Re-examining Constructions of Basic Writers' Identities: Graduate Teaching, New Developments in the Contextual Model, and the Future of the Discipline

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ABSTRACT: This essay extends arguments made by Gray-Rosendale in two earlier essays published within the Journal of Basic Writing *(1999 and 2006), ones that focused on how basic writers' identities were being constructed in our scholarship. She traced developments in various approaches— developmentalist and grammar-based models (1970s), academic discourse models (1980s), conflict models (1990s), and contextual models (2000s). The present article outlines strategies for teaching "Teaching Basic Writing," a graduate course that she has taught for over twenty years at Northern Arizona University. Gray-Rosendale also examines exciting recent trends in the contextual model by analyzing three key essays that have appeared in* JBW. *Finally, based upon what she discovers, she offers insights about the future of the contextual model, the future of her graduate course, and the future of the discipline.*

KEYWORDS: academic discourse; basic writers' identities; conflict; contextualism; developmentalism; graduate education; self-constructivism

Since I first arrived at Northern Arizona University as a newly minted PhD from Syracuse University twenty plus years ago, I have been teaching various versions of a graduate course in our MA Program in Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies (RWDMS) titled "Teaching Basic Writing." Teaching this course over so many years—both face-to-face and online, both in full semester and half semester forms—has taught me a great deal about the field of Basic Writing, of course, its various twists, turns, and shifts. It's also provided me with many chances to enact and model flexible approaches

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to theorizing and teaching to my graduate students. Such approaches are increasingly critical to the professionalization of today's graduate students since the landscape they are encountering within their classrooms and administrative work is constantly changing. In large part I have designed my "Teaching Basic Writing" graduate course around a series of specific shifts—developmentalist and grammar-based models (1970s), academic discourse models (1980s), conflict models (1990s), and contextual models (2000s)—that I have witnessed in the construction of basic writers' identities over time. I also published two articles about these shifts in *JBW* over the years. The first, titled "Investigating Our Discursive History: *JBW* and the Construction of the Basic Writer's Identity," appeared in 1998. The second, titled "Back to the Future: Contextuality and the Construction of the Basic Writer's Identity in the *Journal of Basic Writing* 1999-2005," was for a 2006 special issue, marking the twenty-fifth volume of *JBW*. Both teaching this course and conducting this research have enabled me to educate a generation of folks who now teach basic writers themselves and even occasionally teach courses like "Teaching Basic Writing."

In these two previously mentioned essays, I drew in part from Joseph Harris's work in *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966* and from Michel Foucault's understandings of discourse and writing history in *Archaeology of Knowledge*. As I noted in the first essay, such writing of history for Foucault aimed to expose the "epistemological field, the episteme in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to rational value or its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility" (1970, xxii). Not only does such writing of history look at key moments where discursive forms solidify and concentrate upon certain ideas. It also investigates moments of historical disjuncture and change so as to better examine both the past and the present while paying close attention to the social and political issues that inform them. As I mentioned in this first of the two essays, I turned to *Basic Writing* (the earlier title of the journal) and the *Journal of Basic Writing* for two reasons: it has always been the "main organ of the Basic Writing movement, and therefore it provides by and large a sustained view of such changes" and "placed within this journal this history may offer the opportunity for self-reflection, a recognition of where we've come from, the paths we've taken, and the adventures upon which we have yet to embark" (1999, 109).

In this present essay, I provide an overview of this graduate class in "Teaching Basic Writing" in which we trace the history of constructions of

Basic Writing students' identities. As I show, learning about such shifts not only conveys a crucial history to graduate students. It also encourages them to remain more open in both their theorizing about as well as teaching of Basic Writing students. In addition, I explain the major assignments and readings I use in this course to model, expose, and explore changes that have occurred in these constructions. This close examination of how the field constructs basic writers' identities encourages our graduate students to engage in a kind of deep reflective inquiry that asks them to continually look at the past, present, and future of our research and teaching. It also demands that our graduate students put Basic Writing students at the very center of their inquiries. And, ultimately, as I reveal, this results in ongoing, project-based strategies that will help graduate students as they both create scholarship about Basic Writing as well as teach basic writers themselves.

I then return to a question I have addressed in those two aforementioned articles that have appeared in the *Journal of Basic Writing*: In the years since I last examined this question (2006), how are basic writers' identities being constructed in our scholarship, specifically within the *Journal of Basic Writing*? And I ask other questions too. Is the contextual model for constructing basic writers' identities still operating? Or, is something new taking its place? These are particularly important issues for graduate students and other scholars and teachers in Basic Writing Studies to continue to examine because they reveal the kinds of investments that have shaped our pedagogies historically, how exactly we have perceived our students, their lives, and their capabilities. Specifically, I investigate three essays (2013-2016) from *JBW* that indicate exciting developments in this area. Finally, I explain the value of these essays and their implications to the future of Basic Writing Studies. I describe some of the crucial student projects that have come out of my "Teaching Basic Writing" class over the years, suggesting how they might develop further given the compelling changes I am seeing in Basic Writing Studies altogether. I also consider some alterations I hope to make to my graduate course in "Teaching Basic Writing" given the new approaches I am witnessing, and I offer some tentative thoughts on the future of the discipline. My sincere hope is that readers will leave this essay with a renewed sense of the importance of articulating our history, of conceiving of our present, and of celebrating all that lies ahead.

Course Structure, Readings, and Assignments

In the earliest years of teaching "Teaching Basic Writing," a graduate course that is based around these historical changes, most of my students had little experience actually teaching basic writing. They had certainly encountered basic writers in teaching composition classes, in working in The NAU Writing Commons, or perhaps while working as instructors or supplemental instructors in The STAR Program (Successful Transition and Academic Readiness) I direct. But those were usually their main experiences. Today many of my on-line graduate students in particular are already teaching Basic Writing at community colleges across the country, many for quite some time, and have never taken a course of this kind that exposes them to both the history and theory of Basic Writing as well as its various teaching applications. Some of these students are in our RWDMS MA Program. Some are getting Certificates in RWDMS while pursuing graduate degrees in Literature, Creative Writing, TESOL, Professional Writing, or English Education. Still others are getting doctorates in Education. And a growing number of these students already have doctoral degrees and are returning to school to gain a Certificate in RWDMS or to just take a few key classes that might improve their teaching.

