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Original Publication Information

This article was originally published in *English Education*, volume 26, issue 1, in February 1994.

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Mapping Errors and Expectations for Basic Writing: From the “Frontier Field” to “Border Country”

Bruce Horner

Through *Errors and Expectations* (1977) and the founding, in 1975, of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, Mina Shaughnessy is largely credited with establishing both the field and the term “basic writing” (Gray, 1979; Troyka, 1987). Yet Shaughnessy ends *Errors and Expectations* by warning that the errors and expectations to which she refers are *teacher* errors and expectations, closing her study with the hope that “our enterprising new students will somehow weather *our* deficiencies and transcend our yet cautious expectations of what they can accomplish in college” (1977a, p. 294). Describing the field of basic writing as a “frontier, unmapped, except for a scattering of impressionistic articles and a few blazed trails,” she likens *Errors and Expectations* to a “frontier map” “certain to have the shortcomings of other frontier maps, with doubtless a few rivers in the wrong place and some trails that end nowhere” (1977a, p. 4).

Much of the subsequent discourse in the field of basic writing can be located on the “maps” provided by Shaughnessy and some of her colleagues at CUNY. These maps identify basic writers in terms drawn from theories of cognitive development and from theories of discourse and second language acquisition. But such maps tend to place BW students at particular stages of cognitive development or language acquisition in ways that, unfortunately, continue what Miller has observed as composition’s tendency to treat students as “emerging, or as failed, but

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never as actually responsible 'authors,' . . . as only tentative participants in consequential learning about writing" (1991, p. 196). In such models, as Bartholomae has recently complained, basic writing risks becoming "a reiteration of the liberal project of the late 60s, early 70s, where in the name of sympathy and empowerment, we have once again produced the 'other' who is the incomplete version of ourselves, confirming existing patterns of power and authority, reproducing the hierarchies we had meant to question and overthrow" (1993, p. 18).

The growing field of basic writing in this way recapitulates the history of writing instruction given students of all ages, who have been similarly identified as always "emerging" and/or "other" by their placement at a particular stage of cognitive development and literacy acquisition. However, recent work by teachers and researchers of the writing of "established" writers, college students, high school students, and even children offers an alternative model for locating students and their writing. For example, Harste et al (1984), working with young children, call into question the validity of notions of "developmental stages," "readiness," and "emergent reading" for understanding how children learn to read and write, finding that "one must approach all children as if they know quite a bit about reading and writing" in order to "build upon the knowledge they have already acquired about literacy" (p. 44). Boomer et al (1992), arguing for educational programs that involve both teachers and students in negotiating curricula, ask that we recognize children (K-12) "as decision makers, intenders, owners of their own ideas, willing partners with their teachers in the active pursuit of their own learning" (p. 15).

Such work, loosely categorized as the study of "border" writing and "border" pedagogy for its attention to the negotiation of power and identities in writing and teaching, offers a way to resolve the conceptual and ethical dilemmas on the horns of which basic writing teachers have found themselves caught. For such work suggests a redefinition of the situation faced by basic writers as the situation of any writer. "Literacy," Harste et al argue, "is [for us as for the young] neither a monolithic skill nor a now-you-have-it/now-you-don't affair" (p. 69). By adopting this view, we can see the phenomenon of "basic writing" as a representative instance of the history, theory and practice of literacy instruction generally.

In this essay, I first trace the surfacing of the dilemmas posed by earlier conceptions of basic writing and then examine how "border" conceptualizations of basic writing respond to those dilemmas. To illustrate the differences between earlier and more recent conceptualizations, I discuss theoretical and pedagogical approaches to written "error" corresponding to each arguing for that redefinition of the "territory of basic writing" as "border" territory and the art of writing as negotiation. While this redefinition introduces new difficulties for teachers and students, it

effectively resolves the dilemmas posed by earlier conceptions of basic writing by identifying both students and teachers as active participants in negotiations of power and thus improving the expectations of both for the work they face in confronting one another.

Beginners or “True Outsiders”

Shaughnessy has urged two sets of terms to account for the writing difficulties of her students. In an oft-quoted passage from the Introduction to *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy states that “BW students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are *beginners* and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes” (1977a, p. 5; my emphasis). Consistent with her use of geographic metaphors to describe basic writing as a “frontier,” however, she also describes BW students as foreigners, “true outsiders,” “students whose difficulties with the written language seemed of a different order from those of the other groups [of students admitted to CUNY], as if they had come, you might say, from a different country,” “strangers in academia” (1977a, pp. 2, 3). In such a view, the task confronting basic writers is to “move across the territory of language” (1977a, p. 10) presumably through the uncharted territory of basic writing and in the direction of the land and language of the academy.

