

# Troubling Discourse: Basic Writing and Computer-Mediated Technologies

Leigh A. Jonaitis

*ABSTRACT: Through an examination of literature in the fields of Basic Writing and developmental education, this essay provides some historical perspective and examines the prevalent discourses on the use of computer-mediated technologies in the basic writing classroom. The author uses Bertram Bruce's (1997) framework of various "stances" on literacy technologies to both contextualize discussion of technology in the field of Basic Writing and to consider implications for further discussion and research. By emphasizing the interrelatedness of technology and literacy, a "transactional" stance on computer-mediated technologies relies on the idea of literacy as a social practice, and would therefore align better with the overall values of the field of Basic Writing.*

*KEYWORDS: basic writing; computers; technology; discourse*

In discussing the various "hopeful threads" of the first twenty years of the journal *Computers and Composition*, Charles Moran reminded the field of the "strong and persistent hope that computers would specifically advantage basic writers" (350). Despite the dramatic increase in technology usage on college campuses and research done on the use of computers in writing courses, this hope has not been fully realized. In basic writing classrooms, computer-mediated technologies often seem to be viewed as "add-ons," and in some cases, limited to word processing rather than online learning. In a recent exploration, Linda Stine finds that little is being said about basic writers and online education; accordingly, she calls for basic writing teachers and students to participate more fully in the online learning debate ("Basically Unheard" 141). Though still not fully realized, the hope that computers will benefit basic writers persists.

As a community college instructor who has taught online composition and hybrid courses for basic writers for over twelve years, I am especially interested in the ways in which faculty view the use of computer-mediated technologies with basic writers. My experiences as an online instructor and

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**Leigh A. Jonaitis** is Professor of English at Bergen Community College, where she has taught basic writing and composition courses, including online and hybrid courses, since 2000. She has served as Department Chair of English Basic Skills and as Adjunct Coordinator. She currently serves on the Regional Executive Committee of the Two-Year College English Association-Northeast (TYCA).

writing program administrator of a community college basic writing program have continually re-shaped the ways with which I work and consider technology in the basic writing classroom. Such rethinking has led me to examine, interrogate, and "trouble" the prevalent discourses on the use of computer-mediated technologies in the basic writing classroom through current literature in the fields of Basic Writing and developmental education. This kind of work is even more important in light of Susan Naomi Bernstein's recent call for reinvigorated support for the 1974 NCTE "Resolution for Motivated but Inadequately Prepared Students" and her specific recommendation that basic writing educators provide students "with necessary resources for obtaining an equitable education." While technology is not specifically mentioned as one of these resources, it can be inferred. I argue that not only must we recognize technology as one of several resources needed for an equitable education, but also consider how any use (or non-use) of technology in the basic writing classroom has political implications for our students' access to equitable education.

As such, I consider how the field of Basic Writing has framed the use of computer-mediated technologies with basic writers by using Bertram Bruce's (1997) framework of various "stances" on literacy technologies. Bruce articulates seven possible stances that educators can and do take towards computer-mediated technologies before ultimately urging educators to think beyond the separate entities of "literacy" and "technology." Bruce advocates for a transactional view of technologies, which "tells us that technologies do not transform or determine literacies, nor could they ever be irrelevant to literacy practices. Instead, they are part of the continual reconstruction of literacies" (303). By emphasizing the interrelatedness of technology and literacy, a transactional stance on computer-mediated technologies relies on the idea of literacy as a social practice. This essay examines how a transactional view would therefore provide a better starting point for those concerned with access issues in Basic Writing.

## Discourse and Defining the Basic Writer

Proponents of New Literacy Studies (see Kress; Gee; Lankshear et al.; Street) point out that "reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and we can add historical, political, and economic) practices of which they are but a part" (Gee "New Literacy Studies" 177). James Paul Gee's definition of discourse is taken from a sociolinguistic perspective:

“Discourses” are characteristic (socially and culturally formed, but historically changing) ways of talking and writing about, as well as acting with and towards people and things (ways which are circulated and sustained within various texts, artifacts, images, social practices, and institutions, as well as in moment-to-moment social interactions) such that certain perspectives and states of affairs come to be taken as “normal” or “natural” and others come to be taken as “deviant” or “marginal” (e.g., what counts as a “normal” prisoner, hospital patient, or student, or a “normal” prison, hospital, or school, at a given time and place). (“New Literacy Studies” 180)

Bruce Horner depicts what he calls the various discourses that have been used in the field of Basic Writing<sup>1</sup> since its inception at City College over 30 years ago. Such discourses include a “Horatio Alger” discourse, in which Basic Writing gave students “power” to succeed; a separate (but certainly unequal) discourse, in which students in remedial programs were perceived as being “at a particular stage in a natural sequence of learning” (208); and a “frontier” discourse, in which teachers of Basic Writing were considered “pioneers” of a “new profession” (210). Horner also contrasts the public discourse surrounding Basic Writing with the discourses used in the field itself, stating that “until discourse on the teaching of writing recovers the specific historical, material, institutional, and political context of that teaching and that discourse, it will be difficult for us to hear what study of the historical experience of literacy has to say” (220). As Horner makes clear, it is important to recognize the contexts in which such discourses about Basic Writing develop.

