Basic Writing and the Conflict over Language

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Abstract: David Bleich's exploration of language conflicts in the university in The Materiality of Language: Gender, Politics, and the University *helps explain the ongoing struggle over basic writing as between two radically different understandings of language. Progressive educators and writing teachers see language as rhetorical and contextual, "material" in Bleich's terms. Policy makers, large-scale writing assessment designers, and public discourse generally see language as ahistorical and decontextualized, involving ladders of skills to be mastered, or "sacralized." This article examines the struggle between these materialist innovations and repressive policy mandates and assessments as a manifestation of this root struggle over language. The ongoing nature of this struggle, having occurred in this country for over a century, means progressive programs must maintain a stance of constant vigilance, innovation, and subversion. The outcome critically affects efforts to increase access to higher education.*

KEYWORDS: basic writing; access; acceleration; assessment; policy; writing programs; mainstreaming

Contemporary discourse around basic writing programs falls into two categories. First, time-honored complaints about student writing continue in this century, with disgruntled professors venting about sentences without verbs or nouns, accompanied by accusations that high schools aren't doing their job. Similarly, we hear hysterical accounts of tsunami-like waves of destructive student writing washing over universities, lowering standards and taxing budgets and resources. Less visible to the public is the proliferation of discourse around writing instruction that creates and supports accelerated learning, mainstreaming, directed self-placement, and other institutional innovations that facilitate access to the kinds of cultural capital that higher education offers. This back and forth between complaint and innovation is the way that we engage in conflicts about the very nature of language and its role in reproducing or, in fewer cases, challenging, social inequality.

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These conflicts around language—and their history—have been comprehensively examined by David Bleich in his recent book, *The Materiality of Language*, where "materiality" is contrasted with the Platonic tradition and its emphasis on what Bleich calls the "sacralization" of texts. Sacralization fixes texts and their meanings by assigning their origins and use to a powerful being: god, the priest, the law, the policy, the teacher, the test, the score, the accuplacer. Language is decontextualized and ahistorical with the consequence that power becomes opaque, masked. Approaches to language study that emphasize materiality contextualize language in history and situation, understand the dynamic nature of production and reception, and make plain and visible the *actions*, including political actions, of language. Since access to language opens the door to participation in communities, when access is masked by sacred texts whose meanings can only be determined by preselected members of the community, then access is limited. When, as is also the case, members of marginalized groups continually press for access through both direct and subversive means, the "elect" hold tighter to their power and institute policies and practices to insure that access continues to be limited. Articulating this struggle illuminates the cycles of innovation and repression in basic writing programs and helps explain institutional resistance to mainstreaming.

Bleich's text joins a number of recent studies in composition that explore materiality, broadly conceived as the frequently unequal distribution and value of space, resources, and experience; the physicality of writing; and the consequences of the movement and meaning of language. This interest includes focused analyses of historical or cultural materialism, such as Bruce Horner's *Terms of Work for Composition* or Tony Scott's *Dangerous Writing*; labor studies such as Eileen Schell's and Patricia Lambert Stock's *Moving a Mountain*; Laura Micciche's use of the new materialism in "Writing Material"; or the collection of articles in *College English*'s special issue on materiality guest-edited by Bleich. This scholarship turns our attention to language's effects on the physical world of actual people, money, work, time, movement, and action.

Bleich's focus on language conflicts in the university makes his work particularly apt for this article. *The Materiality of Language* discloses how historic conflicts between the sacred and the material, realized often by the suppression of the study of vernacular languages in the Church and in universities, continue to shape contemporary attitudes towards language use. Bleich comments on how the endurance of this conflict keeps "language in a community of privilege by resisting the vernacular, by maintaining

the superstition that a language can be intrinsically sacred or superior, by limiting access to universities themselves, and by declaring that authoritative knowledge can only appear in one language" (135). Recasting the last three decades of conflict around basic writing in these terms explains how vague and often uninformed tirades about remediation reveal understandings of language use that have excluded and continue to exclude people whose language differs from the academy's. His analysis makes plain why work in our field is often contested, troubled, and difficult, even as it can be rewarding and productive.

