

Stuck in the Remedial Rut: Confronting Resistance to ESL Curriculum Reform

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Abstract: This article presents a case study of a university ESL program that was highly resistant to reform, despite substantial evidence that its curriculum and policies were ineffective. The author draws on surveys, interviews, and participant observation to show how remediation served not only as an instructional model, but as an institutional identity for the program. This remedial identity was reflected in a testing-heavy, basic skills curriculum focused primarily on lexico-grammatical issues, as well as in the program's policies for placement, tuition, and course credit. Through data-gathering and cross-departmental collaboration, the program was able to construct an alternative identity for itself—one in which its role was to support diversity, rather than to eradicate deficiency. This study adds to the growing body of scholarship on the ideological and political conditions in which basic/ESL writing is situated, and offers insights on how programs can re-envision their role within institutions.

Keywords: ESL; institutional identity; remediation; curriculum reform; basic writing

One of the research areas in which *JBW* has a well-established track record is curriculum reform. Scholar-practitioners in basic writing have presented numerous accounts of challenges, successes, and lessons learned throughout the reform process. In the most recent issue of *JBW*, Doreen Ewert offered one such account, focusing on an ESL program undergoing a “paradigm shift” from a decontextualized, skills-based curriculum to one focused on more holistic and authentic literacy goals. A similar shift has taken place at many other institutions, resulting in curricular models that emphasize reading-writing connections (Goen and Gillotte-Tropp), fluency ahead of accuracy (MacGowan-Gilhooly) and overall synchronicity between basic writing and the mainstream curriculum (Huse, et al.). Authors in *JBW* have presented a variety of course configurations for accomplishing these aims, including accelerated courses (Adams, et al.), stretch courses (Glau; Peele),

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studio courses (Grego and Thompson; Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson), and learning communities (Darabi; Mlynarczyk and Babbitt). Although these models differ in significant ways, they all indicate a trend away from traditional linguistic *remediation* toward more integrated curricular *mediation*.¹ That is, rather than trying to “fix” writers and their writing, we are more focused on helping students navigate the academic curriculum. Although this trend can be seen throughout the field of basic writing, it is particularly noteworthy in programs serving multilingual/ESL writers, as the field of TESOL has tended to place greater emphasis on lexico-grammatical issues than on rhetorical concerns (Kroll; MacGowan-Gilhooly; Matsuda, “Division of Labor”).

This non-remedial trend has been bolstered by a growing body of scholarship about the pedagogical and ethical problems with the traditional remedial curriculum. In 1999, William Lalicker characterized the “baseline” (also known as “prerequisite”) model of basic writing instruction as one emphasizing “grammatical conformity” over “rhetorical sophistication.” Lalicker explained that this model often engenders resentment among students who do not see its relevance to their academic goals. A number of longitudinal studies have substantiated this claim, particularly among undergraduate ESL writers (e.g., Leki; Sternglass; Zamel). Such findings, combined with increasing political pressure to reduce or eliminate remedial education as an enterprise, have led many ESL programs to consider curricular alternatives (Otte and Mlynarczyk). The shift away from traditional remediation is also evident in recent position statements from a number of professional organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), which articulate that support for multilingual/ESL writers is most effectively implemented through a non-remedial model in which courses are credit-bearing, content-rich, and collaboratively-designed, with input from mainstream academic programs and disciplines.

Despite this seeming consensus about the direction our programs should take, many institutions have not abandoned the traditional remedial model. Vestiges of remediation can be seen in many programs’ policies for placement, credit, and tuition, and well as in assessment practices, curricular content, and the institutional position of the programs themselves—trends which will be discussed later in this article. My central question is why some programs are stuck in what I call a “remedial rut,” while others have made significant progress toward an alternative paradigm. To answer this

question, I draw on a five-year case study of one university's ESL writing program, which was, until recently, very much on the traditional remedial side of the spectrum. My analysis suggests that for this program, linguistic remediation was more than an instructional model; it was an institutional identity. In order to move forward with curriculum revision, the program needed to develop an alternative understanding of its function within the institution. This was an arduous and risky process—one that is still in progress to this day.

Institutional Identity in Basic/ESL Writing

Before looking at the challenges faced by this particular program, it is important to consider the institutional conditions within which remedial education usually operates. This contextual understanding helps explain how an institutional “identity crisis” can prevent curriculum reform. In *The Politics of Remediation*, Mary Soliday posits that the function of remedial education is not just pedagogical, but political: Remediation allows institutions to claim to “maintain democratic access without damaging selectivity in a hierarchical system” (13). In many cases, remedial education serves as a *de facto* admissions and/or graduation policy for institutions whose academic standards have not been clearly defined or enforced. Sugie Goen-Salter describes the situation as a “delicate balancing act” between open access and high standards, with remedial education resting in the middle (97).

For institutions dealing with an increasing numbers of underprepared writers, remedial education seems particularly expedient: It places the responsibility for addressing the needs of those students squarely on the shoulders of the remedial writing program, without requiring substantive changes to the mainstream curriculum or to the institutional culture. As Soliday explains, the assumption is that “only students require remediation, not institutions, coalitions, or interest groups” (143). Moreover, if students who have received the “treatment” continue to need writing support, blame can be directed toward the remedial program. Hence, remedial programs function both as the solution and as the scapegoat for literacy and language problems.

