

# Who is the Basic Writer? Reclaiming a Foundational Question for Graduate Students, New Teachers, and Emerging Scholars

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*ABSTRACT: The question of who is the basic writer threads the history of Basic Writing, characterizing many disciplinary tensions and concerns. When traced to Basic Writing's beginnings as part of open admissions at CUNY, the question often links to Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations as a telling of basic writers' language deficiencies. This essay attempts to reclaim the question of who is the basic writer for Basic Writing studies by proposing to offer it to graduate students of Basic Writing and their mentors as a heuristic occasion for professional development. To de-link the question a bit from its acquired history, I critique and reframe Errors' relation to its open admissions context and to its author's intentions for informing teacher disposition and emphasizing student affect. As well, I highlight examples of student-present literature for how they model teacher disposition in view of this question, and I reference recent basic writing scholars' efforts to view students more authentically from co-constructive and race-conscious perspectives.*

*KEYWORDS: affect; Basic Writing; basic writers; community college; Errors and Expectations; Quentin Pierce; Shaughnessy; social justice; two-year college*

Recently having completed a project with a student affairs colleague, I've just spent a good part of my summer orienting myself to the research of persistence and retention, literature important for advocating for basic writers, particularly those assigned to remediation at community colleges. Authored by scholars of sociology, economics and education, urban education, and student affairs, this literature is discernibly "public facing," speaking to policy makers, administrators, and scholar-colleagues who strive for macro-reflections of the field. Professionally, these scholars teach and train graduate students, interface with Student Affairs and administration, and,

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admittedly, write impressive papers. I believe this literature is a great boon to our field's own growing efforts to argue policy, placement, and assessment, particularly from a two-year college and social justice standpoint. In fact, much of the literature on persistence and retention deals squarely with the community college now educating nearly half of all U.S. college students and a "*marginalized majority*" (Deil-Amen 136) of nontraditional students, also nationwide, and where most of our basic writers and readers, so designated, are taking their pre-college, developmental, or remedial courses.

While macro-reflections of Basic Writing have filtered my perceptions of the field for quite some time, I did not realize the extent to which intersections with policy in the scholarship were peopled with so many research-smart social science professionals, voicing many similar concerns. Some of these scholars are familiar to us, such as Hunter Boylan and Vincent Tinto; and others less so. And the extent to which many of our comp-rhet, community college scholar-colleagues have been optimizing this research toward reform proves its relevance to the work of the two-year college "teacher, scholar, activist" (Sullivan, "The Two-Year College"). In the mix, I find an interesting band of questions asking "whether" along with "why" and "how so," taking account of the many facets of incurred costs such support leverages on students themselves. Probing "whether"—whether remedial designations work, how much, and under what circumstances—as I have found, also returns critical clarities regarding the "who" of remedial identities and policies. For example, my recent dive into the retention and persistence literature has shone light in corners of what I believed were fairly developed views of basic writing cohorts, but I had never noticed *these*: commuting two-year college students who tend to prize campus events and activities in which academic and social advantage *combine*; Latinas in community college who consider the influences of their not-college educated partners as assets, not detractions; and "racial-minority commuting students," especially those from largely segregated neighborhoods, who "likely expect their time on campus to be an opportunity to interact *across* racial lines" (Deil-Amen 143-144, 142, 160; see also Zell; Karp). Here one can generalize to Basic Writing, as I do, Regina Deil-Amen's uncovering of the "traditional" college student as a "smaller and smaller minority" (136) among populations frequently steered toward remediation.

Today, as remedial designations are more critically interrogated, the "whether" questions now current across disciplines may feel stark to some instructors who have spent years of their professional lives inside the basic

writing classroom. They may confound in classrooms of graduate education in Basic Writing that approach the topic in view of history and through the lens of social justice. Problem-solving around these questions might mean permanently setting the main keywords of our discipline in scare quotes. (Think of Joseph Trimmer's 1987 finding of "700 different ways to identify [basic writers] across 900 colleges" [4]). How, then, might it still be possible to discourse students and their contexts from a *micro*-perspective, to properly see, know, and claim the students for whom we would advocate, in relation to a bracketed field?

The history of Basic Writing tells us that the question of who is the basic writer is foundational—an earmark of those conversations and debates identifying Basic Writing with the tensive politics and promise of 1960s Civil Rights movements and their retractive aftermaths. But like Mary Soliday has noted of identifications of students as basic writers more generally, it's a question in which we may find that, on some level, the actual students have gone missing. In "Defining Basic Writing in Context," Lynn Troyka observed "the matter of identity" (13) in searching out who is the basic writer makes it possible to say who basic writing *is for* and so what basic writing *does*— two keys for authority in our field. By 1987, Troyka saw the *what to do* of Basic Writing inductively linked to the *who* of basic writers as an urgent matter of disciplinary definitions. Searching needs and reasons to designate students as "basic" moved theory *past* Mina Shaughnessy's early-on, empathic urging that colleagues recognize students' capacity for the new opportunities, requiring great resources, and *toward* conceiving writing problems that might be generalizable to a national population (Troyka 13). Today the question arises in moves to combat additional limits on access and the advancement of opportunity. Given these facts, what does it mean to grasp the question in view of one of its other facets, turning toward graduate student mentorship and as a means to recognize actual students?

In this essay, I hope to make the case for reclaiming what I see as an important and tensive question for graduate students and emerging scholars in Basic Writing: who is the basic writer? New fast-track versions of writing support and college completion implicitly question basic writers, "Why are you here?" by retrospective reads of how well and soon they hit the ground running. Retention and persistence studies, by contrast, push to account for the stressors of keeping going for many college students, and instead ask, "Why *aren't* you here?" I suggest it is time to refocus our founding question to "*Who are you here?*" and "*Who is Basic Writing for?*" On some fundamental level perhaps we need to reclaim our question from an over-determined and

largely responsive history. Rich evidence of “student-presen[ce]” (Harrington 97) in the Basic Writing literature has clearly increased over the years, revealing many facets of *who*, a good thing. But as new arrangements for writing supports and their populations arise and (re)balance, who is to be included? And how do we speak toward questions we have not invited, in particular, furtive *whethers* targeting students of low-income; racially minoritized and first-generation students; and those of other non-traditional groups?

