

More Talk about “Basic Writers”: A Category of Rhetorical Value for Teachers

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ABSTRACT: This article recuperates the notion of “strategic value,” but to new ends: rather than arguing whether or not basic writing should continue, this case study looks to one institution where it does, asking what value the category “basic writer” holds for teachers at this site. On the one hand, they confirm the existing scholarship’s critiques of the category’s strategic limitations. At the same time, they maintain its potential value when leveraged as a tactic to argue for resources for students, attempt to understand students, and articulate a view of teaching as in service of social justice. Given these tensions between problematic and productive uses of the term “basic writer,” debates about basic writing’s existence would be better served if they shifted away from wholesale critique or defense and instead grappled with more rhetorical questions about value for particular institutions or programs at specific moments in time.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; strategic value; rhetorical value; remediation; student identity

The existence of basic writing has been contentious since its inception, but scholarly debate over whether basic writing programs and courses should continue to exist at all reached a high point during the 1990s. In his 1993 essay, “The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum,” David Bartholomae introduces to this debate the notion of “strategic value,”¹ questioning the role basic writing has come to play in the curriculum and social order of higher education. He advances that, originating as part of the liberal project of the 1960s and 1970s, basic writing once served a strategic function, as a way of marking and staking out a contested space within the curriculum for students whose differences had been deemed signs of their unfitness for higher education. Yet basic writing has since become naturalized, he argues, functioning instead to sort bodies deemed “Other”—these are the “normal” or “mainstream” writers; they are the “basic” ones—while erasing rather than engaging productively with class and race differences,

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with the tensions around those differences, and with the challenges they might otherwise make to the social order of higher education. Calling for a more productive engagement with such differences, Bartholomae concludes, "I'm not sure more talk about basic writing will make that happen" (21).

Directly responding to Bartholomae, Karen Greenberg defends the value of basic writing, arguing that its sorting of students is in service of preparing them to succeed, that most basic writing programs effectively enable rather than hinder students' progress in higher education ("Politics"). Both Greenberg's defense of basic writing and the questioning that inspired it are fairly representative of the field's debates in the 1990s about the existence of basic writing. For critics, basic writing only reproduces society's inequalities, because some students are included in freshman composition while others are excluded, tracked instead into basic writing courses that slow down and impede their graduation and thus the socioeconomic power a degree might allow (Shor, "Apartheid"). But for defenders, basic writing challenges such inequality, empowering students by providing the instruction they need in order to develop their language skills and ultimately succeed in college coursework (Greenberg, "Response"; Collins). Central to this debate are questions about basic writing's politics and ethics, about whether it is in service of or an impediment to social justice for students marginalized by systemic forms of classism, racism, and ethnocentrism in which the academy is implicated. Also central are questions about the practice of mainstreaming—about whether and how to eliminate basic writing and place all students in "mainstream" freshman writing courses (DeGenaro and White; Gleason; Gunner; Lamos; McNenny and Gunner; Rodby and Fox; Shor, "Illegal Literacy"; Soliday; Soliday and Gleason).

What seems to have dropped away from this debate is attention to the question of basic writing's "strategic value." That is, until 2000, when Deborah Mutnick offers another defense of basic writing. Mutnick positions herself as responding not only to leftist scholars like Bartholomae and Shor, who critique the politics of basic writing from within the field, but also to conservatives, who attack basic writing from the outside in order to "reverse affirmative action, end open admissions, eliminate academic support programs, and thus resegregate higher education" (78). Mutnick argues that basic writing needs to be understood within its socio-historical context: as part of movements for social justice, including for open admissions and accompanying academic support programs. She concludes that it "can be seen as a strategic means of keeping the doors open for students" (79), especially for "working-class African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans" (69).

Mutnick’s conclusion that basic writing *can* be viewed as serving a strategic function is compelling. Important, though, is her emphasis on this function as possible, not inevitable. While her case for the strategic value of basic writing at City University of New York (CUNY) is persuasive, it does not follow that basic writing always functions in similar ways, across institutional locations and historical moments. Indeed, Terence Collins, in also defending basic writing, pushes critics to consider varied local iterations of basic writing pedagogies, programs, and structures, rather than arguing wholesale against one homogeneous entity of basic writing (95). It is of course equally important that scholars maintaining the potential value of basic writing do so for specific locations and moments, rather than arguing for a single, homogenous basic writing.

Here I follow Mutnick by recuperating Bartholomae’s notion of strategic value, but to new ends. Rather than arguing whether or not basic writing maintains strategic value, or whether basic writing programs *should* continue or be replaced by mainstreaming, this case study looks to one institutional and programmatic location at which some form of basic writing *does*² exist. I engaged practicing teachers at this institution in “more talk about basic writing” (Bartholomae 21), and I analyze their teacher talk by asking what value the term “basic writer” holds for them, specifically in relation to their particular institutional settings as well as the field as a whole. While this analysis offers needed perspective on the debate about the existence of basic writing, including basic writing programs and courses, my emphasis is on the value of the category “basic writer.” Such value is not located in the category itself, or even in its general circulation through educational and social systems, which is often problematic. Rather, value is produced in the category’s use, in how the term is leveraged by specific individuals and groups, at a moment in time, in a particular location, and with certain goals.