The use of computers in the basic writing classroom often falls into three categories: computer-assisted composition (word processing); computer-aided instruction, which is often self-paced, such as grammar drills that are assessed by a computer program; and computer-mediated communication, which includes online programs and discussions. Much of the research initially done on the use of technology with basic writers was on computer-assisted composition. Discussions were often focused on how basic writers either don’t have access to computer-mediated technologies or whether or not word processing benefits them (see Moran; Crafton). More recently, there has been speculation about how the online environment can be beneficial to basic writers (Pavia), and whether fully-online courses for basic writers are advisable (Stine).

These are important considerations; however, as technology develops, there is a need to recover the context of these discourses in much the same

way Horner urges us to do so with all discourse in Basic Writing. Some basic writers use mobile devices to communicate on a regular basis with friends and family, but have difficulty composing an essay on a computer. One basic writing class may meet in a computer lab where students are expected to develop an online portfolio of their work; another class might be required to take a final handwritten exit exam. We must specifically acknowledge how our basic writers use technology in their everyday lives, how that compares with how they are expected to use technology in the classroom, and what that might mean for our practice as teachers.

Pamela Gay challenges Stephen Bernhardt and Patricia Wojahn’s assertion that much of what has been written about the use of computers and writing instruction “can be applied equally as well to both general and basic writing classes” (qtd. in Gay 72). While acknowledging that the field of basic writing can benefit from the research done in computer and composition, she points out that in considering the impact of computers on basic writing, “we also need to build on prior research with this (diverse) group of students placed in basic writing classes if we want to advance our learning and improve the teaching of basic writing” (72). I would add to this that we must not only consider the population we teach in basic writing classes, but also the implications of placing students in classes that do not award credit, and how the decision to not use computers—or to limit the use of computers in these classes—is ultimately a political choice, even if the motive behind such a move appears benign (faculty not having experience with computers, for example). Viewing technology as separate from literacy, for example, can permit teachers to unwittingly participate in a further stratification of our students. If we define the basic writer as a student who does not place into first-year writing at a specific institution, then this localized definition in turn creates the basic writer. As David Bartholomae points out, “we have defined basic writing (as a form or style of writing) by looking at the writing that emerges in basic writing courses....We know who basic writers are, in other words, because they are the students in classes we label ‘Basic Writing’” (“Writing on the Margins” 112). Elsewhere, Bartholomae critiques developmental psychology as a way to think about basic writers:

Basic writers, we are asked to imagine, work with a style that is preacademic. They are caught in some earlier step in cognitive development (at the level of concrete rather than formal operations, for example), or they belong to a culture that is pretextual (an oral culture, like those that preceded the development of alphabetic writing) and that

hinders the cognitive development required for literate participation in a textual culture. (“Teaching Basic Writing” 114)

The developmental approach, as Bartholomae critiques above, assumes that there is a linear progression that can occur from error-based writing to academic writing. Such an assumption is present in literature about the use of technology with basic writers—the developmental “linear progression” in these fields might begin at one end with word processing and end with fully-online courses at the other. However, if technology and literacy are not seen as separate realms, but rather, as inextricably linked, and students have more advanced experience with literacy technologies than their teachers, then it is important to question a pedagogy that works within a developmental structure. Could it be that those of us who teach basic writing construct a hierarchy of literacy technologies as a way to make ourselves feel “safe” in uncharted territories?

In resisting the “autonomous model of literacy,” Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington echo Bruce Horner in reminding practitioners to consider the contexts within which our basic writers write. If, as they claim, Basic Writing is a “political act,” it follows that the various uses (or non-uses) of computer-mediated technologies with basic writing are also political acts, each asserting claims about what basic writers can or cannot do. The desire to study basic writers’ use of the computer as separate from first-year composition is also a political act. Thus, Bernhardt and Wojahn’s claim that “much of what has been written [about writers and computers] can be applied equally well to both general and basic writing classes” (166) might not be viewed as a dismissal of the importance of basic writers’ use of computer-mediated technologies, but rather, as an acknowledgement of the very elusiveness of the term “basic writer.” If basic writers are defined locally by the contexts in which they are taught, then the study of computer-mediated technologies with basic writers is also a local construction.

