

Self/Portrait of a Basic Writer: Broadening the Scope of Research on College Remediation

Emily Schnee and Jamil Shakoor

ABSTRACT: This article explores one basic writer's evolution as he moves from the lowest level of developmental English at a community college to graduate with a Bachelor's degree. Combining personal narrative, essay excerpts, and textual analysis, this piece aims to expand the borders of scholarship in composition studies to include basic writers as co-authors. In painting an intimate and detailed portrait of one student and his writing, we hope to broaden the scope of what counts as research on college remediation, add texture and complexity to the debate over what it means for basic writers to journey towards academic success, and contest the notion that developmental education is a detriment to students. We conclude with reflections on the lessons learned from paying close attention to the college experiences of one basic writer.

KEYWORDS: college remediation; developmental English; community college; student authorship; literacy narrative

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges came out of the shadows and gained a foothold in the national debate over the future and direction of higher education after President Obama's 2015 proposal to make community college education free for the vast majority of students ("White House Unveils"). This newfound awareness of community college parallels growing public and policy-maker concerns over low completion rates: nationwide just one quarter of community college students graduate in three years (Juszkiewicz; National Center on Education and the Economy; Snyder and Dillow). While the causes of the low community college graduation rate are myriad and varied, students'

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lack of academic preparation and their subsequent placement into required remedial¹ classes are often cited as a primary factor in low retention and graduation rates². The critics of college remediation, relying on a number of widely cited large-scale quantitative studies that examine the impact of remediation on students just above and below the cut-off score, contend that mandatory placement in developmental education impedes students' progress to degree (Bailey; Calcagno and Long; Complete College America; Mangan; Martorell and McFarlin). This current attack on college remediation, articulated as concern over student outcomes, is only the latest iteration of a decades-long assault on basic writing that has been well documented in the pages of this journal (Otte and Mlynarczyk; Smoke "What is the Future?"; Weiner).

Yet the national movement against developmental education sits in uncomfortable tension with the experiences of many basic writing students. Beneath the torrent of media pronouncements and policy initiatives aimed at ending college remediation, the almost eight million community college students who attend our nation's two-year institutions remain largely invisible, reduced to a series of disheartening numbers and statistics. What gets lost in this highly contentious, politically charged debate are developmental students themselves—their stories, voices, and perspectives. In this article, we attempt to provide answers to questions posed by Trudy Smoke more than a decade ago: "What about the students? What do they think? How are they affected by this important debate?" ("What is the Future?" 90). To do so, we explore one basic writer's journey, told through his retrospective narrative and analysis of his college writing, as he moves from the lowest level of developmental English at a community college to graduate with a Bachelor's degree. In painting this portrait, we aim to broaden the scope of what counts as research on college remediation (beyond and beneath the numbers); expand the borders of authority and authorship in scholarship on basic writing to include student writers; and contest the notion that developmental education is a detriment to students.

METHODOLOGICAL STANCE: MOVING FROM PARTICIPANT TO RESEARCHER

This article grew out of a mixed-methods longitudinal study that explored 15 community college students' experience of remediation in the context of a first-semester learning community. The study focused on students' perceptions of their placement in the lowest level of developmental English

as well as the potential of learning communities to enhance students' experience of remediation (Schnee). Jamil was one of the research participants; Emily was one of the principal investigators (and the instructor of the first developmental English class Jamil took). Though Jamil is demographically similar to many students placed in basic writing at our college³—and to those participating in the original study as well—over the course of three years of ethnographic interviews, Jamil stood out in several ways: his five year trajectory from the lowest level of developmental English to a Bachelor's degree; the astute reflections he offered the researchers on his experiences in higher education; and, most significantly, his absolute conviction that remediation was essential to his college success. Jamil knew little of the controversy surrounding the future of college remediation, yet his outward story seemed to epitomize a remarkable defense of basic writing.

Rather than more research aimed at documenting the failures of remediation, we believed it would be important to consider what we could learn from one success. As his former teacher, Emily wondered what a retrospective review of the essays he produced over five years in college might reveal about the development of Jamil's writing skills. The questions that framed our collaboration were: What might be learned from inviting Jamil to write the narrative of his college experiences, through remediation and beyond, *in his own words and from his perspective*, as part of a collaborative inquiry into his development as a writer? Would close examination of the essays he wrote over his five years as a college student—and the retrospective narrative itself—confirm or complicate Jamil's or Emily's reflections on his journey? What might this in-depth portrait add to the increasingly polarized and politicized debate over the future of basic writing? And might our experiment in co-authorship work to broaden the parameters of scholarship in basic writing?

This project also grew out of Emily's deep desire—after years of solitary work conducting the longitudinal study on developmental writers—to engage students more powerfully and equally in research, writing, and their own self-representation. What began as a somewhat impetuous comment (“We should write an article together!”), made during the final ethnographic interview of the longitudinal study that precipitated this piece, has evolved into a multi-year collaborative experiment on writing across genre, positionality, and difference⁴. Inspired by autoethnography's “rich tradition of critical self-study” and commitment to “relational ways of meaning making,” we framed our exploration of Jamil's experience as a dialogic inquiry (Sawyer and Norris 2-3). Thus, we locate this piece at the epistemological

crossroads of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot), narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly; Richardson), and critical participatory research (Fine; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, and Jackson). From these rich and disparate traditions, we borrow a commitment to the nuance of individual lives, the power of stories to create meaning, and the urgency of engaging research participants in constructing knowledge for social change. While we write in the tradition of composition scholars whose work challenges hierarchical pedagogical practices and positions undergraduates as co-authors of their own educational experiences, our intent is not to explore neither contest what happens in classrooms, but rather to enact the principles of dialogic pedagogy as much as possible in our research endeavor (Freire; Grobman; Tayko and Tassoni).

