

# Back to Basics

David Bartholomae

*ABSTRACT: I retired from teaching in August, 2018. In the fall semester of that academic year, I taught a section of Basic Writing (now called “Workshop in Composition”), one of the courses I taught in the fall of 1975, my first year at the University of Pittsburgh. This essay is a documentary account of that course, including writing assignments and student papers, but it is also a reflection on some of the people, courses, and concerns that have shaped and sustained a long career as a teacher of writing.*

*KEYWORDS: Basic Writing; Cambridge English; language difference; ordinary language; travel writing; translingual composition*

I sensed that I simply couldn't judge the students for anything they thought, at least in the beginning. Their backgrounds were too far removed from what I had known before coming to Fuling, and, like all young Chinese, they were surrounded by the aura of a troubled past. It was easy to forget this—it was easy. . . to smile at their childlike shyness, and it was easy to dismiss them as simple young people from the simplicity of the countryside. But of course nothing was farther from the truth—the Sichuan countryside is not simple, and my students had known things that I never imagined. Even if appearances were deceiving, the truth always came through in the ways they wrote about their homes and families.

-Peter Hessler, *Rivertown: Two Years on the Yangtze* (2001)

---

**David Bartholomae** is Professor of English and the Charles Crow Chair of Expository Writing, Emeritus, at the University of Pittsburgh. He has served as the Chair of CCCC and on the Executive Council of the MLA. His honors include a Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award, the ADE/MLA Francis Andrew March Award, the CCC Exemplar Award, the Richard B. Braddock Award (for “The Study of Error”) and the Mina Shaughnessy Award (for Writing on the Margins). He has published widely on composition and teaching. With Jean Ferguson Carr, he edits the University of Pittsburgh Press book series, *Composition, Literacy, Culture*. This essay will be a chapter in his new book, tentatively titled *Like What We Imagine*.

© Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 39, No.1 2020

## **Back to Basics**

I retired from teaching in August, 2018. In my last year, I taught two of the courses I taught in 1975, my first year at the University of Pittsburgh. One of them was Basic Writing, now titled “Workshop in Composition.”

In 1975, my Basic Writing students were almost all working class, most were Black. They came from Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and small towns in between. In the Fall Term, 2017, my students were all Chinese. Many, but not all, came from privileged families. Their lives as students of English were demanding. I admired them greatly for their courage and resolve. All had sacrificed to be where they were in the US., and they struggled with the course, which presented challenges beyond differences in language and culture. Still, this group struck me as possessing a deep sense of entitlement, with the confidence that ensued. They came from families with power and influence. Most were smartly dressed. The room looked like an ad for J. Crew, but for the exception of two persons: the rumpled professor, and the young man sitting next to him who wore a t-shirt, rolled at the sleeves, and who had a hammer and sickle tattooed on his bicep. (The others, perhaps jokingly, said he was a mole, planted at Pitt to report back to the Chinese Communist Party.)

Why did I choose an ESL section of Workshop in Composition for my final semester? Perhaps the most compelling motive for teaching the ESL section was that I wanted to repay a series of favors. Once I stepped down as Department Chair in 2009, my wife and I became deeply involved with Pitt’s Study Abroad program. This included two extended (5 week) stays with students in Beijing (at Capital Normal University). We were warmly received. We loved our time in Beijing. When I returned to Pittsburgh, I began to regularly sponsor visiting scholars from China.

We have also been travelling and teaching all over the world (Argentina, Brazil, India, South Africa, Ecuador, Cuba, Spain, the UK) where I had watched my students (and myself) struggle with our limited command of the language and, in spite of our best efforts, a limited sense of local culture and history.

One of these programs (called “PittMap”) had a focused curriculum that relied on field work. In Argentina, South Africa, and China, the faculty team included an epidemiologist from the Medical School and an Economist. During a full semester, at three sites, we were investigating local and national programs in public health, with a focus on HIV/AIDS. In South Africa, for example, we met with clinicians, government boards of health, the children

and teachers at an orphanage (for children whose parents had died from AIDS), and the pharmaceutical company that was first to produce low cost retrovirals (thanks to an intervention by Bill Clinton), among other sites.

Students made their own contacts with South Africans; this was the expectation of the writing course. The students were to be reporters. They had to find stories out in the field. Some found access to the townships, the shanty towns outside the city; some worked with a group producing Spaza Rap, a hybrid rap, English and Xhosa; some volunteered in an AIDS clinic; some worked out with sports teams from the University of Cape Town; one made close contact with the Jewish community and dined each week with a different family. (She wrote on the actions and inactions of the community during Apartheid.) Another stood in a long line at the Cape Town Medical School for AIDS testing, and this when AIDS testing first became a public initiative and, under the administration of Jacob Zuma, extremely controversial. He wrote a ground-level account of AIDS and its place on the Cape Town campus. After graduation, one of the students went on to work as a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal. Several went on to programs in public health with an international focus.

At every site there were challenging and unforgettable moments of contact and encounter, but also, of course, challenging and unforgettable moments of misrecognition and misunderstanding. All became crucial to the work we did together, as students wrote weekly about where they were and what they were doing.

In my eight years with study abroad, the challenges were invigorating; the work felt pertinent and urgent and important. It seemed an extension of my early days teaching Basic Writing. And, in teaching the ESL section on our campus, I was eager for a chance at a semester-long reflection on language learning in a global context, within an already proven curriculum, and in the company of students who were good at this, who were experienced and successful at working in translingual/transcultural settings. The teaching assignment gave me the opportunity to work closely with a course designed by Marylou Gramm, my colleague at Pitt, an inspired and inspiring teacher whose commitment to translingual composition I admired. I knew I would learn something.<sup>1</sup>

The essay that follows is not organized as an argument. And I want to make it clear from the outset that while I was teaching a course marked as ESL, it is the only ESL course I have ever taught. I claim no expertise in that

field. I am speaking from inside the experience of one course to those who might be interested in the long trajectory of my career as a teacher.

This essay, then, collects a set of interesting examples and puts them in conversation, one with the others. I like this as a model for the essay as a genre. “Ordinary language philosophy teaches us how to think from within. It teaches us to think through examples.” That’s Toril Moi from *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell*.

I was both pleased and surprised by the stories and examples that pressed themselves on me as I began writing this essay, some coming from a documentary instinct (to report on my final course, to think back on my career), but others popping up unexpectedly from the reading I had been doing over the last ten years in support of a graduate seminar on Ordinary Language, a course that had become focused on Cambridge English, the early attempt to create a university-level English curriculum that has served as the foundation for the modern English department in the English speaking world. The key figures were I.A. Richards, William Empson, F.R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams. Wittgenstein was lurking in the wings. Of the group, Empson and Richards had spent a substantial period of time in China, teaching Basic English. The key term that will bring these examples together at the end of this essay is “translingual composition.” Or so I believe. Translingual composition is represented at the outset by the example of Chinese students writing in English in a required first-year course at the University of Pittsburgh.

The course I taught in 2017 was structured exactly like the course I taught in the late 1970s. There were weekly writing assignments, drafts and revisions, usually two of the latter, where the work of revision was initially the work of supplement and addition, later a questioning of key terms, so that two to three-page essays (single spaced, double spaced between paragraphs) became six to eight-page essays. These essays were prompted by assigned readings, but more on that later.

There were also weekly language exercises. I would present typical sentences from their papers, “common errors” we once called them, model sentences with a grammar common to this group of writers, one that varied from what, following Suresh Canagarajah, I called “Metropolitan English.” I’m not sure this label is any less problematic than the old one, Standard Written English, but since most of my students aspired to using their English in metropolitan settings, it seemed strategically useful to name it so.

David Bartholomae

As a profession, and with colleagues in our institutions (willing and recalcitrant), we have learned over time to finesse and refine the ways we name exercises in proofreading and grammar, to find terms other than Error and Correction. If I had called these weekly exercises *Corrections* my students would have known exactly what I was talking about, and so there was an advantage in renaming and reframing examples of language differences, and in thinking and talking about the source, context, and usefulness of these paired sentences without resorting to a simple binary—correct and incorrect. This is one of the important arguments of those who have been working to establish the notion of a translingual composition. Min-Zhan Lu provides a classic example of this exercise in “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone.”