A special issue focused on graduate education in Basic Writing is the right place to re-discourse who is the basic writer, so long animating our profession, to recognize it as *ethos*, both for its troubling and advancing, and to pose it as a heuristic occasion for graduate student mentoring and professional development. Likewise, a special issue on graduate education in Basic Writing signals a recommitment of sorts. This is another turn in a unique field of endeavor, where the impetus to *story* our own profession sharply features (Adler-Kassner and Harrington)—a means to perceive and define for whom we work and what that focus means (Adler-Kassner, *The Activist WPA*). To “[start]. . . with the students,” as Shaughnessy does to begin her *Errors and Expectations* (Otte and Mlynarczyk [47]), we know, today can be read against more extensive narratives of that time and setting (Horner and Lu; Molloy, “Diving In or Guarding”; Kynard; Brown), showing “early leaders” to be “led” (Otte and Mlynarczyk 48) as well by the same politically retractive influences they disclaimed. Still, to “[start]. . . with the students” might be, in fact, one of the current moment’s best reminders to strategically resist macro-level views of students mainly figuring as *cohorts*, defined by institutional agendas and policy, and to decisively locate students’ stories at the core of “theorized practice” (Buell 101).

Having also grown in appreciation for the safe space that was my own basic writing-graduate practicum many years ago, I acknowledge situating the graduate classroom as a potentially de-limited space, one that is affectively inward-facing, as it only-sometimes may be useful to think of conversations among mentors and colleagues in this way. At the same time, it may be helpful to understand these conversations, for many if not most of one’s graduate students, as the first of their kind. Indeed, several authors of this special issue posit the graduate classroom as a space for first working out preconceptions of students wearing “basic writer” as a label. Linking the *who* of Basic Writing to graduate studies might be one course for rethinking our own part in mis- (and *missed*) representations of students, and ultimately, of our classrooms and their institutional frames. A provocative starting point, the question might be set out on Day One of a graduate seminar in order to

highlight what Basic Writing *is like*—i.e. a laboring space for understanding and impacting that definitional impulse to constantly restate the *for whom* and *what's needed in* what we do. It's also possible that such an approach might bring greater embodiment to our work—*a priori* or alongside disciplinary responsiveness to policy and institutional effects—to help ensure insightful and respectful notions of who the so-called “basic writer” might be.

Cultivating a professional life for graduate students means helping them to read the history of the field critically. Transmitting disciplinary knowledge requires nuance and, as Lynn Reid recommends, surfacing the storying *patterns* of scholarship can bring critical awareness to the helps and harms of their reproductions. As all articles of this year's special issue make clear, contentions of many stripes continue to move our field, each implying or driven by some view of the *who* and *what's needed* of our profession. Teaching this tangle, which is crucial, requires courage and inventiveness. Even so, to re-tune a question that packs in so much resonance is daunting—one, to suggest that the work is necessary and, two, to actually figure in that vital pedagogical promise. I read that promise this way: to help graduate students, new teachers, and emerging BW professionals see the long-arc-ing question of who is the basic writer implicit in and foundational to our professional intentions to account for (whom BW scholar Sarah Stanley calls) “the people in the room.”

My first step will be to trouble what we might consider an *excess* of BW history as taught and received, the version which marks and joins Basic Writing's open admissions beginnings with conceptions of the basic writer as deficient (particularly in how these conceptions lead from *Errors*). I see this work at the point of our own fault lines as BW scholars for coming to grips—or to blows—with the many assumed identifiers of “basic,” in which error has held so much sway. Next I will explore some scholarly efforts, past to present, for discovering and cultivating student presence in our Basic Writing literature, to better understand and interrogate motivations for searching out student presences to begin with. Finally, I would like to highlight some of the field's current refiguring of the question of who is the basic writer as a way to expand our sense of what it may mean to teach with and through this question in many contexts, practically and heuristically.

### **An Excess of History Tagged by *Errors***

The question of who is the basic writer threads the history of Basic Writing, characterizing many disciplinary tensions and concerns. When

traced to Basic Writing's beginnings as part of open admissions at CUNY, the question often links to Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* as a telling of basic writers' language deficiencies, an overidentification, I propose, that helps to reify deficit models. Several authors of this special issue on graduate education construct courses to include Shaughnessy early on in the semester, but do not much indicate what stance they would take on *Errors*. How, and how critically, would the text be read?

Instructors of graduate courses might want to reflexively examine the political and heuristic functioning of *first*, whether it may be, for example, to collectively recollect and acknowledge the field moving on, and/or to mark or reinforce a stasis in order to return. Another function might be to incite reading with this awareness: that carrying a text—or question—deemed foundational *further* into history is necessarily onerous, intentional, and complex. How do we decide? While origin stories can be read to explain and justify social and political hierarchies (Wright; Bernal), more critical readings interrogating origins root out these structures, seek their bases, and work toward something new. It's possible with intentional readings of *Errors* to do both: to cite the basis of misperceptions of students as error-prone, at many removes from the academic capital necessary for college success, as well as to read *Errors* as inhering early rhetoric around a still-embedded *ethos* identifying Basic Writing's social justice mission. My guess is that so highlighting *Errors* in graduate studies reaches especially for this latter goal as value—a fraught and engaging move. Yet because that mission has been argued in view of or against its too-easy, often uncomfortable associations with *Errors*, continuing to include *Errors* in graduate studies requires real field- (and self-) consciousness. Where do we go *with it*? (How) can it continue to reflect and/or incite today's still evolving Basic Writing social justice mission?

As with any iconized, well-traveled text, reading *Errors* means reading around as well as through accrued readings while holding open their distances. For one, we could take a minute to question possibly over-identifying Shaughnessy with BW purposes and fault lines that assume student identities of deficiency. Such framing puts distance between the text and later field-defining work of scholars like Troyka who saw the need to move past students in order to define the *what to do* of BW classrooms. Even in Troyka's own centering of *Errors*, "diversity" is "Shaughnessy's most consistent message" (5), according to George H. Jensen whom Troyka cites to help elucidate "the problem of definition" (4).

