

Subversive Complicity and Basic Writing Across the Curriculum

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ABSTRACT: What follows is a simple assertion: time for basic writing to get out from under, a call for us to inculcate a Basic Writing Across the Curriculum. It is time yet again to move away from the concept that basic writers are in need of remedies, in part because all composition courses are in some sense remedial, and to a greater degree because the “illness” that we seek to remedy is in being at least discursively other-cultural. Within this essay there are reflections, speculations, considerations of how to go about what is demanded of us—enculturation and assimilation—while doing what it is we believe we ought to do—promote critical consciousness, something that many of us in many disciplines seek to do, even if those in other disciplines are unaware of the term.

KEYWORDS: Basic writing; programs; writing across the curriculum; discourse communities; racism; assimilation; remediation; enculturation

A Memory, 1984

We finally have health insurance, so Carol can deliver the child who will be AnaSofia in a birthing room in a hospital, Virginia Mason, Seattle, Washington. The dilation has been sudden, precipitous. Unprepared for a long stay at the hospital, I call my friend Virginia for some help: my medicines, toothbrush, those kinds of things.

Virginia shows up in the midst of Carol’s contractions. She tells me that the basic writing program that I have been in charge of is going to be cut, so she has made an appointment for me with the provost for the next day. I don’t know what a provost is, but I get the idea: someone with power.

The baby is born. Some complications. The umbilical cord had become a noose. Two nurses and I unwrap the cord, cut it, rub the feet, and then the squall of life, the baby born. Mom and baby are fine. I’ve got a provost to meet.

Still shaken by the miracle, I show up at the provost’s office. I don’t understand where a provost stands in the hierarchy, but I do understand an office larger than the apartment that houses Carol, me, and three kids with a fourth about to move in. Offices in academics are hegemonically legitimating monuments, primary symbols of power (or the lack: TAs and instructors in the sub-basement).

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The provost explains that the university is about higher education, not remediation, especially given the times (one of many budget crises in my career; they come often; financial crises are a normal part of capitalism, according to Marx and to Keynes, though each providing different ways of dealing with crisis). The university cannot afford the luxury of remediation.

Well, if that's the case, I say, then why do we offer algebra or even regular 101 comp courses? Seems like remediation to me. The only difference I see is who is being served. It was something like that, that I had said.

The provost appears to get defensive. I'm scared that I've crossed a line. She then explains, patiently, that those algebra and comp courses are the norm, that basic writing falls below the norm, is more a basic literacy, pre-university.

I understand, I say. But I go on to say that, based on personal experience, community colleges have their hands full, that culturally they are somewhat different from the university, and that the job of basic writing as I see it isn't teaching grammar or other discrete skills but moving from one way of doing language to another, moving to the ways of language of the university. Sometime not long after this particular conversation, compositionists began to write of "academic discourse communities."

My intention is not to denigrate the community college. I am finding the available means of persuasion—exploiting the discourse of elitism and the discourse of assimilation to this person in a football-field sized office. I argue that we don't remediate; we enculturate. And so, Basic Writing survives at that University (and remains to this day, nearly three decades later).

About ten years after that first meeting with a provost, the other state university in the same state: Same conversation, same threat, same result, given the promise of assimilation, a kind of enculturation.

I

First-year comp has always been remedial, but it gained special notice when it became designed for the poor and the folks of color, not Harvard's comp course but open admissions at City College of New York, in Harlem. In Harlem. And suddenly, these were the New Students (see McAlexander), "the true outsiders" (Shaughnessy, *Errors* 2). "New" reminds me of the somewhat recent national election's sudden realization that there are Latinos in the U.S., failing to remember that the Latinos, the Spanish, were the supposed discoverers of this continent, the first non-indigenous long-term inhabitants. Been here all along, and tied to the original inhabitants, insofar as rules against miscegeny applied mainly to the Spanish elite (Acuña). In

much the same way, the New Students weren't all that new. They were the victims of a particular political economy.

