play in their own education. We recognize that once a student is labeled a “basic writer,” he or she faces a litany of hoops and hurdles in the pursuit of his or her college degree—regardless of where that degree is taken. We also accept the fact that students’ confidence and self-worth is often affected when they are placed in remedial or “pre-college” courses (even when these courses are located, ever-ironically, *at* a college). In short, we see students as the classified rather than the classifiers, an acceptance that has created programs such as directed self-placement, which grow and prosper at various institutions nationwide. But we also seem to agree that the teacher of basic writing can be different: he (or very often, she) can provide a true *help* for students in the way teachers of other sub-

jects (perhaps even standard first-year composition) cannot. The teacher of basic writing can “save” students who cannot, for various reasons, save themselves.

Thus, a question we ask far less frequently, but one that I find reasonable to posit in response to Rebecca Mlynarczyk and George Otte’s *Basic Writing*, is this: What role do basic writing instructors *actually* play in transitioning writers of any educational status from one discourse setting to another? Put another way, how much power do the teachers of basic writing *actually have* to affect any kind of change? This, perhaps, is the most uncomfortable question facing a field that prides itself on the transformational powers of its faculty, who operate against steep odds in providing students with the golden ticket of literacy.

Basic Writing does not attempt to answer this question to any definite end, though it explores with great precision the various factors since the 1960s that have both created basic writing as a field and have stigmatized and ostracized basic writers (and teachers) as a community. *Basic Writing* is a thoroughly researched reference guide that details the history and theory of basic writing in the United States and that will be an invaluable resource for graduate students and other scholars new to the study of basic writing, as well as those interested in issues of access, placement, and ability grouping in composition in general. In these authors’ soup-to-nuts study, however, I find the lingering question of teacher agency below the surface as I read, as teacher selection, training, and institutional authority seems to be significant within each of the sections of the book. How and where do basic writing teachers defend, stand up for, even protect their students from institutional and social harm, Mlynarczyk and Otte ask? And can these teachers reasonably expect that they will be able to be these protectors, given the material conditions of the basic writing classroom and its faculty—especially as we enter a significantly for-profit, and outcomes-centered, era in higher education?

Deborah Brandt, in “Sponsors of Literacy,” raised this question of agency for the teaching of writing in general when she observed that, in socioeconomic terms,

[teachers] haul a lot of freight for the opportunity to teach writing. Neither rich nor powerful enough to sponsor literacy on our own terms, we serve instead as conflicted brokers between literacy’s buyers and sellers. At our most worthy, perhaps, we show the sellers how to beware and try to make sure these exchanges will be a little fairer, maybe, potentially, a little more mutually rewarding. (183)

Certainly in all three of these recent books, we can see the notion of “hauling freight” enacted by teachers who themselves are positioned as “brokers”—intermediaries beholden to both “sides” of the basic writer’s quest for postsecondary validation. For Carter, the freight-hauling comes courtesy of a subject position she holds in relation to standardized tests in her home state of Texas, and the ways in which these tests—and state laws—threaten to undermine attempts at meaningful writing instruction. For Stanley, the freight that basic writing teachers haul is historically-specific, an external charge presented by reluctant administrators at Berkeley who sought to maintain a monopoly on public education—and superior post-secondary intellectual training—in California in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For Mlynarczyk and Otte, however, this freight-hauling is the unquestioned, normative working condition for teachers of basic writing in America. Mlynarczyk and Otte recapitulate the birth of modern basic writing with a significant—and certainly logical—focus on Mina Shaughnessy and her legendary contributions to basic writing (including her coinage of the term, in contrast to other labels such as “remedial,” “dummy,” “hospital,” “bonehead,” or “zero” English). Whereas Stanley’s book demonstrates the relative helplessness of instructors at Berkeley to change, or even manage, external mandates regarding student selectivity and social stratification, Mlynarczyk and Otte provide a rich historical—and disciplinary—context for where and how power has been granted to (or taken by) instructors of basic writing, particularly in their lengthy discussion of the various players at CUNY who hauled more than a little freight in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But as I read through Mlynarczyk and Otte’s in-depth recounting of the origins and subsequent positions of basic writing—admittedly as, perhaps, a reader more familiar with this narrative than might be their intended and eventual audience for this book—I keep waiting for the miraculous ending in which something *changes*, wherein the authors suggest a coming change, a transformation that talks back to the disappointments and setbacks and struggles faced by these early teachers of basic writing, and their inheritors today. While it is not within these authors’ ability to change history—would that it were so—I am left with a sense of both pride and defeat after reading this comprehensive history of the work of basic writing teachers and students, wondering if this extremely comprehensive and thoughtful recounting of the sub-discipline gives us any places from which we might move forward and effect continued change. In other words, now that we know our history, are we, in fact, doomed to repeat it? Put another way,