Mainstreaming at CSU, Chico

Contested, troubled, and difficult accurately describe much of my professional life, particularly around issues connected with basic writing. I was hired in 1986 to coordinate California State University, Chico's basic writing program, which had two courses, one for reading and one for writing. The curriculum that I inherited was based on language assumptions that were the very opposite of materiality: workbooks, decontextualized exercises, reading curricula, and assessment with the Nelson-Denny reading test. As with many basic writing programs in the early and mid-eighties, ours focused on discrete skills, tested students with standardized tests, and separated reading from writing, and ultimately, language from life.

That year, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* was published and the faculty organized a collective reading of it. Its refreshing appeal was much about materiality: students wrote things that mattered to themselves and one other. The curriculum was not limited to personal narratives either; students took each other's real language seriously as worthy of study. Following the faculty reading group, we revised the curriculum, making it more rigorous and eliminating the workbooks and Nelson-Denny reading tests; we integrated reading and writing instruction. Students responded well, producing interesting, important writing and tackling relevant academic subjects. The faculty noticed and continued to up the ante. Pretty soon, the "basic" writing classes were harder and involved more work than the credit-bearing first-year composition classes. Students began to complain, not about the classes, but about not getting baccalaureate credit for their work. They wrote protest letters to the Chancellor's Office—real writing to real people—which riled people down there and got me into trouble with my Dean. No one needed to explain "materiality" to them.

In the early 1990s, my colleague at Chico, Judith Rodby, initiated a mainstreaming program. She began by successfully arguing for a pilot program that tracked a group of students who failed the CSU system's English Placement Test (EPT), mainstreamed them into the credit-bearing course, and required them to attend an adjunct workshop to support their success. Her argument combined institutional critique along the lines of Bartholomae's "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum" with Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger's theory of situated learning (Rodby). The pilot was successful. Instructors were not notified which students were in the workshops (that is, which students were "remedial"). The results were that students in the pilot program earned the same grades, and more than once, slightly *higher* grades, than students who passed the EPT. Consequently, we eliminated the basic writing classes altogether.

Mainstreaming and its Discontents

The elimination of separate classes for students who failed the placement test came at a time of cultural upheaval in higher education, both in the public sphere and in basic writing scholarship. The most vigorous attack on basic writing programs came from the trustees of City University of New York. Motivated by concerns over educational standards, particularly language and writing standards, and the cost of remedial programs, they proposed to eliminate basic writing programs at all four-year colleges and universities. Their proposals set off a storm of protests from students and faculty who argued that the Trustees' proposal cut off access to four-year universities for students of color. Somewhat later, at the University of Minnesota, the Board of Regents eliminated General College, reversing that institution's historic investment in diversity. These policy moves, and others like them, were not designed as mainstreaming, but as cost-cutting moves that would also have the benefit of returning the institutions to more homogeneous language standards by excluding students whose language differed from the academy's.

At the same time—the 1990s and early 2000s—scholarship in basic writing began weighing an opposite move, *increase* access by retaining admission standards and mainstreaming students. Both of these moves effectively eliminated basic writing programs, but differed radically in their understandings of the value of the students' language for academic work. Tensions around these questions emerged at the 1992 Conference on Basic Writing, which set off a flurry of soul-searching and innovation. Especially powerful was Bartholomae's keynote, "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in

the American Curriculum." Bartholomae argued that basic writing as an institutional action reiterated "the liberal project of the late 60s and early 70s, where in the name of sympathy and empowerment, we have once again produced the 'other' who is the incomplete version of ourselves" (18). Such sentiments were responded to vigorously. Karen Greenberg's response, published later in *JBW*, indicates the complexity of the times:

