

Remediating Remediation: From Basic Writing to Writing Across the Curriculum

Melissa Faulkner
Cedarville University

What began as a scholarship of teaching and learning project focusing on the needs of the basic writing students I teach at Cedarville University, a Christian liberal arts university in Ohio, ends with an assessment of the needs of all my institution's students. What I found is that regardless of the skill level students bring with them to university, at some point during their journey from first-year to senior, all students are or become basic writers. Whether it is the first-year student in need of a grammar review before entering composition, a sophomore encountering a new genre in a general education course, or a junior encountering the vocabulary and conventions of his or her discipline for the first time, all students need writing remediation at various times during their academic journeys. Part of the fallout of "No Child Left Behind" has been the elimination of remediation at many universities, both public and private. While the word remediation has always left a bad taste in the mouths of many college faculty, administrators, and students themselves, the word has been dirtied even further with the latest calls for "high standards." While few argue against the need for high standards for our graduates, what are the consequences of squeezing out those students needing remedial courses such as basic writing from the population admitted into higher education in the first place, or of failing to acknowledge the need for continual remediation for all students once admitted? Many of us who teach remediation have responded to nay-sayers with defensiveness—in defense of both our work and

our students—resulting in a type of rhetorical tug-of-war. But if we begin to view remediation, particularly writing remediation, as an ongoing service owed to all of our students as opposed to a temporary once and done type of catch up for a minority group labeled as somehow “lacking,” then perhaps attitudes and practices that keep a segment of our academic population in the peripheral can be changed. Additionally, those students deemed “not lacking” can benefit from the stated fact that their professors are aware that assigned tasks are often foreign to students and remediation is necessary if they are to achieve the intended outcome of the task. What is in need of remediation is not as much about those students arriving at university without a certain skillset as it is our ideas about remediation itself.

A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and described in the article “Literacies of Disciplines” claims, “Instruction is most successful when teachers engage their students in thinking, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and interacting in discipline specific ways, where literacies and content are not seen as opposites but rather as mutually supportive and inextricably linked” (16). The article goes on to compare the idea of disciplines as literacies to traditional ideas of literacies by stating: “...disciplines represent unique languages and structures for thinking and acting: disciplines are spaces where students must encounter, be supported in, and be expected to demonstrate a plurality of literacies” (16). The problem with using the term “literacies” here is the assumption that the proclamation of an individual as literate is static and universal, when in fact it is not a disciplinary construct, but an institutional one: “[Literacy] is an unstable, fluid concept that merges with the cultures and social valuation of each institutional setting” (Ritter, 28). I contend, because of grammar’s ability to be universally measured (as many disciplines call for through

various tests and certifications) and because of grammar's emphasis on steadfast rules and norms, that what the NCTE is calling the "literacies of disciplines" is actually the grammars of disciplines.

In linguistics, grammar is the set of structural rules that govern the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in any given natural language. A natural language is any language which arises in an unpremeditated fashion as the result of the innate facility for language possessed by the human intellect. A natural language is typically used for communication, and may be spoken, signed, or written. However, not all languages are natural languages. Many languages, such as the ones we design around our individual disciplines, are constructed languages. A constructed language—known colloquially as a conlang—is a language whose phonology, grammar, and/or vocabulary has been consciously devised by an individual or group, instead of having evolved naturally. Every language, whether natural or constructed, has a set of rules, or a grammar, for using that language.

The grammar of a particular language not only describes the rules of that language but it also governs the linguistic behaviors of the group using the language. Right or wrong, knowing and using the "correct" linguistic behaviors is necessary for full admittance and acceptance into the community of language users. We see this in the current push for English Only legislation in the United States; we see it in the dismantling of basic writing programs in America's colleges and Universities, and we see it in the high drop-out rates and discouraging student learning outcome assessment data collected across our curriculums. Just as many Americans are questioning whether or not displacing non-proficient English speakers residing in America is the smartest economic move for our country, colleges and universities suffering the fallout of our

