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*Gail Stygall*

## Resisting Privilege: Basic Writing and Foucault's Author Function

**T**rying to define "basic writing" perplexes us, shot through as the term is with local contexts, different approaches, and standardized grammar tests. Any article or research report on basic writing has to be read carefully for how its author describes basic writing. "Basic writers" are equally elusive. Sometimes they are called "remedial," implying that they are retaking courses in material that already should have been mastered. Sometimes they are called "developmental," suggesting a cognitive or psychological problem. At other times and in other places, they may be called "Educational Opportunity Students," suggesting division by access to education. Or they are just "basic," requiring foundational or fundamental instruction in writing. As a case in point, several years ago, I wrote an article, on the basic writing program at Indiana University–Indianapolis, published in the *Journal of Basic Writing*. Impossibly, it seemed to me, I found an article on Harvard University's basic writers in the same issue in which my own article appeared. Surely, we weren't talking about the same students, nor the same writing. And, indeed, we were not. While the students I wrote about were having trouble producing any text, even text with attendant problems in organization and mechanics, the Harvard students were instead having problems with originality, creativity, and elaborating arguments (Armstrong 70–72).

Yet the presence of "basic" is tenacious in English departments and we might want to ask ourselves why the term—which seems only to give some vague indication of a deficiency—continues to signify something important to us. The signification of the term is often masked by the way "basic" is

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held to be something temporary, contingent, requiring emergency methods, quick fixes, “bandaid” solutions. Most explanations fit under some sort of “wave” theory, near invasions of our universities by unexpected, unanticipated populations: the GIs after World War II, economic opportunity students in the late sixties and seventies, returning adults displaced by the economy in the eighties. The “waves” seem to keep coming, for whatever reasons offered, and consequently, basic writing becomes required by the educational system, at the same time we continue to speak of it in terms of the temporary. Teachers of composition may have moved far away from deficit theories of language as an explanation for the presence of basic writing in college classrooms, learning as we have the effects of race, class, gender, and ethnicity on academic performance. But we have moved very little toward eradicating the perceived need for basic writing classrooms.

Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” shows how the concept of the author constitutes and regulates French academic and literary discourse. The “author function” is equally applicable to Anglo-American academic and literary discourse, and serves, I would argue, to organize the curriculum in English studies and define its proper object of study. It is a commonplace for a scholar to identify herself as, for example, a Wharton critic, or for one to say about himself that he “does Milton.” And even though theorists using deconstructive, new historical, Marxist, psychoanalytical, feminist, and cultural studies approaches to literature may dispute who counts as an author, what they approach is often still the author—perhaps an unknown, noncanonical one, but still an author with most of the precepts of the author function intact. A brief glance at the index of Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature* affirms this orientation toward the author: The index is only briefly disturbed by references to theories and approaches, dominated as it is by the names of authors and critics, both regulated by the author function. If literature and its related author function remains opposed to non-literature, non-literary writers will always fall short of the English department’s highest value. A master discourse that reveres one kind of authorship and dismisses all others is bound to affect those kinds of authorship counted among the “all others” category.

Specifically, I want to argue that the institutional practice of basic writing is constructed and inscribed by the notion of the author function, and that the teaching of basic writing is formulated around the educational discursive practices necessary to keep the author function dominant. What I mean by *educational discursive practices* are those activities and talk about education that we experience as natural, normal, inevitable, and unremarkable. These are practices that we take for granted: one teacher for each classroom; the existence of classrooms and buildings made expressly to be filled with large numbers of students and correspondingly few teach-

ers; grading and sorting students; separating students by age and grade level; dividing time into semesters and quarters, days into class periods; homework and all those other aspects of the daily life of education that we rarely question.

Linda Brodkey found these discursive practices maintaining asymmetrical power relations in a variety of ways, when she analyzed a series of letters exchanged between a graduate class she was teaching and an Adult Basic Education (ABE) class. In the letters they traded, Brodkey's professionally oriented middle-class graduate students controlled the "conversation" with the ABE students through either silencing obvious class and experience differences or by transforming the ABE writer's experience into a middle-class version. For instance, the tensions and ambiguities that one ABE student felt in the aftermath of a murder of someone she knew was transformed into "that problem" in the graduate student's reply. In another exchange, an ABE student tells of having to move because the home she rents is being sold, while the graduate student responds with questions about what sort of house she will buy and comments on the current mortgage rates—a middle class reality wholly outside the experience of the ABE correspondent.

