

(Re)membering Basic Writing at a Public Ivy: History for Institutional Redesign

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ABSTRACT: This essay offers a history of a basic writing course that began at a public ivy campus in the 1970s. Relying on principles of universal design and on insights derived from his school's studio program about ways the institution's selective functions can impact curricular matters, the author describes how the basic writing course was merely retrofitted to an English Department's goals, rather than integrated into its mainstream business. In turn, the author suggests that historical studies such as this can help basic writing teachers excavate and reinvigorate democratic reform efforts often backgrounded in light of a school's elite reputation.

KEYWORDS: universal design, history of basic writing, studio, access, public ivy

[R]emembering is a way of doing things, not only with words, but with our minds, in remembering or recollecting we are exercising our memory, which is a kind of action.

—Paul Ricoeur

Someone is watching — and documenting what we are doing. Now! while they're looking for something in our files — let's do something else.

—C. Ann Ott, Elizabeth Boquet, C. Mark Hurlbert

The two short narratives below reflect my memory of basic writing at Miami University. They are part of the same story; for the moment, however, I want them disentangled so that I can key on their respective emphases. This first part summarizes efforts at curricular change that a colleague and I, both English faculty at Miami's regional campus in Middletown, undertook (haphazardly) on behalf of our school's "at-risk" student writers:

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(Re)membering Basic Writing at a Public Ivy

As a genuinely curious junior faculty member in 1995, I asked why the department's College Composition Committee's list of subcommittee assignments included no mention of English 001/002, the basic writing workshops. When committee members—including several former directors of the composition program—expressed surprise over the workshops' existence, I responded (after some coaxing from my Middletown colleague) with a proposal to form a subcommittee to monitor basic writing at the regional campuses. The committee approved the proposal at its next meeting, marking the first time, I since have learned, that basic writing received any mention in the College Composition Committee's minutes, this despite the fact—I have also discovered—the workshops had been listed in the university's catalogue since 1974. I also learned, rather quickly, that English 001/002 had been since the late 1980s staffed and run by our campus's Office of Learning Assistance, not the Department of English.

Nevertheless, authorized by our department colleagues at our highly-selective central campus to butt into the doings of an English workshop taught by another office, my colleague and I engineered a series of not-so-happy meetings with the incumbents, finding ourselves intruders in a place long occupied by others doing what they felt necessary to ensure the academic survival of students identified as “at risk” on our open-access campus. Learning Assistance was enrolling students in 001 and 002 concurrently and approaching the paired workshops as a single, 2-credit basic writing course that students took prior to English 111, the first course in Miami's liberal education plan. From what my colleague and I had seen by way of syllabi and worksheets, we assumed (rightly or wrongly) that English 001/002 focused on grammar instruction and piece-by-piece construction of essays, a type of pedagogy that, we felt, represented writing to students as a series of subskills rather than as a rhetorical act.

Anticipating the support of our department colleagues on the central campus at Oxford, home of a respected graduate program in Composition and Rhetoric, we set out to make some changes in our campus's basic writing curriculum. We wanted to use 001 as a studio, where students enrolled in English 111 would meet once a week in small groups to discuss their class assignments with students from other classes and with studio instructors, who would facilitate

a workshop atmosphere.

Although the incumbent teachers then and since have resisted our characterization of them and their 001/002 course in the regressive terms I use above, my colleague and I saw ourselves, nonetheless, locked in a series of rigid polarizations: process/post-process pedagogies (she and I) vs. current-traditional pedagogies (seemingly, everyone else); the Office of Learning Assistance vs. the Department of English; adjunct (hired through Learning Assistance to teach this “remedial” developmental workshop) vs. full-time faculty (who traditionally had steered clear, and had been expected by the Department and Learning Assistance to steer clear, of the workshops); compositionists (us) vs. the writing specialist (the Director of our Writing Center), even theorists (us) vs. practitioners (them). During one period in the midst of these “dialogues,” my colleague and I each managed to pilot a section of English 111 (which we taught) conjoined with sections of English 001/002 (taught by Learning Assistance staff), but this initial studio was no studio at all: It was a current-traditional class latched onto a process/post-process course different from other English 111 offerings only in that it was reserved for students identified as “at risk.”¹

Then, serendipitously (in our view, anyway), instructors who had been teaching basic writing designed and received University Curriculum Committee approval for a 3-credit basic writing course, English 007: Fundamentals of Writing, and they vacated 001/002. At this point, my colleague and I “found,” so to speak, 001 “on the books” and began teaching it in the manner we thought best. In 1998, then, English 001, a one-hour, credit/no credit writing workshop, became the site for studio practice and the property of the English Department at Miami University Middletown after a ten-year stay in the Office of Learning Assistance and after being off the radar of the department on our central campus in Oxford for at least the same length of time.

Indicating broader institutional attitudes toward notions of remediation, this second narrative details features of my school’s selective function in action:

Spring 2002: Our department’s studio program has been up and running for four years and I accomplish the rare feat of checking off

everything listed on my day's to-do list. Tapping my fingers on my desk, wondering what I might do to kill the final 36 minutes of this office hour, I start to wonder how Learning Assistance ever came into possession of English 001 in the first place, and I wonder why that office, and not English, still staffed the "Fundamentals" course, English 007. It occurs to me to call an administrative office on our central campus and ask someone there to explain the situation to me.

A very high-ranking person in this office answers the phone. I ask him, "Why does the Office of Learning Assistance conduct the basic writing courses at Middletown?"

"What?" he asks. "The English Department doesn't teach them?"

"What subject do *you* teach?" I ask him.

He says, "Science."

I ask, "How would you like it if Learning Assistance taught your science courses?"

"Why, I wouldn't like it at all," he says. From what I can tell by his tone and from what I know about this person from previous conversations, I can assume he is genuinely concerned with and baffled by the information I've just offered him. In response, he gives me the name of another high-ranking person, who happens to be familiar with the history of the University Curriculum Committee and whom I phone immediately.

I ask this person the same question I asked the first person, and he tells me a story. I'm aware the story he tells me is the wrong story, however, because the situation as I know it predates by at least 20 years the one he describes. The story he rehearses for me involves our campus's 3-credit basic writing course, English 007, a story with which I am already familiar. Or rather, as it turns out, it is one with which I am only partially familiar.