These students, no matter who they may be or what backgrounds they bring to the course, often have very strong reactions to taking the class. Many say that they wish that they had been required to take such a course before ever beginning to teach any students—and especially basic writers. A number have actually taken the materials from my class and have, with my permission, shared them with all of their colleagues who also teach basic writers and will never have a chance—due to time and/or money—to take a course of this kind. In some cases, I have actually heard back from their colleagues as well, thanking me for teaching the class, for the reading materials, and for the assignments. For my graduate students who are on campus, taking the "Teaching Basic Writing" class has had other effects as well. As a result of the course, they are better able to help the struggling students that they encounter in their writing classes and tutoring situations.

The discipline's constructions of our basic writers' identities propel our detailed studies within the "Teaching Basic Writing" course. Our class covers the various cohesions and disjunctures within the history of the construction of those identities. Therefore, the scaffolded assignments in the course involve learning our complex and sometimes contradictory theories and histories. Next, we directly apply what we have learned to real teaching

situations and experiences. In this way, graduate students are better prepared to enter the world of teaching writing whether at the community college or four-year university. And, if they are going on to doctoral programs, they have far more theory and experience in Basic Writing than many of their counterparts who will be applying.

I have long structured versions of my graduate course "Teaching Basic Writing" around those key shifts in the construction of basic writers' student identities that I saw occurring over time in both the *Journal of Basic Writing* and in the discipline of Basic Writing Studies generally. Essentially, it's been my own winding journey through the discipline that has inspired exactly how and what I teach. As part of this, I have tried as much as possible to remain very adaptive in my approaches. This has meant sometimes focusing more on certain areas than on others, as a way to model this thinking to my graduate students. I want them to understand that the best teaching of Basic Writing students comes not from adopting one set of theories or practices alone but rather from being open to creating a sort of patchwork quilt, a cobbling together of various crucial pieces of knowledge from our long history. We need to always be open to utilizing the strategies that will best help us to reach our students in a given situation or context. This requires both deep knowledge as well as a kind of a spontaneity in our teaching. As noted earlier, these varied approaches have often included developmentalist and grammar-based models (1970s), academic discourse models (1980s), conflict models (1990s), and contextual models (2000s).

"Teaching Basic Writing" both examines these pivotal historical moments as well as traces various disruptions that occurred within each approach. I have chosen to construct the course around these shifts for a number of reasons that relate to my key goal for the course—to help to create the most informed past, present, and future teachers of Basic Writing that I can within the time afforded by the class. My key goal is, of course, informed by some other assumptions I make. First, my course begins from the premise that Basic Writing Studies theory and practice are deeply interconnected, that one must know theory and history in order to be an effective teacher and that the best pedagogical practices also reinform our theories about teaching. Second, I believe that if graduate students understand the theories and histories—and specifically the ways in which basic writers' identities have been constructed—they can be more self-conscious about their own pedagogical choices with their Basic Writing students and more compassionate about the various needs and identities that their Basic Writing students bring with them into their classrooms.

The version of "Teaching Basic Writing" that I now teach is on-line and seven and a half weeks long. It has seven modules.[1] Each of the first six modules receives a week of focus while the seventh module receives a week and a half, leaving extra time for students' final projects and project presentations. In each module I include both the required readings and a set of additional readings. In this way, students can read the primary texts I assign and then delve into subjects more deeply as they wish.

Early in the semester (1970s): The beginning of the course provides an extensive historical framework. I find that this is important to do because my graduate students have varying levels of knowledge about Basic Writing Studies and also need to understand its relationship to the larger discipline of Rhetoric and Composition. I want my students to emerge from these modules confident in themselves as well as their historical knowledge. We read pieces from Theresa Enos's *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers* and Kay Halasek's and Nels P. Highberg's *Landmark Essays in Basic Writing*. Once George Otte and Rebecca Mlynarczyk's *Basic Writing* came out, that also became a significant addition to the course. We also read introductory pieces from Susan Naomi Bernstein's *Teaching Developmental Writing: Background Readings* and sections of Chitralekha Duttagupta and Robert Miller's most recent version of *The Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Basic Writing*. My graduate students examine selections from the *Basic Writing e- Journal (BWe)*, too. *The Journal of Basic Writing*, however, is perhaps the backbone of the course, the set of texts to which we keep returning over and over again.

In the first two modules, students write a detailed "Literacy Autobiography" about their own experiences. This helps them to conceive of how their reading and writing experiences have shaped them as students and teachers as well as enables them to consider how such experiences may have shaped their own students. They also write "A History of Basic Writing Studies" piece in which they situate their own teaching and learning experiences within this larger history. We have several discussions related to their own writing struggles and their teaching experiences with struggling writers. All of these things help to set the stage for the upcoming modules that ask them to consider their own identities as students and teachers alongside how the identities of basic writers have been constructed historically. I introduce the idea of their final projects for the course very early on as well, so that they have ample time to begin jotting down their ideas and thoughts.