This research also seeks to further existing scholarship in at least two other ways. First, in focusing on one site of basic writing, my case study responds to repeated calls for attention to local rather than generalized conceptions of composition in general and basic writing in particular (Collins; Gray-Rosendale; Keller and Weisser; Ritter; Wright). It responds as well to demands for research that, rather than taking as its object students deemed basic writers, turns critical attention to the field of basic writing and its knowledge-making practices in relation to students (Gray-Rosendale; Horner and Lu; Lunsford and Sullivan; Reagan). While I ask critical questions about the “basic writer” construction that resemble those posed in this scholarship, my work departs from and develops it by exploring them

through analysis not of textual representations, but of data collected by interviewing teachers.

Not unexpectedly, the teachers I interviewed confirm the existing scholarship's critiques of the category "basic writer" and its limitations. In particular, these teachers point to the ways in which the category holds limited value for making generalized knowledge claims about students—about their struggles and proficiencies with language, as well as their cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds—especially when such claims are made across local institutional contexts. But at the same time, the teachers interviewed maintain that the term "basic writer" does hold some value. Utilizing Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactic, my analysis points to the rhetorical value of the term when leveraged by teachers in order to argue for resources for students, develop knowledge about students, and articulate a view of teaching as in service of social justice. Given these tensions—between the potential tactical value of the term and its strategic limitations, involving the varied meanings of the term across time and space—I conclude with the assertion that debates about basic writing would be better served if they shifted away from wholesale critique or defense and focused instead on the more rhetorical question of value for a particular institution and program at a particular moment in time.

THE CASE STUDY

Setting and Participants

The particular institutional setting for this case study is an urban university, a public university in California, which I will refer to as California Urban University (CUU). The basic writing program at CUU is called the "Integrated Reading/Writing Program," or "IRW" for short. The decision not to name the program "Basic Writing" is of course significant, especially for this study of the term "basic writer," and thus I will refer back to it as the analysis proceeds. Here it is important to explain that the title "Integrated Reading/Writing" refers to a philosophy informing the program's design which teachers are trained to enact in their classrooms. In short, the IRW program, implemented in 2001, puts into practice what research has shown to be effective by integrating reading and writing instruction for students placed into "remedial" courses (Ackerman; Nelson and Calfee; Salvatori; Spivey and King).

The move to integrate reading and writing instruction at CUU was made not only in response to research, but also in the face of statewide threats to eliminate remediation. Although remediation has existed within the state university of which CUU is a part since the mid-1970s, attempts to eliminate it have existed for just as long. As Sugie Goen and Helen Gillotte-Tropp explain, one of these attempts, a 1997 plan mandated by the state university system’s Board of Trustees, required that all universities in the system “reduce the number of incoming students in remedial courses to no more than 10% by 2007. This plan immediately limited remedial instruction to one year and instituted the hefty penalty of ‘disenrollment’ from the university for any student failing to complete the remedial requirement during his or her first year” (91).

Because this 1997 mandate meant that students would have only one year to complete remedial courses before being disenrolled, the IRW program was designed to be completed within one year. Basically, incoming CUU students take a placement test used throughout the state university system and, if they are assessed as needing remedial writing instruction, they are encouraged to take an IRW course rather than Freshman Composition. Whereas Freshman Composition is a three-credit course taken in one semester, the IRW program most often consists of a sequence of two four-credit courses, taken over two semesters. Students enrolled in these courses receive full college credit for the eight units in which they are enrolled and, once they complete the sequence, they have fulfilled the equivalent of Freshman Composition, only in more time and with extra support. With this support, and the integration of reading and writing instruction, most students have been able to complete “remedial instruction” within one year.

This success of the IRW program holds political significance as the elimination of remediation at CUU would greatly affect access and equity. Although the student populations that make up basic writing courses vary by region, institution, and time, those that make up the IRW program are culturally and linguistically diverse. For example, at the time of the 1997 mandate, of the students deemed basic writers at CUU, 80% spoke a native language or dialect that was not so-called standard English, 50% were immigrants, 89% were people of color, and just over 50% were first-generation college students.³ Across the state university system, African-American students have been placed in remedial courses at relative percentages higher than any other group of students for the last decade. More recently, in 2007, two-thirds of African-American and Latino students admitted were placed into remedial English courses. At CUU, the IRW program was designed in

part to protect access to the university for these students, to maintain the rich diversity of CUU.

The faculty involved in the IRW program at CUU thus have a history of responding creatively to the perceptions of literacy “crisis” that so often surround remediation—in ways that involve rethinking the enterprise of basic writing: They teach reading and writing together as part of the same meaning-making process and within the same course, and have renamed these courses to reflect their understanding of what the courses actually accomplish. They have made these changes in response to research as well as their local situation, structuring the courses to address the specific threats to students being deemed “remedial” on their campus. So teachers at CUU have a lot to offer to conversations about how basic writing might proceed in the future.

