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From The Norton Book of Composition Studies, ed. Susan Miller, W. W. Norton, 2009

# Introduction to *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*

MINA P. SHAUGHNESSY

## BACKGROUND

TOWARD THE end of the sixties and largely in response to the protests of that decade, many four-year colleges began admitting students who were not by traditional standards ready for college. The numbers of such students varied from college to college as did the commitment to the task of teaching them. In some, the numbers were token; in others, where comprehensive policies of admissions were adopted, the number threatened to "tip" freshman classes in favor of the less prepared students. For such colleges, this venture into mass education usually began abruptly, amidst the misgivings of administrators, who had to guess in the dark about the sorts of programs they ought to plan for the students they had never met, and the reluctancies of teachers, some of whom had already decided that the new students were ineducable.

It was in such an atmosphere that the boldest and earliest of these attempts to build a comprehensive system of higher education began: in the spring of 1970, the City University of New York adopted an admissions policy that guaranteed to every city resident with a high-school diploma a place in one of its eighteen tuition-free colleges (ten senior colleges and eight two-year colleges), thereby opening its doors not only to a larger population of students than it had ever had before (enrollment was to jump from 174,000 in 1969 to 266,000 in 1975) but to a wider range of students than any college had probably ever admitted or thought of admitting to its campus—academic winners and losers from the best and worst high schools in the country, the children of the lettered and the illiterate, the blue-collared, the white-collared, and the unemployed, some who could barely afford the subway fare to school and a few who came in the new cars their parents had given them as a reward for staying in New York to go to college; in short, the sons and

MINA P. SHAUGHNESSY (1924–1978) created the term "Basic Writing" to describe inexperienced writers as underprepared students, replacing common views of supposed mental, social, and linguistic disabilities with information about the logic of all composing and the regularity of nonstandard written forms. She began the CUNY Basic Writing program as a response to new open admissions policies involving New York literary figures such as Calvin and Alice Trillin and poet Adrienne Rich to support her program. Shaughnessy's book *Errors and Expectations* (1977), based on the few ways of approaching the texts of inexperienced writers that were then available, set the tone and pace of responses to new students by the field of composition studies throughout the 1970s.

daughters of New Yorkers, reflecting that city's intense, troubled version of America.

One of the first tasks these students faced when they arrived at college was to write a placement essay and take a reading test. Judged by the results of these tests, the young men and women who were to be known as open admissions students fell into one of three groups: (1) those who met the traditional requirements for college work, who appeared from their tests and their school performance to be competent readers and writers with enough background in the subjects they would be studying in college to be able to begin at the traditional starting points; (2) those who had survived their secondary schooling but not thrived on it, whose reading was seldom voluntary and whose writing reflected a flat competence, by no means error-free but limited more seriously by its utter predictability—its bare vocabulary, safe syntax, and platitudinous tone, the writing of students who had learned to get by but who seemed to have found no fun nor challenge in academic tasks; (3) those who had been left so far behind the others in their formal education that they appeared to have little chance of catching up, students whose difficulties with the written language seemed of a different order from those of the other groups, as if they had come, you might say, from a different country, or at least through different schools, where even very modest standards of high-school literacy had not been met.

Of these groups, the first was clearly the group whom college teachers knew best. They were the students for whom college courses and tests had been designed and about whom studies had been made. The second group, however, was also known to them; its students resembled the academic stragglers of another era, those who had tended to end up in "bonehead English" perhaps but at least some of whom had been known to take hold at a later point in their development and go on to complete their academic work creditably. The third group contained the true outsiders. Natives, for the most part, of New York, graduates of the same public school system as the other students, they were nonetheless strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them. Most of them had grown up in one of New York's ethnic or racial enclaves. Many had spoken other languages or dialects at home and never successfully reconciled the worlds of home and school, a fact which by now had worked its way deep into their feelings about school and about themselves as students.

They were in college now for one reason: that their lives might be better than their parents', that the lives of their children might be better than theirs so far had been. Just how college was to accomplish these changes was not at all clear, but the faith that education was the one available route to change empowered large numbers of students who had already endured twelve years of compulsory schooling to *choose* to go to college when the doors of City University suddenly swung open.

Not surprisingly, the essays these students wrote during their first weeks of class stunned the teachers who read them. Nothing, it seemed, short of a miracle was going to turn such students into writers. Not uncommonly, teachers announced to their supervisors (or even their students) after only a week of class that everyone was probably going to fail. These were students, they insisted, whose problems at this stage were irremediable. To make matters worse, there were no studies nor guides, nor even suitable textbooks to turn to. Here were teachers trained to analyze the belletristic achievements of the centuries marooned in basic writing classrooms with adult student writers who appeared by college standards to be illiterate. Seldom had an educational venture begun so inauspiciously, the teachers unready in mind and heart to face their students, the students weighted by the disadvantages of poor training yet expected to "catch up" with the front-runners in a semester or two of low-intensity instruction.



Five years have passed since that first class of open admissions students entered City University. Some of those "ineducable" students have by now been graduated; some have dropped out; some have transferred to other types of programs after having found their vocational directions; and still others remain in college, delayed because of outside jobs that eat into their college time and because of the extra time they spent at the outset developing their skills as readers and writers. The teachers who five years ago questioned the educability of these students now know of their capabilities and have themselves undergone many shifts in attitude and methodology since their first encounters with the new students.

Despite such advances, the territory I am calling basic writing (and that others might call remedial or developmental writing) is still very much of a frontier, unmapped, except for a scattering of impressionistic articles and a few blazed trails that individual teachers propose through their texts. And like the settlers of other frontiers, the teachers who by choice or assignment are heading to this pedagogical West are certain to be carrying many things they will not be needing, that will clog their journey as they get further on. So too they will discover the need of other things they do not have and will need to fabricate by mother wit out of whatever is at hand.

This book is intended to be a guide for that kind of teacher, and it is certain to have the shortcomings of other frontier maps, with doubtless a few rivers in the wrong place and some trails that end nowhere. Still, it is also certain to prepare the inexperienced teacher for some of the difficulties he is likely to encounter and even provide him with a better inventory of necessary supplies than he is likely to draw up on his own.[1]

The book is mainly an attempt to be precise about the types of difficulties to be found in basic writing (BW) papers at the outset, and beyond that, to demonstrate how the sources of those difficulties can be explained without recourse to such pedagogically empty terms as "handicapped" or "disadvantaged." I have divided this territory of difficulty into familiar teaching categories, which serve as headings for the main sections of the book: Handwriting and Punctuation, Syntax, Common Errors, Spelling, Vocabulary, and Beyond the Sentence. In each of these sections, I have tried to do three things: first, to give examples of the range of problems that occur under each category of difficulty; second, to reason about the causes of these problems; and third, to suggest ways in which a teacher might approach them.

