

Basic Writing

Basic writing programs have a tumultuous history in higher education. They were formed in response to inequitable systems and structures that failed to support diverse students and minoritized populations entering colleges and universities in the 1960s and 1970s. Ira Shor (1997) writes in his widely debated article, “Basic writing as a field was born in crisis” (p. 91). Basic writing is tied to the open admissions movement in the 1970s which altered the landscape of higher education. In 1970 at the City University of New York (CUNY), for example, first-year student enrollment increased from 20,000 to 35,000 (Otte & Mlynarczyk, 2010). Nearly every history of basic writing acknowledges Mina P. Shaughnessy at City College of New York, who was charged with creating a program for “new’ students who entered colleges under the open admissions revolution of the sixties” (Shaughnessy, 1976, p. 178). Shaughnessy, most notable for *Errors and Expectations* (1977), was important in helping establish basic writing as a field and site for research and rejecting assumptions and stereotypes used to describe students entering college through the open access movement.

In the 1970s, many administrators were responsible for developing programs and classes to support student writers who previously didn’t have access to colleges and universities. Basic writing programs ultimately emerged from this. In the 1980s and 1990s, the term, definition, perception, and structure of “basic writing” became contentious in composition studies (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Bizzell, 1986; Greenberg, 1997; Lu, 1991; Shor, 1997). There were internal arguments about the name and even the nature of basic writing, as well as external pressures from policymakers that were affecting writing programs across the nation (Wiener, 1998). Basic writing programs were experiencing budget

cuts and/or were being defunded because of public perception and hysteria on “error” in student writing and elitist language ideologies. In sum, there were national conversations on literacy that expressed discontentment about student preparation in college (see “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” Sheils, 1975; “Johnny Can’t Write Because English Teachers Can’t Either,” Lambdin, 1980). Harvey S. Wiener (1998) felt that it wasn’t the basic writing programs themselves that were at fault *per se*, but instead administrators’ lack of response to these narratives on students and their writing: “Those with the responsibility for writing programs have not attended appropriately to public perceptions about the basic writing enterprise” (p. 97).

Basic writing programs have had to account for these national and institutional challenges while trying to support multicultural student populations. Further, basic writing has been marginalized in composition studies at large. As George Ott and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk (2010) write, “Research on basic writing is in short supply. Chronic marginalization of BW faculty is the chief cause of the dearth of scholarship . . . no branch of academia has been more adjunctified than composition, no subset of that more adjunctified than BW” (p. 122). Many program administrators have to contend with these ongoing issues and constraints, including a lack of institutional resources and support needed to develop sustainable programs. There are several basic writing program models, and in most of them, the larger mission seems to come from a desire to be inclusive, equitable, and supportive of students. Some programs offer credit for basic writing, while others don’t. Some use directed self-placement measures, while others use standardized testing to place students. Some stretch and combine their basic writing class with first-year writing, whereas others have standalone basic writing courses. The goal is a good one—to promote and advocate for students, and to develop policies and practices that help foster success for diverse learners—but in reality, it’s difficult given the internal and external challenges and pressures that surround basic writing programs and classes.

There are various basic writing pedagogical approaches, too. Some teacher-scholars have suggested a genre-based approach (Hall & Stephens, 2018), sociocultural and antiracist pedagogies

(Stanley, 2017), recommended multimodal assignments (Balzotti, 2016), and offered different ways to assess students' linguistic diversity (Athon, 2019). A recurring theme on teaching basic writing is the concept of "contact zones," which Mary Louise Pratt (1991) defines as the meeting and clashing of cultures: "Spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today" (p. 34). Basic writing classes are good sites for embracing pedagogies that center cultural knowledge and linguistic diversity. Teaching basic writing takes a willingness to listen and engage with students about their histories and communities. This contact zone framework, alongside critical pedagogies (see Paulo Freire) or feminist theories, could disrupt hierarchies between the teacher, who is traditionally positioned as the English language expert, and the basic writing student, who is traditionally positioned as deficient in English. There's great value in decentering and subverting power, and amplifying students' histories, languages, and cultures in and through basic writing.