My own project, following Brodkey, was to examine the discursive practices evoked in a slightly different configuration of letters and comments on drafts between teachers and students. Unlike the combination in Brodkey's project, all these students—at all three universities involved—had some investment in a college education and in the academy. Instead of using class as a unifying principle, the graduate students' first loyalty related to the profession of English, not surprising considering that they and I were involved in a graduate seminar in an English department. The basic plan of the project worked in two parts. First, in graduate seminar I was teaching at Miami University on the topic of basic writing, my students responded to papers written for a Temple University basic writing course taught by Frank Sullivan. Sullivan's urban Philadelphia students were conducting an educational ethnography of their own experiences, and his students were living worlds apart from bucolic Oxford, Ohio, the site of Miami's main campus, where my graduate seminar was held. Second, my students corresponded with students enrolled in a basic writing course taught by Betty Anderson at Indiana University–Indianapolis (IUPUI). My hope for the students in the graduate seminar seemed simple enough: reading and analyzing the dynamics of the project would convert to immediate differences in our practices. I thought that my students and I could resist reconstructing our correspondents as "basic writers" by becoming conscious of the discursive practices involved in doing so. But this proved difficult for all of us, in spite of our best intentions.<sup>1</sup>

In examining the operation of the author function in these exchanges I will begin by reviewing what Foucault says about the notion of the author, and then turn to the seminar participants' comments and letters to the basic writers for representations of the notion of author in English teachers' practice. These representations appear in several ways: First, in the substantial differences in the amount of text written in the letters—the graduate students writing lengthy letters, the basic writing students composing brief ones—and the stance of interrogator taken by the graduate students—asking numerous questions—serve to reconstruct differences covertly, that is without explicit comment. Second, in the graduate students' claims for the neutrality of educational discursive practices, a neutrality that can only maintain the dominance of the author function. Third, in the graduate students' constructions of an educational identity for themselves and for the basic writers with whom they corresponded—constructions which were radically different and serve to maintain difference at the same time they proclaim the unimportance of difference. I will draw from the letters and the comments made on the basic writers' papers for illustrations of these practices. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of the hazards and hopes of such bridging projects, the attempts to resist privilege.

### **If This Is an Author, What Is a Basic Writer?**

As Foucault writes in "What Is an Author?", in literary criticism,

The author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design). The author is also the principle of a certain unity of writing—all differences having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation, or influence. (111)

This idea of the author permeates much of what goes on in the teaching of literature, if not also in literary scholarship. Foucault suggests that novelists are not likely candidates to be "founders of diversity," using Marx and Freud instead as exemplars of those authors whose works created "the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts" (114). However, it is often those exemplars who provide the foundation of particular practices within literary criticism. Founders of discursivity are not just writers of their own particular texts; they are founders of schools of thought, creating entire discourses patterned on their work. Both versions of author function—author in the literary sense, and author in the

sense of discursive initiation—regulate the work that goes on in English departments.

The author function, as Foucault develops it, has four characteristics: First, when writing or authorship became property and thus operant within the law of property, writing offered the possibility of transgression, especially in “the form of an imperative peculiar to literature” (108). Second, the author function can vary from discourse to discourse. For instance, while authorship is important in literature, it is less so in scientific writing. Third, the pairing of an author to a particular discourse is not a simple matching; it is rather the social construction of a “certain rational being” (110). Finally, the author function allows readings that acknowledge several selves of the same author, framed by processes of “evolution, maturation, or influence” (111).

What would these characteristics mean when applied to the teaching of basic writing? Certainly the right to transgress conventions is reserved for authors—whose works comprise the canons of literature or those who are published—and not to those apprentice writers who do “pseudo-writing.” I would point to studies of teachers imposing student standards on professional texts, denying supposed nonauthors the right to transgress—as Joseph Williams demonstrates in “The Phenomenology of Error” in which he plays on our acceptance of his *CCC* authorship to lead us to ignore his “errors.” Denial of the right to transgress has consequences in what teachers write on student papers. In examining a broad range of his colleagues’ responses, Donald Daiker found nearly 90% of their responses to be negative. The dominance of the negative suggests that it is only pedestrian transgression that we find in the writing of students and that we reject it. Moreover, the primary means by which we designate a student as a basic writer is as transgression, typically by a placement test in which the students’ writing is deemed deficient. The ownership of student texts is also in doubt—as suggested in the works of Nancy Sommers, and Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch—who show teacher commentary often appropriates and redirects the student’s texts. These aspects of transgression and ownership are intensified when applied to basic writers whose transgressions are always assumed to be less than artful and whose ownership of their texts is seen as unwarranted for their lack of value.

Foucault’s second characteristic—the relative prominence a discourse gives authorship—places apprentice writers in an academic setting in which the author function has prominence. This prominence results in a principle of limitation operating for nonauthors. The positive value of a piece of writing is enhanced in literature by the recognition and confirmation of its individual achievement. As a consequence, plagiarism has a high negative value. For someone whose writing has been judged “basic” in

quality, the principle limits the possibility of change, a quality reserved for authors. A significant development in a student's writing may mean she is greeted with cries of "who helped you with this paper?" or "whose work have you left uncited?" To further regulate this aspect, the teachers of writing classes, who are also often themselves scholars of literature, are also subject to the author function, and, as a consequence, have an interest in maintaining it. Finding and keeping a "good" job—that is, one on a tenure line—means publishing. Tenure decisions often mean the application of the author function to scholarly writing. Accordingly, the basic writer in an English department faces not only an object of study regulated by the author function but also teachers who are similarly regulated.

The third characteristic, the construction of a "certain rational being," also has implications for basic writers. If an author writes a passage that is unclear or that is not obviously related to what came before it, then readers assume there is a reason for it, embedded in the author's intent or milieu. If a basic writer does so, then teacher-readers often construct a non-literate, non-logical writer (as in Thomas Farrell's argument that speakers of dialects without the copula lack abstract reasoning ability), or construct a less sophisticated, pre-conceptual thinker, (as in Andrea Lunsford's early work with basic writers), or even construct a mysterious Other (as in Mina Shaughnessy's description of her reactions to reading the work of basic writers).