Perhaps first readers were meant to hear not so much the problems of students as about the problems of teaching students, or of teachers *as*

problems, who were largely white and middle-class. At some point, by marking the distance between teachers' readiness to teach and students' now-readiness to learn, the keywords of Shaughnessy's text come to stand in for the errors of the field from that portion of it doing the resisting—asking *whose error, whose erring?* Where teacher matters are the larger issue, *Errors'* read is oratory: professionals delaying the project of open admissions are exhausting the social-professional capital needed for the endeavor. "Diving In" invites and assures, while *Errors* exhorts: time for faculty to step up and accept the *political* responsibility called *teaching*. So construed, the problems of writing become instruction's missed opportunities within teaching, problems of outreach, conveyance, and inclusion (Adler-Kassner, "2017 CCCC Chair's Address"), and not of isolated error. Likewise today's community college scholars writing on assessment link institutions' undue focus on nonstandard language use in placement practices to modes of "isolation" (Poe, Inoue, and Elliot; see also Kelly-Riley and Whithaus.). In this regard, *Errors* aims larger and smaller: larger in the matter of exhorting teachers to their professional mission; and smaller in the matter of errors, which are remediable, and frankly (it feels like someone saying), beside the point. The reader who might encounter the text in a graduate studies in BW seminar is left to decide: whether to regard the voluminous attention to error in *Errors* as evidence of a long-operative (over)identification of error and Basic Writing, or of error's troubling capacity to exceed far more vital teaching concerns.

Another frame for reconceptualizing the expression of a social justice initiative in *Errors* might be in its attempt to notice and account for student affect and motivation. In this sense, it is more potently "originary"—and functional—to Basic Writing and its claims. The early era of open admissions raged with affective realities for students, not only in students' capacities as agents to intentionally turn toward or away from (Ahmed) the new opportunities, but also in the conveyed sense that they themselves were being deeply moved, or *affected*. "[A]ffective variation" (Barrett And Bliss-Moreau) in *Errors* surfaces in the non-transitive and active *to affect*, or *affect-ing*, in students' wishing for, trying, and intending, and shows again in students being *affect-ed*, in other words, moved, moving, and impacted by the political, social, and economic realities of that time. Capturing an affective conflict and struggle, *Errors* draws a circle around many *shared* drives and capacities for learning without attention to these versus those, or to which students, because of this or that score profile, merit a share in the limited supports. This is not to say that we should accept the eliding of differences (as in "all students want X") uncritically, or to allow the guise of difference

insidiously generated by data-gathering to simply slide by (Henson and Hern). Rather an affective lens links students' wanting and intending to capacity itself. By stressing student *wanting*, in view of "what all students want," that they "might accomplish something in the world" (291) and so "improve the quality of their lives" (292), an *Errors* read to resonate affect returns the focus to what all seeking students are *owed*. Off the table are key, and later, discipline-facing questions: Whatever it was, or would be, that the field might ask students *to do*, or institutionally where they should land, was not to define who students *are*—competent individuals worthy of inclusion, instruction, and resources, and who, in turn, were ready to explore the promises of open admissions. The spotlight on students arriving "at the door" centralizes *expectancy*, an affective state incorporating readiness or trust that one's anticipations will be met. Obligations adhere to such states as they simultaneously agitate for those holding, and withholding, resources and opportunities to *respond*.

Attending likewise to BW's hidden claims to affect enhances the case for placement practices that more fully align open access institutions with their stated social justice missions. Recent attention to BW's opportunity costs, disparate impacts, and "fairness as equal to evidence" in assessment practices (Gilman; Henson and Hern) hits these notes precisely. As George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk assert, early Basic Writing scholarship held the mere rooting out of error to be fundamentally offensive to the student, "an old place to begin a new discussion of writing" (Shaughnessy, "Introduction" 1; qtd. in Otte and Mlynarczyk 13), and contrary to professional endeavor. In her 1988 *JBW* article comparing basic writers at Harvard and CUNY, asserting writing "problems" to reveal shared "crucial difference[s] between. . . ways of [students] viewing their own work" (74), Cheryl Armstrong writes, "There is, after all, an egalitarianism about writing problems, and about writing potential" (78). Armstrong reflects a basic point our field has claimed—that by "looking *through* students' writing it may be possible to identify" that which "underl[ies]" (74) obvious error—in order to make more meaningful connections to (and about) the writers themselves; this is a notion in large part prior to pedagogies, processes, and the identifiers of "basic." As Armstrong describes:

Shaughnessy may be said to have launched basic writing research on two—at times opposing—paths. Investigations into cognitive processes including studies by Perl, Lunsford, Sommers, Rose, Troyka, and Hays have outlined some of the thinking strategies of

basic (or, in Rose's study, blocked) writers. At the same time work by researchers including Bizzell, Bartholomae, Epes, and Kogen has traced basic writers' problems in rhetorical issues, to an unfamiliarity with the language or conventions of academic prose. (74)

Both directions seem to strain for an as-yet unacknowledged emphasis on student affect as the "something more" of the writer-self. But rather than holding these approaches to their partial moments in history, *post*-Shaughnessy and *pre*-our contemporary critiques of linguistic essentialism, as might occur in chronological studies of BW, a more cross-sectional view of BW from a *who is* and *who for* standpoint might refocus these "[i]nvestigations" (Armstrong 74) to reflect the kind of *wondering about* students that has been a Basic Writing mainstay.

Victor Villanueva picks up these affective strains in recounting his own formation into Basic Writing studies in the late 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand, theory's tight linking of basic writers and cognitive struggle, as a chronological view of BW history might reflect (and added to "a particular reading of classical rhetoric" [Villanueva, "Subversive Complicity" 37]), supports Villanueva's sense of the racism in BW which landed these writers "on the wrong side of the Great Cognitive Divide" (37). But as Villanueva also notes, how basic writing theory and institutions have used the findings of these early "investigations" into students' cognitive and rhetorical ability does not in itself sync with the basic writers of Shaughnessy's *Errors* who work purposely and with intention—as basic writing *rhetors*—wielding language of great nuance. Under this construction, the language of the academy pales in comparison with students' expressions due to its stiffness and lack of depth: in Shaughnessy's words, "writing [that] is but a line that moves haltingly across the page" (7). The *de facto* linking of cognitive struggle, rhetorical deficit, and basic writers, Villanueva argues, owes more to "composition folks [who] got caught up with developmental schemes" (46), and suggests more about "writing teachers *in their attitudes* toward basic writers" (46, emphasis mine) than it does about basic writers (including, in this view, basic writers under Shaughnessy).