If each use of computers with basic writers can be seen as a “political act,” then what kind of politics does each act adopt? Some historical perspective may prove helpful here. In the 1990s, scholars in the field of Computers and Composition (Barton; Romano; Hawisher and Selfe), called for a more critical view of technology: one that would reexamine what they viewed as the essentially positive discourse(s) of the time. Ellen Barton analyzes what she calls the “discourses of technology.” One, the “dominant discourse,” is characterized by “an optimistic interpretation of technology’s progress in American culture,” while the other, in her view represented by the theoretical

scholarship in English studies at the time, is the “antidominant discourse,” characterized by “a skeptical interpretation of technology’s integration in contemporary culture and education” (56). She equates the antidominant discourse with scholars on the cultural Left and the dominant discourse with neoconservative critics. Framing the various perspectives on technology as an either/or debate is helpful to a point, but does not address the multiple views of researchers, faculty, and students. As technology advanced and computers were increasingly used in writing classrooms, a greater variety of perspectives inevitably emerged.

Writing in 1997, Bertram Bruce acknowledges this variety by providing a useful framework for categorizing the faculty and scholarly discourses about the use of computers with students. Based on his interactions with literacy and technologies, he articulates seven possible “stances” that educators and researchers can (and do) take. These stances are described as “neutral,” “opposition(al),” “utilitarian,” “skeptical,” “transformational,” “aesthetic,” or “transactional” (290). Some of Bruce’s stances are more aligned with the “dominant discourse” that Barton describes—that is, an essentially positive view of technology—while others could be seen as “antidominant.” Others don’t fit as neatly into such a binary. Even so, Bruce acknowledges that his is “an incomplete list of possible positions one might assume with respect to new technologies” (291). Therefore, I use Bruce’s stances on literacy technologies here merely as a way to begin to imagine new possibilities for the way basic writing teachers and scholars both view and use computer-mediated technologies with their students.

### **Opposition(al) and Skeptical Stances on Technology**

According to Bruce, one who subscribes to an “oppositional” stance feels that “the inevitable uses of technology for surveillance, regimentation, and social stratification far outweigh the alleged benefits” (290). On the other hand, one who subscribes to a “skeptical” stance “does not see great dangers in technology, just overblown rhetoric about it” (291). An oppositional stance is more likely to be found among faculty opposed to the use of technology with basic writing students, and less likely to be found in scholarship. This is probably a result of the nature of scholarship, and the overall pressure to use computer-mediated technologies in all disciplines at the college level. The “skeptical” stance is more likely to be found in basic writing research, even in work that would align itself mostly with the “utilitarian” or “transformational” stances. For example, working under the assumption that there

is pressure to incorporate technology in basic writing classrooms, Catherine Matthews Pavia uses computers “only for word processing” in her basic writing classes, rather than more “complex” uses of computer-mediated technologies like Web page authorship (20).

Rather than a conscious rejection, most resistance to more current technologies comes from what I believe is a tacit assumption about what students supposedly need in order to pass a basic writing course. In some contexts, more “complex” uses of technology can be seen as an example of what Jeanne Gunner calls “critical” discourse. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s theory of the author function, Gunner outlines tenets of “iconic” and “critical” discourse in *Basic Writing*. Iconic discourse “reproduces the field according to certain laws, always in relation to the iconic text and figure,” while critical discourse “is transgressive, challenging the laws and the icon, and so is received with hostility by the traditional Basic Writing community” (27). According to Gunner, iconic discourse emphasizes the binaries of educator/administrator, teacher/scholar, and practitioner/theorist, and thus revolves around the construction of the altruistic and self-negating “iconic teacher-figure.” Such a teacher-figure “works against the repressive social givens of a particular age” (31) and values being an outsider in academia. In *Basic Writing* iconic discourse, conflict and struggle—particularly against administration—provide reason for the basic writing teacher to exist. In the context of administrative pressure to use computer-mediated technologies, then, iconic discourse may make faculty resistance to computer-mediated technology not only permissible, but also “natural.”

This reluctance is based on the assumption that so-called “remedial” students will be challenged by learning more “advanced” technologies in addition to the writing tasks they have been assigned. Back in 1996, Robert Crafton articulated specific perils of word processing with basic writers and advocated a return to more “traditional methods” (325). He warned that the effects of word processing “may be relatively innocuous for sophisticated users of language and computers,” but “the effects may be far more serious for basic writers and basic computer users, leading not to greater linguistic and rhetorical sophistication but to arrested development” (320). This resistance to more current technologies may be a cyclical trend in *Basic Writing*. In 2004, Pavia seems to feel that introducing anything other than word processing might be beyond the capability of basic writers. This echoes Crafton’s concern, eight years earlier, that word processing itself is beyond the capability of basic writers. Such resistance is rooted in iconic discourse: there are assumptions about what basic writers can do, and also what they

should do in the basic writing classroom. As pressure increases to eliminate remediation at both four-year and two-year colleges, there is an increased emphasis on the “basics” that a student needs to acquire before entering a first-year composition course. In this context, the use of computers for something like Web authorship may be seen as unnecessary.