INTERVIEWS

Through these interviews, you'll get a sense for how different teachers perceive basic writing and approach administration and teaching. I was fortunate to chat with Susan Naomi Bernstein, Darin Jensen, Bryna Siegel Finer, and Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt about basic writing programs and classes. Bernstein shares the history of basic writing programs in higher education and how they intersect "with social movements for reparations and restorative justice for ongoing and historical educational and social injustice." She talks about challenges facing programs and future directions for basic writing studies. Jensen talks about the label *basic writing* and Mina Shaughnessy's legacy, and he also describes how he approaches teaching basic writing. Finer mentions common assumptions about basic writing students and how she would go about training and developing graduate students to teach basic writing courses. And Calhoun-Dillahunt concludes by talking about her research on responding to students and what she enjoys the most about teaching basic writing.

Shane to Susan Naomi Bernstein: Do you mind providing a brief history of basic writing programs in higher education? [Episode 63: 01:18–05:39]

The history of basic writing programs or BW programs in higher education intersects with social movements for reparations and restorative justice for ongoing and historical educational and social injustice. In the 1960s, BW was part of a movement to create equitable access to higher education for BIPOC, poor and working class, queer and disabled, and other people who were historically closed out of post-secondary institutions by the material realities of White supremacists and elitist etiologies of higher education.

That said, I would suggest that there are many histories of basic writing, and that much depends on who is writing those histories and how basic writings historical contexts are evoked. For example, histories recounted by students and teachers of basic writing might be framed, and would be framed, quite differently from basic writing histories written by writing program administrators. Additionally, any history of BW in higher education needs to be grounded in a clear understanding of historic and ongoing inequities in K–12 public schooling in the United States.

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, many four-year colleges had eliminated basic writing and many two-year colleges no longer offer open admissions. For K–12 public school histories, I would recommend Bettina L. Love's book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionists Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. I'm reading that right now. It's amazing. I love it. I've been waiting for a book like this. It's just really pulls so much together. Valerie Kinloch's book *Harlem On Our Minds: Race, Place, and the Literacies of Urban Youth*. For a history of BW grounded in US social justice movements, I would recommend Conor Tomás Reed's article, "The Early Formations of Black Women's Studies in the Lives of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde." What

Reed does is that he doesn't look at it from a writing studies perspective. He looks at the perspective of social movement at City University of New York. That's what it is. It's how basic writing grew out of social movements.

Really kind of look at what you're doing and why you're doing it. If you're saying that, as I've often heard people say about basic writing, "Oh, well it's too late. It was an experiment that failed." I'm like, "What are you talking about? What are you talking about?" It's about what Bettina Love focuses on—*potentiality*, right? It's not about numbers. It's not about enrollment management. It's not about kind of isolating, or they say, "Oops well, this doesn't look so good. So let's move a little money around." I've seen this in so many places. Let's get rid of things that could be looked at as remedial, rather than redefining it. Rather than making it more assets-based, it's instead, "Well, we don't want anything that looks like a deficit and anyway, it's not working. So we're just going to toss the whole thing." Rather than trying to think about, well, what do we need to do to make it better so that it is more inclusive, more equitable and more diverse in that it envelops, it works with, it is informed by more folks rather than fewer.

Moving from that I would generally recommend, and this has been informing everything I've done for the last four years, I would recommend James Baldwin's activist writing on bearing witness to Black lives and White supremacy, especially his *Collected Essays*, the [Library of America] edition that Toni Morrison edited, and his previously uncollected essays in *The Cross of Redemption*. I loved that book.

Shane to Susan Naomi Bernstein: What are some of the biggest challenges to basic writing programs? [Episode 63: 05:40–10:54]

The most significant challenge is that the burdens of administrators are borne by students and teachers of basic writing. This isn't new with me. Mina Shaughnessy wrote about this half a century ago and not in *Errors and*

Expectations, which of course is problematic, but her essays and her speeches and her writing outside of *Errors and Expectations*. It uses words like *democracy*, it identifies problems that we also now are facing. Half a century ago, Mina Shaughnessy identified the problems of basic writing or the challenges were being borne by students and teachers and unfunded mandates basically. One of those burdens is the misperception of basic writing as remediation.