We are keenly aware of the potential inequalities in student-faculty co-authorship, particularly in which the student is both “study participant” and “co-author” (Fishman and Lunsford qtd. in Grobman 181), yet we embrace the challenges of this “experiment in writing across differences” based on the trust developed over our now almost ten year friendship (Lico and Luttrell 669). Though several decades of age and experience—as well as differences in gender, education, and social class—separate us, our collaboration is rooted in deep respect, genuine affection, and a shared propensity for brutal honesty. In hindsight, it’s clear that our collaboration unofficially began in Jamil’s first semester of community college. During walks back to Emily’s office after class, Jamil taught Emily a thing or two as he dissected his experience of remediation with her. Later, as a participant in Emily’s longitudinal study, Jamil was a key informant whom Emily engaged in frequent member checks to test the interpretive validity of her emergent findings (Guba and Lincoln). His wise and penetrating analysis of his college experiences led to new understandings of the research data and inspired this piece. Thus, we view our collaboration as a longstanding balancing act in which we combine our different strengths—Jamil’s insider standpoint and Emily’s researcher lens—to depict one student’s experience of college remediation. Over time, we have accepted the validity of our different voices and perspectives and “work[ed] diligently and self-consciously through our own positionalities, values, and predispositions” to offer scholars of basic writing this collaborative rendering of one young man’s complicated and textured journey from basic writer to college graduate (Fine 222).

To produce this essay, both authors analyzed all available data from the larger study—a sampling of Jamil’s writing (eight drafts of the only essays he saved) composed over the course of his five years in college, five semi-structured interviews conducted over the three years of the previous study,

quantitative data collected from institutional records, as well as a series of dialogic interviews conducted as the co-authors worked on this article and Jamil composed his retrospective narrative—and pooled our analyses to write this piece. We each had multiple opportunities to read, revise, and re-think every section. Though we began our collaboration with a general sense that remediation was a positive experience for Jamil, we did not have pre-determined hypotheses that we set out to prove. Rather, we employed a grounded theory approach to data analysis, letting our questions and Jamil's evolving narrative guide the telling (Glaser and Strauss). As we reviewed and discussed the data and wrote our ways into this piece, the central themes emerged: For Jamil, remediation was a tremendous asset that provided him a foundation of confidence and skills necessary for future academic success. Further, his strong motivation played a crucial role in his ability to benefit from developmental education. Exposure to academically rigorous courses and experiences, particularly in an intensive summer “Bridge to Baccalaureate” program, were pivotal to Jamil's decision to transfer to a four-year college. And, perhaps most critically, in this era of “quick fix” approaches to remediation, our findings highlight the significance of *time* to the development of Jamil's writing abilities, including the need for a long view of students' writing development that moves beyond basic writing and composition courses into the disciplines.

Single Case Research in Basic Writing

Scholarship on basic writing has a strong history of single student case studies (see Buell; Pine; Roozen; Smoke “Lessons”; Spack; Sternglass “It Became Easier”; as well as Zamel and Spack as exemplars of case study scholarship in composition). However, few of these studies directly engage the student-participant as a partner in setting the research agenda, analyzing data, or co-authoring the findings of the research. Our collaboration builds from and extends the case study tradition, eschewing traditional modes of researcher interpretation in favor of self-representation whenever possible. Further, despite an upsurge of interest in undergraduate scholarship in the field of composition, we found few published studies in which a basic writer served as co-author. Thus, we concur with Leary's assertion that “students' voices have not been adequately included in the conversations that are happening about them in composition studies” and write, in part, to fill this gap in the literature (94). Our intent in this piece was to engage Jamil in the public debate over college remediation as we took readers along on his

personal journey, through the inclusion of his retrospective narrative and lengthy excerpts of writing done during his time in basic writing and beyond.

While we make no specific claims about the universality of Jamil's experience, the acceptance of case study research in composition underscores the importance of locally generated knowledge to our field and acknowledges the value (and limitations) of extrapolating from a single case. Our intent in this piece is not to argue that Jamil's experience speaks for all basic writers, but to invoke Michelle Fine's notion of provocative generalizability which "rather than defining generalizability as a direct and technical extension of a finding or set of findings . . . offers a measure of the extent to which a piece of research provokes readers or audiences, across contexts, to generalize to 'worlds not yet,' in the language of Maxine Greene; to rethink and reimagine current arrangements" (227). We hope that a close look at Jamil's experience of developmental education and his evolution as a writer will move our readers, and ultimately those who determine policy, to "rethink and reimagine" the value and future of college remediation (227). Additionally, we encourage our readers to consider this single case through the lens of Ruthellen Josselson's call for the "amalgamation of knowledge" through meta-analysis of small-scale qualitative studies such as ours (3). It is our hope that the publication of this account will open the door to many others like it, each portrait one piece in the "multilayered jigsaw puzzle" that comprises basic writing, moving our field beyond a focus on the "commonalities and disjunctures . . . [of] individual studies to larger frameworks of understanding" (4-6).

A Note on Structure

Lastly, we include a note on the unconventional structure of this essay, which intersperses Jamil's retrospective personal narrative, excerpts from his college essays, and our analysis of his writings organized chronologically—to parallel his development—around four emergent themes: *the power of motivation*, *the importance of writing after remediation*, *the value of academic rigor*, and *the significance of time*. Our decision to pivot between personal narrative, essay excerpts, and textual analysis was deliberate and a reflection of both our writing process and the methodological goal of engaging Jamil's voice and viewpoint directly in the research product. Because we wanted to *show* (as well as tell) the story of Jamil's development as a writer, we knew that his essays had to feature prominently in this piece. Our challenge was to situate these essays—which, with the passing of time, have become artifacts

of prior experience—within the contours of Jamil’s current writing and his reflections on his college experiences. The retrospective narrative, which initially emerged as a springboard, a way for Jamil to write his way into our still amorphous ambition to co-author this piece, soon became a pillar of our work. As Jamil drafted each section of his narrative, we went back to the essays and interviews produced during those time periods looking for textual evidence to confirm, complicate, or illuminate the most salient themes. We held lengthy working meetings in coffee shops, mulling over how the essays, interviews, and evolving narrative fit together (both as we drafted the original manuscript and over many rounds of revision). Emily took copious notes of these reflective conversations, which found their way into the final product as well. Though unconventional, this *mélange* ended up feeling like the truest representation of Jamil’s deep and textured experience that we could muster.