The person on the phone tells me that sometime in the late 90s the Curriculum Committee "swung a deal" with the executive directors of the regional campuses to approve the 007 course on two conditions: One, that the course not count toward graduation (and I believe this is pretty consistent with state mandates regarding pre-100 level courses, anyway); and two, all parties needed to agree that English double-oh-7 would "*never* appear in the college catalogue." In short, the committee permits the executive directors their course

only if English 007 “gets out of the house of English.”

While I am talking to this person, he tells me he has taken out the catalogue and is paging to the listing of English courses. What he sees in the catalogue is the course description for English 001 (not 007, which, as agreed, does not appear there); he sees a course that I know has been on the books since 1974 and which now is the location of Middletown’s studio program. In any case, the voice I hear on the other end of the phone at this point seems puzzled, “How did this get in here?” he asks. “This is not supposed to be here.” (Tassoni, “Blundering” 273-74)

Rather than blend them together, a process that would involve smoothing over obvious discontinuities in presentation, I leave disentangled the above narratives because, with Mary Soliday, I do not want “to assume that curriculum changes will challenge the academy’s selective functions.” “To work against the discourse of student needs . . . that has defined our [basic writing] enterprise,” Soliday writes in *The Politics of Remediation: Institutional and Student Needs in Higher Education*, “we cannot afford to conflate [the] two perspectives or to neglect one in favor of the other” (19). In other words, any history of the development of Miami Middletown’s studio cast solely in terms of ways it addresses the *needs* of basic writers at our open-access campus would rest “upon a cluster of assumptions, the chief of which is that only students require remediation, not institutions, coalitions, or interest groups.” To challenge these assumptions, I agree with Soliday that we need to generate more specific case studies of the role remediation plays in postsecondary education, so that we who work in the field of basic writing can view the manner in which our local struggles unfold similarly (143). An understanding of these patterns, in turn, can help us better locate our reform efforts (144), so my disentangling/highlighting of my university’s selective function in action—the Curriculum Committee’s insistence that the regional campus hide 007 and my Oxford administrator’s subsequent surprise at finding a course considered remedial²--helps me address the kinds of practices and beliefs that might curtail access of some Middletown students to the central campus (where an average of 200 to 300 Middletown students transfer annually),³ not to mention access to the middle class and altogether better life chances. Reciprocally, this focus on selective function helps me respond to beliefs and practices that block access of those who work and study on the central campus to the experiences and understandings of regional campus students, particularly those whose lives and preparation

levels might not reflect those of traditional academic narratives.⁴

(Dis)entangling Curriculum Change and Selective Function

“It would be unprofessional, and politically unwise, to suggest that teachers of Freshman English can radically change the Nature and purpose of Miami.”

-Response of Miami University English Professor to Freshman English Text and Program Committee, 1975

While I disentangle aspects of selective function from my history of curricular change in English 001, I do not underestimate the degree to which this function always already entangles curricular matters. Studio practice itself leads me to an examination of such institutional dynamics; and unlike my colleague quoted in the epigraph opening this section, I am hopeful that studio work, especially studio work done within the expanded contexts offered by case histories such as the one I recount below, can lead to institutional redesign consistent with democratic aims. Based on the model articulated by Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson, the studio sections at Miami Middletown are basically geared to help “at-risk” students examine the implications of teachers’ assignments, comments, and grades and to facilitate students’ negotiation of these various aspects while they explore their own writing processes. Students enrolled in the studio bring to each session some element of the writing projects they are conducting for their mainstream courses. Working collaboratively with the studio teacher and other students, they discuss the parameters of particular assignments, offer feedback to drafts in progress, and scrutinize their classroom teachers’ responses to their work as a means toward developing their strengths as writers, improving their academic performance, and enhancing their overall understanding of the role they might play as readers and writers of culture. Our regional campus offers six to twelve sections of 001 per term and their instructors, tenured or tenure-line members of the English Department and other teachers with extensive backgrounds in composition studies, meet regularly (under the auspices of the basic writing subcommittee I mention above) to explore issues in studio practice. One of the more common threads we discuss in these meetings pertains to how we might best use the broadened perspective on writing instruction that studio work allots us to intervene in curricular *and* broader institutional matters.

In regard to curriculum, studio sections, after all, comprise “at-risk” and, at times, advanced students concurrently enrolled in a variety of composition (and other) courses, so each session provides us with views of writing

pedagogy across an array of classes and disciplines. Such views, I think other studio instructors would agree, reinforce for us the importance of students' understanding the rhetorical contexts within which they write, as well as the ways these contexts affect how and what students write. In addition, the small-class size (usually four to six students) of the studio permits more time for individualized discussion than do mainstream courses: We, therefore, learn more about our students' backgrounds and life circumstances—gang life, disgruntled wives and husbands, four kids, Attention Deficit Disorder, Dyslexia, two jobs, an unreliable car—that affect their performance in school, let alone on individual writing assignments. In other words, alongside classroom matters, English 001 allows us to examine, as Grego and Thompson say, “that which academia has traditionally disregarded as unacademic (and, thereby, irrelevant) and show[s] how that very thing is actually of defining significance” (65-66). Our own understanding of the manner in which all of these personal/instructional/contextual elements impact our students and our studio work has also led to multiple discussions in which we explore ways our studio discoveries might be channeled back into the curriculum, discussions in which we question the degree to which we might use our insights to help other teachers across the university provide better instruction, flexible requirements, and pertinent course content, thus assuring more access for more “at-risk” students to upper-tiered courses on the Oxford campus, as well as on our own.