Basic writing courses need to be fully funded and to be offered with full credit for graduation and transfer. No credit is a big, big problem. That made them easier to eliminate . . . something like directed self-placement, also not unproblematic, but nevertheless, creating a system as fair as possible with fully funded support services for tutoring, advising, counseling, and unimpeded access to healthcare, food, and housing. Sure, I'm leaving out other things as well. This would be for me the ideal model. Just the whole person, right? I mean the whole student and community concurrently. Basic writing courses and support services would be informed by a deep, deep awareness of racial and economic injustice, and the intersectional needs of queer and disabled people, and people from religious minorities.

Here I'm going to go a little autobiographical on you. It's always hard for me to know whether I should bring this up. It's not about me, but I have a much clearer understanding of the whys of why I got involved in this. I have ADHD and generalized anxiety that weren't diagnosed until I was fifteen years out of grad school. I had no accommodations, which is why I'm such a big believer in them. The other thing about that was that in kindergarten, in the 1960s, they were doing lots of experiments with us.

One of the things that I was able to be involved in back when I started school, they weren't teaching kindergartners how to read as a matter of course. That came later. Because of my hyper focus on things like books and magazines and things like that, they thought, "Oh, well, let's put Susan

in this experimental class where we're teaching kids how to read." That saved me. That saved me because I learned how to read and learned how to write. Once I did that and we left that school district and moved to a much more conservative school district that wasn't doing anything like this, they were like, "Whoa, you're sort of ahead a grade level." That saved me when other things started tanking. It was literacy stuff that and I was like, "Whoa, that's like super important."

The other part is that back in '60s and '70s, there were some things that we're totally missing now. College needs to be free, as CUNY was for many folks until 1976. Or more fully subsidized. Free is better obviously, but more fully subsidized by state and federal funding. That's how it was for me. When I was an undergraduate in the late 1970s, one-third of my tuition was paid for by a needs-based state scholarship. While I still had loan debt, the indebtedness was much less onerous than student indebtedness in subsequent generations. Now especially, students' financial burdens and family responsibilities are an additional challenge for basic writing programs. Invisible, not invisible to many of us, but invisible to some folks who are making decisions. If my dad hadn't had access to low-cost education, a generation before me coming out of New Deal stuff, I wouldn't be here talking to you right now.

I mean, that stuff is intergenerational and significant. It breaks my heart isn't the right word. Enrages is a better word. It enrages me that that's gone. It just enrages me now that it's more necessary than ever. It's also more absent.

Shane to Susan Naomi Bernstein: What's the future of basic writing studies, or what future directions would you like to see scholarship and basic writing programs take? [Episode 63: 17:14–21:50]

It's got to be . . . action research and activist practice. This is what Bettina Love talks about, what Valerie Kinloch talks about. This is what it's got to be. It's got to be informed

by our current and ever-evolving historical moment. It's got to be involved. It's got to be with an understanding of what happened and why it didn't work. Folks working on it have to be unafraid to challenge . . . I say "unafraid" and I totally, I'm like shaking all the time. I'm like, "Oh no, I didn't say it right." I'm going to use the word sacred because it involves potential, right? It involves something that's larger than us. That's larger than enrollment management. That's larger than universities. It involves the whole of the culture, all of our history and all of what is going to come.

As a teacher and as an administrator, it's got to involve your whole self and be informed by your life. That means that you have to look at your life in the way that Baldwin talks about to really, for White people especially, look at our own histories. Where are the gaps and absences? What are the stories we've been telling ourselves? What is missing from those stories? It's got to be informed by that. Most of all, I'm leaving out the most important part, it's got to be, it's got to be centered on students and what students need and where students are coming from and what they bring with them. It's got to not be a deficit thing. We have to stop looking at it as deficit model. It's got to be like Bettina Love says, it's got to be an assets-based model. That's what I see it as. All the places, all the points where it failed, were the, "Oh, well," or the idea of, "This is a failed experiment," or "It was too late for folks."

