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## Basic Writing: In Search of A New Map

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Susan Naomi Bernstein, Independent Scholar

Writing reflects a daily struggle with language and belief, with learning to understand what we want to say and the many ways we can choose to say it. Writing remains an existential struggle, potentially transformative and profoundly connected to the developing perspectives of the writer. Writing is critical engagement and embodied engagement with the word and the world, to borrow Paolo Freire's often-cited (29-36), but still arresting, terms for the constantly changing processes of literacy development.

Writing pedagogy, I argue, should mirror that critical engagement regardless of who our students are or what their experiences with writing have been. Indeed, we urgently need close readings of Basic Writing classrooms, the term I will use to describe potential attributes of beginning courses in college writing.<sup>1</sup> The students enrolled in such courses often linger precipitously at the margins of higher education, and the courses themselves are consistently underfunded and in constant danger of elimination.<sup>2</sup> Examinations of Basic Writing classrooms remain vital

for effectively interrogating — and ultimately re-envisioning — the premises of “remedial” and “basic skills” education.

If we wish to end the need for and the existence of “remedial” courses in higher education, we cannot simultaneously demand the uniformity of standards in high stakes placement and exit assessments; this demand for uniformity contradicts our concurrent goal for critical engagement that English educators value in student writing. My search for a new map is a quest to make sense of this seminal contradiction that undermines many Basic Writing courses before the semester even begins. The writing pedagogy I advocate here grows out of the bureaucratic minefield that Basic Writing has become at many institutions and the impact that this minefield continues to have on students and teachers alike.

### **Boundaries and Limitations of the Current Map**

What is Basic Writing and why does Basic Writing often exist as a separate, segregated space on the margins of the rest of the institution? Perhaps the

responses to these questions seem simple at first, but it seems almost impossible to define our understanding of Basic Writing by what it *is*, rather than by what it is not. Basic Writing often focuses on the knots of difference that make writing unacceptable or incomplete; in other words, Basic Writing is everything that is “not” College Writing. Most of us are familiar with this litany of nots:

- Basic Writing is not grammatically correct.
- Basic Writing is not clearly organized.
- Basic Writing does not have a thesis.
- Basic Writing does not feature any or many paragraphs.
- Basic Writing does not have topic sentences.
- Basic Writing does not include sufficient supporting evidence or examples.
- Basic Writing is not complex.
- Basic Writing is not College Writing.

But what would happen if we defined Basic Writing by accentuating its most positive features? Basic Writing would be, through this lens, a series of opportunities for students. Basic Writing exists because our system of public schooling is fraught with unequal opportunities. Basic Writing, however, is an opportunity to hold our commitment to public education accountable. If the academic world said YES to Basic Writing and approached it as critical engagement, a course description might look something like this:

- Basic Writing creates a space—physical and/or virtual—for students to develop as writers.
- Basic Writing provides an opportunity for students to discover the kinds of writing they will encounter throughout college and in the workplace.
- Basic Writing offers time to practice writing intensively and extensively.

This second list is much shorter and presents a more accurate view of Basic Writing’s potential to honor the recursive nature of the writing process in creating a written product for a variety of audiences and purposes. Such opportunities frame Basic Writing as non-deficient; the lenses of the frame allow us to see that “remedial” is an inappropriate label for a college course and for students who find themselves in the difficult situation of taking this course. This re-seeing can become a first draft of our new map, a map linked by time and place to the advent of open admissions college education in New York City.

For a very brief moment in history, educators such as Mina Shaughnessy, who designed the Basic Writing program at the City College of New York (CUNY) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, were able to create a vision of Basic Writing as a social change movement. The history of open admissions in the decades following the social movements of the 1960s is much rehearsed. Instead of reiterating that history,<sup>3</sup> I will concentrate instead on Shaughnessy’s approaches to pedagogy and the implications of those approaches for drawing a new map.

Shaughnessy envisioned a pedagogy that would provide students with equal access to a democratic education and that would enable teachers to experiment with pedagogy that would facilitate equal access for students. Various stakeholders did not believe that “remedial” courses belonged at City College or other public universities; they worked continually to undercut the efforts of educators and students involved with Basic Writing, as Jane Maher has described in her groundbreaking biography *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*. Then, as now, many stakeholders inside and outside of public higher education identified Basic Writing as “remedial.”<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Shaughnessy and a diverse community of students and teachers struggled to establish a

foothold for Basic Writing, and for a while they managed to succeed. Because of the urgency surrounding the beginning of open admissions at CUNY and because of the experimental nature of those first courses at CUNY, Mina Shaughnessy was able to hire teachers with wide varieties of experiences, among them the feminist poets Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich.