Concerning selective function, then, it is my understanding of the ways contextual matters can operate as forces for inclusivity or exclusivity that makes my administrator's “not supposed to be here” so alarming to me. Although understandable in the wake of the Curriculum Committee's dictate that 007 remain invisible, the statement nonetheless points not only to an institutional bias that “at-risk” students may confront, but it also calls attention to 001's own status—despite its thirty-year history--as retro-fit, a status compromising any transformative function it might serve. I refer to retro-fit here in terms of disability studies and notions of universal design, which I think align easily with issues in basic writing, especially in regard to open access.⁵ In her introduction to *Strategies for Teaching Universal Design*, then NEA chairperson Jane Alexander explains: “The concept of universal design goes beyond the mere provision of special features for various segments of the population. Instead, it asks at the outset of the designing process how a product, graphic communication, building, or public space can be made most aesthetically pleasing and functional for the greatest number of users” (iii). A retro-fit, such as a ramp, may allow access to a building for

some segments of the population previously excluded, but the retro-fit itself does not guarantee other features of the building will be as equally negotiable or that the retro-fit itself will be without stigma or that the retro-fit even will be sustainable; universal design, on the other hand, looks to integrate accessibility function into the overall design of structures. Related to basic writing, universal design, then, would look for ways of integrating the issues and concerns of “at-risk” students into the mainstream business of the department and the institution more generally, rather than merely retrofitting onto its structure a single course that is perpetually “not supposed to be.” Redesigning the institution in the manner of universal design marks a challenge to what Mike Rose has called “the myth of transience,” which constructs basic writing as a provisional duty of colleges and universities, not part of the real work of postsecondary education, and funds and non-tenures those involved with the enterprise accordingly (5). This narrow notion of postsecondary education’s “real work,” international consultant on universal design Elaine Ostroff might say, reflects a limited view of diversity shaped “for a mythical average norm,” rather than focused on opportunities to examine standards and to increase the good design and usability of the institution (1.12).

Any such movement toward institutional redesign necessarily expands definitions of “access” beyond just “admission to the university.” After all, as the history below indicates, English 001 students have been from the course’s beginning not only admitted to Miami University, but also enrolled in other courses at the same time they were members of the basic writing workshop. In light of notions of retrofit and universal design, I view issues of “access” more in terms of what Pegeen Riechert Powell describes as “the struggles of oppressed groups to achieve real changes in current and persistent power structures” (29). And with Tom Fox, I see these demands for access culminating in significant critiques and revisions of literary canons and selection and placement procedures, as well as in “the continuing battle for civil rights for African Americans, the struggle for safe and productive lives for women, arguments for the acceptance and support of gay and lesbian people, and the fight for legitimacy and respect for those who speak languages and dialects other than standard English” (*Defending* 1).

While attention to these concerns is indeed apparent in many courses, policies, and initiatives across our university, such conceptions of access, particularly where they are tied to basic writing, remain problematic to the school’s image as public ivy. In Miami’s case the perpetuation of this image means that it must, at least in part, affirm its “Yale of the West” reputation

for selectivity and academic excellence in the wake of a state policy that stipulates any graduate of a charter school must be admitted by the state university system's local division (Moll 43). As Richard Moll pointed out in 1985, Miami's solution to this conflict has been the regional campuses at Hamilton and Middletown, which are each within twenty-five miles of Oxford and so can take most of these commuter students, while the central campus continues to award slots to students on the basis of standards derived from class rank, grade point average, curriculum, high school recommendations, special abilities, and SAT and/or ACT scores (58). In other words, the Middletown campus itself, not to mention English 001, could be viewed as an attempt to assure Oxford's reputation for selectivity and quality by separating it from the university's efforts to provide access. John Alberti writes,

[T]he question of access in higher education, which links crucially the question of social class with race, gender, and other protected status categories, is often obscured by the question of "quality," most typically in the creation of a false opposition between access and quality. At most open-access, working-class schools, this issue manifests itself in the question of "remedial" education and the relationship between two- and four-year schools. . . . In its most positive manifestation, this concern is linked with worries about whether such students will be able to succeed in college and make it through to graduation. In its more typical, negative form, discussion can devolve into questions of who is or isn't "college material" and whether the very presence of developmental classes on campus somehow contaminates the entire curriculum with lowered expectations and standards. (570)

To challenge this false dichotomy between "quality" and "access," Alberti recommends reversing the perspective in the ways teacher/scholars think about higher education so as to think about second-tier schools—open registration, regional and four-year colleges, what Alberti calls "working-class" colleges—as the norm (563).⁶ Aligning myself with basic writers here, my historicizing of 001 pushes this reversal in perspective a bit further. This history provides a narrative that challenges residual power structures in the cause of revising reductive notions of quality that maintain the studio as a retrofitted element and stall possible sources of institutional redesign.

My research into the history of English 001 indicates its retro-fittedness, if you will, persists in a tension between efforts to mainstream and

assimilate students of nontraditional academic and social backgrounds and efforts to siphon concern for these students who are referred to courses like 001 away from the Department of English at Oxford to the school's Office of Learning Assistance on the regional campuses. Situated in this office, not only the students, but also basic writing faculty and staff are distanced from, as William DeGenaro writes, "the intellectual and disciplinary work of writing studies." This distance, DeGenaro would say, marks a point at which historical context becomes crucial:

Without context, it is easy to look at my own former institution's separation of first-year composition and basic writing as a simple and isolated case of situating instruction within the unit with the most experts. The English Department has composition experts. The Learning Assistance Center has experts in secondary, special, and developmental education. History tells us that such a schism is neither isolated nor simple. Rather, institutions of higher education have a long history of setting up institutional roadblocks to student success. Sociologist Burton Clark famously analyzed back in the late 1950s the "cooling out function" of higher education—the tendency to depress the aspirations of students. Now I'm not advocating blindly adopting monolithic and overly deterministic concepts like the "cooling out function" and applying those concepts to our own institutions. On the contrary, I'm suggesting that only through localized histories can we interrogate the extent to which these historical forces may be in effect locally. (ms. 7)

Designed for students to take concurrently with their first-year composition course, English 001 from its beginning reflected efforts to mainstream, rather than isolate (Gracie, E-mail),⁷ the school's nontraditional students and, as such, was as it is today positioned—potentially—to help students and teachers generate change reflective of universal (re)design. However, siphoning forces—in the form of an elitist and unreflective regard for academic standards and the image of the public ivy—stalled at the gates any impact beyond a retrofitting that the course might have at either the curricular or selective levels. Surely, I can understand that systems must at various times in their histories retro-fit and jury-rig correctives to respond to changes in policy and philosophy or to maintain old promises in the wake of such changes. I can also acknowledge that courses like 001 signal my own institution's intention to address operations that compromise its democratic

aims. Nevertheless, I do not believe that these retro-fits can stand at such a distance from “the intellectual and disciplinary work of writing studies,” nor associatively, from political debates scoring the relation between any public ivy institution and its open-access campus, and hope that the system undergoes the deep changes necessary to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the very practices it retro-fits unto its ongoing business. Highlighting matters of selectivity, my aim in composing this history is to use the momentum my colleagues and I have generated through our studio curriculum to turn this distance into a place for critical exchange geared to help reverse the flow of this siphoning.