current economic crisis are questioning the wisdom of displacing students deemed remedial through abstractly constructed writing situations such as standardized tests and placement essays while simultaneously seeking to respond to assessment data and close feedback loops that consistently show students become less proficient in writing, specifically across the curriculum and in the disciplines, as they move through their university years as opposed to becoming more proficient, which is ultimately the goal for every student, at every institution, in every discipline. If students arriving in academia as first-year students are said to need remediation because of their inability to show proficiency in English language grammar through a measured assessment, then what must we say about juniors and seniors who are unable to show proficiency in the grammar of their constructed disciplinary languages through measured assessment? They, too, are in need of remediation. Which makes sense because just as it is possible for a perfectly capable student to arrive on academia's doorstep lacking knowledge of English grammar rules and conventions, it is probable, in fact, expected, that students arrive on their disciplines' doorsteps lacking knowledge of the grammar of that discipline. The process for learning and applying grammar rules is the same for both sets of students, requiring systematic and intentional remediation, moving grammar to a central position across the curriculum and in the disciplines. And identifying nearly all students as in need of grammar remediation at some point during their academic years confirms the idea that "the welfare of the university depends in no slight way upon the remedial student" (Stanley 33). Such a model removes the stigma from remediation and acknowledges that all teachers, from the basic writing instructor to the mentor for the senior seminar, share the job of teaching grammars because, as the NCTE acknowledges, "As such, all

teachers play an equally important role because no one class or teacher can best develop students' literacies [grammars] apart from discipline-informed resources and lenses" (16).

In order to effectively argue that all university students either arrive at university as basic writers or become basic writers during their stint there, it is necessary to define as much as possible what exactly a basic writer is.

In the introduction to her book *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Harvard and Yale 1920-1960*, Kelly Ritter calls upon commonly used writing rubrics to identify four types of writers generally identified as basic. Type one is minimally competent with knowledge of grammar and structure but no social and/or intellectual context to create any real content. Type two is also considered a minimally competent student with knowledge of grammar and structure and understanding of context but hesitates to put ideas on paper, lacking confidence in his or her ideas. The type three student understands context and does not hesitate to share ideas, but has no control over the grammar or language necessary to do so. Finally, the type four student is often labeled as "fundamentally deficient" and found to be lacking in both ideas and grammar. These students are often referred to as "not college material" (5). Although Ritter ultimately argues, and I believe, correctly so, against the usefulness of these categories because of their dependence on the "values and objectives of a particular institution," it is easy to see how these same categories of writing abilities are applied to individual students as they grapple with the new grammars and contexts introduced to them as they move into and through their disciplines, with the worst case scenario being the type four student who is weeded out of his or her chosen discipline just as the traditional basic writer is weeded out of the institution altogether (41). As universities scramble to keep enrollment and retention rates high and disciplines fight to receive much needed

resources that are often allocated based on the number of majors declared, more importantly, as institutions and individual instructors confirm their dedication to graduating a more diverse student body, we can't afford to continue operating with such a dismissive attitude. An overview of the history of basic writing can help illuminate its relationship to increased access to higher education and how issues such as socio-economic class, race, and ethnicity are discussed within that larger conversation.

While the basic writing course wasn't officially born until the 1960s, Ritter points out that basic writers existed within academia well before then. Harvard began its version of a remedial writing course, English A, in 1885, after it was found students consistently performed poorly on the writing sections of entrance exams. And, "As early as 1912 the term 'awkward squad' was being applied by the larger English studies community to underprepared writers [at Yale]" (Ritter 80). Students remanded to the "awkward squad" by their composition teachers were drilled weekly on basic spelling and grammar by tutors, although the course was never officially on the books.

Officially, though, the basic writing course as we know it today came as the end of the Vietnam War, the creation of the G.I. Bill, the Civil Rights Movement and the second wave of feminism successfully pushed for open admissions policies and a "let them in" mentality. In their book simply titled *Basic Writing*, George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk outline the history of basic writing from the 1970s through the present decade. In the 1970s, Mina Shaughnessy was tasked with directing the City University of New York (CUNY) basic writing courses. Her iconic work, *Error and Expectation*, theorized a pedagogy of teaching basic writing. Shaughnessy argued against giving basic writers a free pass on error as though they

lacked the ability to learn. She found pattern and reason in error and urged faculty to identify those patterns, consider along with students the reason behind those patterns, and then work to correct them.

Otte and Mlynarczyk identify a move from product to process in the 1980s, largely because of the basic writing movement, but along with that movement came cognitivism, which attempts to identify and assess the ways writers think as they write. This was short lived as scholars such as Mike Rose were quick to point out that it is inherently wrong to judge the way one thinks.

Process theory did, however, help to foster a new appreciation of, and emphasis on, literacy narratives. These narratives such as Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self*, Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps*, and Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* invited scholars of basic writing to investigate the relationship between not only language and social class, but language and race as well. Researchers such as Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu in *Representing the Other* began to critique Shaughnessy's work as too error focused, saying it divorced language from meaning, which is created and constructed differently in differing cultures, but there was backlash against this by those who claimed good-natured efforts to elevate content over form didn't understand the reality of being not proficient in language, and emphasis on social class and race increased stigma, in direct opposition of the intended goal. The result of these intellectual discussions was disagreement within the discipline of English language studies over whether or not basic writing should continue to exist.