We recognize that this piece may “not *sound* or *feel* like [a] typical academic article . . .” yet we firmly believe that this rendering offers readers a more fine-grained and authentic depiction of Jamil’s journey through higher education than any sole authored piece by either of us could (Tayko and Tassoni 10, italics in original). In highlighting both Jamil’s present and past writing, and his metacognitive reflections on his own growth, we aim to counter static conceptions of students who begin their college careers in remediation while expanding the ever-widening borders of “authorship and authority” in composition studies to include basic writers in the still nascent movement of “. . . students writ[ing] themselves into disciplinary conversations and challeng[ing] faculty/scholar-constructed representations of them” (Grobman 176-77).

JAMIL’S JOURNEY

Taking “Another Shot at School”

To begin, we invite our readers into the first section of Jamil’s retrospective narrative in which he introduces himself and describes what led him to enter higher education in 2008 after spending several years out of school.

A few months after dropping out of high school in 10th grade, I earned a GED, but it would be nearly two years before I walked through the gates of community college. My mother, being severely undereducated and suffering from crippling anxiety, never had the ability to support my academic growth; growing up in a

ghetto, with peers that did not offer any intellectual stimulation, dampened my ability to develop socially and led to a kind of seclusion from the rest of the world; finally, around the age of sixteen, I was experiencing symptoms of Tourette's Syndrome which made it increasingly difficult to do well in school and eventually led me to drop out one year after diagnosis. After leaving high school, I hit an all-time low—my medical issues intensified and I felt an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. My situation became more desperate when I started abusing drugs. I lost precious friendships and, in an attempt to combat loneliness, began to associate with others similar to me—high-school dropouts on a downward spiral. For a little over a year I was only semi-conscious of myself and the world outside of my bedroom; the majority of my days consisted of inebriation, watching television, and playing hours upon hours of video games. Any hope I had for ending the cycle of poverty I was born into was quickly fading; I began to experience suicidal ideation and endured breakdowns.

Sometime around February 2008, I decided I needed to transform my life. This would not come easy; in order for me to successfully change it was imperative to rid myself of addiction and the people I was associating with. Out of great desperation, I applied to work as a camp counselor a long distance from New York City—a kind of rehab incognito. By the end of the summer, I was no longer in the vice-like grip of addiction and I had even stopped smoking cigarettes. My medical conditions significantly subsided and for the first time, I befriended decent people—individuals who were in college and experienced the better side of life. The time I spent working at camp served as a catalyst to develop new social skills, confidence, and clarity. I was ready to take another shot at school.

Theme 1: The Role of Motivation – “An Enduring Commitment to Learning and Growth”

Jamil showed up in developmental English on the first day of his first semester in community college having already read the course text, a short novel Emily would spend much of the next few weeks cajoling and commanding many of the other students to purchase. It was not until several months later that Jamil confessed to Emily, his instructor, how frustrated and disheartened he was to have been placed in this class, the lowest level

of developmental English at the college and how much he “did not like the idea of being in a classroom that I wasn’t getting any credit for.” Nevertheless, Jamil’s high level of motivation to take advantage of *everything* the class, and Emily, had to offer effectively masked how “pissed off” he was at this placement. Instead of shutting down, Jamil sought success with a vengeance, writing no less than five drafts of the first essay Emily assigned. Jamil vividly recalls this first essay writing experience in college:

Not too long after the first week of class, I was required to write an essay on a reading by Malcolm X and compare personal experiences. This would be the first time in years I would write an essay and the first time I had ever used Microsoft Word. As I look back at a hard copy of this essay, I find each page flooded with comments. For starters, I titled the page “Malcolm X,” the writing was not in the required MLA format, and there was no heading. After learning of all of these mistakes I remember thinking to myself: “If I didn’t know to write a heading, there must be so much more I need to learn.” I became more determined to develop my writing and overall academic skills.

Despite Jamil’s strong motivation and ambitions for himself as a writer, his score of 4 (out of a possible 12 with 8 the minimum for passing) on the university’s writing assessment test was what landed him in developmental English. Such low scores are not unusual for students who, like Jamil, have been out of school for several years and have done little to no writing in the interim. However, with hindsight, Jamil is quick to acknowledge that he “definitely needed a remedial course” and Emily concurs. Early in our collaboration, as we begin to compose this piece, Jamil looks back at the essays he produced in that first semester and categorizes his writing as “simple, not [having an] expansive vocabulary, not much original thought or argument, [having] awkward wording.” Though he is characteristically harsh with himself in this assessment of his writing, Jamil and Emily agree that his ideas were strong—the “content was there”—and that his primary challenges in the first semester, like those of many basic writing students, were with mechanics (learning to identify and correct the very many errors in spelling, punctuation, and syntax that plagued his early essays) and grasping the conventions of academic essay structure and development.

In his retrospective narrative, Jamil describes the strategies he employed to improve his writing, which involved an intense focus on under-

standing writing conventions and a willingness to spend hours revising every essay draft:

For the entirety of the first semester, I worked desperately to improve my reading and writing ability. I carefully read all of the comments that filled the margins, spent nearly three hours a day writing and rewriting, and analyzed the style of writing by authors I was reading. I can recall breaking down paragraphs and attempting to understand what made a paragraph a paragraph. I tried to understand what it was about the content in the first sentence that made it an introductory sentence, how it connected to the second sentence and the purpose of the content in the second sentence, how a line of reasoning was threaded throughout a paragraph and how it was concluded. I tried to understand how writing worked on a macro (meaning and content) and micro (punctuation and structure) level. Draft after draft, I would use a newly learned mechanism of writing. If, in the first draft, I was advised how to properly use a comma, I would, in the following draft, attempt to write in such a way that would require a lot of comma use so that I might develop my comma placement. In a sense, my writings revolved around my ability to use punctuation. I was in the process of developing a foundation, and I had yet to develop a unique style of writing and the ability to write fluidly. I used every page as if it were a training ground for grammar instead of a canvas for expression and thought.

Jamil's strategy of using instructor feedback to hone in on understanding and correcting mechanics proved effective in producing subsequent drafts with notably fewer errors in punctuation, grammar and syntax.