This reversal entails “historical reflection,” which, as Miller and Bowdon write in their section of “Archivists with an Attitude,” “can help us to value the potential of our situation by revitalizing our sense of the civic” (593). Like Ricoeur in the epigraph that opens this article, I see remembering as a “kind of action” (5), a way to identify how struggles unfold similarly, but also as a way to move beyond repetition of these patterns toward deep changes in the ways a public ivy such as ours might enhance its commitment to democratic access. Reading the concerns and interests of the regional campus students currently enrolled in our studio program as the norm, I construct an institutional history of basic writing at Miami Oxford, not to dwell on biases that had all but expelled basic writing as a concern of the English Department at the central campus, but to excavate, repopulate, and revitalize the efforts that developed and sustained English 001 there to begin with, and to gather the forces of those efforts in the cause of redesigning the institution toward more democratic ends. Such a redesign would mark the degree to which basic writing is crucial to the mainstream business of the university, not as a transient response to a temporary literacy crisis, but as an enterprise that speaks directly to the challenges of making education as accessible, as relevant, and as liberatory as it can be for the greatest number of students.

Dis(re)membering English 001 at Oxford

“Finally, the Department offers a writing Workshop each term for one hour of credit. First preference for registration is given to Educational Opportunity Program students.”

-Bob Johnson, Chair of English Department, 4/27/1976⁸

While reflecting an effort to support nontraditional students, the history of English 001 at Oxford also marks a resistance to institutional re-

design. Of the senior faculty--including two former department chairs, four former directors of college composition, and various others I encountered casually before and after committee meetings and in formal interviews--and the administrators I spoke to while preparing this article, few people (two, actually) recall English 001 ever being offered at Oxford: Most of the people who were even aware of the course's existence assumed it had only been offered at the regional campuses. Putting politics aside for a moment, I don't think these memory lapses and mis-memories are surprising--how many of us will recall next semester, let alone thirty years from now, when and how the courses we currently do *not* teach were ever taught? I do think the type, if not the lack, of memory is significant, though, especially given the time period in which 001 first came into being. During this period from 1974 through 1978, when English 001 started appearing regularly in the Oxford schedule (it doesn't, by the way, appear on the Middletown schedule until 1979), departmental records frequently refer to what is alternately called the "writing problem" or "writing crisis" at Miami University, connected explicitly to the "Johnny Can't Write" articles that circulated in such journals as *Newsweek* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and which triggered similar crises in schools across the nation (See Shor, *Culture Wars* 59-103). The English Department at Oxford circulated a questionnaire to all its campuses at this time concerning teachers' conception of students' levels of literacy. The answers confirmed the degree of discontent faculty associated with the preparation levels of students. While one report that I found (excerpted in the epigraph beginning this section) does mention English 001 as one means by which the department was working to counteract students' writing "deficiencies," the course is ignored in other reports, even in those documents encouraging the establishment of a writing center that would link the English Department with the Developmental Education Office (now the Office of Learning Assistance). Indeed, English 001 seems virtually absent from Oxford's memory: at least as that memory is represented in the archives and in the minds of those whom the archives represent.

The course receives no mention, for instance, in the 1977 "Final Report" of the Committee for Improvement of Instruction's Subcommittee for the Study of English Composition, which had been formed specifically to address Miami University's "writing problem." As a result of its findings, the subcommittee encourages increased efforts to explore innovative methods of teaching composition, calls for higher expectations for student writing across the university community, and advocates "changes in teacher education programs to increase the effectiveness of secondary and elementary

teachers' abilities in composition instruction." Additionally, and perhaps most pertinent to my project, the nine-member subcommittee--composed of three English Department faculty, three students, and representatives from Business Analysis, Physics, and Developmental Education--identifies "the difficulty in isolating from the average student those students who require remedial or intensive programs" as a chief component of the "writing crisis," and they assert that to deny the fact that a "certain segment of any set of students will require remedial education" would "force the better prepared students to operate at a level below their potential" (Committee 1). The subcommittee then names the Office of Developmental Education as responsible for providing services for these remedial students once they've been identified. In other words, far from viewing English Studies, as John Alberti suggests, as "uniquely positioned to provide leadership in the effort to locate the progressive potential inherent in looking at social class more closely within the classrooms of higher education" (564), the report seems to indicate that students in need of remediation, for whom—I would guess--curricula must be adjusted, class time devoted, and values systems reconsidered, offer a hindrance to traditional students, not a challenge to standards and certainly not a call to integrate their experiences and understandings into the mainstream business of the department, if not the university (see Fox *Defending* 41). Simply, the assumption here is that remedial students need to be isolated from "better prepared" students and that those isolated students would be best served by non-academic offices. In accord with this institutional design, the fact that the English Department itself at this time offered a basic writing course that mainstreamed "at-risk" students while providing them with extended support through the one-credit workshop received no mention at all. It is the Developmental Education Office and not the English Department that the "Final Report" designates as responsible for students identified as underprepared.