Finally, though some composition scholars have recently examined the notion of the "authentic self" or the unified voice in relation to ideology, the dominant approach has been to silence multivocality and to unify self-presentation in students' texts. Richard Ohmann's political analysis of voice and unity as precepts of teaching composition suggest their value for a late capitalist society. These textual "qualities" also have value in maintaining the author function. Valorizing multivocality in works of literature has the effect of denying or banning its presence in works by non-authors. In fact, given the tensions and issues at stake in the basic writing classroom, one scholar, Ann Murphy, sees value in providing explanation for the sense of division experienced by basic writers, but cautions that "a process which seeks further to decenter them strikes me as dangerous" (180). Thomas Recchio's recent CCC article on Bahktinian approaches to a student's writing suggests the strength of our disciplinary requirement that student texts be unified. Though Recchio recognizes and affirms the presence of multivocality in student texts, he concludes by saying recognition of multiple voices by the student is the way to "provide the coherence and continuity that the paper presently lacks" (453), but his is a minority voice. A glance at contemporary textbooks would hardly allow us to believe that the idea of unity was in danger of being abandoned.

None of the three groups of students involved in my letters' project could begin to maintain authority within the academy without doing work that was valued by the academy, especially within English departments. Being declared a marginal writer as a first year college student is public and institutionally sanctioned. Being declared marginal in a graduate English program—as a consequence of a declared interest in composition, an interest in the non-authors, as it were—is less public, less officially sanctioned, yet is just as powerful. Its effects are evident in the comments and letters of the graduate students enrolled in the seminar. Like Brodkey's students, my students' best intention toward basic writers—to resist privilege—could not overcome the discursive practice of the author function, the fundamental ideological apparatus of English, the very affirmation of which could prove their "true" nonmarginal status.

### Differences Inscribed in Letter Form

Graduate students, even those in composition and rhetoric, typically learn how to teach basic writers in one of two ways: by trial and error in their own classrooms or in a graduate classroom in which they are being trained to teach composition. Neither of these approaches raises the questions of differential educational practices, nor do these approaches ask the would-be teacher of basic writers to examine her own role in reproducing a stratified system of conceptualizing and teaching writing. In order to pursue my goal of making educational discursive practices visible to teachers preparing to teach basic writers, I wanted to know whether being self-conscious about differences and their implications would result in less reinscription of status. Would the letters acknowledge difference and resist masking it? Broadly speaking, the research and theoretical literature on basic writing does not challenge the existence of the labeling of some writers as basic, but instead concentrates on the types of students to whom the label is applied or provides methods for teaching them. Nor does this literature typically challenge would-be teachers of basic writers to examine how the labeling or inscription takes place or to examine who is served by such labeling. I would argue that this occurs because our discursive practice is a master discourse and it assumes that we have an unconstrained right to divide and stratify our students as writers, dividing authors from non-authors.

Each of my ten graduate students was writing to three of the IUPUI basic writing students and the letters analyzed for this essay include 46 actual exchanges. Nearly 70% of Anderson's students were male, while 75% of my graduate students were female. Some effects of gender were apparent,



though gender was not the focus of my analysis. In addition, approximately 25% of Anderson's students were African American. The topic of race was absolutely missing from all discussion, both in the graduate student's basic writers' letters exchange and in the graduate students' responses to the Temple basic writers' essays, Temple being a site where gender was more balanced but African American students more visible. Anderson's students initiated the exchange, and she chose initially not to disclose that they were writing to graduate students in English. She feared that they would simply freeze and not write at all. By the second round of letters exchanged, both groups had revealed and discussed the status of the Miami students. My hope in having the basic writers initiate the exchange was to disturb the normal conversational assumption that the one who initiates the exchange and its topic sets the agenda for the conversation. My students knew that part of their task was to try to understand what being labeled "basic" meant to Anderson's students and what their lives were like at a large urban university. These initial exchanges are characterized by a formality typical of educational enterprises.

On both sides, the letter writers carefully answered each and every question raised by the correspondent, with one exception. Fully half of the basic writing students refused to answer direct queries about what they were doing in their writing course and what they thought about being there. Of the half responding to these queries about being labeled a basic writer, two types of answers dominate. As we might expect from the power of the institutional discourse to label, one response is to acknowledge their subjectivity, accepting the label, and take the blame for being a basic writer. Responses in this category included "my writing is not up to par," "I kinda flunked out," "I have to take refresher courses and not having good grades in high school," and "this course is mostly for people who had low SAT scores like me." The second category of responses is one in which the recipients of the labeling don't even have consciousness of some sort of subjectivity but instead see it as a natural fact of the world, as in "I wish I wasn't placed in the lowest class, but that's the way it happens, I guess." Also in this second category are the responses that characterize the Access Center, the name of the home of the basic writing course at IUPUI, as a kind of prison, as suggested by comments like "I can't wait to get out of Access Center," and "I'm still in the Access Center." Paradoxically, the Access Center restricts and regulates access to the university.