In the middle of the semester (1980s and 1990s): Midway into the course we concentrate on the developmentalist constructions of basic writers' student identities. I want my graduate students to understand the earliest

formations of Basic Writing Studies within Rhetoric and Composition and to think about how focusing on issues of grammar and cognitive development may have shaped the various ways in which scholars and teachers viewed their students. We read Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* alongside her essay "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," Adrienne Rich's "Teaching Language in Open Admissions," and Jane Maher's *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*. We also read John Rouse's "The Politics of Composition," Patricia Laurence's "Errors Endless Train," Min-Zhan Lu's and Elizabeth Robertson's "Life Writing as Social Acts," John Brereton's "Four Careers in English," and selections from Joseph Harris's *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*. There is a discussion about unpacking and analyzing various constructions of Shaughnessy and also about applying Shaughnessy's ideas to our own teaching. Then there are two writing assignments. The first focuses on "Shaughnessy's Rhetoric" and the second on "Maher's Constructions of Shaughnessy" as well as various uses of biography for the discipline of Basic Writing Studies. Finally, my students produce a project proposal and literature review for the Final Course Project. Since this is a 600 level topics course, I give my students quite a bit of latitude in terms of how they approach the project. However, it needs to examine an issue in Basic Writing Studies and/or offer an application of some of the histories and theories we are studying.

Next, we begin to focus on narratives and storytelling. I want my students to understand that personal experience as a form of evidence can be central to the kinds of research and theorizing we do within Basic Writing Studies. My students often find this section particularly valuable because they can see particular examples of literacy acquisition in action. We read selections from Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, bell hooks's *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black,* Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez,* Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*, and Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. There is a discussion about both analyzing these narratives and applying what the graduate students are learning from reading them to their own teaching. There are two writing assignments on "Narratives" that help the students to better understand the situations of individual people by explaining how social, cultural, and contextual factors have shaped their lives and their writing. In both cases, my students have the option to answer a series of detailed questions about these specific literacy narratives.

It is during this part of the course that my students begin engaging more fully in online discussions about their Final Projects for the course. It's also at this point that students concentrate on academic discourse models for understanding basic writers' student identities. I want them to consider how these constructions might impact the ways in which they teach their own students. We read David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts: Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course* and Patricia Bizzell's *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness.* We also read a crucial exchange from the *Journal of Basic Writing* that involves Myra Kogen, Janice N. Hays, as well as G. Genevieve Patthey-Chavez and Constance Gergen where the developmentalist paradigm for understanding basic writers' student identities begins to break down in favor of an academic discourse model. There is a discussion about academic discourse and how it is defined across these texts and my graduate students describe how they have utilized or might utilize this model within their own teaching. Next, there is a writing assignment on "The Kogen/Hays Debate" in which my graduate students are encouraged to articulate the different positions taken by the two thinkers in their exchange with one another—the first favoring more of an academic discourse model, the second a developmentalist—as well as to consider how this debate fits into the larger history of Basic Writing Studies.

Toward the end of the course (Late 1990s, 2000s, and Beyond): In the home stretch, we investigate conflict constructions for basic writers' student identities, or models that consider issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, region, as well as disability, and identify how such models might shape their approaches to teaching their students. We read Min-Zhan Lu's "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence" as well as "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" We also read Joseph Harris's "Negotiating the Contact Zone," Deborah Mutnick's *Writing in an Alien World,* and Pamela Gay's "Rereading Shaughnessy from a Postcolonial Perspective." Finally, we read selections from Lu and Horner's *Representing the Other* and Adler-Kassner and Harrington's *Basic Writing as a Political Act.* There is a discussion about what constitutes effective teaching given each of the models that we have discussed thus far in the course and students offer their final assessments of the developmentalist, academic discourse, and conflict approaches for understanding basic writers' identities. There are two writing assignments. One focuses generally on issues of "Politics and Basic Writing" while the other focuses specifically on "Mutnick and Identity Constructions." In both cases, my graduate students are encouraged to apply what they have learned from

their readings and our discussions to their own teaching experiences by also examining case studies and scenarios. Confronted with a specific student writing problem, the larger social, cultural, and political issues that might give rise to it, as well as a specific context in which it occurs, how exactly might they respond and why?

Finally, we examine contextual models for basic writers' student identities as well as investigate various attempts at constructing what the "future of Basic Writing" might look like. I want my graduate students to consider what basic writers' student identities look like when constructed in terms of specific institutional contexts as well as to think about possible next directions for the discipline. In this module, we read a wide range of texts and also focus on the very latest issues from the *Journal of Basic Writing*. We read parts of Shannon Carter's *The Way Literacy Lives: Rhetorical Dexterity and Basic Writing Instruction*, Keith Gilyard's "Basic Writing, Cost Effectiveness, and Ideology," George Otte and Rebecca Mlynarczyk's "The Future of Basic Writing," Lynn Quitman Troyka's "How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise," and Edward White and William DeGenaro's "Basic Writing and Disciplinary Maturation: How Chance Conversations Continue to Shape the Field." We also watch a YouTube Seminar, "The Future of Basic Writing II: Liz Clark and Heidi Johnsen." Finally, we watch a series of YouTube videos that feature my now retired colleague Gregory Glau and I having conversations about various developments within Basic Writing as a discipline, where it has been, and where we imagine it going in the future. My graduate students engage in a discussion about their assessment of their own work in the course as well as the course itself. Oftentimes, they conclude the course much more willing and able to see multiple approaches as valuable to their teaching of basic writers, and they have a better sense of the fact that they are not working in isolation but rather come from and are contributing to quite a long and rich history of Basic Writing teaching and theorizing. They also sometimes surprise me and themselves, I think, by the extent to which they deeply wish that the class was longer, that there was much more time to explore these ideas. In short, none of us seem to want the class to come to an end, though of course it always must. They offer a Final Presentation of their Final Projects to the group as well as submit them for all of us to read and comment upon. There is one final writing assignment in which they consider the potential futures of Basic Writing in light of their readings and all that they have learned from the course.

Problems within the Contextual Model

As late as 2006, I was arguing in my scholarship that the contextual model for understanding basic writers' student identities was beginning to dominate our discourses. While this was a positive development in various ways, there were also some distinct problems in this approach, making it more necessary than ever for us to more fully take students' complex identities into greater consideration when we represented them within our scholarship and created pedagogies with them in mind.