Attitudes that buttressed this tendency toward the siphoning off of underprepared writers "out of the house of English" were apparent to a degree even in the English Department itself, given its reaction to the CCCO resolution on Students' Rights to Their Own Language in 1974—again, the year that 001 first appeared in the catalogue. The President of the College English Association of Ohio had asked for responses to the resolution and the English Department's Text and Program Committee (a precursor to the College Composition Committee) scheduled a meeting in February 1975 to discuss its implications. Responses to the resolution and to the scheduled discussion ranged from sympathetic to virulent, from reasoned to flippant,

but not one of respondents saw the Resolution as an invitation to institutional redesign. One department member, in a memo headed “Senseless Meetings,” saw the CEA’s request as a personal matter, better attended to by individuals who wished to reply, not by the Text and Program Committee. “I’m all for meeting on February 4,” she writes, “but let’s get on with our own business. The world will take care of itself, and harmless drudges will make pronouncement after pronouncement. The pronouncements will continue to be harmless unless we let them interfere with our business.” Looking a little more deeply into the politics of the status quo, a couple of faculty posited Standard English as already a compromise amongst varying dialects, terming it “a language which, contrary to the CCCC resolution, exists in a generally recognizable way, and which is, whether we wished it were or not, the first prerequisite for success in the world of educated English speaking people”; the other respondent describes Standard English as “a classification allowing great variety [of language variations] but with recognizable and mutually agreed upon limits.” While these respondents wrote in defense of Standard English, others expressed distaste for the kinds of languages affirmed in the resolution. “[T]his is the stupidest goddamn idea I have ever seen & the dumb motherfucker that proposed it has got his head up his ass,” writes one member of the committee, expressing his reluctance to even attend the meeting scheduled to discuss the resolution. Another note, replete with expletives and deliberate misspellings, wishes a swift demise to the CCCC altogether and chides the resolution for its lack of specific reference to black dialects, whose valuation the respondent sees as the document’s hidden agenda.

Two other memos, notable for their length and serious attention to the issue, express qualified agreement with the resolution to respect language variants, but given time requirements and the weight of the culture, admit that there are some limits to the acceptable range of dialects the campus could teach, let alone use. These memos are also notable, however, for ways they characterize the central campus and its students. One respondent writes, “The dialect business isn’t all that crucial an issue on the Oxford campus. Our students are almost all white, upper middle class members of the elite dialect group. Their problems for the most part do not stem from them using a socially censored dialect but from their inability to use their own dialect effectively.” Another respondent suggests that a course of study in which “all [language] variations can and ought to be accepted” should perhaps be conducted at “the branch campuses” for students who do not want to go beyond two years of study. Such a student would “pursue some growth of

his own, reading as best he can and writing up to the level of getting some fluency with his thoughts and emotions, for his own self-expression.” This department member goes on to assert that “it’s a fact of life that schools like ours are ‘elitist,’” and he suggests that Oxford’s attitude toward students with other modes of language should be equivalent to that of kids on the playground: “*If you want to join our group, here’s what you have to do.*”⁹

After considering these various responses and discussing the matter amongst themselves, committee members on February 11, 1975, unanimously passed the following “qualified endorsement” of the CCCC resolution:

The Freshman English Text and Program Committee offers a qualified endorsement of the resolution passed at the April 1974, meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication on Students’ Rights to Their Own Language. While this committee agrees with the resolution’s call for increased understanding and respect for dialect diversity within our pluralistic society, we recognize and endorse the obligation of our staff to teach our students to use and be comfortable with standard written English. The CCCC resolution is sensitive to student rights but it is not sufficiently aware of students’ *needs*. As a consequence, we cannot endorse those implications of the resolution which would significantly inhibit our students’ performance both within and without the academic community and would deny their right to learn and use a dialect other than their own. (My emphasis)

These notes and this qualified endorsement, all from the 1974/75 Text and Program Committee files, speak to attitudes circulating around the department at the advent of what it would come to term a “writing crisis.” The files indicate some of the degree to which that “crisis” would focus on Oxford’s traditional students’ inability to practice Standard English appropriately. The crisis, in other words, marked the failure of members of an elite dialect group to use their dialect effectively, rather than a call to examine language variations and how they might speak to course requirements and content, placement procedures, basic competency examinations, admission standards, and campus mission statements in general, not to mention the image of a public ivy. For the most part, these records, along with those reports documenting the school’s “writing problem,” prescribed elite students and their mishaps as the purview of composition faculty in the Oxford English Department; students with language “variations” and

students with “deficiencies,” on the other hand, were the province of the Developmental Education Office and the regional campuses.

The Text and Program Committee’s qualified endorsement does, however, suggest the tension between the department’s elitism and its democratic (read “assimilative”) aims in its reference to students’ “right to learn and use a dialect *other* than their own.” While some members of the department who responded to the resolution discussed Standard English as itself an amalgam of many dialects, the language of the Text and Program Committee indicates the extent to which discourse about writing instruction has often overstated the differences between students’ languages, particularly those languages of students identified as “at-risk,” and academic language, and it is a rhetoric with which the CCCC resolution itself has been complicit. As Joseph Harris writes,

There has been much debate in recent years over whether we need, above all, to respect our students’ “right to their own language,” or to teach them the ways and forms of “academic discourse.” Both sides of this argument, in the end, reset their cases on the same suspect generalization; that we and our students belong to different and fairly distinct communities of discourse, that we have “our” “academic” discourse and they have “their own” “common” (!) ones. The choice is one between opposing fictions. The “languages” that our students bring to us cannot but have been shaped, at least in part, by their experiences in school, and thus must, in some ways, already be “academic.” Similarly, our teaching will and should always be affected by a host of beliefs and values that we hold regardless of our roles as academics. What we see in the classroom, then, are not two coherent and competing discourses but many overlapping and conflicting ones. (18-19)

Where overlaps and conflict might point to potential sites for institutional redesign, the “us/them” effect of the polarization Harris describes serves, rather, to instill retro-fit. This effect undergirds a pedagogy of initiation through which “at-risk” students must conform to the demands of the existing structure, which, in turn, makes no move toward reciprocation but to retrofit various services. So, while English 001 was designed to mainstream rather than isolate its students, the Text and Program Committee’s qualified endorsement of the CCCC resolution, in overstating the differences between discourses, might be read as a cautionary message to those students who

are already the most anxious and uncomfortable about the status of their language in academia. Similar to the memo above that references kids on a playground, this message, writes Tom Fox, is that “We [academics] write a different ‘English’ here, forget what you know” (Fox, *Defending* 58). The language of basic writers, Fox admits, surely differs from academic discourse, no matter how it is defined; but, he argues, the pedagogy of initiation may jeopardize basic writers’ success: “They not only have to master ‘skills’ (as in the service courses), but they have to acquire a new way of understanding, knowing, arguing, reflecting” (59). Since I think it fair to guess that the Oxford department circa 1974 would not have invited its traditional students (part of “us”) to embark on courses of study in nonstandard English dialects, I think it is also fair to assume the students referred to in the concluding statement of the committee’s qualified endorsement are students (a “them”) for whom Standard English is not the dialect with which they are most comfortable. With this reference, then, the Text and Program Committee does indeed acknowledge, if not extend its hand to, students who do not reflect the school’s white, upper middle-class mainstream. At the same time, however, this invitation, based upon the notion of initiation, represents a retro-fit, not an offer to explore home and school discontinuities, reject standardized texts as a measure of writing ability, or examine discourse communities in academic contexts (see Fox, *Defending* 41). While debates over such issues may have occurred in other locations and situations across campus, they did not attend discussions about basic writing.