Nevertheless, Jamil's attention to instructor feedback was not limited to mechanics and each draft of his essays demonstrated substantial changes in essay structure, development, and the degree of specificity and clarity with which he expressed and supported his ideas. An early draft of his essay on motivation, which began with the simple declaration: "I have learned a lot from Malcolm X" evolves, by the fifth and final draft, into a thoughtful comparison of the role of motivation in his and Malcolm X's life:

Motivation is a beautiful thing to possess, it's what helped Malcolm X change his life. An inmate doesn't just decide to pick up a book one day and begins to desire the ability to read and write. No, there has to be something that compels one to make such a drastic change in their life.

In Malcolm X's case what initiated his motivation in learning to read and write, was the lack of knowledge, lack of acknowledgement and the fact that Malcolm X was unable to communicate with the individual he had admired, Elijah Mohammed. Malcolm X had found his inability to communicate with Elijah Mohammed very frustrating, in which case this was one of the main determinant factors that led to Malcolm X's intense motivation.

In my case, "I needed to walk the grounds of what felt like hell", before I found any motivation. I found myself engaging in self abusive, life threatening and socially inappropriate behaviors which were getting me nowhere in life. After about four years of such an extreme and dangerous life style, I decide I wanted to make a change in my life. The determinant factor in leading to my motivation of wanting change in my life was, the fact that I knew there was a better life out there than the one I was currently living; a life that did not involve being depressed every day, one that did not involve self abuse, one that did involve disrespect towards me and others, one that did not involve addiction, and one that did not involve me worrying about coming home to a safe environment, having food on the table and not being able to pay for school.

Such reflection on his academic and social background prior to entering community college and his strong motivation to succeed was an outstanding feature of much of Jamil's early written work. However, by the end of the first semester, his final essay, entitled "What is intelligence?" integrated ideas from two course texts, posed compelling rhetorical questions around which he advanced an argument in favor of the theory of multiple intelligences, and attempted, albeit clumsily, to integrate concepts learned in his introductory psychology class. In this essay he questions, "How can it be that people considered geniuses are not universally intelligent?" and goes on to argue that "the idea of having an I.Q. test determine how productive, successful, and satisfying a person's life was going to be is a complete injustice and needs to stop!" While not a perfect essay—and one Jamil later critiques as "making super bold statements which are not supported" and using clichéd references to historical figures (John Lennon and Henry Ford among them)—Emily believes that it represents a remarkable transformation for a writer in the short span of a twelve-week semester. Jamil's experience in basic writing highlights the powerful role of motivation—what he now calls his "almost pathological determination to do well"—to the development of

his academic literacy skills. As he demonstrates in the essays he composed in basic writing and affirms in his retrospective narrative, “I had come to college with determination and an enduring commitment to learning and growth.”

Theme 2: Writing Beyond Remediation – “I Learned How to Learn”

In this section, we explore how Jamil’s development as a writer continued upon his exit from remediation as he moved through freshman composition and began taking courses in the disciplines. In his retrospective narrative, Jamil reflects:

Completing all of the remedial requirements was an academic milestone—I was proud to be a part of the mainstream college population. However, the celebration did not last long; aware of my less-than-adequate academic foundation, I came to understand that conquering remediation was only one of the many battles for knowledge and success that I would have to overcome. Fortunately, as a result of good timing and luck, I was able to dramatically increase my critical thinking and writing ability over the span of a semester when I enrolled in a philosophy course by the name of Logic and Argumentation the semester before I took Freshman composition. After purchasing the textbook, *The Art of Reasoning*, I was deeply concerned about my ability to do well in the class, because prior to enrollment, I had no true understanding of logic. Fortunately, as the class progressed, so did my knowledge of the subject. The content taught in this class enabled me to better organize my thoughts, formulate, break apart and analyze arguments, and it enhanced my understanding of categorization and the meaning and function of definitions and concepts. By becoming aware of, developing, and utilizing *cognitive tools* such as methodical analysis and categorization, my ability to examine a reading or lecture increased exponentially; I developed a kind of meta-awareness of content being studied, an understanding not limited to concrete immediate material, but one that was able to grasp the abstract, such as the workings of pedagogy.

Surely enough, these *tools* enabled me to tame streams of thought and channel them into well-structured and meaningful sentences, paragraphs and pages. No longer crippled by the arduous task of

writing without decent analytic, categorization and augmentation ability, I was able to devote more time to the abstract aspects of subject matter and, in effect, deepen my understanding of concepts and issues concerning politics, philosophy, psychology, and many other areas of study. After completing the logic course, all other classes became easier to manage and do well in. Part of this was due to being in school for a year, but I attribute much of my progress to the cognitive skills I became aware of and enhanced in the logic course. In a sense, I learned how to learn.

Jamil's assessment of the importance of the logic class to his academic development comes from the vantage point of time and distance; this insight does not surface as a prominent theme in the interviews conducted during this period, nor is it evidenced in the writings he saved from this semester. However, what is striking are the changes Jamil expresses in his feelings about writing at this time. No longer is writing just a monumental challenge to be tackled and conquered on his way to the fulfillment of other academic goals but a source of deep satisfaction and pride. Just one year after entering remediation, during one of the interviews conducted for the study that preceded this one, Jamil commented, "I learned a lot in English. I wrote something just yesterday and I showed it to [my friend] and she was like, it looks like somebody else wrote it. . . . I'm really happy that now I can get the maturity of my thoughts across accurately." What began as a chore imposed by academic gatekeeping was transformed for Jamil as he assumed the mantle of writer: "I don't think I could have been more far behind than when I first started . . . and I've developed this newfound appreciation of writing. . . . I look at it as an art now. It's amazing!"

This awareness of writing as an art form can be seen in the few pieces of writing Jamil saved from his third semester in community college when he was enrolled in freshman composition. It is in this period that Jamil develops his skills as a storyteller and begins to use language in a rich and graceful way. An essay entitled "What's in a Name?: The Dimensions of a Name" begins with a carefully drawn snapshot of the embarrassment his unusual name has caused him over the years and leads into a lovely description of his birth and naming, which concludes:

"Jamil," my father said, "his name is Jamil." He had decided on the name long before my birth. Little did he know what he was getting his light skinned son into by giving him an Arabic name. Unfortunately,

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my father passed away when I turned three years of age. Not only did he leave behind a family, but he also left a name behind, an empty name, the name I bear with me always.