The examples have been drawn largely from placement essays, some 4,000 of them, that were written by incoming freshmen at City College of the City University of New York over the years 1970 through 1974. To the criticism that samples written under testing situations do not represent the true com-

petence of writers, I can only answer that where writers are as unskilled as the student writers we are considering, the conditions of writing seem to matter less than they do for more advanced writers. Thus the initial essays of this group proved to be highly accurate guides to placement. Indeed, it was not unusual to find students at this level doing better on their test essays than on outside assignments.

The reader will quickly—perhaps even impatiently—note that I have tended to use more examples of individual difficulties than he needs in order to identify the sort of problem I am discussing. I have done this in part to suggest that the problem I am naming occurs in a variety of contexts but also because I see a value to being immersed in examples. It deepens one's sense of pattern and thereby develops the ability to make swift assessments and classifications of writing difficulties. Should the reader feel no need for this immersion, however, he will be able to follow my line of analysis without heeding all the examples.

In reasoning about the causes of the various difficulties BW students have as writers, I have drawn from three resources: my students and the explanations they have given me, directly and indirectly, of their difficulties with written English; my colleagues, who have shared their insights with me over the years in many different settings, both formal and informal; and my own experience as someone who writes and therefore understands the pressures and peculiarities of that behavior.

From these resources, I have reached the persuasion that underlies this book—namely, that BW students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes. These they make aplenty and for such a variety of reasons that the inexperienced teacher is almost certain to see nothing but a chaos of error when he first encounters their papers. Yet a closer look will reveal very little that is random or "illogical" in what they have written. And the keys to their development as writers often lie hidden in the very features of their writing that English teachers have been trained to brush aside with a marginal code letter or a scribbled injunction to "Proofread!" Such strategies ram at the doors of their incompetence while the keys that would open them lie in view. This is not to say that learning to write as a young adult does not involve hard work, for certainly it does, but only that the work must be informed by an understanding not only of what is missing or awry but of why this is so. In each chapter, I will therefore be trying to tease out the reasons that lie behind the problems I have illustrated.

My suggestions for helping students overcome these problems are of several sorts. Sometimes I offer actual lessons; sometimes I recommend a method or strategy, such as sentence-combining or free writing, that is already (or ought to be) part of a teacher's technology; and at others, I merely urge a fresh perspective on an old problem. The teacher therefore who is searching for a tightly and fully structured writing program will not find it here. This book is concerned with the orientations and perceptions of teachers in relation to a specific population of student writers. It assumes that programs are not the answers to the learning problems of students but that teachers are and that, indeed, good teachers create good programs, that the best programs



are developed *in situ*, in response to the needs of individual student populations and as reflections of the particular histories and resources of individual colleges. Thus, while I have sketched out a course plan in my final chapter which arranges the pieces of my analysis into teaching order, I do not expect anyone to accept it as a prototype. It is, let us say, a tried way of beginning a writing apprenticeship.

The course plan also serves to suggest the proportion of time that would be given in class to the goal of achieving correct form. Without this indication, the reader is certain to conclude that the "basic" of basic writing is not how to write but how to be right, for five of the book's eight chapters are devoted to the errors students make. This attention to error is certain to raise questions—both pedagogical and political—in the minds of many teachers. Why, some will ask, do English teachers need to be told so much about errors? Isn't their concern with error already a kind of malignancy? Ought we not to dwell instead upon the options writers have rather than the constraints they must work under if they are to be read without prejudice?

There is a short answer to these questions—namely that the proportion of time I spend analyzing errors does not reflect the proportion of time a teacher should spend teaching students how to avoid them. But since teachers' preconceptions about errors are frequently at the center of their misconceptions about BW students, I have no choice but to dwell on errors. The long answer to these questions leads us into more controversial territory. Yet it is important, before this exploration of student writing begins, that I explain more fully why error figures so importantly in this book.

## SOME VIEWS ON ERROR

For the BW student, academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to someone. The spoken language, looping back and forth between speakers, offering chances for groping and backing up and even hiding, leaving room for the language of hands and faces, of pitch and pauses, is generous and inviting. Next to this rich orchestration, writing is but a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws.

By the time he reaches college, the BW student both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer. He is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes. He can usually think of little else while he is writing. But he doesn't know what to do about it. Writing puts him on a line, and he doesn't want to be there. For every three hundred words he writes, he is likely to use from ten to thirty forms that the academic reader regards as serious errors. Some writers, inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin, crossing out one try after another until the sentence is hopelessly tangled. The following passage illustrates the disintegration of one such writer.[2]

*Start* 1 Seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to infant.
*Start* 2 To a infant seeing and hearing is something beautiful and stronge to infl

*Start* 3 I agree that seeing and hearing is something beautiful and stronge to a infants. A infants heres a strange sound such as work mother, he than acc

*Start* 4 I agree that child is more sensitive to beauty, because its all so new to him and he apprec

*Start* 5 The main point is that a child is more sensitive to beauty than there parents, because its the child a inftant can only express it feeling with reactions,

*Start* 6 I agree a child is more senstive to seeing and hearing than his parent, because its also new to him and more appreciate. His

*Start* 7 I agree that seeing and hearing have a different quality for infants than grownup, because when infants comes aware of a sound and can associate it with the object, he is indefeying and the parents acknowledge to to this

*Start* 8 I agree and disagree that seeing and hearing have a different quality for infants than for grownups, because to see and hear for infants its all so new and mor appreciate, but I also feel that a child parent appreciate the sharing

*Start* 9 I disagree I feel that it has the same quality to

*Start* 10 I disagree I fell that seeig and hearing has the same quality to both infants and parents. Hearing and seeing is such a great quality to infants and parents, and they both appreciate, just because there aren't that many panters or musicians around dosen't mean that infants are more sensitive to beautiful that there parents.

So absolute is the importance of error in the minds of many writers that "good writing" to them means "correct writing," nothing more. "As long as I can remember," writes a student, "I wanted to be an English teacher. I know it is hard, keeping verbs in their right place, s's when they should be, etc., but one day I will make them part of me."