Such concerns about the necessity of computer-mediated technologies in basic writing are not limited to computer-assisted composition. Fully-online courses for basic writers are currently seen as especially deviant, in both the literature of the field and in faculty discussions. In a study of 256 online developmental writing students, Carpenter, Brown, and Hickman found that students who remained in the online class were more successful (as determined by course completion) than their face-to-face counterparts; however, they were less likely to remain in the course to begin with (35). While Linda Stine has had great success with hybrid courses for her basic writing students, she does not advocate fully-online courses, claiming that “Internet-based learning is not a natural fit for basic writing students” (33). Such a claim about what is not “natural” for basic writing students seems to rely on the assumption that online learning is dependent on their weaknesses (reading and writing) rather than their oral and aural strengths. However, the rapid advancement of video and audio capabilities have altered the landscape of online learning in recent years, opening up online possibilities for basic writers. Online course material that once had to be read can now be heard and viewed.

The National Center for Developmental Education has also expressed its opposition to online courses for basic writers in its book *What Works: Research-Based Best Practices in Developmental Education*, the very title of which reveals some of the discourses of the field of developmental education. The emphasis on “what works” implies that there are things that do (and do not) “work,” and that one can definitively say what those things are (or are not) in any given context. But this begs the question: what does it mean to “work”—for whom, and in what contexts? Such concerns are not unique to developmental English, but they bear mentioning because there are possible implications for the use of computer-mediated technologies with basic writing. A practical discourse, or one that emphasizes what works or does not work, particularly in terms of the use of technology in the classroom with basic writers, can be viewed in light of an oppositional or skeptical stance: if the technology does not work with students in the classroom, then, the argument goes, such use should be abandoned. Nevertheless, if the technology does work for basic writers, then it is viewed as either enabling students to

achieve outcomes already put in place (a “utilitarian” stance), or “transforming” them (a transformational” stance). These two stances are explored later.

If discourses contribute to certain perspectives and states of affairs being seen as “normal,” then the “normal” perspective in this case is that basic writers can only learn what they need to learn by being in the physical classroom for at least part of the time. However, as of this writing, the idea of fully-online courses for basic writers is often summarily rejected, in both the literature of the field and in faculty discussions. Though resistance to basic writers in fully-online courses is not without reason, it seems wise to continually revisit those reasons in order to avoid relying on—or completely believing in—the socially-constructed assumption that all basic writers must learn in a physical classroom. Considering the rapid proliferation of online resources and access, rejecting this option for motivated and capable basic writers denies them a potential opportunity.

### Access

One important reason educators and researchers might take up an “oppositional” or “skeptical” stance on technology with basic writers is a concern over basic writers’ lack of access to computer-mediated technologies. Access is an incredibly important consideration for basic writers and computers. James Porter’s definition of computer access for students includes “(1) infrastructure (money and machines), (2) literacy (education and training), and (3) community acceptance (freedom to speak online) (99)” (qtd. in Pavia 14). Citing the difficulty her basic writing students encountered in the context of Porter’s last two criteria for access, Catherine Pavia challenges the notion that simply asking basic writers to use computers (and providing a computer lab in which to do so) grants them “access”: “Access issues run deeper than computers, programs, availability, and use in a writing classroom—they stem from and encompass students’ family, culture, and class genealogies that affect their interactions with the classroom component” (18). Charles Moran claims that while most in the field of computers and composition acknowledge that access is an issue—indeed, access to technology for women and minorities is one that has been explored in depth—the relationship between wealth/class and access has not been comprehensively addressed in scholarship (206). Pavia believes that computer classrooms “provide students with access to choice” to write with the computer and “that the option to write with computers is a good one for basic writers” (18). This reasoning implies that one has a choice to use the computer when writing. To what extent, though, has writing on a

computer become less of a choice? How do we do our basic writing students a disservice when we fail to consider how instrumental the computer is to writing in the workplace and their personal lives?