The essay goes on to provide the reader with an evocative description of Jamil's early memories of his Pakistani father and then attempts to connect his own experiences with those of Gogol, the main character in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*:

*I remember the scents, taste and styles of the food my father prepared when I came to visit him. I loved the dishes he made; my favorite was the chicken curry. I remember the smell of the apartment when he began to cook; it was filled with the aroma of spices like cinnamon, curry, black pepper, and cloves. My father would spend hours cooking, much like the Indian mother Ashima in *The Namesake*. *The Namesake* is a novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri, the book is about a Bengali family and the struggles they have living in America.*

It is here that the writing falters as Jamil seems unable to settle on a clear focus for this essay. He wanders through various well-told anecdotes from his own life and the novel, hints that having an unusual name can be a character-building experience, but never lands on a clear answer to his own guiding question, resorting to the obvious: "What's in a name? I encountered many answers to my question." Looking back, Jamil remembers being passionate about this essay and having a strong sense of pride in it—one that he no longer quite feels. With hindsight, Jamil accuses his younger self of being "a bit overly dramatic" in writing that his father "left a name behind" and he wishes he'd found "a more educated way to express my thoughts . . . about the social aspect of having a name that doesn't fit the face."

While this essay showcases Jamil's increasing fluency with language, particularly his ability to narrate a story with grace and emotion, structural challenges remain: he is not yet able to use the specific to illustrate a larger point, to effectively connect his own narrative to the themes of the novel, and to focus his writing around a central purpose. Ironically, it is precisely those academic skills Jamil was exposed to in the logic course that seem to be lacking in this essay—the ability to weave a strong and coherent argument out of the lovely shards of anecdote and literary analysis. It is not until Jamil is well into his tenure at a four-year college, taking upper level classes in his major, that strong evidence of the kind of well reasoned argumentation he

learned in the logic course begins to appear in his academic essays (a finding we discuss further in Theme 4: The Significance of Time).

Theme 3: The Importance of Academic Rigor – “Becoming an Academic Soldier”

While Jamil contends that college remediation gave him an essential foundation for future academic success, writing courses alone were not sufficient to prepare him for the transition to a four-year college. Jamil credits a rigorous academic summer program with catapulting him into the more sophisticated and demanding reading and writing tasks that would characterize the last two years of his undergraduate experience. His retrospective narrative explains:

One of the factors that played a role in my easy transition to a baccalaureate program was an experience I was privileged to have during my second year of community college: I was offered an opportunity to attend a summer “Bridges to Baccalaureate” program at Purchase College of the State University of New York (SUNY). The program consisted of one accelerated three hundred level hybrid psychology and literature course. Along with twelve other students, I was required to develop a ten-page research paper, read four lengthy books, and complete other assignments within four weeks. This was my most intensive academic undertaking to date.

Before entering the program, Jamil expressed many doubts about his ability to succeed in this academically rigorous curriculum, but he was up for the challenge: “I will struggle, but through the struggling, I feel like I will develop some kind of endurance for studying. I like to call it becoming an academic soldier.” In effect, this experience served as a form of academic boot camp for Jamil. His retrospective narrative illustrates how.

Prior to attending this program, I had not written more than four or five page papers, or read more than twenty pages a day. However, due to the fast paced nature of the program, I would frequently read sixty to seventy pages a night while completing homework assignments and other tasks. There was one afternoon I sat in a computer lab writing for six hours straight in order to meet a deadline. It is these experiences that enabled me to grow intellectually and enhance my ability to read and write. Important too is the fact that I was taken

out of my comfort zone. The expectations of the program were quite high and, as a consequence, forced me to adapt to performing under pressure and become aware of important strategies such as time management.

Although I received an “A” for the course, I felt that I wasn’t able to gain much momentum while in the program; I spent the majority of my time trying to keep up. There was always more homework to complete, more articles to read and writing to plan, along with workshops. Throughout the duration of the program, there were times I felt I was inadequate as a student because many of the other students did not seem to struggle as much as I did; they seemed to have stronger writing skills and were able to manage time well. During the first week I considered dropping out. Nevertheless, after evaluating my performance and identifying my weaknesses, I became aware of the things I needed to work on. I learned the importance of time management, the need to become proficient in navigating academic databases, and further developed the ability to put work over comfort. At the end of it all, I came out a more confident and prepared student.

The culminating assignment that Jamil researched and wrote while in this pre-baccalaureate program shows that he has begun to grapple with much more sophisticated, philosophical, and psychological concepts than in any of his previous writing. In this seven page essay, written just two years after starting community college, Jamil attempts to connect and compare Viktor Frankl’s ideas about existential frustration to a Freudian conception of neurosis and comes up with a cross-disciplinary explanation for the increase in psychological disorders in industrialized societies where traditional religious beliefs have largely been cast aside. Jamil describes this essay as the first paper in which he “made a conscious effort to really utilize another source of information beyond what I think or feel.” The essay begins:

Long ago in history tradition and religion were a big part of people’s lives; the practice of tradition and religion were so prevalent that dictated how people lived, thought and behaved. With the level of guidance religion and tradition offered man, it seemed to almost counter balance the loss of Paradise; man didn’t have to worry about discovering values and beliefs which made him think himself a good person, the values were provided for him . . . there was little room for what causes spiritual ambivalence

or, better, what Frankl terms existential frustration. Unfortunately for man, the foundation tradition and religion offers . . . does not support man as it once did; man has to endure the burden and suffering of making choices . . . (Italics in original).

Several pages later, this essay attempts to weave together Jamil's interest in the power of philosophy and psychology to explain the human condition and homes in on his main point:

Unfortunately not everyone achieves a sense of meaning; while being in an existentially frustrated state, man has a lot to contend with. Though there is something intriguing that often happens to man when his will to meaning is frustrated; he develops a neurosis, but not the type of neurosis which is commonly understood in a more traditional sense. The neurosis arises not from being psychologically or biologically ill, but from being existentially ill; instead of having psychological or biological roots which cause this neuroticism, it is the spiritual dissonance (existential frustration). . . . The reality of such disorders can be found in most places in the world though, most often in heavily industrialized societies . . . because of the lack of importance the countries have given to tradition and religion.