In the last half dozen years, compositionists have identified significant problems with conceiving of BW students, and those deemed illiterate generally, as either “beginners” or “true outsiders.” Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the real advantages accruing from such conceptions. Most importantly, they allow us to see both the intelligence and educability of BW students (Lyons, 1985). Viewing the writing of BW students as akin to either beginners or foreigners encourages, first, an acknowledgement of the students’ educability or “linguistic aptitude”; second, a far more tolerant attitude toward students’ errors (though not a dismissal of the importance of errors); and third, a model for discovering patterns in those errors, or the “logic” of the students’ errors, and for addressing them (Lyons, 1980). Just as beginners and foreign speakers make characteristic mistakes and go through characteristic stages in the process of learning an unfamiliar language, so BW students can be understood to make characteristic errors and to go through characteristic stages in the process of improving their writing. In short, both conceptions of BW students present the students and their writing as not fixed but *in process*. As Shaughnessy, describing “the view a teacher is more likely to have toward a foreign student learning English,” explains,

[The student's] errors reflect upon his linguistic situation, not upon his educability; he is granted by his teacher the capability of mastering English but is expected in the course of doing so to make errors in English; and certain errors, characteristic errors for natives of his language who are acquiring English as a second language, are tolerated far into and even beyond the period of formal instruction simply because they must be rubbed off by time. (1977a, p. 121)

Much of the research on basic writers since 1975 represents attempts to understand them in at least one of these ways. Those viewing basic writers chiefly as beginners have looked especially to theories of cognitive development to explain such students' difficulties (Berg & Coleman, 1985; Elifson & Stone, 1985; Goldberg, 1985; Hays, 1983; Kroll, 1978; Lunsford, 1979; Tremblay, 1986). Basic writers, such research suggests, are somehow stuck at a lower level of cognitive development, unable to engage at a "formal-operational" level of thought (Berg & Coleman, 1985; Lunsford, 1979), or occupy a lower position on William Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development (Hays, 1988; see Bizzell, 1984; Slattery, 1990). Those viewing basic writers primarily as "foreign" or "outsiders" have looked especially to ethnographic studies, second-language acquisition, and discourse theory (Bartholomae, 1985; Bizzell, 1986b; Kogen, 1986; Martinez & Martinez, 1989; Trimbur, 1987). The problems of basic writers, these scholars have argued (often in response to studies drawing on theories of cognitive development), are signs not of cognitive immaturity; rather, they signal a difference in "world view" (Bizzell, 1986b), "values" (Martinez & Martinez, 1989) or a lack of familiarity with certain discourse conventions. As Bartholomae has put it,

Basic writers are beginning writers, to be sure, but they are not writers who need to learn to use language. They are writers who need to learn to command a particular variety of language—the language of a written, academic discourse—and a particular variety of language use—writing itself. . . . [Basic writing] is not evidence of arrested cognitive development. (1980, p. 254)

Harris (1989, September) has observed that in keeping with these two ways of viewing basic writers there have developed two different sets of metaphors for thinking about changes in the students' writing and the role of basic writing teachers: metaphors of "growth" and of "initiation." If we think of BW students as cognitively immature beginners, then "improvements" in their writing are signs of cognitive *growth*, with BW teachers *fostering* such growth. If we think of BW students as *foreigners*, then changes in their writing represent changes in their social or cultural identities *initiated* at least in part by writing courses.

But both of these metaphors have been found to be problematic.

Imagining students as cognitively immature denies the obvious facts of their status as adults (cf. Shaughnessy, 1977b). Further, as Rose (1985) has argued, identifying BW students in this way has functioned largely to exclude them and BW programs from the university. Fostering cognitive maturity sounds like an unimpeachable, even commendable vocation, but not one appropriate for college. Finally, such a view, as Rose and others have argued, ignores the rich complexity and particularity of both cognition and writing (Rose, 1988; Berthoff, 1984; Bizzell, 1982, 1984; Haswell, 1988; Kogen, 1986; Martinez & Martinez, 1987).