I interviewed five CUU teachers, whom I will introduce in the order that they appear in the analysis to follow. (All names are pseudonyms.) Of these teachers, the most experienced with basic writing are Laura, Zinnia Mae, and Karen. Laura has 17 years of experience teaching at CUU, Zinnia Mae has 13 years of experience teaching at both CUU and community colleges, and Karen has 19 years of experience as a tenure-track professor, “many more not counting that,” in both city college and university settings. All three have taught basic writing courses; Laura and Karen have also participated in basic writing program administration, as well as published on basic writing pedagogy and the history and politics of remediation. The two other teachers interviewed—Sadie and William, who have 14 and 18 years of teaching experience—reported less experience with basic writing but nonetheless offered their perspectives, as composition teachers, on how the term “basic writer” circulates both at CUU and in the field of composition more broadly.

In addition to undergraduate teaching experience, William, Laura, Zinnia Mae, Karen and Sadie have all taught graduate courses, largely at CUU and to future teachers of reading and writing. In many cases, this graduate teaching has included an emphasis on preparation for teaching so-called developmental or basic writing courses in community colleges and IRW courses at CUU. More so, this graduate instruction is often highly informed by the philosophy of integrated reading and writing instruction that drives the design of the IRW program and its curriculum. Not surprisingly, then, a philosophy of integrated reading and writing instruction informs many of these teachers’ perceptions of basic writing and especially of the limitations and values of the term “basic writer.”

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to discuss with these teachers their perceptions of the category “basic writer”—its uses, purposes, and effects—I collected data primarily through in-person interviews, with each interview being about one hour or more in length. I used semi-structured interview techniques (Merriam 78), which, as defined by Bogdan and Biklin, are “open-ended”; the participant is encouraged “to talk in the area of interest” and the researcher may “probe more deeply, picking up on the topics and issues the respondent initiates” (95).

To analyze the data, I used the constant comparative method, which involves comparing one segment of the data with another to determine similarities and differences (Merriam 159). Based on such comparisons, I grouped together data on a similar dimension, and then gave this dimension a name, making it a category. The overall objective of such analysis is to seek patterns in the data, arranging them in relationship to each other in order to develop the analysis.

In response to the patterns identified, my analysis is informed by Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* and the theory of rhetoric embedded in his distinction between strategy and tactic.⁴ For de Certeau, a strategy comes from a position of relative power, an established place, and operates within a rationalized system, functions as part of a strategic logic that maintains control of interactions within and through that place as well as its relationships to others. A tactic, in contrast, is more fleeting, less systematized; it originates from points without established place or relative power, seeking to in some way make use of the existing places, logics, and systems without having much control over them. De Certeau makes this distinction, in part, in order to turn attention to the tactics of everyday practices, indicating as well that, if strategies are best understood through science, tactics are best realized through rhetoric.

Though the phrase “rhetorical strategy” is generally used to refer to a range of symbolic actions, both those de Certeau calls strategies and those he considers tactics, a rhetorical action that is strategic can be differentiated from one that is tactical. To avoid confusion within my own analysis, I avoid the phrase “rhetorical strategy” entirely, focusing instead on how various uses of “basic writer” seem to operate strategically and/or tactically. In the case of the term “basic writer,” it operates strategically when used by established educational institutions and programs that, from their locations and positions of power, maintain those locations and the relationships between

them and others, including students. Bartholomae's description of the sorting and othering involved in institutionalized basic writing, then, refers to what de Certeau would call strategic action. In this sense, the term "basic writer" may have lost its value precisely because of the degree to which it has become part of a strategic logic.

De Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactic is most useful, though, in that it enables one to both acknowledge the limitations of "basic writer" as part of a strategic logic and, at the same time, not dismiss its potential rhetorical value when tactically used by teachers in their everyday lives. In the case of broad programmatic actions across institutions and time—and at the level of abstraction and sweeping argument—the term "basic writer" probably has lost much of its value. But the participants interviewed in this case study recognize such limitations and, at the same time, reported finding the term valuable in at least some situations they encounter as teachers, including in their participation in program administration. Whether the term holds value in their view depends on the rhetorical situation in question, factors of that situation including those of space and time. Thus de Certeau's work enables a complicating of Bartholomae's notion of strategic value, including a more thoroughly rhetorical understanding of value. It is also useful for attempting to make sense of the everyday practices in teachers' lives and, even more importantly, for making decisions about whether, when, where, and how to leverage the term "basic writer."

LIMITED VALUE: PROBLEMATIC USES OF "BASIC WRITER"

Not surprisingly—and particularly given the history of IRW at CUU—these teachers both share many of the same critiques of basic writing leveled in existing scholarship and push those critiques further. Teachers at CUU see the category "basic writer" as having limited value for constructing knowledge about students, telling teachers very little about students. As Laura put it, we "continue to think of [basic writers] in ways that are less than useful, to theorize . . . who they are in ways that obscure more than they reveal." Laura and the other teachers interviewed pointed to a number of problematic uses of the category "basic writer." Here I highlight a couple of these limitations to the value of the category, especially when it is used as part of what de Certeau theorizes as a strategic logic, before moving on to the potential rhetorical value of the category when used tactically.