So the university decided that those Harvard boys or those Yale boys, products of the best college prep schools of the second half of the nineteenth century, were not quite literate, certainly not for Harvard or Yale, Kelly Ritter reminds us. At Harvard the boys were assigned to English A, and some to English B, and even some to English D, the letters correlating to potential grades in writing in English A, to degrees of heads' boniness, "bonehead" the term used at the University of Utah for its remedial students in the 1940s (Ritter 68), with Shaughnessy saying that the new students weren't even up to par with the boneheads (*Errors* 2). Or there was Yale's "Awkward Squad," white, middle-class Ivy Leaguers of the 1920s through the 1960s who nevertheless required what we would now call basic writing (Ritter 43-44). And when the likes of Sharon Crowley shouted for an end to the universal requirement for first-year comp, she was hooted down. But when economic crises loom, the racialized, non-middle-class version of "remedial" writing is immediately slated for removal. And the way to save it is to invoke a rhetoric that cobbles together multiculturalism or equal opportunity and assimilation.

Monday, 11 March 2013, The Chronicle of Higher Education, front page: A long column titled "The Second-Chance Club: Inside a Semester of Remedial English." It's a very nice piece, showing how the students have to pass a timed writing—clear thesis sentence, four paragraphs (well, at least it isn't five), answering three questions on the assigned writing. The Chronicle's column contains pictures of the students, Black students, and the white professor (though there is one white student in the pictures, as well; you just have to look closely to find him). The caption under a headshot of the prof declares that "Professors in remedial courses often must be social workers, too." This exposure is good for the survival of basic writing. And the message is clear—a second chance at upward mobility, a dedication to assimilation, a multicultural imperative for an improved economy.

But for all the inherent sympathy, multiculturalism tends to fail because by-and-large it tends not to be anti-racist. The problem with multiculturalism is that it relies on a conception of cultural pluralism, an ideal (a Platonic "Good," even), but given the political economy of the day (no matter which school of "political economy," the political liberal's Keynesian or the economic neoliberal's Friedmanian), the idea of all cultures living together in mutual understanding is not yet here. So we do an injustice in acting as if a mutuality already exists, that with a little effort on thesis sentences and

coherent paragraphs as defined by Cicero, Aristotle, or Bain, we can level the playing field (and put this way, resorting to a cliché, makes the absurdity apparent). But absurd or not, the rhetoric of the new racism, with its preference for *difference* over *racism*, allows for arguments based on assimilation and enculturation to become how best to sell basic writing, whether to central admin or to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Far be it for us to point to absurdity or even the violence inherent in our nation's dominant metaphor, the melting pot. Sometimes rhetoric actually is about duplicity, Plato notwithstanding.

Assimilation, enculturation, remains the general norm, even as we in writing try to write our ways out of that norm. Melting into the pot is seen as the way to maintain a nation, the rhetoric goes; identity politics risk the loss of a national identity. It's a strange notion, when we think in terms of all the cultures (as opposed to "races") contained beneath the umbrella term *America*. We're really quite capable, apparently, of clinging to ancestry and realizing our national identity. We do better to look to the relations among discourse, the cultural, the political (not only as ideology but as political power more broadly conceived), and the economic.

Gyatri Spivak begins to approach this recognition of the forces at play as she writes not only of epistemologies that give credence to the power of discourse as ideological, but also as she writes of the epistemology of other political economic forces, what she calls (à la Foucault) an epistemology of violence. She is referring to the degree to which "subalterns" (like the disenfranchised, the poor, women, often) are never quite able to speak or write from their own ways of knowing. That is, when Spivak asks "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she argues that since our identities are formed in relation to others, power relations are such that there is no truly autonomous Other, no truly autonomous subaltern whose voice is separate from and stands alongside the voices of those in power. She concludes that the answer to whether the subaltern can speak is no. And this is surely no less true for so many of those, women and men, who find themselves in (or choose to enter into) basic writing classrooms, forced into a particular way of marshaling arguments: Edited American English and Aristotelian logic. Yet what choice do we have as teachers, we ask. Code meshing? It's a great concept: using the rhetorical power available in some dialects that are not available in the Standard, an intentional blending of dialectics. And it is more than simply a great concept; it is right; it is some assertion of the subaltern speaking. But before code meshing could work in sociology or in history or any place in the college or university outside of the English classroom, we would have

to educate an awful lot of educators. We've been trying for over forty years now, but some notion of "proper English" continues to hold sway.