does this narrative, inclusive and fine-grained as it is, move us forward, or simply articulate more clearly where we now sit?

Readers should not take my specific lament as an indication that *Basic Writing* is anything other than a heroic and worthwhile book for readers both inside and outside composition studies. It will be a life-saving reference for emerging scholars in the field, who not only can benefit from the extensive bibliography and list of resources at the end of the book (in combination with something like the *Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Basic Writing*), but also from the nuanced discussion of how basic writing has evolved in postsecondary instruction since the middle of the twentieth century. Indeed, excluding the in-progress work being done in basic writing at this very moment, it is hard to imagine what, if anything, these authors have left *out*. Add to the quality of the book the fact that it is not only available through Parlor Press as a print publication, but also available for free download through the WAC clearinghouse (<http://wac.colostate.edu/books/basicwriting/>) and you have an accessible, substantial text that should be on all writing teachers' bookshelves.

This almost unbelievable comprehensiveness and coverage may in fact be what nags at me as I read *Basic Writing*, as I feel a certain frustration that despite the massive amount of research and scholarship on this subject, we still look at basic writing and, particularly, *teachers* of basic writing as marginalized, long-suffering, and residing at the bottom of the academic food chain. As the authors point out, as much as first-year composition is frequently relegated to underpaid, overworked contingent faculty, basic writing is almost *guaranteed* to be taught by this same pool—and perhaps the least-qualified, lowest-paid among them. What we seem to be lacking here, and in a lot of work on the subject, is a comprehensive education plan for teachers of basic writing, separate from the first-year composition seminar/practicum and cognizant of the course's historical standing that reaches beyond CUNY et al., and beyond the community college setting. We are more than willing to glorify (rightly) our basic writing faculty ancestors, but we seem less willing or able to set paths for our future basic writing faculty cohort, one already overwhelmed by the social ramifications embedded in the teaching of writing, ramifications that now begin to trickle down rapidly to the secondary level.

As such, I leave this book wondering, a little forlorn, now that we know nearly everything about basic writing (at least since the 1960s), what should we *do*? The final chapter of the book, "The Future of Basic Writing," (like a good deal of literature on basic writing in general) contextualizes this future in terms of politics. But curiously absent in this look to the future is the previously-central figure of the teacher him or herself, a figure so very

important in the construction of this field. I find this an interesting shift in both the book's perspective and perhaps our field's perspective on the teaching of writing more broadly. Has the "freight" become so difficult to haul that we have recast the struggle of teaching underprepared students (of all classes, social groups, and academic levels) as a more global war, with students rather than teachers on the frontlines, being the test-takers, and the consumers of an increasingly mandatory college education? If so, Mlynarczyk and Otte's final words are somewhat sobering:

Of course, a society never really decides to do anything. That falls to individuals, to their resolve and their initiative. The future of basic writing, like its past, will depend on how external forces combine with initiative from within, often resulting in moments of extraordinary leadership and fragile consensus as well as incremental progress and stunning setbacks. There are lessons to be learned from that history, some hard and some inspiring. Some may have lost their relevance with the passage of time. But some may make the past of basic writing a guide to building its future. (188)