At the community college where I teach, students enrolled in basic writing classes are required to meet in the computer lab for the “practicum” portion of the class at least once a week, if not more. Many of my own basic writing students express a general comfort with computer-mediated technologies, and most of them use such technologies on a daily basis. Most students use the Internet multiple times a day through social networking sites and mobile devices, and they are expected to use the computer to type papers for all of their classes. Many students note ways in which they feel their writing and language choices in their academic writing were affected as a result of computer-mediated technologies. Even students who claim to have the most difficulty using technology most often do not have major difficulties working with the computer in the lab. They are able to develop their writing in a word-processing program and post to course-required blogs successfully with little assistance from me. Many students now compose essays on their mobile devices and email them to me. Their experiences complicate some of the assumptions made about basic writers’ use of computer-mediated technologies. I recognize that not all basic writing students will have the background with such technologies that my students had, and that the institutional status of Basic Writing may contribute to limited resources and often prohibit classroom use of technology and innovation. Nevertheless, my students’ comfort with computer-mediated technologies points towards a need to consider the wealth of literacy practices that our basic writers bring to the classroom. When educators determine what students are (or are not) capable of when it comes to working with computers, they must be informed by the individual students’ literacy practices, as well as the expectations they will face when they leave the classroom.

Although most of my students have more access to computer-mediated technologies in the classroom than seems to be acknowledged in the literature, the difference in access outside of the classroom must still be an important consideration. In the past few years, mobile devices have made their way into the lives and classrooms of basic writers. Questions about access have typically dominated the literature on the use of technology with basic writers; however, student participation in a full range of mobile technology should alter our perceptions about the use of technology in the classroom. Access is not only about considering whether or not students are experienced enough to use computer-mediated technologies in the classroom, but also

how we as basic writing teachers address the access that students have to computer-mediated technologies outside the classroom. Issues surrounding access will continue to change as technology develops, and increased access will actually create a new kind of digital divide. Marisa Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark, writing in 2009, point out that the digital divide is moving beyond mere access to technology, but has become “rather a more complex divide of those who have the educational access, training, and critical engagement” required of academic and professional cyber-literacy (48). In addition, in the last five years, as access to digital devices has spread, there is early research to suggest that as a result of parental guidance, children from poorer families are spending much more time than children from more well-off families using their devices for purposes other than education (Ritchell). Once this generation enters college, such a divide could potentially have a significant impact on basic writing classes. Basic writing educators must consider students’ pre-college literacy practices in light of this more complex kind of cyber-literacy. To not do so denies basic writers the necessary resources for obtaining an equitable education.

### **High Hopes for Access: the Utilitarian and Transformational Stances on Technology**

In Mary Soliday’s view, most basic writing research “has always been especially concerned to identify, and then meet, students’ needs” (4). This focus on student need (however that may be defined<sup>3</sup>) and what “works” is related to Bruce’s characterization of the utilitarian stance on technology, in which “technology provides marvelous new tools for teaching and learning that can improve literacy education” (290). A utilitarian stance might then focus on students’ “needs” and on the technology that can be employed to fulfill those needs. The findings of Stan and Collins’s 1998 survey on the use of technology with basic writers seem to indicate that instructors who used technology with basic writers in the 1990s were aligned with the utilitarian and transformational stances on technology; among other things, they found that “the positive evaluations of using technology overwhelmingly outweighed the neutral or negative ones” (32).

While scholarship on the various modes of educational technology use (computer-assisted composition, computer-aided instruction, and computer-mediated communication) might find a place within a utilitarian stance, it is computer-aided instruction that is most often considered utilitarian. Literature about publishers’ software programs, which claim to

assist students and faculty, take a positive stance on technology and often emphasize the ways in which such CAI programs help faculty and administrators to “manage” students<sup>4</sup>. This notion of computer-aided instruction addressing specific student “need” often relies on the idea of “self-directed learning.” In *Changing Literacies*, Colin Lankshear and James Gee encourage a critical approach towards this concept of “self-directed learning” by “asking what constructions of ‘self’ and ‘direction’ are operating in this particular text, and why they are operating here” (94). The implication here is that the basic writer’s ideal “self” and “direction” is clearly defined in terms of curricula. If one is operating under the utilitarian stance, however, there is not much room to question textbook-like computer-aided instruction, since such packages are usually viewed as an “add-on” to the basic writing curriculum. This “add-on” view also includes debates over whether basic writing courses can be done online, as well as research claims that hybrid courses represent the “best of both worlds” (Stine “The Best of”; Brown). If a hybrid course is considered to be the best of both worlds, then the assumption is that the classroom and the online space each inhabit its own “world” with its own sets of rules, drawbacks, and benefits.

The utilitarian stance is a difficult one to shake: writing about “technology” in and of itself places it as separate and outside of the field of Basic Writing. In that sense, even the subtitle of this essay—“Basic Writing and Computer-Mediated Technologies”—could indicate that I view computers in basic writing through the utilitarian stance. As with the oppositional and skeptical stances, a utilitarian stance contributes to assumptions about the place of computer-mediated technologies in basic writing classes. If technologies are, as Bruce claims, “part of how we enact texts and make meaning” (300), then viewing technology as a necessary (or unnecessary) “add-on” or as a “separate world” does not address the complex relationship between literacy and technology.