One problematic use CUU teachers pointed to is the emphasis in “basic writer” on student deficiency. Here participants echoed critiques of deficiency commonplace in the field of basic writing (Bizzell; Gray-Rosendale, “Investigating”; Halasek and Highberg; Harris; Horner and Lu; Stygall). In part, a deficiency model gets in the way of knowing about students because it overemphasizes the ways in which students struggle with academic writing and, in doing so, obscures their proficiencies with a range of literate practices. All of the teachers in this case study granted that basic writers struggle with writing, and most saw attempts to understand and describe those struggles as an important part of knowing students, but most also cautioned against an (over)emphasis on deficiency. They were especially critical of the tendency to interpret problems with academic writing as representative of larger problems with thinking and/or college readiness.

Most interestingly, these teachers extended existing critiques of the deficiency model by pointing to the ways in which its overemphasis on student difficulties with writing tends to overshadow their difficulties with reading. Zinnia Mae explains,

“Basic writer” . . . leaves out the reading piece. I know the term “basic writer” is more prevalent than “basic reader.” But my own experience is that students at all of these levels, if they’re struggling with writing, they’re struggling with reading. . . . There are a few instances where that’s not the case, but more than 90% of the time it is. So I feel, on the one hand, it labels whole students as deficient, and on the other hand, ignores a place where they actually may be. I want it both ways.

Zinnia Mae wants descriptions which accurately and fully capture how students labeled “basic writers” *do* struggle, and at the same time, which avoid overextending deficiency to apply to all of the students, their experiences and abilities.

The potential value of the category “basic writer” is also undermined when it is used to make generalizations about the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of students deemed basic writers. For example, Laura discussed how the category “basic writer” is often assumed to overlap with certain other identities in ways that essentialize and overlook the diversity of students within the category. She stated that these “essentializing ways of looking at these students” include “overly conflat[ing] the basic writer with the ethnic minority student in ways that do a disservice to

them both, [to] our understanding of both basic writing as a construct and our understanding of ethnic diversity as a construct.” Here Laura echoes Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams’ caution against conflating basic writing with race and ethnicity (570), as well as Steve Lamos’ analysis of the ways in which basic writing students are “discursively coded as non-white” in spite of larger numbers of white students being basic writers (22). Laura went on to say there is also “some conflation of basic writers with linguistic minorities,” and a tendency to think of basic writers as “fitting a certain demographic,” as being “first-generation college students, of lower socioeconomic background.” Her point, of course, is not that the category “basic writer” does not often include all of the above students, but that “for every student who does fit” the above demographics, “there’s one who doesn’t.” She emphasized, “It’s just so much more variable than that, it’s so much more variable.” And, when the category is used in ways that ignore such variation, its value for understanding students is limited.

More importantly, conceiving of students in ways that ignore the complexity of their cultural backgrounds, of both their difficulties and proficiencies with language, affects the students themselves. When asked to describe a particular basic writer that stands out in her memory, Laura answered that “the kind of student who springs immediately to mind” is “less an example of who I consider to be a basic writer and more an example of what I think that label can do to a student.” The student, from Vietnam, has “seven different languages in her repertoire,” “is a student who came to the U.S. when she was young, had gone to U.S. schools, had never been in an ESL class,” but when she “gets to college that linguistic bundle gets tagged as ‘basic writer.’” Laura conceded that, as the student’s teacher, she could see on paper why the student was “labeled . . . ‘basic writer,’” and wasn’t “saying this is ridiculous.” Still, the student “had such a rich linguistic mix that the way the program was designed at the time could not tap into it. She had this competency in language,” but in terms of “both the label and the instruction the label entitled her to . . . Her language background was a deficit, instead of . . . rich resources to tap into.” For Laura, as well as others whose research focuses on multilingual students, a linguistic background that includes knowledge of seven languages is not a deficit, and conceptualizing it as such gets in the way of understanding student proficiency with language (Canagarajah; Matsuda; Roberge, Siegal, and Harklau). Such misunderstanding impacts students. As Laura indicated, students are “entitled to” forms of instruction that cannot “tap into” their “rich linguistic mix” and thus can have only limited effectiveness. Moreover, students are

affected by an awareness of how they are being misunderstood and labeled as linguistically deficient. Laura explained that this particular student was “keen to that,” and as the student’s teacher, Laura saw how such awareness affected the student: “It’s heartbreaking.”

While the value of the category “basic writer” is obviously limited, this limitation is in part because the meanings assigned to the term are highly localized—specific by region and institution, as well as to any moment in time. All of the case study participants made this point. Even Karen, who most strongly insisted that the concept “basic writer” has “some universal dimension to it too,” conceded that what it means is “local” and “institutional.” Sadie compared different institutions at which she has taught, cautioning against making generalizations based on local assumptions:

Basic writers here [at CUU], for example, have a pretty different set of needs than those at [a public university in Pennsylvania], and it’s important to be responsive to those, and that’s the main thing actually. It can be problematic when people are at different places and assuming that because they’re using the same term they’re talking about the same issues. . . . I guess what’s . . . dangerous about the term . . . is that any time a term gets reified . . . it loses that dimension of local specificity.