NARRATIVES OF PLACE: THE LOCATIONS OF BASIC WRITING

Unlike Mlynarczyk and Otte's *Basic Writing*, which takes us all over the United States and into classrooms at all types of postsecondary institutions, Jane Stanley's *The Rhetoric of Remediation* is stubbornly—and bravely—situated in the geography of northern California, from the harrowing Gold Rush through the present day economic collapse of this state of arguably mythic proportions. Stanley works as a kind of historical paleontologist more than a scholar of basic writing; indeed, her complete lack of references to either composition scholarship generally, or basic writing scholarship specifically, troubled me deeply on my first read. And as I see this book being reviewed in a variety of our field journals, I do wonder whether Stanley's study owes it to other basic writing scholars to acknowledge their work in some way (there is only one mention of Mina Shaughnessy, for example). In its structure and selection of references, Stanley's book is an almost-antithesis to Mlynarczyk and Otte's work, presenting UC-Berkeley in a disciplinary vacuum isolated almost completely from the (historical) scholarship of the field.

But what ultimately makes Stanley's book a valuable addition to the skillful compilation of Mlynarczyk and Otte—or even a counterstatement, in its aim to bring basic writing to a larger readership, ideally, outside of composition studies—is its attention to the literal geography of basic writ-

ing, and the way in which social and topographic spaces of the West coast in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries affected the rise and maintenance of “Subject A,” or remedial writing, at this prestigious public institution. I, for one, was delighted to read about educational practices on the *other* coast, as so many institutional histories and narratives of higher education start and end in the eastern seaboard. Stanley continues to disrupt the accepted narrative of basic writing and remedial instruction by locating her study at a public, but prestigious, university (UC-Berkeley) and by historicizing the basic writer as a campus figure, or student-type, dating back to the nineteenth century, very specifically defined by factors beyond and external to the student him or herself, but important to the local conditions of the institution. Because Stanley’s narrative relies so heavily on the *place* of northern California, as well as the environs of Berkeley specifically, I came to read her book as a historian’s look at a social practice within the university, rather than a study of basic writing *per se*, from the point of view of a scholar of composition and rhetoric. The geographical emphasis in Stanley’s book, and its love of the curious history of higher education in California, is what I think readers will find sets it apart from other books in and about this field.

Stanley’s book is brief (142 pages, plus notes and references) and is divided up into eleven chapters—almost mini-chapters, given their quick punch and focus—that take the reader chronologically through the development of Subject A at Berkeley, in the explicit context of the growth of California as a state, as an educational superpower (one might note that California’s community college system is one of the largest and most heavily patronized in the nation, for example), and as an economic paradox of sorts. Stanley makes it clear that the financial promise of UC-Berkeley was only as strong as its admissions base, a claim I find quite familiar in my own research on basic writing in the Ivy League. Stanley describes this as the “curious academic accommodation that allowed the cash-strapped young University of California to accept nearly all applicants, but at the same time to identify half of them as illiterate” (6). As she so deftly notes later in the book, at Berkeley—and elsewhere in the country—“the welfare of the university depends in no slight way upon the remedial student” (33).

Readers interested in the history of higher education will find equally fascinating in Stanley’s book the discussion of how both world wars affected enrollments; how the university strongly resisted the advent of community colleges—called by one administrator a “dangerous expansion” of the educational system (qtd. in 68); and the general conflation of state politics and general education, particularly as California’s economic power began to dwindle. Readers should also find interest in the role that well-known

figures such as Ronald Reagan played in Berkeley's development and identity in relation to California state politics, and also be intrigued by the discussions of campus culture that inevitably shifted how "literate" and even "student" were defined, as Stanley carefully details the ways in which ethnic majorities and minorities were and were not accommodated by the evolution of Subject A.

