

Fall 1993


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Recommended Citation

Hindman, Jane E., "Reinventing the University: Finding the Place for Basic Writers" (1993). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/nc_pubs/76

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Jane E. Hindman

REINVENTING THE UNIVERSITY: FINDING THE PLACE FOR BASIC WRITERS

ABSTRACT: A poststructuralist critique of basic writing placement and pedagogy, this paper argues that our notions of good writing (i.e., the criteria by which we as English professors and compositionists authorize and “place” students) come not from some general or transcendent standards, but rather from the practices by which we self-authorize within our own discourse community. Using Bartholomae and Petrosky’s curriculum presented in Facts, Artifacts, Counterfacts as a point of departure, I propose a language-centered curriculum which uses discourse itself as the subject of the semester-long project wherein students eventually learn to critique our practices and create their own discourse communities. This modification, the author argues, comes closer to empowering students to be the agents of their own authorization and placement at the academy.

In transition from one theory to the next, words change their meanings or conditions of applicabilities in subtle ways. . .the ways in which some of them attach to nature has somehow changed. Successive theories are thus, we say, incommensurable. (Kuhn 338)

Thomas Kuhn’s reflection on the ways paradigm shifts change the meanings of terms foregrounds what I see as a shift in David Bartholomae’s use of the term “marginal.” This change in meaning supplies the point of departure for my argument.¹ My preliminary examination of “Inventing the University” and “Writing on the

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© Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1993

Margins” will contextualize Bartholomae’s use of this term and my critique of his and Petrosky’s *Facts, Counterfacts, Artifacts* will illuminate how that shift affects the usefulness of their curriculum. I argue that, because it does not provide basic writers with the means for the agency or critical consciousness necessary to situating themselves on the margins of a language practice, *Facts* cannot make good on its promise to teach basic writers to seek out the margins of the language and methods of the university. In Section Two of this essay, I outline an alternative to *Facts* that will facilitate the necessary agency and awareness essential to basic writers’ situating themselves in the language and practice of the university.

However, my purpose here is not simply to critique but also to expand on Bartholomae and Petrosky’s notions of what goals and needs should drive basic writing curricula, to ask some very important questions about what constitutes authority in the university. Accordingly, in Section Three of this article I consider how, as professors of English—by which I mean anyone whose work it is to profess English, to carry on the academic labor of the discipline—we practice a discourse and discipline that function to conceal the ways by which we earn authority at the university. Consideration of how a basic writer can authorize herself or himself at the university and earn a place therein provides, at best, persuasive evidence of the effectiveness of my proposed revision to *Facts* and, at least, suggestions for new ways in which to conceive of and practice composition and basic writing pedagogy.

I. Ludic or Ghettoized: Which Margin Is Whose?

In his 1985 article, “Inventing the University,” Bartholomae classifies basic writers as “marginalized,” students who are on the outside of the university because they do not yet know how to appropriate academic discourse. However, their “mainstream counterparts,” the ones whose writing earns them unrestrained access to the academic community, are able to enter into the discourse by “placing [themselves] in the context of what has been said and what might be said” (152).

It is very hard for them to take on the role—the voice, the persona—of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis, or research. They slip, then, into a more immediately available and realizable voice of authority, the voice of a teacher giving a lesson or the voice of a parent lecturing. . . . They offer advice or homilies rather than “academic” conclusions. (136,137)

Because “the university . . . is the place where ‘common’ wisdom is only of negative values—it is something to work against” (156), basic writers must learn how to set themselves against the commonplace, learn how to invent the university for themselves so that they can move from their marginalized, excluded positions on the outside of the work of the academy to the inside.

Bartholomae’s 1987 article, “Writing on the Margins: The Concept of Literacy in Higher Education,” also considers what it means to be writing on the “margins” and how teachers decide what kind of writing is considered “outside” of the writing accepted at a university. Here, Bartholomae pays particular attention to those borderline cases “that put pressure on what we take to be correct . . . that call into question our assumptions about orderly presentation, standards of copy editing, and the stability of conventional habits of thinking” (68). In reviewing the many sample placement exam essays that are included in his essay, Bartholomae demonstrates that the more clearly marked basic writers’ essays are the ones in which we “don’t see ourselves in what they [the student writers] do” (69). He explains that “the difference between the top and bottom rank is marked by the ease with which a student (in 15 minutes) could place himself within a conventional discourse” (75). As he did in “Inventing,” Bartholomae again defines the problem of the basic writer as a problem of place, of “moving into and appropriating the specialized discourse of a privileged community . . . a community with its peculiar gestures of authority, its key terms and figures, its interpretive schemes” (69). Securing a place for themselves in academic discourse is a strategy that basic writers must adopt if they choose and/or are chosen to remain in the university. As a result:

We [basic writing instructors] must put marginal students immediately within representative academic projects (in courses like the seminars we offer to advanced students) so that we can see (and they can see) the position of their writing within the context of those varieties of writing that enable the work of the academy. (70)

Bartholomae and Petrosky do just that in their creation and implementation of a curriculum—described in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*—specifically designed to enable basic writing and reading students to authorize and locate themselves in the university.