In a conversation conducted in 1981, Lorde and Rich discussed their pedagogy for teaching Basic Writing ("Interview"; see also Rich's "Teaching Language in Open Admissions"). Lorde and Rich used literary and sociological texts to teach Basic Writing, texts that challenged students' previous experiences with reading and writing. Lorde and Rich believed that students enrolled in these courses were capable of engaging with the complexity of these texts; these educators created a pedagogy that would break complexities into manageable component parts for the students. Lorde, in particular, discussed her joy at learning, along with the students, the power and possibilities of studying grammar and sentence structure. In these ways, students could gain more access to the texts and to the purposes and potential of writing, thus embodying the principles of democratic education that Shaughnessy envisioned (723-27).

### **Contexts for Reading the Basic Writing Classroom: Understanding Constrictions and Restrictions**

What Jean Anyon has called the "hidden curriculum" (68) has, to some extent, come out of hiding and is now more visible to students under extreme financial and academic pressures. In other words, the intellectually invigorating reading and writing courses described by Lorde and Rich now recede into the background as explanations of course policies take up more syllabus space and class time. The hidden curriculum of Basic Writing as an institutional gate-keeping

mechanism is revealed when assessment criteria for placement and exit must be explained, as well as rules for credit/no credit courses and financial aid. Students rightly have questions about these issues, since failure to follow a specific policy may well result in failure for the course and failure to thrive in higher education.

The limits and boundaries of "remediation" have haunted me often in the last several years as I have participated in the rise and fall of new programs and in the failed hopes and crushed dreams of far too many students. Students are usually required to enroll in "remedial" courses because they have failed a writing placement test; the test is generally given before the term begins. Often, as Ira Shor has observed (1-10), students have not been fully informed about the institution's expectations for college-level writing. Indeed, many students also have not absorbed the unstated assumptions behind the placement test, that the test determines how the institution views students as writers. Given these circumstances, "remediation" always already carries the stain of failure for students.

"Remediation" also contains the seeds of its own failure to find a sustainable place in higher education. In the current period of diminished public funding for post-secondary institutions, "remedial" courses are often eliminated, as recent examples from California and Ohio make clear (Jaschik n.p.; Hand n.p.). Institutional policies for "remediation" also grow more restrictive, as institutions raise "educational standards" to enforce "academic rigor."

These restrictions carry the consequence of limiting access to higher education. As Janice L. Bloom's research with urban high school students suggests, young people often eliminate themselves from the pool for higher education (363-64). This elimination often happens when potential students face life circumstances exacerbated by economic

emergencies. Placement tests and “remedial” courses figure into this equation because they generally cost the same amount of money as college-level courses. However, “remedial” courses usually do not carry credit for graduation. Educational opportunity, under these circumstances, morphs into a separate-but-equal world of “remediation,” and its bureaucratic restrictions and constrictions to the material bodies of human beings.

#### **“A Better Place to Live for the Next Generation”**

The classroom narrative that follows grows out of these material consequences of “remediation” and the responses of students to working with the kinds of pedagogical challenges with which Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich and their students struggled (Lorde and Rich; Rich) — and found intellectual gratification. I examine an open admissions, beginning Basic Writing course classroom in a large northeastern city. The students would not earn graduation credit for this course, and they would have to take a second, more advanced (but also non-credit) Basic Writing course. This second non-credit course would determine their eligibility to take the test to “exit remediation.” The backdrop for this classroom suggests the “conflict and struggle” (Lu 33-55) of institutional definitions of and purposes for remediation as always already embedded in the material realities of unequal educational opportunity. In this highly contested and ever-diminishing space, students and their teachers are increasingly under the gun to produce visible, if not quantifiable, results.

I present this class as exemplary — an exception to business as usual. This exception helps me to plot the coordinates of a new map that foregrounds students’ strengths and presents possibilities for a collaborative journey toward critical engagement with academic writing. Students are represented as composite figures; writing is paraphrased; and names, details, and backgrounds

have been changed to protect privacy.