These schemes were ones to "poke fun at" (Villanueva, "Subversive Complicity" 37) for the ways they tried to capture an order for writing, either in its learning or its teaching. Shaughnessy's *ethos* was to anticipate the political expediencies and language prejudice rising from within English departments and educational systems threatened by access and, later, to form a response, or structure (administration, testing, placement), from another

institutional standpoint for counter-narrating *bone fide*.

Recent scholarship diving into the archives of open admissions at CUNY and elsewhere continues to illuminate the material and affective turbulence of settings where access seeks roots (“CUNY Digital History Archive”; Molloy, “Human Beings Engaging”). *Errors* is one artifact of that turbulence heard and felt in what Patricia Laurence, an English instructor at City College at the time, called the “polyphony of the faculty” (24). *Errors*’ foundational status makes it more difficult to hear it engaging the surround-sounds of BW counter-rhetoric since BW, focused on social justice, has been slow to claim those strains. Many teachers were vexed to observe, as they supposed, “the thick jeer” of student resistance to the necessity of “hard-core remediation” (Wagner qtd. in Lamos 64: Lamos 63-64), and they characterized students as disengaged (Center). By locating open access students at the “beginnings” of a new process-based landscape—wherein “all high-risk writers were best viewed *as the same kind of ‘beginners’*” (Lamos 67, emphasis mine), *Errors* targeted teacher affect and resistance for their capacity to bring down the house on these counts. As new “national, institutional, and disciplinary” agendas emerged around literacy in the era, an “espous[sal of] mainstream interests and beliefs” linked to “standards and Standard English” (Lamos 55) spotlights an *Errors* jutting to the sidelines of emerging discourses that were implicitly and practically racialized. Yet it drums and drones persistently to convey the frustration of trying to communicate in a fractious, intolerant milieu. There are shaming elements here: supposedly aspirational professionals needing to be reminded of obligations and standpoints that should be known and felt. “[T]his obsession with error,” “little tolerance for. . . errors,” and “the power of the F” (*Errors* 8) read as reprimands, more shameful for their coming ten years after open admissions had begun.

Because the era spans a period of promise relatively short-lived, rhetorically and practically cut down by the perceived literacy crisis of the 1970s, endpoints gain on readings of *Errors* to associate it with aftermaths and ragged yields of Basic Writing programs. This may well be justified, but as a focal point among contentions in BW, *Errors* does not appear to have exhausted its reach toward discussion points that may continue to help re-define basic writing and the basic writer now and into the future. A critical stance on *Errors* still draws questions forward, important grist for graduate students and scholarship. While becoming central to Basic Writing, how central was *Errors* to contemporary and current literacy-crisis discourse? How far do we equate a response to crisis, one stuck to its frames, with *being* the crisis? And particularly apt for this moment of claiming social justice for

potentially refiguring placement policies, what possibilities, if any, inhere in *Errors* for rethinking our disciplinary relationship to error?

Toward this last point, David Stubblefield, in his recent dissertation, locates Error (his capitalization) among major “basic practical terms that have traditionally characterized the practice of teaching writing” for “novelty” as a value, so that, when rethought, they may become “viable sources of pedagogical possibility” (4). Among these terms, Error signals discourse itself as error, or “linguistic equivocation” (5). In other words, this Error is the basis that *is* discourse in its productively erring tendencies: its wandering, cross-referencing, overwriting, and double-meaning (to name a few). Then too, as if playing out some unexpected cue, Stubblefield engages Laurence, citing her *JBW* article, as part of his argument about Error’s programmatic errancy—a concept that “rework[ed],” and was “reworking” (within), CUNY’s 1960s open admissions context. In this view, Laurence’s grasp on error and *Errors* is a grasp on Error in this ontological sense, where Error signals “the possibility of knowledge” that buoys all discursive acts and impulses. To (re)turn to “the [v]anishing [s]ite” of Laurence’s (and Shaughnessy’s) CUNY open admissions context, the Error (and not error, important for Stubblefield) in contention at that site was “the ground or meeting place for nascent ideas where questions about the *possibility* and the *limits* of normativity in the discipline flourished” (69), a term for drawing others into, and even more so to constitute, a discursive community. While seeming to inscribe a concept to define a discipline, Error (and perhaps *Errors* by extension) works “as public space where the latent theoretical and educational commitments of faculty members, departments, and divisions met and interacted” in order to ask essential, student-centered questions. Stubblefield cites Laurence for his set of these questions:

Do we believe in these students? Can they learn? Can we teach them? These were the questions that beleaguered faculty asked in the 1970s, placing the mission of the university in question (Laurence 23). [Here open] larger questions about what is and is not possible inside of the discipline’s current discourse. (Stubblefield 69)

These are some of the key questions of *Errors*.

This possible reframing of *Errors* may prove useful not only for loosening that text’s characterizing hold on students—error-prone, error-defined—

and BW instruction, but also for conveying something about the accretion of meanings once associations become linked, one to the other and as a system, as certain personages, ideologies, or contexts are also ascribed to them. Assumptive thinking leaps forward at just such times, and graduate students must be encouraged to mark and scrutinize their own student frames for evidence of similar discursive impacts. Competing readings of *Errors* and of Shaughnessy offer time and reason to question whether certain field issues preoccupy the text in the same way, toward the same priorities, as they did for some readers as perceptions around basic writers and BW grew difficult to harmonize. We may agree with Darin Jensen that the often less-than-critical treatment of *Errors* in graduate comp-rhet courses pulls toward “disciplinary history” instead of leading BW professionals to “examine [*Errors* and Basic Writing history] as a ‘living’ body of work which graduate students may need to know about” (106-107). Jensen’s read on *Errors* and Basic Writing history shows the potential of wider contexts for discussing access and language policy as these impact basic writing programs. I believe *Errors* to have rhetorical capacity enough for extending these discussions, as part of a “living body” of critical readings in Basic Writing for graduate studies by which to keep questions or *who is* and *who for* open.