Examining how this model was operating from 1999-2005 in the *Journal of Basic Writing*, I saw essays falling into three major categories: "the Basic Writer's identity as constructed *in situ*; the Basic Writer's identity constructed as a theory, academic discourse, and/or history reformer; and the Basic Writer's identity constructed as a set of practices in action" (2006, 7). In some ways, this was an encouraging turn of events since earlier models "sometimes risked delimiting the Basic Writer's identity according to a deficit theory model, a 'problem' that the Basic Writer endured, be it cognitive, discursive, or social" (2006, 18). The contextual model was different from earlier models in that it mainly examined local institutional sites—rather than making more global statements about basic writers—as a way to construct basic writers' identities. For all teachers of Basic Writing—my own graduate students as well as those many other teachers of Basic Writing—this meant that our teaching and our claims about teaching would be more related to the everyday contexts within which we and our students found ourselves.

But I was quite cautious about my findings, writing and thinking as I was from within that historical period itself. I made note of the fact that the focus on the local had perhaps resulted in the loss of "some of our ability to describe relevant institutional, political, and social trends in broader, general terms within basic writing scholarship" (19). I worried that this could result in some insularity among programs and interrupt the building of crucial coalitions across programs at a time when national and global concerns were seriously impacting our teaching.

It also put a lot of pressure on basic writers' student identities to be responsible for saving us all from our troubled history. The roles seemed to have changed: "In contrast to times past, one might argue that now the teacher/researcher has been recast somewhat as the flailing victim in need of rescue—our students in the new narrative now acting as our figurative, if not our literal, saviors" (20). This focus on basic writers' identities, while valuable, ran certain risks we had to struggle to avoid. Finally, I urged that "in

sometimes unreflectively privileging direct student voices, actions, practices, and perspectives, we may seem to assume their transparence" (20). Instead, student voices "are always mediated by our students' previous experiences, their oftentimes incredibly complex and conflicted cultural positions, the multi-layered institutional spaces within which their discourses are produced, and their generational affiliations" (20).

Tracing Basic Writers' Student Identities from 2006-2017

Since I published that essay, I have not had a chance to engage in a sustained examination of the latest developments within the contextual model. So this present article affords me a rare opportunity that promises to impact both my graduate teaching and my scholarship in very meaningful ways—to examine what has happened since I last looked carefully into how basic writers' identities are being constructed in the journal. As I studied *JBW* from 2006 to the present, I wanted to explore answers to certain questions, questions that seemed more critical than ever in light of our increasingly conservative political environment, this era of "fake news" and what increasingly feels like a reality television culture in which we find ourselves, as well as the ever-constant budget cuts to and eliminations of Basic Writing programs. How we think about basic writers' identities as well as how they think of themselves still matters greatly. Was the contextual model continuing as the predominant approach for how basic writers' identities were being characterized in the journal? Had other approaches begun to change or perhaps challenge it as well?

As I considered these questions, I found myself thinking a good deal about Otte and Mlynarczyk's excellent 2010 "The Future of Basic Writing" that appeared in *JBW* and then in slightly revised form in their book *Basic Writing*. They note that imagining the future of Basic Writing is always in part about more fully understanding our past. They write that "There are lessons to be learned from that history, some hard and some inspiring. Some may have lost their relevance with the passage of time. But some may make the past of basic writing a guide to building its future" (28 in article; 188 in book). So, I decided to look at our recent past for clues as to where we have been and where we are headed. Learning such things, I knew, would inevitably impact both my future teaching of "Teaching Basic Writing" as well as my own scholarly work.

What I discovered through this process—I read and took detailed notes on each essay written within the journal from the 2006 issue on—is

that some crucial issues have come to the fore. Repeated themes involve the redefinition of key terms; concern with assessment practices; a focus on technology and Basic Writing students; the importance of L2 Learner issues; challenges to the private/public split in Basic Writing students' and teachers' lives; a focus on rethinking questions of standards and access; various challenges to the personal/academic writing binary; and the professionalization of the Basic Writing discipline.

I also discovered that there is still a great focus on contextual constructions of basic writers' student identities. This is a metaphoric investment that remains absolutely critical from 2006 to our current historical moment. It should certainly still be a significant part of how I approach teaching the "Teaching Basic Writing" course and how my graduate students think about working with their students—how they design lessons, create curricula, and advance their scholarship. However, the ways in which this contextual model is now manifesting itself are myriad, complicated, and quite intriguing. Basic writers' identities are now being quite self-consciously analyzed and constructed within the pages of *JBW*. When essays offer contextual constructions centering on specific students and programs, they more often also do the following:

- Make important gestures toward and connections with larger public, political, and social issues
- Relay an ever-greater commitment to outreach, collaboration, communal work, public policy, and coalition-building
- More fully integrate basic writing students' identities and voices into our research while at the same time perceiving them as always mediated, constructed, as well as multi-layered and differing greatly from context to context

Though there are certainly other examples to which I might turn, a few more recent essays from 2013-2016 hold a special place in the history of the journal, making very strong cases for paying closer attention to exactly how our Basic Writing students are constructing their own identities within our classes—Barbara Bird's 2013 "A Basic Writing Course Design to Promote Writer Identity: Three Analyses of Student Papers," Patrick Sullivan's 2015 "'Ideas about Human Possibilities': Connecticut's PA 12-40 and Basic Writing in the Era of Neoliberalism," as well as Emily Schnee and Jamil Shakoor's 2016 "Self/Portrait of a Basic Writer: Broadening the Scope of Research on College Remediation."

Academic Writer Identities: Barbara Bird's Analysis

Barbara Bird's 2013 "A Basic Writing Course Design to Promote Writer Identity: Three Analyses of Student Papers" is an important essay to introduce to our graduate students in a class like "Teaching Basic Writing." It reveals the ways in which teachers might both honor the identities our Basic Writing students bring to our classrooms while also helping them to effectively enact and construct other kinds of identities in their writing, ones that will ultimately enable them to become more effective academic writers.

