

Relocating Basic Writing

Bruce Horner

ABSTRACT: I frame the continuing value of basic writing as part of a long tradition in composition studies challenging dominant beliefs about literacy and language abilities, and I link basic writing to emerging—e.g. “translingual”—approaches to language. I identify basic writing as vital to the field of composition in its rejection of simplistic notions of English, language, and literacy; its insistence on searching out the different in what might appear to be the same and the familiar; and its commitment to work with students consigned by dominant ideologies to the social periphery as in fact central, leading edge. These positions enable basic writing teacher-scholars to learn, and re-think, along with their students, what it can, does, and might mean to write. They thus help to maintain the intellectual, pedagogical, and ethical integrity of composition as a field committed to working and reworking language and literacy.

KEYWORDS: academy; basic writing; ideology; language; language relations; literacy; translingual

My title¹ is meant to draw on the notion advanced by Alastair Pennycook of language as a local practice. In his recent book by that name, he argues that each utterance, no matter how conventional or repetitious it might seem, produces difference insofar as it operates in, and on, a different temporal and spatial location. Invoking the proverb that we can never step into the same river twice, Pennycook observes that even an apparently exact repetition of an utterance produces difference insofar as it takes place in a temporally as well as spatially different location and thus carries a different significance (*Language* 35). We, and the river, are simultaneously the same and not the same with each step we take.

I'll have more to say about Pennycook and language generally below, but here, I simply want to sketch this notion for the help and, I believe, the hope that it offers for the struggles of those of us committed to basic writing. That hope comes from the perspective it gives us on the recurrence of what appear to be the same struggles, its argument for the necessity of engaging in these struggles, and the difference that these efforts make despite appear-

Bruce Horner is Endowed Chair in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Louisville, where he teaches courses in composition, composition theory and pedagogy, and literacy studies. His books include *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*; *Representing the “Other”: Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*, co-authored with Min-Zhan Lu; and *Cross-Language Relations in Composition*, co-edited with Min-Zhan Lu and Paul Kei Matsuda and recipient of the 2012 *Conference on College Composition and Communication Outstanding Book Award*.

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ances. From such a perspective, basic writing must be, and is always being, re-located, and basic writing itself represents a re-location of earlier and other struggles. In short, the field now known as “basic writing” is part of a long and ongoing tradition in composition studies and beyond of challenging dominant beliefs about literacy, language, and students.

I admit that, on the one hand, this perspective on the location of basic writing can produce a debilitating sense of having to keep fighting the same fights, making the same arguments, over and over again, like Sisyphus, with those who seem impervious or indifferent to us, and to do so just to stay in the same place and keep from losing ground. I’m thinking here, for example, of a three-year effort my colleagues and I made, at a school where I used to work in my WPA days, to allow students in our school’s basic writing (BW) courses to earn graduation credit for taking these courses, partly by creating a one-credit studio course for the students to take. After a long, difficult, and often exasperating struggle, we seemed to have achieved success.

But our sense of elation was short lived: first, we came to realize that up until the last decade or so, our school had already been granting graduation credit for these courses, so our achievement simply reinstated a policy that had been in place in the past. The ground we’d gained, in other words, was a place that we used to occupy that had been lost for awhile; hence the basic writing course was, in a simple, crude way, re-located right back where it had been before. And second, the studio courses for which we’d fought proved so popular with all students—not just those identified as basic writers—that the school administrators felt they had no choice but to eliminate them, so that our apparent progress in their creation was wiped out.

But if it seems from this example that we’re simply and constantly reinventing a wheel that keeps getting broken, or going off track, there is another sense in which something different is produced. Recalling Pennycook’s argument that an iteration of the ostensibly “same” is also always simultaneously different in meaning by virtue of changes in its temporal as well as spatial location, I see that in the example just cited, the basic writing course itself, though it carried the same name and number, had been redesigned, and the justification for allowing students to earn graduation credit for it was not the same as the original justification. In fact, in making our case, my colleagues and I could draw on a significant body of scholarship that had not been available previously.² Thus the ground we had seemed simply to regain was itself different than before. And of course, the students who were affected were different, and our temporary success at developing studio courses is now part of the history of the institution and, perhaps, a

precedent for reiteration, however different, in the future.