In conversations across institutional contexts, use of the term “basic writer” may involve assumptions about shared meaning, when in fact, a student deemed a “basic writer” at one institution may not be at another institution, much less during another moment in time. Sadie’s point about generalizing across institutions thus echoes Bartholomae’s concern that basic writing obscures differences among students rather than engaging with difference productively.

While talking with Laura about both differences among students and different meanings of the term “basic writer,” I asked her, “What do you think the term does tell us? If it’s so variable, what is it saying?” She responded, “That’s the 64 million dollar question. I think . . . that question is only answered locally.” Indeed, the term “basic writer” probably has lost its value as Bartholomae suggests, if judgments regarding “value” are made in sweeping ways that themselves erase differences across space, between local institutions and programs. Yet, if questions about value are asked locally, attending to the specificities of space and time, then the term “basic writer” may hold some tactical value for teachers in particular rhetorical situations.

POTENTIAL RHETORICAL VALUE: “BASIC WRITER” AS TACTIC

While the teachers interviewed for this case study echoed and developed critiques in the scholarship on basic writing by articulating many of the limitations of the category “basic writer,” they also maintained that the term holds some value, both for the field in general and for them at their local institution(s). In particular, analysis of their teacher talk suggests that the category “basic writer” holds value when used tactically to advocate on behalf of their students; attempt to understand those students; and articulate a view of teaching as in service of social justice. That this particular group of teachers maintains the term’s potential rhetorical value is especially significant given that they are working at an institutional site where “basic writing” is not even the official name of the program or its courses and where, in practice, students are almost never called “basic writers.”

“It’d Be Lovely If We Could”

Some teachers at this location echoed Mutnick’s claims about the value of basic writing to advocacy efforts on behalf of students. These teachers claimed rhetorical value for “basic writer” by describing it as a central term within arguments that groups of students belong at colleges and universities. Laura, for example, maintained that the term “basic writer” can be leveraged in order to advocate for students, to create space for them within higher education:

I think it’s created a space on college campus for students who need it. . . . I still think we need . . . advocacy on those students’ behalf. And so . . . to the extent that it gives us [such advocacy], I think it’s still . . . a useful construct.

Similarly, Zinnia Mae implied there is a continued need for such advocacy at CUU by pointing to recent attempts to deny students admission and disenroll already admitted students:

Here there’s been sort of a threat to being developmental, or basic, or whatever, because . . . there’s the Executive Order, so now it’s like get through . . . or get out . . . which is all housed under this long term plan to get rid of remedial education here at the university.

. . . So it’s definitely about not wanting to let people come in, or if you don’t finish in a year, sending them away.

In the face of this immediate threat, the term “basic writer” may indeed maintain the “usefulness” Laura assigned it.

Karen claimed, however, that the term has lost its value. She acknowledged that, historically, the term “basic writer” has been used to advocate for students, but asserted that the term itself is no longer needed in order to continue such advocacy. Focusing on the history of open admissions at CUNY and contrasting CUNY with CUU, she explained as follows:

Now there are alternative models, and . . . open admissions is over. . . . There is a difference between basic writing and admissions policies, and that’s what I have to think about. I wasn’t an advocate for basic writing, you know, but I was always an advocate for open admissions. I think you can have open admissions, you don’t have to have basic writing. . . . But maybe, at some point . . . in a sense, those two things were much closer than they are now. It certainly is true, people who said, if they get rid of basic writing, they’ll get rid of the basic writers. That is true. At CUNY it was true. But I don’t see that that’s true here [at CUU], because the history of [this state university system] is different than the history of CUNY. The students are different. So that may have something to do with it too.

In contrast to Laura, then, Karen insisted that teachers and program administrators can advocate for students, open admissions, and student support programs without leveraging terms like “basic writer.” Yet Karen did acknowledge that, at least in some institutions and at certain moments in time, the term “basic writer” has been central to arguments for open admissions. She recognizes, then, that even if the term has lost its strategic value, it has at times been, and may even still be, used tactically.

Basic writing teachers and program administrators have leveraged the term to argue not only that students deemed basic writers be admitted into the space of higher education, but also that, once those students are admitted, they be provided with resources to help them succeed. Case study participants discussed this use of the term often and at length. For example, although Karen does not completely agree, she conceded, “some people I know at CUNY would say it’s been very powerful and helpful because it has . . . helped students to get . . . small classes and teachers who care about

them.” Sadie shared her view that the term has been used to get access for students to smaller classes that meet for “twice as many hours” and offer “a different type of support,” including “more focused instruction.”