> If reactionary political academics and budget-minded administrators and legislators join forces with composition "stars" like David Bartholomae to attack basic writing programs, then these programs are doomed. Students will have to "sink or swim." Given the priorities of most universities, underprepared writers will not benefit from any of the tens of thousands of dollars that schools would save by ending placement testing and basic skills instruction. Most of the money will probably be spent on small senior seminars, on the library, on research projects, and on visiting professors. Indeed, if enough people subscribe to David Bartholomae's views on basic writing, there won't be any basic writing instruction in college much longer. (6-7)

Note how Bartholomae's concern for respecting language diversity—advocacy for students' vernacular—is transformed into an elitist position in Greenberg's analysis. Such was the cauldron of competing views on basic writing.

The defense of mainstreaming touched the language conflict nerve locally as well. Colleagues in Chico's history department circulated James Traub's story in *The New Republic* accusing the 1992 Basic Writing conference of political correctness with the comment, "no wonder they can't write." A colleague in composition from another campus called our campus's reasoning for mainstreaming "moronic," rejecting the argument that if you don't have a basic writing program, you don't have basic writers. Another colleague, one actively involved in scoring the EPT, looked down the road and said, "The English Placement Test is our baby. Don't kick the baby." Our defense of mainstreaming, that there was nothing wrong with the language that our students brought with them to the university, seemed heretical to people both in and out of the academy. The analogy between contemporary university politics around language and the church's history of treating heretics isn't far-fetched. Bleich's exploration of the conflicts over language study in the origins of the university shows repeatedly how advocacy of the

vernacular results in persecution. We argued that with strong instruction, students' vernacular could easily serve the purposes of the institution.

Nationally in the years that followed, there was a push-me/pull-me, back and forth between the repressive policies discussed above and new designs for basic writing programs. Scholars and teachers throughout the 1990s and early 2000s produced scores of successful and inventive programs, including mainstreaming experiments, directed self-placement, and stretch or accelerated programs. Important books such as Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu's *Representing the "Other"* (1999) and Geri McNenny and Sallyanne Fitzgerald's edited collection, *Mainstreaming Basic Writers* (2001), along with a succession of articles in this journal, challenged the profession to reconceive basic writing.

Basic Writing Innovation

In California, particularly in the last decade, campuses in the California State University (CSU) system and in the California Community College system have grappled with convincing research that shows that institutional structures of basic writing may do more harm than good. Thomas Bailey's series of articles on developmental programs, many of which were inspired by Peter Dow Adams' work in Baltimore, makes strong claims that the time and cost for students of developmental classes discourage students from completing the sequence and consequently achieving their college aspirations. Bailey makes clear (as do other researchers) that this is not necessarily a critique of the pedagogy of developmental programs. His well-known article, "Challenge and Opportunity: Rethinking the Role and Function of Developmental Education in Community College," concludes,

> Many students who are referred to developmental education never enroll in it. Many who complete one remedial course never show up for the next course in the sequence. Overall, fewer than half of students who are referred to developmental education complete the recommended sequence. What is more, many students who complete their developmental courses do not go on to enroll in the associated college-level courses. (24)

Katie Hern, an instructor at Chabot College in Hayward, CA, co-leads the California Acceleration Project, which examines current research, including Bailey's, and recruits community college faculty to research the efficacy of their own programs. Hern's research findings mirror Bailey's:

> Students who pass just one 4-unit course succeed in the [college transfer] course at exactly the same rate (82%) as students from the 8-unit two-semester sequence. It's hard to believe. We would think that more guidance and practice in academic literacy would result in better performance at the higher level. But four years of data, involving thousands of students, shows that it didn't. These four years of data also make clear the stark reality of exponential attrition: only 23% of students who began in the longer sequence went on to complete College English versus 45% from the accelerated track. ("Exponential" 6)

She also reiterates Bailey's point that these data do not support a pedagogical or curricular critique. The reasons for attrition are complex, having to do with a variety of issues, often with family and economic pressures that make going to colleges for long periods of time too costly in both economic and human terms. Hern argues that the greater number of "exit points" (those places where students need to sign up again, where they can opt out), the greater likelihood of students not completing the sequence.