The pattern of seeming to fight to gain ground, only to find that we ourselves and the ground gained is not what we had thought—neither entirely new nor entirely the same as before—is a pattern that we can see repeated in the history of basic writing. Way back in 1973, for example, Mina Shaughnessy was writing that it was difficult to tell whether she and her colleagues were in “a rear or a vanguard action” (“Open Admissions and the Disadvantaged Teacher” 104). And the history of basic writing itself is part of a larger history of struggle with and on the contested terrain of literacy, of which composition is one small field, evincing similar patterns. From this perspective, the successful effort at the 2011 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) to recognize the vitality and importance of basic writing to the field of composition—an effort by the Council on Basic Writing itself—is part of a much larger historical struggle over literacy: its geography, its boundaries, its residents.

In saying this, I am claiming a tradition of and for basic writing that is inevitably partial in every sense, so let me be clear about my claim. I am claiming basic writing—“relocating” it, if you will—as part of a tradition of refusing to settle for fixed designations of what is and isn’t literacy, or illiteracy, fixed designations of who is and isn’t educable or worthy of education, and fixed designations of what we do and don’t know about literacy and its learning and teaching. That tradition insists on searching out what is different in the seemingly same. Along these lines, the tradition I identify with basic writing is a tradition that takes the difficulties teachers and students experience with reading and writing as an occasion for rethinking what reading and writing do, and might, entail, and of what people might attempt in their reading and writing, and how (cf. Slevin, *Introducing* 44).

Within this tradition, teaching courses called basic writing and students called basic writers does not call for transmitting a fixed body of knowledge, skills, or practices but, rather, for engaging in collaborative inquiry with students. Instead of using the experience of difficulty to dismiss the writing, or the students producing such writing, from the course and the academy, basic writing has taken that experience of difficulty, as James Slevin put it, as “an invitation to think and get to work” (*Introducing* 13) by developing the most pedagogically and intellectually productive and responsible interpretations of that difficulty possible. Against the temptation to use teachers’ and students’ experience of difficulty in reading and writing to dismiss the students as illiterate or ineducable, basic writing takes their experience of difficulty as in fact the norm, both statistically and culturally: to be expected

and even sought out as a resource for intellectual work. Again, in what seems to be the familiar and settled, we look for what is in fact different.

One direct and important corollary to this approach to difficulty as an essential part of literacy work is that teaching, in basic writing, is not the site for applying knowledge about reading and writing produced elsewhere but, instead, is itself a site for producing and revising knowledge about reading and writing. This is of course amply documented by the landmark scholarship for the field of composition studies as a whole, and for literacy studies more generally, arising out of work with students identified as basic writers (e.g., scholarship by David Bartholomae, Glynda Hull, Mike Rose, Mina Shaughnessy, and Marilyn Sternglass, among many others). In saying that teaching basic writing is itself a site for producing knowledge about reading and writing, I don't mean teachers don't need time and support to do research outside the classroom; we do. But it does mean that such research exists in conjunction and dialogue with, rather than instead of, research conducted through teaching, in collaboration with students, and that at its best the research conducted outside the classroom takes up questions initially emerging from the site of teaching.

In fact, when basic writing teachers get into trouble, as they sometimes do, it's frequently because they've tried to apply a theoretical framework developed elsewhere, from other sites, "to" basic writing: I'm thinking here, of course, of Mike Rose's critique of such efforts and his caution against a tendency to "drift away from careful, rigorous focus on student writing" ("Narrowing" 294), to "strip and narrow experience" (296) and "avert or narrow our gaze from the immediate social and linguistic conditions in which the student composes: the rich interplay of purpose, genre, register, textual convention, and institutional expectation" (295). Rose casts this as a problem in making unsupported leaps "to" theory, but I think his critique can also be read as a strong caution against making leaps "from" theory in ways that erase variability, difference, and complexity.