What did surprise me, however, in Stanley's historical coverage was her willingness to sometimes back away from issues of place that would seem to deeply affect how literacy was defined at Berkeley. As one small example, in her chapter "The Tides of the Semi-Literate," Stanley brings up the free speech movement and student activism on campus in the 1960s, yet remarks that this movement "is not central to my story of the rhetoric of remediation at Berkeley" because, she claims, the protestors active in this movement were those with "above-average GPAs" who "likely passed their Subject A exam" (102). This seems like an odd demarcation to make, since the notion of free speech would seem central to issues of access and literacy on a campus such as Berkeley (or anywhere); plus, the reputation of Berkeley as a site for social activism would seem quite germane to the study of a contested subject such as basic writing. Finally, it seems odd to argue that those who passed the Subject A exam, but were protesting limitations on students' speech rights, would have no place in a history of remediation. I can imagine some fascinating oral histories from these students that might have given even more dimension to Stanley's tale.

But here I am writing the book that *I* want, or would have written, and not the book that Stanley has penned, a sin especially easy to commit when discussing a field whose history is filled with untold stories and local scenes, and archives, yet to be tapped and ripe for controversy. Stanley's book, though not squarely one within the tradition of composition studies scholarship as we typically view it (despite the book's publication in the Pitt Series on Composition, Literacy, and Culture) is an important eye-opener in regards to the local, the meaning of space/s, and the forgotten histories of basic writing and its community players beyond the classroom.

KEEPING HOUSE: BASIC WRITING AND INSTITUTIONAL VISION(S)

If Stanley's book demonstrates how powerless students, teachers, and even local administrators can be in the face of a state board of regents' quest to make its flagship university a national exemplar, come hell or high (economic, social, racial) water, Shannon Carter's study, *The Way Literacy Lives: Rhetorical Dexterity and Basic Writing Instruction*, in somewhat striking contrast, not only presents itself as an argument *about* power—specifically

“rhetorical dexterity”—but thereafter parses out the components of rhetorical power in building and sustaining a basic writing program that faces, rather than backs away from, the uncomfortable position of the teacher and student in the larger machinery that is basic writing—the machinery that Bartholomae so deftly articulated in “The Tidy House.”

Readers will first notice, and be affected by, Carter’s bold chapter titles, each of which build upon her book’s title in sometimes unexpected ways. These chapters are “The Way Literacy Tests,” “The Way Literacy Oppresses,” “The Way Literacy Liberates,” “The Way Literacy Stratifies,” “The Way Literacy (Re)Produces,” and finally, “The Way Literacy Lives.” In each of these chapters, Carter shows readers both the promises and pitfalls of marking individuals as “acceptable” or deficient” or even “extraordinary” in both academic and non-academic settings. Carter explains rhetorical dexterity as a positionality that asks

literacy learners to examine the similarities and differences among a variety of communities of practice, making explicit comparisons among the behaviors that mark one as literate in communities of practice beyond school and those more traditionally associated with the academy. . . . A pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity demands that the learner identify contexts in which she is already highly literate, mapping similarities between the two spaces and developing an understanding of and (at some level) acceptance of those systems of logic incongruous with the systems of logic that shape other contexts in which she finds relevance, agency, and competency. (114)

In setting out this ambitious agenda for revising the way we look at basic writing, Carter’s book is certainly the most theoretical of the three profiled here, and perhaps also the most “political”—despite Stanley’s explicit attention to the politics of the state of California and the University of California at Berkeley, and Mlynarczyk and Otte’s historical recounting of the struggles basic writing has faced when set against various lawmakers and institutional authorities. I make this claim because Carter begins her book with a discussion of the laws and educational mandates in her own home state, Texas (and thus deserves a nod here as also profiling the local/geographical), and thereafter sets about dismantling some of the very tenets that underscore those tests and the state’s various legislative moves as aimed at students at her own university, Texas A & M Commerce, many of which target non-native speakers and all of which objectify and highlight socio-economic and class differences endemic to this border state.

