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ABSTRACT

Although Mina Shaughnessy remains influential in the basic writing field, her answers to the vital questions of who basic writers are and why they underachieve as writers are changing. Whether she intended to or not, Shaughnessy's book "Errors and Expectations" (published in 1977) was a major force in forming an image of basic writers as urban and of lower socio-economic status--aliens in academe, whose writing skills were weak and who were represented by a high percentage of minorities. She stressed their inexperience with standard English, with writing in general, with academic writing in particular. In the 1990s, the term "basic writer" is far more inclusive. Basic writers are described as diverse--different only from each other and coming from a variety of backgrounds. Four often interrelated reasons for writing underachievement are now stressed: (1) a more universal kind of inexperience among students, one cutting across socio-economic and dialectic lines; (2) the acknowledgement by educators of students' lack of interest in writing and reading; (3) the influence of biochemical irregularities (hypoactivity, hyperactivity, and attentional disorders) as factors in the low achievement of a number of students; and (4) the acknowledgement of the role of learning disabilities in basic writers' difficulties. Changing answers to Shaughnessy's questions will be influential forces in shaping basic writing programs as educators move further into the 1990s. (Contains 18 referneces.) (RS)

MINA SHAUGHNESSY IN THE 1990s:

SOME CHANGING ANSWERS IN BASIC WRITING

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When Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations appeared in 1977, it gave shape and direction--even a name--to the emerging basic writing field. Ten years after the book's publication, Theresa Enos, in A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers, notes that "Shaughnessy's conception of basic writers has informed and transformed our consciousness of basic writing and the skills of basic writers" (v). In this brief talk, however, I want to summarize how, although Shaughnessy remains revered and influential, her answers to two vital questions--WHO are basic writers? and WHY are they underachieving as writers?--have been changed.

Shaughnessy's apparent answer to the first question--who are basic writers?--is found in the opening pages of Errors and Expectations. There she describes three categories of students tested by the City University of New York's open admissions system. The first two categories were 1) "competent readers and writers . . . who met the traditional requirements for college work"; and 2) students resembling "academic stragglers of another era" whose writing reflected only a "flat competence," who found "no fun nor challenge in academic tasks," and who "had tended to end up in 'bonehead English'" (2). In the third group were the students who scored lowest in the testing, "true outsiders," (3) most of whom probably would not have been admitted to college in the past. These students were the inspiration for Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations.

Shaughnessy's descriptions of these students are, of course,

well known. She regarded them as a homogenous group; and she emphasized their difference from traditional college students. They had, she wrote, "difficulties with the written language [that] seemed, by college standards, of a different order from those of the other groups, as if they had come, you might say, from a different country, or at least through different schools, where even very modest standards of high-school literacy had not been met" (2, emphasis mine). These students were different not only academically, but culturally and linguistically: "Most of them had grown up in one of New York's ethnic or racial enclaves. Many had spoken other languages or dialects at home" (3).

Whether she intended to or not, with such descriptions of her students and then generalized statements about "basic writing students," Shaughnessy was a major force in forming an image of basic writers as urban and of a lower socio-economic status--aliens in academe, whose writing skills were stunningly weak and who were, as a group, represented by a high percentage of minorities.

Shaughnessy also gave a strong answer as to WHY the writing skills of basic writers lagged behind those of traditional students. She stressed their INEXPERIENCE--inexperience with standard English, with writing in general, with academic writing in particular. Throughout Errors and Expectations, Shaughnessy points to basic writers' lack of practice with the physical act of writing and their lack of familiarity "with written sentence patterns" (66) that are not "part of [their] native speech" (72)

or "dialect" (45).

Shaughnessy explicitly rejects two other reasons: lack of effort/interest and weak verbal skills. She insists that basic writing students are NOT "indifferent to . . . academic excellence" and NOT "slow," "non-verbal" or "incapable" (5). In particular, she rejects a factor that was gaining increasing attention during the 70s: learning disabilities, defined by the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children in 1968 as disorders "in one or more of the basic . . . . [cognitive] processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language" (in Coles, 12). For example, while Shaughnessy sensitively describes the spelling errors of her students as "a visual slurring of configurations so extreme at times as to suggest . . . a perceptual disorder rather than mere inexperience," she relates such errors only to their background: "Certainly were such errors to appear in the papers of [the] academically advantaged, . . . there would be good reason to explore the possibility of an underlying disorder. But where students have had limited practice in reading and writing, they cannot be expected to be able to make visual discriminations of the sort most people learn to make only after years of practice and instruction" (174).

In the years following Errors and Expectations, perhaps partly because Shaughnessy's advice applied so well to various types of underprepared writers, individuals in the composition field expanded her apparently limited definition of basic writers

and, correspondingly, her explanation for their underachievement.