The default institutional identity for a remedial program, then, is one of institutional service. Mike Rose and Mary Soliday posit that much of the discourse and practice in a traditional remediation model reflects a prioritization of institutional expediencies: Students undergo some form of standardized diagnostic which identifies the areas in which remediation is needed. They

are then prescribed a particular sequence of courses, and may be prevented from enrolling in some or all of their other (non-remedial) courses until they have completed the remedial treatment. Courses are usually non-credit, and may require that students pay additional tuition and fees. Although these features may give remedial programs some financial and curricular autonomy, they primarily serve to demarcate remedial coursework as separate from, and clearly not equal to, the academic mainstream. The typical curriculum for remedial writing also reflects this demarcation, focusing on accuracy over fluency, and decontextualized “skills” over discipline-specific conventions (Del Principe; MacGowan-Gilhooly; Rose 346-348).

Although this traditional remediation model can be seen throughout basic writing, it is particularly common in programs designed for ESL writers. Though institutions may claim to value these students’ cultural and linguistic diversity, they often operate from a tacit assumption of linguistic homogeneity and therefore respond to multilingual writers with a “policy of containment” (Matsuda, “Myth” 642; Horner and Trimbur). This containment approach is most clearly reflected in a testing-heavy, grammar-focused curriculum, where the goal is linguistic assimilation through the eradication of error (Shuck 59-63; Smoke). Comparative studies have found, in fact, that ESL writing courses tend to focus more heavily on lexico-grammatical concerns than their counterparts in (L1) Composition and/or Writing Across the Curriculum (Atkinson and Ramanathan; Braine; Harklau). Ultimately, at many institutions, language difference is treated more as a deficit than as a resource (Canagarajah 589).

Because their work is so closely associated with “deficiency,” programs operating from a traditional remediation model tend to be institutionally marginalized. Administrator surveys have revealed that ESL programs in particular tend to lack status within their departments, and their faculty rarely collaborate with their counterparts in other disciplines (Ignash; Williams 160). Instructors tend to have higher teaching loads, lower pay, less job security, and fewer professional development opportunities than many of their colleagues in other departments and programs (Blumenthal; Ignash). Many describe their institutional status as second class, and feel that their work is seen as less academic than that of their non-ESL counterparts (Gray, Rolph, and Melamid 77-78; Ignash; Williams).

This low status, combined with the institutional pressures discussed earlier, puts remedial ESL programs in a difficult bind: Their very existence depends on the presence of students the institution has deemed linguistically deficient. The program must be able to identify, label, and remediate those

deficiencies, as well as to demonstrate in an objective way that the remedy has been successful. When students are found to need additional language support after completing remedial instruction, the program may be subject to criticism. Given this complex set of conditions, it is understandable why some scholars have claimed that remedial ESL programs are better suited to the needs of institutions than to those of students (Blumenthal 48-49; Ignash; Oropeza, Varghese, and Kanno). Indeed, remedial ESL coursework has been found to divert time and resources from students' other academic goals, and may increase the likelihood of student attrition (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal 7; Ignash; Lalicker; Tinto). Many students come to resent or even reject the "ESL" label, because it is so often associated with an approach they find stigmatizing and punitive (Ortmeier-Hooper; Marshall; Oropeza, Varghese, and Kanno).

An increasing number of scholars in second language writing have called for an ideological shift—from deficiency to diversity—in the ways that multilingual/ESL students are treated by institutions of higher education. If these students truly are valued members of the educational community and contributors to institutional diversity, they must be treated equitably. This shift has implications for everything from curriculum and assessment (Crusan; Hamp-Lyons and Kroll) to financial aid and academic support (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal; Oropeza, Varghese, and Kanno). A diversity ideology also requires that institutions interrogate the myth of linguistic homogeneity, and consider ways in which multilingualism can be seen as a desired goal for all students, rather than as a deficiency on the part of non-native speakers of English. (Hall 37; Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur; Shuck 68; Tardy 636-639). The labels applied to students are changing to reflect this diversity orientation, with increased use of terms such as "multilingual," "linguistic minority," and "linguistically diverse," as alternatives to "ESL" or "Limited English Proficient."²

What this implies is a shift in function for the basic/ESL writing program, from student remediation to institutional mediation. At many institutions, this shift is already taking place, as evidenced by the curricular trends discussed earlier. A recent exchange on the Conference for Basic Writing Listserv demonstrated this trend. Asked to characterize the curricular approach at their institutions, a number of participants said that their programs had evolved away from a "basic skills" approach, and were focusing more on academic literacy and critical thinking. This direction is not universal, however. Several members said their programs were still operating from the basic skills approach, relying heavily on practices best

aligned with a traditional remediation model, such as grammar drills and workbook exercises (May 2012).