To guard against this danger, teacher-scholars of basic writing have learned to put aside the presuppositions and analytical frames that would seem to explain away students' difficulties, or our difficulties with students, as reiterations of familiar phenomena, or examples to be labeled. While guarding against this danger is of course important for all disciplines, it is especially the case with basic writing because of the power, pressure, and pervasiveness of beliefs about literacy, and about basic writing students' literacy in particular, that would have us explain away, literally, these students and their literacies. And this is why I believe basic writing has such a central role

to play in the ongoing struggle over literacy, and hence why I believe in the importance of CCCC reaffirming its commitment to basic writing.

From an institutional standpoint, basic writing courses, students, and teachers have always been located on the periphery of the academy. This does not mean that they are, in fact, peripheral to the academy; rather, their location on the periphery is ideological, obtaining even in institutions where basic writers constitute the statistical norm: as basic, they are by ideological definition peripheral. But this is a perversion of the strategic intention behind the term *basic writing* to contest this peripheral location, a strategic intention that we can recover. In that strategy, the word “basic” does not represent “simple” but, rather, fundamental and profound, the site for open inquiry, as in the “basic” research in which scientists engage. It is possible, in other words, to understand the peripheral location of basic writing and basic writers as, in fact, not the site for preliminaries but, rather, leading edge work addressing the most fundamental questions about literacy and its learning.

Of course, that understanding of basic writing is decidedly not the prevailing, dominant view of the course, its students, or its teachers. The dominant view—dominant not only in the sense of being prevalent but also in the sense of being in the service of social dominance—holds literacy to be singular, uniform, and stable, and a cognate for intellectual ability, social and civic maturity, merit, even morality. Those in positions of dominance invoke this notion of literacy as a trope for themselves and people like them, and illiteracy as a trope for those they deem unlike themselves and hence unworthy to be in, well, positions of dominance. Such beliefs—and they are often unconscious and (therefore) operate all the more powerfully—justify the restriction of literacy schooling to those presumed to have the right and ability to benefit from literacy—that is, those who are, in effect, to literacy born. Or they define literacy schooling as a means of gatekeeping, social sorting, or brutal assimilation and indoctrination: the banking education of which Freire wrote so eloquently.

As crude as these notions of literacy are, it’s worth reminding ourselves that they are both longstanding and still dominant, and they are dominant in part because of the asymmetrical social relations they help to sustain. As Brian Street has observed (*Literacy in Theory and Practice*), if one adopts a view of literacy as autonomous, then the low social and economic conditions of the dominated can be explained away as a simple consequence of their lack of literacy. Their lack of literacy is taken as an explanation and justification for their irredeemable, if lamentable, fate (they being deemed congenitally

incapable of literacy), or it presents their difficulties as a situation to be remedied by simply gifting them with literacy and all the blessings presumably attendant upon its possession.

We can see the prevalence of these ideas in the terms that have been and continue to be all too commonly used to talk about students, or prospective students, as either “college material” or “remedial,” “skilled” or “unskilled,” “bright” or “slow,” “college ready” or “underprepared,” even “literate”—or “truly literate”—or else illiterate. These are terms that make up what Mike Rose identified, back in 1985, as the “language of exclusion”: a language that assumes difficulties students have with reading and writing are at best transient, and hence to be either ignored or addressed in minimal fashion until the difficulties, or more accurately the students, disappear (“The Language of Exclusion”).

Against such ideas, we can see, in the work of innumerable teacher-scholars of basic writing, demonstrations of the intelligence, abilities, and potential of those that such language excludes from consideration. Further, that work demonstrates that literacy, far from being a single, internally uniform, and stable entity or even set of practices, is plural, and its varieties both unstable and not discrete but intermixing. Thus, even those well-intentioned efforts to simply transmit to students the literacy purportedly necessary to their subsequent academic and socioeconomic success have misfired—not just because the relationship between educational credentials and employment opportunities has been shown to be at best tenuous, but also because those efforts have posited a false singularity, uniformity, and stability to the literacy to be learned and maintained, as well as a problematically uniform, linear model for the development of such a literacy.