First, the definition: today the term "basic writer" is far more inclusive. Basic writers are described as diverse--different only from each other, and coming from a variety of backgrounds. They include students in Shaughnessy's second category, those who wrote with only a "flat competence," found no fun in writing, and tended to end up in "bonehead English." Indeed, the term "basic writer" seemed often to be used as a synonym for all those postsecondary underprepared students that had formerly been referred to as "remedial" or "developmental"; Lynn Troyka asserts in a 1987 article that the use of the new term represented but a "semantic switch" (3). Presumably using this definition of basic writer, Troyka examined a national sample of 109 "basic writers'" essays, and was struck by the "dramatic" differences among them, both in weaknesses and in strengths. Other studies--for example, Jensen's (1986) and Minot and Gamble's (1991)--likewise challenged the concept of basic writers as a homogenous group. Lunsford and Sullivan, in their 1990 essay "Who Are Basic Writers?," summarize the new view with an effective image: what has emerged from studies of "basic writers" during the last two decades, they wrote, is "no clear, well-defined photograph, but a shifting, protean image." (27).

In light of this expanded image of basic writers, cross-disciplinary studies in such fields as linguistics and cognitive psychology, and simply classroom experience, a number of additional, often interrelated reasons for writing

underachievement are stressed today. I will briefly describe four of these reasons.

First, there is a more universal kind of inexperience, one cutting across socio-economic, and dialectic lines: the effect of our increasingly oral American culture. In 1979 Gary Sloan published an article documenting the effects of "oral culture" by contrasting errors in 2,000 freshman themes with grades of C or above, half of them written from 1950-57, and half from 1973-76. He notes that in the later themes, oral English errors were "astonishingly more pervasive" (156). Rubin and Dodd point out in Talking into Writing (1987) that both nonstandard and standard dialect speakers "who rely on oral modes of interaction can experience [similar] problems in adapting to a literate [written] style of communication" (3-4). With the increasing sophistication and accessibility of technology--the cable networks, VCRs, individual telephones, video games, and walkmans, students are even more likely to hear than to see language, and the written language that they do read (in ads or newspapers) is often close to being transcription of oral dialect. In short, we have expanded Shaughnessy's idea of inexperience.

Second, educators seem increasingly willing to acknowledge that a reason for much writing underachievement is students' lack interest in writing and reading. Indeed, in the 1981 Dictionary of Reading and Related Terms, published by the International Reading Association, we find the term illiteracy distinguished from a new term--aliteracy. Illiteracy is defined as the

inability to read or write, particularly due to lack of education, while aliteracy is a "lack of the reading habit, especially a lack in capable readers who choose not to read" (emphasis mine)--and, we can add, I think, "or write." Along these same lines, Thomas Toch, author of In the Name of Excellence a 1991 study of American education, tells us that "by one estimate as many as two thirds of the nation's public secondary students are 'disengaged' from their studies"--and such attitudes, states Toch, occur in "affluent suburban schools as well as their urban and rural counterparts" (235). Many underachieving writers, then, simply prefer not to read or write --just as I prefer not to spend Saturday afternoons watching football games on television. This preference is not necessarily a result of emotional or psychological conditions such as anxiety, depression, or lack of self-esteem.

Third, biochemical irregularities, have gained increased understanding as factors in the low achievement of a number of students--in high school and college, not just in grade school. Three of the most common biochemical irregularities are hypoactivity, hyperactivity, and attentional disorders. Hypoactive students are slow, "overfocused. They ponder too long, are overly attentive to details, and cannot arrive at decisions rapidly. They are lethargic, sluggish, and need more sleep" (Smith 101). Hyperactive students, as children, have been described as "unleashed tornadoes" (in Smith 100); in adolescence they may "remain fidgety, restless, impulsive. . . . Study may be

difficult for more that a few minutes at a time." Attentional disorders, often appearing with hyperactivity, are marked by distractibility and an inability to concentrate. One adolescent with this condition compared his mind to "a television set on which someone is always switching channels" (Smith 106). Obviously such conditions affect student writing.

Finally, the role of learning disabilities in basic writers has become much more widely acknowledged. Before 1981, LD theory was interpreted as suggesting that cognitive disorders could not be diagnosed in a student if there were any other major obstacle to that student's learning--such as "environmental disadvantage." This interpretation accounts, no doubt, for Shaughnessy's views of the subject. And, in fact, students identified as LD during the 70s were usually from middle or upper socioeconomic levels (see Coles, The Learning Mystique, 1987, 12 and xii-xiii). In 1981, however, the definition of "learning disability" was reworded; the revision made clear that students whose writing is below their expected potential because of background (or some other major obstacle, such as physical handicaps) may, in addition, be learning disabled. (See Hammill et. al., 1981, 336). This clarification, along with the expanded image of basic writers, the establishment of LD programs in many colleges (Peterson's 1985 Guide lists 302), and numerous articles and books on the subject (Coles; Lazarus; McAlexander, Dobie, and Gregg; McAlexander and Gregg; O'Hearn; and Richards) has resulted in teachers' growing awareness that learning disabilities may

play a role in students' writing weaknesses.

Only relatively recently, I think, have the numerous bits and pieces of these new answers--and others--begun to come together, but I predict that as a result, we will find certain trends in today's basic writing programs increasing. Three in particular are 1) more employment of oral communication activities and audiovisual media in teaching writing (to respond to problems of inexperience and motivation); 2) increasing attention to the biochemical conditions of students, through teacher awareness and counseling programs; and 3) more basic writers (and college students in general) recognized and supported as learning disabled.

These changing "answers" to the questions, "Who are basic writers?" and, "What are the reasons for their underachievement?" will, in short, be influential forces in shaping basic writing programs as we move further into the 90s.

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