On the other hand, if learning to write is not a matter of becoming cognitively mature but of changing one's social and cultural identity, initiating such change seems liable to charges of cultural imperialism, converting the "natives" to *our* native ways by teaching them the rituals and gestures of academic discourse. Such conversions are difficult to justify ethically. Justifications that have been offered, such as Thomas Farrell's argument that "literacy," including the acquisition of the forms of Standard English, enables critical consciousness or a mode of thought necessary to Western culture, tend to fall back on "foundationalist" conceptions of literacy which the "social" view rejects (Bizzell, 1986a). In such foundationalist conceptions, literacy either as a medium or a practice is reified and idealized into the equivalent of what, in the nineteenth century, the West came to know as "art." Cultural critic Raymond Williams has described this nineteenth-century development as one in which "two processes—the idealization of art and the reification of the medium—were connected. . . . Art was idealized to distinguish it from 'mechanical' work" (1977, p. 160). In this process, Williams explains,

The properties of "the medium" were abstracted as if they defined the practice, rather than being its means. This interpretation then suppressed the full sense of practice, which has always to be defined as work on a material for a specific purpose within certain necessary social conditions. (1977, pp. 159-60)

Claims that literacy yields significant cognitive rewards apply to "literacy" a similar abstraction of the written medium and thus suppress the full sense of literacy as a practice.

But those rejecting justifications based on such reifications of writing still face an ethical dilemma. Bizzell, perhaps foremost among compositionists confronting this dilemma, explains,

an anti-foundationalist understanding of discourse would see the student's way of thinking and interacting with the world, the student's very self, as fundamentally altered by participation in any new discourse. These will not be changes the student can erase at will. Also, the ability to participate in a new discourse will change the student's relationship with other

discourses—particularly in the case of academic discourse. Because academic discourse is identified with social power, to show familiarity with it can mean being completely alienated from some other, socially disenfranchised discourses. Thus the student's new ability to participate in academic discourse will condition his or her opportunities to participate in other discourses, and make some life paths more attractive than others. (1986a, pp. 43-44)

However, teachers rejecting a reified, "foundationalist" view of literacy simultaneously deny themselves any foundation, or authority, for advocating or initiating such changes. As Bizzell puts it in a later essay, "We [teachers] exercise authority over [students] in asking them to give up their foundational beliefs, but we give them nothing to put in the place of these foundational beliefs because we deny the validity of all authority, including, presumably, our own" (1990, p. 670).

As noted above, there are serious problems associated with viewing basic writers as "beginners"; such a view belies the evident maturity of BW students and the very complexity of their writing. But if it doesn't make sense to think of these students as beginners, it is becoming increasingly clear that it makes equally little sense to think of many of them as "foreign." And just as "cognitivist" approaches to understanding basic writing risk being exclusionary, so there are exclusionary implications in identifying native basic writers as "foreign." Writers adopting such identifications have sidestepped those implications by treating the contradiction of describing native students as "foreign" not as oxymoronic (i.e., "pointedly foolish" [OED]), but as a paradox ("a statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief, often with the implication that it is marvelous or incredible" [OED]), a marvel to be wondered at but not challenged or questioned. We can see this treatment obtaining when Shaughnessy states that basic writers seem to have "come from a different country" or states of them, "Natives, for the most part, of New York, graduates of the same public school system as the other students, they were nonetheless strangers in academia" (1977a, pp. 2-3).

Such a treatment of the situation of basic writers as *paradoxical* recurs in the more general debate on America's "literacy crisis"—at least, paradoxically, in the language of conservatives. Former Secretary of Education Bennett warns that if students are not given access to the Western high cultural tradition, "they will become aliens in their own culture, strangers in their own land" (1984, pp. 29-30). Hirsch laments that currently, though

[young people] share a tremendous amount of knowledge among themselves, much of it learned in school, . . . from the standpoint of their literacy and their ability to communicate with others in our culture, what they know is ephemeral and narrowly confined to their own generation.