Much about the "remedial" situation encourages this obsession with error. First, there is the reality of academia, the fact that most college teachers have little tolerance for the kinds of errors BW students make, that they perceive certain types of errors as indicators of ineducability, and that they have the power of the F. Second there is the urgency of the students to meet their teachers' criteria, even to request more of the prescriptive teaching they have had before in the hope that this time it might "take." Third, there is the awareness of the teacher and administrator that remedial programs are likely to be evaluated (and budgeted) according to the speed with which they produce correct writers, correctness being a highly measurable feature of acceptable writing.

Teachers respond differently to these realities. Some rebel against the idea of error itself. All linguistic forms, they argue, are finally arbitrary. The spelling of a word, the inflectional systems that carry or reinforce certain kinds of information in sentences—these are merely conventions that differ from language to language and from dialect to dialect. And because the forms of language are arbitrary, the reasoning goes, they are not obligatory, not, at least, in those situations where variant forms can be understood by a reader or where the imposition of new forms undermines the writer's pride or confidence in his native language or vernacular.

Such a view excludes many forms from the province of "error." Certainly it leaves no room for those refinements of usage that have come to be associated with writing handbooks—who-whom and that-which distinctions, the possessive form with the genitive, the split infinitive, etc. Beyond this, it would exclude variant grammatical forms and syntactical patterns that originate in varieties of English that have long been spoken but only recently written, and then only in folk and imaginative literature. These forms would include double negatives, regularized irregular verbs (grow, growed, growed), zero inflections in redundant situations (e.g., the omission of the plural *s* in *ten jobs* because plurality is already indicated by the number), and various orthographic accommodations to vernacular forms.

When one considers the damage that has been done to students in the name of correct writing, this effort to redefine error so as to exclude most of the forms that give students trouble in school and to assert the legitimacy of other kinds of English is understandable. Doubtless it is part of a much vaster thrust within this society not only to reduce the penalties for being culturally different but to be enriched by that diversity.

Nonetheless, the teacher who faces a class of writers who have acquired but a rudimentary control of the skill discovers that the issue of error is much more complex and troubling than it seems in theory. He finds, for example, that the errors his students make cannot be neatly traced to one particular source, namely, the habitual preference of a vernacular form over a standard form. Instead he finds evidence of a number of interacting influences: the generally humiliating encounter with school language, which produces ambivalent feelings about mastery, persuading the child on the one hand that he cannot learn to read and write and on the other that he has to; the pleasures of peer and neighborhood talk, where language flows most naturally; the contagion of the media, those hours of TV and radio and movies and ads where standard forms blend with all that is alluring in the society.

The writing that emerges from these experiences bears traces of the different pressures and codes and confusions that have gone to make up "English" for the BW student. At times variant and standard forms mix, as if students had half-learned two inflectional systems; hypercorrections that belong to no system jut out in unexpected places; idiosyncratic schemes of punctuation and spelling substitute for systems that were never learned and possibly never taught; evasive circumlocutions, syntactical derailments, timid script, and near-guesses fog the meaning, if any remains after the student has thus spent himself on the sheer mechanics of getting something down on paper. One senses the struggle to fashion out of the fragments of past instruction a system that will relieve the writer of the task of deciding what to do in each instance where alternative forms or conventions stick in the mind. But the task seems too demanding and the rewards too stingy for someone who can step out of a classroom and in a moment be in the thick of conversation with friends.

Confusion, rather than conflict, seems to paralyze the writer at this level. Language learners at any level appear to seek out, either consciously or unconsciously, the underlying patterns that govern the language they are learning. They are pressed by their language-learning faculties to increase the degree of predictability and efficiency in their use of language. This is less a choice they make than an urge they have to move across the territory of language as if they had a map and not as if they were being forced to make their way across a mine field. What has been so damaging about the experience of

BW students with written English is that it has been so confusing, and worse, that they have become resigned to this confusion, to not knowing, to the substitution of protective tactics or private systems or makeshift strategies for genuine mastery of written English in any form. Most damaging of all, they have lost confidence in the very faculties that serve all language learners: their ability to distinguish between essential and redundant features of a language left them logical but wrong; their ability to draw analogies between what they knew of language when they began school and what they had to learn produced mistakes; and such was the quality of their instruction that no one saw the intelligence of their mistakes or thought to harness that intelligence in the service of learning.

There is no easy or quick way to undo this damage. The absence of errors, it is true, does not count much toward good writing, yet the pile-up of errors that characterizes BW papers reflects more difficulty with written English than the term "error" is likely to imply. To try to persuade a student who makes these errors that the problems with his writing are all on the outside, or that he has no problems, may well be to perpetuate his confusion and deny him the ultimate freedom of deciding how and when and where he will use which language. For him, error is more than a mishap; it is a barrier that keeps him not only from writing something in formal English but from having something to write. In any event, students themselves are uneasy about encouragements to ignore the problem of error, often interpreting them as evasions of the hard work that lies before teachers and students if the craft of writing is ever to be mastered. Indeed, many students still insist, despite the miseries of their earlier encounters with grammar and despite the reluctance of teachers who have lost confidence in the power of grammatical study to affect writing, that they need more prescriptive grammar. Perhaps, as some would say, the propaganda of a long line of grammar teachers "took." But it may also be that grammar still symbolizes for some students one last chance to understand what is going on with written language so that they can control it rather than be controlled by it.

There is another reason why the phenomenon of error cannot be ignored at this level. It has to do with the writer's relationship to his audience, with what might be called the economics of energy in the writing situation. Although speakers and listeners, writers and readers, are in one sense engaged in a cooperative effort to understand one another, they are also in conflict over the amount of effort each will expend on the other. That is, the speaker or writer wants to say what he has to say with as little energy as possible and the listener or reader wants to understand with as little energy as possible. In a speech situation, the speaker has ways of encouraging or pressing for more energy than the listener might initially want to give. He can, for example, use attention-getting gestures or grimaces, or he can play upon the social responsiveness of his listener; the listener, in turn, can query or quiz or withhold his nods until he has received the "goods" he requires from the speaker.

Nothing like this open bargaining can go on in the writing situation, where the writer cannot keep an eye on his reader nor depend upon anything except words on a page to get him his due of attention. Thus anything that facilitates the transfer of his meaning is important in this tight economy of energy. Great writers, it is true, have drawn deeply upon the energies of readers, holding



them through pages of exasperating density or withholding from them conventional word order or vocabulary or punctuation in order to refresh the language or create new perceptions; but even here the reader expects his investment to pay off in intellectual or emotional enrichment. He is, after all, a buyer in a buyer's market.