Yet it is the sheer difference in length that most constructs the graduate students into the author category, leaving the basic writers behind. With the exception of two pairings, the graduate students wrote letters three and four times as long as those of the basic writers. Consider the following exchange.

Dee

My name is James Jefferson Jones. I was born in Biloxi Mississippi in September 5, 1970. I am interested in sports, weight lifting, fishing and wood working. I am a freshman at IUPUI. I take 12 hours of classes, I am a full time student.

I work as a service worker at the Officers Club at Fort Benjamin Harrison. Indianapolis Indiana. I am planning on being a Dietician or an engineer.

Well Dee that is all that I have to say. I would like for you to write to me and tell me about yourself too. I really would like to know about you.

Sincerely yours

James Jones

Dear James,

Thanks for writing to me. I look forward to getting to know you. You must be busy being a full time student and working at the Officer's Club at Fort Benjamin Harrison. I admire you a lot for doing both. I work at the university, too, and go to school. You'll have to write and tell me more about the classes you are taking and what kinds of things you do at your job. (Is the food any good at the Club? Do you sample the cooking?)

You'll also have to tell me more about your weightlifting. A few weeks ago I bought my first pair of ankle and hand weights and an exercise videotape. My doctor recommended upper body exercise with weights to help a heart condition I have. I've been feeling wimpy! Even so, I work out every other day. I also try to walk two miles at our gym three times a week. Hopefully, I'll be in better shape soon. Unfortunately, my knees have been bothering me. Maybe I've been exercising too much? Do weights hurt your joints? Do you work out with machines? I've been thinking about looking into that too.

You said that you were born in Mississippi. How long did you live there? Why did you come to Indianapolis? Mississippi is one state I've never visited so I'd like to learn about it. I grew up in a small town near Indianapolis.

Of course, being a Hoosier means I'm an I.U. basketball fan. Actually, I like all the Big 10 teams. My favorite time of year is the NCAA playoffs in March-April. Do you have a team you want to win?

I'm looking forward to hearing from you again. I'm beginning to feel the crunch of having lots of work to do—papers to write, books to read, and projects to finish. Writing to you is a nice break from all that!

Sincerely,

Dee

This initial exchange between Dee, the graduate student, and James, the first year basic writing student, appears innocuous, without reminding James that he is a basic writer. But a closer examination reveals some interesting characteristics. James' opening letter is 109 words long, while Dee's response is 321. Clearly, Dee feels comfortable writing, even to someone she does not know. Further, James asked no questions, while Dee feels it appropriate to ask eight questions. Dee felt that she was simply responding to James by echoing back his declared interests, but how she did that was to elaborate beyond what he had managed painfully to write (the handwriting is tortured in the original). Moreover, her final paragraph subtly etches her proficiency as a writer in contrast to James, with her "papers to write, books to read, and projects to finish." For James, who doesn't think of writing as a pleasure, Dee declares "writing to you is a nice break from all that!"

So what, a reader might ask, is problematic about Dee's response and the others like it? That there is a difference in the length of the letters is no surprise, given that Dee is a graduate student and James a first-year student. And, after all, Dee was under my watchful eye. Dee in some ways intentionally wrote more so as to honor her correspondent, whom, she believed, may not have received lengthy responses from his teachers. But notice that Dee is responding *as a teacher*. Dee, like all the students in the seminar, could choose a role in these letters and several were available to them: learner, student, pen pal, or teacher. Nonetheless, she, and all the others, chose the role of teacher, their reactions to the correspondence guided by disciplinary knowledge about basic writers. Dee consciously intends to do nothing more than show interest in her correspondent, but she announces that she is an author of sorts, while James is not.

Eventually for some pairings, the length of the letters evened out. These were the more successful pairings and usually occurred between two women, though two crossgender pairings also achieved an evening of length during the course of the project. What is remarkable is that we did not notice the magnitude of the difference in length until well after the close of the letters project. We did discuss in class the interrogative stance that the graduate students took, but it was nearly a year later before we began to recognize the length as an important factor in reinscribing the basic writers' positions.

### **The Discursive Practices of Education, or the Obvious Benefits of Getting an Education**

If these graduate students were unconscious of how structured their responses are when prompted to describe their personal selves, we can

expect even less conscious control over their educational discursive practices. Here I am drawing from my students' responses to Sullivan's students, who wrote about their observations as students at Temple University. An early assignment in the seminar was for my graduate students to write a teacher's response to these papers. Though I told my students that these were final products, most insisted that the papers were drafts and they responded accordingly, telling the students what they found interesting and what they thought could be improved. What was striking about their responses was the absolute refusal to comment on the realities depicted in some of the Temple students' written observations. Not one of my students reacted directly to the critiques of classroom practices developed by the Temple students. Let me offer an example from one of the student papers from Temple. The student, an African American male, makes the claim that "where students sit does affect the class behavior." In the next-to-last paragraph of the paper, he makes the following statements:

My last pattern is that no blacks sit in the front of the class and as I was thinking I came up with this hypothesis, for years whites were always in the front liked and liked to kiss up to people, in this case, teachers and blacks they just want to come to class, get the work done and do what they got to do . . . An when your in back like all the blacks are they tends to get lost and not get good grades.