Hern and many of her colleagues in the California Acceleration Project started a movement, with classroom and program innovations and experiments, workshops, and reading groups proliferating across California. The project critiques current placement systems and has worked toward designing better common placement tests. At the core of the project is a belief that students are more capable than the placement tests show. Hern argues that when "colleges accelerate students' progress into college-level courses, they're seeing that students are much more prepared than previously believed" ("Some College Students"). The California Acceleration Project's multi-leveled critique of remediation looks at classroom pedagogy, institutional practices, and ideological change. The group's beliefs around the value and suitability of students' vernacular language practices, their preparedness, have supported and extended the remarkable energy around these issues in California and have achieved results across the state, reducing the number of remedial courses and increasing accelerated models.

The four-year college systems in California, both the CSU and the University of California (UC), are somewhat behind the community colleges on this issue. In the CSU, however, the days of "moronic" seem to be over. The last survey of campuses in late 2012 revealed eight of twenty-three

campuses in the CSU system have fully implemented stretch, accelerated, or mainstreaming programs, five more are being piloted, and four more campuses are developing similar programs. Additionally, nine campuses have initiated directed self-placement programs where students can choose the stretch or the regular course ("Stretch Status Roster"). As is the routine, these efforts to honor students' languages and increase access are met with new responses that decrease access.

Materiality Repressed: Early Start and the EPT

In one of the most trenchant sections of *The Materiality of Language*, Bleich examines Ludwig Wittgenstein's insight into language study that "things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity" (qtd. in Bleich 109). Bleich extends Wittgenstein's point by arguing that the materiality of language is not just hidden, but repressed, not acknowledged and pushed out of sight (109n83). The materiality of language exists in plain sight; everyone experiences the materiality of language in their ordinary lives. We don't use language to abstract it, attribute it to God or some other origin; we don't imagine it has magic powers. When we want some salt, we say, "Pass the salt."

The materiality of language is obvious to everyone who speaks. In order to sustain sacralized language study, materiality has to be continually repressed. A better example couldn't be invented than the CSU's Early Start program. In the midst of all the productive innovation discussed above, in 2010, the trustees of the CSU came up with one of the more convoluted and restrictive ideas in the history of basic writing. Concerned that the numbers of remedial students were growing, *from 47% in 1997 to 49% in 2010* in English (CSU Analytic Studies), "overwhelming" our campuses and resources, the trustees decided that they would implement Early Start, which requires *admitted* first-year students to begin their remediation before fall term or else they cannot enroll. The hysteria around this two percent increase over thirteen years is pretty astonishing, and evidence of the high-pitched forces that wish to inhibit access. For instance, a news article about Early Start from the *Contra-Costa Times* by Matt Krupnick was titled "CSU Overwhelmed By Remedial Needs." It begins with the sentence: "Wracked with frustration over the state's legions of unprepared high school graduates, the California State University system next summer will force freshmen with remedial needs to brush up on math or English before arriving on campus" and continues by calling the number of students "staggering" and diagnosing them as "woe-

fully unprepared" (Krupnick). Just to make it clear: this was in response to a 2% increase. Did the trustees know? Did Krupnick check? The huge fuss over a 2% increase is indeed bizarre, but a fact such as this one is only in plain sight when someone says it is.

Nobody on my campus was wracking with frustration, at least not more than usual. The remediation rate, as Mike Rose consistently points out, is relatively stable. Campuses across the system have been engaged in thoughtful innovation that reduces both the cost to campuses and the time spent by students. The grass roots, that is, faculty on local campuses, were taking care of business in progressive and helpful ways. And then, the trustees concoct an unfunded mandatory program?