Many young people strikingly lack the information that writers of American books and newspapers have traditionally taken for granted among their readers from all generations. (1987, p. 7)

These authors, in eerie echoes of Shaughnessy and Bizzell, thus warn of the prospect of a curious phenomenon: natives who nonetheless belong to another country, members of a culture and a community who are yet nonmembers, knowledgeable youth incapable of communication, “aliens in their own culture, strangers in their own land.” Such descriptions give a peculiar cast to Shaughnessy’s likening of the “territory of basic writing” to a “frontier.” Lyons argues that Shaughnessy “uses this image . . . with great precision,” explaining:

The frontier is the place where everyone is a stranger, and where nobody is fully at home or settled in. In this new territory, everyone has to get his bearings, students and teachers alike, and everyone has to make adjustments in his habitual modes of thinking and acting. The frontier calls on everybody’s resourcefulness and ingenuity in adapting his particular kind of knowledge to new situations. It also calls for a special openness and trust—in a difficult and sparsely populated land, people must cooperate for survival. And the frontier is finally a place where the future is necessarily more important than the past. (1980, p. 11)

But this vision of basic writing as frontier ignores the prior, ongoing inhabitation of the “frontier” territory by a variety of “others,” inhabitants from whose perspective the territory is not “frontier” but “home.” Of course, the descriptions of basic writers cited above positing clear distinctions between those who belong and those who don’t, the skilled and the unskilled, do recognize the presence of “others.” Both visions, however, displace those “others” in a rehearsal of the American “frontier” experience and common representations of that experience. As Bourdieu observes of frontiers generally: “The frontier . . . produces cultural difference as much as it is produced by it” (1991, p. 222). In the history of the American “frontier,” not everyone was a stranger; but the strangers, with considerable firepower, on encountering native inhabitants of the territory, decided the natives were the strangers, “true outsiders,” “outlandish,” or “foreign.” These they tried to convert when they weren’t trying to eliminate them from the territory altogether. Subsequent mapping of the territory involved not only the delineation of rivers and paths but also the identification of what territory belonged to whom, with only tiny pockets of land allotted or “reserved for” the original inhabitants, if indeed their presence and need for any territory was acknowledged at all.

I recall the American frontier experience not in order to equate the teaching of basic writing with cultural genocide but to demonstrate that viewing students as “foreign” has led us to think about teaching in terms

of conversion or deracination. The dilemma is both ethical and conceptual, arising from problematic identifications of both students and teachers which must be abandoned if the dilemma is to be resolved. It is foolish, finally, to identify native students as strangers and for those of us teaching basic writing to identify ourselves as “natives”—whether of the academic discourse community, the Land of Standard English, or even the Land of Literacy, and it is dangerous to deny the operation of power (while enacting it) through denying the specificities of history and circumstance. As descriptors of language practice, such identifications are counterproductive, for they encourage a reified sense of students and teachers and their languages and “discourse communities” while masking power relations among those groups (Harris, 1989; Horner, 1992, pp. 185–188; Pratt, 1987). Just as conservatives like Bennett and Hirsch can be attacked for positing and attempting to impose a particular, narrow, reified view of American culture as representative of all American culture, so theoretical discussions sometimes present particularized, narrow, but most importantly reified views of the discourse of academic writing as representative of the literacy to be given to students viewed as “other” by teachers imagined as “having” “literacy.” The actual frontier of basic writing, and in particular the actual writing of BW students, calls this view into question. As Bartholomae has more recently observed,

[Basic writers] are not the only ones who make mistakes and who present their work in ways that are inappropriate for a university. Mainstream freshmen, senior English majors, graduate students, our colleagues may all produce work that is naive, wrong, or off the track. The issue, then, is not who misses the mark but whose misses matter and why. To say this is to return attention to institutional processes of selection and exclusion. . . . The work of basic writers calls into question our assumptions about orderly presentation, standards of copy editing, and the stability of conventional habits of thinking. This is not to say that order, correctness, and convention should not be goals of a literate education. It is to say, however, that the borderlines between our work and theirs are not as clear as we like to assume. (1987, pp. 68–69)

Basic writing threatens our sense of our identity (as represented in our written work), our possession of particular linguistic territory (and I am uncomfortable invoking the first person plural here). This sense of threat is all too similar to that sense of threat implicit in conservative appeals to preserve a reified cultural legacy posited as *the* American culture, *the* tradition. Conservative rhetoric implicitly responds to the threatening sense that the culture posited is a pure construct in conflict with other possible constructions of that culture. The pronouns, as usual, are telling. For example, Hirsch argues that it is only through “shared information” that “*we* learn to communicate effectively with one another in *our* national

community" (1987, p. xvii; my emphases). But he complains early in his book that *he* can no longer communicate via allusions to Shakespeare, as his father once did, because he can no longer assume that others would recognize or understand such allusions (1987, pp. 9-10). He admits that youth share other knowledge among themselves which he, evidently, does not know but presumably could learn. The problem for Hirsch, it seems, is thus not simply that he cannot communicate with them, but that their knowledge threatens to displace the legitimacy, even the communicative power, of his own. "They" have a shared community, and it is not "ours."