Ironically, as voices to dismantle basic writing programs for democratic reasons came from the educational left, calls to do so from the educational right because of money and prestige

were occurring. By the late 90s, all remediation was removed from CUNY, the birthplace of modern basic writing, and many other schools because of perceived ‘dumbing down.’ But, as Otte and Mlynarczyk point out, most of these calls to end remediation came from the outside, from those not properly equipped or qualified to make pedagogical judgment calls. For example, it was then NYC mayor, Rudy Guiliani, who pushed to have all remediation in New York moved from four-year to two-year institutions, where students are then pushed towards vocational training.

Currently, the battle over what to do with the perceived lack in student writing rages on. Many stakeholders, namely on the outside of academia, cite the need for high standards and the necessity of cutting budgets due to the nation’s economic crisis as justification for eliminating basic writing. But many other stakeholders, mostly on the inside, recognize that first, as is quantified through formal and mandatory assessment, many of our students from first-year through senior-year are failing to achieve the high standards various institutional learning outcomes expect of them; therefore, failing to meet high standards is hardly a reason to systematically expel students from higher education. Instead, it is an opportunity to revisit curriculum. And, second, the number of students needing writing remediation upon arrival at the doors to the ivory tower has *increased* as opposed to decreased, much less been eradicated, which was the expectation when formal basic writing instruction was born in the 1970s. So, when outsiders suggest the elimination of remedial courses, they are not suggesting four-year institutions of higher learning turn away a small number of students in exchange for saving money on faculty and material resources. Instead, they are suggesting a significant number of students, whose tuition dollars far outweigh the cost of the resources necessary to address student

needs— needs that, again, are not specific to the group commonly labeled as remedial. So, what is the answer? Many, and I am in this camp, believe a curriculum of inclusion, of mainstreaming writers of all levels and recognizing the need to address not only lack on the surface of writing— grammar, spelling, punctuation, mechanics, and structure—but also lack at the heart of writing— critical thinking, genre norms, research abilities, and discipline specific grammars—is necessary to not only address what President Barrack Obama referred to in a 2009 speech as “the remediation problem,” but also to close the assessment feedback loop that indicates across the board that students are not prepared to write in their chosen disciplines, not because we are required to, but because it is the right thing to do. The curriculum of inclusion I suggest—one that addresses the writing needs of our students from the first-year through the senior-year and creates the academic atmosphere necessary for enrolling and retaining students—is a formal writing across the curriculum (WAC) and in the disciplines (WID) program. In order to understand how a WAC/WID program can benefit students at all levels of academia, it is important to understand that basic writing is not the temporary condition that it was once believed to be. The idea that students underprepared in writing are expected to solve their “problem” by the end of freshman year or else is not feasible; it never has been. Understanding the “myth of transience” is necessary in order to re-envision teaching writing across the curriculum (Rose qtd. in Stanley 341).

In “The Language of Inclusion,” Mike Rose names the “myth of transience,” which says faculty and administration continually view the problem of poor student writing as a temporary condition that can be “fixed” with the addition of a basic English course or an additional composition course, which fuels shortsighted planning. Worse yet, it relegates writing instruction

to the English department, thus “insulating the disciplines from the opportunity – and responsibility – to develop broad curricular responses to the needs of student writers (Stanley 3). Or, faculty and administration mistakenly believe that writing crises at the university level will go away with the next round of revisions to high school or even primary school curriculums. After the iconic article “Why Johnny Can’t Write” appeared in *NewsWeek* in 1975, massive reform of primary and secondary school curriculum took place on a national level. Such curriculum revision has occurred again since the 2001 enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act. And through all of this reforming and revising, enrollment of university students in basic writing courses has continued to increase. Take, for example, the Basic English enrollment statistics at my own institution.

According to its admissions office, in the 2002-03 academic year Cedarville University had 2,853 total students enrolled and a total of 10 students enrolled in Basic English. For the 2010-11 academic year, the total number of students enrolled at Cedarville University had risen to 3,300 total students, with 43 of those students enrolled in Basic English. While the overall population of Cedarville University experienced a total growth rate of 1.2% over an eight year span, the enrollment in Basic English experienced a growth rate of 26.4%. These disproportionate rates of growth indicate that the need for remedial writing instruction among the general population of the University is increasing exponentially, not decreasing as those believing simply revising the high school curriculum would “fix the problem” would expect. And, if a minimum of twelve years of writing instruction at the primary and secondary level employing continual reformation and revision to curriculum still allows for a significant number of students matriculating into university to be assessed as unable to write at a university level,

then it is unreasonable to expect one semester of remedial English to “fix” the problem. It does not. Here I refer once again to the Basic English program at Harvard University. In 1914, The Committee on the Use of English by Students at Harvard was formed after it was found that “writing skills declined after English A” (Russell 150). And, as a 2003 article spinning off of the 1975 article similarly named, “Why Johnny Can’t Write Even Though He Went to Princeton” points out, it isn’t just remedial writing students who fail to master academic writing as they move through university; an alarming percentage of the student body at large fail to show mastery even as they complete their senior years. Once again, to illustrate my point I will refer to data collected at my own institution.