But maybe, rather than throw up our hands and say that the *reality* is that we must give in to the power and the economy, to students' own wishes for a chance at the middle class, say in resignation that we teach academic discourse lest the folks in sociology or history or whatever hurt the students, maybe we can gain a force in numbers, forge alliances, insinuate basic writing into WAC. We have our expertise—literacy and its pedagogy—but they have theirs. And as often, they too recognize the politics, just not necessarily the politics in believing writing is simply writing, in believing that the codes are agreed upon, a given. On the one hand, we would do well to insinuate our knowledge into theirs. Some of the most interesting writing and research about racism obtains in sociology (like Bonilla-Silva or Winant); some of the most interesting research and writing about language is happening in psychology (like Martín-Baró in Aron and Corn or Mishler); some of the most interesting uses of written narrative is happening in the medical professions (also Mishler); there's even an entire field of study called Narrative-Based Medicine (see, for example, Greenhalgh and Hurwitz). What we know that they might not is that as language carries meaning, meaning carries cultures and their ideologies, ideologies and their economies.

I have made this argument before, though in another context ("Politics"), that we cannot presume to be the purveyors of critical consciousness. In terms of racism, we stand to learn from those other disciplines while we inform them of the ways of writing and rhetoric. We can learn from folks in business who have economists among them, from historians, from political scientists, from sociologists, as well as from the literary figures and critical theorists from whom we have grown accustomed to learning. We give something to the disciplines—matters of literacy and rhetoric grounded in the sociopolitical; and they give us something—their considerations of the political and the economic. And we introduce them to basic writers, not as needing remedies or in need for proper development (Rose), but as rhetorical power players (Villanueva, *Bootstraps*). It's time. And it's bound to succeed, since we'd be in the business of justice and maybe even real equality somewhere down the line, not composition teachers who "must be social workers," not missionaries converting the natives to the religion of "proper" discourse.

The missionary. Some of us read Shaughnessy's "Diving In" as a spoof on developmental schemes. So much of the work in education was being tied to developmental models at the time of Shaughnessy: William Perry,

Maslow, Bloom, and especially Piaget. Shaughnessy was clearly poking fun at the missionary mentality of teachers like her: trained in literature, suddenly faced with the New Student. But it turns out not to be so funny a scheme, since somehow it seems that we can't quite get past "converting the natives" because of the exigencies of power and economics. We remain stuck in the idea that there is only one way for students to succeed: learn the discourse of power, doing almost nothing outside of our closed conversations in Writing Studies to alter that discourse. That *Chronicle of Higher Ed* article mentioned above clearly honors the successful conversion of the natives. If basic writing is to be no longer missionary in its method, though, no longer social work, then we should be engaging with the other minds across the disciplines who also face the students we face, having those faculty work with us rather than point accusatory fingers at us. We should enter into a dialogue across the disciplines so as better to understand the social processes that could relegate such a large number to the trouble-heap. All of us can use the tools at our disposal to circumvent reproducing a school system that has traditionally failed to educate the woman, the poor, or the person of color at the same rate of efficiency as others. And while we learn from them, we pass on contact zones and critical pedagogies and world Englishes and meshed codes, passing on our particular ways of understanding what many other disciplines also understand, that language is not just the conveyor of knowledge but is the way knowledge becomes known.

II

But the problem remains: how to teach the written rhetoric of power without negating students' power, the power inherent in their own ways with words. One answer might be to teach a conscious mimicry. This is not a new idea, of course (see, for instance, bell, Bhabha, Fuss). As I mentioned some years ago ("Rhetoric"), Puerto Ricans, as the longest continuous colonial subjects of the modern world, have long used a strategy called *jaibería*, a *jaiba* rhetoric. Puerto Rico's situation is one in which political power makes colonialism no longer tenable, yet there remains an economic situation in which nationalism is not feasible. The trick then is maintaining a cultural identity while complying with dominance. That's achieved through a *jaibería*, a "subversive complicity" (Grosfoguel), kind of like shining someone on, a conscious mimicry. Sociologists Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner, and Goeras call on Diana Fuss's reading of Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* to describe a *jaiba* politics as a mimicry rather than a masquerade:

According to Diana Fuss in her essay on Frantz Fanon, there is a tendency within postcolonial and psychoanalytic discourse to distinguish between the practices of mimicry and masquerade. While in psychoanalysis, masquerade is understood as the unconscious assumption of a role, mimicry, according to Homi K. Bhabha, is understood as a colonial strategy of subjugation. Fuss, however, stresses that there can be a mimicry of subversion where the deliberate performance of a role does not entail identification. The performance's contexts thus become crucial in determining its subversive potential . . . [In] both Fanon's and Fuss's texts, the most powerful example of subversive mimicry is that of the Algerian Nationalist woman militant who "passes" as a Europeanized subject in order to advance the cause of National liberation. (26-8)

In comp terms, this is where "inventing the university" is a mutually conscious decision, not just foisted on basic writers but encouraged as a jointly agreed upon strategy, not with the idea that students become like teachers but rather that students learn how to gain the trust of teachers so that a communal learning can take place, what Fanon calls "a world of reciprocal recognitions" (218). This is the strategy of a particular program with which I am currently involved, CLASP, which I'll describe a little further below.