Although there were changes in the terms I used, and they are not unimportant, and most certainly changes in the grammatical patterns I was highlighting, I was teaching proofreading and sentence-level revision just as I had in a Basic Writing course 42 years ago. Why proofreading? Here is how we phrased it in 1975. Students don’t make all the errors the English language allows. They make a predictable set of errors. They have their own “style of error,” as Shaughnessy used to say. A personally tailored list allows for focused proofreading. And proofreading itself is a difficult skill to learn. Adult readers don’t read each word on a page. They anticipate and fill in the blanks. A writer must *learn* the odd form of reading that is proofreading, paying attention to all the words, sentence by sentence.

Below is a language exercise from the fifth week in that 15-week term. Creating a handout like this is common practice wherever ESL is taught. There is nothing original or exceptional in what I am offering.

### **Language Exercise: Proofreading Guide**

*Here are student sentences (your sentences) that vary from what we might call “Metropolitan English,” the English that circulates and serves as cultural capital in the world’s great cities. When you proofread, I want you to set aside time to hunt for sentences like the ones I’ve indicated below. When you find one, I would like you to revise—and to revise with a Metropolitan reader in mind.*

*And, and this is important, I would like you to be prepared to talk about the changes you make—why you made them, what was won or lost in*

the bargain.

**1. Sentence boundaries—marking the beginning and end of sentences.**

- *I consider myself a very **patriotic person, I am** so patriotic that I even love the countries like Pakistan and Russia which are good friends with China.*
- *China’s education environment is more competitive than the **U.S.A, students** have to get a high grade before they enter into a better school in next level.*

**2. Simple mistakes and typos—these tend to be hard to spot but easy to correct.**

- *Even in this small town where **I was barn**, learning a foreign language has become an important thing for current students.*
- *A few weeks before the first day of school, I started **loosing** sleep.*

**3. Shifts in verb tense—if the speaker, scene, or the action are set in the past, keep the verbs in past tense.**

- *My parents weren’t rich enough to move into a better district for a living, so they **have** to choose a second-hand apartment as a transitioning shelter.*
- *My father was born in a rural place in Chongqing province. His family was poor, and he **has** two sisters and one brother.*

**4. Other errors with verb tense**

- *The article said Chinese students **has been teach** these patriotic content, but these patriotic materials also help students to build their*

David Bartholomae

*views for students' life.*

**5. Plural nouns—plural nouns normally take a final S.**

- *Our English festival always started by watching English **movie** and reading English books.*
- *“Why is a raven like a writing desk?” Alice asked. The show Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland was performing and drama is one of the traditional **program** in our English festival.*

**6. Definite article—“The”**

- *Now, considering what Chinese government has done to Chinese kids as a bystander, I have my own point of view. \_\_\_ Chinese government utilizes different means to infuse red ideology into children and tries as much as possible to fetter their minds in order to create unity.*
- *Though the show did shape my views towards \_\_\_ Long March and the Communist Party, it became meaningless when I was repeatedly forced to watch it.*

**7. Relative pronouns—blurred patterns**

- *In the recent couple years, there are increasing number of students in **China do not know** about the past history at all. (There are an increasing number of students **in China who do not know** about history at all.)*

As I did in 1975, I used class time for students, alone and in pairs, to reread (or proofread) their weekly essays and to revise sentences. I would circulate and help. Later, we would talk about individual instances and examples, particularly when a revision seemed particularly inspired or particularly unsatisfying. I would ask students to add examples to their personal lists and to let me know if they saw examples I should add to mine or that might suggest a new numbered entry on my handout.

## Writing in the Contact Zone

As has been the case throughout my teaching career, the writing assignments in this course were all prompted by readings, readings chosen because, although difficult (first year college students are not the assumed audience) the writing is exemplary, and the essays touch upon subjects that, I believed, could engage both me and my students at our best. In this course, I wanted to provide my students with ways of thinking about where they were geographically and intellectually, and I wanted them to have interesting references they could bring into discussions beyond my classroom.

I opened the course with Min-Zhan Lu’s much travelled 1987 *College English* essay, “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle.” Lu writes about her youth and young adult life in Shanghai, about learning English, about schooling under Mao Tse-tung, and about her family’s persecution during the Cultural Revolution. It is a complicated and moving essay (an unusual combination, in my experience). I have taught it often and it has always been a challenge.

I also drew from two books I admired, both by former Peace Corp workers in China: Peter Hessler, *Rivertown: Two Years on the Yangtze*; and Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*. I have had the pleasure of meeting and talking with both. My students and I spent an evening talking with Osnos in Beijing, and I helped to host Peter Hessler when he came to my campus for a reading at the invitation of my colleague, Michael Meyer, also formerly in China with the Peace Corps, and whose books I regularly teach in my course on Travel Writing.

I am not going to give an extended account of my use of these two books. I taught the opening chapter of *Rivertown* (including its brilliant account of teaching English composition in China). Here is an excerpt from the opening assignment:<sup>2</sup>

### **Peter Hessler, “Downstream,” from *Rivertown***

*In “Downstream,” Hessler provides his view of the Chinese students, teachers, and administrators at the college in Fuling, Sichuan Province, in 1996. Imagine that you are writing to his American readers, including students here at the University of Pittsburgh.*

*Where, in your opinion, is Hessler most accurate? Where is he at his*

David Bartholomae

*best? Where does he show that he has a deep understanding of China and Chinese people? Be precise and provide details.*

*Have things changed since he published his book in 2001? What would an American reader need to know to be up to date? Be precise and provide details.*

*And where, in your opinion, does he miss something important or misinterpret what he sees and hears? What preconceptions does he bring with him about China or about the Chinese? Where, in his writing, do you sense or see this preconception And how might that preconception be said to distort his vision or get in the way of understanding? Again—be precise and provide details.*

Notes:

- *I'd like you to quote briefly from Hessler's writing and think about the precise words in that quotation. That is, your reader will need to "hear" Hessler. This means that you will need to provide at least two good examples of the way he thinks and writes.*
- *When you quote from Hessler's work, please include the original page number (in parenthesis) at the end of each sentence that contains a quotation.*
- *Don't quote or summarize too much; otherwise Hessler, not you, will be writing this essay. Give plenty of time to your commentary.*
- *I'm looking for at least two pages, single spaced, with a space between paragraphs.*
- *Proofread when you are finished.*

Osnos came last in the course. The chapter we chose, "A Chorus of Soloists," was about individual ambition and youth culture in relation to Chinese revolutionary history and ideology. As with the other readings, the assignment sequence took the essay through a first draft and two revisions. In the

middle was an exercise in summary and paraphrase. Here is the opening Osnos assignment:

***Evan Osnos, “A Chorus of Soloists”***

*In the chapter from Age of Ambition, “A Chorus of Soloists,” Evan Osnos tells the story of Han Han and his phenomenal presence in Chinese popular culture as a novelist, a blogger, and a media superstar. He was, Osnos says, “a seductive spokesman for a new brand of youthful defiance” (169). (Did you read Triple Door? Do you know people who did?) Han Han, according to Osnos, did not “reorder the political life of Chinese youth, or force the hand of policymakers, but he was a powerful spokesman for the joys of skepticism” (175).*

*And Osnos also tells the story of Michael, the student from Li Yang’s Crazy English who perfected his English by listening to American advertisements. Michael, he says, “framed the study of English as a matter of moral entitlement.” He told his students, “You are the master of your destiny. You deserve to be happy. You deserve to be different in this world” (180).*

*I would like you to write an essay of about four pages. You’ll have two weeks to finish it and one week to revise.*

***Week one*** (two pages, single spaced): *I would like you to hear your account of some area of youth culture that has captured the attention of your generation. What is it? What are its attractions? What needs and desires does it serve? How might it have spoken to you? How and when might you have chosen to be “different in this world?” (These questions are meant to get you thinking. Please do not use this list of questions to organize your essay.)*

*Whatever you choose as your subject, you will need to describe it in close detail. And you will need to pay close attention to its reception—to your interest, but also to what you have heard others say. It would be helpful to have more than one person speaking in your essay.*

David Bartholomae

*You can imagine a thoughtful, interested American reader. Your reader, however, knows nothing about Chinese popular culture.*

Several students wrote about video games (of course), several about TV shows (*The Voice*, *Happy Camp*; *FeiChengWuRao*, a match-making show; *Where are We Going, Dad*, a weekly family travel adventure). One wrote about *Wei Bo* (like Twitter); and one about the *Monkey King*, a folk figure who has re-emerged in digital form.