Drawing on research from David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" and a body of work about writers' identities published by Roz Ivanič, Bird examines how students can come to better understand academic writing not by parroting academic discourse conventions back to their teachers but rather by adopting certain kinds of textual identities or dispositions. For Bird, ideally three textual components must be present in her students' writing—"1) autobiographical writer identity: generating personally meaningful, unique ideas, 2) discoursal identity: making clear claims and connecting evidence to claims, and 3) authorial writer identity: performing intellectual work, specifically through elaboration and critical thinking" (71). Her own Writing-About-Writing (WAW) course is specifically designed to encourage the adoption of these identities.

Next, Bird produces three comparative analyses with forty-seven student papers collected over a two-year time span to gauge the effectiveness of this course in terms of creating these specific types of academic writer student identities. She engages in three comparisons. First, Bird compares the first paper her students wrote in the WAW Basic Writing course with the final papers that they produced. She finds a small but noteworthy "increase in the percentage of both authorial and discoursal components" or that the students had expanded the "percentage of words to discuss their claims"(82/83). Second, she compares the final papers that her students wrote to their "most significant" paper produced at the end of their freshmen writing classes. Here she finds that students had increased one essential authorial element in their writing—"logical development" (85). Third, she compares that "most significant paper" for the Basic Writing students to a similar paper produced by typical freshmen writing students. In this comparison she discovers that the Basic Writing students evidenced "more of their own ideas (autobiographical component) and more of their own authority as academic thinkers (the authorial component)" (86). In other words, based on her empirical study, Bird discovers that "basic writers demonstrated improvement

(first study), short-term transfer (second study), and expanded intellectual contributions—their authority—as compared with freshmen writers (third study)" (87). As a result, Bird suggests that the self-conscious construction of basic writers' student identities in our classes can definitely help them to achieve some of our key writing goals in our Basic Writing writing courses.

Several things make this argument especially valuable to the question of professionalization and graduate education as well as to how basic writers' identities are being constructed in the discipline generally. Bird is self-consciously acknowledging and valuing both the identities basic writers bring to our classes as well as those we as teachers would like them to take on. It's important for our graduate students to see that basic writers' own identities prior to taking our Basic Writing classes can be utilized to help them try on other identities, identities that they often need to take on in order to be successful in their Basic Writing classrooms. Bird is also carefully connecting her discussion of basic writers' identities to larger trends as well as concerns that she sees operating in Basic Writing scholarship and in the academic world generally. Her work suggests the overall value of WAW courses in Basic Writing or of immersing students in a rigorous, self-reflective writing classroom experience. As Bird notes, it is an approach that "intentionally invites students to participate as scholars—emphasizing high-level academic participation and dispositions toward writing" (88). If we can foster students' adoptions of such academic writerly identities in our Basic Writing classrooms, her argument also suggests, our students are likely to carry those identities and their textual productions into their other college classes and beyond. Her work also advances research in "writer identity theory" and therefore has implications for the larger discipline of Rhetoric and Composition (88). These are new possibilities around better understanding basic writers' identity constructions that are wonderful to see.

Due to the fact that Bird's work has these kinds of far-reaching implications, it might also pose prime possibilities for understanding students' academic writerly identities across programs as well as across various academic institutions. If Bird's approaches to student identity have such value for Basic Writing courses, surely they have the potential to aid writing in other disciplines and within other schools as well. Bird is also quite reflective about students' voices and identities, clearly understanding that they are always complex and mediated by larger factors. Her hope is to foster a pedagogy in which students "can authentically perform their academic writer identities as those who belong" and not as continual outsiders trying unsuccessfully to find their way in (89). And, finally, Bird is suggesting the

various ways in which these two sets of identities—the ones our students bring with them and the academic ones we ask that they take on—might be brought together thoughtfully and self-consciously such that neither set of identities are necessarily privileged over the others.

Not only does this essay offer us some critical suggestions about Basic Writer student identities, however. For our graduate students, in particular, this essay reveals how one author in the discipline of Basic Writing Studies is self-consciously examining Basic Writer student identity not for how she can construct or change it but for the powerful ways it can manifest itself in students' own writing. Her aim is to harness and foster those student-generated identity constructions rather than as some scholars in the past have done—requiring that students simply adopt academic discourse conventions that do not match their own lives or identities. Bird's essay also reveals the ways in which the contextual model—with its typical focus on a small set of classes or papers—is increasingly having larger repercussions for all of our teaching.

Hopeful Identities: Patrick Sullivan's Analysis

Patrick Sullivan's 2015 "'Ideas about Human Possibilities': Connecticut's PA 12-40 and Basic Writing in the Era of Neoliberalism" is a vital essay that might be used to introduce our graduate students not to how basic writers might come to adopt academic writer identities but instead to how basic writers construct their own identities in response to various political and socioeconomic situations. Sullivan traces changes in Connecticut legislation that "appeared to establish a 'floor' for matriculation into open admissions institutions in Connecticut—thereby effectively abandoning students who scored below cut-off scores which were at or below the 8th grade level" (45). He offers an ethnographic study of a group of students who were in a transitional studies class that was implemented during this time to aid these specific students. Sullivan taught and designed the English 9000 course where he works at Manchester Community College.

Sullivan's text makes note of the important fact that "students who test poorly on standardized tests and enroll at community colleges typically bring with them rich and often 'non-traditional' life histories that have helped them shape both what they have learned and how they approach the academic enterprise" (47). Drawing on research in neuroscience, psychology, and intelligence, he takes us into these students' lives through an analysis of their responses to an assignment he refers to as "Journey Essays." These

specific essays "invited them to talk about their family history and document their journeys to MCC" (50). Sullivan includes quite large excerpts from their essays so that the students really get to speak for themselves through their own written texts, to construct their own identities for his readers. Sullivan explains too that the stories that they tell are "complex" and "deeply embedded in global political movements, national and international history, economic realities for the poor and working class, and gender issues, along with more personal histories, aspirations, and ambitions" (51).