Let me now introduce two terms that, until this point, I have made almost no reference to in my discussion: *English* and *language*. I have relocated basic writing as part of a longer and broader tradition of struggle about literacy, arguing that basic writing teaching and research has offered a more complex view of literacy and indeed is the site for basic research on literacy. Now let me extend that relocation to consider teaching and research on basic writing as also the site for basic research—and work—on language and English.

As a preamble to this extension of my argument, it’s worth acknowledging that in line with dominant views of literacy as uniform, singular, stable, and autonomous, there is also a dominant view that treats English, language, and writing as coterminous, hence the equation of writing teachers with English teachers, and English teachers with a reduced notion of language

practices as reiterations of syntactic conventions, identified by the term “grammar.” In that view, to teach writing is to teach English is to teach a conventional grammar for English; English, language, and writing are seen as names for the same stable, uniform entity, also known as literacy.

Early research in basic writing complicated this view most obviously in recognizing the plurality of languages and language varieties students brought with them to college, a plurality that seemed to help explain the difficulties some students had in producing the kind of writing that some faculty seemed to demand, at first by suggesting language difference as a cause of that difficulty. According to some versions of this response to students’ linguistic heterogeneity, students’ difficulties with writing, at least with writing in English, were attributed to the interference of other languages. To accommodate this model to students identified as native English speakers, the ESL label was modified to ESD—or speakers of English as a second dialect. While some versions of this line of thinking have led to equating basic writers with ESL students and vice versa, the best of them recognized students’ fluency in a variety of languages, and fluency in writing in other languages, as, in fact, a resource on which students, and their teachers, might draw, rather than a barrier they had to overcome.³

In a somewhat different response to recognition of the diversity of students’ languages, teachers and scholars drew on research in second language acquisition to understand students’ difficulties with error as evidence of students’ production of the equivalent to what applied linguists termed an “interlanguage” that learners of a new language develop as they learn that language, with its own set of shifting and idiosyncratic rules. I’m thinking here, for example, of David Bartholomae’s landmark study of error, tellingly called “The Study of Error,” and some of the work by Glynda Hull and Elaine Lees (see Hull, “Acts of Wonderment”; Lees, “Proofreading as Reading,” “The Exceptable Way.”)

Because I’ll be arguing against some of these responses, I first want to make clear that the identification of basic writers with learners of an additional language has had several productive consequences. First, insofar as the difficulties experienced by learners of additional languages are taken as normal rather than evidence of cognitive or other deficiencies, the difficulties basic writers experienced could now be defined as themselves normal rather than signs of cognitive immaturity or other defects. Indeed, when seen as evidence of a kind of interlanguage, errors represent writers’ intelligence, rather than their deficiencies, an intelligence that Mina Shaughnessy persuasively demonstrated through her analyses of students’ errors (in *Errors*

and Expectations). Indeed, it was a short step from understanding students' difficulties as a manifestation of language differences to raising the possibility that the difficulty could be attributed as much to limitations in teachers as to limitations in students—recall that the errors and expectations that Shaughnessy's book *Errors and Expectations* refers to are those of teachers, not students. This has certainly spurred the humility, and intellectual curiosity, of teachers that are requisite to basic research on writing.

Second, the identification of basic writers with learners of an additional language foregrounded the notion of language as a countable noun, and this has helped to chip away at the ideology of English-only monolingualism dominating composition itself, as well as U.S. culture more broadly. Put simply, recognizing the fact of writing in languages other than English has helped challenge the dominant tendency to equate writing with English by rendering language visible as a factor about which we can pose legitimate, basic questions, such as which language students can or might write in, and what relation fluency in writing in one language may have to fluency in writing another. Students might well be quite fluent speakers, and writers, of languages other than English, or of other Englishes, and this might well affect their writing in English for school.

Third, and relatedly, alternative writing practices in traditions of writing in other languages have made visible the mediation of language by writing that the conflation of writing with English elides. In other words, in place of the equation, and conflation, of writing with English and English with language, work in basic writing has been asking basic, in the sense of crucial, questions about which language, even which English, and which way of writing, we are to be engaged with. In place of treating English, language, and writing as coterminous and as noncount nouns, basic writing assumes a plural, and potentially fluid, view of languages, Englishes, and ways of writing.