The English Council of the CSU (representatives from English Departments and Writing Programs in the CSU system) passed a strongly worded resolution that noted that Early Start was discriminatory, punitive, financially burdensome to students, likely to be ineffective, and ignored the innovative work on the campuses that was successfully addressing the "remedial problem." They cited the research about numbers of courses and noted that Early Start added yet another hurdle to completing first year composition. It spoke to the material consequences of the proposal. The resolution, and a similar one by the Academic Senate of the whole CSU, was completely ignored. Early Start costs students $182 at a minimum. There were 18,690 students who were required to take Early Start in 2012, a number that has remained steady in the two years following. The math: $3,401,580 was taken from the most economically poor CSU-bound students.

The clearest definition of remediation in English in the CSU is simple: those students who fail the English Placement Test. The EPT, originally, was one of the few large-scale assessments developed by faculty (in conjunction with the Educational Testing Service). For the mid-1970s (the test was first used in 1977), it was considered a progressive assessment in that it didn't rely entirely on multiple-choice questions on usage, and included a 30-minute essay that was holistically scored. In a way, the EPT staved off more formalist approaches to assessment. The field of writing assessment and language study, too, has changed since the 1970s and what was progressive forty years ago stands in the way of change in the present. The entire house of remedial cards is held in place by this test, even though many of these new programs overwhelmingly challenge its validity.

I want to take a quick look at the kind of test it is, but not for a critique of the test—no need, it's a terrible test—but to understand how the materiality of language is suppressed, making basic writing as an institutional

practice difficult to eliminate, despite evidence of its harm to students. The EPT has three parts, two sections of multiple choice questions on reading skills and composing skills, and one forty-five minute essay. The California State University English Success website has several sample questions, such as the following in the reading section:

> *Each year, millions of people visit the national parks of the American West, and they come for a variety of reasons. Some seek to explore the historical past. Others are looking for a short escape from the hot city or the crowded office or factory. Still others are trying to learn something about the mysteries of nature. Whatever their reason for visiting the parks, few leave disappointed.*
>
> *1. People who visit the parks for the first reason mentioned by the author would most probably want to see*
>
> *(A) an animal preserve*
> *(B) the ruins of a Pueblo Indian village*
> *(C) a canyon with a variety of geological formations*
> *(D) a geyser with a predictable pattern of eruptions*

I couldn't answer this simple question and had to ask my office mate. I skimmed it and thought "first" meant most important, and the passage didn't say anything about most important. Once I realized it was a *counting* task, I wondered if students were ever asked in a college class a question like this, and if so, why.

Here is an example of a multiple-choice composing skill question:

> *A clenched fist shows anger, and drooping shoulders indicate despondency; the first is an example of conscious body language, while the second is unconscious.*
> *Rewrite, beginning with:*
> *Body language may be unconscious, . . .*
>
> *The next words will be*
> *(A) that shows*
> *(B) the first example*
> *(C) as when*
> *(D) and, for example,*

I got this one right, but the feeling of bizarreness remained. I should note that Accuplacer, one of the most widely used placement instruments, which is owned by the College Board, has very similar questions. These tests are not good. They do not accurately predict success in writing courses and they mislead students about the content and practices of reading and writing in college. The Grand Canyon disconnect between the tasks required in college and the tasks required by the test obscures the functions and uses of writing. These tasks repress or obscure the idea that language is material because, in this context on this test, no one really cares what words come next when one starts a sentence about body language a different way. Most importantly, and most obviously, the consequence of answering the question does not have to do with body language, but with access to the university and with money.

