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Postcards from the Beach

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I am a basic writer. I didn't know this, really, until my dissertation advisor constantly pointed out what he would call my "infelicitous prose" and scolded me for not identifying for myself when my thinking was breaking down on the page. The irony that my dissertation was about basic writers didn't escape him, which he was all too happy to point out.

I'm in my 14th year of teaching basic writers, and my scholarship mostly talks about how I think we can help basic writers change the way they view the act of reading, the ways they can try to manage the difficult thoughts they are grappling with, and the ways we can help them improve their writing. In each case, I also talk about their fear of failure and their fear of being "wrong," which I, as well as countless other basic writing scholars, believe hinders their academic performance. (See, for example, Shaughnessy, Bartholomae, Rose, Horner, and Sullivan—to name a few.) But perhaps what I should be writing about is why their fear of failure and of being wrong is so scary, why it can shut them down. Because who better to explain this than a fellow basic writer who knows that being perceived as "stupid" paralyzes us with fear?

I'll never forget the day I decided to quit writing my dissertation and give up on the degree. For months I had been receiving insensitive criticism on my theoretical chapters, and I couldn't understand why my advisor was being so callous in his remarks. Since I was writing in Bakersfield and he was in Santa Barbara, my plan was to get as far as I could with each chapter and then ask him to point out areas that he felt weren't clear. In order not to waste his time, I even had a colleague read my chapters first so my advisor would receive chapters that had already gone through a significant round of revision based upon reader feedback. I explained this plan to my advisor, yet he ignored my plan when he read my chapters. Here's a smattering of some of the comments I received back:

- Your most infelicitous sentences are merely the result of hasty inattentive composition and have much more to do with the

fact that you are writing too fast and may have a tin ear sometimes for academic prose.

- You sometimes look like a basic writer or basic reader in the prose of this chapter, because you are a relatively inexperienced participant in the discourse that this chapter participates in.
- Is that English? It's like Martian.
- This is a scholarly document, not a postcard from the beach.

Each chapter was saturated with such comments that told me I was obviously in over my head. I could see, after all, that he wasn't wrong in his observations because after he pointed out a problem, I could immediately see what he was talking about. And through this process, chapter after chapter, I became convinced that these comments could only mean that I was stupid.

So I quit.

Okay, so I didn't quit for very long because I did somehow manage to work through my ideas and finish the dissertation, which was about basic writers successfully joining what Mike Rose calls "the academic club" (142). Yet with each word I wrote about basic writers, I felt I was relinquishing my membership in Rose's club and instead joining the Marginalized-Students Club that I was hoping to help my students escape. And I have to say it's not a club in which I would like to remain, but I cannot escape its membership.

Basic writing scholars have for years discussed the attitudes that paralyze their students, and I can say, as one of them, that these scholars are not wrong. I still struggle so much with wording and phrasing; I know I am not an effective reader of my own work because I need someone to help me see where my logic and writing break down. I don't need someone telling me how wrong I am or how misguided, awkward, imprecise, or infelicitous my words are. I get it: I am an outsider. And I have often questioned why I continue to go through the hazing ritual demanded for inclusion. Yet continue I do.

I write my story not because I think it's profound in any way but because I thought that in this age of underprepared students, writing programs appreciated the challenges basic writers face and were therefore careful not to hire instructors who would, like my advisor, fail to recognize the kind of harm they do when they don't understand the acute fears that basic writers have. Yet much to my dismay, I recently learned through the following job listing that some writing programs still hire basic writing instructors with little-to-no training:

The qualifications for teaching credit courses are a Master's degree with at least 18 graduate hours in the teaching specialty. Faculty teaching developmental studies (reading, writing, and math) require a bachelor's degree with a major or minor in the teaching field.