Errors, however, are unintentional and unprofitable intrusions upon the consciousness of the reader. They introduce in accidental ways alternative forms in spots where usage has stabilized a particular form (as is now true in spelling, for example, or in the familiar albeit "illogical" inflections). They demand energy without giving any return in meaning; they shift the reader's attention from where he is going (meaning) to how he is getting there (code). In a better world, it is true, readers might be more generous with their energies, pausing to divine the meaning of a writer or mentally to edit the errors out of his text without expecting to be rewarded for their efforts, but it would be foolhardy to bank on that kind of persistence except perhaps in English teachers or good friends. (That errors carry messages which writers can't afford to send is demonstrated by the amount of energy and money individuals, business firms, publishing houses, etc., spend on error removal, whether by correcting fluids, erasers, scrapped paper, or proofreaders.)

All codes become codes by doing some things regularly and not others, and it is not so much the ultimate logic of these regularities that makes them obligatory but rather the fact that, logical or no, they have become habitual to those who communicate within that code. Thus the fact that in the general dialect the *-s* in *ten jobs* is a redundant form merely repeating what a numerical adjective has already established does not reduce the general reader's pause over *ten job*. The truth is that even slight departures from a code cost the writer something, in whatever system he happens to be communicating, and given the hard bargain he must drive with his reader, he usually cannot afford many of them.

This is not to say, of course, that the boundaries of error do not shift nor to suggest that certain battles along those borderlines are not worth waging. English has been robustly inventing itself for centuries—stretching and reshaping and enriching itself with every language and dialect it has encountered. Ironically, some of the very irregularities that students struggle with today are there because at some point along the way the English language yielded to another way of saying something.

But when we move out of the centuries and into Monday morning, into the life of the young man or woman sitting in a BW class, our linguistic contemplations are likely to hover over a more immediate reality—namely, the fact that a person who does not control the dominant code of literacy in a society that generates more writing than any society in history is likely to be pitched against more obstacles than are apparent to those who have already mastered that code. From such a vantage point, one feels the deep conserving pull of language, the force that has preserved variant dialects of English as well as the general dialect of literacy, and one knows that errors matter, knows further that a teacher who would work with BW students might well begin by trying to understand the logic of their mistakes in order to determine at what point or points along the developmental path error should or can become a subject for instruction. What I hope will emerge from this exploration into

error is not a new way of sectioning off students' problems with writing but rather a readiness to look at these problems in a way that does not ignore the linguistic sophistication of the students nor yet underestimate the complexity of the task they face as they set about learning to write for college.

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NOTES

1. After having tried various ways of circumventing the use of the masculine pronoun in situations where women teachers and students might easily outnumber men, I have settled for the convention, but I regret that the language resists my meaning in this important respect. When the reader sees *he*, I can only hope *she* will also be there.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, the writers of sample passages are native to the United States, where they have had from twelve to thirteen years of public schooling, mostly in New York City. The topics of placement essays, from which many of the samples come, are given in the Appendix. In this essay, an initial class essay, the student was attempting to contrast the ways in which infants and adults see the world. Each of the "starts" in the present sample was crossed out in the original.

# Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention

RICHARD E. YOUNG

*The process of examining any topic is both an exploration of the topic, and an exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in the light of which we approach it; a dialectical combination of exploration and exegesis.*

—MICHAEL POLANYI

On what basis can one argue that, at this moment, we need certain kinds of research in rhetorical invention and that we are less in need of other kinds? I would like to move toward an answer by first proposing that since the beginning of the century, the teaching and researching of composition have been guided by what Thomas Kuhn (1970) has called a "paradigm,"[1] a system of widely shared values, beliefs, and methods that determines the nature and conduct of the discipline. A paradigm determines, among other things, what is included in the discipline and what is excluded from it, what is taught and not taught, what problems are regarded as important and unimportant, and, by implication, what research is regarded as valuable in developing the discipline. It is what accounts "for the relative fulness of . . . [our] professional communication and the relative unanimity of . . . [our] professional judgments" (Kuhn, 1970, p. 182). For those working within a discipline, a paradigm is an eye to see with.

It is not difficult to find evidence for the contrary position that there has been no generally shared system of beliefs which has guided work in the discipline. One need only recall the extraordinary variety of courses Kitzhaber (1963) discovered in his survey of freshman composition programs to wonder whether we have any discipline at all. However, I think a reasonable case can be made for the proposition that for several decades members of the discipline have shared a remarkably stable system of beliefs, a system that Daniel Fogarty (1959) has called "current-traditional rhetoric" (p. 118). If we accept the

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In 1983, Young conducted a federally sponsored year-long seminar in rhetorical invention, based on his continuing study of how to help students at any level approach topics from many perspectives. He organized techniques from applied linguistics as ways to think and write about not only the fixed, defining qualities of a concept or event, but also their part in processes of change that are visible to observers in relation to broader cultural settings. This article helped form the basis for further research along those lines. It was published in *Research in Composing: Points of Departure*, Charles L. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., in 1978.

# Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence

MIN-ZHAN LU

*Abstract* This article examines Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* in light of current discourse theories which posit language as a site of struggle among competing discourses. It finds Shaughnessy's analyses and recommended pedagogies dominated by a view of language as a politically innocent vehicle of meaning. The author argues that this view of language leads Shaughnessy to overlook basic writers' need to confront the dissonance they experience between academic and other discourses, which might undercut her goal of helping students achieve the "freedom of deciding how and when and where to use which language." The author further argues that to pursue Shaughnessy's goal of countering unequal social conditions through education, we need to abandon the limitations of the essentialist view of language informing our pedagogy.

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER is to critique an essentialist assumption about language that is dominant in the teaching of basic writing. This assumption holds that the essence of meaning precedes and is independent of language, which serves merely as a vehicle to communicate that essence. According to this assumption, differences in discourse conventions have no effect on the essential meaning communicated. Using Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* as an example, I examine the ways in which such an assumption leads to pedagogies which promote what I call a politics of linguistic innocence: that is, a politics which preempts teachers' attention from the political dimensions of the linguistic choices students make in their writing.

My critique is motivated by my alignment with various Marxist and post-structuralist theories of language.[1] In one way or another, these theories have argued that language is best understood not as a neutral vehicle of communication but as a site of struggle among competing discourses. Each discourse puts specific constraints on the construction of one's stance—how one makes sense of oneself and gives meaning to the world. Through one's gender; family; work; religious, educational, or recreational life; each individual gains access to a range of competing discourses which offer competing views of oneself, the world, and one's relation with the world. Each time one writes, even and especially when one is attempting to use one of these discourses, one experiences the need to respond to the dissonance among the various discourses of one's daily life. Because different discourses do not enjoy equal political power in current-day America, decisions on how to respond to such dissonance are never politically innocent.