As Sullivan indicates, we simply cannot consider basic writers' identities without taking both local and larger issues into consideration, especially those that have to do with such large changes in educational policy. Drawing on the work of Stephanie L. Kershbaum, Sullivan especially makes note of the importance of recognizing how student identity is always contingent and in flux (Kershbaum 9). In other words, we cannot and should not understand basic writers' identities as one thing—they are always complicated and changing, shaped by development, context, as well as greater social and political concerns. Sullivan's idea is that we should work especially hard not to construct identities for our Basic Writing students. Rather, we would do far better to look closely at the intricate identities that they construct for themselves.

Next, Sullivan unpacks the various issues with which his students have to contend in their lives, something about which we and our graduate students always need to be conscious. He makes note of the many jobs that his students have to hold in order to attend school in the first place, many working close to 40 hours a week. Sullivan characterizes the key role that scarcity plays in his students' academic success as well. Their lack of access means that "most of the students in this class were living more tenuously than traditional college students, who were able to attend a residential college for four years" (60). Sullivan also describes students' struggles with reading, pointing to the fact that the students did not have access to a "wide and diverse variety of cultural references" (61-62). He examines the fact that many of his students grew up in poverty and that such students "often develop a much more limited vocabulary than children who grow up in professional families" (63). Finally, many of the students disliked reading and had limited experience with it—"many claimed never to have completed reading a full book" (64). Important to highlight for our graduate students who are studying the histories and theories of Basic Writing, all of these analyses help to situate Sullivan's basic writers' identities both within the context of Sullivan's class and within broader socio-cultural and political concerns.

Also important for our graduate students taking classes like "Teaching Basic Writing," Sullivan suggests that we should not consider basic writing students to be incapable of college-level work but instead embrace Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade's thoughts on "critical hope." Sullivan quotes from Duncan-Andrade's essay titled "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete," indicating that critical hope "rejects the despair of hopelessness and the false hopes of 'cheap American optimism'" (West, 2008, p. 41). Critical hope demands a committed and active struggle "against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth inequality, group xenophobia, and personal despair" (West, 2004, pp. 296-297) (5)" (66). According to Sullivan, this is a kind of hope that allows students to really have the "potential for agency and control of destiny" (66). In other words, Sullivan contends that when we think about basic writers' identities and write about them we should do so with an eye toward this critical hopefulness, taking their own agency and control of their identities to be central to our mission. This is consequential for our graduate students to keep in mind when they work with Basic Writing students, especially those whose writing struggles may seem insurmountable.

Sullivan goes on to describe that there are lessons to be drawn from his study that may be relevant to a discussion of Basic Writing students and programs at other institutions across the country. In particular, he calls attention to a need for "equity, agency, and social justice" over things like "test scores" (70). Again, as Sullivan shows, basic writers' identities need to be understood both within the local contexts within which they occur but also in terms of their larger social and political import. This is indispensable for our graduate students to keep in mind both as they learn the history and theory of Basic Writing Studies as well as teach their own Basic Writing classes.

The last section of Sullivan's essay, which is quite fascinating, focuses on "Activism." He argues that many state legislatures are now too often dictating our educational goals and curricula. According to Sullivan, there is a "neoliberal economic model at work here suggesting that developmental education itself is the problem, rather than a host of economic, social, and cultural variables that can slow down or stop progress toward a degree for some students" (71). He argues that we need to fight against this trend and that, in spite of the difficult situations in which many developmental writing programs now find themselves, we should have some genuine optimism for the future, a crucial message for our graduate students as they go forth to continue their work teaching basic writers or, in some cases, to just begin it. And Sullivan's closing words are a tremendous call to action for us all: "Let us

engage this important work in classrooms across America with hope—and determination in our hearts" (74).

There are many things to admire about Sullivan's article and its placement in *JBW*. There are also numerous ways in which teaching such an essay may impact our graduate students (and their own teaching of Basic Writing) positively. While Bird decisively examines how basic writers can come to adopt their own academic writerly identities, Sullivan self-consciously allows basic writers the space within his own essay to construct their own identities, letting them literally speak for many pages of his text. Simultaneously he calls for us to give basic writers more agency in their own educational processes. These student voices that he cites, however, are not understood to be transparent. Rather, they function as complicated, mediated, and necessarily shaped by larger discursive issues. Sullivan also acknowledges the tough local situation in which he finds himself and that increasingly many Basic Writing teachers and administrators are finding themselves. Many of our graduate students may find themselves in similar situations. In the face of this, Sullivan does not waver or buckle. He instead calls for a greater understanding of what he is witnessing, one informed by looking at broader institutional, political, and social concerns relevant to our Basic Writing students' lives. Finally, Sullivan's approach is ultimately an extremely optimistic one—one that is crucial for our graduate students in classes like my "Teaching Basic Writing" course to understand. He calls for coalition-building and a focus on how broader concerns impact local contexts. If we can acknowledge the complex construction of basic writers' identities and the forces that shape them, we can intervene to both help them learn more effectively as individuals as well as help bolster our Basic Writing programs altogether.

Academic Soldier Identities: Emily Schnee and Jamil Shakor's Analysis

Emily Schnee and Jamil Shakoor's 2016 "Self/Portrait of a Basic Writer: Broadening the Scope of Research on College Remediation" could also be very usefully taught to our graduate students in a course like my own "Teaching Basic Writing." The writers do not just examine how basic writers might come to adopt academic writerly identities. They do not just show how basic writers construct their own identities in response to various political and socioeconomic issues. Rather, they offer a great example of both possibilities *as they occur*. They too use the contextual model, in this instance a case study of an individual student, as a way to make an argument for broader

issues related to Basic Writing teaching and theory. But, in this example, that individual student is in fact one of the co-authors of the text, Jamil Shakor. As a result, Jamil is able to very directly construct his own identity for the discipline and argue for the value of Basic Writing altogether.