The question is not whether the field is moving forward but rather why some of us are left behind. What prevents a basic/ESL writing program from assuming an alternative institutional identity—one in which it is associated with diversity, rather than deficit? The answer, in short, is that identity construction is a political process—particularly in basic writing (Goen-Salter 83). Remediation is a function that most institutions accept as a necessary evil. Its very existence allows them to claim, as Rose explains, that “[t]he problem is not ours in any fundamental way; we can embrace it if we must, but with surgical gloves on our hands” (357). Mediation, in contrast, implies greater authority and visibility for the basic/ESL program, as well as an acknowledgement that the responsibility for supporting multilingual/ESL writers must be shared across entities. Essentially, a mediation model asks more from the institution, and makes fewer guarantees. It is not so difficult to see, perhaps, why a basic/ESL writing program might think it risky—perhaps even self-destructive—to attempt to re-define itself in this way.

In this article, I use the Academic ESL Program (AEP) at Northern Green University (NGU)³ to illustrate these dynamics. Drawing on survey and interview data collected in collaboration with program administrators, as well as on participant observation from program meetings and internal listserv discussions, I show how the AEP’s curriculum and policies reflected a deficit orientation, and were perceived by many students as ineffective and discriminatory. I discuss how these findings brought to light a sort of identity crisis for the program, and how this contributed to curricular inertia. I then outline the rhetorical and tactical strategies that helped the program to articulate an alternative institutional identity for itself. This case is part success story and part cautionary tale: While the AEP’s curriculum has become more integrated and relevant, some of its other policies still reflect a deficit orientation. This is a program that has not fully escaped the remedial rut, but is making significant progress in that direction.

Institutional Context: Northern Green University and the Academic English Program

Northern Green University (NGU) is a large, public research institution on the West coast. When I began my study in 2006, the university had more than 30,000 undergraduates and approximately 10,000 graduate students. Precise numbers of multilingual students are difficult to come by, since NGU,

like many institutions of its kind, does not regularly report on numbers of students for whom English is not a first language. However, residency data indicated that non-US citizens comprised approximately 14% of the student body—8% international students (F1 visa holders) and 6% US permanent residents (mostly with in-state residency status). NGU's policies stated that all of these non-US citizens were required to demonstrate English language proficiency. Students from some countries where English was the primary language (e.g., Canada, the U.K. and Australia) were exempted, as were students who had attended US schools for more than ten years. All others were required to submit standardized test scores (TOEFL, SAT, ACT, etc.) as evidence of language proficiency, or to take the AEP's "diagnostic test," which would place them in the AEP course sequence.

Several of the policies the AEP had in place in 2006 reflected a deficit orientation: First, the program relied heavily on testing not only for placement, but as the sole measure of success. Course completion depended on attaining a minimum of 80% on the final exam, and the failure rate for AEP courses was over 20%—significantly higher than in courses such as First Year Composition. Second, students had no choice in which courses to take, and were required to enroll in the designated AEP course before they could complete the registration process for their other (mainstream) courses. Third, all of the courses were non-credit and required additional tuition from students, at a per-credit rate that was actually slightly *higher* than that of in-state tuition. Finally, the curriculum was a salient example of Lalicker's "prerequisite" model, focusing heavily on grammatical rather than rhetorical objectives. The first three courses in the four-course writing sequence focused entirely on grammar and vocabulary, with writing only at the sentence-level. The fourth course emphasized paragraph-level writing in response to short articles from newspapers and encyclopedias. All four courses used timed tests as the only form of assessment, and writing was graded almost entirely on the use of grammatical structures and vocabulary that had been introduced in each unit. There were no courses devoted to writing beyond the paragraph level, nor to academic reading or speaking. No distinctions were made for US residents versus international students, nor for undergraduate versus graduate students.

Data Collection: Procedures and Findings

Administrators and teachers in the AEP knew anecdotally that many students were displeased with the program. Comments on course evaluations

often revealed a high level of dissatisfaction with the AEP as an entity, even though students often expressed appreciation for the teaching of a specific instructor. To gain a better sense of how the AEP was perceived by students, as well as how ESL students were perceived by non-AEP instructors, I worked with an AEP administrator to initiate a needs analysis project, which included several instruments for data collection. First was a paper survey that was distributed in-class to AEP students, without the instructor present. The survey included quantitative questions about how much importance students gave to various language skills and writing genres, as well as open-ended questions about whether they saw the AEP curriculum as helpful (see Appendix A). This survey was completed by 129 students (of 231 total enrolled) in Spring 2006. I also conducted hour-long, semi-structured interviews with ten students who were enrolled or had recently exited from the AEP, asking them about their experiences with the program (see Appendix B). Eight of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The AEP administrator and I also developed an online survey, which was distributed via email in 2007 to faculty and teaching assistants in departments and programs known to have high numbers of ESL students. The survey asked participants (N= 89) to discuss their perceptions of ESL students, and to describe the strategies and resources they used to support those students (see Appendix C). In addition, I interviewed seven non-AEP faculty/staff who work with large numbers of AEP students to gain an additional perspective on AEP students' academic needs and experiences, both inside and outside the AEP.

Findings from the needs analysis revealed that very few AEP students were satisfied with the curriculum. Many felt that the almost exclusive focus on grammar was not well-suited to their needs. As explained by one interviewee, a graduate student from Iran, "I think the level of my knowledge in grammar has been saturated." One of the survey respondents wrote, "Often times, I feel I know more grammar than a native speaker." Another said that "the stuff [in the courses] is not useful for academics." Students offered a number of suggestions for improvement. Most prevalent were requests for more extensive and disciplinary-specific writing assignments, more challenging readings, and more attention to speaking proficiency—particularly for graduate-level international students.