From the perspective of such a view of language, Shaughnessy's stated goal for her basic writers—the mastery of written English and the "ultimate freedom of deciding how and when and where" to use which language (11)—should involve at least three challenges for student writers. First, the students need to become familiar with the conventions or "the stock of words, routines, and rituals that make up" academic discourse (198). Second, they need to gain confidence as learners and writers. Third, they need to decide how to respond to the potential dissonance between academic discourse and their home discourses. These decisions involve changes in how they think and how they use language. Yet, most pedagogies informed by the kind of essentialist assumption I defined earlier, including the one Shaughnessy presents in *Errors and Expectations*, tend to focus attention on only the first two of these challenges.

I choose *Errors and Expectations* as an example of such pedagogies because, following Robert Lyons, I interpret the operative word in that book to be "tasks" rather than "achievements." As Lyons cogently points out, Shaughnessy's work "resists closure; instead, it looks to the future, emphasizing what needs to be learned and done" (186). The legacy of Shaughnessy, I believe, is the set of tasks she maps out for composition teachers. To honor this legacy, we need to examine the pedagogical advice she gives in *Errors and Expectations* as tasks which point to the future—to what needs to be learned and done—rather than as providing closure to our pedagogical inquiry. One of the first tasks Shaughnessy establishes for composition teachers is that of "remediating" ourselves ("Diving In" 238). She urges us to become "students" of our students and of new disciplines. Reading *Errors and Expectations* in light of current theories of language is one way of continuing that "remediation." Shaughnessy also argues that a good composition teacher should inculcate interest in and respect for linguistic variety and help students attain discursive option, freedom, and choice. She thus maps out one more task for us: to carry out some democratic aspirations in the teaching of basic writing.[2] Another task she maps out for composition teachers is the need to "sound the depths" of the students' difficulties as well as their intelligence ("Diving In" 236). If, as I will argue, some of her own pedagogical advice indicates that an essentialist view of language could impede rather than enhance one's effort to fulfill these tasks, then the only way we can fully benefit from the legacy of Shaughnessy is to take the essentialist view of language itself to task.

In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy argues that language "is variously shaped by situations and bound by conventions, none of which is inferior to the others but none of which, also, can substitute for the others" (121). Using such a view of language, she makes several arguments key to her pedagogy. For example, she uses such a view to argue for the "systematic nature"

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"I wrote this piece because I was under the sway of the rhetorical power of Shaughnessy's article 'Diving In.' I wanted to imagine how she might dive into the conversation surrounding Basic Writing during the 1990s if she had still been alive."—M-ZL

of her students' home discourses, the students' "quasi-foreign relationship" with academic discourse and, thus, the logic of some of their errors. She also uses this view of language to call attention to basic writers' existing mastery of at least one variety of English and thus, their "intelligence and linguistic aptitudes" (292). She is then able to increase the confidence of both teachers and students in the students' ability to master a new variety of English—academic English.

Shaughnessy's view of language indicates her willingness to "remediate" herself by studying and exploring the implications which contemporary linguistic theories have for the teaching of basic writing.[3] However, in looking to these fields for "fresh insights and new data," Shaughnessy seems to have also adopted an essentialist assumption which dominates these theories of language: that linguistic codes can be taught in isolation from the production of meaning and from the dynamic power struggle within and among diverse discourses.[4]

We see this assumption operating in Shaughnessy's description of a writer's "consciousness (or conviction) of what [he] means":

> It seems to exist at some subterranean level of language—but yet to need words to coax it to the surface, where it is communicable, not only to others but, in a different sense, to the writer himself. (80)

The image of someone using words to coax meaning "to the surface" suggests that meaning exists separately from and "at some subterranean level of language." Meaning is thus seen as a kind of essence which the writer carries in his or her mind prior to writing, although the writer might not always be fully conscious of it. Writing merely serves to make this essence communicable to oneself and others. As David Bartholomae puts it, Shaughnessy implies that "writing is in service of 'personal thoughts and styles'" (83). Shaughnessy does recognize that writing is "a deliberate process whereby meaning is crafted, stage by stage" (81), even that "the act of articulation refines and changes [thought]" (82). But the pedagogy she advocates seldom attends to the changes which occur in that act. Instead, it presents writing primarily as getting "as close a fit as possible between what [the writer] means and what he says on paper," or as "testing the words that come to mind against the thought one has in mind" (79, 204). That is, "meaning is crafted" only to match what is already in the writer's mind (81–82).

Such a view of the relationship between words and meaning overlooks the possibility that different ways of using words—different discourses—might exercise different constraints on how one "crafts" the meaning "one has in mind." This is probably why the pedagogical advice Shaughnessy offers in *Errors and Expectations* seldom considers the possibility that the meaning one "has in mind" might undergo substantial change as one tries to "coax" it and "communicate" it in different discourses. In the following section, I use Shaughnessy's responses to three student writings to examine this tendency in her pedagogy. I argue that such a tendency might keep her pedagogy from achieving all the goals it envisions. That is, it might teach students to "write something in formal English" and "have something to say" but can help students obtain only a very limited "freedom of deciding *how* and when and where" to "use which language" (11, emphasis mine).



The following is a sentence written by one of Shaughnessy's students:

> In my opinion I believe that you there is no field that cannot be effected some sort of advancement that one maybe need a college degree to make it. (62)

Shaughnessy approaches the sentence "grammatically," as an example of her students' tendency to use "fillers" such as "I think that . . ." and "It is my opinion that . . ." (62). She argues that these "fillers" keep the writers from "making a strong start with a *real subject*" and make them lose their "*bearings*" (62, my emphasis). The distinction between a "real subject" and "fillers" suggests that in getting rid of the "fillers," the teacher is merely helping the writer to retrieve the real subject or bearings he has in mind. I believe Shaughnessy assumes this to be the case because she sees meaning as existing "at some subterranean level of language." Yet, in assuming that, her attention seems to have been occluded from the possibility that as the writer gets rid of the "fillers," he might also be qualifying the subject or bearing he originally has in mind.