These tests remain in place, some of the most stubborn practices to uproot, supported by trustees, professors in other fields, and tacitly—or directly—by public discourse that routinely laments the students' failure. The public, and many of our colleagues on our campuses, believe that students are "woefully unprepared" in writing and believe in the tests and programs that assess and remediate students. We are engaged in a prolonged ideological struggle over how we study, define, and teach writing. This struggle takes place primarily between those of us engaged in the discipline of teaching writing and those who are not. It is a consequential struggle. Students who get discouraged by the time and money spent in levels of remediation lose access to language practices and genres of the disciplines, practices that are useful for citizens as well as for students, important for participatory democracy as well as for improving education.

In Plain Sight

Bleich's argument that the materiality of language is in plain sight is no more obviously illustrated than on the CSU's very own English Success website, a website designed to help students through the bureaucracy of CSU's remediation system and encourage students to prepare for the test. The transcript below the video, which is meant to encourage students to take the EPT, illustrates one student's material understandings of language:

"My name's Cherise Arzaga, and I think my major's gonna be English. EPT, it's like you think you're over with your SATS and everything and you have to take another test. Actually I took the EPT on my birthday so it was one of those tests where I'm just like 'Ohh, I gotta get this done' and so on and you think you do fine and then you find out you have to take English 1 or a remediation class and it sucks, 'cause you've been in AP classes or, like, you've done the work and now you have to do the remedial classes. It's just, it's sad kinda. I didn't really know much about it. I just knew it's just gonna be another standard test to take it, write an essay. Get good sleep before! And just focus that day and just write an essay. Take it seriously cuz you pay for that and then if you don't take it seriously you have to pay for another class that you don't get credit for, but you do learn in the end, but still, you know, take it seriously. You have that time to save money and do it right."

This is not a ringing endorsement of basic writing, nor is it an endorsement of the English Placement Test, despite its being on the CSU website, apparently designed to encourage prospective students to pass the test. She locates the test in a material world: in time (her birthday), and most importantly in an economic system of actual dollars and credits. In fact, it's almost all about the money, echoing my point about Early Start, and undercutting the supposed educational purpose. Understand that during this time, California and much of the rest of the country were in the most serious economic trouble in decades, and tuition increased from $1428 in 2001-02 to $5472 in 2011. The cost of the test, the cost of the non-baccalaureate credit, and the cost of the extra time in the university all weigh hard on students. "If you don't take it seriously," she says, "you have to pay for another class that you don't get credit for." Rodby examines this same issue in "What It's For and What It's Worth":

> It did not finally even matter how relevant, insightful, or provocative our curriculum was. No remedial courses in the California State University system carried credit, and our students were finally not able to accept the worth of courses that gave them no credit. They understood that they were in an economy in which literacy was a (if not the) medium of exchange. (108)

At the same time, Cherise recognizes the meaninglessness of the test. Her

understanding of language is decidedly material, and it undercuts the validity of the test, even in a video designed to encourage students to take the test seriously. It's a chore, a hoop, and it's part of a system of other standard tests. Get a good night's sleep so it doesn't suck.

Writing Assessment and Placement

The conflict between material conceptions of language and sacred, formalist, or transparent conceptions is a long one, one that program administrators and teachers of basic writing experience on a daily basis. What can articulating this conflict do to improve the lives of students and ourselves? Such a view of language conflict can inform policy decisions around basic writing, especially about large-scale placement or programmatic writing assessment. To the degree it's possible, we need to assess students' writing on its material value, on whether it gets the work done that it proposes to do and whether or not that work is of value. Recent studies of writing assessment have moved the field away from formalist assessments and towards more materialist approaches. These studies embrace language difference and variety and recognize the situatedness of language use. Asao Inoue, in *Antiracist Assessment Ecologies*, examines the connections between race and writing assessment (including a trenchant critique of the EPT) and by doing so argues for the value of students' writing that eschews formalism. His own classroom assessment practice is materialist, assessing students on the multiplicity of labor by asking them to document the number of hours they have worked and on the interconnectness of their writing in the local ecologies of their world. His assessment troubles formalist approaches by examining how the value of writing is embedded in dynamic ecological social networks.