These findings were not particularly surprising, given that the AEP had made an intentional choice to prioritize grammar in the curriculum, which had been developed in 1996 to replace a model that emphasized process writing and library research skills, dating back to the 1980s. Very little data

is available about that earlier model, but veteran teachers did recall that it had culminated in a final research paper of 10-15 pages. By the 1990s, many had become concerned that the older curriculum prioritized quantity over quality of writing. Around the same time, a number of non-AEP faculty had begun to complain about the writing of ESL students in mainstream classes—particularly of US immigrant students, whose numbers at NGU were rapidly increasing.⁴ Hence, the heavy focus on grammar starting in 1996 was the result of a pendulum swing away from fluency and toward accuracy—reflecting the sort of dichotomous thinking that is still quite common in discussions of ESL writers (Ewert; Kroll; MacGowan-Gilhooly).

The AEP's mission statement, which was said to have been developed alongside the 1996 curriculum, explained that the program's aim was to help students "bring their English skills up to a level where they do not pose an excessive burden to [non-AEP] instructors. . . . ensuring that students who graduate . . . possess adequate English language skills that maintain the university's academic standards and reputation" (Operations Manual, 2007-2008).⁵ Evident in this mission statement are two key assumptions: First is that ESL students are likely to pose a burden to faculty. Second is that those who graduate with inadequate English skills pose a threat to the university's reputation. As explained by one program administrator in a listserv post commenting on this statement, "It is easy to see how some teachers embrace both the remedial nature of the [AEP] and the idea of gatekeeping" (October 2008). Clearly, the program felt that it had a responsibility not just to students, but to the institution at large.

Although I never found evidence that the university had explicitly tasked the AEP with this "protective" function, the findings from our online survey of non-AEP faculty and teaching assistants did reveal that many saw remediation as the best and only way to address the needs of ESL writers. Among the responses were a number of calls for stricter entrance requirements and prerequisite instruction. A teaching assistant in the Communication department stated that "Many of them lack very basic skills that we assume they have when they get to our class." Another, from Engineering, posited that "stricter prerequisites for entry into the University, and into certain classes, would help students whose language skills still need remediation to receive that attention instead of failing classes." This sentiment was echoed by faculty and teaching assistants in a number of other departments, including Anthropology, Biology, and the Business School.

When asked what they did in their own classes or departments to support these students, the majority of survey respondents were able to

offer some examples of instructional strategies and/or academic resources. Still, many indicated that they were unwilling or unable to offer the level of support that was needed. Class size was one of the primary factors. As one faculty in Biology put it, “With large classes of 300+ in the intro level and 100+ at the 400 level, we don’t have the resources needed to provide ESL students individual support.” Other respondents were concerned about issues of fairness. As explained by one faculty member in the Business School, “I try to evaluate them relative to their background, but I don’t think it is appropriate for me to actually change the class to accommodate the ESL students.”

The AEP: A Fraught Institutional History

Given the sorts of comments presented above, it becomes easier to see how the AEP had come to believe that its students were a potential “burden” to instructors, and that a remedial curriculum was the best means of lessening that burden. Much of the tension evident in these statements is related to NGU’s admissions practices: The Admissions Office had been moving toward a holistic approach, officially announced in 2006, whereby no minimum test scores were required. In addition, NGU had longstanding reciprocity agreements with several local community colleges, and was expected to maintain strong representation from those colleges in the incoming student body—particularly among transfer students, many of whom were US permanent residents. Faculty both inside and outside the AEP frequently complained about what they saw as a persistent lowering of academic standards that had resulted from these admissions initiatives.

Within this context, the AEP came to the conclusion that its “mandate,” (a term often used in program meetings) was to address a pervasive problem of linguistic deficiency at NGU. Many AEP faculty were convinced, in fact, that non-AEP instructors were giving students a pass in terms of language, and that it was the AEP’s job to raise proficiency *beyond* what was needed for academic success. As explained by one on the program’s internal listserv, “I’ve heard time and again that professors feel compelled to lower their standards in order to accommodate the vast range of language skills they find in their students. . . . I’d really hate to just go with the flow in terms of what professors will let pass” (January 2006).⁶ In other words, the AEP’s sense of mission went beyond student support: the program felt its role was to create and enforce linguistic standards for the institution—to enact what Lalicker calls a “tough love” approach.

This mission of linguistic gate-keeping gave the program a sense of importance, but also put instructors in a difficult position, as the enforcer of standards that their own program had created. There was a persistent anxiety among instructors and administrators about whether the AEP could defend and validate its work to the institution. The heavy reliance on timed testing for placement and course completion was one means of demonstrating that the program's evaluation procedures were consistent and objective. While this testing-heavy model may have helped the AEP prove its worth to the institution, it caused many students to question the program's validity. As articulated by one survey participant, "The passing score for final exam is too high. I felt that the object of [AEP] course is not [to] help to improve English skills for student, [but] making money instead." Another wrote that "You should focus on teaching us how to pass the final . . . I feel waste of time and money for taking this class." Some of the most emotionally charged comments came from students who had worked hard in their classes and done well on homework assignments, but did not score high enough on the final exam. One wrote, "When I failed the final, I just wanted to quit school. I know that somebody, who does not take [AEP] classes, doesn't understand students' feelings."