The purpose [of the course], then, is to engage students in a process whereby they discover academic discourse from the inside. They have to learn to define a subject . . . to assume the burden of developing working concepts and a specialized vocabulary. In this sense, they are given the task of inventing an academic discipline. . . . They will begin to learn what a subject is—how it is constituted, how it is defended, how it finds its examples, ideas and champions, how it changes and preserves itself. (301)

It is in this essay describing the theory which drives the curriculum presented in *Facts* that we can see the shift in Bartholomae's use of the term "marginal." This shift is crucial because it unwittingly conceals the curriculum's failure to elucidate how a discipline authorizes itself and therefore to facilitate basic writers' gaining the authority their writing lacks. We can easily recognize the transformation in the notion of "marginal" in this specific essay because it occurs within a single concluding paragraph:

The course we've defined above demonstrates our belief that students can learn to transform materials, structures and situations that seem fixed or inevitable, and that in doing so they can move from the margins of the university to establish a place for themselves on the inside. At the end, however, these relationships may remain hesitant and tenuous—partly because they will continue to make more mistakes than their "mainstream" counterparts (although not so dramatically as before), but also because they have learned (and perhaps in a way their "mainstream" counterparts cannot) that successful readers and writers actively seek out the margins and aggressively poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university. (305)

Initially, this paragraph presents the "margins" as undesirable, a "ghetto" outside of the university where basic writers have involuntarily been placed and from which they need to flee in order to become insiders. At its close, however, the paragraph presents the "margins" as a place to pursue actively because (the implication is) truly successful writers are outsiders who crave the arch self-rule of these margins. Bartholomae and Petrosky claim that their curriculum will teach a basic writer how to choose to be such an outsider because it involves such students in a project that empowers them to earn the position of insider.

Let's scrutinize this claim. Can we accept the assertion that students in this course will come to know an academic subject and its discourse? Students of the course will study and form a theory of "adolescence" or of "work" (the topics for the academic projects that Bartholomae and Petrosky suggest). Thus, they will experience the problematization of their own existential situations that Freire sees as essential to the adult literacy process; likewise, they will learn that an essential practice of the university, of a discipline, is to make general commonplace, "fixed," knowledge look like naive assumptions. Thus, Bartholomae and Petrosky's promise that their course will empower students to locate and authorize themselves on the inside of the university is a claim more than justified.

However, I see no evidence for fulfillment of the promise that the curriculum will enable students to seek out the margins of the methods of the university. Yet, actively seeking those oppositional margins and aggressively poisoning themselves in a tenuous relationship to the university is what Bartholomae and Petrosky say successful writers must do. How empowering can their curriculum be if it does not enable *that* movement, that shift from center to margins?

I would argue that there is another kind of "enabling" going on, an enabling of the status quo within our own discipline (professing English) that *disables* the voluntary move to the margins that Bartholomae and Petrosky propose. We professors of English—by which I mean not simply basic writing instructors or even composition teachers but all those who practice the discipline of English—are probably not wittingly disabling anyone. On the contrary, we all—like most enablers—have only the best of intentions: we only want to empower inexperienced writers who want to learn how to write well. Nonetheless, much of our pedagogy involving these "marginalized" students fails to give real power or place or freedom to them because it does not elucidate the source of English professors' authority within the discipline; our pedagogy does not contextualize our own writing within the academy. Thus it is the politics, not the intention, of our methods, that are disabling.