### **Student-Present in the Scholarship: Still “Searching for Quentin Pierce”**

Searching the BW literature for signs of student-present narratives and building conversations around them—inviting graduate students and new teachers to cultivate their own stories—is one way to effectively locate the question of who is the basic writer past theory and into the rapport-rich relationships of emerging graduate-to-professional BW community. We will learn from first instances: to seek for students and avoid “represent[at]ions of] ourselves” (Harrington 95). At the rim of proximity to our own potential for bias and partiality, we are in stronger critical positions to shift away from ourselves and try to focus better on our students. Like any other deliberative practice of mindfulness and intention, this decentering needs referencing and modelling. Graduate students can be helped to see and experience this practice as academic early on by exploring some of our field’s key attempts to spotlight actual students.

One early iconic case study, exemplifying the inherent biases and potential in earmarking what is essentially our field’s foundational question, is the story of Quentin Pierce. As such, it has standing for how a field continues

to define itself in and through student subjectivities. In “The Representation of Basic Writers in Basic Writing Scholarship, or Who is Quentin Pierce?” Susanmarie Harrington used Quentin’s case, his interaction with teacher David Bartholomae as Bartholomae wrote about him in “Tidy House,” in light of her main concern: the lack of helpful, intentional recognitions of basic writers in Basic Writing research. What we get is Harrington reading Bartholomae reading, not Quentin, but Quentin’s essay—as only a shadow of Quentin’s intentions. This vantage point conveys for Harrington much of Basic Writing’s self-reflexive partiality, effectively overlooking Quentin. Roughly twenty-nine years after *JBW*’s inception and more than thirty years since CUNY’s open admissions, instructors saw the primacy of textual analysis of student writing for feedback, and grasped many of the reasons that students find academic writing so difficult. What was needed was to hear more of students’ voices, to extend representations of our work past those which mainly “represent ourselves” (95).

Bartholomae’s student, Quentin Pierce, was such a voice, struggling to be heard. Even so, Harrington assessed that Bartholomae could only wonder at the source of his student’s disaffection and anger, even rage. How likely was it that a basic writer, in curt sentences and expletives scrawled at the end of his essay, in a note to his professor, could *not* leave his teacher in awe of his intentions? “I don’t care. I don’t care” about this topic, Quentin wrote, “About a man and good and evil, I don’t care about this shit fuck this shit, trash, and should be put in the trash can with this shit. Thank you very much. I lose again.”

“*[A] very skillful performance*” was how Bartholomae described it (7, qtd. Harrington 94).

Harrington regretted that Bartholomae did not inquire after Quentin, did not reach to wonder more about Quentin and his intentions, rather than what was *to be done*—not for Quentin *per se*, but for students like Quentin, who troubled the basic writing classroom. To remark, she wrote:

“Tidy House,” like *Errors and Expectations*, is the story of a teacher, not the story of a student. . . Bartholomae returns to some thoughts about Quentin at the end of “Tidy House” to address the question of what will serve students—and what served Quentin in particular. . . But what we don’t see is Quentin Pierce at work, except as represented through his teacher’s reading. . . as Bartholomae noted in his initial response to the essay, it’s hard to know what Quentin intended with his text. (94)

To counterpoint, Harrington modelled thinking and disposition that was more materially-oriented and affectively student-based, reflecting *wondering* in two related ways: she modelled wondering by not only thinking more about Quentin herself, but also by imagining what more-of-wondering about Quentin by Bartholomae might look like. For example, while valuing Bartholomae's attempt to find Quentin's intention *in his writing* (with Bartholomae seeing that he simply can't), Harrington pondered: Couldn't one engage Quentin as a partner in interpreting his own text? It was right to deliberate a bit longer in the *who* of Basic Writing before head-longing into the *what was to be done*. But there was no time for this, unfortunately; propped up by Quentin's end of essay note, "Tidy House" initializes Bartholomae's new and challenging curricula: *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* and *Ways of Reading*, to which Quentin's challenge allowed a natural lead-in: "the essay had an idea—and. . . the writer called for the moves" (Bartholomae) to express it better, which *Facts* and *Ways* could help accomplish. Was Quentin's note to be read (reduced) to such a "teach me better" moment? For Bartholomae, there was little need to explore further, or to engage Quentin in a shared project of (intentional) investigation. Apparently a better book, a better plan for writing, reading, and connecting, would help students like Quentin as well as safeguard the basic writing classroom from such errant surfacing of affect in the future.

Today, Quentin's "performance" might be addressed by affect studies which look to uncover as-yet unassimilated emotions and energies such as arise in the peripheral spaces of a basic writing setting rife with affective *stuff*. It is here between and among subjects that responses to material and social constraints make their impact. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe affect as the "*forces of encounter*" (2, 3) or "shimmers" that "[arise] in the midst of *in-between-ness*, . . . imping[ing] or intrud[ing]" (1, 2) upon "bodies and worlds" (1), conveying an experience of something *other* imbuing it. Andrew Murphie draws on Felix Guattari's pinpointing of the concept: affect is what "make[s] up the relations within the temporary worlds we are constantly creating, and by which we are constantly being created. . . the complexity of the world in movement." Therefore, "Affect is much more powerful and central than we might have thought"; and so, it is crucial to culture (and not only to culture), but also "crucial to our relations, conscious, unconscious or non-conscious, as well as our sense of place, our own and other bodies. . . and to larger questions" of social and political being. This is not to say that Quentin's complexity of affect was a text to be mined; rather, as a quintessentially relational attribute, it suggests Ahmed's point

of a “turn[ing] toward” (31), a potential within and for relationship. Despite this, Quentin’s affect is treated more as “attitude,” an attribute ascribed to *individuals* and which here, in this case, sourly incurs upon the classroom. Basically, it is all we get of him in Bartholomae’s rendering. What’s more, we are implicitly cautioned to see Bartholomae as a target (and that we could become targets too). Thus isolated, affect’s as-yet unassimilated standing in this BW classroom calls attention to the *who* and *what more of* Quentin that there remains to be understood.