Jamil is passionate about the ideas he is explicating in this essay and he makes it known that his personal experience of ennui is driving his academic investigation of humankind's search for meaning. Nevertheless, the essay ends on a hopeful note as Jamil concludes that, "man is capable of finding meaning under even the worst conditions life has to offer. . . . Often times, it is hardship which affords us the opportunity to better ourselves; consequently rendering the old saying true: what doesn't [kill] me makes me stronger." Once again, Jamil uses a writing assignment to affirm the validity of his own difficult life experiences and his drive to overcome them.

This essay also points out areas for further development in Jamil's academic writing skills. There are surface errors in punctuation, spelling, and spacing. In re-reading this essay as we worked together to revise this article, Jamil is horrified to realize that his final draft contains different fonts: "Do you see this?!" he exclaims. "I can't believe there's different fonts!" More importantly, the flow of his argument is choppy at times and he appears to be struggling with some of the concepts he writes about. With hindsight, Jamil reveals that he is both proud of the academic milestone this essay represents and critical of its shortcomings. He now argues that one of the signs of maturation in a writer is to make smaller claims, support them more

thoroughly, and not assume the universality of one's own experience: "Just because it's true for you," Jamil states in one of our meetings, "doesn't mean it's true for the rest of the universe." He contends that in this essay he needed "to be more aware of counter arguments" and of doing more than "reiterating the concepts that Frankl introduces in his book." He claims that "there's not much originality in the paper . . . not too much critical thinking, though I thought there was at the time." Jamil now believes that at this point in his development as a writer, he did not yet have "the cognitive tools to plot out writing, instead of just going for it. I think I was just coming up with ideas as I went along. I was genuinely interested and wanted to find substantial ideas to fill up the pages, but I was writing on the fly." Despite this retrospective critique of his final essay, Jamil is very clear that the Bridges to Baccalaureate program was crucial to his development as a reader and writer.

The rigor Jamil encountered in this academic boot camp both echoed his intense first semester in basic writing (in which he spent "nearly three hours a day writing and rewriting") and taught him how to push through steeper academic challenges than he'd previously encountered in order to find satisfaction on the other side. Jamil explains that while he was at Purchase College, he "kind of like, passed a threshold where now I can read a dense article and not have to read the sentence three times over. And, writing papers now, I used to dread writing, like a paper of one or two pages. Now, it's like, I crave writing. I actually enjoy writing papers now." In his retrospective narrative, Jamil reflects on the development he sees in himself as a result of this summer program:

The Baccalaureate and Beyond program at Purchase College served as a kind of test; I had a month to use everything I was taught at community college and was pushed harder than ever before. Completing the program served as a real confidence booster—I realized I was capable of a lot more than I thought. My reading, writing, and analytic skills were further developed, and I came out more eager to complete my Associate's degree and move on to earning a B.A.

Soon after his participation in the Bridges to Baccalaureate program, Jamil began to pursue transfer to a four-year college in earnest. Jamil's transfer application essay serves as a document of his intellectual journey since starting college. Though it re-hashes some of the personal history that appears in his early college essays, Jamil has come to possess both a meta-cognitive understanding of these experiences and a fluency with prose

(despite small errors in punctuation and syntax) that allow him to narrate these experiences in a less raw and more intellectually mature light. What is most evident in this essay is that he is passionate about *ideas* and the bulk of the essay focuses not on experiences (unlike his essays in developmental English) but on what he is *thinking*:

Going into college I decided I wanted to work toward becoming a clinical psychologist. I was always intrigued by the oddities of people suffering from mental diseases like schizophrenia and disorders such as phobias. This curiosity led to me further my studies in psychology, in particular, psychoanalysis. Studying psychoanalysis I found the concept of the subconscious and the idea of a therapy tailored to it very interesting. However, it wasn't too long until I came across a book entitled Consciousness Explained by Daniel Dennett. Before reading this book, I took the idea of consciousness for granted; I had no idea of the complexities that are involved in making us conscious beings. Taste, touch, sight and sound, I was clueless as to how incredibly intricate these systems are but more importantly, how they processed stimuli to create an experience.

Jamil's essay then segues into his interest in philosophical questions ("Does a soul really exist? What is the thing we call a self or personality and what is it composed of?"), their connections to neurobiology ("How does the alteration of chemicals in the brain have the ability to change one's personality? What are the neurological and philosophical implications of this bizarre phenomenon?"), and his desire to enroll in a neuropsychology program and study the brain as an opportunity to help "people find truth and closure."

Jamil concludes this essay reflecting that what he proposes—to understand the human brain—is "a daunting task but, my interest in neuroscience only grows as I continue learning about the brain and the role it plays in the life of man, and I don't expect this to change. It's a life-times worth of work but I can see loving every minute of it." This personal statement, more than any other piece of writing, truly captures who Jamil was—his difficult past, his developing writing skills, his passion for learning, and his future ambition. Though not an easy or comfortable experience, Jamil's time in the academically rigorous summer program was pivotal to the development of his reading and writing abilities and to bolstering his belief that transfer to a four-year college was within his reach.

Theme 4: The Significance of Time – “Years to Develop”

In this section, we explore the crucial and multi-faceted theme of *time*, which was key to Jamil’s development as a writer and his ultimate success as a student. Jamil’s experiences both confirm many of Marilyn Sternglass’s findings on the importance of time to the development of students’ writing skills and speak back to the current push for accelerated pathways through basic writing (Edgecombe; Hodara and Jaggars; Jaggars, Hodara, Cho, and Xu). Time spent in developmental courses is often seen as derailing students from their pursuit of a degree, yet Jamil’s two semesters of basic writing provided him a foundation of confidence and academic skills without which he is convinced he would have “failed miserably” in college. In his retrospective narrative, Jamil assesses the challenges he faced upon transfer to a four-year college:

The expectations of writing ability at the four-year college were higher than that of the community college I attended. During my first semester, I enrolled in one writing intensive literature course, two philosophy courses, and a course in statistics. During the first couple of weeks, the volume of reading and writing I had to complete threatened to overwhelm me. The literature course required about three hundred pages of reading and two to three writing assignments a week. The two philosophy courses involved readings that were very dense, requiring thorough analysis and writings that were expected to be thoughtful and original while containing strong argumentation. What I found most challenging about completing all of the tasks was managing my time. I had a two-hour commute to and from campus, a part-time job, and not much time for study. To be a successful writer requires more than knowledge of grammar and structure; it is equally important to be able to endure stressors such as multiple deadlines and be able to manage time. Eventually, I found my pace and was able to do well.