Students were also angered by the fact that the diagnostic test, which placed them into AEP courses, had been designed by the program itself, and was said to be particularly difficult. As explained by one interview participant—a female undergraduate from China who had recently married a US citizen—"We thought that the program made the test really hard [so] only the most excellent can pass." This concern was echoed by other students as well. One survey respondent wrote that "The AEP test is bias. It seeks our failure, not our success."

These comments echo what many AEP instructors saw as an inescapable truth—that the program's mandate came from the institution, rather than from the students. When students' expectations were pitted against those of the university, the latter won. This dynamic produced strong feelings of resentment in students. One of my faculty/staff interview participants, a writing center administrator who supports undergraduates from underrepresented groups, put it this way: "They [AEP students] start to feel like 'This is a hoop I have to jump through. I fill out these little exercises, get the right answers, and then get out of here as quickly as I can.'" In her view, the curriculum was based on a myth: "Pass the test and you're cured," she called it.

These concerns were occasionally brought up in AEP program meetings, and more frequently in private conversations. One long-term instruc-

tor said openly in meetings that in terms of testing, the AEP could easily be seen as “the fox guarding the henhouse.” Other instructors told me they were worried that students, as well as other NGU staff committed to student support, saw them as the enemy. These sorts of comments reflect a high degree of frustration with the remedial mandate. Yet even greater than this frustration was the fear that questioning that mandate might result in the dismantling of the entire program.

An examination of the program’s institutional history helps to explain why this fear was so strong.⁷ The 1970s and 1980s were a time of high institutional vulnerability for the AEP. The program was passed back and forth multiple times between the English and Linguistics departments, because neither wanted responsibility for it. Leadership was also unstable during this time: Between 1975 and 1984, the program had six different directors, some of whom were graduate students. In 1984, the AEP was permanently relocated to the Office of Extension, a branch of the institution that operates autonomously, and includes mostly fee-based programs for non-matriculated students (e.g., professional certificates, community workshops, and summer programs). This arrangement gave the AEP more institutional stability, but also meant that the program had no departmental home and virtually no representation within faculty governance, where major decision-making occurs. As a result of its affiliation with Extension, the AEP’s administrative offices were moved to a business tower about a half-mile outside the university’s main campus. AEP faculty were ranked as Extension Lecturers, which gave them the lowest salary of any of the university’s full-time teaching staff. In addition to low pay, job security was a major concern, as most instructors’ employment was dependent completely on student enrollments, which varied with each quarter.

Although it seems most probable that the AEP had been moved to the Office of Extension for administrative ease, the story told internally was that the program had been officially demarcated as remedial, and that the state legislature had determined that remedial courses could not be covered by tuition. Therefore, it was said, the only place where the program’s fee-based, non-credit courses could be housed was in Extension. These assumptions were later found to be myths: The program had never been given a remedial mandate, at least not explicitly. In fact, prior to the 1990s, courses had been credit-bearing, and much more closely linked to other academic departments. Additionally, no law or policy preventing funding for remedial education could be found in the records of the state legislature.

Although there are a number of unanswered questions about the AEP's institutional history and the lore that accompanied it, what comes through most saliently is that the program was institutionally vulnerable for a number of years, and that this vulnerability had resulted in a persistent fear of dislocation or even disappearance. As it stood, the AEP was financially self-sustaining and administratively independent. The program had complete control over its curriculum and assessment practices, as long as it could demonstrate that it was fulfilling the remedial mandate. The program's work needed to be standardized and quantifiable. As explained in the program's Operating Constraints, the AEP needed to maintain an "accessible, clear, easy to implement" curriculum with "reliable" testing measures and exit criteria. Anything that could not be measured in a timed testing situation was seen as less reliable, and therefore threatening to the program.

On the part of students, however, these practices were often seen not as objective, but as discriminatory or even exploitative. One interview participant admitted that "The impression I had was that [NGU thinks] international students have money. They can pay without questioning, and they don't have this option for us to question." Another asked me directly, "Are you guys trying—I mean the program—to make more money out of the international students?" Survey responses echoed these concerns. One simply wrote, at the end of the survey, "Stop stealing students' money!"

Deconstructing the Remedial Identity

Our needs analysis data confirmed that the AEP was not meeting the academic needs of its students. Even worse, as illustrated above, the program was seen by many students as an obstacle, rather than an asset. Yet in late 2006, when AEP administrators and I began to present our initial findings to others in the program, we encountered significant resistance. They did not deny that the curriculum and policies needed to be reviewed. Yet they were afraid that that any substantive changes might lead to some form of institutional backlash. The existing model, despite its many flaws, met the expectations of most NGU faculty, who assumed that ESL students simply needed more grammar instruction in order to be successful as writers—an assumption often made by faculty without a background in second language acquisition (Del Principe; Ewert). Most in the AEP knew this to be untrue, but were reluctant to disrupt the status quo, fearing that the program might be criticized—or perhaps even dismantled—if it tried to shift away from a traditional remedial model. What was the AEP's institutional mandate,

many wondered, if not to remediate linguistic deficiencies? From 2006-2009, despite the clear direction indicated by our research findings, the curriculum remained frozen, with only minor changes to testing and grading procedures. It became clear that real reform would not happen without pressure—or at least input—from outside the AEP.