To vary the pace and rhythm of the course, I also provided some shorter exercises in reading and writing. I would clip articles about China from the *New York Times*, and I introduced students to a new genre, the Letter to the Editor. I reprinted a short column by Didi Kirsten Tatlow (NY-Times, 9/2/2016), “For China’s Children, a Resoundingly Patriotic Return to School?”, for example. Here is how it opens:

Sparkling red stars and bloody tales of military sacrifice accompanied 200 million Chinese children into the new school year this week, with the Education Ministry requiring them to watch a television show extolling the spirit of the Communist Red Army as it escaped its enemies on the Long March.

“Be unrelenting!” was the message of the 90-minute event, “Flag of Our Ancestors,” broadcast on CCTV, the state broadcaster.

In a sign of how wide-ranging the government’s propaganda efforts are, the Education Ministry asked schools to instruct parents to ensure their children watched the show, at 8 p.m. on Thursday, the first day of classes. Some asked parents to send photographs as proof that their children had complied.

And it concludes:

Since 1949, Chinese schools have sustained a diet heavy in patriotism and Communist Party propaganda. But the annual back-to-school show, which began in 2008, has moved more sharply in that direction with the ideological tightening under President Xi Jinping, as he has cracked down on corruption and freethinkers alike and deployed the language and symbolism of a purist form of Communism to unify the country.

“Back to Basics”

I received many spirited responses in defense of propaganda. Some sounded like prepared responses; some sounded more halting. Here is one that sounds practiced; it very skillfully brings US history into play:

I am not an expert of politics or history, but if there is one thing I know, it's that patriotism is not a bad thing. Countries are carriers of people's culture. In a world which has 193 nations, the idea of patriotism is the last bunker to protect country, people and culture. Look at the people who didn't have their own countries: the Jews were slaughtered before they built their own country; native Americans lost their home because they did not fight back when outsiders stepped on their lands. That's why China is “brainwashing” its children with patriotism, because we've been bullied for too long. We were first invaded by Western developed countries around 1900s and forced to “rent” out our territory; then the Russians and Japanese came and took over half of China. After the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China, we were still despised by other more developed countries, even India and Vietnam can step on us. . . .

And now, we are finally powerful enough to protect ourselves against invasions; we can finally say we are proud to be Chinese; our government can tell the children: “Hey kids, remember, the deeds done by our ancestors did not go to waste, we didn't let them down.”

But I also received several letters to the editor, equally spirited, that while they appreciated the government's initiative said, in effect, “Give us a break. Do you think Chinese students have no sense of irony, no sense of spectacle—that, as young people, we can't both be in school and out of school all at the same time?!” Here are three brief excerpts.

Like students in the United States or students in any other countries, students in China have their own opinions towards the government they have, towards the educational system in which they ‘suffered’ a lot, and even towards tiny ‘society’ like their schools.

When I entered the middle school and was asked to write about the show again, I got bored. I knew exactly what was going to be in the show, but I had to write an essay to tell how moved I was and how meaningful the show was. Later in high school, the tradition went on. I could write an essay about the show without watching

David Bartholomae

it. All I had to do was to tell the greatness the Community Party had achieved.

It does seem that the government has achieved great success—almost everyone is following the instructions and requirements. However, is it true success? For me, I reckon, what the government is doing is a ritual. That is a superficial meaning of success. Deepen inside the surface, are students really affected or really touched by what they are doing? In my heart, those over glorified programs or events will not affect me anymore. While a few very innocent students, who I was one of them once, indeed accept and embed the red ideology in their minds without further thinking, I believe nowadays Chinese students will not be moved by the show, the speech or the movie; rather, they regard these as onerous tasks, just as homework, to undertake.

The trope of irony is slippery, difficult to manage in the play of language as it crosses boundary lines—the teacher’s desk, national borders, local languages, divisions of power and authority. This is Empson’s argument in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, where he argues that irony (which often cannot be “pegged out in verbal explanations”) “can, often magnificently, show us what there is to be looked at, prove there is a crossroads where we so far have seen only a single, well-trodden track.”

Later in the semester I took students to visit the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, just across the street from the Cathedral of Learning. (I love this building, the Cathedral; it is, itself, a test of irony and its management.) The Carnegie is a nineteenth-century museum and features rooms full of dead animals, stuffed and posed in dioramas. Each tells a story. A mother grizzly bear protects her cubs while catching and eating salmon. They are threatened from above by eagles, and from in front by a male grizzly, skillfully placed beyond the glass, out in the hall next to the spectator.

One student wrote about a display of a mother leopard and her cubs. It was touching, she said, until she thought about who shot them and how they arrived at this spot in Pittsburgh, PA. She wrote,

the scene was superficially a harmony one, but deeply a ferocious one. I even thought I was guilty to stand there and watch them happily without thinking about their pains. Maybe this was the Americans at that time. They believed they could conquer the

“Back to Basics”

nature; they could get anything as long as they and the other Americans wanted it. I knew Americans had a tradition of moralism. With the feeling of exceptionalism and righteousness, they believed they were moral example for the rest world. But it seemed to me that it was so contradictory.

This is skillful writing, and part of its achievement is represented in the way she (correctly) imagines what it is I hope to hear. What do I write at the bottom margin? Good job? Or, “why do you put those last two sentences in past tense? Americans *had* a tradition of moralism? . . . they *believed* they were a moral example for the rest of the world. That would be a grammar lesson with an edge. Is she putting me on? Am I putting her on? I had an easier time knowing where and how to push with my US students.

This is the odd conundrum of teaching, one that haunts a book like Bill Cole’s *The Plural I*, one of the books that inspired this essay. When is one’s writing a step forward in thinking and in living the world, and when is it not? When is it just submission? Themewriting. Stock Response. Here is I.A. Richards on stock responses (from *Practical Criticism*).

A stock response, like a stock line in shoes or hats, may be a convenience. Being ready-made, it is available with less trouble than if it had to be specially made out of raw or partially prepared materials. And unless an awkward misfit is going to occur, we may agree that stock responses are much better than no responses at all. Indeed, an extensive repertory of stock responses is a necessity. Few minds could prosper if they had to work out an original, “made to measure” response to meet every situation that arose—their supplies of mental energy would be too soon exhausted and the wear and tear on their nervous systems would be too great. Clearly there is an enormous field of conventional activity over which acquired, stereotyped, habitual responses properly rule, and the only question that needs to be examined as to *these* responses is whether they are the best that practical exigencies—the range of probable situations that may arise, the necessity of quick availability and so forth—will allow. But equally clearly there are in most lives fields of activity in which stock responses, if they intervene, are disadvantageous and even dangerous, because they may get in the way of, and prevent, a response more appropriate to the situation.

The danger or disadvantage of the stock response. To be sure, these play out differently in the People's Republic of China than in the U.S., and hence I had no good instincts for where and how to push in the ESL course, but the concern to move beyond stock responses has been the guiding principle of my teaching for 45 years.

### **Writing as Struggle (1)**

I opened the course with Min-Zhan Lu's essay, "From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle," first published in *College English* (1987). From the late 1970s through the 90s, I taught our "Teaching Seminar," a required course for new Teaching Assistants/Teaching Fellows. The course was not an Introduction to Composition as a field; it was a semester-long reflection on the course everyone was teaching (and we taught from a shared syllabus), with a few readings from key sources (Richards, Burke, Shaughnessy) meant to provide context for discussion, much of which was devoted to student essays, writing assignments, and possible new readings for the following semester.

Because I wanted the course to be centered on actual practice (rather than the usual fantasies of who writers are and what writers do), for the opening writing assignment I asked students to write about an important writing lesson, in school or out of school, a time when they learned something meaningful, when they took a significant step forward as writers, and to do so from the inside, as memoir.

Min Lu's essay for the seminar was an early draft of "From Silence to Words." There were, in fact, two essays from that course that were published and that went on to wide circulation, including publication in composition textbooks. The other was "From Outside, In" by Barbara Mellix, a writer in our MFA program. Her essay was first published in the *Georgia Review*, also in 1987. Mellix, an African American, wrote about the language of home and the language of school, about taking Basic Writing as an undergraduate and now being in a position to teach it.