In the first week of our Basic Writing class, a student named Helen asked me: “Why are we beginning with ‘I Have a Dream?’ What about King’s later speeches? What about reading something by Thurgood Marshall or Fannie Lou Hamer?” Helen had emailed me after watching “I Have a Dream” on YouTube in class on the first day of the term. She wrote, “My name is Helen, I sit in the front of your class I wore a bright orange shirt today, anyway I’m hoping that you will be the one to unleash the missing writer inside of me.” Helen’s concerns would motivate me to think and rethink about this class long after the term had ended. Our shared concerns about writing helped us to form an unusual classroom community — unusual because of our commitment to making collective, if sometimes chaotic, decisions about course curriculum and assignments. In perhaps the most significant decision of the course, we voted to drop a short novel from the syllabus and to focus instead on one of King’s most rhetorically complex and intricate texts: “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.”

King presented “A Time to Break Silence,” a groundbreaking speech against the War in Vietnam, on April 3, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City. A year and a day later, on April 4, 1968, King was assassinated during a sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis, Tennessee. Most significantly, however, my students and I were studying King’s work in the same spring that Barack Obama was running for President of the United States; for the first time in many years, I would bear witness to a classroom of young people engaged in a critical historical moment.

We approached working with “A Time to Break Silence” through analyzing how King used grammatical structure and word choice to create a persuasive text. Often our work took the form of key word analysis in single paragraphs of the

text, as exemplified by an excerpt from a whole class participatory lesson on how King used binary oppositions to create a connection to his audience — Concerned Clergy and Laity (see Appendix 1). We also listened to the entire speech (over an hour long) and took part in an exercise that involved kinesthetic learning and an investigation of learning styles. In this sense, our class implemented principles of universal instructional design; universal instruction design provided students with opportunities to select resources from a variety of learning styles. With a text as rich as “A Time to Break Silence,” I suggested that students would benefit from a class project on kinesthetic learning; the speech would allow students to grapple with language and rhetorical issues through small and large motor movements. The goal was for students to learn how to analyze a passage through an embodied, kinesthetic investigation of the text (see Appendix 2). This investigation was designed to enhance their interpretive strategies for examining text. They eventually would translate their interpretations into persuasive writing.

Each group had approximately twenty-five minutes to select, discuss, and carry out its project. Some groups drew individual pictures clearly connected to the themes of their excerpts, and one group wrote and presented a skit based on King’s list of strategies for achieving peace in Vietnam. One group chose to construct a mural with deliberate placement of text and images. Our next step in this process was to move from group work to group presentations. Because I was observing the presentations at the front of the room, I did not know that Devin, sitting in the last row, was photographing and videotaping the presentations with his cell phone. When his group rose to give the final presentation, Devin’s role as class photographer and videographer was revealed. The class and I invited Devin to lend

his phone to another class member who would record the proceedings. Another student offered to videotape while Devin’s group presented their mural, and I took notes. The video excerpt and the mural have been published on the National Conversation on Writing website (see Appendix 3 and Appendix 4).

These artifacts represent the collective work that becomes possible when, in Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle’s terms, the teacher and the students approach classroom-based research as both process and as product. Students themselves become active researchers on the question of what constitute “best practices” for teaching and learning in basic writing courses; they take a primary role in co-creating an environment in which “best practices” can flourish. This research seems particularly vital in the current material realities of our students’ lives and in the lives of our institution, in a historical moment when “remedial” courses at colleges and universities are threatened by legislative intervention and funding cuts that make sustaining such courses a low institutional priority.

Perhaps the “risk” of disengagement lessens when students have an opportunity to share responsibility for their own success, when the motivation is intrinsic rather than extrinsic, and when students share responsibility for each other’s learning. Vincent Tinto has noted that collectivity and collaboration can contribute to successful retention of students categorized as “at-risk” (173). In this case, the students’ involvement extended from the kinesthetic activities and group work to their writing for the course.

Their classroom-based inquiry gave them an opportunity to turn the embodied experiences of their observations into writing. The final in-class high-stakes essay assignment invited students to respond to one of two writing prompts about “A Time to Break Silence.” Writing in the midst of



the whirlwind of events surrounding the spring presidential primaries of the 2008 US elections, students seemed to be particularly inspired by the following prompt:

In his 1967 speech “A Time to Break Silence,” Dr. Martin Luther King states, “A time comes when silence is betrayal.” Several times he repeats the phrase “we must speak.” Do you think that Dr. King’s commitment “to break the silence of the night” is still meaningful in 2008? Why or why not? Refer to “A Time to Break Silence” as support for your own ideas. Write an essay of at least 250 words and refer to “A Time to Break Silence” as support for your own ideas. [N.B. 250 words was our program’s minimum length requirement for the course; students’ final essays in the course were generally 500 words or longer.]