While it is fairly common teacher lore that those who sit up front tend to get better grades, the racialization of the pattern asserted here received no comments. I've joked about the general pattern of "good" and "bad" students seatings with my large lecture classes, commenting on the impossibility of everyone sitting up front. Every student in the graduate seminar had heard of this pattern and neither I nor they had ever applied it beyond "good" and "bad" students. Yet this Temple student was telling us that race was a factor as well and that white, "good" student behavior was considered "kiss up" in his community. Not one of us suggested that he or she had noticed anything similar. No one commented on the issue of race. Instead, we were silent on the educational practice and on the subject of race. Several of the graduate students chose to comment on the sentence structure or on developing what it meant to "get the work done and do what they got to do." We seemed to be saying that students sit where they sit; they know who "counts" as "good" students and so do we. They choose, we affirm the rightness of their choice, and that seems to be fair. So response moved to the form of the paper. Though my students did not make a large issue of grammar in these papers, they consistently invoked

form—development, detail, logical progression—rather than respond to the actual observations of the Temple students.

In the letters exchange, the Miami students illustrated the discursive practices of education in their rhetoric of the “natural” benefits of education. The Miami students were well aware that the term “basic” was politically charged and applied to those least powerful in an educational system. Coursework included examinations of the practices of labeling; the relation of labels to race, class, gender, and ethnicity; and close analyses of a broad range of basic writing textbooks, including the all too common workbook “remediation” texts. My students recognized these practices as malignant and consciously sought change. But at the same time, all of us had the teaching of writing bracketed, somehow not affected by the rest of the practices that are so much a part of education. Teaching writing, so it seemed, was not culpable in maintaining these practices; after all, it, too, was marginal. But education, writing in particular, and the letters exchange itself were portrayed in the letters as benevolent processes.

The following series of comments represent some of the aggregate data from the study. Though I recognize that it might be more comfortable to read lengthy exchanges from selective pairings, I believe that it is the aggregate data that makes it clear that we are dealing with a shared practice, a discursive practice about education. The graduate students in my class were a diverse lot: a current high school teacher, a community college admissions officer, three former high school teachers now opting for the academy, a former creative writer, and two traditionally tracked literature students. Some had gone to prestigious undergraduate institutions; some had attended schools very much like IUPUI. That their ideas about educational practice should be so similar is remarkable; hence, my insistence on presenting the data as aggregated. All of the following comments were written by Miami graduate students. The first series displays for eight pairings how the graduate students wrote with the assumption that education is empowering for everyone; the second series shows them making the same sort of assumption about the value of the letters exchange.

*Talking about education and its “natural” benefits*

*Katy to Dell:* I think it’s pretty brave of you to go back to school and work towards a career change, especially since you already have a good job at General Motors. I think a lot of people become complacent or just feel stuck in a job if they’ve had it for a while, especially if it’s a good job.

*Roger to Wini:* You know how teachers are always asking you to do one thing or the other.

*Katy to Eric:* You said that you're not a "genius," but you never know—I know a lot of people who really flowered in college. Besides, you don't have to be a genius to do well in college; I'm living proof. It really makes a big difference when you have a lot of support from your family and friends and the school itself. All of those things helped me a lot.

*Chris to Ron:* I'm sorry that you have to deal with the challenges of dyslexia. It sounds as if you have learned to deal with it very well. I appreciate the tip on deciphering your letter. Actually I'm used to reading phonetically; my husband can't spell worth a damn!

*Katy to Dell:* Just out of curiosity, what does your family think and what do your children think about having a parent in college? Has it given you more things in common, more things to talk about? Are your school experiences different or pretty much the same?

*Dee to James:* I really admire you for working part time and taking classes—and especially for hanging in there after a bad first semester. I can tell from your letter that you are really trying to keep up with everything this semester. I *know* all that hard work will pay off for you in the end. Just don't give up on yourself.

*Karen to Quentin:* I think it's great that you love being in school. I'm excited about it, too—I'm 34 and I've been away from books and classes for a long time, so it feels especially good to be back.

*Marge to Keith:* You didn't tell me you were a karate *teacher*. Wow! How do you teach selflessness? (I think it might help me to learn some of that.)

*Warren to Terry:* Do you like your writing class? I like to write but it seems like I only have time to write what I have to for class, but that is ok for now, I guess. Do you write outside of schoolwork? Do you get the chance to write "for fun"? Do you carry writing outside of class. I don't do as much as I would like to, but sometimes I'll sit down and just freewrite a lot to get some feelings or thoughts or dreams out. It helps me clear my head sometimes.

That education is viewed as having unquestioned "natural" benefits is clear from these comments. Katy insists that seeking change through education is good and brave; Dee applauds James' struggle to go to work and school simultaneously; Karen tells Quentin that school feels good; and Marge reacts with pleasure upon finding out that Keith teaches something, even if it is not academic in nature. The discursive practice here privileges schooling and assumes that everyone receives benefits equally from it. What is surprising about this stance is that these teachers all know that education does not necessarily pay off for all students.