I want to take time to summarize "From Silence to Words" in detail. The essay is a classic, I know, and widely read, but classics tend to lose their edge. This one benefits from rereading. Here is how it opens:

My mother withdrew into silence two months before she died. A few nights before she fell silent, she told me she regretted the way she had raised me and my sisters. I knew she was referring to the way we had been brought up in the midst of two conflicting worlds—the world of home, dominated by the ideology of the

“Back to Basics”

Western humanistic tradition, and the world of a society dominated by Mao Tse-tung’s Marxism. My mother had devoted her life to our education, an education she knew had made us suffer political persecution during the Cultural Revolution. I wanted to find a way to convince her that, in spite of the persecution, I had benefited from the education she had worked so hard to give me. But I was silent. My understanding of my education was so dominated by memories of confusion and frustration that I was unable to reflect on what I could have gained from it.

The essay is the occasion for that reflection. You can trace her further thinking through many of her publications, including “Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?” (1992), “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone” (1994), “Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation” (1999), “Living-English Work” (2019), and her memoir, *Shanghai Quartet: The Crossings of Four Women of China* (2001). The latter, I believe, is not as widely known as it should be.

“From Silence to Words” turns first to the several languages of her early upbringing, each connecting her to a different world of experience, thought, and feeling. She grew up speaking a Shanghai dialect, something later shared only with her servants. In school, she learned to read, write, and speak in Standard Chinese, “the official written language of New China.” And at home, she spoke English with her parents, her sisters, and their tutor, a Scot. This she thought of as private, a family language. She says, “While I was happy to have a special family language, until second grade I didn’t feel that my family language was any different than some of the classmates’ family dialects.”

As she grew older, and as China “was making a transition from a semi-feudal, semi-capitalist, and semi-colonial country into a socialist country,” the family’s English identified them as imperialists, enemies of the people. Her father was a physician. His practice served a wealthy, English-speaking community in Shanghai. He (and the family) would become a target during the Cultural Revolution, 1966-76, when she was in high school and beyond. She learned to use English only when she was at home.

And in school, she learned to master Standard Chinese and, through it, to identify as a proper working-class subject. She says,

As school began to define me as a political subject, my parents tried to build up my resistance to the “communist poisoning” by expos-

David Bartholomae

ing me to the “great books”—novels by Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Bronte, Jane Austen, and writers from around the turn of the century. My parents implied that these writers represented how I, their child, should read and write. My parents replaced the word “Bourgeois” with the word “cultured.” They reminded me that I was in school only to learn math and science.

She says,

I learned a formula for Working-class writing in the composition classes. We were given sample essays and told to imitate them. The theme was always about how the collective taught the individual a lesson. I would write papers about labor-learning experiences or school-cleaning days, depending on the occasion of the collective activity closest to the assignment. To make each paper look different, I dressed it up with details about the date, the weather, the environment, or the appearance of the Master-worker who had taught me “the lesson.”

She tells a chilling story of her first day in junior high school:

... we were handed forms to fill out with our parents' class, job, and income. Being one of the few people not employed by the government, my father had never been officially classified. Since he was a medical doctor, he told me to put him down as an Intellectual. My homeroom teacher called me into the office a couple of days afterwards and told me that my father couldn't be an Intellectual if his income far exceeded that of a Capitalist. He also told me that since my father worked for Foreign Imperialists, my father should be classified as an Imperialist Lackey. The teacher looked nonplussed when I told him that my father couldn't be an Imperialist Lackey because he was a medical doctor. But I could tell from the way he took notes on my form that my father's job had put me in an unfavorable position in his eyes.

The defining moment comes when she is assigned a report on *The Revolutionary Family*, a novel that represented an appropriate working-class consciousness.

In one scene the [mother] deliberated over whether or not she should encourage her youngest son to join the Revolution. Her

memory of her husband’s death made her afraid to encourage her son. Yet she also remembered her earlier married life and the first time her husband tried to explain the meaning of the Revolution to her. These memories made her feel she should encourage her son to continue the cause his father had begun.

She was, she says, “moved” by this scene. And “moved” was a word her mother and sisters used to talk about what they valued in the English novels they were reading, novels like *Jane Eyre* or *David Copperfield*. The genre of the book report, she knew, required her to emphasize the mother’s revolutionary spirit. She chose this scene to illustrate the point.

The next morning, however, she knew that she could not turn in this book report. “I had dwelled on [the mother’s] internal conflict, which could be seen as a moment of weak sentimentality,” a virtue in one context but a sign of weakness in the other. She rewrote the report, “taking care to illustrate the grandeur of her Revolutionary Spirit by expanding on a quotation in which she decided that if the life of her son could change the lives of millions of sons, she should not begrudge his life for the cause of the Revolution.”

Writing this book report, she says, “increased my fear that I was losing the command over both the ‘language of home’ and the ‘language of school’ that I had worked so hard to gain.” One way of thinking and writing “interfered” with the other. To a writer for whom words matter, and in a context where identity is taken seriously, “code-switching” is not an easy fix. And the rest of the essay considers the difficulties Lu had managing the competing languages of family and school, defined in terms of liberal humanism and revolutionary commitment. There is a short final section that proposes a writing class that will allow, even promote, competing voices within a single text.

Although I feel that I know Min Lu well, I know very little about the period in her life between the middle-school girl, writing a book report on *The Revolutionary Family*, and the woman in her mid-30s, a wife and a mother who arrived alone at the University of Pittsburgh in 1982 to study for a PhD in English, writing first on Theodore Dreiser and later on Mina Shaughnessy and Basic Writing.

The US didn’t establish full diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic until 1979, just three years before her arrival. Min Lu arrived long before there were well established protocols for student and faculty exchange, and long before the steady flow of students from China into graduate pro-

grams at U.S. universities. Lu's trip was an extraordinary step across time and place, one requiring great courage, inventiveness, resilience, and resolve.

In *Shanghai Quartet*, she says, "Most immigrants know how to package their life according to the standard expectations for a straight story." I understand Lu's writing (and teaching) as an effort to avoid the traps of the standard narrative, pastoral or heroic. There is no straight story in this writer's formation, but there is a clear line of effort and imagination in her work as a teacher on behalf of writers who share a sense of always being out of position, who hear the "dissonance among the various discourses of one's daily life." This is the program she outlines in "Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone":

... I am most interested in doing three things: (1) enabling students to hear discursive voices which conflict with and struggle against the voices of academic authority; (2) urging them to negotiate a position in response to these colliding voices; and (3) asking them to consider their choice of position in the context of the sociopolitical power relationships within and among diverse discourses and in the context of their personal life, history, culture and society.

I deeply admire the commitments in thought and action throughout this exemplary career. I admire Lu's determination to "stay on line with the voices that matter—that is, voices which can bring us the intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect, and will to meet the challenge of hanging together as we work to end oppression in the twenty-first century."

Although I do not have the time and space to treat him at length, I cannot help but recall another great teacher/traveler, I.A. Richards, also determined, I believe, to stay on line with the voices that matter.

Richards taught English in China during several extended stays between 1927 and 1979. He was in China for a total of 52 months between 1927 and 1938; he was in China for 6 months in 1950 and 3 months in 1979. After publishing their first book, *The Meaning of Meaning*, Richards and Charles Ogden began to work on a program of instruction which they called Basic English—that is, the English language reduced to 850 words and a simplified grammar.

Richards held a professorship at Cambridge and had recently finished a visiting position at Harvard. He had emerged as a leading figure in English studies, and he would quickly be identified (wrongly, many believe)

as a founding figure in a group that, in the US, came to be called the “New Critics”. Yet his next career move was to put it all aside to move to China, where he would work with middle school teachers, preparing them to teach a new, experimental entry-level curriculum designed to make the learning of English more manageable.

I can’t be alone in finding this decision to be remarkable. And Richards did this at a time of war (the Japanese had invaded China), and at a time when widespread poverty meant that the conditions of living and of travel were difficult and primitive. At one point, he and his students had to move from Tsing Hua National University in Peking to the “University in Exile,” Liana, in the mountains of Hunan province, to avoid the bombs and pitched battles on the streets of the city.

Basic English is often condemned as an imperialist project. It lost its momentum with the Second World War and with the Communist Revolution in China. Richards’ primary motive had always been to improve basic instruction, although it is true that Richards (and Ogden) believed that a simplified English might become a global means of communication, as it has. The first world war had been a defining experience for Richards. In developing and promoting Basic English, as in the teaching of English to English speakers, Richards’ stated motive at this early stage of his career was to improve communication, avoid misunderstandings, and prevent the conditions of war.