Some of the reading that I've been doing, I went back and I read about what CUNY was like before open admissions. I read some of the arguments in regular New York Times articles, that are not so different from now, in the early 1960s about what CUNY was like before. In reading James Baldwin's biographical history stuff that he, at one point, had thought about going to City College, but he couldn't get in because he didn't have an academic diploma. He worked when he was in high school and he went to an elite high school. Most of his classmates were Jewish.

Stan Lee graduated from the same high school a couple of years before him. He had to work. He had eight brothers and sisters. He had to help support them. He was growing up in Harlem and his family was working class, and there was a lot of suffering. City College had a requirement of, I believe, it was an A- average and what was called, at that time, an academic diploma, which would now probably become a Regents diploma if I remember right. He couldn't go. In a way that was good for him because he was able to leave us so much. In another way, he shouldn't have had to suffer and no one should have to suffer.

I'm not even sure if it would be called "basic writing" even. What it should be doing is alleviating suffering and not contributing to it. Everything needs to be offered for credit or the credit system needs to be imagined. I was the beneficiary of much work that was pass-fail. It meant it gave room to experiment and to find out more about what education could be. That's what the future has to be. It's got to be equity, inclusion, diversity. It can't just be performative. It's got to be active, it's got to be a real thing and viewed in everything.

Shane to Darin Jensen: The label "basic writing" was created, in many ways, to resist the dominant use of the word "remedial," specifically its attachment to "students" and/or "classes." In what ways do you feel like academia's understanding of basic writing has changed since Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* was published in 1977? [Episode 23: 07:47–11:56]

Hope Parisi wrote this magnificent essay in the *Journal of Basic Writing* about this and she has a retrospective of exactly the question that you're asking. Here's what I would say. I would say that I am sad that we even read Mina Shaughnessy's book anymore. I think that there's all sorts of problems with it even though she meant well, and that in most composition and pedagogy courses, when we read basic writing, we end up reading a chapter or maybe even the whole of *Errors and Expectations* and I feel like

we should leave Mina as a wonderful important historical footnote, but that there's a lot of other work that's been done that is more interesting. I think Susan Naomi Bernstein would say that we shouldn't call anyone "basic writers." That there's no such thing as a basic writer. She's right. But I don't know what the hell to call people then.

I've been involved with NADE (which is now NOSS), National Association for Developmental Education, and they use this idea of "developmental education," which is somehow less damning to me than the notion of basic writing. But to answer one part of your question, our culture still thinks that we have "remedial" writers and our culture . . . I still spend time in the writing center getting students who come in and they just want to "fix" things, right? They have a notion of "correctness" that dominates their writing. So we do this still . . . every time I get a nursing student in the writing center who's bugged up about APA and it's just like, "You know, you're going to be fine and it doesn't need to be perfect." Except they have nursing instructors who want that to be perfect and it's an enormous part of their grade. So even outside of writing studies, the notion of correctness of the current tradition that's sort of grammatical is really, really important and it still dominates.

I think that one of the failures of writing studies, or maybe one work in progress of writing studies, is that we have not done a good job communicating how people really learn to write and how writing is a process and how writing is something that happens over multiple attempts. Not to be flippant, but I couldn't give the nursing faculty Anne Lamott's "Shitty First Drafts" and have them understand, "Oh!" because that's not what the nursing faculty want. They want students who can produce medical notes and case notes that are accurate and that have a shared grammar. I can't really blame them for that.

I don't know. There's lots of pieces to that question. I don't like the notion of "basic writer." However, if we get rid of

the idea of basic writing or developmental writing, then we won't have a space. I'm really worried, especially the way developmental education has been under attack, that we won't have a space to give time to students who need the extra help, who need the extra instruction. I think that the other part of it is that we don't do a good job communicating to other publics what good writing instruction looks like.

Shane to Darin Jensen: You mentioned not wanting to lose the space and perhaps even the attention and resources attached to basic writing programs. Do you feel like there's a better conception of basic writing that moves away from that label but still very much gets to its identity or the work that happens in basic writing programs? [Episode 23: 11:57–14:03]

“Underprepared” or “underresourced.” Christie Toth and Brett Griffiths write this chapter in a book on class and they use the term “poverty effects.” I rarely have students who do not have the cognitive abilities to write at a college level. Whatever that is. Sometimes they're not motivated because of previous school experiences. Mike Rose writes about that kind of stuff. Sometimes they've had poor public schooling. This is not blaming high school teachers, but if you grow up working class, if you grow up poor and you don't have a lot of books in your house and nobody's really pushing you to read, there are a hundred things that happen by the time I get a student sitting in whatever we're calling it.