By contrast, in 1999 Marilyn Sternglass provided a formidable book-length answer to the *who is* and *who for* questions of Basic Writing in *Time to Know Them*. Just as *Errors* may be said to anticipate many of the tensions and divergent lines of argument to encompass Basic Writing for years to come, so *Time to Know Them* provides case studies as models, and a methodology, for answering the question, who is the basic writer? Sternglass *wondered*, as many basic writing teachers *wonder*, what becomes of these students who contend with and against troublesome, confusing identities as basic writers? How do they grow with, through, and *past* them? Following a group of students through their academic landscapes, Sternglass discovered that “issues of race, gender and sexual orientation, class, and ideology. . . affect their approaches to undertaking academic tasks” (60) to an extent; yet students find their resources in diverse and complex ways.

In the *Journal of Basic Writing* issue of Spring 1999, the volume just prior to the one where Harrington makes her call for more “student-present” scholarship (Fall 1999), here for the first time, on the cover of the journal, the term “*basic writer*” appears in scare quotes (though this is not the first time the term is typographically called out and made suspect. See Gray-Rosendale’s “Investigating Our Discursive History: *JBW* and the Constitution of the ‘Basic Writer’s’ Identity”; see also Armstrong 69). In a solicited article for that issue, Sternglass moved in closer to one of her book’s participant-subjects, a woman named Joan who eventually succeeds in graduating and obtaining a full-time counselor position in a methodone clinic. In this article, we also learn that this same student, under a different pseudonym, was similarly followed through four years (not Sternglass’ six), only to be sadly denigrated, by James Traub in *City on a Hill*. The article extends from Sternglass’s keynote address to the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors marking the decision by CUNY’s Board of Directors to end remediation at four of CUNY’s four-year colleges—once again exemplifying student-present writing formulated prototypically “in response.” But even as prototype, the article addresses the *who* and *who for* questions long-arc-ing in Basic Writing.

How was this done? By showing the contradictions and conflicts that inhere in basic writer identity construction not only by way of a real person, but also a person very real to her teacher, Sternglass, who greatly invested in her student. As a result, we learn a great deal about Joan and the complexities of BW affect, identity, and belonging. We learn: *Who is the basic writer?* For one, she is more than a novice or beginner—she is resourceful and determined. *Who is the basic writer?* She is someone who goes beyond conflict-infused and “incapacitating representations of students so labeled” (Gray-Rosendale, “Revising the Political” 27); she is a re-negotiator of her own identity. *Who is the basic writer?* She is someone who stays the course, beyond the number of years at which point it must be clear to all that, having run out of time, the student has failed. *Who is the basic writer?* She happens to be, in this particular case: poor, education-oriented, female-identified, self-sustaining, handicapped and self-enabling, urban, Black, raised by a single-parent, raised to be determined, and predisposed to an interest in psychology and to give back to her community. That is, she is a student with many stories, not just one.

In *Basic Writing*, Otte and Mlynarczyk note basic writing scholars’ consistent interest in student-present research matched mostly to the frame of “conflict and struggle.” I like this point for how it recognizes the affective knot of Min-Zhan Lu’s “can able to” (451) referencing intention in error, and other instances of linguistic and rhetorical dissonance across the academy, as these reflect a much wider dynamic of the basic writer not always in sync with—not always *wishing for*, not always *wanting*—what the academy holds out as a good. Shaughnessy’s take on students’ intention—“wanting what all students want”—again cedes ground; since, from a Basic Writing standpoint, graduate students knowing to search for and recognize the ways in which students and the academy can and frequently do *disidentify* is crucial. This disposition will help new and emerging professionals in BW take deep account of the basic writing or open-access classroom, encouraging a wider lens on the unique literacy and social practices of students, to be explored in many ways: in conversation, class presentations, interviews, and more, as well as through their writing.

As with affect theory, today’s perspectives on extra-literate practices distributed across the full spectrum of one’s activities strain against basic writer identifiers. In his two-article study of Charles Scott, Jr., an undergraduate student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Kevin Roozen presents one of the best examples of one student’s many literacies as actively linked and intersected along diverse communicative pathways, all dynamically impacting and repurposing one another, across time and

space. Drawing from a rich base of writing and social theory, Roozen captures Charles' success as basic writer, poet, stand-up comic, and journalist as it emerges from a de-limited, always expansive "nexus of practice" whose activities are "never. . . finalized or finalizable" (Scollon; qtd. in Roozen, "Journalism, Poetry" 10-11). These qualities bear their own affective *ethos* by how they inform one another as they encompass other ostensibly more privileged centralities—in this case, academic and standard English literacies. As Shaughnessy understood on some level, it is not possible (nor, programmatically are we finding it so necessary) to know basic writers as basic writers only. Encouraging the fullest "documented narratives" of literacy possible, Roozen's extended case study approach is inquiry into identity as well as literacy. Its example has already been working to prompt basic writing scholars to ask many as-yet unasked questions by which to better know so many Charleses, Joans, and Quentins.

### **Seeing More of "The People in the Room"**

Many recent *JBW* authors have followed similar approaches, some directly influenced by Roozen's work with its reference to Ron Scollon's "nexus" of social practice and Paul Prior's "laminations," or layerings, of literacies; others by the ethnographic study of social contexts; or by narrative inquiry-based approaches borrowed from teacher education, to name a few. Emily Schnee and Jamil Shakoor's co-authored article on Jamil's progress through basic writing is one example which, as with Charles, presents basic writing subjectivity in the fullest measure possible: Jamil honestly shares his start-points, troubles, resentments and resistances, alongside periodic progress and boosts in confidence, until finally, success. Much like Sternglass, Schnee and Shakoor know better than to abstract "the basic writer" from one case study, despite their subject hitting such personal chords. Instead they present the *affective* view of inquiring after basic writers as I have argued for it here: that to know one basic writer by way of their differences is to know only that encountering other basic writers means discovering difference repeatedly and to question whether the descriptor of "basic" fits at all.