Consider how Freire elaborates on his evaluations of the imitative, mechanical, decontextualized literacy pedagogies that Bartholomae and Petrosky's curriculum strives to supplant. Notice too how Freire employs the term "marginal," how he distinguishes between the "involuntarily excluded" aspect of the term and the "voluntarily refusing to be implicated" coinage:

. . . the a-structural perception of illiteracy revealed in these texts exposes the other false view of illiterates as marginal men. Those who consider them marginal must, nevertheless, recognize the existence of a reality to which they are marginal. . . . But being “outside of” or “marginal to” necessarily implies a movement of the one said to be marginal from the center, where he was, to the periphery. This movement, which is an action, presupposes in turn not only an agent but his reasons. . . . *Who is the author of this movement from the center of the structure to its margin?* Do so-called marginal men, among them the illiterates, make the decision to move out to the periphery? (161, emphasis added)

Bartholomae and Petrosky claim that their curriculum will empower the student to be the author of this movement to the borderlands or “margins” of the language and methods of the university, to make a choice where before no choice was possible. I think not: while such a course may illustrate to students how to transform their own reality in the sense of the facts of the subject—be it adolescence or work—the course does *not* unveil for them the context within which they have been denied a place or authority in the university. In short, the course does not empower the basic writer to identify the authors who have to prevent—however unwittingly—a student’s movement from the center to the margins of our own potentially disabling discipline.

If, then, [his] marginality is not by choice, marginal man has been expelled from and kept outside of the social system In fact, however, the social structure as a whole does not “expel,” nor is marginal man a “being outside of.” He is, on the contrary, a “being inside of,” within the social structure, and in a dependent relationship to those whom we call falsely autonomous beings, inauthentic beings-for-themselves. These men, illiterate or not, are, in fact, not marginal. . . . They are not “beings outside of”; they are “beings for another.” (Freire 162)

In other words, basic writers are beings for us as professors of English; the notion of marginal students as “marginal” (involuntarily excluded) is essential to the functioning of our own system; our own autonomy and place are dependent upon someone else’s dependence on our authority to assign or deny location.

Bartholomae points to this dysfunction in the educational system (and by implication within our own discipline) when he cites Foucault’s “The Discourse of Language”:

In its [the educational system's] distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it. (227)

As Bartholomae explains how the system's function translates into the students' position:

If the university officially places some students on the margins (in remedial writing courses), that *position* is a representation (perhaps in its most dramatic and telling form) of the position of every writer. ("Margins" 70)

Mike Rose argues too that:

The function of labelling certain material remedial [or basic] in higher education is to keep in place the hard fought for, if historically and conceptually problematic and highly fluid, distinction between college and secondary work. "Remedial" gains its meaning, then, in a political more than a pedagogical universe. (349)

It is this political and systemic context driving the labeling and assigning of place to marginalized, basic, remedial students that undermines *Facts*. I find it unlikely that Bartholomae and Petrosky's model curriculum will explicitly provide the agency for basic writers (the students we call "marginalized" in the sense of "excluded" but whose entrapment is at the very center of our system) to move to the real "margins" of academic discourse and university methods, to the borderlands wherein one can resist being implicated in or even subvert the dysfunctional power structure of a system. On the contrary, the course provides students the opportunity to move from the excluded position of the "margins" to the included position at the center. And the subjects which *Facts* proposes as the focus for students' academic projects do not illuminate the institutional context of the language and methods against which students need to position themselves in order to be successful writers. Inventing the study of adolescence or of work will not facilitate the basic writers' critique of the writing practices which authorized their "mainstream counterparts" and denied them access to "mainstream" writing courses. Such a critique is essential to the voluntary and active search for the margins of any practice or institution. In order to be the agents of their own marginalization, basic writers need to be able to recognize their

position at the center of the system that—in part at least—gains its authority by de-authorizing them.

II. Altering the *Facts*

In its emphasis on semester-long academic projects, *Facts* provides a crucial point of departure for a basic writing pedagogy because it establishes much of the context that surrounds academic writing. I want to pursue that model a step further and suggest a course whose subject matter is discourse itself, the discourse of the students and of the university. I propose a revised curriculum whose content is language-centered, rather than focused on the topics of adolescence or of work. A language-centered curriculum that, among other things, contextualizes the institutional practices of evaluating and placing writers in the university *will* illuminate for basic writers not only their position as writers in the university, but also the position of nonbasic writers, of honors student writers, and of the evaluators of writing in English courses.

My proposal relies heavily on *Facts* because—unlike other imitative, decontextualized, atomistic approaches to teaching basic writing—Bartholomae and Petrosky's curriculum acknowledges that for basic writers the problem of writing in the university is the problem of appropriating power and authority through a particular way of writing. Their curriculum also considers—though not to a sufficient extent, I believe—the problem of place, of context, “not only physical space, but historical, social, cultural, and economic realities—i.e., the structural dimensions of reality” (Freire 161). These realities are essential because:

the relationship of the writer to the institutions within which he writes [is] . . . central rather than peripheral (a social or political problem external to writing and therefore something to be politely ignored). . . . We cannot assume that we can teach the sentence or the paragraph as though they were context-free (as we do in workbook exercises or in courses that offer a version of writing that has little to do with writing in the academic disciplines). (Bartholomae “Margins” 70)