The students who wrote the three paragraphs below took part in the mural/video project as participant observers. The following paragraphs served as the conclusions for their final in-class essays, representing the last words that the students would write for the beginning Basic Writing course:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave this speech “A Time to Break Silence” in 1967 but it ‘s still applying for 21<sup>st</sup> century. Just like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said “We must speak.” We must speak up right now to save our country and put stop on war. We must speak up to improve America. It is the time to break silence, otherwise most of the college students will not get a better education and the American economy will go down and down and we could be facing another great depression.

**John**

The reason that Dr. King’s commitment “to break the silence of the night” is still meaningful in 2008 is because by speaking out and standing up you can make a change in the world. At times it could become hard but if we stick together as a nation we would become stronger as a group. Martin Luther King is a very strong example of why “we must speak.” United we stand as a strong country. Remember if we speak out now we can make the world a better place to live in for the next generation.

**Michael**

King is all about keeping people united as one. One quote that he uses where he says that we all must stay together to “create a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” This quote suggests how he believed that people should stand up for what they believed in. I also believe that his commitment is still alive today because learning about him made me want to be a better person and always fight for what I believe to be true.

**Sarah**

I was particularly intrigued by the ways in which technology played a significant role in this classroom and the ways in which students turned their engagement with technology into writing. As happens in many contemporary classrooms, we watched YouTube videos together to study history and to make connections between history and the present moment. Not only did the students agree to spend a significant amount of time studying a single text, they also used technology to aid their comprehension of the text and its historical and contemporary contexts. Students also created their own multimedia presentations to move from a familiar technology to a difficult and unfamiliar text, what Shannon Carter calls

“rhetorical dexterity” (142). For instance, students responded to visual and kinesthetic presentations with photography and videography, framing their responses to peers’ multimedia work by creating additional multimedia texts.

Valerie Kinloch, drawing on her research with Harlem youth, understands multimodal learning as a means of creating reciprocity and enacting transformative learning for both educators and students. Through referencing the work of her own students, she affirms the critical need for students and educators to co-create their learning environments (186). Such learning is not a one-way, top-down process, but builds reciprocity for everyone involved. As Kinloch states, “[multimedia learning] brings us closer to witnessing how youth understand education, experience learning, and make meaning from a variety of encounters...” (187). Indeed, Devin gave the class an opportunity to keep a record of our own learning through digital media, something that I had not considered when I had planned the lesson for that day. Because of Devin’s initiative in creating a more inclusive definition of multimedia, our class has a much fuller record of the ways in which we made meaning that day.

This record includes (perhaps most obviously) visuals and sound, but also the kinesthetic and the emotional. We hear the camcorder changing hands and watch its quickly shifting angles as its first-time videographer, who also serves as an impromptu narrator, learns to focus; we observe the shift of subject positions as professor and students move from teachers to learners, from audience members to performers. We also can see and hear the emotions in the room, from body language to the moments of making meaning. At three minutes and forty-seven seconds into the video, for example, a muralist describes his symbol of “chickens kissing” to signify happiness. The videographer laughs, and we watch as

the muralist moves his fingers down to pictures of soldiers “killing one another.” At four minutes and thirty-five seconds, the videographer finds connection in the work of another muralist. “Oh, that’s symbolism. That’s symbolism. I like that,” the videographer enthuses. “That — that’s good. I like that.” As our class experienced making meaning through multimedia, we reconnected to “A Time to Break Silence” and the rhetorical tropes that we had encountered as we studied the key words of the text.

Indeed, students in this beginning Basic Writing class grew more engaged with persuasive writing in relation to, rather than in isolation from, multimedia; this engagement also included listening to and watching available recordings of King’s speeches. Of the many endeavors of the co-created curriculum in our Basic Writing classroom, perhaps the most exciting remained our class’s movement through the visual, aural, and kinesthetic literacies of multimedia through the literacies of writing for an academic audience. In other words, the students’ writing and multimedia, cited above, serve as examples of the critical skills involved in learning to write for an academic audience. The students’ persuasive writing might appear to be the most crucial example, as students would need to write a persuasive essay to pass the test for “exiting remediation.”