During the 2009-2010 academic year, Cedarville University formed a committee of faculty members from across the curriculum tasked with assessing how effectively its students write. After researching various rubrics used at other institutions to assess writing and consulting with the University’s composition teachers, the committee created a rubric examining five criterion identified as essential to good writing. The criterion are: context and purpose for writing, organization and structure, critical thought and appropriate support, language and comprehensibility, and grammar. While the criterion remained the same for first-year students through seniors, the performance indicators became increasingly more advanced, requiring students to show improvement and advancement of skills as they proceeded through university. During the 2010-11 academic year, the rubric was piloted. A minimum of two first-year courses, sophomore courses, junior-level, and senior-level courses, the professors of which had identified the course as containing a significant writing requirement, were chosen to assess student writing across the University by applying the writing rubric to at least one major writing assignment. The

courses selected were purposefully chosen to represent a variety of general education courses and disciplines. The rubrics were completed electronically, and a specially designed computer software program compiled the results. An overall score of 15 on the rubric indicated mastery of each of the five criterion for that particular academic writing task for each course level. The mean score for first-year students was 11.72, for sophomores it was 8.84, for juniors 12.17, and for seniors in the final semester of their university education, the mean score was only 9.05. In other words, aside from a slight surge in writing performance during the junior year, students' writing scores progressively declined as they progressed through the University. This data supports my assertion that at some point during their academic careers, the majority of students need writing remediation to learn the norms and conventions of academic writing as a whole, and particularly in their chosen disciplines. A formal WAC/WID program that prompts faculty to dialogue about the norms and conventions of writing in their individual disciplines and then equips them with the skills to articulate this knowledge to students and to create a writing process-based pedagogy that fosters improvement in student writing would serve as the type of remediation necessary to move students toward mastering the various writing tasks they encounter.

In November 2001, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at UC Berkeley, Judson King, called for a system-wide review of the prospects for improving undergraduate writing. He asked the University Committees on Educational Policy and on Preparatory Education to examine not just the writing competence of students about to enter the university, but also of those about to leave. Cedarville University has done the same and the data confirms the findings of King's task force that "...students' writing skills seem to decline – or lithify – as

they advance toward their degrees” (qtd. in Stanley 136). King’s task force further observed: “faculty need to understand that students learn to write in context – in the context of the university rather than high school, and then in the context of their disciplines...writing skills are not learned once and for all, but progressively, as demands intensify (qtd. in Stanley 136). King’s original question asked: “If the current process is not achieving our goals, what new approaches would better serve us?” And the task force answered this by emphasizing the importance of upper-level writing intensive courses. After teaching basic writing for four years and composition for ten, participating in the assessment of student writing from first year through senior year, and analyzing the results of that assessment, I advocate a certain number of designated writing intensive courses be required for graduation. These writing intensive courses should infiltrate not only the general education courses, but expand through the disciplines as well. In essence, I recommend writing across the curriculum and in the disciplines at all institutions of higher learning to teach students not only grammar of the English language, but also the grammars of individual disciplines.

As Mary Soliday points out, remediation policies and admissions practices always coincide with times of economic boom and bust. The success of any institution of higher education is dependent upon the success of its students. And, considering all students enter into their disciplines needing remediation, “The welfare of the university depends in no slight way upon the remedial student” (Stanley 33). Writing crises and surges in writing remediation that are erroneously viewed as temporary occur in conjunction with social change. Access to education increased at the end of WWII, after the Civil Rights Movement, and certainly with the open admissions policies born largely from the surge of soldiers returning home from Vietnam.

With the new policy allowing parents to pass their GI Bills on to their children, and with the homecoming of American soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan, demands for access can once again be expected, exacerbating the so-called current writing crisis and increasing the need for remediation. Economically, we are certainly in a bust right now, but such economic cycles have always been and always will be, thus responding to them with increased and decreased remediation is an inappropriate response. Instead, recognizing students' need for remediation in writing across the curriculum and in the disciplines and every faculty member's role in that remediation is imperative to student success, therefore, it is imperative to the institution's success. Embracing WAC/WID programs is an effective means of remediating remediation.

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