Though the proposed topic for study is revised, the methods of the course I propose are no different from those described in *Facts*: beginning from their own personal experiences, students in such a course examine the language used by their families, their

peer groups, and/or other subcultures. Their semester-long, seminar project considers such questions as the following: Who is authorized to speak in the discourse of any particular group? How is such authority recognized and practiced? What privileges does the authority provide? How do the dominants of the group protect that privilege? Beginning with their families and peers, students begin by observing and recording some of the language practices of those familiar groups. Drawing from their early writing about their own experiences as “case studies,” students then begin constructing theories about the language systems they have examined. Later on in the semester, students observe and record some of the language practices of academic groups and then compare the theories they construct about those practices with the theories of the professionals, that is with *ours*. To facilitate the comparison, students can focus on the language specific to English studies, in particular all aspects of the English placement exam settings that result in assigning students to basic writing courses.

Study of this aspect of English practice proves particularly illuminating because this context is a site wherein professors of English calibrate their notions of “good writing.” At the institution where I profess English, for example, all graduate teaching assistants and associates—the imminent generation of instructors of upper division literature, creative writing, second language acquisition, rhetoric and composition classes, and the current generation of instructors of first-year composition courses—are required to participate in the training sessions for the holistic grading of Freshmen Placement Exams (FPEs). In addition, a more concise version of this training precedes every grading session of FPEs. The purpose of the session is to align the instructors’ notions of “unsatisfactory,” “average,” and “sophisticated” college level writing—as well as the corresponding assignments to basic, mainstream, or honors composition courses—with those existent in the discipline. In this context an essential legacy of English professors is passed on: here is tangibly identified that which constitutes the boundaries of authority in our discipline; herein are we professors of English implicated by and in our own practice.

These features are precisely those that make this context one most fruitful for basic writers to examine and critique. The purpose of their study is not to “pass” placement exams: in most institutions, such as the one where I teach, students in a basic writing course will already have “flunked” the exam in the sense that they have been placed in a course that isolates them from

“their mainstream counterparts.” Rather, their concentration on this context of composition instructors’ discursive practices is intended not only to make explicit to students what those instructors see as “good” writing, but also to provide the opportunity for students to analyze and critique the language system valued in composition courses and (presumably) throughout the academy. In other words, after seeking out the materials necessary to observing our placement exam expertise (e.g., audio tapes of holistic training sessions, a large sampling of student exams and the scores they earned, interviews with graders), students can compare their theories about discourse and authority in the university with those of the specialists, that is, with the professors of English, those whose self-authorization put the students in the basic writing courses in the first place.

Such a curriculum, I believe, enables students to examine the ways in which authority is meted out in any language system. This study problematizes the existential situation of language use itself, especially as that use occurs at the university. It illuminates (or at least makes possible the illumination of) what Peter Elbow describes as

the very thing that is attractive and appealing about academic discourse [but that also] is inherently problematic and perplexing. It tries to peel away from messages the evidence of how those messages are situated at the center of personal, political, or cultural interest; its conventions tend toward the sound of reasonable, disinterested, perhaps even objective (shall I say it?) men. (141)

Unlike Elbow, who wants to “argue for one *kind* of nonacademic discourse . . . [a kind] that tries to render experience rather than explain it” (136), I want to argue not necessarily for a particular kind of discourse but for a curriculum that will reveal the evidence of how the messages of academic discourse *and our practice of evaluating them* are situated. Like Elbow, I’m arguing that “we need to take a larger view of human discourse” (137) into our classrooms; I disagree, however, that merely providing a place for basic writing students to find and express their authentic voices will elucidate this larger view. Such a discovery, I think, certainly would not hurt, notwithstanding Bartholomae’s objections that “it is wrong to teach late-adolescents that writing is an expression of individual thoughts and feelings.” (“Reply” 128). To teach students *only* that writing is a form of personal expression does seem wrong: I concur with Bartholomae that such myopia renders students “powerless, at least to the degree that it makes them blind to

tradition, power and authority as they are present in language and culture" (128-29).

An empowering basic writing pedagogy, then, should provide a space where students can not only express individual thoughts and feelings but also uncover the hidden positionality of academic discourse; it should reveal what's at stake for English teachers in the practice of teaching English, how their self-authorization is essential to their definition of "good" writing in the academy. What better way to promote self-reflexivity and linguistic awareness in students, to "relate *speaking the word to transforming reality*" (Freire 164)? Through such a pedagogy, students may develop the critical consciousness necessary to being the authors of their own movement *from* a dependent, uninformed, "marginalized" position at the center of an obscure, enigmatic system *to* an autonomous position on the "margins," that place where successful writers "aggressively poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university." They will certainly become situated such that they can begin to see how successful writers'—indeed, even teachers'—authority is of their own construction, a construction that has often kept basic writers at the mercy of a disabling system. In this case, then, it may be our basic writing students who develop the ability to move to the outside of, to deconstruct the notion of place and authority as it relates to professing English.