During his final semester in college—just five years after entering community college and being placed in the lowest level of developmental English—Jamil wrote an essay for an upper level philosophy course that he now considers “one of my best pieces of writing.” Entitled “On Soul,” it attempts to disprove Socrates’ cyclical argument on the immortality of the soul. In this essay, Jamil adopts the rhetorical conventions of philosophy in order to refute Socrates’ notion that “the existence of the soul was [not]

contingent upon the living body,” reinforcing the importance of writing in the disciplines to the development of students’ writing skills. Jamil takes apart the cyclical argument step by step and disproves the assertion that “the workings of the soul were entirely independent of the workings of physical reality” by demonstrating the power of the physical world over objects, in this case a stone. In this essay, Jamil effectively mimics the philosophical tradition he is writing about, yet he still finds ways to insert his own voice: “There are physical limitations!” Jamil declares in refuting Socrates’ conception that life could follow death as surely as death follows life. He also works hard to make these arguments personally meaningful and relevant to a contemporary audience. His essay ends with a forceful assertion that “accepting this notion of death . . . has made me feel livelier!” Jamil contends that “without death, there would be little drive for one to get things done and little significance in accomplishing goals; without death, one could continue to pursue a goal for all eternity.” Jamil continues to grapple with some of the very questions he wrote about in his first semester in developmental English (the importance of human drive and motivation), albeit with a set of disciplinary tools he has developed to assist him.

This last essay of Jamil’s college career shows many strengths in his development as a writer since he began college. Compared to his early essays, his syntax is clearer and more complex; much of the essay flows quite nicely; he uses more sophisticated vocabulary; and, most significantly, he is capable of detailed, logical argumentation to prove his point. Looking back, Jamil describes this essay as the first he wrote with “near 100% intention, meaning that everything that’s on the paper was meant to be on the paper . . . not only in terms of conceptual accuracy, but the words and the way I expressed the ideas was very intentional.” The essay argues:

Another flaw of the belief in the immortality of the soul, is the idea that the soul can both be effected by physical phenomena and, at the same time, be independent of the laws of physics. As I have shown above, it is only sensible that the mind is a system emerging from the workings of a brain; a brain whose constituents are properly ordered and nurtured. Clearly, the notion of the mind surviving the death of the brain falls in direct contradiction with this idea. What reason have we to believe that the mind is capable of both, being manipulated by physical events (such as the consumption of alcohol) and at the same time, act independently of the laws of physics?! . . . Clearly, there is not sufficient reason (if any), to

believe the nature of the mind is an exceptional kind of entity; one subject to the laws of physics and exist independent of them at the same time.

It is interesting to note that it is in this essay, which is written within specific disciplinary rhetorical conventions (rather than in the more generic “academic” essay style commonly assigned in composition courses), that we first see compelling evidence of the logic and argumentation skills Jamil was introduced to in his second semester of community college when he serendipitously enrolled in a logic course. Jamil attributed substantial progress in his writing skills to the mental processes he became familiar with in this class, yet it is only now, several years later, that we see them emerge so clearly in a piece of writing. Jamil’s experience confirms Sternglass’s finding that “the expectation that students [will] have become ‘finished writers’ by the time they complete a freshman sequence or even an advanced composition course must be abandoned” and underscores the significance of time for the maturation of thinking and writing skills (“Time to Know Them” 296).

Of course, Jamil’s writing is still a work in progress. He continues to shy away from clear and powerful thesis statements, preferring to focus this essay around a question (“Does the soul in fact leave the body upon physical death?”) rather than a declaration of his intent to disprove Socrates’ cyclical argument (though this is what he does). Certain transitions between paragraphs are still rough, and the essay ends without circling back to Socrates’ argument, so the conclusion feels somewhat disconnected from the body of the essay. Jamil, despite expressing pride in his work on this essay, is quick to point out its flaws. He declares some of the examples he used infuriatingly colloquial, shaking his head disparagingly at the excessively graphic language in the sentence, “if one were to get his brains blown out by a .50 caliber round. . . .” He finds his reference to major historical figures, such as Jesus and Lincoln, cliché and is convinced that he could find a more creative way of making his concluding point that “death affords character to life.” Emily is struck by Jamil’s ability to retrospectively assess his own writing and believes that this is one of the most important academic skills he has developed during his five years in college.

The significance of time to Jamil’s development as a writer conflicts with both his own initial desire to move through developmental English at a rapid clip and the growing body of research advocating for the speed up of remediation, claiming better college outcomes for students who move through abbreviated sequences of developmental courses at an accelerated pace (Edgecombe; Hodara and Jaggars; Jaggars, Hodara, Cho and Xu). Yet

there are important ways in which time surfaces as fundamental to Jamil's experience as well: remediation as a "time to fail" and learn from that failure in a supportive environment; time management as key to his academic success and a skill to be learned alongside academic reading and writing; and finally the time Jamil needed to cultivate and adopt a scholarly identity.

PONDERING THE JOURNEY: LESSONS LEARNED

Towards the end of his retrospective narrative, Jamil looks back at his college experiences and considers his journey. He questions what his college experience might have been like without the support of basic writing classes upon entry:

Looking back, I'm not sure how I made it through my first semester. If it wasn't for the cushion provided by remediation, I am certain I would have done poorly. Remedial classes helped lay the foundation for my academic and professional growth and enabled me to gain my footing both in classes and in negotiating the dynamics of the college environment. Remediation provided me time to learn without being penalized for making errors along the way. In retrospect, if I did not first attend this remedial English class before taking college-level English courses, I would have failed miserably.