Another writing sample from earlier in the course suggests the complexity of the processes involved in learning to write for an academic audience. In the following sample, Robert experiments with persuasive writing in a rough draft of his second essay; he writes to make meaning for a twenty-first century reader of “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” and focuses especially on the theme of violence:

I believe the 21<sup>st</sup> century audience would capture about this theme all the horrible and



awkward experiences that harm or damage the life of the Vietnamese people and shock the whole world. The actions that the 21<sup>st</sup> century audience should take as a result of paying attention to this theme might be learning the reasons and consequences that a war would always bring. Consequences like the economy, prices of food gas, more people unemployed, more homeless people, low paying jobs, lack of education, and lack of healthcare. These are reasons and consequences that a war would always bring. Because all the money is used to buy machine guns, and transport the soldiers to the war zone.

Educators in beginning Basic Writing classes often present the concepts of developing ideas and using supportive evidence as crucial skills for writing for academic audiences. Students may interpret these skills as adding more details to their essays but may not have experience with implementing such details in their own writing practice. The multimedia of kinesthetic learning offers an embodied experience of adding detail through voice, body language, color, and digital videography, as students learned through creating the video and then replaying that experience on YouTube. Robert drafted this essay not only in the context of reading “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” but also in the context of student-driven multimedia projects and through watching and listening to recordings of King’s speeches. Traditional and new media worked together to create the context for learning the critical skills involved in composing a persuasive essay.

Such work holds the promise of turning basic writing into an engaging and challenging academic course that offers students new opportunities to develop their abilities as writers. “Exiting remediation” is a finite, institutionally imposed goal,

with punitive consequences for non-compliance. Yet a curriculum which foregrounds students’ prior and developing knowledge presents exciting possibilities for basic writing pedagogy.

### **What is Basic Writing? What I Believe to Be True**

We as teachers also have an opportunity to develop and to grow, to remove ourselves from our own comfort zones so that we may learn again. This learning may indeed become a difficult task, and we may feel stymied by too many papers to grade, too little time for grading and preparing lessons, and too many additional responsibilities to clearly hear our own voices speaking back to us. Nonetheless, as educators we need to examine our own implicit notions that we are always already aware of students’ abilities, needs, and behaviors within the complex communities that constitute our classrooms.<sup>5</sup> We may need to go against the grain of what we think we already know from our own experiences as teachers and students so that our approaches to teaching and learning do not stagnate or calcify. Along with our students, we can refuse to accept their pre-defined status as institutional failures.

As the students themselves suggest, following King’s model of speaking out “against the silence of the night” can bring its own powerful rewards. John and Robert’s concerns appear to foreshadow the Wall Street crash of September 2008. Yet students in tenuous financial and academic circumstances have long struggled with the intersections of economics and education; their concerns are not new and have not been adequately addressed or ameliorated.<sup>6</sup>

Although high stakes tests may seem to offer a snapshot of how students perform on a single measurement of skills that are uniformly normed and evaluated, the test results are less reliable for determining individual characteristics of a cohort of students.

The tests do not measure motivation for learning beyond high school, persistence for learning in challenging situations, or potential for future achievement. The tests do not measure the bureaucratic system of barriers that a new college student must negotiate, or the damage done by marking Basic Writing courses as “remediation” and misidentifying students and their teachers as “failures.” As stated earlier, this demand for uniformity (via standardized testing) contradicts our concurrent goal for critical engagement that English educators value in student writing.

Indeed, the tests also do not account for the support systems that students with more educational privilege can take for granted. Students with educational privilege in high school, as Bloom found in her research, often have better access to information about college, including financial aid and career counseling; their preparation for college may be more strongly supported by teachers and administrators at their school and by their families.