The labor required for the human judgments for large-scale programmatic assessment often results in formalist assessments. The absence of money for the labor of materialist assessments is one of the ways that restricted funding keeps formalist assessments in place. Tony Scott and Lil Brannon's "Democracy, Struggle, and the Praxis of Assessment" describes large-scale assessment of a writing program that values the labor of students and teachers and understands language as materialist. Instead of seeking consensus about the value of student writing, they encourage dissensus, "which foregrounds unequal relations and continued struggle for power" (294).

Similarly, Chris Gallagher, in "Immodest Witness: Reliability and Writing Assessment," argues that current writing assessments "operate on assessment concepts and practices that demand highly controlled, arhetori-

cal approaches to reading and writing" (74). By adopting *witnessing* as the conceptual role for readers assessing student writing, Gallagher provides us with a powerful model to reconceive assessment, particularly reliability. Witnessing involves the assertion of a contested truth in an actual situation and requires not only an assertion but a response, one that either revises the truth or contests it. Using "witnessing" as a model, Gallagher argues that writing assessment is a "material and embodied rhetorical act" (77).

Gallagher's, Inoue's, and Scott and Brannon's work, along with other progressive research in writing assessment, shows how materialist assessments of writing, though often labor-intensive, can support the democratization of the academy. Additionally, as these studies show, the material/formalist dichotomy is useful in arguing against bad assessments, such as the EPT. Inoue's analysis of the EPT, grounded in his focus on local diversity, makes a strong *materialist* argument, showing not just that the test is somehow objectively racist or biased but that it clearly has racist effects, particularly on the multilingual Hmong students. Inoue argues that "the fact that failure (low scores that mean remediation) pool so cleanly, abundantly, and consistently in Hmong racial and linguistic formations in Fresno . . . shows us that larger structural racism is happening in schools and classrooms, as much as it is in the test itself. Good writing assessments should be able to identify such structural racism, not work with it to produce more racist effects" (74). While these studies of writing assessment radically change program and classroom assessment, they have not been widely employed in the placement systems that produce basic writing programs. If such concepts were applied to placement assessments, the binary sorting of writers—basic or regular—would end and basic writing programs would dramatically change.

Living in the Conflict

The conflict between Platonic approaches to language use and materialist ones will likely go on as it has: continued tactical innovations to programs that reduce the time and money students need to spend to receive a college degree by reducing the number of basic writing courses met by countermoves that reduce access by requiring more time, more money. The work and high spirits of collectives such as the California Acceleration Project, the hard institutional work of progressive CSU faculty, and new approaches to writing assessment all demonstrate an irrepressible progressive impulse. It has been, and it will continue to be, met with opposition.

This article seeks to add intellectual juice to our work. Opposition will seek to deny the material uses of language through mandated tests, curricula, and other policies. These strategies will limit access to academic language and practices to our students. In turn, the authority of basic writing teachers, authority to design institutional practices and curricula that support our students, will be reduced. Our job in this dysfunctional dialogue is to be clear about what we know from our research, our experience, and our classrooms and not be silenced. Those of us with institutional security need to speak out against policy, interference in our curricula, and assessment mandates. While we may not be successful, we can at least make some noise, point out injustice and untruths, continue subverting mandates, and occasionally change some policy.

Finally, and not insignificantly, understanding this conflict explains our professional lives, in the sense of "Oh, that's what going on," providing a balm of sense on the often senseless abrasion of professional experience. Keeping the conflict in mind helps to defamiliarize the strange view of language as a form and not as an action. Understanding the continual repression of materialist views of language means that we are the ones who articulate the conflict and explain, to say what's in plain sight. We need to not be surprised at what people say to us about our students' language, not caught speechless at assumptions springing from a institutionally-manufactured understanding of language historically and currently designed to keep people (including or especially those people who fail a test and are named "basic writers") from participating fully in institutions, communities, economies, and democracy.

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