For instance, Shaughnessy follows the student's original sentence with a consolidated sentence: "A person with a college degree has a better chance for advancement in any field" (63). Shaughnessy does not indicate whether this is the student's revised sentence or the model the teacher might pose for the student. In either case, the revised sentence articulates a much stronger confidence than the original in the belief that education entails advancement. For we might read some of the phrases in the original sentence, such as "in my opinion," "I believe that you," "some sort of," and "one maybe need," as indications not only of the writer's inability to produce a grammatically correct sentence but also of the writer's attempt to articulate his uncertainty or skepticism towards the belief that education entails advancement. In learning "consolidation," this student is also consolidating his attitude towards that belief. Furthermore, this consolidation could involve important changes in the writer's political alignment. For one can well imagine that people of different economic, racial, ethnic, or gender groups would have different feelings about the degree to which education entails one's advancement.

In a footnote to this passage, Shaughnessy acknowledges that "some would argue" that what she calls "fillers" are "indices of involvement" which convey a stance or point of view (62 n. 4). But her analysis in the main text suggests that the sentence is to be tackled "grammatically," without consideration to stance or point of view. I think the teacher should do both. The teacher should deliberately call the student's attention to the relationship between "grammar" and "stance" when teaching "consolidation." For example, the teacher might ask the student to consider if a change in meaning has occurred between the original sentence and the grammatically correct one. The advantage of such an approach is that the student would realize that decisions on what are "fillers" and what is one's "real subject" are not merely "grammatical" but also political: they could involve a change in one's social alignment. The writer would also perceive deliberation over one's stance or

point of view as a normal aspect of learning to master grammatical conventions. Moreover, the writer would be given the opportunity to reach a self-conscious decision. Without practice in this type of decision making, the kind of discursive options, freedom, or choice the student could obtain through education is likely to be very limited.

Attention to this type of deliberation seems just as necessary if the teacher is to help the student who wrote the following paper achieve the style of "weav[ing] personal experience into analytical discourse" which Shaughnessy admires in "mature and gifted writers" (198):

> It can be said that my parents have led useful live but that usefulness seems to deteriorate when they fond themselves constantly being manipulated for the benefit of one and not for the benefit of the community. If they were able to realize that were being manipulate successful advancements could of been gained but being that they had no strong political awareness their energies were consumed by the politicians who saw personal advancements at the expenses of dedicated community workers. And now that my parents have taken a leave of absence from community involvement, comes my term to participate on worthwhile community activities which well bring about positive results and to maintain a level of consciousness in the community so that they will know what policies affect them, and if they don't quite like the results of the policies I'll make sure, if its possible, to abolish the ones which hinder progress to ones which well present the correct shift in establishing correct legislation or enactments. In order to establish myself and my life to revolve around the community I must maintain a level of awareness to make sure that I can bring about positive actions and to keep an open mind to the problems of the community and to the possible manipulation machinery which is always on the watch when progressive leaders or members of the community try to build effective activities for the people to participate. (197)

Shaughnessy suggests that the reason this writer has not yet "mastered the style" is because he has just "begun to advance into the complexity of the new language" and "is almost certain to sound and feel alien with the stock of words, routines, and rituals that make up that language" (198). The "delicate task" of the teacher in such a situation, Shaughnessy points out, is to "encourag[e] the enterprise and confidence of the student" while "improving his judgment about both the forms and meanings of the words he chooses" (198).

I believe that there is another dimension to the teacher's task. As Shaughnessy points out, this writer might be "struggling to develop a language that will enable him to talk analytically, with strangers, about the oppression of his parents and his own resolve to work against that oppression" (197). If what Shaughnessy says of most of her basic writers is true of this writer—that he too has "grown up in one of New York's ethnic or racial enclaves" (3)—then the "strangers" for whom he writes and whose analytical discourse he is struggling to use are "strangers" both in the political and linguistic sense. To this writer, these "strangers" are people who already belong to what Shaughnessy calls the world of "public transactions—educational, civic, and professional" (125), a world which has traditionally excluded people like the writer and his parents. These "strangers" enjoy power relationships with the very "politicians" and "manipulation machinery" against whom this writer is resolved to fight. In trying to "talk analytically," this writer is also learning the



"strangers'" way of perceiving people like his parents, such as viewing the oppression of his parents and his resolution to work against that oppression with the "curiosity and sentimentality of strangers" (197–98). Thus, their "style" might put different constraints than the student's home discourse on how this writer re-views "the experiences he has in mind" (197). If all of this is so, the teacher ought to acknowledge that possibility to the students.

Let me use the writings of another of Shaughnessy's students to illustrate why attention to a potential change in point of view might benefit students. The following are two passages written by one of Shaughnessy's students at the beginning and the end of a semester:

> *Essay written at beginning of semester*
> Harlem taught me that light skin Black people was better look, the best to suceed, the best off fanicially etc this whole that I trying to say, that I was brainwashed and people aliked. I couldn't understand why people (Black and white) couldn't get alone. So as time went along I began learned more about myself and the establishment.

> *Essay written at end of semester*
> In the midst of this decay there are children between the ages of five and ten playing with plenty of vitality. As they toss the football around, their bodies full of energy, their clothes look like rainbows. The colors mix together and one is given the impression of being in a psychedelic dream, beautiful, active, and alive with unity. They yell to eachother increasing their morale. They have the sound of an organized alto section. At the sidelines are the girls who are shy, with the shyness that belongs to the very young. They are embarrassed when their dresses are raised by the wind. As their feet rise above pavement, they cheer for their boy friends. In the midst of the decay, children will continue to play. (278)

In the first passage, the writer approaches the "people" through their racial and economic differences and the subject of childhood through racial rift and contention. In the second paper, he approaches the "children" through the differences in their age, sex, and the color of their clothes. And he approaches the subject of childhood through the "unity" among children. The second passage indicates a change in how this writer makes sense of the world around him: the writer has appeased his anger and rebellion against a world which "brainwashed" children with discriminatory perceptions of Blacks and Whites. Compared to the earlier and more labored struggle to puzzle out "why people (Black and white) couldn't get alone [sic]," the almost lyrical celebration of the children's ability to "continue to play" "in the midst of the decay" seems a much more "literary" and evasive form of confronting the world of "decay."

Shaughnessy characterizes this writer as a student who "discovered early in the semester that writing gave him *access* to thoughts and feelings he had not *reached* any other way" (278, my emphasis). She uses these essays to illustrate "the measure of his improvement in one semester." By that, I take Shaughnessy to have in mind the changes in length and style. By the end of the semester, the student is clearly not only finding more to say on the subject but also demonstrating better control over the formal English taught in the classroom. This change in length and style certainly illustrates the effectiveness of the kind of pedagogical advice Shaughnessy gives.