Students that are the first members of their families to attend college may not have these support systems; such students may not be aware of the need to consciously prepare for college, and they may not know how to find information that will help them to prepare. These issues may be exacerbated by the financial needs of students who must work full time to support themselves and their families. The learning gaps of unequal access to cultural and financial capital are not measured by standardized tests and cannot be easily “remediated.” Yet unequal access seems inextricably linked to students’ “failed” performance on high stakes tests and their placement in “remediation.” Given the high stakes exigencies surrounding our students’ lives, the search for a new map becomes even more significant.<sup>7</sup>

It is equally significant to document our own search for a new map, whether that means writing with students, or contributing to scholarly discourse, or initiating or adding to discussions in our own institutional and other communities. If we remain silent, we risk losing time in the endless activity of reinventing the wheel. When we do not keep a record, there is no writing, reading, or thinking — and silence stands in the place of active and deeply embodied learning. This silence and the absence of embodied lives is what we risk when we re-inscribe institutional practices of placement and assessment that were NOT always natural or normal. Our records can help to create educational spaces that remove us from our comfort zones as learners (and as teachers) and that help to address the risks of burnout and disengagement. The act of recording itself can help us to become reflexive. Yet self-reflexivity remains only one part of an ongoing process. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle remind us (calling attention to the work of Dwayne Huebner), we must “responsibly take action to improve the educational choices and life chances of [our] students” (84).

This “transformation of silence into language and action,” as Lorde suggests elsewhere (“Transformation” 40), can be compared to the difference between having a dream and learning to break silence to enact the dream in material reality. We must continue to embody the hope and the potential for learning. We continue to “always fight for,” as King would have it, “what I believe to be true.” There is a world of writing waiting to be born and we must start by writing a new map for this leg of the journey. Let us begin together — and let us begin now.

## NOTES

Thanks to my students enrolled in beginning Basic Writing in Spring 2008, and my colleagues Adam Vine, Amy Winans, Steve Cormany, Shannon Carter, and Ken Monteith who read, discussed, and debated with me the many drafts of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Mina Shaughnessy introduced the term “Basic Writing” to the general public in her 1977 book *Errors and Expectations: A Guidebook for Teachers of Basic Writing*. For *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy studied writing samples of students that were placed in beginning writing courses in the early 1970s, the first years of open admissions at the City University of New York (CUNY). The appropriate name for beginning writing courses has been debated and contested frequently in the thirty-three years since *Errors and Expectations* was first published. George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk provide an especially succinct version of this history in their recent book *Basic Writing*. I use “Basic Writing” here to affirm germinal connections to the introduction of open admissions at CUNY, and to the work of Mina Shaughnessy at CUNY.

Many state legislatures and other post-secondary education stakeholders prefer the term “remedial,” and tellingly, these stakeholders generally do not cite or acknowledge Shaughnessy’s work in their arguments against beginning writing courses. I will enclose “remedial,” “remediation,” and other variants of the term in quotes to indicate its misappropriation for educational reforms that seek to eliminate (or have already eliminated) open admissions and beginning writing courses at post-secondary educational institutions. See Thomas Bailey for specific examples of this usage. Although Bailey notes that “the terms developmental education and remediation are used interchangeably” in this work (11), the first term, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) suggests “Of, pertaining, or incidental to development; evolutionary,” while the second term’s first suggestions “the action of remedying, *esp.* the giving of remedial teaching or remedial therapy.” While the first term presents education as evolutionary process, the second term draws a direct connection to remedies and therapies for illness or other conditions that deviate from the norm. (Also see Rose, “Colleges Need,” A76, cited in Otte and Mlynarczyk).

In June 2010, Thomas Bailey was appointed by United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to chair the Committee on Student Success. This committee, as charged under the Higher Education Equal Opportunity Act,

will develop recommendations for two-year degree-granting institutions of higher education to comply with the law’s graduation and completion rate disclosure requirements. The committee will also develop recommendations regarding additional or alternate measures of student success that are comparable alternatives to the completion or graduation rates, taking into account the mission and role of two-year degree-granting higher education institutions. (United States Department of Education)

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, many institutions across the United States have already eliminated courses called Basic Writing, as well as courses in beginning college reading and basic mathematics. See Greene and McAlexander, and Otte and Mlynarczyk, for specific histories surrounding this issue.