What I would say is that it's more about first-generation students. It's more about poverty effects. It's more about class. It's more about students not understanding the moves of “academic writing,” or the moves of middle-class standards that we try to assimilate people to in post-secondary education. I want to resist that it has anything to do with their deficiency as a learner, as a thinker, as a human being. It has to do, in most part, with poverty effects, with class, with opportunities, with previous educational experiences

that end up expressing themselves on a writing test or the Accuplacer or whatever measure people are using to sort students into classes.

Shane to Darin Jensen: How many years have you taught basic writing and how do you approach the basic writing classroom? [Episode 23: 04:19–07:46]

Eleven years. When I started at Metro (Metropolitan Community College in Omaha), the faculty there, Erin Joy and Susan E. Lee and some other folks, all had just revised their developmental writing sequence and they had this great course called “Read and Respond.” It was very literacy focused and then building on writing skills. They had this kind of studio model that was called “Fundamentals of College Writing.” . . . it really was an integrated reading and writing model. I say that because I think that, for me, forms the basis of why I do what I do. I saw the holistic model that Erin and Susan and others had developed as being the way to teach developmental writing. Obviously there’s already been lots of critique of skill-based instruction, “skill and drill,” building sentences.

The Metro program was really interested in having students write essays, write short essays, write responses, right? Lots and lots of writing and lots of reading. I think that my goal is to get students to engage in the process of writing and to understand writing as a process and reading as a recursive process. That they aren’t deficient. And that is really important because I think one of the things that I took into my developmental writing courses is also a discussion of applied linguistics in the sense that many of my students, when you ask them what “good” English is, they’ll say “proper,” and they come with standard English ideology already embedded into them. They come with middle-class notions of language. The reason they’ve hated their English classes and they didn’t want to go is because they had teachers who were still using current-traditional rhetoric methods.

So not only getting them to write, but also beginning to critically deconstruct the standard English ideology that has been foisted on them. When I taught at Omaha, I taught at a historically African American campus in an African American neighborhood. It was very clear the kinds of racism hidden in standard English. It was everywhere . . . it was immediately oppressive. We talk about that in my rural campus, too. We talk about rural English or working-class English compared to “standard” English.

Shane to Bryna Siegel Finer: What are some common assumptions about basic writing students and classrooms? [Episode 55: 00:57–04:02]

I’ve been teaching basic writing for a very, very long time. I’ve been doing a research project and collecting longitudinal data from nine basic writing instructors from across the country for the last two-and-a-half years. I’ve been spending the last couple of months analyzing that data. In terms of common assumptions, I think that there’s a myth or there’s an assumption that the students who are placed in basic writing are unmotivated or they don’t want to be there. While I think sometimes that can be true, the reason for that has to really be explored. Right? By whoever’s teaching the class, by the people who do the placement, by the WPA. The students aren’t necessarily unmotivated just because that is their intrinsic nature . . . being placed in basic writing comes with a lot of emotional stuff. Students start to realize, “Oh wait, I was placed in this class, but my peers were placed in another class. Why didn’t I get into this class?” Often, they’re going to end up paying for an additional class that their peers aren’t. So there’s a lot of stuff that comes with being put into basic writing. It’s not that students have a character trait of being unmotivated. So that is a really important thing that people should not assume about the students.

Also, there’s an assumption that anybody can teach this class. A lot of the people who I talked to in the research

study that I've been doing have talked about how they see this happening at their own universities where a lot of adjunct or graduate students or contingent faculty teach basic writing when they haven't had any training in it or any experience teaching it. And then, the students are kind of at a loss, right? They're not getting necessarily the best experience in the classroom. That's really a hard place for the students to be in. There are, of course, amazing instructors and adjuncts and graduate students who are great teachers, but I really think to teach this class—we talk about it at our own institution as a “specialized course”—you need some specialized training.