III. [Mis]Recognizing Good Writing

It remains to be seen whether a curriculum such as this one will actually work. And even though my primary purpose in this essay is not to argue for this specific curriculum, I do believe that this model, or one similar to it, needs to be realized, tested, and probably further revised. What I am primarily concerned with here is carrying on the work that Bartholomae and Petrosky began when they revolutionized the way we think about the goals and needs that should drive a basic writing curriculum.

In order to instigate this project (and by extension, to ascertain the feasibility of my own curriculum proposal), I want to consider at some length how existing practices of professors of English might delimit basic writers. Thus, in this section of the essay, I want to look more carefully at what it is that we do when we profess English in general and—more specifically—when we teach composition courses. I want to get as much distance as possible from, in order to examine the system of, the norms and beliefs that

drive what we accept as “natural” and “true” about our composition practices and our standards for good writing. I hope to demonstrate here how academic discourse and disciplinary practice both work to conceal the ways in which authority is earned in our own and in students’ writing, how this camouflage is so effective that we ourselves may not even recognize it. My examination in this section is intended to convince us that we as basic writing teachers need to make efforts to reveal (rather than conceal) the ways that student writers can earn authority in their writing. We can begin these efforts by initiating and persuading other professors of English to participate in a redirection of some of our discipline’s expertise with critique, a shift from our usual focus on texts to our own disciplinary conventions. By demonstrating that English professors need to learn to read against our own practices and by explaining methods that might help us accomplish such a goal, I will also be making a case for my specific curriculum proposal as a means by which basic writing teachers can learn to “read against the grain” and basic writers can learn to authorize themselves as successful writers in the academy.

I want to begin by looking at the rudiments of professing English. One undeniable aspect of our general practice as professors of English is evaluating student writing. Reading placement exams is one task among many in our practice as professors of English who have a place in and are authorized by a discipline within an institution. What is it, then, that we are doing when we read these exams and place students in the “appropriate” composition course?

When he describes the kind of writing that we authorize in our capacity as evaluators of placement exams, Bartholomae points to a definitive aspect of our practice as professors of English. He explains that the successful student writer establishes authority (that is, earns a place in a “mainstream” writing course) by using an “enabling gesture,”

a posture, with its attending language, that stood before this paper . . . [and was] brought forward to enable his narrative, “his” story of “his” experience, the sort of thing a decent, educated person ought to say. (“Margins” 76)

The language attendant to the posture involves a specialized vocabulary,

terms [which] locate the experience in the context of a recognizable interpretive scheme. . . . [This kind of] argument is a more powerful one . . . “powerful” in the political

sense since it is an argument that complicates a “naive” assumption (*it makes scholarly work possible, in other words*). (“Inventing” 152, emphasis added)

What this means, of course, is that successful writers make an essential gesture to English professors’ authority by presenting arguments that enable scholarly work. We are trained to read these gestures as masterful (I use the term intentionally) because when we as professors (scholars) of English function as readers of placement exams, what we are doing—consciously or not—is authorizing an argument that makes our own work possible. How could we do otherwise? Denying place or authority to such an argument would take an “unnatural” act of hyperconsciousness, some may even say self-destruction, for we are seeing ourselves in what these writers do: their work is our work. Likewise, how could we do other than refuse to authorize or honor a commonplace argument, one that simplifies or that accepts “naive” assumptions? If the argument based on naive assumption were one with authority, scholarly work would become *impossible* or at least superfluous; accepting such an argument would deny us our own hard-earned places in the institutions that authorize us.

In other words, our places and authority within the university determine our vision. Yet, we are usually unaware of how that vision is circumscribed, taking instead its definitions and standards as given or universal. Stanley Fish describes his own colleagues

as actors within an institution [who] . . . automatically fall heir to the institution’s ways of making sense, its systems of intelligibility . . . Such a person, when pressed, is likely to say, “but that’s just the way it’s done” or “but isn’t it obvious” and so testify that the practice or meaning in question is community property as, in a sense, he is too. (320-21)

Always implicated in our own practice, we professors of English who grade placement exams are on the lookout for what we do, and when we find it we call our discovery “good writing.” A constructed artifact “already embedded within the institutional structure that makes it possible,” our notion of what constitutes good writing—that judgment which authorizes one student to move to a guaranteed place in the academy and sentences another to a restricted, temporary place pending further “development”—is an entity which has “palpability and shape only because of the assumption of some other system of intelligibility, and [it is]

therefore just as available to a deconstructive dissolution as are poems, assignments, and lists" (Fish 330-31).