- <sup>3</sup> In addition to the histories cited above, also see Sternglass; Laurence, Rondinone, Gleason, Farrell, Hunter, and Lu; Horner and Lu; Soliday; Maher; Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers; and Ray for histories that present specific details and differing perspectives on the fraught relationship of CUNY and Basic Writing. I am also indebted to my colleague Victor Rosa for his insights regarding CUNY in the early years of its open admissions policy and the hopes of social change that this policy engendered for students and professors alike. In addition, see Ritter for a history of Basic Writing at elite selective enrollment institutions.
- <sup>4</sup> See Rose's eloquent arguments in defense of providing higher education for students that, because of education inequity in economically under-served communities, may lack adequate preparation for college. Rose sees access to higher education as a critical necessity for creating a more just society. Also see Traub, who argues that college is "too late" for many of the students that he observed in "remedial" courses at City College in the early 1990s, and Danzig, who in 1976 suggested that "egalitarian education has been developed with little regard for the realities of the world of work" (12).
- <sup>5</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Adam Vine for offering this insight.
- <sup>6</sup> See Gutiérrez and Rogoff, and Royster and Taylor (cited in Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers) for critical work on teaching and learning, and the complexities of embodied identities.
- <sup>7</sup> At the time of this writing, CUNY has just announced that it has closed admissions for first-year students applying to all of its campuses (including the community colleges), for the 2010-2011 academic year. Students who applied after the first week of May 2010 would be put on a waiting list, the first ever in CUNY's history. See Foderado and Christ. At the end of the 2008-09, the college that I refer to in the article eliminated its beginning Basic Writing course, but in the spring of 2010 several of the students from the 2008 class had moved well beyond their "remediation" requirements in writing. In subsequent meetings, in the cafeteria and in my office, these students spoke passionately of their love for writing and of their current academic interests in urban studies, theater, and politics.
- <sup>8</sup> At the 2010 meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges, philanthropist Melinda Gates, co-founder of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, stated, "If you start in a remedial class, the odds are that you will never finish a credit-bearing course in that subject" (Amario). The Gates Foundation is one of many stakeholders involved in reforming higher education, and Melinda Gates, in these remarks, reiterated many stakeholders' low expectations for students to succeed beyond "remediation."

Gates Foundation research (completed by the firm Public Agenda) also suggests that a key reason that students do not graduate from college has nothing to do with intelligence or ability to learn, but with the material realities of economic inequality. According to the research, more than 50% of college dropouts have household incomes of less than \$35,000 a year, and 70% had not received loans or scholarships to help pay for college costs. Because they need to work to support themselves and their families, many of these former students attended college part time and were not eligible to receive financial aid (Lewin). In the popular media, however, "remediation" and economic inequality seldom, if ever, were reported in the same context. Stories of "success" in courses called "Basic Writing" also are rarely reported to a wider audience.

## Appendix 1: Key Word Analysis

### •Key word

#### •*Opposite of key word*

#### •Definitions of key words [and opposites]

This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional **love** for all mankind. This oft misunderstood, this oft misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as [a weak and cowardly force,] has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of **love** I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am not speaking of that force which is just emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. **Love** is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: "Let us **love** one another, for love is God. And every one that **loveth** is born of God and knoweth God. He that **loveth** not knoweth not God, for God is love." "If we **love** one another, God dwelleth in us and his **love** is perfected in us." Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day.

We can no longer afford to worship the god of *hate* or [bow before the altar of retaliation.] The oceans of history are made [turbulent by the ever-rising tides] of *hate*. And history is cluttered with [the wreckage of nations and individuals] that pursued this self-defeating path of *hate*. As Arnold Toynbee says: "**Love** is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the [damning choice of death and evil.] Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that **love** is going to have the last word."

## **Appendix 2: Group Work with Learning Styles**

### **DIRECTIONS:**

- A member of each group picks a passage from the hat.
- The group creates a presentation from one of the learning styles listed below; your presentation must show why King's speech is still relevant in 2008.
- The group presents a 5-7 minute presentation to the class; audience questions and discussion can be included as part of the presentation.

### **VISUAL:**

- Create a collage that analyzes the passage
- Create a mural that analyzes the passage
- Something else?

### **ORAL/AURAL:**

- Create a musical presentation that analyzes the passage.
- Create a play that analyzes the passage.
- Something else?

### **KINESTHETIC:**

- Create a dance that analyzes the passage.
- Create a pantomime (silent movement piece) that analyzes the passage.
- Something else?

## **Appendix 3: Mural**

"Mural for Dr. Martin Luther King' 'A Time to Break Silence." National Conversation on Writing. 8 July 2008. Web. 28 November 2008.

<http://dmc.tamu-commerce.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/ncow&CISOPTR=71&REC=13>

(See separate pdf file.)

## **Appendix 4: Video**

See "A Mural for Martin Luther King's "A Time to Break Silence."  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN3tOn2bi0>



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