You need to have some experience working with students and working with students who need additional support and have some training on the sort of pedagogy that goes along with that, too. It's not like anybody can just sort of walk in and teach it.

Shane to Bryna Siegel Finer: I'm interested in knowing how you would suggest going about preparing someone to teach basic writing. What resources, texts, materials, or pedagogical strategies would you recommend? [Episode 55: 06:11–08:25]

What can best prepare somebody to teach basic writing is to be in the classroom with a teacher who's already doing it. With an experienced teacher. So either that they are assigned to be that person's graduate assistant or teaching assistant or something like that, or they ask if they can shadow that teacher so in some way they are in that classroom for once a week working as an in-class tutor. Spending time in an actual classroom. A lot of us get our PhDs from institutions that don't teach basic writing. So they don't offer basic writing to undergraduates. We get our PhDs in composition, rhetoric, or some related field, but we don't ever have the experience or the chance to teach basic writing. We teach something like English 101 and maybe some other kind of freshman writing course. We might learn about basic writing or we might read some

books about it or some articles, but we don't get that hands-on experience.

I was really lucky because I taught as an adjunct in some places before I did my PhD I was kind of thrown into it and got a lot of practice doing it that way. But I think if you are a graduate student, if you can get some experience in the classroom, that's the best way. If you can't, I mean, there's a lot of great reading. Everybody will say read Mina Shaughnessy and Mike Rose. The Council of Basic Writing has a really great website/blog where people post tons of resources and articles and links to the journal. I mean, you really have to immerse yourself in that current scholarship to understand what's going on in that area if you're not able to get into the classroom itself.

Shane to Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt: In "Conversing in Marginal Spaces: Developmental Writers' Responses to Teacher Comments," you study basic writers' perception and attitudes on response. You research what basic writers do when they receive feedback from teachers. What did you learn from studying students' reactions to marginal comments? How has this research helped shape your teaching? [Episode 49: 12:26–18:01]

This was actually a three-year project Dodie and I did. The article only represents the first year . . . but it doesn't represent the third year, which was my favorite . . . the third project was actually case studies and that was awesome.

I interviewed, I think we had five or six students out of Dodie's class and we kind of went through that whole process that we did with the study, but just with those students and then follow-up interviews with them. It confirmed what we were seeing. It also provided a lot more support, for the most part, of the autonomous nature that these students are bringing in. Again, we still have these assumptions that developmental students—and they're not wrong, there's support for this—that developmental students want directive feedback and want to be told what to do. But they really do want to intellectualize . . . the

majority of them, like most any other student, they're just students, they're just writers, they're just earlier more novice writers.

I think that was really helpful to try to get rid of that bias that I think I had and didn't intend to have because I love teaching developmental students. I was maybe being a little bit too nurturing, like, maybe this is my K-12 where I'm trying to show them the right way versus kind of treating them as they are adults with perfectly capable brains and plenty of ideas that just maybe need more practice at academic forms. It was great to work with another colleague and to kind of share these experiences back and forth. It was great to talk to students, even when it wasn't direct. We did interviews with the students, even in the first round, but you're getting to know them on the page pretty well and how forthright they are and how much they're willing to share about their experiences.

It was mostly very heartening to understand that our hunch that we felt like commentary was important. Both she and I devote far too much time to it. I haven't gotten any better. I get more efficient, but I'm slower. So it hasn't been a time-saver at all. It's still a hugely time-consuming process, but you're hoping that it makes a difference and our study suggested that it does. When you engage in it with this opportunity to discuss things with them on the page, that's what they're taking it as, that's what they want, that is how they are maturing . . . I think back to very early in my career teaching, I implemented portfolios, that's something I even did in grad school. I loved that idea of just having them revise and make some choices. What I remember is I would look at portfolios and all this stuff that I remembered had so much potential, and then I'd look at it and I'd be like so disappointed because it didn't live up to this potential that I had in my mind.