It was also the case, however, that Richards was fascinated with the difficult meeting of the two cultures and the two languages. Travel suited him. His time in China provided material that would enable further thinking about reading, writing, and the difficulty, even the impossibility, of interpretation and translation. Below is a story that Richards liked to tell. It is one of my favorites. I’m taking this account from John Paul Russo’s excellent biography of Richards. Although there was not so much at stake for Richards, it speaks to Min Lu’s story of the two book reports, one for home and one for school:

[Richards] taught *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* to a class of about 40 Chinese. At the end of the novel, the black flag is unfurled, signaling that Tess has been hanged for child murder. When Richards read the climatic lines, “The President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess,” the class burst into spontaneous applause for the only time in the course. In a state of amazement, Richards passed out

David Bartholomae

protocols, and back came the universal response: Tess had shown disrespect to her father at the beginning of the novel. The students had been waiting for the just punishment that a great artist like Hardy would surely mete out.

This is the Richards of *Practical Criticism*, a book built around the initially unpredictable readings of poems by students and colleagues at Cambridge in the 1920s, gathered through written responses (“protocols”). There, as here, his response to difference, to ways of reading and thinking that are initially distant from his own, is to make those differences a matter of consideration, of discussion, part of the course and part of his research. It was not to correct them or to make them disappear. As I said earlier, Richards is often considered a founding figure in the American New Criticism. His practice, however, was far from theirs. The American New Critics had little interest in how students read. Whatever student responses might emerge, they would be quickly replaced by the brilliant example of a Professor reading a poem before a group of silent admirers.

In the 1930s, while teaching in China, Richards wrote *Mencius on Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition*, as a way of thinking about how a mind might hold two systems of thought without, he said, “reciprocal disturbance.” His last visit, just before his death, was in 1979, and it included a lecture in Shanghai on “sequenced language learning.” I take delight in thinking of Richards and Lu crossing paths somewhere on a sidewalk in the French Concession. Between sequenced language learning and reciprocal disturbance, they would have had something to talk about.

## **Writing as Struggle (2)**

Below is a shortened version of the assignment I gave to my students. It was their opening writing assignment. There was much buzz and consternation among the students over my suggestion that they need not necessarily start at the beginning or end with the end.

### ***Writing Assignment #1: due 9/12***

*For your first assignment, I'd like you to begin your work on a brief literacy narrative. For this first draft, I would expect 2-4 pages. Here are some suggestions to help you to begin:*

“Back to Basics”

- *You can use “From Silence to Words” as a model. I would you like you to write about an important recent lesson as you have been learning to read and write in English, to do the kind of advanced work that is expected of you here as a student at the University of Pittsburgh. You do not, however, need to write about something you learned in class or directly from a teacher.*
- *You are preparing a first draft. You don’t have to begin at the beginning and you don’t have to finish. You will return to work on this document in the following week. We will be working together to find a sense of shape and direction. You can draw upon anything you included in your in-class essay.*
- *My advice is for you to begin not with a generalization but with some specific scene or scenes. Begin with a story (or stories) rather than with an argument. If people are speaking, you can, if you choose, let them speak as characters speak in fiction. You can, obviously, write in the first person.*

The first set of papers were a real disappointment. All told the same story—about hard work, rigid teachers, late nights doing homework, and the tyranny of the GAOKAO, the national SAT-like exam used to direct students to their slot in higher education. I later learned that this is essentially the approved narrative of high school education in China—survival in the face of parental pressure, young lives drained of fun, students who learn to follow the rules. Here is a sample from a first draft: “Fortunately, I learned how to make my paper be ample and how to make my argument be strongly supported the same time with struggling to meet the minimize requirement of my assignment.”

And I said, “No. Please. I want you to reread Min Lu’s essay and, when you write, I want you to think *in the manner of* Min-Zhan Lu. Yes, of course she was formed at a different moment in the history of your country, but what was it like for you? I used this exercise in class:

### **Lu Exercise 1: “future proletarians”**

In “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,” Min Lu recalls this scene from her schooling:

One of the slogans posted in the school building read, “Turn our students into future Proletarians with socialist consciousness and education!” For several weeks we studied this slogan in our political philosophy course, a subject I had never had in elementary school. I still remember the definition of “socialist consciousness” that we were repeatedly tested on through the years: “Socialist consciousness is a person’s political soul. It is the consciousness of the Proletarians represented by Marxist Mao Tse-tung thought. . . . It is the task of every Chinese student to grow up into a Proletarian with a socialist consciousness so that he can serve the people and the motherland.” (440)

Let’s assume that all schools in all countries (including the US) are designed to turn students into future *some things*--if not working-class heroes, then characters who can occupy some ideal or acceptable social role. What was it like for you?

Please prepare brief answers to these questions—one or two sentences. I won’t collect these, but I *will* ask you to read aloud in class.

1. What ideal role was presented to you and your friends once you moved beyond elementary school? How was your experience different from you parents’ experience?
2. Did you find it easy to assume that role? Does it make sense to think of education as a “struggle.” If so, why?
3. Was English necessary for that role?
4. Was learning English a struggle? Was it in any way a *Min Lu*

*like* struggle—that is, a struggle over identity? A struggle to reconcile a Chinese point of view and an American or Western point of view?

5. Min Lu says that she spoke (and thought) one way at home and another way at school or in public. Would you say this was true for you? If so, can you provide an example?

These were pressing questions for me. My children had each spent two full years in a small-town Spanish school—first elementary school, and then high school. No one spoke English. And, as I have said, I had spent six semesters with Pitt students studying abroad. I was trying to imagine the extraordinarily complicated set of forces that had shaped these young Chinese lives—turned them to English and, then, to a 4-year undergraduate program in the city of Pittsburgh. They didn’t make these decisions on their own. Private fantasy was at play for sure. (What will I do? Who will I be? Where will I go?) But there was a complicated array of other interests at play here—state and local ministries or boards of education (or whatever they might have been called), family, and certainly some areas of youth or popular culture, among others.

Hessler said of his students, “I brushed against people just long enough to gain the slightest sense of the dizzying past that had made them what they were today.” I wanted the students to understand that I was not just setting an exercise. I wanted to learn something about China and about their generation of young Chinese men and women. They were my primary sources.

The essays, in the end, were mostly predictable, partly, I think, because of an unwillingness to leave anything behind that could get a person into trouble, or slow him or her or them down on their chosen path. I had the sense that writing in English was always and only a move on the chess board, a way of writing whatever they needed to write in order to move on to something more important. It was hard to spark a sense of joy or passion or confusion. But this is old news to anyone who teaches composition. Still, the conditions of restraint must be different for Chinese students (and in ways I will never understand).

It was also the case that, with the very substantial amount of time I needed to devote to sentences, my students could not give much to revision. Or perhaps this is what I want to say: they were very good at and interested in additions, in searching around for more and more interesting examples; they weren’t as willing or able to pick away at the key terms governing the search.

These essays were long. I've chosen from those that seemed the most ambitious and surprising. I've cut them to show the range of examples (and the willingness to linger with examples), but not the general shape of the essay. I've not made any other changes. The essay below was the first to break the pattern of thesis and conclusion. It sent a buzz around the room when I read it out loud, slowly, trying to honor its tone and rhythm:

I consider myself a very patriotic person, and I am so patriotic that I even love the countries like Pakistan and Russia which are good friends with China. There were three "Russians" in my high school's class. I called them "Russians" only because they spoke Russian, but actually one of them was Ukrainian and the other two were Greeks with Ukrainian/Russian lineage. I liked to think of them as Russians because I like Russians, and I liked them, so I tended to combine them with the characters I liked, which I am sure was a very natural thing for humans to do.

Despite their feelings, I kept calling them "Russians", "comrades" or "the Red Children". They've expressed some negativities toward these names, but I ignored them, since as far as I could see, they were just like all other nicknames, like Timmy, Matty, Sasha and Vladya. Eventually, they asked me formally to stop calling them like that, and I stopped, but that came later.