*Justifying Educational Practice: The Letters Exchange*

*Katy to Eric:* The letter exchange is something I get to do in one of my classes, but it's not like a chore or an inconvenience to me. I love to write letters, but I don't always have the time, so writing to you is kind of like a creative outlet for me. I like to write, even school papers, but I think letter writing for me is like fiction or poetry to a creative writer—I still put a lot of thought into my letters, but I can say what I say, and I don't feel too limited by subjects or themes. I feel free to pursue all kinds of subjects and ideas.

*Chris to Ron:* I wasn't sure if I should tell you I was a graduate student. I was afraid I would intimidate you and I didn't want to put any additional pressure on myself. It's hard enough to try to write an interesting letter to a stranger, particularly when two English professors get a copy of it for evaluation purposes. I figured that if you knew I was a grad student you would expect a very profound letter.

*Laurie to Marg:* Why are our teachers having us do this? We're interesting people! We write differently, go to different schools, have different lives—all that'll show up one way or another. Then they can write about us! I don't mind, either. It's really fun to meet another person—even through the mail—and I'll take my paragraph of fame if this winds up going somewhere for my teacher.

*Rob to Erica:* I guess my professor's goal in having us write to one another is for you to tell me what your writing course is like, what you learn from it, and things like that. In the meantime, I'll tell you what I learn. Maybe we will teach each other something.

*Chris to Ron:* I'm sorry we were both coerced into writing to strangers but I'm also convinced that of all the writing assignments I've had in college, this one could be the most fun. One or two letters from now we won't be strangers.

*Laurie to Erin:* My English class involves studying teaching methods and theories of teaching for classes like the one you're in. It looks at questions of what "competency" is and who determines it. I know I've re-read some of my rough drafts of papers and thought "wait—this is all mixed up." But what's okay for a draft isn't for another situation. Sometimes, too, I've looked back on a paper that I thought was food and thought "Did I write this?" It intrigues me—was I really a different person the moment I wrote that—maybe more involved, or caught up in the subject—and so a better writer. It's like another person wrote that paper.

*Katy to Eric:* By the way, I understand your doubts about me being a real person. This is an unusual class project, not to mention an unusual way to

start writing to someone you don't know. If I had to pick a name off the chalkboard, I think I'd have my doubts too. In a way, I think you had the harder or riskier part in this—you had to take the initiative and get things started. Well, let me reassure you, I am definitely a "real person."

When graduate students turn to justifying the letters exchange, they also invoke the discourse of educational practice, Katy assumes writing is good, that individual creativity and freedom result from its practice. Rob and Laurie clothe the writing context in a learning experience—obviously good on the face of it. Katy interestingly has to respond to a male IUPUI student who doubts that she is a real person. Eric wrote in his first letter:

Anyway we were assigned in this class of mine to pickout a name of a chalkboard—I picked your name since it sounded the prettiest. To be honest, I do not really know if you are a real person, but if you are then I am sorry for douting you and my teacher.

Katy responds that indeed she is real and that she understands why he may have doubts, though she never expresses the actual reason he has doubts. Katy's correspondent seems to know that the person who stands in a classroom is a self constructed in an educational context, not a "real person," even if he can't say why that is true. None of the graduate students describe the debate about who basic writers are supposed to be or what their writing is supposed to say about their abilities.

The tone of the discourse is cheerful—difference is positive; learning is good for you—even though each writer knows the potential damage in being labeled. Katy, for example, writes Eric in her next letter to say how valuable she finds letter writing: it is on the same plane as creative writing. Laurie tells Marg that it's just that they're different, implying, with clear hope that there's nothing wrong with that, even though the literal difference—graduate students in English, and basic writers at an urban campus—is immense. Only Chris, a first semester graduate student admits that the writing feels uncomfortable. In one letter she says:

I don't want to dishearten you but I don't think students, undergraduate or graduate, ever feel comfortable about their background or skills. Now that I am a graduate student I'm supposed to have achieved a certain level of success in writing. I feel intimidated every time I turn in an assignment. So don't feel like you are at a disadvantage.

Chris resists some part of educational ideology in the expression of her own doubts about her performance in writing, but she is nonetheless a graduate student in English, performing on cue for her classes. That ability to perform on demand and its inexpressibility—"so don't feel like you are



at a disadvantage”—allows the reinscription of difference at the same time Chris offers solidarity with her correspondent.

### Constructing an Academic Self

In order for the author function to be reproduced, apprentices in English departments must be inducted into thinking of themselves as author-scholars. Though these graduate students represent a range of standings—from second semester M.A. students to Ph.D. students nearing qualifying exams—they all identify themselves with institutional programs: Katy’s “English literature major,” Dee’s taking a course in “British 19th century autobiography,” Roger’s “working on a master’s degree in composition and rhetoric,” and on through the entire group. Throughout their letters, these students articulate the organization of the discipline, replicating its structural forms for their basic writing correspondents. Moreover, these students write about writing, about authorship, about its centrality to what they do. Katy talks of her journal writing and diaries, even “freewrites” as “fun,” while Warren juxtaposes his desire and satisfaction in writing with his like of “trashy late night television.” They take courses in writing, ask questions about writing, and see differences in writing. It is Katy who best expresses the demands of the discipline when she writes:

Sometimes when school work and ‘real life’ concerns really pile up, I feel like things are getting out of control, but somehow I manage to get one what needs to be done. I think one of the things you learn in school is how to establish priorities, which for me means deciding what absolutely must get done *now* and what can wait.