Notably, one of the members of Text and Program Committee listed as present at the February 11 meeting was Marjorie Cook. What’s significant about Dr. Cook is that, beginning with English 001’s first appearance in the course schedule in 1972/73 through Fall 1983 (when she stopped teaching classes), Marjorie Cook is the only instructor listed for the course. Both the English department chair and the director of college composition during these years recall English 001 as *her* course (Gracie, Interview; Johnson), and while studying her 1978 syllabus with me, the former chair conjectured that she used English 001—which seemed to highlight exercises in grammar and punctuation and some in-class writing devoted to the modes—to help prepare students for the basic competency test, which they needed to pass in order to earn credit for Freshman Composition.¹⁰ Although campus lore affirms the administration has always frowned on the notion of any remedial courses at Oxford (Smith), this former chair also recalls no controversies at either the departmental or administrative level regarding Cook’s offering the course (Johnson). Indeed, her syllabus, which represents an accommodative rather

than critical approach to Standard English, would seem to suggest that Dr. Cook's intention was not to "radically change the Nature and purpose of Miami," but to help nontraditional students assimilate to the prevailing Nature and purpose, an intention which may have facilitated its coming into being as retro-fit rather than as a site for institutional redesign. As writers like Lisa Delpit have argued, there is much to appreciate about such accommodative approaches, and I have no intention of dismissing their benefits to underprivileged populations. However, the eventual siphoning of 001 to the university's "outer boroughs," if you will, indicates how precarious such democratic enterprises become when they are retro-fitted to existing structures. As well-intentioned as they may be, retro-fits of this sort are not developed to inform existing systems how they might redesign themselves in response to insights offered by new constituencies. Accommodating (rather than resisting) existent criteria, English 001 could be accepted as a "friendly amendment" to the existing structure; in the same way, it could be easily absorbed into an historical narrative that affirmed elite students as central characters and assigned walk-on roles to those arriving through open-access policies.

While English 001 at Oxford now remains mis-remembered at best, the colleagues who authored her 1985 memorial do laud Dr. Cook herself for teaching "at the two extremes of departmental offerings—English 001 for academically disadvantaged freshmen and seminars for Ph.D. candidates specializing in modern poetry" (Gracie, et al 1). In regard to the former group, the memorial attests to her generosity (in terms of both money and commitment) toward and tendency to stay in contact with her basic writing students even after they had graduated (1-2). Dr. Cook died in January 1985, and although from Spring 1986 to Spring 1987, seven sections of the course were offered, staffed by G.A.s and adjuncts, it would not be scheduled at the Oxford campus again until 2003. It should also be noted that Cook became an assistant dean the year that 001 first appeared on the books and that she had been promoted to associate dean by the time of her death, at which point she was still listed as the instructor for English 001. In other words, while its instructor garnered a rather high profile in the institution, the course itself remained marginal to departmental, not to mention university, concerns. Here was a tenured member of the department and administrator teaching basic writing at a public ivy, and but for her memorial and the one memo I quote above, I can find no reference before 1995, when I proposed the formation of the subcommittee on basic writing, of the course in any of the documents directly tied to English. What helped make this such a

personal and even, to borrow the terms of iconic discourse, such an altruistic enterprise on Cook's part (see Gunner 31)? Why were Dean Cook's efforts not something more central to the mission of the department, especially at this time when students rights to their own language and the "writing crisis" had generated enough attention to become part of the institution's history, at least as that history is represented in the university's archives?

Alongside the allegiance to elite discourse and distaste for nonstandard dialects that some members of the English Department expressed in reactions to the CCCC resolution, the answer could rest in the student population Dr. Cook served. I have found scattered references to writing workshops, but not necessarily to English 001 or Marjorie Cook, in archival files devoted to the Educational Opportunity Program Students, those students to whom, up until 1992, the college catalogue listed as given first preference for English 001. In a memorandum dated July 15, 1974, which would have been the summer directly before the semester in which 001 first appeared in the catalogue, the Director of the Equal Opportunity Office offered this description of the EOP to members of a university committee who were deliberating continued waivers of suspension for EOP students:

In the recent history of Miami University there has been very little done in terms of remediation of academic difficulties or compensation for academic deficiencies. Until the advent of the Educational Opportunity Program, the student with any academic deficiencies, if admitted, was required to literally lift himself by his own bootstraps if he was to be successful here. The Educational Opportunity Program was the first organized attempt to recruit, support, retain and graduate this kind of student at Miami University. (Young 1)

EOP students, according to the Equal Opportunity Director, represented "financially disadvantaged backgrounds," came from "predominantly black high schools," and were usually the first of their generation, if not first in their family, to attend college. Unlike traditional ("us" group) students who might fail to practice their dialect of privilege successfully, these EOP students ("them") experienced "cultural, social, and educational [dis]advantages" and were limited by "their family backgrounds and their environments" (Young 1-2); and in what can be seen as an early challenge to the discourse of student need, the director acknowledges that Oxford represents to EOP students "an environment that is hostile to low achievement and somewhat indifferent to their background" (Young 2).