So the most prepared teachers teach the most prepared students, while the least prepared teachers teach the least prepared and most



Shown here: *Big Mama Kale*

fragile students. This is just wrong. Basic writers need to be nurtured and praised for what they do well, not frightened by all that they do wrong. Basic writing teachers need to be trained to teach their students; otherwise, they are sure to add to the already-high attrition rate. If I quit as a doctoral student, how many incoming students will quit—and stay quitted—from college simply because their teacher focused his attention on surface level detail and style and/or consistently and flippantly made fun of their prose? Basic writers are already marginalized, and schools that throw them into pits with instructors who don't know how to teach them (and quite possibly don't care to learn how) manage to marginalize them even further.

As I struggled with writing my dissertation, what I needed was for someone to help me without telling me how stupid I was for writing what I did. Would it have really been so difficult to say, "I am not sure what you mean here in relation to the last sentence" instead of "you have a tin ear for academic prose"? I cannot begin to describe the irreparable damage he has done to every writing task I have taken or will ever take on; I feel I cannot escape the brand of "basic writer." Yes, I understand the frustration my advisor felt and the frustration that many basic writing teachers feel every day, but unless they are trained to comment mostly on content issues without sounding judgmental and cruel, our students are going to feel like Martians in a sea of prepared and successful students. I think what untrained (and/or uncaring) instructors don't realize is that if they are harsh in their criticisms of basic writing students' writing, they are telling them that they are deficient, not just their writing. And I have to say that knowing I am deficient because of my writing makes me feel like a fraud and a hypocrite. After all, who am I to be teaching these students if I feel that I can't even write myself?

But, for whatever reason, I do teach them, and I often do so successfully. Perhaps it's the inside track I have to basic writers' fears and circumstances that lead me to temper the language I use when I address problems in their writing. Or maybe it's the empathy that I can't help but have for my students. Lucia Volk recently argues that "to teach in an inspiring way requires an acute awareness of the position of the learner, empathy for their fears of failure, and admiration of their courage in wrestling with the unknown" (119). Before I knew I was a basic writer, I was taught to appreciate their circumstances. In fact, one commonality among all of the successful basic writing instructors I know is the training that taught them how to teach and empathize with their students. This training is not something that usually accompanies "a bachelor's degree with a major or minor in the teaching field." This "community college for the 21st century" in the Southwest that boasts it is a "Great College to Work For" has it backwards: The BAs should teach the prepared students because the prepared students know what it means to learn and can take on much of their own learning if they have an ineffectual instructor. The underprepared cannot.

Incidentally, my dissertation advisor and I have had many a conversation about the comments he made in my dissertation.

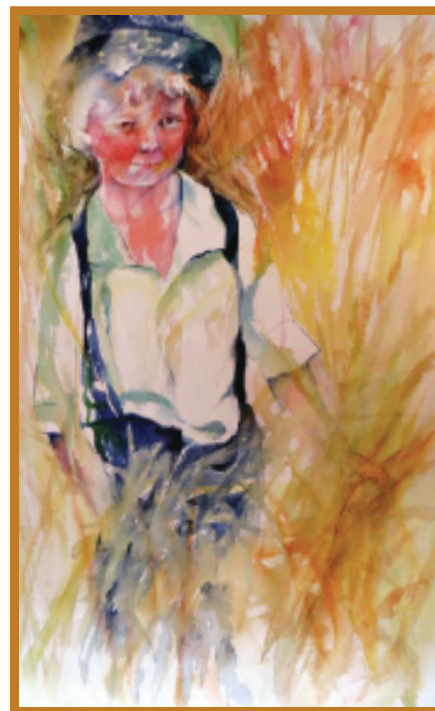
Surprisingly, he still reads my work, and he still makes me feel stupid sometimes, but at least now he tries to be careful about the way he criticizes me because of my writing and thinking, and, because of his experience with me, he is now more careful in his responses to the writing and thinking of his current students. That's a step in the right direction. I just wish backwards writing programs would follow suit and understand that untrained and uncaring instructors can break basic writers' fragile academic egos. In fact, if backwards writing programs aren't careful, the only writing that their basic writing students ever will be interested in doing will be postcards from the beach.

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Shown here: *Amish Boy*