Our systemic belief in the inadequacy of general or communal knowledge points to another important facet of what we as practitioners do within a discipline at a university: not only do we evaluate student writing, but also we do the research necessary to establish ourselves as authorities in our fields. That is, we push for our own specialized place which—when won—authorizes us because we and only we can claim to know it. As Edward Said describes this struggle:

the status of a discipline [is such that] its subject matter becomes a field or territory. Along with these goes a whole apparatus of techniques . . . to protect the coherence, the territorial integrity . . . the social identity of the field. . . . You have to pass through certain rules of accreditation, you must learn the rules . . . speak the language . . . master the idioms . . . accept the authorities of the field. (7-8)

To earn—or at least maintain—a specialized place, writers at the academy must learn the techniques that protect the territory of their knowledge. The university, in other words, is a place of specialists, a place where the way to earn authority is to have so much specific knowledge as to be able to complicate any issue, to make general knowledge look like naive assumptions. Further, as practitioners at the university, we English professors develop a certain specialized style of vocabulary, idioms, gestures to authority in our writing. And, like the self-conscious, self-reflexive writing practices which we English professors develop, the writing we expect from a student requires her to

enter into a discourse . . . [and] by stylistic maneuvers, to take possession of it at the same time. . . . The writer must learn that his authority is not established through his presence but through his . . . ability . . . to speak as a god-like source beyond the limitations of any particular social or historical moment, to speak by means of the wisdom of convention, through the oversounds of official or authoritative utterance, as the voice of logic or the voice of the community. (Bartholomae, "Inventing" 151,155)

The student, as well as any or all of us who are engaged in the practice of English studies, does this by "placing himself in the context of what has been said and what might be said"; by authorizing himself by who he is rather than by what he can say about

his topic in the context of what is generally said" (i.e., the commonplace); and by using a more specialized vocabulary of terms "which locate the experience in the context of a recognizable scheme," a scheme "in which the text continually refers to its own language and the language of others" (Bartholomae, "Inventing" 152, 153). In other words, as scholars at a university, we authorize ourselves by commandeering the right to speak definitively to readers who demand highly specialized (that is, inaccessible to the uninitiated) complications of commonplace topics; we only authorize student writers who follow suit.

Overall, then, we could say that what we do when we practice English is protect our interests. When we map out a certain place as our specialty, our project, we are protecting our interests, as we are when we speak with "god-like authority" on our subject. Likewise when we evaluate student writing and grade placement exams, we are safeguarding our investments: it's in our own best interests to evaluate the argument that gestures to our own authority as "powerful" (in the political sense), or "good," or "college level material," or even "cognitively mature," and to label argument of the "naive" type as unacceptable. It's obvious, we might say, that the writer of the "sophisticated" sample has a demonstrated fluency with written language and deserves a place in the university while the writer of the "naive" essay, on the other hand, is not really "literate" and will not "feel comfortable" in the university or in the "regular" first-year composition course.

This is not to say that those of us who are seeing ourselves in the "sophisticated" writer's work and who are therefore reading that work as masterful are conspiring against people who do not do what we do. Chances are that we're not even conscious of what we are "seeing." Rather, I am arguing that we have a misrecognized penchant to honor arguments (writing) like our own.² My point here is not to chastise those who assign a "developmental" course to a writer who doesn't say what a "decent, educated person ought to say," not to condemn our practice but rather to try to recognize (rather than misrecognize) it for what it is. Neither is my point that—because we can deconstruct our own notions of what constitutes good writing—what we think is good writing isn't "really" good, nor that we should stop placing students in composition courses or quit evaluating them.

Rather I want to establish that English professors' evaluations of student writing are determined by their own discursive practices rather than by some transcendent or fixed quality of excellence. However, rarely—if ever—do we as basic writing instruc-

tors tell students that the skills required to be a successful writer in a composition course are, in a sense, like those required to be an English professor. In fact:

Most teachers tell students (and themselves) that these skills are the *best* uses of language and mind—not the skills of a particular class in a particular productive system. This is mystification, and . . . it works by suppressing the social and potentially political content of English. (Ohmann, 170)

The point I *am* arguing is that we will be better basic writing teachers if we demystify our own use of language, if we reveal this potentially political content of an English composition course. Such revelation is most essential to a basic writing course. Given the unlikelihood (impossibility, some say) that, in our capacity as basic writing instructors and professors of English, we will be willing or able to step *outside* of our own system of intelligibility, we need at least to find some means to step *to the side* of it, to recognize what our practice is and how our system of intelligibility works. It's the mystification of our practice, I think, that delimits basic writers and keeps them in a dependent relationship to the English professor and the institution. Thus, we basic writing instructors—indeed all writing instructors—need to become more aware of what we do in all our capacities as professors of English so that we can make explicit to basic writers (or any other writers for that matter) what it is that we are on the lookout for when we evaluate student writing.