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A course syllabus from English 001, attached to a petition to revise its catalogue description in 1978, affirms EOP students as target audience in its description of course objectives:

Some students—*particularly students whose severe deficiencies in verbal skills stem from a poor background in language studies*—would benefit from a laboratory session for the theory of rhetoric taught in English 111. The students in 001 would apply such theory by writing in a more structured situation than is possible in English 111, with more guidance from the instructor, and with immediate discussion and evaluation of the writing. (My emphasis)

In other words, if the population of basic writing students that Marjorie Cook instructed in 001 did indeed come out of the EOP program, then we might attribute the lack of English Department documentation about them to the fact that, despite some gestures such as that represented in the final lines of the Text and Program Committee’s qualified endorsement of the CCCC resolution, they simply were not considered the purview of the English Department. In addition, the fact that Developmental Education files reveal only vague references, at best, to the workshop could be attributable to the fact that the course was indeed an English course taught by a rather distinguished member of that department. English 001 at Oxford, caught between two programs with two distinct missions, on the course schedule of a lone teacher, and reserved for a group of students who did not match the profile of the school’s “white, upper middle-class” norm, seemed positioned all along to be unremembered, mis-remembered, retro-fitted.

Preemptive (Re)membering for Institutional Redesign

“When you retire, you get a call or letter from Archives, asking you to remember them.”

–Frank Jordan, Professor Emeritus, Miami University

While I will describe in this section the value of preemptive (re)membering, there is at least one reason to be cautious about such an enterprise: The administration at Oxford (in conjunction with the state’s Board of Regents)¹¹ might really act at some point upon the impression that our English 001 studio (and all that it represents in terms of open access and

universal design) is, indeed, “not supposed to be here.” While the story of 001 on the Middletown campus has a rather available history of its own,¹² the invisibility of 001 at Oxford has perhaps been a contributing factor to the studios having the vitality, thus far, that they’ve had. The factor that invisibility has played was suggested to me in Fall 2003 when students at the regional campus who were not enrolled in English 111: College Composition were being locked out of our 001 studios when they attempted to register on-line. Up until this point, Middletown faculty and advisors had encouraged any student who desired additional focus on writing from any course to enroll in the studio and had even attracted some sophomore and junior English majors, who contributed their own insights to studio sections. In Fall 2003, however, my former regional campus colleague who co-founded our studio program, now director of College Composition at the central campus, scheduled a section of 001 there devoted to ESL students. Through a process fathomable, perhaps, only to computer programmers, her scheduling of the course at Oxford triggered some mechanism in our university’s computer registration system, aligning enrollment to the course’s catalogue description, which explicitly states that students should be concurrently enrolled in English 111 in order to take 001.¹³ Someone, so to speak, had begun watching us: The moment to generate redesign while backs were turned was shrinking rapidly, and the time to negotiate change face-to-face had arrived.

While people in the deans’, archival, records and registration, personnel, and department offices are still returning the files I requested in the process of my researching this article, I’m considering a type of negotiation that proceeds from a preemptive (re)remembering, one geared toward implicating as many people as possible in re-peopling, re-prompting, and redesigning the history of basic writing at our public ivy. Although virtually no memory exists of English 001 at the central campus, my research tells me that many active faculty members were very much involved in the literacy debates that took place there during the late 1970s and that a few of them were actually involved in instituting and even constructing basic writing at Miami. For instance, I found the name of one person who didn’t recall the course or even the existence at one point of a Developmental Education Office at Oxford to be listed several times in the early 70s as the director of writing workshops sponsored by that very office. I found the name of another person who could not at first recollect English 001 listed as the person responsible for having prepared the catalogue description revision for it in 1978. I even managed to exchange emails with a teacher who taught the course as a visiting

instructor in 1986. She remembers having to lobby hard to have the course offered, as most faculty, she writes, would not admit that any Oxford students required remedial help, but she also remembers that the chair of the department did agree with her, took a stand, and scheduled the course (Smith). I also exchanged emails with this former department chair: He has no recollection of the course ever being offered at the central campus (Chabot). As I mention earlier, I do not fault any of these people for not recalling their role in 001's history. Instead, I am encouraged by the responses I received to my inquiries. While nearly everyone I spoke to during the course of my research failed to recall English 001 as an Oxford course, no one responded derogatorily to the course or its intended purpose (as the archives might lead one to guess), and nearly everyone sent me unsolicited emails after our initial exchanges, sharing with me their resurfaced memories of Marjorie Cook and submitting to me newly recalled bits and pieces of the department's history.¹⁴ These responses germinated in me a belief that projects such as this can re-people a history that would otherwise remain vacant or, at most, mis-remembered in ways that unwittingly resist institutional redesign.

My original impulse was to construct this history using iconic discourse focused on the efforts of Marjorie Cook. While I do believe that her work with basic writers at Oxford deserves further study, I came to realize that this version of the story, focused on the one teacher who taught this one course, would only foreground the efforts of individual will and eschew the much-needed discussion of institutional inertia and, as Soliday might say, neglect scrutiny of the university's selective function. My hope is that a re-peopled history, enacted through the very kind of face-to-face pestering and re-prompting this type of research involves, can help reverse this inertia that exists in the tension between the institution's democratic aims and its elite reputation. Mary Soliday calls for more case studies of the role remediation plays in higher education so that we in the field can better locate our reform efforts, but what a preemptive (re)membering at local sites can also do is implicate those who might otherwise not recognize their own stake in this field. Despite its incidents of self-professed affinity to elitist standards, the history of basic writing at Miami Oxford indicates a series of individual and structural initiatives poised to challenge forces of exclusivity: Educational Opportunity Programs; a course designed to provide basic writing students with additional support *while* they are enrolled in mainstream courses; a writing center jointly directed by English and Learning Assistance; a Department Chair willing to offer the course against the grain of the institution's image as a public ivy; English faculty conducting summer workshops for "at-risk" students; a "call for increased understanding

and respect for dialect diversity within our pluralistic society”; an Associate Dean who founded and taught a course devoted to the school’s most vulnerable students. In other words, writing our own institutional histories is one way to “find allies,” as Ira Shor recommends, to help us create change (“Apartheid” 102). Stories such as the one told in this article are by nature collaborative ventures, involving research that re-gathers, re-members people and policies that have all along fueled challenges to the exclusivities characteristic of a public ivy. Histories such as this provide narratives so that allies might locate themselves in them and discern the roles they have played and might still play in relation to institutional forces that curtail or facilitate access.