I have found this state of relations between languages, Englishes, and ways of writing almost impossible to represent graphically, at least in two dimensions. I take this difficulty as an illustration of the complexity of these relations. And in practice in the field of composition studies generally, there has been a tendency to follow the path of reducing that complexity by settling for what I've termed elsewhere an archipelago model (“‘Students’ Right’”), rather easily represented graphically (see Figure 1).

Such a model, while explicitly acknowledging and legitimizing difference in languages, ways of writing, and even Englishes, has at the same time retained four key tenets of monolingualist ideology: that languages,

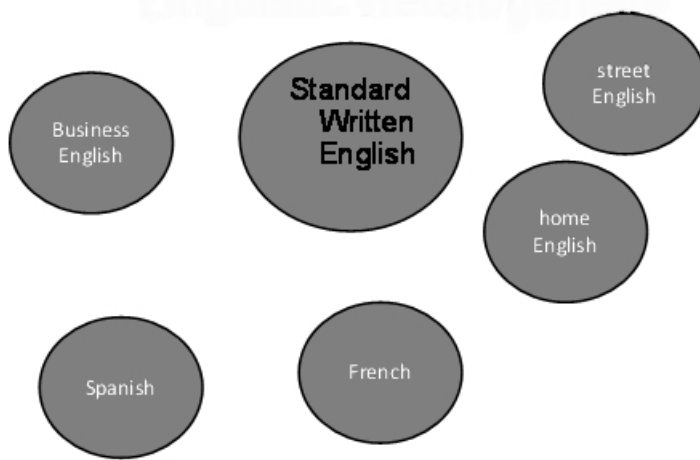


Figure 1. Archipelago Model of Linguistic Heterogeneity

and ways of writing them, are 1) stable and 2) discrete from one another; 3) internally uniform; and that 4) each has its specific, fixed, and appropriate sphere of use: French in France, English in the U.S., academic writing in school, texting for cell phones. The model of language and literacy development based on this is an additive model: individuals are imagined as adding more and more discrete languages, and even ways of writing them, to their repertoire. There is an equivalent to this model in some versions of writing in the disciplines, whereby writing for history class is seen as discrete from writing for chemistry or writing for sociology. Each is seen as legitimate, but only in its own sphere, and as stable and internally uniform. That is to say, while languages, Englishes, and ways of writing are seen as plural, they are understood to consist of conflated sets, and, further, they are identified and conflated with specific sociogeographic locations. Invoking a notion of a variety of language and writing practices, each appropriate in its own sphere, elides the political question of who determines what is appropriate, and what a particular language practice might be appropriate for.

I'll make two more important, and related, points about this archipelago model: first, it overlooks the possibility of what critics have named "traffic": that is, the interdependent relationships and interchanges among the language and literacy practices of specific sites.⁴ Language users, including writers, are instead imagined as either fixed in their locations, or as trading in one set of practices for another as they move from one location to another, or at best as having the equivalent of dual language and literacy citizenship—individuals who can switch from one set of practices to another

as the occasion appears to demand it: academic vs. nonacademic, chemistry vs. sociology, French or Chinese or English, and so on. Second, the archipelago model evacuates writer agency. Writers are posited not as active participants in the production of languages and writing practices but, instead, as necessarily followers of those practices somehow deemed appropriate to given sociogeographic locations: French in France, business writing for business class, and so on. Pedagogies following this model are thus inevitably pedagogies of transmission and acquisition, despite differences in how that process of transmission, and acquisition, is imagined.

I mentioned above that it is difficult to represent graphically the relations between different language and literacy practices that their pluralization seems to demand, as opposed to an archipelago model. The archipelago model achieves simplicity at the cost of failing to represent, or acknowledge, the traffic among peoples and practices that obtains in, well, practice, on the ground, and the agency of language users in helping to shape and reshape those language practices. What is needed, in other words, is a model that brings in, among other factors, the temporal dimension, and that dispenses with the affordances of Venn diagrams. Figure 2 is one possible alternative representation of relations among language and literacy practitioners, modeled after images of traffic patterns.