And what must be done now is writing, writing that will lead to being the author-scholar. Laurie’s remark to Marg is telling: “I’ll take my paragraph of fame if this winds up going somewhere for my teacher.” Writing is the game and they intend to be players.

Why are graduate students in an English department seemingly so transparent in reinscribing the author function on these basic writers? That question deserves our consideration because it is so often our graduate students who teach basic writers. And even more than basic writers, graduate students in English departments are subjects of the master discourse, the apprentices who must subscribe to reigning educational discursive practices if they intend to remain in the academy.

### Resisting Privilege

Yet it is these graduate students who also suggest the means of resisting the author function at the same time they appear to actively reinscribe it on to

their basic writing correspondents. This move toward resistance slips in with their presentation of teaching narratives in the letters, almost as if to say that it is as teachers, not as author-scholars, that they are capable of scrutinizing their roles. In writing to Wini, Cincinnati public school teacher Roger comments on his first year of teaching in the following way:

Teaching for me has become much easier. My first year was fairly difficult because the school is fairly big, about 2500 students, urban, and predominantly black, nearly 85% black. The students gave me a very rough time when I first started teaching. I actually had things thrown at my back the first couple of weeks of teaching.

Roger seems uncomfortable with the role of disciplinarian and surprised and upset by his students' denial of his authority to teach. That he acknowledges it at all is a kind of slippage in discursive practice. We are always supposed to be in control. And there is a second slippage as well in Roger's narrative. Roger comments on race, the single occasion in the letters in which race was explicitly mentioned, and thus he violates the practice of never mentioning racial difference in student populations.

Dee also slips away from educational ideology when she relates the following events to Greg, her correspondent:

I had a great weekend! My sister and her family (husband, nephew—18 yrs old, niece—14 yrs old) came to visit. My one bedroom apartment is really small, so it seemed like wall-to-wall sleeping bags and people when we bunked down for the night! My nephew Rod is thinking about coming here to college next year. I called a student from last semester and asked if he'd show Rod around campus. I was kind of nervous about Rod having a good time. I guess I wanted him to like it here. Anyway, Rod told me later that Ken (my student) is still mad at me because he got a B instead of an A in his class. I really like Ken and his being mad at me about a grade is just one of those unpleasant things about being a teacher.

The dismay Dee feels over the consequences of evaluation—a part of accepted educational ideology—was not part of “a great weekend.” Dee is uncomfortable with the fact that she liked and trusted the student well enough to send him off with her nephew and that he complained to her nephew. Educational ideology intervenes. It seems impossible to keep them separate. That she characterizes her reaction as merely “unpleasant” suggests just how powerfully the educational discourse guides any discussion about its practices. Yet her telling of the incident also suggests her desire to go beyond a mere reproduction of existing practices. She is beginning to resist and beginning to be able to discuss her resistance. Why such resistance would appear in the form of teaching *narratives* is an

interesting political question in itself. Perhaps because teaching lore is typically not a canonical form of the expression of authorship in English departments, such vignettes of classrooms are less subject to “discipline” and thus more available as a venue for resistance.

How we go about resisting deserves considerable rethinking on our part. Let me close with some observations on this project. As I said, I had hoped that we could become conscious of how we all participate in the process of constructing basic writers. I expected that process to occur through the course readings and activities which included critical discourse analysis of basic writing textbooks and course guides, as well as the reading of Brodkey’s “‘Literacy Letters’” at the beginning of the course. I also expected—and I hoped I was demonstrating—reflective practice. In short, I expected to use education to critique *and* change educational practice, a difficult paradox at best, but one that is a common project in much of contemporary graduate education in the humanities and social sciences. Liberal educational ideology assumes that knowing *about* a situation is enough to change practices. My training in composition and sociolinguistics left me predisposed to assume that teaching *about* the subtle labeling and structuring of English department practices would be enough to change those practices in the next generation of teacher-scholars, even as I knew that critical analysis would predict a different outcome. I had, in fact, probably undermined my own project by locating it in a graduate seminar. Where but in the graduate seminar does the panopticon discipline so well? I read, and my students knew I read, letters going both directions. I knew, and they knew, that I would be commenting on those letters by analyzing the practice. It made little difference that I invited my graduate students to participate in the project as peers; their being in my classroom was enough to tell them that we were anything but peers. Moreover, I, with my students, readily adopted the trope of the Other, setting off to other institutions to bring back exotic knowledge *about* the basic writer.<sup>2</sup> And “knowledge about”—rather than changed practices—is what we brought back.

From the standpoint of the letters alone, we were not successful and I was responsible. But this is only to offer the evidence of a single course, in a single semester. When I look to see what that group of graduate students is doing now, I see a group committed to change, and most are still engaged in some way in work with basic writers. The high school teacher has become a proponent of portfolios, allowing his students the opportunity to revise and present their best possible writing. Three of the students helped me examine gender differences in writing groups and hypothesized connections with class, race, and ethnicity as well. One of those students worked hard to reform an early opportunity program that clearly reinscribed minority

students into a less privileged status at the same time it was inviting them into the academy. Another chose to teach at a branch campus of Miami so that she could begin to work with basic writers honorably. Yet another has taken on the principles of standardized testing, for its masking of reification of social differences. Only time could provide evidence of their commitments. Are these commitments based solely on the basis of this course? I would be foolish to make such a claim. But in this course, these students had the opportunity to rethink what was “natural” about basic writers and beginning that process of rethinking had later consequences.