Wendy Pfrenger's recent "Cultivating Places and People at the Center: Cross-Pollinating Literacies on a Rural Campus" identifies the place-based context of subjectivities, whether writing consultants' or student-clients', that again, constantly "impinge or intrude" one upon another, impacting places and selves. Pfrenger follows several writing consultants who are deeply shaped by their rural geographies in adaptive, not constrictive ways; in turn,

they become the ones best able to mediate the academic environment for their student-clients. As with Schnee and Shakoor, subjectivities move and collide in their turn-taking, enacting a dialectic of merging and switching out—student to tutor/teacher, tutor/teacher to student.

Another recent author, Sarah Stanley, fosters a similarly dynamic collaboration around identities in “From a Whisper to a Voice: Sociocultural Style and Anti-Racist Pedagogy.” Stanley takes a hard look at her own classroom and the experience of one student, Tejada, seized by the awareness of racialized impacts on identity for students of color who attempt to become audible interpreters of their own texts. Stanley identifies student feedback on writing as an area particularly fraught, and develops a pedagogy where this feedback can be made public, collaborative, and inquiry-based—an opportunity for both better elucidating feedback and supporting race-positive identity. At the article’s center are descriptions of the “sentence workshop” Tejada facilitates, in which she relates her discomfort over an unwieldy, troublesome sentence she has written. It’s a sentence about race, feeling marginalized, and her intention—her *wanting*—to find and have more of a voice. Together Tejada, her classmates, and her teacher carefully open the spaces of her hesitation: What is her intention behind her bracketing what Stanley calls, after Derrick Bell, her racial-realist self, of enclosing what might be an essential part of her identity and perspective within actual *parentheses*? Tejada’s sentence begins: “I, (as part of a minority group) have witnessed and experienced how a single word or action on the part of those who are not categorized within the dominant culture, has. . .” With support, she comes to examine that self-diminishing rhetorical move and to articulate, “Oh, well. Like I said it’s like. . . The way you feel. . . I’m sorry. . . I believe it relates to that because I, myself, have been in situations in which. . .” Reflecting on the workshop, she searches out a clearer sense of her hesitations and their social-political import:

I notice that I wrote ‘as part of a minority group’ within a parenthesis, which seems as if I am refusing to express it completely or almost whispering it. . . Now that I think about it, I believe that in a way, I am expressing a form of silence by enclosing that fact. (19-20)

As successful as this pedagogy is for Tejada and others, Stanley reflects on coming to the insights that now (only lately) have consciously fostered it:

As a white teacher of Basic Writing in the Fall of 2009, I was not equipped with the everyday reality of racial micro-aggression on a

college campus and did not encourage, as I would now, establishing a shared lens with students. I also believe that had I also been in closer proximity—that is, intimate daily living with the frustrations and emotional challenges of exclusion, discrimination, abuse, and aggression—our classroom could have been healthier and more transformative. I was too tightly bound to a curricular map—an effect of whiteness, in how I understood what it meant to teach who I was teaching—and this realization helps me to see how the term micro-aggression continues to resonate. (21)

As Cheryl C. Smith and I noted in our Editors' Column for that journal issue:

Stanley offers a case study from her own teaching history to showcase her development from “prioritize[ing] *my* pedagogical relationship” toward putting more emphasis on “the experiences of the people in the room” (italics in the original). Recognizing the value of “the people in the room” grounds her argument that “an impressionistic response that does not also include democratic discussion with students about intentions will not only limit learning or growth, but [we] believe it will lead us further away from, as Asao Inoue puts it, “socially just futures.” (1)

What Stanley's pedagogy around “the people in the room” acknowledges is something close to discernible in a posited teacher-Shaughnessy, linked materially and imaginatively to a SEEK community of teacher-colleagues whom Sean Molloy has researched and recognized were clearly in mind of the *who* of BW before the *what to do*. The positioning of the teacher in ecological models such as SEEK is/ was one of lateral standing, encouraging of moments where teachers yield the space of authority so that teacher and student re-enter the instructional setting together. Stanley's teacher-voice becomes just another voice, here a tactically quiet one, among those of the other “people in the room.” These others are the real impetus leading Tejada to discover something vital about herself.

### **And Keeping Them in Mind**

It's a short step from grasping the importance of this new relational positioning—standing at the side of, in the same temporal moment—to understanding both the literal and figurative roots of advocacy, an act of “standing with.” Far from reducing the space that's needed—as often happens in

contractions of space that surround the privileging of mainly standardized language practice, for example, or for predetermining access only for those students “likely to benefit” (Henson and Hern)—the question of who is the basic writer, and, in view of comp-rhet and social justice conversations, who is basic writing *for*, can be used for pedagogical- and *ethos*-shaping purposes to generate more socially just teaching on our parts and new and greater space for encompassing more of students’ literate lives. Basic writing students and teachers may find ways to work as collaborators in their research and (self-) inquiry where a basic writing *ethos* of recognition for students’ intentional lives widens to encompass teachers too, to inquire about literacy’s engagements among them both.

As an editor, I have often been struck by moments in the editing process when authors come to sense the growth and change of their own subjectivities alongside those of the students they are writing about. This process is gently facilitated, frequently through small and simple invitations: for instance, to detail a conversation where voices are heard more subtly upon a second or third consideration; to reflect on and write about a wrong turn pedagogically; to trace back a pedagogical or professional starting point in order to grasp some up-to-this-minute previously unacknowledged influence. These opportunities stand as the core of qualitative thinking for scholars in their writing and, when fostered toward this purpose, can be so as well for the places of their teaching.