Laura also insisted on the value of the term “basic writer” for arguing that students should be provided with needed resources. She described basic writing as an “enriched experience” that is “not remedial,” but that provides “additional resources” for students transitioning from high school to college work, including “smaller classes” and other forms of support:

What basic writing can be is a container for students. It can be a place where students feel seen, and heard, and known—where they can be all those things, where they’re not just a student in a class, where their educational histories, just their histories as humans on the planet, are seen as part of what we’re doing in this classroom, what’s going on in the university. It’s not seen as having nothing to do with it, or something they have to confess in an office hour when they’re in trouble. . . . It’s part of the business of what we’re doing here, [an] understanding that, yeah, I came from somewhere, and I’m moving here, and let’s translate. And this is kind of the place to do that, and there aren’t a lot of places on a college campus where that happens. . . . It serves as emotional as well as academic support for them.

Laura went on to state that, “I’m not ready to dismiss or do away with . . . the concept . . . the protections that it offers.” These “protections” include the range already mentioned: smaller classes, longer amounts of time in those classes, enriched emotional and academic support, and at least some protection from disenrollment. Laura concluded, “I worry if we do away with that concept then we do away with the protections. . . . I mean it’d be lovely if we could have those protections without the . . . term.” Thus for Laura and others, the term “basic writer” is limited and conflicted, but still one to be held onto in situations where it maintains rhetorical value for tactically advocating on students’ behalf.

“If People Keep Talking Long Enough”

These teachers also pointed to the potential rhetorical value of the category “basic writer” within attempts at invention, at developing knowledge about students. Admittedly the results of such attempts have been less

than perfect: all of the teachers interviewed for this case study recognized limitations to the value of the term “basic writer,” *especially* for constructing knowledge about students. In fact, rather than claiming that the term has value in pointing to propositional knowledge—something that can be known about students termed “basic writers”—teachers see the term as one they may use tactically when faced with what they do *not* know about their students.

William explained the emergence of the term “basic writer” as “a response to unexpected performance,” to the “writing of students not previously in college.” In other words, when teachers confront student writing they do not expect, and thus do not know how to understand much less respond to, they make use of terms like “basic writer” in the process of trying to make sense of the unexpected performance. While such attempts at understanding can be accompanied by a range of affective responses, for William, “basic writer” is one of a “vast array of labels teachers use to deal with being overwhelmed” by the unexpected. Zinnia Mae further explained the same sort of teacher frustration:

I feel like sometimes the conversations that happen around a basic writer are born out of a teacher’s frustration about not being able to help that student. . . . So when the teacher talks about it, it’s about what the student didn’t do, or couldn’t do, and it often feels . . . very aggressive. But I really think it’s the teacher’s frustration because they don’t know what . . . to do to help that student accomplish whatever they’re trying to get them to accomplish.

In exploring the ways teachers sometimes use the term “basic writer” out of such frustrations, Zinnia Mae made clear not only that the label points to what teachers do not know, but that this lack of knowledge is often due to a lack of preparation for teachers themselves. Indeed, teachers may at times be no more prepared for their basic writing classrooms than their students are presumed to be, and a developing body of literature uses the term “basic writer” to acknowledge this need for improved training of teachers (Goen-Salter; Troyka and Goen-Salter).

Yet, in the face of not knowing how to effectively assist students, many teachers use the category “basic writer” to attempt to better understand their students by identifying patterns among students. William, in answering a question about what he sees as the purposes of the term, included this function: “Every label is a strategy for understanding patterns. So when we

categorize students as basic writers, we're saying they have some things in common, and it's useful to look at those patterns. That is why comp instructors and researchers [use the term]." For William, the term "basic writer," like any category, is a way of grouping together different objects—in this case, people, or more specifically, students—based on similarities. The point of such categorizing of students is to improve teacher understanding of patterns in student writing. William recognized the dangers of such categorization, stating, "Again, [it's a] potentially useful term to talk about patterns, but if you become too wedded to the term, and use it to hide from rather than look at the students in front of us, then it's useless." In spite of this caution that the term "basic writer" becomes "useless" once it becomes part of a strategic logic, William made clear that individual teachers may use it tactically in order to develop understanding of patterns in their own students' writing.

The term is also used as an approach to invention by the larger field of basic writing, by teachers and researchers attempting to understand patterns across students in different locations. In this way, basic writing teachers and researchers have categorized themselves as much as they do students: to the degree that they have participated in the creation of basic writing as a subfield of composition, they have designated themselves as basic writing teachers, scholars, and, in some cases, programs—have grouped and organized themselves together with the intention of advancing their understanding of students. While participants in this study recognized the problems with generalizing across institutions, as previously pointed out, they also acknowledged the value of generalized terms for organizing areas of study. Zinnia Mae explained as follows:

Because I'm doing research the past couple years, I'm really beginning to understand why it's important to have uniform terms, so you can look at all research in an area. When there's this variety of terms, it's really hard because [you] may not know a term means the same thing, so you miss a whole area of literature or knowledge that's come before. So I can appreciate getting a term and sticking with it. . . . I'm beginning to change my orientation to some of the terms. Like [with] "basic writer," I pointed out some of the ways that it's lacking, and it's not even a term I use—I would never describe my job as working with basic readers and basic writers. And even though it's not something I've taken into my heart, it can help us to learn more about our profession, and what other teachers are doing, and our students.