Those who argue that computer-mediated technologies are “transformational” think that they “will replace or radically transform the basic definition of literacy” (Bruce 291). Though such “transformation” is seen as essentially positive, proponents of such a stance feel that educators’ task is to understand and guide this transformation (291). It is the positive perspective that links both the “transformational” and “utilitarian” stances, and therefore some scholarship on basic writers and computers (Stine “Best of”; Pavia; Kish; Cummings) could be categorized as both utilitarian and transformational. Linda Stine uses computer-mediated communication to argue for increased use of the hybrid environment (partly in-class and partly online) with basic

writers: “the current structure of this basic writing course, with one week online and one week face to face in a classroom, seems to offer our students the best of both worlds: the infinite freedom of the Internet enhanced and made manageable by regular classroom interactions” (66). Stine employs the “best of both worlds” rhetoric, but also implies that it is the classroom interaction that “manages” the “infinite freedom of the Internet” (66). In explaining how basic writers can use computer-mediated communication to help with writer’s block, Judith Mara Kish claims that “teaching with the computer and emphasizing the non-linear recursive opportunities in word processing may help students begin to see the possibilities of their texts” (155). The transformational stance is implicit here in the assumption that students might not be able to see such possibilities without the use of the computer.

Beyond the possibility of transformation in the classroom, there is the possibility of institutional transformation. Charles Moran points out the continuing hope for improved professional status as a result of working with technology, emphasizing that “technophiles” typically want to effect educational reform through technology as a community rather than having such reform imposed on the discipline by institutional forces (353). In other words, providing “sites of resistance” provides for potential “transformation.” Likewise, Jeffrey Grabill advocates the use of technology as a way for a basic writing program to gain legitimacy in the institutions which they serve. He challenges faculty reluctance to use new technologies with basic writers and demands that those in the field take a more active role in making decisions about their use—not just in the classroom, but on a departmental and institutional basis. In the “transformational stance,” technology is seen as a savior, rescuing both student and programs from their lowly institutional status. More significantly, it is seen as an entity separate from the literacy practices of students, as are all of the stances discussed so far.

### **Evolving Literacy: The Transactional View**

In Bruce’s transactional view, technologies “are part of the continual reconstruction of literacies. As such, they too are constructed out of the evolving literacy practices” (303). Unlike the other stances he describes, Bruce emphasizes that the transactional view is not really an alternative stance, “but rather, a conception of a mutually constitutive relation between technologies and social practices” (303). He draws an analogy between the printing press and the chalkboard—we don’t view these elements as separate anymore because they are so connected to notions of literacy. The question

of whether students would compose better on computers (versus writing by hand) is now complicated by the fact that students do much (if not most) of their composing on the computer (or the cell phone or iPad). Basic writing teachers must recognize that “technology and writing are not distinct phenomena; that is, writing has never been and cannot be separate from technology” (Haas x). Whether one is using a pen and paper or a laptop to compose, the technology becomes habitual enough that one eventually does not notice its use. Cynthia Selfe argues that this is precisely why we must be aware of the influences of emerging technologies on literacy. If indeed our use of computer-based activities drives curricular change in Basic Writing because we believe that the technology can “accomplish the goals of conventional literacy instruction better or more efficiently than traditional activities” (483), we are not acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between the two.

This symbiotic relationship between technology and literacy can be better understood through the idea of literacy as a social practice, as explored by The New Literacy Studies movement (see Gee; Kress; Street). For example, Brian Street offers a distinction between what he calls “autonomous” and “ideological” models of literacy: in his view, the autonomous model “works from the assumption that literacy in itself—autonomously—will have (benign) effects on other social and cognitive practices” (7). The danger in this model, as he asserts, is that it “disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal” (77). It is therefore appropriate that the autonomous model has been taken up by researchers in Basic Writing in order to question some of the assumptions that basic writing teachers bring to the classroom. Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington reference Street’s work to point out that conversations about Basic Writing “do not often involve an examination of the ideological contexts in which...literacy skills are used” (6). The “linear narrative of writing ability” in Basic Writing described by Ann DelPrincipe—the belief in “a sequence of complexity to verbal acts and the parallel belief that discrete levels of ability correspond to the sequence of complexity” (65)—could be said to correspond with an autonomous view of literacy. In both interpretations, “literacy” is accepted as “neutral” and “universal.” The other view that Street presents, what he terms the “ideological” model of literacy, posits that literacy “is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological practices” (77). Bertram Bruce’s call to abolish the distinction between “literacy” and “technology,” then, makes sense in light of this view of the ideological model of literacy, in which literacy is always contested.