Oddly enough, this task has yet to be accomplished. Though Richard Ohmann's analysis is fifteen years old (and—one could convincingly argue—composition studies have undergone substantial revision since his review), his appraisal of the rhetoric textbooks and pedagogies intended to define and enable “good writing” still stands: “the failure is in their inability to translate what English instructors know and practice . . . into good sense about Freshman English” (139). Ohmann pinpoints the failure even more specifically: “really the textbooks are about tidying up and transcribing thought, not thinking” (136).

IV: *Facts Revisited: The Critical Gesture*

Ohmann's criticism and its emphasis on “thinking” brings me to the final rudiment of our practice as professors of English that I'd like to consider, namely “critique.” I devote this last section to a discussion of that aspect of our practice, for it is specifically

with respect to this crucial element of what we recognize as authoritative writing that *Facts* shortchanges students. I'm convinced that without the opportunity to witness, participate in, and evaluate this and other aspects of our discursive practice, basic writing students cannot realize *Facts*' promise that they will "actively seek out the margins and aggressively poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university."

What is it that we do when we "critique"? Our practice as professors of English requires us to set ourselves against the bias and ideology of other critics, other disciplines, other practitioners, even our own conventions. We set out a space for ourselves by identifying the assumptions of an interpretive community and then aligning ourselves with and/or setting ourselves against these assumptions. And—as we have seen in the way that other aspects of our practice determine what we consider authoritative when we place and evaluate students—because critique is an aspect of our own work, we also expect to see it in "good" student writing.

Thus, a further demand we are making on students who want to earn a place for themselves in the university is that they know how to think, how to make the "critical gesture." This gesture to our expertise with critique, the demonstration of what we call "critical thinking skills," is perhaps the surest way for a student to earn authorization from us. Because it is also a gesture that pushes against the commonplace language use that would render a student no different from everyone else, this critical gesture necessitates an understanding of not just our specialized vocabulary and schemes, but also the practices of our discipline: one cannot critique that which she or he does not understand or of which she or he is unaware. The operative question then is how can a student writer become aware of our practice?

In his explanation of how one comes to understand the terms and practices of any interpretive community, Stanley Fish reminds us that

in order to grasp the meaning of an[y] individual term, you must already have grasped the general activity . . . in relation to which it could be thought meaningful; a system of intelligibility cannot be reduced to a list of the things it renders intelligible. . . . Communication occurs only within such a system (or context, or situation or interpretive community) and . . . the understanding achieved by two or more persons is specific to that system and determinate only within its confines. (304)

In other words, students cannot write (communicate) authoritatively within the university system simply by memorizing a list of things that the system considers authoritative; they must comprehend the activity, the practices, of the system.

So, even if they were equipped with explicit instructions elucidating how to reproduce the gestures that English professors recognize as “good” (that is, as imitations of their own), basic writing students would not be able to do much more than imitate our discourse without comprehending our discursive practice; they would not be able to recognize its purposes nor its potential for critique, for transforming reality, for creating place and authority. Yet, understanding academic discourse’s potential for transforming reality is crucial to students becoming the agents of their own movement from the center of a disabling system to its margins, to becoming autonomous beings for themselves who can speak with authority. Freire maintains that imitative activity does minimal or no good for the student, for

linguistic contexts . . . when mechanically memorized and repeated, are deprived of their authentic dimension as thought language in dynamic interplay with reality. Thus impoverished, they are not authentic expressions of the world. (161)

Imitation does not enable writers to work against convention, to situate themselves on the margins of the practice and protocol of a discipline.

The *Facts* curriculum does involve students in the practice of creating a discipline by engaging them in semester-long projects in which they examine the topics of “work” or “adolescence”; it does empower students by problematizing their existential situations with respect to work or growing up. However, and despite the fact that such topics are accessible to students, a curriculum that enables the creation of disciplines on those particular topics does *not* provide the authentic context for students to learn about power in discourse. Within the discipline wherein the students are being evaluated, the course does not reveal what their evaluators do to earn authority in the institution and therefore what they have been trained to consider authoritative when they evaluate students’ discourse.