When Russia sent its troops to Crimea, it became a big topic in our social study class. Of course I was on the Russians side because I love Russians. In my opinion, Crimea belonged to Russia, and actually, even Ukraine should belong to Russia. Since Russia was the biggest power in the Soviet Union, all the small countries around Russia should belong to it. From my now perspective, that idea was very foolish, probably even Vladimir Putin himself would not think like that. But I was young and naive. I told my thoughts to my "Russian" friends: "Putin is not invading, he is just taking back the land his fathers used to own." Unexpectedly, the Ukraine girl went nuts after she heard this. She started yelling to me that Crimea is not part of Russia. Ukraine is an independent country and so on. Then I realised what a giant mistake I've just made. I might even break our friendship by saying that. Luckily, after I apologized to them, they still treated me as friend. . . .

### “Back to Basics”

Until recent, I just noticed how wrong it is to think someone as what I would like them to be. After I moved into college, I met some new people and made some new friends. One of a new friend I made has a Taiwanese roommate. When he told me about his roommate’s nationality, I tried to correct him by saying: “Hey, Taiwan is part of China, you know that?” and he said: “Yeah, I know, but he want to be known as Taiwanese.” I suddenly understand why my friends were not happy when I called them “Russians.” Though they speak Russian, that does not mean they are Russians. I should not put tags on them. I need to treat people in the way of how they want to be treated. I think of myself, I don’t want to be called as “the god dam commie” (although I am a steadfast communist). Just like Confucius said: “Don’t make others do things you don’t want to do.”

Still, the idea of racial identity confuses constantly. I asked my Hispanic friend: “When you think about your self, do you think of your self as an American first, and then Hispanic? Or is it the other way around?” He looked at me and said: “It depends.” “What about right now?” “Hispanic.” Then I asked his roommate who was laying on the bed: “What about you? American comes first or White?” “Definitely American.” He said. I am very confused about their different answers. One seems care more about his ethnic identity than his nationality, and the other one seems think the opposite way. For me, I always think myself as a Chinese and then a communist. . . .

So yesterday was Sam’s birthday. Everybody on my floor was saying happy birthday to him in GroupMe. (In case you don’t know, that’s a group chat app.) Then, a Chinese guy texted him happy birthday in Chinese characters and all the sudden, people started saying happy birthday in their own languages. At first, there was Russian, and then Arabian, Spanish, German, Japanese, Korean, and a native Nigerian language called Bohop or something.... There were in total of 10 different languages!

I didn’t know there were so many different language speakers on my floor, and I was shocked. What’s funny was that the Nigerian guy didn’t actually say happy birthday, instead he said something about Sam’s mother. We knew that because Luke, another pretty funny guy on our floor who texted happy birthday in Spanish, translated all the languages into English.

I don't think the essay would be improved by some final discussion of diversity. I told the writer that I would love to see him write another section, of equal length, this one turning to the different languages, peer groups, and political affiliations within the group of Chinese students on our campus. But we were at the end of the cycle of draft and revision, and it was time to move on.

What all the students admired in this piece, as did I, was its energy and sense of fun. There was a recognizable person in here rather than a stock figure. My composition classes almost always are defined by an early moment where a writer appears as a compelling character with a "real" voice. That was how this essay was read by the class, but there were not many who followed suit in their revisions.

This next student paper was remarkable, to me at least, for its length and range, and for its straightforward (neither melodramatic nor overly self-conscious) account of what seemed to me to be the crushing cost of making the passage to Pittsburgh. It is also a wonderful reading of Lu's essay. At one point, the writer defines herself as "unobscured and adventurous," what a lovely phrase!

"Unobscured" became a term of use for me in that class. In this essay, the writer was writing about her parents, and it is the stories of their lives that allows her to become "unobscured." This coining is preceded by another interesting pair of terms. Their age and her travels to the US ("geographical craziness") all led, she said, to "concurrence and controversy." In these pairings (and in the precision of the terms) she is searching for a third term, a somewhere in the middle that can't be found, as it shouldn't. But the searching for terms and the unusual coinings, like "unobscured," are signs of a writer at work trying to make her language do something new, something important, something other than stock response (what the language is prepared to do, or used to doing).

There are moments in the essay where she enacts (and not just narrates) her version of the "conflict and struggle" of Min-Zhan Lu's learning to write in Shanghai. I think it is brilliant. And I said so. And to frame the discussion I asked, "Where else in this essay, on the page, do you see this writer as 'unobscured'?"

My father was from a small town in Henan, the middle east of China; my mother was from a little village in Inner Mongolia, the most northern part of China; I was born in Henan, then I lived in Georgia for three years before moving to Pennsylvania. On top of

### “Back to Basics”

the geographic craziness, the age difference among the three of us were quite drastic as well. My father is fifteen years older than my mother, and they had me when she was thirty. This variation of our experiences lead to both concurrence and controversy. We could have profound discussions on the topics from literacy, medicine, to policy during afternoon tea. My father and mother would always have something fascinating to say, and I brought the youth's and western thoughts to the table. Their experiences helped me to be unobscured and adventurous.

My middle school was a boarding school, the top one in Henan Province. Because it was a province school, it was in the capital of Henan, which was a two-hour drive from where we lived. It was my first time living away from home and away from my mother and father. A few weeks before the first day of school, I started losing sleep. I did not understand why I would have trouble falling asleep since I considered myself being one of the best sleepers in all of the people that I know. My mother told me that my sleep problems were caused by a thing called “excitement.” “Ha! Now it makes sense!” I was excited to potentially start a new life at this new place with all those new people. But I was nervous at the same time, especially about living at a dorm with six other girls.

Move in Day was literally a race to get to the room and claim our territories, so that we could get the “good” spot. The room was approximately ten square meters. It was set up with four sets of gun metal lockers standing against the wall near the red metal door; two sets of bunk beds with wooden boards as the “mattress” on each side of the room; a small glass door to our washing area where we had three sinks, one toilet, and one shower. I was a little bit let down by the fact that as many as seven people were shoved into this little tiny space. I could not help to complain, “this place is terrible, how can I live here for three years?” Then I saw both of my parents laughed, and my mother said, “honey, back in the days when I was getting my associate degree, it was so much worse than this.” My mother had not told me a lot about her college life, and my reaction to her comment was, “you lived in a dorm too? I thought... well, I don't actually think about life way back then. So what was it like, mom?” She and my father both chuckled, and then sat down on the naked

wooden board, and started telling the story from her youth years –

“Your grandfather was in the army, so he and your grandmother moved to Inner Mongolia under the order of the commander to help exploit desolate areas there in October 1954. Then your aunts were born, I was born, and your uncle was born last. We grew up in that little village. Oh, the one you visited last time when you went back.” “You mean the one that we drove up the mountain for two hours to get to and we did not see any human being or any types of transportations on the way up there?” I interrupted with great inconceivable, “I mean, they weren’t even houses, they were [made of grass] bricks! How does that work? It gets super cold in the winters there.”

My mom nodded undeniably and continued with her story. “Your grandfather used to make these trousers with cottons for us. Those trousers were so thick that they could stand on there own! Your grandparents had one room, and the rest of us had the other. I didn’t like sleeping in the same bed with four other people. But what could I do? Nothing. So I told myself everyday that I had to get out of that poor little village. When I was about ten, my sisters and I started working as mushroom pickers in the mountains to get some extra money for stuff that we wanted really badly. For me, I wanted a pair of white sneakers, and they cost 0.5 yuan. I finally worked my hours and got the money to buy these wonderful shoes.

But guess what your grandmother did? She beat me the second I walked into the house. She blamed me for spending money on useless things and accused me of being too much of a vanity. All she wanted us to become were good students at school, and obeying children at home. That was when I swore to myself that I would become the best mom if I ever have a child.

I worked extra hard at school, because I wanted to get out. And I succeeded! I achieved my goal by getting the top scores and came to Henan for high school and then college after that. Speaking of residential life, we used to have a bed that was as wide as the room, which probably was about eleven meters long, and twelve girls slept in the same bed. Although there were disagreements about snoring and showering here and there, I enjoyed it. We would turn

“Back to Basics”

off our lights and all be in bed before the RA comes to check on us, and then chat about everything, classes, friends, fashion, boys, all kinds of stuff, until really late. I think it was a unique experience, and taught me how to be around people. Don't complain, and never give in without a fight.”

....

The entire family on my father's side was Hui Chinese, thus they were all Muslims. I did not believe in the Islamic faith. My grandparents were pure Muslims. My grandfather had a big white beard just like Muhammad. My grandmother married my grandfather when she was fourteen and had been a virtuous wife as the Islamic culture set her to be since. Both of them grew up in a small village where everyone were Muslims; everyone had the same last name; everyone was related to everyone. However, there were never any sparkles or clicks between my “family faith” and I.