Correspondingly, the written language of basic writers threatens, or seems to threaten, to displace the language that teachers would have them use. "Their" conventions for writing are not "ours." Thus those of us teaching basic writing are caught between the horns of an ethical dilemma: if we "convert" students to "our" conventions, we are liable to charges of cultural genocide; on the other hand, ignoring differences between their conventions and those of Edited American English amounts to abandonment (cf. Philip, 1989, pp. 18-19; Delpit, 1988, pp. 291-297).

Borderlands, Margins, and Negotiation

One resolution to this dilemma is represented in recent revaluations of "borderlands," "margins," and "negotiation" as terms to describe the writing, and responding to the writing, of young children (Harste et al, 1984, pp. 27-79), high school students (Robinson & Stock, 1990), the full range of K-12 students (Boomer et al, 1992; Delpit 1988), and professional writers (Hicks, 1991; hooks, 1990), as well as beginning college students (Bartholomae, 1987, 1993; Harris, 1989, 1989 September; Hill, 1990; Horner, 1992; McQuade, 1992; Rose, 1989; Sommers, 1992; cf. Giroux, 1992, pp. 28-36). This resolution might be thought of as recuperating Lyons's utopian account of the "frontier" of basic writing cited above. What renders the "frontier" image utopian is the absence of any sense of power relations among the participants, the absence of any sense of their individual or collective histories, and its assumption of shared ideals for the future. All are equal and equally strangers (the territory belongs to no one as of yet), all must make adjustments, everyone must contribute, trust is essential, everyone looks to the future rather than brooding on the past. These render the account vulnerable to ridicule, whether as a representation of basic writing or indeed the teaching of any writing at any level, or as an account of the American frontier experience. Redefining that "frontier" as "borderland" and the cooperative efforts of "frontier settlers" as negotiations between border residents injects a healthy sense of power relations into the picture and refutes both the idea of the writer as autono-

mous individual and the notion of writers operating from a location indisputably at the center of organically unified discursive communities with shared goals, suggesting instead a conception of writing as the ongoing re-negotiation of positions in response to inevitable histories of conflict and contradiction, and a conception of the field of teaching writing as essentially a site of contestation.

Injecting such a sense of power relations into Lyons's depiction and questioning the particular future to be worked toward need not entirely eliminate it as an ideal. What is attractive in Lyons's depiction is its sense of give and take and of unpredictable change—"everyone has to get his bearings, students and teachers alike, and everyone has to make adjustments." In this phrase Lyons imagines a process of negotiation among the parties as to what will be offered and what will be accepted, the changes that each is willing to make and those which are rejected, a welcome lack of determination about the direction to which those changes will lead, and a sense that no one—neither students nor teachers—is comfortably "at home" or "native." By imagining the process in terms akin to negotiation, Lyons comes close to resolving the dilemma of requiring conversion or abandonment. For negotiation acknowledges conflict and power as integral components of the dynamics of change while positioning all parties as agents—allowing in education for what Boomer et al describe as "ownership" of learning (1992, pp. 15-16). In negotiation, the parties involved are interdependent on one another and on the outcome of the negotiation. In negotiating, both parties engage in a dynamic exchange of power in which both are changed in ways neither can predict beforehand (Gulliver, 1979, pp. xvii, 81). Through a process of exploration, revision, and learning, both parties reposition themselves in relation to each other and to their prior understandings of themselves and the issues negotiated (cf. Boomer 1993, p. 8).

Nor need the operation of power among parties of unequal status somehow falsify negotiations or predetermine their outcomes, as is sometimes imagined. As social theorist Giddens reminds us, "Power relations . . . are always *two-way*, even if the power of one actor or party in a social relation is minimal compared to another. Power relations are relations of autonomy and dependence, but even the most autonomous agent is in some degree dependent, and the most dependent actor or party in a relationship retains some autonomy" (1979, p. 93). That teachers in some ways wield more power than students thus does not mean that students lack power or autonomy (rendering them automatons). As the inability of teachers to predict the outcomes of their encounters with students illustrates, those encounters are engagements in negotiation, negotiations in which power operates in both directions in ways that can change both students and teachers.