I think the study really brought home that 1) I'm taking ownership of their paper when I'm doing that, I'm

imagining what it can be, and 2) I wasn't always being fair because I had imagined what their paper could be and it wasn't that they weren't passing, it was still satisfied, still credit . . . it was just like, it's not as good as I thought it could be. Like they were making changes. I'm just not seeing them because they weren't the changes that I was telling them to make necessarily, or they weren't changing in the way I thought they should change. So it's humbling and it's good. Then, to really think that the point is not to create a great paper. That'd be great if we both agreed and we're both really thrilled and proud of this work. The point is to learn how to change your writing and to learn how to make decisions about it; to make those decisions and to have a reason why you made those decisions.

Shane to Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt: What excites you the most about teaching basic writing, or what do you enjoy about teaching that class? And why? [Episode 49: 09:38–12:26]

I love the students, first and foremost. I love them because more than any other group, I think they are there to transform their lives, whatever that means to them. They feel very invested and they feel very grateful for their education. That's easy to work with. And they're with you, right? So they're very engaged in learning. They're less kind of "point oriented." . . . so they want to learn and we can all focus on learning and the course outcomes.

My commentary is better in those classes because it does feel less pressured without a particular grade that I have to assign at the end. One-hundred percent of them could be satisfactory, I would love that, that would be my goal. It's not really a gatekeeping sort of class, but it is, it still does prevent them sometimes from moving onto college level, even though there's not a test or whatever that they have to pass at the end, but they seem really focused on learning. When students are focused on learning, that's where I'm the happiest, because that's kind of what I'm there for. We don't have to do all the, I call it "point grubbing," where

we're kind of distracted from what we're really doing here because we're so concerned about what the final grade will look like.

There's just a lot of freedom and flexibility, too, in developmental writing courses. Our campus has a lot of freedom. We don't have a standardized curriculum at all, we just have standard outcomes. I think that works really well for who we are, predominantly full-time, which is rare at a two-year college. We have developed collaboratively our course outcomes so we all have a clear sense of what we're looking for. We've done a lot of assessment. Everyone feels pretty comfortable doing what works well for you as a teacher, where your strengths are as a teacher, where your interests are as a teacher.

DENOUEMENT

To me, basic writing programs and classes start with an awareness of the sociocultural conditions and realities of students. The history of basic writing is one of *access*. It seems to me that investigating the question of access and understanding how power and privilege circulates and is reinforced in academia and public spaces is central to any work related to these programs and courses. Basic writing programs and classes, then, should be attentive to their students. They should be asset-based and should reject deficit models. Basic writing should be approached through potentiality and opportunity, not through limitations and needs. And ultimately, they should value linguistic diversity, social justice, and multiliteracies.

Most writing program administrators and teachers are aware of the larger cultural issues (e.g., racism, classism) that influence teaching basic writing. These biases have been reinforced through program practices, such as placement tests and standards that disproportionately affect students of color. As basic writing scholarship moves forward, administrators and teachers have to listen to students and reaffirm their literacies and languages. Some administrators might need to consider renaming their basic writing programs and classes given the negative perceptions and associations with the words *basic* and *developmental writing*. Tom Fox (1990)

says that programs “have been limited by narrow definitions that misrepresent the languages and communities of their students” (p. 65). Composition studies and writing programs might need to further interrogate the labels used and assigned to classes and students.

For more research on basic writing theory and praxis, I recommend George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk’s (2010) reference guide to basic writing titled *Basic Writing*, Susan Naomi Bernstein’s (2013) *Teaching Developmental Writing* (4th ed.), Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu’s (1999) *Representing the “Other”: Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*, and the *Journal of Basic Writing* (JBW), as well as the *Basic Writing e-Journal* (BWe). I also offer the following questions to help guide more conversations on basic writing programs and classes:

- How are programs and classes supporting the needs of diverse student populations who have been and continue to be marginalized?
- What classroom strategies and practices are being used to value sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and socioeconomic diversity? Through what pedagogies, assignments, and assessments? And how are teachers providing feedback in ways that support students’ language practices and differences?
- How are program administrators advocating for basic writing students through placement procedures, class sizes, and credit-bearing statuses?
- How are programs helping students transition into basic writing classes? And how are programs talking about and labelling these classes and what affects might that have?
- How are graduate programs preparing and developing instructors to teach basic writing? What basic writing studies research and theories are being amplified in graduate composition seminars and pedagogy courses?