As the two writers assert, we live in a world in which college remediation courses, particularly those in community colleges like Kingsborough Community College, CUNY where Schnee works, are constantly under fire. As they attest, "What gets lost in this highly contentious, politically charged debate are developmental students themselves—their stories, their voices, and perspectives" and their essay aims to change this: "we hope to broaden the scope of what counts as research on college remediation (beyond and beneath the numbers); expand the borders of authority and authorship in scholarship on Basic Writing to include student writers; and contest the notion that developmental education is a detriment to students" (86). They note that too few studies "directly engage the student-participant as a partner in setting the research agenda, analyzing data, or co-authoring the findings of the research" (89). The aim of the essay is to, through dialogic inquiry, learn from Jamil's success story *in his own words*. This is a very important essay for our graduate students in a class like "Teaching Basic Writing" to read and understand because what the essay offers is not another construction of a Basic Writer's identity through a contextual model but rather a Basic Writer's construction of his own identity through various examples of his own written discourse, written discourse that he himself controls.

Schnee and Shakoor also utilize a unique discursive structure—one that could provide graduate students with alternative ways to approach their own scholarship—in that their article includes two sets of voices and two sets of identities in making its argument, weaving Emily's and Jamil's changing voices together. In particular, the article "intersperses Jamil's retrospective personal narrative, excerpts from his college essays, and our analysis of his writing organized chronologically—to parallel his development—around four emergent themes: *the power of motivation, the importance of writing after remediation, the value of academic rigor,* and *the significance of time*" (90). The essay traces each of these four themes carefully. The text does not just look at the work that Jamil completed within his Basic Writing course in isolation either. Importantly, the authors examine it within the context of his larger academic life. For example, while they note that Jamil credits college remediation courses with aiding his writing, they also attest that in order to successfully move to a four-year college, Jamil found a "rigorous academic summer program" to be especially helpful (99). Jamil's attitude is particularly

salient to notice and to highlight for our graduate students here. As he states, "'I will struggle, but through struggling, I feel like I will develop some kind of endurance for studying. I like to call it becoming an academic soldier'" (99). Hearing Jamil's voice directly here can crucially shape the ways in which our graduate students approach teaching their own Basic Writing students. The writers also focus on the importance of time in Jamil's development as a writer, citing Marilyn Sternglass's work on this subject. In effect, these are all critical building blocks to helping Jamil become the writer that he is today. As the writers further advance, "Jamil's two semesters of basic writing provided him a foundation of confidence and academic skills without which he is convinced he would have 'failed miserably' in college" (104).

Schnee and Shakoor close their essay by making connections to broader issues from this single case. As they argue, "the significance of time to Jamil's development as a writer conflicts with both his own initial desire to move through developmental English at a rapid clip and the growing body of research advocating for the speed up of remediation" (106). They also once again note that Jamil's "firm conviction that developmental education laid the foundation for his future college success is an important piece of the remediation story—one that must be heard by those contemplating dramatic policy changes that will fundamentally alter who can attend college and how" (107). In addition, and importantly for our graduate students to witness, Schnee and Shakoor show the value of joint authorship in allowing basic writers to construct their own identities for the discipline: "We hope that our experiment in co-authorship inspires others to invite students into the scholarly circle as the protagonists of their stories, the researchers of their educational experiences" (107). Finally, they broaden their discussion even further to offer some thoughts for all of us to consider, regardless of the local contexts in which we teach: "college remediation must be sanctioned and valued, academic skills take time to harvest, writing development requires a long view, exposure to academic rigor is crucial, transformation is 'a lot to ask'" (107-108). Schnee and Shakoor close with this statement: "College remediation, as Jamil's experience affirms, may be one of the few remaining times and spaces in higher education in which building one's confidence, while laying a previously missed academic foundation, is a sanctioned and valued educational pursuit" (110).

Several things are clear about this essay's importance in *JBW* and its importance in terms of educating our graduate students in Basic Writing Studies. Like some other contemporary essays that utilize the contextual model, it raises broader institutional, social, and political implications as well

as issues for the discipline and beyond. Taking Jamil's experiences as a crucial example of a Basic Writer's experiences in action, we can better understand the value of Basic Writing Programs for all such students. In addition, reading this essay will help graduate students who are teaching and researching in Basic Writing Studies to think further about the value of Basic Writing classes in students' long term learning. This article accomplishes this in a very unique way—through a Basic Writer's construction of his own identities for himself, his teacher, as well as the discipline. It does not do so in a static way either, as we learn who Jamil is at various points within his academic career and witness the various struggles and successes that he experiences. Jamil's identities are multiple and diverse, revealing the incredible complexity of who a Basic Writing student is and can be. The essay also utilizes a narrative structure that challenges our traditional research. The text is polyvocal, weaving two sets of voices and two sets of experiences together. It also features many kinds of texts—Jamil's written essays for class aside his reflections of his writing experiences at different stages within his academic career. This essay is a particularly promising example for graduate students and the future of the discipline because the attempts to construct the Basic Writer's identities are in large part being authored by the student himself.[2]

The Future of the Course and the Discipline

In light of how basic writers' identities have been constructed from 2006-2017 in Basic Writing Studies within the pages of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, I am genuinely hopeful for the future of my "Teaching Basic Writing" course and the future of our discipline. I will certainly build significant readings like the recent ones I have analyzed here into my class. In upcoming versions of the course, I will include a separate module on the latest developments within the contextual model. In addition, I will encourage my graduate students to think further about how their particular Basic Writing students construct their own identities and help my graduate students to create both scholarly projects and pedagogies that honor these constructions.