Yet, these two passages also indicate that the change in the length and style of the student's writing can be accompanied by a change in thinking—in the way one perceives the world around one and relates to it. This latter change is often political as well as stylistic. I think that Shaughnessy's responses to these student writings overlook this potential change in thinking because she believes that language will only help the writers "reach" but not change how they think and feel about a certain subject or experience. Thus, attention to a potential change in one's point of view or political stance seems superfluous.

If mastery of academic discourse is often accompanied by a change in one's point of view, as my reading of these three student writings suggests, then it ought to be the teacher's task to acknowledge to the students this aspect of their learning. However, teachers may hesitate to do so because they are worried that doing so might confirm the students' fear that education will distance them from their home discourses or communities and, as a result, slow down their learning. As Shaughnessy cogently points out, her students are already feeling overwhelmed by their sense of the competition between home and college:

> Neglected by the dominant society, [basic writers] have nonetheless had their own worlds to grow up in and they arrive on our campuses as young adults, with opinions and languages and plans already in their minds. College both beckons and threatens them, offering to teach them useful ways of thinking and talking about the world, promising even to improve the quality of their lives, but threatening at the same time to take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world, to assimilate them into the culture of academia without acknowledging their experience as outsiders. (292)

Again and again, Shaughnessy reminds us of her students' fear that college may distance them from "their own worlds" and take away from them the point of view they have developed through "their experience as outsiders." She argues that this fear causes her students to mistrust and psychologically resist learning to write (125). Accordingly, she suggests several methods which she believes will help students assuage that fear.

For example, when discussing her students' difficulty in developing an "academic vocabulary," Shaughnessy points out that they might resist a new meaning for a familiar word because accepting it would be like consenting to a "linguistic betrayal that threatens to wipe out not just a word but the reality that the word refers to" (212). She then goes on to suggest that "if we consider the formal (rather than the contextual) ways in which words can be made to shift meaning we are closer to the kind of practical information about words BW students need" (212). This seems to be her rationale: if a "formal" approach (in this case, teaching students to pay attention to prefixes and suffixes) can help students learn that words can be made to shift meaning, then why not avoid the "contextual" approach, especially since the "contextual" approach will only activate their sense of being pressured to "wipe out not just a word but the reality that the word refers to"?

But taking this "formal" approach only circumvents the students' attention to the potential change in their thinking and their relationship with home and school. It delays but cannot eliminate their need to deal with that possibility.



As a result, students are likely to realize the change only after it has already become a fact. At the same time, because the classroom has suggested that learning academic discourse will not affect how they think, feel, or relate to home, students are also likely to perceive their "betrayal" of home in purely personal terms, the result of purely personal choices. The sense of guilt and confusion resulting from such a perception is best illustrated in Richard Rodriguez's narrative of his own educational experience, *Hunger of Memory*. Rodriguez's narrative also suggests that the best way for students to cope constructively with their sense of having consented to a "betrayal" is to perceive it in relation to the politics of education and language. The long, lonely, and painful deliberation it takes for Rodriguez to contextualize that "betrayal" suggests that teachers might better help students anticipate and cope with their sense of "betrayal" if they take the "contextual" as well as the "formal" approach when teaching the conventions of academic discourse. In fact, doing both might even help students to minimize that "betrayal." When students are encouraged to pay attention to the ways in which diverse discourses constrain one's alignments with different points of view and social groups, they have a better chance to deliberate over how they might resist various pressures academic discourse exercises on their existing points of view. As Shaughnessy points out, "English has been robustly inventing itself for centuries—stretching and reshaping and enriching itself with every language and dialect it has encountered" (13). If the teacher acknowledges that all practitioners of academic discourse, including those who are learning to master it as well as those who have already mastered it, can participate in this process of reshaping, then students might be less passive in coping with the constraints that academic discourse puts on their alignments with their home discourses.

In preempting Shaughnessy's attention from the political decisions involved in her students' formal or linguistic decisions, the essentialist view of language also seems to have kept her from noticing her own privileging of academic discourse. Shaughnessy calls formal written English "the language of public transactions—educational, civic, and professional"—and the students' home discourse the language one uses with one's family and friends (125). Shaughnessy insists that no variety of English can "substitute for the others" (121). She reassures her students that their home discourses cannot be substituted by academic discourse, but neither can their home discourses substitute for academic discourse. Thus, she suggests that academic discourse is a "necessary" and "advantageous" language for *all* language users because it *is* the language of public transaction (125, 293). This insistence on the nonsubstitutive nature of language implies that academic discourse has been, is, and will inevitably be the language of public transaction. And it may very well lead students to see the function of formal English as a timeless linguistic law which they must respect, adapt to, and perpetuate rather than as a specific existing circumstance resulting from the historically unequal distribution of social power, and as a condition which they must recognize but can also call into question and change.

Further, she differentiates the function of academic discourse from that of the students' home discourses through the way she characterizes the degree to which each discourse mobilizes one's language learning faculty. She presents the students' efforts to seek patterns and to discriminate or apply rules

"*self-sustaining* activities" (127, emphasis mine). She argues that the search for causes, like the ability to compare, is "a constant and deep *urge* among people of *all* cultures and ages" and "part of an *unfolding intellective power* that begins with infancy and continues, at least in the lives of some, until death" (263, emphasis mine). Academic discourse and the students' home discourses, Shaughnessy suggests, unfold their "intellective power" differently. The home discourses of basic writers are seen as allowing such power to remain "largely intuitive," "simplistic," and "unreasoned" (263), while the conventions of written English are seen as demanding that such power be "more thoroughly developed," "more consciously organized" (261). Thus, academic discourse is endowed with the power to bring the "native intelligence" or the "constant and deep urge" in *all* language learners to a higher and more self-conscious level.

This type of depiction suggests that learning academic discourse is not a violation but a cultivation of what basic writers or "people of all cultures and ages" have in and of themselves. Shaughnessy thus suggests basic writers are being asked to learn academic discourse because of its distinctive ability to utilize a "human" resource. Hence, her pedagogy provides the need to learn academic discourse with a "human," and hence with yet another seemingly politically innocent, justification. It teaches students to see discursive decisions made from the point of view of academic culture as "human" and therefore "innocent" decisions made absolutely free from the pressures of specific social and historical circumstances. If it is the student's concern to align himself or herself with minority economic and ethnic groups in the very act of learning academic discourse, the politics of "linguistic" innocence can only pacify rather than activate such a concern.