Gail Okawa outlines a pedagogy wherein students are asked to look at how people of color are represented in ways that hide their political identities, asking students to remove these masks. By the same token, folks of color can quite intentionally choose to conceal by the wearing of masks, consciously enacting Fanon's white masks, though Okawa refers to Mitsuye Yamada's use of the mask metaphor. In a similar vein, Malea Powell tells tales of the trickster's ways, a rhetoric which "exposes the lies we tell ourselves and, at the same time, exposes the necessity of those lies to our daily material existence" (9). And there is *imitatio*, a forming of the self through a learning process of mimicry. *Jaibería* is not a new idea. I talk to a provost, imitating the discourse of assimilation disguised as multiculturalism, so as to be able to provide critical opportunities critically.

Acknowledge that Basic Writing Programs are always subject to the political economy because of a structural racism; recognize the institutional belief that higher education cannot be responsible for what it sees as the shortfalls of lower education (blame always flowing downstream), and we are perforce pulled into a rhetoric of survival, a complicit rhetoric with somewhat subversive motives. In other words, I'm calling for *imitatio* with an anti-racist critical pedagogy, *imitatio* taking on a particular mental state—a *jaibería*, mask-

ing in a discursive trickery—while students work *with* us on discourse, work critically and consciously on conventions, and while we—both the students and the teachers of writing—work on introducing those in other disciplines to the basic writer and swap discoveries and conceptions of economics and political power and language.

In the pages of this journal some years back, I told of how I introduce basic writing students (and others) to the idea of writing as epistemological, that language comes from the self in dialogue with one's culture ("Theory"). It's a fun exercise. I invite you to try it. What that article doesn't mention, however (since that wasn't its intent), is what happens after the opening gambit. Once we establish something about language as epistemological and a social construction, we discuss conventions. This is pretty straightforward at first, matters of registers and codes that all students understand immediately—speaking to an elder versus speaking to a peer, say. Then to the "logic" behind academic discourse, the idea that whereas the writing with which they are most familiar within a school context (the fiction and poetry) is designed for surprise, expository and argumentative academic writing tends to work from an older Roman oral legal tradition, in which the jurors or judges must know an argument's general premises or assertions first, so as to prepare listeners for the arguments to follow (and thereby judge). I even show them a short passage from Cicero's *de Inventione*. Then we go into the matter of vocabulary. This is, of course, an issue for graduate students no less than basic writers, graduate students given to preferring "that's problematic" to "that's a possible problem," just as undergraduates learn "to be cognizant of" rather than simply "get it." Inspired decades ago by a rhetoric by Patrick Hartwell, I provide a number of clichés in "academic" speech, and we work these together: "Refrain from being lachrymose over precipitately decanted lacteal fluid" or "Male cadavers are incapable of yielding any testimony." Soon they see the problem in using a vocabulary which has not yet become their own. As a class, we work through these examples. The students tend to respond. So students are encouraged to let go of the fear, to the extent that's possible, asked to write "naturally," in their own ways. Then we work through papers together. Unlike the standard stage model of *the* writing process, we begin with editing, mainly marking sentence breaks (since fused sentences and run-on sentences tend to be the greatest problems). Then we translate. Using a student-volunteer's paper, we work together to translate the student's discourse onto something akin to academic discourse, especially as pertains to audience. In the process, students become conscious translators of their own ways with words to those of the academic discourse community. The

process thereby calls on a conscious understanding of Aristotle's logic, and a conscious understanding of contrastive rhetorics.

I have used this process successfully for many years with students from other cultures, including those students who might look white and middle class but who are at least at one remove from the supposed traditional student. As with any pedagogy (including the one discussed below), I can't claim classes full of critically conscious literacy epiphanies, but most get most of it in the mere fifteen weeks, the forty contact hours, that we have.