My father used to tell me bedtime stories from the Quran. I enjoyed them, but they were simply entertainments to me. Celebrations to traditional holidays on the Islamic calendar were just exciting parties that had amazing food. I did not like the Islamic faith, and I was glad that my father allowed me to not like it. I disliked it because of the forceful element to it. It is difficult for me to accept my identity to be a Muslim strictly because my father is one. In my opinion, the freedom of thoughts and beliefs should be a necessity to human beings. I should be able to choose what I believe in and no one can put me a group based on my family history. Maybe I valued freedom more than many Chinese due to the American novels I read and movies that I watched. I never liked it, let alone believing this faith of my family's.

My father had always wished that I could believe in something. He wanted me to learn more about other cultures and faiths, so that I would one day have a spiritual sustenance. My father did not agree sending me here to the US. when I first proposed it. He thought that Americans discriminated Asians, and it was not as safe as China due to the problems with gun controls. The drugs and alcohol at American high schools and college he saw from TV shows or movies made it even more challenging to convince him to let me study in the US. Finally, he gave in, but under one strange condition, that

David Bartholomae

was for me to go to a Christian school. I took this offer with great pressure because I was eager to learn anything new.

....

I arrived in the US in August, 2014. My host family was Christian. We went to church every Sundays. Most of my classmates were Christians. I had a bible class everyday. We celebrated Christian holidays instead of Islamic ones. Everything was different. The first bible class was full of confusion. Everybody but me in the classroom got the biblical references the Mr. Wilson, my bible teacher, made. I did not know what “Roman 6:15” meant; I did not know when or where Jesus was born; I did not know who Abraham was. On top of all the previous knowledge that I lacked, my vocabulary seemed to vanish when I read the bible.

There is no rush here toward a Conclusion and the detail comes from within the scene. The turn to her parents and grandparents was, perhaps, inspired by the example of Hessler’s students, who also located themselves in a family history. But you always believe (or the students and I were quick to believe) that she was writing about people and places and ideas that mattered to her. Part of this is in the loving attention to detail, which *unobscured* the scene, the place, and the time:

[The boarding school room] was set up with four sets of gun metal lockers standing against the wall near the red metal door; two sets of bunk beds with wooden boards as the “mattress” on each side of the room; a small glass door to our washing area where we had three sinks, one toilet, and one shower.

But the writer’s achievement is also in her willingness to bring forward the terms of an unconventional life. The Hui Chinese are one of the 55 ethnic minority groups in China. While they are not actively persecuted, as in the case, for example, of the Uyghurs, they remain marginalized. This is what I meant when I said that she wrote about something that mattered because it mattered. Her subject was not determined by a standard narrative. She struggles that it be unobscured. And when she succeeds, you want to say, “Wow.”

I tried very hard to move students away from the sorts of conclusions that sum everything up, speak in a loud voice, and leave the world a happy

place, part of the drill of Chinese (like American) writing instruction. I have had pretty good success with this in other courses. Here I couldn't make much of a dent. The biggest change came with the ways students gathered and considered examples—slowly, thoughtfully, and at length, as something other than props, support, or proof. And Lu's essay was exemplary in this regard.

Here is part of the conclusion of the second essay, above:

Luckily, I have two sets of family on each side of the planet. My American parents would explain to me phenomena in the US, and they were always excited to listen to me expressing my Chinese point of view. My father was surprisingly supportive when I presented him with my interest in Christianity. We talked about the similarities and differences from the Bible and the Quran regularly. His perception on America became weaker after getting to know this country. My appreciation toward my diversified and accepting family grew stronger as I acquired more knowledge from other languages and cultures. The opinions and experiences my parents shared with me were precious. They helped resolve the struggle that I had with discourses of Chinese and English.

### **Some Versions of Pastoral**

In the opening chapter to *Rivertown*, Peter Hessler tells a story about his friend and colleague, Adam, the other Peace Corp volunteer in Fuling. In a moment when he needed to usefully fill classroom time, Adam turned to his students and, in a phrase familiar to us all, he said, “Write about anything you want.”

At the end of the hour, Adam collected their papers. They had written about anything they wanted, and what he had was forty-five shopping lists. I want a new TV, a new dress, a new radio. I want more grammar books. I want my own room. I want a beeper and a cell phone and a car. I want a good job. Some of the students had lists a full page long, every entry numbered and prioritized.

In the 1970s, when I started teaching, stories like this would often begin or end a conference paper at CCCC. They provided the punch-line or the pivot, a demonstration of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, evidence of the impossible task of teaching composition in the era of open admissions. *We inhabit different countries, different planets*—that was

David Bartholomae

the subtext. *I could be a good teacher if they would just send me good students, students whose writing I can read.*

Hessler, however, uses the story to set up the passage I placed as my epigraph.

I sensed that I simply couldn't judge the students for anything they thought, at least in the beginning. Their backgrounds were too far removed from what I had known before coming to Fuling, and, like all young Chinese, they were surrounded by the aura of a troubled past. It was easy to forget this—it was easy. . . to smile at their childlike shyness, and it was easy to dismiss them as simple young people from the simplicity of the countryside. But of course nothing was farther from the truth—the Sichuan countryside is not simple, and my students had known things that I never imagined. Even if appearances were deceiving, the truth always came through in the ways they wrote about their homes and families.

*It was easy to dismiss them as simple people from a simple countryside.* Both the invitation to dismissal and the speech act to provide cover were the subject of William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1931), where he considers the "trick of language," the form of "magical thinking" that allows us to construct simple binaries, like complex and simple.

Empson, following Richards, taught Basic English in China in the late 1930s, and then again from 1947 to 1953. (He taught in Japan in the early 1930s. He posthumously published a book on *The Face of the Buddha*.) Empson had difficulty finding a permanent position at an English university, and he was restless. His first full time appointment was at the University of Essex in 1955.

Empson had spent his early career seeking out the thorniest, most difficult passages in all of English literature in order to do the work he wanted to do. His first book, written while he was an undergraduate at Cambridge (and studying with Richards), was *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. The title was an Empsonian joke, demonstrating the craziness of any precise account of imprecision, of words, sentences and passages that had multiple meanings. And, as I said, each chapter is built around readings of some of the most difficult passages in all of English literature: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Pope, Hopkins, Eliot. How should (or might) readers (or writers) locate themselves in moments where meanings are multiple, where the language is slippery, when passage or utterance defies paraphrase, defies all attempts at under-

standing? He is interested in moments where readers and listeners (writers and speakers) stumble; when they stumble and when that stumbling cannot (should not) be attributed to a failure of education, class, will, or attention.

And so, of course Empson would take the opportunity to live and teach in China. His interest in travel was, like Richards', part of his interest in the limits of language, the problems of knowledge, translation, interpretation, “the structure of complex words,” to use the title of the book that followed *Some Versions of Pastoral*. Empson's argument, following Richards, was that meaning was always contextual and contexts were changeable and unpredictable. With language, verbal or written exchanges were always fraught and contingent; someone was always out of step; misunderstandings were inevitable. Knowing this was the proper preparation for a life in the world.

The opening example in *Some Versions of Pastoral* is Thomas Grey's poem, *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*. In it, the poet reflects on rural labor and rural laborers—one of them buried here in a country churchyard, forgotten and unheralded, perhaps a “mute inglorious Milton,” an example of opportunity wasted.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Empson is always quick to pull the curtain on the wizard. He says, “What this means, as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system. . . . This is stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it.”

The trope of the pastoral, what Empson calls a “trick” of language, erases difference in order to serve the needs and desires of power. But the power he is concerned with is not rooted in class or capital. It rests with the tropes deployed by a writer or reader. That is, Empson considers the trope in the context of working-class as well as high-brow literature. He argues that these speech acts conveniently represent the difficult, unequal relations between, say, rich and poor—or, in later chapters, the wise and foolish, adults and children, life and death, spirit and body, conscious and unconscious, gardens and heath, the “best” and the worst. And, we might add, teacher and student. Pastoral (as a trick) allows these unequal relations to be fixed in image and phrase and, so, to appear “beautiful,” “natural,” inevitable, part of nature or god's plan. It is a way of ignoring difference as though such ignoring were a

generous thing to do when, in fact, the gesture (or the trick of language, as Empson has it) is a way of pushing others aside, erasing them, placing them in the standard narrative of high and low, ignorance and experience, and so on.