And there are also things I would change in the actual mechanics of the class. The two groups of students—graduate students from Miami and basic writers from IUPUI—met at the end of that semester on the Indianapolis campus. Students on both sides had the opportunity to meet, talk, lunch, explore, and reorient perspectives. If I were to do the project again, I would make sure that the groups met earlier, perhaps exchanging days in which they shadowed one another. What would my students have thought about an employer who was suspicious of his or her employee bringing a “shadow” to work, a practice less remarkable in an academic setting? What would my students have thought about the sort of dead-end, minimum wage jobs that many of the basic writers were enduring? What would they have thought of the various administrative hurdle jumping that the basic writers had to negotiate in the Access Center? Surely the various disciplines to which basic writers are subject would be more apparent. If my purpose was to help my students understand how basic writers lived, letters alone could not provide enough context. The basic writers were as proficient in creating a rhetorical self on paper as the graduate students were, masking some of the very experiences that I most wanted my students to know about. And I would take greater advantage of the opening that the teaching narratives seemed to provide—moments when the graduate students dropped their professional personae and acknowledged their own insecurities within the master discourse.

Susan Miller, in the conclusion of *Textual Carnivals*, argues that composition scholars are in a unique position to use their marginal status as the means to understand practices in English departments and to become a “designated place for counterhegemonic intellectual politics” (187). As she suggests,

These often-stated but persistently unpoliticized practices and insights in the field have positioned [composition] to transform its ancillary identity by engaging intellectual as well as practical political actions. As the institutional site designated as a passive enclosure for ‘unauthorized’ discourse, composition has simultaneously been designated as a marginalizing power. But this

enormous power to contain the discourse of the majority can be, if its professionals claim it, the strength that represents the field's identity. (187)

The idea of authorship in English departments is constructed by the people who populate them. We do not have to simply accept current practices, especially when those practices make it impossible for some student writers to escape the imposition of negative status. By challenging the principles on which the author function rests, by exploring the lived experiences of our basic writing students, by agreeing to rethink our own positions, we can begin to resist the reinscription of power and collaboratively redefine the author.

Specifically, several changes in basic writing pedagogy seem both warranted and necessary from this project. First, we should make the historicity of the basic writing "problem" visible to our colleagues and administrators. It is not temporary and our responses should not be based on its alleged momentary appearance. Only by continuing to see basic writers as temporary problems can administrators justify creating temporary faculty positions to answer the needs of these students. Who needs a tenure-line, permanent position for instructing basic writers when the problem will evaporate as soon as the current crisis is over? Second, as composition faculty, we should be rethinking the identity politics of labeling ability levels of writers. Who, we should be asking, is served by maintaining the labeling? We can and should acknowledge that at least one group well served by maintaining the ability divisions is the faculty who teach both "regular" and "basic" writing, allowing us to celebrate supposedly homogenous classrooms, claiming that the homogenous classroom is to be preferred for its ease. Yet, as those of us who have taught basic writing can attest, homogenous basic classrooms are hardly the typical case. If we conclude at the local level that the politics of labeling must remain in place because of institutional constraints, then we should vigorously oppose the practice at many institutions of sending our least experienced teachers into the basic writing classroom. The vulnerability of graduate students and part-time instructors to institutional forces makes them the groups most likely to construct basic writers as the institution demands.

For some readers, the endpoint of a Foucauldian analysis seems to be despair, immobility, and hopelessness. Is it hopeless? I think not if resistance is foregrounded in our training of new teachers of composition and our own practice as teachers and administrators. It is to resistance that I would guide those who train teachers of basic writing, and it is what Foucault means when he discusses resistance:

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power. (*Power and Knowledge* 142)

Foucauldian analysis is only a beginning, not surrender to the inevitable. Like David Shumway, I believe that the power of Foucauldian analysis is best used in reconceptualizing contemporary politics and resisting disciplinary power. But we must act from the analysis. The letters described and reported in this essay are not anomalous. They are representative of the language we use in our commentary on students' papers, our talk in student-teacher conferences, and our modeling of talk appropriate for peer responses. In examining the role of the author function in creating and regulating the positioning of basic writing in English departments, I hope to point us to the path of resistance, one in which we examine our representations of educational discursive practices.

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## Notes

1. All of the students, graduate and "basic," discussed in this article have been given coded names. In doing so, I am hoping to honor them for their honesty and their willingness to pursue self-reflection on their own roles.

2. I should make clear here that Miami University insisted that it had no basic writers, and thus had no basic writers for us to correspond with on the Oxford campus,

even though the classroom experiences of some indicated otherwise. To be sure, Miami was selective in its admissions process, and most of its students came to first year composition with considerable competence. But at least two of the graduate students enrolled in the seminar had worked or were working in the Writing Center where the unacknowledged basic writers were often sent.

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