Two initiatives were undertaken in 2008-2009, which helped to provide this input. The first was a cross-departmental working group that brought instructors (mostly graduate students) from the English department's Writing Program into dialogue with those in the AEP. One impetus for the formation of this group was a rarely-discussed claim on the AEP's website—that the program could “help students who are non-native speakers of English achieve the linguistic level of native-speaking incoming freshmen.” It seemed logical, then, that the Writing Program for first-years might serve as some sort of curricular context for the AEP. At the same time, many in the Writing Program had expressed a desire for pedagogical strategies and resources to meet the needs of multilingual/ESL writers. As explained by one English faculty member on the online survey, “[the AEP] operates in relative isolation from other writing programs. So we need to share resources better and learn from each other.”

The meetings, which first began as informational sessions, resulted eventually in two new collaborative course offerings, which were piloted in 2008 and have been offered each quarter since: First is a two-credit studio course, which is open to any multilingual/ESL student enrolled in the Writing Program, and is capped at ten students. The second is a linked model, in which a cohort of students enrolls in two back-to-back courses—one in the Writing Program and the other in the AEP. The instructors for both courses work closely together and share curricular content. These courses not only meet curricular needs, but also ensure a long-term, collaborative relationship between the AEP and the Writing Program. They also set a precedent for offering academic credit for some of the AEP's coursework.

The second major initiative was an institution-wide task force that was formed in 2008 to look at the university's language policies. This group was formed in part due to political pressures: An editorial article had been published in a local newspaper, criticizing NGU for recruiting low-income, first-generation immigrant students and then requiring additional coursework and tuition fees from many of them. At least one student had also threatened the university with a lawsuit, claiming that the AEP's policies amounted to discrimination by nation of origin. Several affiliates of the AEP, myself included, were invited to join the task force, alongside representatives from

Admissions, the Registrar's Office, the Office of Diversity, and other entities with a vested interest in the multilingual/ESL student population. This group began to look at some of the conditions and policies that had constrained the program, eventually articulating a list of recommendations for how the AEP, and NGU as a whole, might better support these students.

Both of these initiatives were significant in that they decreased the AEP's institutional isolation, which in turn led to a reconsideration of the remedial mandate. Two questions began to emerge from these conversations, and helped the AEP to re-envision its institutional identity: 1) What writing standards has the university articulated for all students? and 2) How does the AEP's work fit within those standards? Many in the AEP were surprised to find that very few university-wide academic standards had been articulated beyond the list of course requirements for general education and degree completion. After participating on the task force for several months, one of the program administrators wrote an internal memo in which he articulated his conclusion that "the entire edifice of [NGU's] undergraduate education as far as standards for incoming students or outcomes required for graduation is basically 'turtles all the way down.'" Consequently, he said, "we should feel quite free to invent our own curricular mandate for the AEP, because nobody else is going to do it for us. And really, this is only common sense. Who knows better than us?" (November 2008).

Although the "turtles" metaphor might seem cynical, it was quite effective as a rhetorical device for helping the AEP confront an inconvenient truth—that there was no universal linguistic "mandate" that had been agreed upon by NGU. Without such a mandate, it seemed clear that the AEP's institutional function could only be determined within the context of specific departments and programs, and in relation to the academic goals of students. The AEP could not on its own truly *remediate* anyone; it could only *mediate* (and help students mediate) within the academic curriculum. This notion of being non-remedial incited a variety of responses from AEP instructors. While some thought that it opened up exciting possibilities, others felt that it left the program without any sense of direction. After a series of listserv discussions about what next steps should be taken in terms of curriculum, one instructor wrote, "We are all talking about stuff, but it's slightly different stuff, and we are simply not on the same page about what the [AEP] is. Let's maybe answer that question first" (October 2008). This same sentiment was echoed in program meetings over the next several months. The AEP seemed to know what it was moving away from, but not what it should be moving toward.

A pivotal turning point came in a presentation at the AEP faculty meeting in February 2009, when the program director began to articulate an alternative identity for the program—a shift from remediation to support. The university “is responsible for its own admission and graduation standards,” he explained. “We are to provide academic support to those who have been admitted in spite of limited English Proficiency.” His presentation ended with a slide that said, “We are not fixing everything. We are merely (!) designing curriculum to support multi-lingual students (and thus diversity)” (punctuation original). This was the first time I had heard the word “diversity” mentioned explicitly as part of the AEP’s vision. At the end of his presentation, the director encouraged the curriculum committee to return to the needs analysis data that had been collected in 2006 and 2007, to provide direction for reform. Even before this, some in the AEP had already begun to talk about these data as the new “mandate” for the program: “We’ve identified the needs these students have, not by means of some [NGU] mandate,” wrote one listserv participant, “but by working with the students, talking with them about the demands of their courses and now, talking with others who instruct them and attempt to help them on campus” (October 2008).