The Hessler of my example does not fall for the trick. He doesn't settle on "simple," nor on its complement, "complex," which would be equally dismissive and patronizing (the "inscrutable oriental"). He wants to know things he has never imagined, and so he turns to the singleness of the cases before him—presenting one student paper after another and, later, one instance after another—all from his teaching and his life in Fuling.

And, in doing so, he enacts what I understand to be both the methods and the ethic of "translingual composition," which I take to be a new way of conceiving the motives and methods of what we used to call Basic Writing. I'm drawing, now, from Bruce Horner's definition of translingual in the chapter, "Language," in his most recent book, *Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange* (2016), but I'm referring broadly to the publications of a larger group of colleagues. Translingual composition locates writing temporally as well as spatially—always in process, always in motion, always a negotiation. Translingual composition is an orientation rather than a specific set of practices. Translingual composition produces and requires a "set of dispositions"—tolerance for variation, humility and a willingness to negotiate meaning, letting ambiguities pass, a recognition that language is changing, not static.

Perhaps the founding document for translingual composition is the *College English* essay, "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach" (2011), written by Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. Here are some of its resolutions:

- The translingual approach we call for extends the CCCC resolution [on "Students Rights to their Own Language"] to differences within and across all languages. And it adds recognition that the formation and definition of languages and language varieties are fluid.
- The translingual approach encourages reading with patience, respect for perceived differences within and across languages, and an attitude of deliberate inquiry.
- The translingual approach asks of writing not whether its language is standard, but what the writers are doing with the language and

“Back to Basics”

why. For in fact, notions of the “standard English speaker” and “Standard Written English” are bankrupt concepts.

As the term “Basic Writing” once opened up new possibilities for thinking about English in use, and about composition as a school subject, so, I believe, *translingual composition* has that power now. It reanimates all forms of writing as a negotiation across languages. It speaks equally to Basic Writing, to all forms of first year composition, to WID, to introductory courses in journalism and non-fiction, and, as I note, to study abroad.

In this essay I’ve wanted to account for a Basic Writing course I taught in my final semester, and I wanted to think back to where I began as a teacher and a writer.<sup>3</sup> And in thinking about where I began, I couldn’t help but make connections to Cambridge English, here represented by I.A. Richards and William Empson.

Why Empson and the trick of the pastoral? Because, as I continue to read this odd and difficult book, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, I always find myself thinking about the problems central to what we are talking about when call up a term like Basic Writing. From a certain humane perspective, it is tempting to assume that language differences don’t matter. That they can be overlooked or overcome. This is one of the tricks of pastoral. To celebrate a common humanity, differences must be erased. The shepherd and the lord of the manor can/should speak, think, and feel as one. One must be consumed by the other.

What Empson shows is how very difficult it is to think otherwise, to productively, for example, inhabit and engage diverse ways of thinking, speaking, and feeling. And to do so without resorting to hierarchy, where one utterance, one sentence, for example, must be replaced by another in order to be acceptable. Empson’s argument is that neither sentence is fully expressive on its own.

Composition courses are ground zero in these struggles. What I have learned late in my career is to see the importance of bringing our energies to the fundamental problems of writing in a global context, and there is no better testing ground than undergraduate courses that combine travel and travel writing, where the opening assignment, for example, may be to write about South Africa, to write about South Africa without being South African. And even if you could inhabit such a position, Empson asks, which South African might you then be? Or which and what kind of North American do you become? Or might you become? Empson doesn’t solve the problems of

Basic Writing (or travel writing), but he is brilliant at showing all their forms and manifestations. And he does so with great delight.

Perhaps the simplest and most elegant statement on language diversity comes from Raymond Williams, whose writing and teaching defined some of the finest, but also the final moments of the Cambridge project. Williams was a Professor at Cambridge; he was also Welsh, working-class, the son of a railway signalman. He was a distinguished academic; he also devoted 15 years to teaching adult education courses through the Workers' Educational Association. He was closely and deeply aware of language difference—of different “structures of feeling” as well as the different habits of thinking and writing. A culture, he said, “is always both traditional and creative.” It is composed of “both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings.” And the problem of having to choose between an “educated” or a “customary” style, he would say, is that neither is sufficiently articulate.<sup>4</sup>

### **Acknowledgments**

I'm grateful to colleagues who read early versions of this essay and who offered both advice and encouragement: Paul Kameen, Peter Moe, Marylou Gramm, Min-Zhan Lu, Bruce Horner, Suresh Canagarajah, and Mike Rose.

### **Notes**

1. Some who read an early draft of this essay wondered if there were another story to tell—of a shift in priorities on our campus. Had we diverted funds that once went to American students in order to attract and serve international students who could easily pay full out of state tuition and who did not rely on local scholarships or financial aid? So far as I can tell, the answer is no. It is certainly not the case that the University of Pittsburgh (or its English department) has abandoned its traditional commitments to Basic Writing. We continue to provide a range of support for US students who seek these courses or who are required to take them.
2. All student writing is used with permission.
3. I finished this essay in mid-September, 2019, when our Pittsburgh campus was truly an international meeting place, and when our Study Abroad program was booming, developing both new courses and new sites. I could never have imagined the Pittsburgh campus now, under the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic and nervously awaiting the

2020 General Election. Our national politics has been determined to isolate us from the rest of the world, in spite of the best efforts of those in opposition. It will be some time, I suspect, before we can again present convincing arguments to re-engage. I believe that we must, and I trust that we can, and it is in that spirit that I send this essay out into the world.

4. To see Richards thinking through the relationship between “ordinary” and “creative,” or “customary” and “educated,” I would recommend two essays that have been important to me and that I have used often in my teaching: “Culture is Ordinary” and “Notes on English Prose: 1780-1950.”

### Works Cited

- Canagarajah, Suresh. “The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2006, pp. 586-617.
- Coles, William. *The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978.
- Empson, William. *The Face of the Buddha*, edited by Rupert Arrowsmith, Oxford UP, 2016.
- . *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. 1947. New Directions, 1966.
- . *Some Versions of Pastoral: A Study of the Pastoral Form in Literature*. 1935 Penguin Books, 1966.
- . *The Structure of Complex Words*. 1951. Harvard UP, 1989.
- Rodney Koeneké, *Empires of Mind: I.A. Richards and Basic English in China, 1929-1979*. Stanford UP, 2004.
- Haffenden, John. *William Empson Among the Mandarins*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Hessler, Peter. *Rivertown: Two Years on the Yangtze*. Harper Collins, 2002.
- Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. “Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach.” *College English*, vol. 73, no. 3, 2011, pp. 303-21.
- Horner, Bruce. *Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange*. Southern Illinois UP, 2016.
- Koeneké, Rodney. *Empires of Mind: I.A. Richards and Basic English in China, 1929-1979*. Stanford UP, 2004.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. “Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?” *College English*, vol. 58, no. 8, 1992, pp. 887-913.
- . “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle.” *College English*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1987, pp. 437-48.

David Bartholomae

- . "Living-English Work." *College English*, vol. 68, no.6, 2006, pp. 605-18.
- . "Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 45, no. 4, 1994, pp. 442-58.
- . "Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no.2, 1999, pp. 172-94.
- . *Shanghai Quartet: The Crossings of Four Women of China*. Duquesne UP, 2001.
- Mellix, Barbara. "From Outside, In." *Georgia Review*, Summer 1987, pp. 258-67.
- Meyer, Michael. *The Last Days of Old Beijing*. Bloomsbury USA, 2010.
- Moi, Toril. *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. University of Chicago P, 2017.
- Ogden C.K., and I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*. 1923. Harcourt Brace, 1989.
- Osnos, Evan. *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.
- Richards, I.A. *Practical Criticism: A Study in Literary Judgment*. 1929. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transactional Publishers, 2008.
- . *Mencius on Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition*. 1932. Curzon Press, 1997.
- . *Basic English and Its Uses*. Norton, 1943.
- Russo, John Paul. *I.A. Richards, His Life and Work*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.
- Tatlow, Didi Kirsten. "For China's Children, a Resoundingly Patriotic Return to School." *The New York Times*, 2 Sept. 2016.