The existential situation for students in basic writing courses is that the authority respected within academic discourse is often of a type they don’t recognize; in fact, academic authority requires students to set themselves against “convention,” against the com-

monplace authority that basic writers do recognize. Furthermore, the power structure within the university system often excludes basic writers, placing them on the outskirts (outside of, on the “margins”) of the system in remedial, “no-credit” composition courses. At the same time, these exclusionary practices of the system conceal the fact that authorized writers are those who voluntarily travel those same outskirts, those who expropriate autonomy and authenticity by challenging the conventional language and practices of the university. Problematizing *this* existential situation is what will empower basic writers to make the critical gesture essential to academic discourse.

It seems clear, then, that unless students are presented with the authentic context within which the practice of composition studies is revealed and open for critique, they will not be empowered to learn “that successful readers and writers actively seek out the margins and aggressively poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university.” The *Facts* curriculum can reveal to students how academic disciplines are created, how to complicate the commonplace and thereby make scholarly work possible, how to create the specialized language associated with and recognized as authoritative by a discipline; in short, *Facts* shows students how to mark off the territory necessary to creating a discipline, to inventing the university.

However, because it does not reveal for them the authentic context of their situation at the university, those conditions under which they have been delimited by the language and methods of the university, the *Facts* curriculum does not empower students to critique those conditions. Yet, this critical gesture is essential to students’ learning to write with authority:

The movement toward a more specialized discourse begins . . . when a student can define a position of privilege, a position that sets him against a “common” discourse and when he or she can work self-consciously, critically, against not only the “common code” but his or her own. (Bartholomae, “Inventing” 156)

As a way to provide the authentic context of composition studies, I have proposed a revision of the *Facts* curriculum. Rather than on the subjects of “adolescence” or “work,” my revision focuses on discourse and language use as its topic. Because that subject would help provide more explicit disclosure of what we do when we profess English, I believe it will facilitate students’

recognition of how to appropriate authority in composition courses as well as in other sites of academic discourse. Furthermore, because my proposed academic project would include students in (or at least reveal to them) the process by which placement exam essays are evaluated, they will be engaging in our practice as composition instructors. Therein, I believe, lies the strength of the curriculum.

However, and as I mentioned at the outset, more work needs to be done to discover if in fact this revision makes good its claims. I have begun that project myself.³ I hope to hear about others' successes or lessons with revisions to current basic writing pedagogy theory or practice. Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of the particular revision I propose here, however, it seems essential that we all hold open to investigation our ideas of what goals and needs should drive a basic writing curriculum. Especially as we approach the 21st century and its potential (if the projections hold true) for students of even more diverse economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds than those we already know, that curriculum becomes increasingly crucial to the retention and academic success of basic writing students. We only maintain the status quo, perpetuate mysticism, when we refuse or neglect to consider the questions of how basic writers can locate and authorize themselves in the university, a status quo that denies those students entry altogether or that allows them only temporary place with little or no authority. The sort of pedagogy that I propose provides a way not only for our students to know and locate their places but also for basic writing instructors to do the same, for us to step to the side of our own practice and keep a watchful eye on our often unconscious or inadvertent choices about where to locate ourselves and, by implication, our students.

Notes

¹I gratefully acknowledge David Bartholomae, Tilly Warnock, and Duane Roen for their support and assistance in reviewing and commenting on various versions of this paper.

²For this term "misrecognition," especially as it relates to "gesturing," I am indebted to Bill Epstein's definition ("gesture. . . a way of sanctioning critical activity under the cover of some other activity") and to his explanation: "because gesturing attempts to transfer authority. . . from a human body. . . to a reified sign. . . seemingly stabilized within an autonomous, disciplinary matrix,

it is also a way of *misrecognizing* the participation of individual critics in the community of professional practice. If practice is, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested, a contingent temporal activity poised on the margin between discursive and nondiscursive behavior that can only be 'misrecognized,' then gesturing is one of the characteristic forms of this behavior—"a truth whose sole meaning and function are to deny a truth known and recognized by all, a lie which would deceive no one, were not everyone determined to deceive *himself* [or herself]." (Epstein 64-65)

³During the Spring and Fall semesters of 1992, I experimented with this curriculum, especially the unit on training the basic writers to be graders of the Freshmen Placement Exam. Based on my own initial responses, as well as those of the students in the pilot sections and other instructors who observed, my theory holds up in practice. But, of course, these initial responses constitute another paper, evidence that needs demonstration before it can be persuasive.

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