It's clear that the contextual model and its various iterations, while still very much in use, have expanded to include myriad other ideas and approaches, many of which greatly honor basic writers' constructions of their own identities and allow basic writers to use their own voices while always acknowledging that these voices are themselves in flux and mediated. Increasingly, I see these trends also operating in Rhetoric and Composition as a larger discipline with a renewed focus on embodied rhetorics and more

complicated understandings of both identity construction within Literacy Studies as well as how both teachers and students "write the personal."

I might be tempted to call these new developments in Basic Writing Studies that we are witnessing within the contextual approach something novel, different, to suggest that a new model is indeed emerging. If hard pressed, I might even term it "self constructivist"—a title that attempts to honor that what we are increasingly seeing in our scholarship are students' own complex self constructions and not our constructions of them. But, I am not yet entirely sure about this. Time will tell if it becomes a larger model or is just a new feature of the contextual model itself.

As I noted earlier, in my 2006 *JBW* article as well as in my "Teaching Basic Writing" graduate class, I have at moments cautioned that basic writers' student identities were sometimes being turned to as "capable of overhauling our theory, the problems within academic discourse, our troubled history." I noted that "the teacher/researcher has been recast somewhat as the flailing victim in need of rescue—our students in the new narrative now acting as our figurative, if not our literal, saviors." But the three essays I have just analyzed make clear that we can turn to and feature our basic writers' constructions of their own identities in ways that do not put pressure on them to solve the many problems of the discipline but instead feature their fluctuations, their messinesses, their moments of contradiction. If we do so, our students may themselves provide us with unique ways to rethink such problems (including things like how to best argue for the existence of Basic Writing programs themselves) collaboratively as well as help us to push beyond them.

In addition, these new contextual understandings of the Basic Writer's identities as articulated in the three articles provide excellent models for our graduate students studying Basic Writing theory and practice. My graduate students have produced very intriguing projects as part of the "Teaching Basic Writing" course for many years now—ones that have treated basic writers' identities as central to our inquiry. In just the last few semesters alone, they have created specific lesson plans for Basic Writing classes as well as larger curricular projects for Basic Writing programs; made arguments about how to best teach Basic Writing to Native American students; suggested ways to bridge high school Language Arts teaching and the teaching of college Basic Writing classes; examined how to best structure Basic Writing in community colleges; traced debates of various kinds about theory and history within the discipline as well as offered analyses of them; investigated how to create effective peer review group work in Basic Writing classes; examined the economics of the technology divide and considered what the best uses are

for technology in Basic Writing classes; used Creative Writing exercises to teach argumentation to Basic Writing students; and composed administrative documents to argue for the value and continuation of Basic Writing Programs for specific community colleges and universities.

Some of the projects that my students have produced for the "Teaching Basic Writing" class have resulted in thesis and capstone projects focused entirely on Basic Writing. Some of these projects have resulted in scholarly publications within the discipline. For example, two of my graduate students, Loyola Bird and Judith Bullock, co-authored an essay with me on teaching Native American Basic Writing students that appeared in *JBW*. Some of these projects have become writing samples in applications for doctoral programs. Some of these projects have been the kernels that resulted in doctoral dissertations and even book projects.

But, as much as my own graduate students have made basic writers' identities central to their studies, I believe that we can encourage all of our graduate students to take such projects further still. One of our aims of professionalization for the field of Basic Writing should be to continue to help our graduate students to better articulate the kinds of Basic Writer identities their students themselves are creating and what the potential effects of them are. Such knowledge will inevitably feed back into our classrooms, impacting the assignments we create and how we assess them. Another aim may involve championing collaboration across students' differences and across different Basic Writing programs. Our graduate courses in Basic Writing can foster these things by exposing graduate students to the sorts of articles I analyze here, of course, and encouraging them to produce projects in this vein. Finally, I do think that the kinds of thoughts about the history of the discipline and basic writers' identities that I have addressed here lay the foundation for a new relationship between basic writers and their instructors/professors—ones in which we are increasingly collaborators, facilitators, and co-researchers. Here I am not calling for blurring the lines between students and teachers so much as recognizing the many things we share in common—oftentimes issues of institutional marginalization, desires for greater agency, and concerns about having stronger voices both within the classroom and within larger institutional spaces.

Basic Writing Studies has come a long way since 1998, when I first took up the question of how basic writers' identities were being constructed in the *Journal of Basic Writing*. We have experienced many changes, the most recent of which, as I hope I have shown, seem extremely promising and important to include in the education of our graduate students. It has been

a tremendous thing to witness such changes over these years. And it has been a joy to teach the "Teaching Basic Writing" graduate class for so long, to continue to revisit it and alter it as the discipline has itself changed and grown. Part of revising this class, of course, is about continually studying our history in this very detailed, concentrated way, about looking at how basic writers' identities are being constructed by the discipline, especially within the *Journal of Basic Writing*. So, I look forward to perhaps revisiting this question again at some point, perhaps years from now, also within the pages of *JBW* itself.

Notes

1. While I do not supply my detailed assignment sheets for this course here due to space considerations, instructors should feel free to contact me if they would like to see them.

2. There are two other recent essays that I seriously considered analyzing for how they construct basic writers' identities in this new way but could not because of time and space. I think that they are also very well-conceived articles that I will likely add into the final section of my "Teaching Basic Writing" class. Wendy Pfrenger's "Cultivating Places and People at the Center: Cross-Pollinating Literacies on a Rural Campus" examines the value of using students' home literacies as ways to bridge to/interact with academic literacies, featuring stories of how student consultants accomplish this as well as the impacts on the student clients in terms of their own learning. Likewise, Lucas Corcoran's "'Languaging 101': Translingual Practices for the Translingual Realities of the SEEK Composition Classroom" suggests that we work from students' own languaging processes in their everyday lives to create a metadiscourse that helps them to make fuller sense of those processes.

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