III

Gaining more than forty hours in the acquisition of academic discourse means having to involve our colleagues across the curriculum. At my institution right now, we are involved in a program called CLASP (Critical Literacies Achievement and Success Program). Although the students are those who are first generation, of color, and from poverty, there is no assumption that students are operating from a lack. We take their presence in college at face value, meaning that we simply accept what they themselves believe: that they are capable of college work, a belief substantiated by their very presence at an institution with no open admissions policy, an institution, in fact, subject to a state mandate against racial preferences on admissions (a ban now upheld by the Supreme Court's April 2014 decision in *Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action*). CLASP is not a remedial program. Rather, it operates from Fanon's "reciprocal recognitions," that whatever the students don't know about how professors operate, the professors are equally ignorant of how these "New Students" operate. At the heart of the program is discussing how to talk with professors, discussing with the students the kinds of questions they might have of the instructor, having the students jot down their questions, and mandating a series of visits during the professors' office hours. The best learning is one-with-one; novice students' great fear is the one-with-one with professors. Through this program, the professors get to discover the students as more than victims; the students get to discover the professors as less than geniuses.

Within CLASP, we include the Writing Commons, an offshoot of the Writing Center, wherein tutors are trained in the grammars of the dominant dialects of the students who participate in CLASP: Chicano English (see Fought) or African American Language (see Smitherman and Villanueva). They're also shown the workings of contrastive rhetoric. And they are taught how to listen—rhetorically—that kind of conscious listening (and

even eavesdropping) that Krista Ratcliffe describes. And the students learn precisely the same things: rhetorical listening and rhetorics (as plural), and of course, matters of correctness, since infelicities obtain in every dialect and language. The CLASP Writing Commons provides an introduction to the ways of a writing center but within a community with which they are familiar, even though the students contain all the variations on ideology one would expect of “traditional” students. They get to hear each other on racism, class, assimilation, sexuality—the hot-button subjects that are typical of humanities and social science courses. They get to hear each other; they learn to discuss; and again, the tutors get to discover how not-at-all-different the students are. What’s more, the students gather more and more awareness of themselves as rhetorical beings, gain greater metalinguistic awareness, develop a vocabulary with which to speak with their professors during those office hours that the program mandates. They become the agents of their own basic writing across the curriculum.

And those of us who work at training faculty who are interested in CLASP from across the curriculum (and the interest is in fact across the curriculum) reinforce what students discover about the organizational patterns and other discourse markers (matters other than simple mechanics) that are manifest in students’ early draft writing. The faculty learn from us and from the students that often the students’ writing does not reflect a lack of organizational abilities but different organizational patterns. The Arab student or the Latina student who seems to go on long tangents can discuss with faculty, thanks to contrastive rhetoric, how the tangent might not be (and discover the discursive footnote). And the student, in discussion with the faculty who is conscious of contrastive rhetoric, might also discover when a tangent really is a tangent—and would be a tangent in Spanish or in Arabic academic discourse. So while professors learn (or recall, since many are not monolingual in English) the conventions of other languages and deliver the conventions of particular disciplines, the students—and the professors—become conscious of the conventions-as-conventions. In remaining conscious of students’ patterns of predispositions by way of early drafts that give vent to culturally specific discursive ways, the conversation is opened up; the professors and the students work together in assuring students gain access to the places they wish to go by way of the academy without erasing where they’ve been. Their mimicry, their conscious invention of the university, has the potential of changing the university, broadening the university’s conceptions of discourses in action, of the rhetorics that are always at play, more members of the university discovering that, at bottom, we are all creatures of the word.

From Pablo Neruda:

Nació
la palabra en la sangre,
creció en el cuerpo oscuro, palpitando
y voló con los labios y la boca.

Más lejos y más cerca
aún, aún venía
de padres muertos y de errantes razas,
de territorios que se hicieron piedra
que se cansaron de sus pobres tribus,
porque cuando el dolor salió al camino
los pueblos anduvieron y llegaron
y nueva tierra y agua reunieron
para sembrar de nuevo su palabra.
Y así la herencia es ésta:
éste es el aire que nos comunica
con el hombre enterrado y con la aurora
de nuevos sere que aún no amanecieron

The word
was born in the blood,
grew in the dark body, beating,
and took flight through the lips and the mouth.

Farther away and nearer
still, still it came
from dead fathers and from wandering races,
from lands which had turned to stone,
lands weary of their poor tribes,
for when grief took to the roads
the people set out and arrived
and married new land and water
to grow their words again.
And so this is the inheritance:
this is the wavelength which connects us
with dead men and the dawning
of new beings not yet come to light

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