By May 2009, a new curriculum had been developed and was ready to be piloted during the summer quarter. Over the next two years, the curriculum and policies continued to evolve, and have come to include several credit-bearing courses, more extensive reading and writing instruction, and a multi-pronged approach to assessment whereby assignments—not just timed tests—count toward the final grade. Instructors have also outlined goals for ongoing needs analysis and curriculum review. Many of them now gather feedback from students at the beginning, middle, and end of their courses, using surveys, reflective writing assignments, and more open-ended course evaluation forms. These measures provide regular input on students’ experiences not just in the AEP, but across the curriculum. A number of students have commented that the new courses are much more relevant to their academic needs. One wrote on an addendum to the course evaluation, “I am certain that I’ll use all of the styles that we learn in this course. In fact, I’ve been using some of the writing styles in my other humanities class.” Another said, “I am a law school student, so these writing [skills] actually help me now!!!” (punctuation original). Students from a variety of other disciplines—including Business, Chemistry, International Studies, and Social Work—have given similar feedback. The AEP has begun to assume a “mediation” role in other ways as well, consulting more frequently with

the English department's Writing Program, as well as with several campus Writing Centers.

There are some lingering effects of the AEP's remedial past, however. Placement into courses is still based on standardized test scores, although the in-house diagnostic test has been revised significantly to be a more authentic assessment of language proficiency. Students who are placed into the program are still subject to a prescriptive curriculum sequence, and those who are not successful in completing the prescribed courses may have holds placed on their registration. Perhaps the most salient vestige of a remediation model, though, is that courses are not covered by tuition, and therefore continue to be a financial burden for students. In addition, the AEP continues to be institutionally marginalized. It is still housed in the Office of Extension, and instructors' working conditions have remained the same—or perhaps even worsened—with the recent economic climate. These dynamics seem unlikely to change in the near future, although conversation about them is much more prevalent than it had been in years prior.

Discussion

This case study confirms, but also complicates, much of what has been written about curriculum reform in basic writing. First is that reform is as much about process as it is about product, and often brings to light philosophical disagreements among writing teachers, or between the writing program and the university administration (Del Principe; Ewert). Effective curriculum reform efforts usually require extensive and often contentious dialogue among multiple stakeholders to help articulate these differences and find common ground. Within the AEP, however, the disagreement was not about what was desirable for the curriculum, but about what was possible for the program. Instructors and administrators needed a greater understanding of how the university functioned so that they could evaluate the level of risk involved in re-defining their program. In this case, the dialogue might have been more productive early on, if it had been less insular, and included individuals with a broader institutional perspective. To identify these individuals, however, the program would have already needed a certain level of institutional understanding. Because it lacked a departmental home, and was not included in faculty committees and other decision-making bodies, the AEP had few if any opportunities to interact with potential institutional allies. The program's marginalized position in the university prevented it from recognizing what information it was lacking, as well as what expertise

it had to offer to the broader conversations about writing and learning that were already taking place. In essence, this case study illustrates how institutional isolation breeds ignorance and alienation.

Existing literature also reveals that there is often a tipping point at which change begins to happen. In Doreen Ewert's case, two factors—a call for increased programmatic integration and a change in institutional leadership—served to disrupt the status quo (9). Top-down initiatives like these often help programs to acknowledge and emerge from the remedial rut. In the case of NGU, the establishment of an institution-wide task force certainly played a major role. However, it is probable that this task force alone would not have been a sufficient catalyst for reform. If the AEP had not already laid the groundwork for change through needs analysis and collaboration with the Writing Program, the task force recommendations might not have had much of an impact. The task force was able to validate and scale-up the work that had already begun. For programs awaiting top-down reform *before* exploring curricular possibilities, this narrative offers a warning and a call to action.

This case also illustrates that language matters—not just the academic language we teach in our courses, but the language we use to talk about our programs. The AEP's focus on students' linguistic deficits, rather than on their assets, was infused into the discourse of its mission statement, programmatic documents, and curricular conversations. Beginning to talk about students as “multilingual” and about the program as “support”—both words that now appear prominently on the program's website—helped to facilitate a paradigm shift from deficiency to diversity. Of course, these discursive changes alone would not have been sufficient, and NGU as an institution still reflects a deficiency orientation in many of its policies. Nevertheless, having a new discourse with which to re-define itself was pivotal to the AEP's progress.

The story of this particular program helps to illustrate why the status quo is so difficult to counteract in programs that have been operating within a traditional remedial model. Such a model expects those programs to prioritize the needs of the institution over those of students, thereby reinforcing the notion that language difference is an issue of deficiency, rather than diversity. These expectations come to define, shape, and constrain the program—particularly if that program is already economically or politically vulnerable. Only by engaging explicitly in a process of redefinition, and forming alliances with other entities committed to student support and institutional mediation, can such programs escape the remedial rut. By

viewing curriculum reform as institutional identity construction, we can better understand the nature of resistance and the possibilities for change both inside and outside of our basic writing programs.