Fostering graduate students’ scholarship in Basic Writing richly endows a personally evolving, humane professionalism; this is doubly the case when mentors write with graduate students as co-authors. In recent years, and this past year especially, *Journal of Basic Writing* has featured examples of veteran scholars and graduate students writing together, including the Schnee-Shakoor piece, which features a student of Basic Writing who later becomes a graduate student (though not in Basic Writing). To start (again) with Schnee and Shakoor, the article is essentially the mapping of a mentor-student relationship over time, marking turns and flash points in the co-authors’ meta-discourse about that relationship and its impacts. Among critical topics is their own process of revision. This unique approach to writing matures as Schnee and Shakoor discover themes to their relationship, a main one being a basic writing student’s progress given extended time. Many conversations between co-authors become part of the essay’s fabric, as Schnee and Shakoor reflect upon reflections and also share aspects of their redrafting so that Jamil’s progress—and awareness—as a changing writer (and Emily’s as researcher) are experientially *felt* as well as documented. It is

one of the best recent examples in the journal of the “great focus on contextual construction of basic writers’ student identities” continuing to evolve student-present literature in BW, particularly, as Laura Gray-Rosendale has noted of the same article, of dynamic identity construction “in response to various political and socioeconomic issues”—“as [these constructions] occur” (“Re-examining Constructions” 98) in real time.

It’s also fitting that our special issue on graduate education includes its own examples of mentors writing with students. Tom Peele, Vivian Stoll, and Andréa Stella’s co-authored article is a worthy sample. While offering a researched stance on corpus analysis of students’ argumentative writing, their project highlights the impact of facilitating a large-scale study on emerging professional identities. As graduate students and researchers, Vivian and Andréa each step forward in distinct sections of the article to discuss a particular area of the study they managed or were impacted by. Going beyond the conventions of research reporting, they demonstrate the role of narrative in advancing the field of Basic Writing and in their own formations as teachers. Victor Villanueva and Zarah Moeggenberg’s article, again capturing a relationship, is another sample, this time of paired perspectives on the field as it was and as it continues to evolve. Zarah’s narrative takes up themes introduced by Victor in the article’s uptake—scenarios of feeling displaced and unheard, while exhibiting push back at the same time. These themes resonate for Victor and Zarah in their personal stories as in the history of Basic Writing which these stories chart. Not least, Barbara Gleason’s co-authored article on the CCNY’s Masters in Language and Literacy is a model of inclusivity and writing as celebration, as Barbara draws repeated references to former students, including their motivations for joining the program, their personal letter-like reflections, and updates on their subsequent success. Helping to edit these articles along with my co-editor, Cheryl C. Smith, and, mainly, the two-volume’s guest editor, Laura Gray-Rosendale, I was strongly reminded of an article I co-authored with my graduate intern Lara Rodriguez, some years ago, an experience that has not only sustained my editing work, but also remains a wonderful personal and professional memory.

It was years ago when I too was a student in a graduate practicum on Basic Writing at CUNY’s College of Staten Island and was prompted by my teacher, Peter Miller, to first painfully reveal my own teacher-self as a condition for attempting to see my students. I was invited: *quickly list all your current students from memory* (and then to reflect on my rapport with the students whom my list had forgotten); and *locate and draw yourself in your classroom* (and then try to find words to explain what I had awkwardly and too much

revealed). As part of what was to form a critical *praxis*, I was encouraged to regularly query my students about their own stuck-spots, resistances, and frustrations, and to share these findings with my Basic Writing seminar peers. It was disturbing, so early on, to have felt taken to task, when after one such query inviting students to reflect on what it was like to try freewriting for *just five minutes straight* (no stopping, no self-censoring, only writing), a student wrote to me on a half-sheet of loose leaf and handed it in: “You want, everyone, to write, like you.” What had I not noticed of the student before this incident, of myself, and of our contexts and circumstances on so many levels? It was another place to begin.

Diverse stakeholders with roles to impact the teaching or policy practices of BW leverage the question of *who for* in Basic Writing. Rarely is this question engaged in order to capture students’ competence at the start-point, or the complexities of their lives and intentions. This is how we too often hear it—“in response” and through the screens of institutional or programmatic priorities. The arguable point that Shaughnessy’s style of presenting these students to a mostly white, middle class teacher-audience was a proprietary and privileged one is a relevant “both/and.” Long, impactful traditions of literacy movement tied to social justice were inspired contexts for Basic Writing (Kynard; Brown), though we do not glimpse that from *Errors*. By discoursing the basic writer so sympathetically, attuning students’ claims to education to human aspiration in terms so easily “relatable,” Shaughnessy offered her vision of the basic writer from a white Midwestern altruist’s perspective, though neither Villanueva nor Laurence would say it was linguistically innocent. Yet that conveyed sense of having at least approached students closely in trying to know them, their motivations, their lives and their imagined lives, and the attempt to incite teachers’ activist-professional growth, point to an exigence for rapport and affect in Basic Writing which is still necessary, practically and politically speaking, in continuing to build *ethos* for new teachers, emerging scholars, and the field.

Basic Writing is one area of comp-rhet inclusive of two-year and community college students and first-year writers where a question about students historically undergirds and still filters so much discourse, and which syncs so deeply with a sense of professional mission. Who is the basic writer? Given current austerity policies and metrics, it is hard to imagine the question no longer being weighted “in response” or used pre-emptively in our need to push back against what our students certainly are *not* (i.e. deficient, unequipped, disinterested). Nor do we want to get so much into it again among ourselves, debating too much about it as Troyka knew some time

ago, while there are stakeholders who see the need to fill in the answers for us. New teachers and scholars of BW need this question not only, as Susan Naomi Bernstein insists, to situate their careers in advocacy, first and foremost (“An Unconventional Education”), but also to see, meet, and teach “not who we think the students are or who we want the students to be, but the actual students” (“Occupy,” p. 99). Recent calls to keep individuals at the heart of new reforms and guided-pathway tracks at open admissions institutions and two-year colleges (Sullivan “Ideas about Human Possibilities”; Tinto) likewise affirm the wanting and waiting of student expectancy, the *what we owe* to students, while asking that we revise our notions of “success” to better align with students’ intentions for the educational opportunities they ultimately pursue (Tinto; Boylan, Calderwood, and Bonham).

At core, the question of who is the basic writer turns on understandings and observations about who are the basic writers in *my* particular classroom, different from others in *their* settings and circumstances, and mobilizing the classroom as a possibility space for student and professional identities to form. If held open as a deliberative *pedagogical* space for better seeing bodies, aspirations, and intentions in BW, we might know to drive past reifications of student identities as error-prone, and other isolations, in clearer interest of “the people in the room.”

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