By rejecting the autonomous model of literacy (Street) and the linear narrative of writing ability (DelPrincipe), basic writing educators can employ the transactional view in considering the interrelatedness of literacy and technology. The transactional view seems to address the complexity of the problem and lends itself well to the overall values of the field of Basic Writing; however, some of the other stances are so much a part of the discourses of computers and Basic Writing, it is difficult to think outside of them—specifically the utilitarian, skeptical, oppositional, and transformational stances. One example of the transactional view can be found in Cheryl C. Smith’s exploration of students’ use of a class blog. Acknowledging the effects of Web 2.0 on her students before they arrive in her composition classroom, she wonders if using such technologies can encourage risk-taking, promote classroom interactivity, and enable instructors and students to move beyond a focus on error. Though she is encouraged by the “democratic” potential of such classroom technology, she is wary of the promise of transformation (47). She urges the field to “interrogate the effect” that “Web 2.0 writing practice has on [students]: their thinking, style, and approaches to college writing” (55). In doing so, she encourages educators to consider not only how technology can assist students in the classroom, but also what technological experience students bring to that classroom. Such an argument transcends the transformational stance and moves into the transactional, in which new technologies do not merely assist in developing literacy but are informed by the view of literacy as a social practice. Another strong example of the transactional view can be found in Klages and Clark’s consideration of the public nature of writing in the digital age. Their response to such a shift in literacy practices is to incorporate the multimodal nature of writing into their basic writing curriculum through the use of ePortfolios, blogs, and Web 2.0 tools. Students move beyond written text to create multimodal works in order to “build on their technological dexterity” and “begin to understand their emerging writing skills as equally important components of their digital literacy” (39). It is not simply that the authors are doing multimodal work with basic writing students; rather, it is the ways in which they appear to view that work. The rationale behind Klages and Clark’s curriculum reflects the idea that literacy is always contested and is therefore aligned with both Brian Street’s ideological model of literacy and Bruce’s transactional stance. In using what I would call the transactional view, both Smith’s and Klages and Clark’s work provide excellent examples of the kinds of conversations that we can and should have when thinking about the use of technology with basic writers.

How can we begin to have these conversations with our students and ourselves? Shannon Carter provides a practical way to combat the autonomous model of literacy in her book *The Way Literacy Lives: Rhetorical Dexterity and Basic Writing Instruction*. She encourages teachers to examine more familiar literacies (or communities of practice) in order to better understand academic literacies that may not be as familiar to students. By applying the concept of rhetorical dexterity to the transactional view, teachers might ask students to reflect on the technological discourses students bring to the classroom—for example, asking them to consider the communication “rules” employed on a social networking site, and how those differ from texting, discussion boards, or e-mails. Such discussions help to make explicit the rules that govern different kinds of discourse, particularly in computer-mediated technologies that are textually-based. Instructors can ask students to consider the ways in which they use technological literacies every day. For many students, this is a literacy that they have likely not considered as worthy of study, and yet the exploration of this more familiar literacy provides a space to discuss the kinds of literacies expected in college.

A large part of the transactional stance requires that we are consistently aware of the new literacies that develop as a result of technological practice. This doesn’t necessarily mean we as faculty need to be up-to-date with every single new technological innovation that emerges, but we do need to be aware of them, as well as how the technological hierarchies we construct for ourselves (and ultimately, for our students) perpetuate assumptions about what students “need.” When instructors avoid using technology in the basic writing classroom because of a well-meaning concern about students’ lack of access or familiarity with such technology, they are quietly rejecting a transactional stance in favor of a more comfortable one. Technologically self-critical instructors are aware of and explore with students the technological literacies that both students and instructor bring to the classroom. Consideration of technology in the basic writing classroom, then, is not a luxury, but instead a crucial part of considering the constantly evolving literacy practices that are such a large part of basic writers’ lives.

### **Discursing Computers and Basic Writing**

The transactional view can not only guide how we address the use of computer-mediated technologies in the classroom, but also the discourses we use to consider and theorize the use of technology in Basic Writing. Initially, I explained James Gee’s (2005) definitions of D/discourse, which



might lead one to view Bruce's stances as discourses themselves. However, it seems to me that merely substituting "discourse" for "stances" fails to consider the ways in which discourse is historically, socially, and culturally contingent. Michel Foucault's definition of discourse may be more helpful in enabling the field to think about future research in computers and basic writing. Foucault conceives of discourses as "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity, and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relation between them" (Weedon 108). Viewed through this perspective on discourses, Bruce's stances can be seen as discursive practices within the larger Discourse of Basic Writing (explored by, among others, Bartholomae; Bartholomae and Petrosky; Gunner; Horner; Horner & Lu; Rose).