Shaughnessy's desire to propose a pedagogy which inculcates respect for discursive diversity and freedom of discursive choice articulates her dissatisfaction with and reaction to the unequal social power and prestige of diverse discourses in current day America. It also demonstrates her belief that education can and should attempt to change these prevailing unequal conditions. However, the essentialist view of language which underlies her pedagogy seems also to have led her to believe that a vision of language which insists on the equality and nonsubstitutive nature of linguistic variety, and an ideal writing classroom which promotes such a view, can stand in pure opposition to society, adjusting existing social inequality and the human costs of such inequality from somewhere "outside" the socio-historical space which it is trying to transform. As a result, her pedagogy enacts a systematic denial of the political context of students' linguistic decisions.

The need to critique the essentialist view of language and the politics of linguistic innocence is urgent when viewed in the context of the popular success of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s proposals for educational "reforms." Hirsch argues for the "validity" of his "vocabulary" by claiming its political neutrality. Hirsch argues that "it is used to support *all* conflicting values that arise in public discourse" and "to communicate *any* point of view effectively" or "in *whatever* direction one wishes to be effective" (*Cultural Literacy* 23, 102, 103; my emphasis). Hirsch thus implies that the "vocabulary" one uses is separate from one's "values," "point of view," or "direction." Like Shaughnessy, he assumes an essence in the individual—a body of values, points of view, a sense



of direction—which exists prior to the act of "communication" and outside of the "means of communication" (*Cultural Literacy* 23).

Like Shaughnessy, Hirsch also argues for the need for *everyone* to learn the "literate" language by presenting it as existing "beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood, and region" (*Cultural Literacy* 21). Furthermore, he assumes that there can be only one cause of one's failure to gain "literacy": one's unfamiliarity with "the background information and the linguistic conventions that are needed to read, write, speak effectively" in America (*Cultural Literacy* 22, "Primal Scene" 31). Thus, Hirsch also denies the students' need to deal with cultural differences and to negotiate the competing claims of multiple ways of using language when writing. He thereby both simplifies and depoliticizes the challenges facing the student writer.

Hirsch self-consciously invokes a continuity between Shaughnessy's pedagogy and his "educational reforms" ("Culture and Literacy" 27; *Cultural Literacy* 10). He legitimizes his New Right rhetoric by reminding us that Shaughnessy had approved of his work. For those of us concerned with examining writing in relation to the politics of gender, race, nationality, and class, the best way to forestall Hirsch's use of Shaughnessy is to point out that the continuity resides only in the essentialist view of language underlying both pedagogies and the politics of linguistic innocence it promotes. Critiquing the essentialist view of language and the politics of linguistic innocence in Shaughnessy's work contributes to existing criticism of Hirsch's New Right rhetoric (see Armstrong, Bizzell, Moglen, Scholes, and Sledd). It makes clear that if, as Hirsch self-consciously maintains, there is a continuity between Shaughnessy's work and Hirsch's ("Culture and Literacy" 27; *Cultural Literacy* 10); the continuity resides only in the most limiting aspect of Shaughnessy's pedagogy. Recognition of some of the limitations of Shaughnessy's pedagogy can also be politically constructive for the field of composition by helping us appreciate Shaughnessy's legacy. Most of the lessons she taught us in *Errors and Expectations*, such as students' "quasi-foreign relationship" with academic discourse, their lack of confidence as learners and writers, their desire to participate in academic work, and their intelligence and language-learning aptitudes, continue to be central to the teaching of basic writing. The tasks she delineates for us remain urgent for those of us concerned with the politics of the teaching of writing. Recognizing the negative effects that an essentialist view of language have on Shaughnessy's own efforts to execute these tasks can only help us identify issues that need to be addressed if we are to carry on her legacy: a fuller recognition of the social dimensions of students' linguistic decisions.[5]

NOTES

1. My view of language has been informed by Louis Althusser's notion of ideology, Antonio Gramsci's analysis of hegemony, Jacques Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence, Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power, and the distinction Raymond Williams makes between practical and official consciousness.

2. For discussion of Shaughnessy's pedagogy in relation to her democratic aspirations, see Robert Lyons and rebuttals to Rouse's "The Politics of Shaughnessy" by Michael Allen, Gerald Graff, and William Lawlor.

3. In arguing for the need to show "interest in and respect for language variety," Shaughnessy cites William Labov's analysis of the inner logic, grammar, and ritual forms in Black English Vernacular (17, 237, 304). Shaughnessy also cites theories in contrastive analysis (156), first-language interference (93), and transformational grammar (77–78) to support her speculations on the logic of basic writers' error.

4. For a critique of the way modern linguistics of language, code, and competence (such as Labov's study of Black English Vernacular) tend to treat discourses as discrete and autonomous entities, see Mary Louise Pratt's "Linguistic Utopias."

5. Material from this essay is drawn from my dissertation, directed by David Bartholomae at the University of Pittsburgh. I would like to thank my teachers and colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh and Drake University, especially David Bartholomae and Joseph Harris, for their criticism and support. I want to acknowledge particularly Bruce Horner's contributions to the conception and revisions of this essay.

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# Remediation as Social Construct: Perspectives from an Analysis of Classroom Discourse

GLYNDA HULL, MIKE ROSE, KAY LOSEY FRASER, AND MARISA CASTELLANO

IN THIS PAPER, we examine remediation as a social construct, as the product of perceptions and beliefs about literacy and learning, and we illustrate some ways in which inaccurate and limiting notions of learners as being somehow cognitively defective and in need of "remedy" can be created and played out in the classroom. We will look closely at one student in one lesson and detail the interactional processes that contribute to her being defined as remedial—this specific case, however, is also representative of common kinds of classroom practices and widespread cultural assumptions, ones we've seen at work in our other studies (Hull and Rose, "Rethinking"). In order to better understand these cultural assumptions and the ways they can affect classroom practices, we will attempt to combine an empirical, fine-grained analysis of classroom discourse with broader historical and cultural analyses. We want to place a teacher's instructional and evaluative language in the contexts that we believe influence it, that contribute to the practice of defining students as remedial.

We write this paper believing that, however great the distance our profession has come in understanding the students and the writing we call "remedial," we have not yet come far enough in critically examining our assumptions about our students' abilities—assumptions which both shape the organization

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"We were conducting a study of remedial writing in the three segments of higher education in California, three segments found in most other states: the community college, the state college or university, and the research university. With this article, we wanted to demonstrate how complex the attribution of 'remedial' can be and some of the cognitive, social, and interaction processes that can contribute to that attribution."—MR