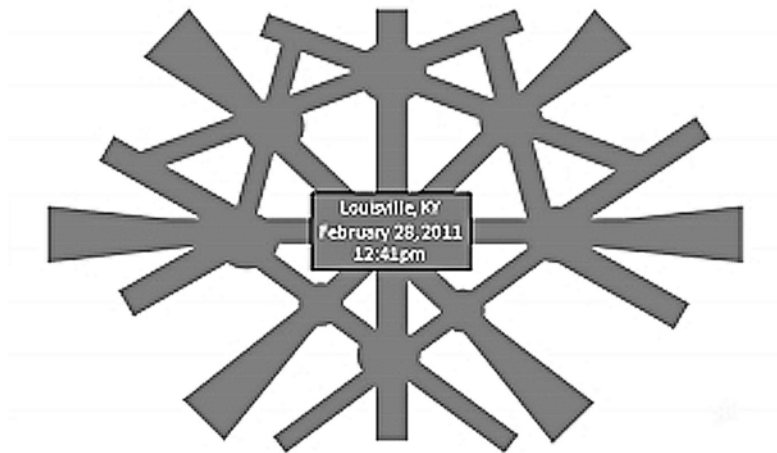


Figure 2: Traffic Model of Linguistic Heterogeneity

Three features of this model are key: first, practices to be found at any given location are informed by who happens to be passing through that location at any given time, what they bring with them, and how they interact with others passing through that location at that time and all that

they bring with them. Second, practices found at a given location will vary depending on the time: what you find at a given intersection point at a given time will differ from what will be found at ostensibly the same intersection point at a different time. It may help to add that in this model, people are to be imagined not as encased in separate vehicles but walking, strolling, or running through, and hence there is the possibility of engaging with each other not only through collisions and fender benders, and that they change their practices in the course of engaging with one another's practices. Third, and paradoxically, the apparent reiteration of a particular practice is in fact productive of difference insofar as it necessarily occurs in a different temporal location—the traffic, and hence the people producing the traffic, are not the same, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, just as the river into which one steps is not the same, nor is oneself, nor one's step.

This model quite emphatically contradicts claims to a settled territory of English, writing, literacy, and language—what Mary Louise Pratt has termed linguistic utopias. Some would understandably see this as a limitation to the model insofar as it seems to complicate what we might wish were a simple, mechanical matter. And in fact, teacher-scholars have had to turn to neologisms to capture this more complicated approach to language, writing, and literacy: among others, *transculturation*, *plurilingualism*, *diversalité* (as opposed to *diversité*), and, for my colleagues and me, *translingual*—terms whose newness might be offputting in seeming to stray from the settled and understood.⁵ But if we're to heed Mike Rose's warning against applying simple models to the complex phenomenon of writing, I would argue that the complexity these terms and the traffic model gesture toward is more appropriate insofar as it more adequately and accurately represents the actuality of practices with languages, Englishes, and literacies, especially, though not exclusively, current in the U.S. and elsewhere and especially, though not exclusively, in those sites identified with the teaching and learning of basic writing, by students and faculty. And, in fact, I would argue that this more complex model of language and literacy as a diverse set of practices that are fluid and intermingling, rather than discrete and stable, is precisely what teachers and students of basic writing have discovered. That is, by paying close attention to the language and literacy practices of our students, we have discovered that, monolingualist ideological beliefs notwithstanding, English, and literacy, are not simple nor mechanical matters but complex ones meriting, and even demanding, sustained critical inquiry.

But I want to go further here by suggesting that we can understand the writing produced by basic writing students—basic writing, as it were—and

hence basic writing students, as participating in the reworking of English and literacy through their writing. In other words, as participants in the ongoing traffic of language and literacy practices, basic writing students rewrite these through their work with and on them. In terms of language, we can say that our students, like all writers, do not so much write “in” English, or any other language, but rather write, and rewrite, English with each writing. Thus the basic writing course is a site for the ongoing and culturally crucial task of reworking English and its writing.