Despite the very smart and engaging discussion of these tests, which have been variously labeled with the acronyms TABS, TEAMS, TAAS, and TAKS (3), in the first chapter of Carter's book, I was most struck ultimately by her discussion of her brother Eric's own struggle with being defined-by-lack, in "The Way Literacy Stratifies." Building upon other literacy narratives in chapters two and three, Carter paints a picture of her brother as a highly intelligent computer programmer who was raised in a 1970s household containing some of the earliest technological apparatuses we now take for granted (for example, the personal computer). A combination of dyslexia and early negative educational experiences leads Eric to be unsuccessful at school-based literacies but completely adept at technological literacies; this is exemplified early in his story by his pre-K teacher insisting that he could not possibly, at this young age, sign his own name—and so thereafter he could not, defeated and, importantly, delineated by her assumptions. Eric's story is the type we need to hear more often, the otherwise anonymous student whom legislators find populating our classrooms and defiling our academic standards; Stanley's book does this from a historical standpoint, with her persistent digging into well-known figures who controlled Subject A at Berkeley. This makes the human element of writing instruction all the more compelling to know. Indeed, basic writing scholarship has often succeeded by its dogged connection to the *real* living persons behind it; as Otte explains in the foreword to *Basic Writing*, "I actually know most of the people named in the stories that follow. . . Seeing (if only with the mind's eye) the faces of people I am writing about. . . has made me want all the more to give them their due" (xvii).

Clearly, in her attention to literacy narratives such as Eric's, Carter is heavily influenced by Deborah Brandt's work (and says as much), as she takes on the stories of real people and real situations to illustrate the consequences of literacy acquisition and practice, both good and bad, in our larger culture. Readers who are not only interested in basic writing, therefore, but also interested in larger culture-based discussions of reading, writing, and, significantly, testing and assessment will find a great deal to admire in Carter's book. While it focuses on achieving a "dexterity" for basic writing and basic writers—and proves this to be achievable by including Carter's own assignment sequences rubric for evaluating the projects following the aforementioned chapters—this book also puts into larger political context the deeply troubled views of literacy that get bandied about at both the state and national level, and that affect—but ironically, do not seem to be affected by—the life and school experiences of those labeled "basic" writers. Carter's book is at once personal and analytical without becoming polemical, and it theorizes writing instruction beyond error, and

into self-awareness, without promoting a return to expressivist pedagogies or essentializing students' experiences. As Carter notes, "Overturning the institutional, political, social, and economic infrastructure invested in the autonomous model of literacy requires time, patience, and—above all—diplomacy" (145). Some readers will respond to this charge by claiming they have little time, energy, or inclination to wait for this failed model that Carter critiques to fall apart. Other readers, perhaps after having read Stanley and Mlynarczyk and Otte's books, will declare that all we have, ultimately, *is* time.

Each of these books illustrates how scholars and readers (and these are overlapping sets, of course) are becoming increasingly invested in the theories, case studies, and histories of basic writing, and also exemplifies how current trends in these investigations concern themselves with local, historical accounts of practice, both successful and failed. Through detailed theoretical and considered historical paradigms, basic writing as a sub-field of composition and rhetoric is no longer confined to classroom-based studies rooted in error—or general *lack*. Basic writing need not be seen as a "problem" solvable by a good, sturdy workbook and a worn-out but plucky teacher who loves her students, and language, unconditionally. Basic writing research has come of age as an enterprise that moves underprepared writers of all shapes and sizes (and levels, and origins) into the mainstream composition studies view, by virtue of both new and experienced field scholars examining and questioning these writers' very constructed existence, as well as their parameters—those both culturally and self-imposed. No longer is basic writing a sub-field limited to the margins of scholarship; it is a fully realized enterprise, seeking equal time in our journals, monograph series, and edited collections. I say, let us encourage more graduate work in rhetoric and composition studies, and perhaps in allied fields, on this subject—in conference presentations, articles, and dissertations—so as to pass the investigative baton to the next generation and keep us from forgetting how far from "standard" we as writers really are.

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