Foucault asks us not to define discourse, but to instead ask "how does discourse function?" This poststructuralist approach, as well as the notion of the transactional view, can enable us to think differently in future research by asking questions like the following:

- How does the interrelatedness of technology and literacy function in the basic writing classroom?
- In what ways are the political contexts of Basic Writing served by the use of technology?
- How does students' past and current work with computer-mediated technologies inform their writing in academic settings?
- Who benefits from the use of—and research about—such technologies in Basic Writing?
- How does access (or lack of access) to computer-mediated technologies impact basic writers?
- What are the disciplinary effects of computerized assessment practices—particularly placement—in Basic Writing?
- Why research the use of computer-mediated technologies specifically in Basic Writing classrooms (as opposed to composition classes)?

These questions are very different from the kind of questions often asked about the efficacy and purpose of such technologies, which too often focus on what basic writers need and how technology can serve those needs, or how basic writers potentially lack the access and ability to use technologies in the same ways as their peers not placed in basic writing. However, the above questions are important ones if one conceives of Basic Writing as a political act.

Resisting the insular nature of discourse can be challenging. As a teacher and a researcher, I too rely on various discourses to think about the ways in which computers affect basic writers. While I believe that we need studies specifically addressing the ways in which computer-mediated technologies are used with and by basic writers, my reasoning is rooted in institutional concepts of Basic Writing, not in basic writing students themselves. That is, it is not the students that warrant a closer examination of these uses as much as the institutions and assessment practices (many of which are now computer-based) that create "basic writers." We are the ones who create the reasons and conditions to use computers with basic writing students, and not using technology with our basic writing students also has implications. Despite English teachers' overall preference that "technology remain quiet and well-behaved in the background of our lives" (21), Cynthia Selfe urges them to consider the ramifications of technological literacy on their students' lives:

Teachers who choose not to use computers in class believe that their decision absolves them and their students from paying critical attention to technology issues. . . . allowing ourselves the luxury of such positions is not only misguided but also dangerously short-sighted. (23-24)

On the other hand, when computer-mediated technologies are used in the basic writing classroom, practitioners take an active role in making decisions about their use. Thus, one cannot be "neutral" towards computer-mediated technologies in the classroom: whether or not one is addressing computer-mediated technologies in the classroom, one is taking a stance that is decidedly not neutral.

Likewise, the field of Basic Writing cannot remain neutral; considerations of the use of technology with basic writers must align better with its overall values. The field would benefit from future research that considers basic writers' use of computer-mediated technologies in light of the discursive practices presented here, as well as research that further explores the technological hierarchies both inside and out of schools, and how they shape basic writers' literacy practices. Research about software programs that are targeted at basic writers and marketed to basic writing teachers is also important. Beyond developing research studies about the efficacy or comparison of such programs, we might consider the ways in which these programs contribute (or not) to an autonomous model of literacy in which

software creators, instructors, and students disregard the social contexts in which literacies develop. As technology advances rapidly and students' increased use of mobile devices changes the ways we consider the access question, so too will ways of thinking about these technologies. As teachers and scholars, we must start to think about the ways we subscribe to—and struggle with—discourse so we might open up new possibilities in terms of using computer-mediated technologies with basic writers.

## Notes

1. Bruce Horner capitalizes the term Basic Writing when referring to what he describes as a dominant discourse on basic writing whose meanings and forms are central to such works as *Errors and Expectations*, the *Journal of Basic Writing*, the 1987 *Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers* and various bibliographies on basic writing (200). I refer to this discourse as Basic Writing to highlight both its institutional power and its selective representation of the wealth of practices and projects in teaching basic writing.
2. As defined by Bruce, those who take up the “aesthetic stance” see new technologies as “affording rich opportunities for creativity in electronic media. They talk of a paradigm shift as artists move from using the computer to recreate or reproduce art to accepting electronic representations per se as finished art” (291). I have not found scholarship about computer-mediated technologies in Basic Writing to be much concerned with this stance, so I will not address it in this essay.
3. Mary Soliday critiques the “student need” argument and claims instead that remediation is more tied to institutional circumstances than student need.
4. For example, according to testimonials on its Web site, the Criterion program appears to have helped streamline the process for placement into remedial classes. Kristen Gray, lecturer at the University of Minnesota, writes “...it is a time-saver for instructors trying to quickly assess students' levels of writing ability without consuming inordinate amounts of time reading through essays and calibrating scores of other faculty and their students.” In one case, using the program eliminated the remedial classes altogether. According to Dr. Robert Ellison of East Texas Baptist University: “The univer-

sity used to offer remedial writing courses, but now all Comp One students write an essay using a Criterion prompt. Students who receive scores of 3 or less are required to take four tutoring sessions in which they work on their essays. At mid-semester they resubmit their essays” (Criterion case studies and testimonials).

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