While she may not use the term “basic writer” to conceptualize or describe her own students and teaching, she sees how the term helps to organize a subfield of study in order to develop and locate knowledge about students, teaching, and learning.

Other teachers went further in assigning value to the term “basic writer” for organizing a field and developing knowledge. For instance, echoing George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk’s account of basic writing’s influence,⁵ Sadie stated that use of the term “basic writer” to organize the subfield of basic writing has been one of the most important developments within the larger field of composition:

I think the basic writer has actually allowed the field to develop in one of the most important ways it has. You know, paying attention to student writing as central to what we do comes out of thinking about how to better help basic writers. So I really see the trajectory of composition emerging out of that. . . . That’s the orientation that I have. . . . What’s important to me is student writing and paying attention to it. So I think [basic writing] has actually enabled the field, and made the way for more issues in a lot of ways, [made it] much richer, [with] much more going on. [There’s] always a danger of getting away from what students are doing in the class. So in some ways basic writers sort of ground or give center to the field.

I asked Sadie how this focus on basic writers grounds and gives center to the field any differently than a focus on student writers in general would, and she answered that the difference is “because their needs are more pressing, the demands are more visible . . . and they need to be accounted for. I think also it’s humbling in a way, for people to think how hard it is to write, for everybody, and how hard it is to teach people to write. Even if you’re good at writing, it’s still very difficult to teach people how to write.” Sadie’s response points to the ways in which basic writing teachers, when faced with the difficult and humbling task of teaching writing, have responded by using the term “basic writer” to organize a field within which the focus is on improving teaching by learning from student writing.

Yet the creation of such professional spaces is not without problems for, as previously discussed, the term “basic writer” *is* of limited value for making generalized knowledge claims about students. Teachers actively engaged in the field of basic writing, therefore, need to be creative in their uses of the term to address this limitation—for example, by continuing to

develop new local descriptions that attend to the ways in which its meanings are varied and specific by region, institution, and time. I have noted Sadie's caution against people from different institutions assuming they mean the same thing simply because they use the same term. More importantly to my point here, though, she followed this caution by clarifying, "But I think if people keep talking long enough, they'll get to the differences and be able to deal with that." In contrast to Bartholomae's questioning of whether "more talk about basic writing" will lead to more productive engagement with differences (21), Sadie seemed to say that, so long as basic writing teachers keep their professional conversations going, they will be able to attend to localized differences.

"Champions for the Underdog"

Further, professional conversations around advocacy for students deemed "basic writers" invoke the term as teachers and administrators articulate an internally persuasive view of themselves as heroic figures. (Del Principe 76; Gunner 31). Zinnia Mae commented directly on this view of teachers, stating "in other institutions, faculty see themselves as like champions for the underdog, teaching basic writers." Teachers at CUU like to see themselves in similar ways, according to Zinnia Mae, so much so that they will hold on to outdated misinformation about changing student populations in order to not disrupt that view of themselves: "But the other part of it is who we see ourselves as, not only [CUU] but as faculty members. We see ourselves as serving this nontraditional student population, supporting these working adults, lots of things that we are proud of. [We are] resistant [to] letting go because we like that picture of ourselves and our institution." In a sense, then, the term "basic writer" has value for teachers who use it to argue for a view of themselves as serving and advocating on behalf of educationally, socially, and/or politically marginalized groups of students.

Laura also pointed to this value of the term "basic writer" in relation to movements for social justice:

I have mixed emotions about the term. We've re-termed it. At first, it was a revolutionary term, a movement, born out of social movement, along with other student protest movements for social justice. And so it has a social justice [element] in the term itself. And I'm really, as a field, proud of that. We've come to critique it

now . . . we’re no longer innocent. But we certainly have that history, and it’s a proud history.

On the surface, teachers using the term to create this internally persuasive view of themselves may seem questionably self-serving. Yet, considering the ways in which teachers at CUU discussed their struggles and the struggles of the field in attempting to better understand and teach students, another way to view such a rhetorical move is as a necessary form of self-maintenance. Perhaps teachers have needed to persuade themselves that they are “champions for the underdog” in order to persist and remain committed to difficult work in the face of institutional, disciplinary, and even societal pressures to turn their attention away from students designated as basic writers. In this way, the construction “basic writer” holds value for teachers who have used it in order to continue the work of teaching.

TOWARD THE FUTURE OF BASIC WRITING: CONTINUING TO THEORIZE

Ongoing conversation is central to maintaining the work of teaching in service of social justice and for attending to the problems with using the term “basic writer” in the process. As Sadie pointed out, teachers and scholars who “keep talking long enough” arrive at and have the opportunity to “deal with” differences in their uses of “basic writer.” In fact, continued use of the category “basic writer” to organize a subfield with its own conference, journal, listserv, etc. may be what allows such conversation. Laura explained how the term still serves the field in this way:

I also think it has its usefulness in our professional discussions to continue to theorize. I think we still need a conference on basic writing, journals dedicated to basic writing. I still think we need to talk about students. . . . We still need descriptions like Shaugnessy gave us in *Errors and Expectations*. She began to describe a new population of learners. . . . They’re not so new anymore, but they’re new every year. I think we continue to need local descriptions. . . . You know, twenty years ago, we were about the universal descriptions, and now I think what we really, really, really need is, to be pointed out in our journals, and to be pointed out in our conversations, how variable the description is.