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Notes

1. Throughout this paper, I use the term “traditional remedial” to refer to a particular type of remedial instruction that is most closely aligned with William Lalicker’s “baseline” or “prerequisite” model. I recognize that there are many remedial programs that implement alternative models. For this reason, I am distinguishing between “remedial education” as an enterprise which might include a variety of curriculum models, and a “traditional remedial model” as a particular configuration of curricula, policies, and practices within that enterprise.
2. In my analysis, I often employ the hybrid term “multilingual/ESL” in order to recognize the need for diversity-oriented labels (e.g., “multilingual”), but also with the knowledge that the term “ESL” has a much greater history within basic writing and may be more easily recognized.
3. This is a pseudonym that has been used in other publications about this same program and institution.
4. I was told by one administrator that these complaints had been documented in a non-AEP faculty survey of some kind, but I was unable to locate a copy of the survey or its findings.

5. The Operations Manual is a collection of documents referenced by AEP instructors and administrators, including lists of goals and operating constraints for the program. Some of the language quoted here was changed in later versions of the manual.
6. I have chosen to withhold the names of listserv respondents to preserve confidentiality.
7. Here I draw on a timeline in the AEP's Instructor Manual, as well as on a research paper written by a graduate student who worked with the AEP in the 1990s.

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Appendix A:
Student Survey Questions

1. I am . . . (check \surd one) ___ a U.S. resident ___ an international student (Foreign visa) ___ other:
2. I am . . . (check \surd one) ___ a graduate student ___ an undergraduate ___ other:
3. What is your major/area of study? (or What do you plan to major in?)

4. What [AEP] course(s) are you currently taking? (Circle)
5. What [AEP] courses have you taken? (Circle all)
6. How many quarters have you taken [AEP] courses? (Circle) 1 2 3 4 5 6+
7. What do you think should be the focus of [AEP] courses?
Rank from 1 to 5 (1 = most important; 5 = least important.)
___ Grammar ___ Listening/Speaking ___ Reading ___ Vocabulary
___ Writing
8. What do you need help with most in your classes? **Check (\surd) up to 4**
___ speaking: oral presentations
___ lecture listening/listening comprehension
___ speaking: participating in class/group discussions
___ reading speed and comprehension
___ speaking: pronunciation
___ study and/or research skills
___ writing: developing ideas and arguments (content)
___ vocabulary: oral and written
___ writing: grammar, sentence structure and punctuation
___ writing: organization
___ **other:** _____
9. What **types of writing** do you most need to practice for your other classes? **Check (\surd) 3**
___ business letters
___ class notes
___ creative stories, poems, etc.
___ interpreting / analyzing texts
___ laboratory reports
___ personal responses to reading
___ persuasive writing

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_____ project proposals

_____ research papers

_____ **other:** _____

10. What parts of your AEP courses have been **most** helpful?

11. What parts of the AEP courses have **not** been as helpful?

12. Other comments/questions: (changes / suggestions for our program, etc.)

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Appendix B:
Student Interview Outline

- 1) Background Information
 - a. What is your family and language background?
 - b. Where are you in your studies?
 - c. How are you feeling currently?
- 2) History at [NGU]
 - a. Which courses were easiest/ most challenging for you?
 - b. Which assignments were most challenging?
 - c. Overall strengths, weaknesses, and areas of growth over time
 - d. What did instructors/programs do that helped you? (How can an instructor support [AEP] students?)
 - e. What other resources helped you?
- 3) [AEP]
 - a. History- Which courses have you taken? When?
 - b. What do you remember most? (about program and about individual courses)
 - c. Specific skills you found useful/not useful for your other classes
 - d. What did you think before/during/after course sequence? (about requirement, about courses, about self as learner)
- 4) Curriculum specifics- How important have the following been for you?
 - a. Grammar (What helps you improve?)
 - b. Writing (Has your writing improved over time? How/Why? How do you know?)
 - c. Academic vocabulary
- 5) How do you think the [AEP] (and the university) might better support ESL students?

Appendix C:
Faculty/TA (Non-AEP) Online Survey

1. With which department or program on campus are you affiliated?
2. Which of the following best describes your position at the AEP:
Teaching Associate (TA); Faculty; Administrator or Advisor;
Instructional Consultant
Other:
3. Based on your experience, approximately how many of your students would be classified as “ESL” or “non-native speakers”?
4. Of the skills that are most important for success in your class, in which of these areas do ESL students need the most support? (please select up to 4 from the list below)

lecture listening/listening comprehension

reading speed and comprehension

writing: developing ideas and arguments (content)

writing: grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation

writing: organization

speaking: oral presentations

speaking: participating in class/small group discussions

speaking: pronunciation

study and/or research skills

vocabulary: oral and written

Other:

5. (Instructors only): What forms of assessment do you use **most commonly** in your courses (choose up to 3)

Exams / Quizzes: Multiple choice and short answer

Exams / Quizzes: Long response and/or essay

Short writing assignments (1-3 pages)

Longer writing assignments (4 or more pages)

Journals

Projects and/or Presentations

Other:

6. What strategies do you use (or are aware of your department using) to support ESL students’ work in the classroom?

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7. What ways have you and/or your department/organization found to support students **outside** the classroom?
8. Do you have any recommendations for how the needs of ESL students might be better addressed **inside** and/or **outside** your department?
9. Do you have any comments on the clarity or content of this survey?