Two quick examples explain how this may be so. The first is relatively straightforward. Students regularly introduce lexical items and idioms that may well seem unconventional but have a logic. For example, one of my students wrote the following statement in a paper: “From a Native Daughter is an essay by Trask in which she spills out her heritage and upbringing, trying to prove injustice amongst the cultural history of Hawaii.”⁶ When I first read this, I was initially disposed to treat it as demonstrating a simple spelling error: clearly, I thought, she must have meant “spells out.” But when I brought this example to class for a lesson in proofreading, it turns out the student meant what she wrote and wrote what she meant, and was using “spills” to capture the dynamics of Trask’s style.

Again, another student wrote that “Both Trask and Lasch use language as a stepping stool.” Here, I thought, was a case of someone unfamiliar with the idiomatic “stepping stone.” But, again, I was corrected by my students, for whom, I learned, stones do not ordinarily serve as steps. Over time, and bit by bit, these and other language practices have the potential to achieve status as the norm, at least for a time, through subsequent iteration: what Pennycook refers to as an ongoing process of sedimentation of practices (*Language* 47). Conventions, in this view, are not simply there, but are sedimented through ongoing iteration. If and when others iterate the idioms mentioned above, they become sedimented in a process of what Pennycook, borrowing from Homi Bhabba, refers to as fertile mimesis. In other words, the *appearance* of language as a set of fixed forms and rules is itself the result of a sedimentation process of building up, over time (*Language* 46-47, 125). Grammar, for example, is the name we give to certain categories of observed repetitions in language practices (46).

It’s easy enough to recognize the fertility of mimesis in iterations of what, at a given time, appear to be unconventional language practices. But that fertility, and hence agency, is also present in writers’ iterations of the conventional, or what we are disposed to recognize as simply “the same.” Thus, students offering up what might seem to be highly conventional lan-

guage, or attempting to do so, rather than having their efforts dismissed as mechanical, or being condescended to as the crude flailings of remedial students who need to learn “the basics” before advancing to “real,” thoughtful writing, can instead be recognized as participating in that process of fertile mimesis. They are producing something with different meaning through necessarily re-locating a given practice—phrasing, wording, syntax or notation—and they can be expected, and asked, to account for their iteration of the seemingly same: what ends, given this context and their desires and needs, this iteration might serve. For if, as social theorist Anthony Giddens observes, “Every instance of the use of language is a potential modification of that language at the same time as it acts to reproduce it” (220), then every instance of the use of language, including what is recognized as repetition, represents an exercise of agency, a choice, whatever the level of consciousness in the making of it.

In her essay “Professing Multiculturalism,” Min Lu described a student who can, from this perspective, be seen as exercising agency in two seemingly contradictory ways. On the one hand, she consciously constructed the unconventional phrase “can able to” to bring visibility to the distinction between the ability and the permission to undertake an action, a distinction submerged in idiomatic uses of the word “can” to mean both. Insofar as her fellow students took up this phrasing “can able to” in class discussions, they participated in fertile mimesis contributing to the sedimenting of this usage. On the other hand, the student herself, following lengthy deliberations about the usage by the class, decided to revise her writing to say “may be able to” (454), on the face of it an iteration of conventional usage.

While this choice might be seen as the writer’s submission to the power of convention—a yielding to what dominant culture demands of writers like the student, multiply positioned as subordinate in her status as a female student of Asian descent in a U.S. classroom, and as a non-native English speaker—we can alternatively view her eventual choice to write “may be able to” as an exercise of agency, as in fact a choice rather than a requirement. As Lu herself argues, “the activities [of deliberation and negotiation] leading to that decision, and thus its significance, are completely different [from a passive writing of the same phrasing based on the sense that she had no choice]. Without the negotiation, [her] choice would be resulting from an attempt to passively absorb and automatically reproduce a predetermined form” (455). Hence, the student’s writing of “may be able to,” while appearing to be the “same” as conventional American English usage, relocates that practice, and in so doing, produces a difference in meaning by virtue

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of who is engaging that practice, when, where, and why. The writer thus exercises agency, and produces difference, both when she writes “can able to” and when she writes “may be able to.” We, and our students, are engaged in rewriting English even when the writing that is produced appears to be simple and mechanical iteration of the same old, familiar “basics” of English and writing. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, basic writing is not simple, not mechanical, nor ever the same.