Use of the term “basic writer” to create professional spaces—a conference, journal, and listserv—may seem more strategic than tactical and, in a sense, it is. Yet this move to create space must be understood within the larger context of the field of composition. For instance, in what is often presumed to be the field’s flagship journal, *College Composition and Communication* (CCC), research and scholarship focused on basic writing is rarely highlighted. In fact, when Kelly Ritter’s “Before Mina Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale, 1920-1960” was published in September 2008, it was the first CCC abstract since December 2002—and the first title since May 1996—containing the words “basic writing.” I do not mean to suggest that the field of composition as a whole has become hostile to scholarly work on basic writing, but rather that the field as a scholarly space is one in which the concerns of teachers whose everyday lives are focused on so-called basic writers are not prioritized. As such, “more talk about basic writing” is less a strategic move to maintain power and more a tactical one to find room within and navigate the field’s own power dynamics. By holding the tension between the limits and the possibilities of the term “basic writer” suggests a more productive way of engaging debates about basic writing’s existence for programs and as a concept. Rather than focusing our energies on sweeping arguments for or against its existence, we might instead think rhetorically about when and how to locally leverage the term “basic writer” so as to highlight the need for advocacy on behalf of students or even teachers, and deliberate when and how it might better serve our purposes to complicate and qualify the term or avoid it entirely.

For example, in conversations within the field, we might ask: When and how can scholars and researchers use the term to continue developing and questioning our understanding of the range of students to whom it is applied and how to most effectively teach them? As teachers within graduate training programs, how can we use the term to introduce existing scholarship and research, while also acknowledging its limitations and encouraging critical thinking about its use? As program administrators and teachers advocating for support programs and other resources for students, when and how should we leverage the term when arguing within the field for one form of change or another? Of course, asking questions like these, which emphasize varied and local uses (or not) of the term “basic writer,” raises another set of problems to grapple with. As Otte and Mlynarczyk caution, the conclusion to Michael Apple’s *Cultural Politics and Education* is “tellingly titled”—“It Ain’t All Local”—and attending only to the local is a mistake made especially by educators and scholars who, like those interviewed for this study, want to

view their work as in service of social justice (74). The challenge facing such teachers and scholars is to ask when and how to tactically deploy the term “basic writer” in local rhetorical situations while also taking into account the broader social, political, and educational concerns that shape and are shaped by local situations and uses.

Especially challenging are the conversations that extend basic writing beyond the spheres of teachers’ scholarship and agency. When and how, for instance, do we leverage the term “basic writer” to defend or revise programs faced with university and/or state-wide budget cuts, threats to change admissions standards, and calls for the elimination of “remedial” programs (Goen-Salter; Rose)? Here, too, we meet the need for caution with our language and definitions. We recognize that the field’s hesitation to generalize has “militated against the development of a united front in defense of [basic writing]” (Otte and Mlynarczyk 70). Though I am not suggesting a united front in defense of basic writing at each turn, in every situation—quite the opposite—the point stands. As the teachers in this case study acknowledge, the term “basic writer” is ripe with definitional limitations. Yet, even as the term should not be used in strategic ways that problematically generalize, there may be situations, moments in time, when it makes sense to tactically use it in order to enter public conversations in hopes of impacting institutional and policy decisions. Susan Marie Harrington and Linda Adler-Kassner rightly assert, “Our internal debates about the nature of basic writing are exciting, but political exigencies challenge us to formulate a clear statement of purpose” (8). Suggestively, though, Harrington and Adler-Kassner found themselves unable to develop such a statement.

I suggest that, instead of working toward a united front, or a clear statement of purpose, we ask of each exigency—within or beyond the field—the questions raised here about when and how it makes sense to tactically leverage or not leverage the term “basic writer.” How we answer such questions will necessarily vary based on the local rhetorical situation—who we are, whom we address, with what purpose, and in what context, including the broader contexts that we must also attend to. But in each case, our tactics should be more rhetorically effective if we at least ask them.

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Notes

1. Bartholomae earlier questions basic writing's strategic value in 1992, in a keynote speech at the Fourth National Basic Writing Conference (Mutnick 76).
2. Here I hope to echo Lisa Delpit: I speak not of how I believe things should be, but of how they are.
3. All of these statistics are from published sources, but I avoid citing them to protect the anonymity of research participants and in accordance with Institutional Review Board protocols for the M.A. thesis research on which this study is based.
4. For other uses of de Certeau's work on strategy and tactic, see Paula Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* and Linda Adler-Kassner's *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*, both of which have informed my own understanding of de Certeau.
5. See, for instance, their discussion of the influence of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* as going "well beyond basic writing to composition, English studies, WAC, pedagogy, literacy, and language studies" (11).

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