Preemptive (re)membering toward these ends can be conducted through other means as well. One thing I’ve personally started to do is insert a note that reads “John Tassoni was here in [year] looking for basic writing at Miami University” into various files I review over the course of my research. Aside from concerns of egotism and a desire for comic relief, one of my intentions in inserting this note is to counteract the gap that suggests no one at Miami has ever been interested in basic writing. Leaving this note in files, I hope, will help direct future researchers and signify to them that the history of basic writing at Miami will not be as forthcoming as they might like it to be, but that it is, indeed, “here.” Another preemptive move our university’s basic writing program is making involves including junior faculty in studio work itself, where they can be a part of an emerging and well-documented history, one that now, thanks to the new director of the program at Oxford, receives frequent mention in the College Composition Committee’s meetings and minutes. And perhaps above all, this preemptive (re)membering has helped lead to a planned Fall 2006 course that will link a graduate seminar, studios, and sections of English 111 at Oxford and Middletown—English 111 sections open to students reflecting any level of preparation who self-select because they desire additional writing instruction. Our intention is to have the graduate students correspond on-line with the undergraduates and work with them in studio settings, all the while the graduate seminar, following principles of universal design, will feature readings and discussions geared to help our graduate students develop curricula that address students representing multiple degrees of academic preparation and forms of literacy: In other words, we’ve come to learn that sometimes it is not just students who require “remediation,” but that teachers *need* engagement with diverse student populations early in their training, rather than be forced to retro-fit curricula that they might otherwise design for a “mythical average norm.” My former Middletown colleague and I also have recently submitted a proposal to rename the studio, giving it the

number English 104, and to expand its catalogue description so that it more clearly invites students to enhance their engagement with and critical reflection on college composition. Such changes will integrate studios further into the institutional design and its new course number should reduce the stigma for those writers at Oxford who could benefit from additional instruction but who avoid the course because of its association with remediation.

In light of such persistent associations, between the regional campuses and remediation, between access and diminished standards, between selectivity and quality, I cannot help but argue, with Reichert Powell,

that it is impossible and irresponsible for mainstream composition studies professionals at selective universities like Miami University to remove themselves from debates about standards and access. Thus, rather than dismiss unproductive understandings about skill, people at institutions like Miami's Oxford campus need to engage those understandings, challenge them, and interrupt the easy association between the gatekeeping function of first year writing and considerations of skill in writing pedagogy. In so doing, we have a better chance to intervene in the conservative—as in 'resistant to change'—imposition of standards on the changing demographics of higher education. (9)

And given that, as Alberti points out, students at elite colleges are beginning to resemble those at second-tier schools in their need to work long hours off campus and their increased exposure to the pressures of commuting, given the growing expense of college room and board (563), the need for Oxford to weigh accessibility issues against the standards it imposes on its own changing demographics increases annually. Unlike my colleague who thirty years ago wrote that "it would be unprofessional, and politically unwise" for writing teachers to suggest a radical change in the "Nature and purpose of Miami," I cannot imagine a less responsible way to behave than to ignore what we know about the undemocratic society we live in, and with teacher-researchers like Shor, Soliday, and others, I believe by remembering the history and politics that brought about and sustain these unequal arrangements we can suggest, potentially, revisions in the ways our institutions go about determining who belongs and who does not, about who is considered in the overall design and who is, at best, retrofitted. Why wait for the archives to call us, when we can call upon them now and make them responsive to our goals?

Notes

1. See Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson “Not Just Anywhere, Anywhen” (75-81) and my “Retelling Basic Writing at a Regional Campus” (178-80) for more detailed and sympathetic accounts of the discussions between English Department faculty and Learning Assistance staff. These other accounts offer more explanation of the rhetorics and politics at work here, the power differentials whose sources extended beyond the individuals who sat down at these unproductive meetings. This present article focuses on (re)membering basic writing at the Oxford campus, but I’m well aware this project must occur on multiple sites.
2. Omitting descriptions of remedial classes from catalogues is not unique to Miami nor something new in academia. See Lunsford (40-41) for a discussion of such practices at Yale and Wellesley during the late nineteenth century.
3. For a discussion of the politics of naming a campus “central” or “main,” “regional” or “branch,” see Hieber 78-79.
4. See Alberti for a deconstruction of this traditional narrative.
5. My thanks to Jay Dolmage for providing me with this vocabulary and many of these connections.
6. In a similar vein, Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers suggest that we “consider the teaching of writing in open admissions sites as central to the historical formation and continuing practice of composition studies” (440).
7. See McNenny for articles detailing the controversy surrounding mainstreaming, its theory, politics, and practice.
8. The quotation is from a memorandum addressed to the provost and titled “The Crisis in Composition.” The memorandum was copied to members of the university senate to inform the group of measures the English Department was taking to improve the teaching of writing skills in the wake of the “Johnny Can’t Write” controversy described in *Newsweek* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
9. These memos and drafts of the committee’s qualified endorsement of

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the resolution are contained in a file marked “Text & Program: Agenda, Summaries 1974-1975” and located in the archival files in the office of the Director of College Composition. My thanks to the director for making me aware of these records.

10. During this time, the department did debate the validity of this standardized, grammar-based, multiple-choice form of assessment. However, these debates emerged from process vs. product considerations rather than issues directly related to basic writing (Johnson).

11. I have limited this discussion to an exploration of the relation between central and regional campuses. Attitudes and policies at the state level also, of course, shape this relationship. For a discussion of the relation between research schools, basic writing, and state policy, see Stygall. Also see Fox (“Working”).

12. Middletown’s Executive Director, C. Eugene Bennett, for instance, lauds the basic writing program in each of his “Annual Reports” through the early 1980s, mentioning it on the first page of each report.

13. The *Miami Bulletin* description for 001 and 002, which originally aligned with 112, the program’s second course in its foundation sequence, currently reads as follows: “A laboratory in composition to be taken concurrently with English 111, 112. Credit/no-credit only” (233).

14. My thanks to all those colleagues, past and present, who took the time to help me (re)member English 001, including Barry Chabot, Bill DeGenaro, Donald Daiker, Mary Fuller, Bill Gracie, John Heyda, Bob Johnson, Frank Jordan, Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, Max Morenberg, Marion Pyles, Jerry Rosenberg, K. E. Smith, Jeff Sommers, and Ellenmarie Wahlrab. Special thanks also to archivist Bob Schmidt and Janet Cox from Academic Personnel Services, as well as to all the others who left their desks to seek files and records on behalf of this project.

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