I began by asserting that basic writing must be, and is always being, re-located, and that basic writing itself represents a re-location of earlier and other struggles that constitute a long and ongoing tradition of challenging dominant beliefs about literacy, language, and students. Some time ago, I wrote that

Basic writing represents a writing movement that has consistently addressed “broad questions about the aims of education and the shape of various educational institutions” and that contributes significantly to the “revitalizing of the teaching of writing” (Slevin, “Depoliticizing” 12). By working with students institutionally designated as at the bottom, basic writing has explicitly called into question the social and political role of educational institutions and the politics of representing students, or prospective students, and their writing in particular ways, as either “literate” or “illiterate,” “college material” or “remedial,” “skilled” or “unskilled.”

Those present at the 2011 CCCC business meeting may recognize this passage as part of the statement I made in support of the resolution put forward by the Council on Basic Writing “that Basic Writing is a vital field and its students and teacher scholars a productive force within composition; is under attack by exclusionary public policies; and therefore must be recognized publicly and supported by CCCC as a conference cluster and with featured sessions” (Council on Basic Writing). I said then, and will reiterate here, that I support the resolution to sustain the continuing insights of basic writing and its project of responsibility to those most commonly identified as outsiders to the academy. I do so both in order that we meet our responsibilities to these students, and also to ensure that we meet our responsibilities as a field and organization committed to rethinking the meaning of literacy, the teaching of writing, and their potential contributions to projects of democracy and justice. This article is my attempt to further articulate how this is so. As I have argued, basic writing is vital to

the field of composition insofar as it rejects simplistic notions of English, language, and literacy, and always insists on searching out the different in what might appear to be the same and the familiar. Its commitment to work with students consigned by dominant ideologies to the social periphery as not, in fact, peripheral but central, leading edge, enables its teacher-scholars to learn, and re-think, along with their students, what it can, does, and might mean to write. Thus, re-locating basic writing as basic to the field of composition studies is vital to maintaining the intellectual, pedagogical, and ethical integrity of the discipline as a field committed to working and reworking language and literacy.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at the annual workshop meeting of the Council on Basic Writing, 21 March 2012, St. Louis, Missouri.
2. With apologies for many omissions, this scholarship included Adams; Barthololomae, "Tidy House"; Duffey; Fox; Gilyard; Glau; Gleason, "Evaluating"; Harrington and Adler-Kassner; McNenny; Rodby; Rodby and Fox; Royer and Gilles; Royster; Soliday and Gleason; Soliday, "From the Margins"; Soliday, *Politics*; Sternglass. My colleagues and I prepared for our work by studying this scholarship in a graduate seminar focusing on alternatives to basic writing. For a rich description of this and other graduate courses such scholarship makes possible, see Gleason, "Reasoning the Need."
3. On the relationship between ESL and basic writing, see Matsuda.

4. On the importance of addressing such traffic, see Dasgupta, Kramsch, and Pennycook, “English.”
5. See Bernabé et al., Guerra, Zamel, Zarate et al. On a translingual approach specifically, see Horner et al., and Lu and Horner. For an overview of these and other terms emerging to capture this complexity, see Canagarajah.
6. All student work is reproduced here with the written permission of the authors on condition of anonymity.
7. This passage is taken from a longer statement submitted in support of the Council on Basic Writing’s Sense of the House Resolution unanimously adopted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication at its 2011 business meeting. The text of the CBW Resolution and a list of signatories can be found at < <http://cbwblog.wordpress.com/2011/04/18/sense-of-the-house-motion-cccc-2011/>>. My statement supporting the resolution patches together excerpts from my essay “Discoursing Basic Writing,” revised subsequently and appearing as Chapter One (“The ‘Birth’ of ‘Basic Writing’”) in *Representing the “Other”: Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*, a book I co-authored with Min-Zhan Lu.

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