Jamil never desired to be placed in remediation, yet his firm conviction that developmental education laid the foundation for his future college success is an important piece of the remediation story—one that must be heard by those contemplating dramatic policy changes that will fundamentally alter who can attend college and how. Closer to home, we hope that basic writing scholars are listening carefully to his story as well. Inviting students, particularly basic writing students, to breach the gates of scholarly research is a risky endeavor, though we are convinced it is a worthy one. We hope that our experiment in co-authorship inspires others to invite students into the scholarly circle as the protagonists of their stories, the researchers of their own educational experiences. We believe that this movement towards joint authorship will not only enrich the field of basic writing research, but will help, in part, to deter the larger assault on college remediation that inspired this article. Jamil's faith in the primacy of remediation to his college success is one of the most compelling defenses of basic writing that we know. To conclude, we highlight a few important lessons that we take from this self/ portrait of one basic writer's trajectory.

Academic skills take time to harvest. Despite the national push for accelerated pathways through college remediation (Edgecombe; Hodara and Jaggars; Jaggars, Hodara, Cho and Xu), Jamil's experience confirms Sternglass's prior research that developing strong writing skills is a long-term process and that "students with poor academic preparation have the potential to develop the critical reasoning processes that they must bring to bear in academic writing *if they are given the time*" (296 emphasis added). The ability to accept critical feedback on his written work and take the time to painstakingly revise each and every draft was key to Jamil's development as a writer. Basic writing classes provided Jamil the foundational space and time in which to initially falter, and grow through the struggle to become a better writer, without the damaging consequences to his self-confidence or GPA associated with failure in credit bearing courses.

Writing development requires a long view. Opportunities for Jamil to expand his writing skills in composition courses after completing remediation, as well as in courses in his major, were fundamental to his progress as a writer. This finding underscores the importance of the writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines movements to students' academic growth and the need for a long view of students' writing development. Jamil's growth as a writer is mostly characterized by slow evolution rather than dramatic turning points, his progress best observed retrospectively through the illuminating lens of time. Though Jamil wanted to find immediate leaps in his writing after the logic course and his participation in the Bridge to Baccalaureate program, the evidence is not there. Jamil's experience belies the idea, so readily embraced by those who oppose lengthy sequences of remediation, that X or Y specific intervention can lead to immediate transformation in writing skills.

Exposure to academic rigor is crucial. Struggling through rigorous reading and writing assignments in the summer college transition program was essential to Jamil's ultimate college success. Through this program, Jamil developed a more realistic appraisal of his writing and the ability to gauge the distance between his academic skills and those he would need to achieve his long-term goals. Furthermore, the demands of this academic boot camp also helped Jamil learn to manage his time effectively so that he could juggle school, work, and a hefty commute in his last two years of college.

Transformation is "a lot to ask." Jamil's admonition that the journey from developmental English to college graduation is a "transformative process [that] is a lot to ask of anyone" must be taken seriously. As Jamil explains in the final paragraphs of his retrospective narrative:

For me, success in college meant more than simply earning a degree and respectable GPA; it was a second chance to build myself, to integrate into a different community. During the entirety of my two years in high school, I attended the equivalent of about three months of classes each year, fought or witnessed fighting almost everyday, and was surrounded by drugs and gang violence. I did not partake in any extracurricular activities: I was not on a football or track team, I was not in a band—not even a student in a class. I spent the later years of junior high and two years of high school in the streets, not in a seat.

College was a complete starting over for me. It was only as a college student that I learned the importance of timeliness, speaking properly, writing and networking. The whole process demanded a kind of transformation, one that could not be accomplished in one semester, by merely improving reading and writing skills. Over time, I started to build new relationships with students and professors, relationships that nurtured my growth as a student. Eventually, I began to speak, dress and behave differently—a seeming requisite to be given the time of day by a professor and considered by the academic and professional world. However, this transformative process is a lot to ask of anyone. The learning and utilization of these skills did not happen in a semester; they took years to develop, only just beginning while I was at the developmental level.

Jamil reminds those of us who teach basic writing that the space between the impulse to go back to school to improve one's social and economic status and what it actually takes to succeed can be very large indeed. Jamil's conviction that basic writing classes enabled him “. . . to acquire the academic literacy skills, motivation, and *self-confidence* to persevere and achieve in college,” despite the challenges, is critical to our understanding of the worth of developmental education (Greenberg qtd. in Wiener 99, emphasis added).

College remediation must be sanctioned and valued. As Emily and Jamil worked on this piece, we would often pause to share our reflections on the process of writing together. While Emily hoped to hear Jamil express feelings of pride and satisfaction in being a co-author, or even discomfort and anger at how he and his writing are portrayed, instead, Jamil has repeatedly remarked that “re-reading these experiences amplifies my feelings of . . . inadequacy, not yet being where I want to be.” While Emily was looking for

narrative closure and hoping that Jamil would feel a sense of achievement through co-authorship, Jamil ends this experience very much where his retrospective narrative begins: with a focus on the role of his background in motivating and mitigating his academic success. Despite Jamil's many outward accomplishments—he holds a B.A., is employed as a research coordinator at a major hospital, has worked as a part-time tutor in the reading and writing center of the community college he attended, and is undergoing rigorous physical training before entering the military—he reminds us that for him, and perhaps many students with similar backgrounds and high aspirations, there is always a sense of making up for lost time. College remediation, as Jamil's experience affirms, may be one of the few remaining times and spaces in higher education in which building one's confidence, while laying a previously missed academic foundation, is a sanctioned and valued educational pursuit.

Notes

1. We use the terms developmental English, basic writing, and remediation interchangeably in this article. While critics of these programs tend to use the term “remediation” in policy debates, this is not a distinction we make in this piece. However, Jamil uses the term “remediation” in his retrospective narrative while Emily is more likely to use the terms “basic writing” or “developmental education.”
2. Sixty-eight percent of community college students in the U.S. must take at least one developmental reading, writing, or math class (“Community College Frequently Asked Questions”).
3. Jamil grew up in poverty, in a public housing project, the child of a single mother with an eighth grade education. He received special education services while in public school, dropped out of high school, and a few years later got a GED. He is the first in his family to attend college.
4. In addition to the personal qualities mentioned earlier, Jamil emerged as a candidate for this collaboration because he was available and willing, unlike many other participants from the original study, to embark on the long and arduous journey of co-authoring a deeply personal yet rigorously academic piece on his experiences in basic writing and beyond with his former professor.

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