Viewing basic writing as border country and the teaching of basic writing as negotiation is thus attractive for several reasons. First, unlike the cognitivist view, it acknowledges the position of students as agents in relations of power. Rather than being seen as so many hungry, naturally deplorable, vacuums, beginners bringing with them little but the potential to learn, students are recognized as capable of and interested in exploring options and exercising choices in their work and requiring respect for their maturity and responsibility as adults. Second, this view makes explicit the historically and politically marginal, “border” status of basic writing courses, students, and teachers in relation to activities deemed more “central” while adopting a perspective that inverts that status, in effect redefining “border” as “leading edge.” By adopting such a perspective on “marginality,” as Robinson and Stock explain, “the spatial location *margin* may be recognized for what it is—a generative site for making meaning, a generative site for building knowledge with the potential to benefit all of us wherever we reside” (1990, p. 273). Third, establishing the territory of basic writing as border country acknowledges more fully the fluidity of identities which basic writing students, teachers, and courses may occupy at any given moment. Giroux describes “border pedagogy” as enabling students “to rewrite their own histories, identities, and learning possibilities” and as positioning teachers “as intellectuals whose own narratives must be situated and examined as discourses that are open, partial and subject to ongoing debate and revision” (1992, pp. 30, 35). Redefining basic writing as border country establishes both teachers and students as strangers to one another who nonetheless agree to meet to engage in what Ira Shor has described as “mutual re-creations” (1980, p. xxvii) in which students and teachers continually contest one another’s positions and authority in ever shifting relations of power. This view thus eliminates the ethical dilemma teachers have posed for themselves of whether or not to “convert” students by acknowledging students’ own responsibility and choice in seeking change and the indeterminate nature of the changes to which any basic writing course might lead either students or teachers.

Finally, such a conception of basic writing corresponds closely to recent accounts of writing which stress the operation of conflict and power in the production of writing. Indeed, some writers have attested that it is only under such “border” conditions, fraught with conflict, that writing is possible. Anzaldúa, writing of both geopolitical and psychic borders, describes borders as

set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.

The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (1987, p. 3)

Yet she argues that it is these very conditions that make her writing possible. As she explains,

Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer. . . .

Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create. (1987, pp. 72, 73)

hooks (1990), acknowledging that marginality is commonly identified as a "site of deprivation," argues from her own experience as a writer that it also be recognized as a "site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (pp. 342, 341). Lu (1987), drawing on her own experience of conflict between the discourses of Mao Tse-tung's Marxism and Western humanism in her education in the People's Republic of China, recommends treating the writing classroom as a borderland in which students learn to negotiate and draw on such conflicts in their writing. Neither her parents nor her school teachers recognized the value of such experiences of conflict. Instead, home and school: "each contrived a purified space where only one discourse was spoken and heard. . . . [and] jealously silenced any voice that threatened to break the unison of the scene" (1987, p. 445). As a result, she explains, "I was unable to acknowledge, grasp, or grapple with what I was experiencing, for both my parents and my teachers had suggested that, if I were a good student, such interference [between discourses] would and should not take place" (p. 443). Nonetheless, she claims that "in spite of the frustration and confusion I experienced growing up caught between two conflicting worlds, the conflict ultimately helped me to grow as a reader and writer. Constantly having to switch back and forth between the discourse of home and that of school made me sensitive and self-conscious about the struggle I experienced every time I tried to read, write, or think in either discourse" (pp. 437-38). Consequently, Lu argues that rather than maintaining borders between discourses, we need to encourage students to explore ways of negotiating the conflicting discourses of home and school in their writing (p. 447). Philip (1989) similarly argues for Caribbean writers that they write in the contested space between the language varieties of demotic and Standard English. For Philip, "The excitement . . . as a writer comes in the confrontation between the formal and the demotic within the text itself" (1989, p. 18). "To say that the experience [of the Caribbean] can only be expressed in standard English (if there is any such thing) or only in the Caribbean demotic . . . is,

in fact, to limit the experience. . . . It is *in the continuum of expression* from standard to Caribbean English that the veracity of the experience lies” (p. 18). “It is not sufficient,” she argues, “to write only in dialect, for too often that remains a parallel and closed experience, although a part of the same language. Neither is it sufficient to write only in what we have come to call standard English. The language as we know it has to be dislocated and acted upon—even destroyed—so that it begins to serve our purposes” (pp. 18-19).

Error: Basic Writing’s High Profile Issue

The images these writers present of the scene and dynamics of writing correspond closely to the actual situation and experience of class meetings for basic writing courses, meetings in which strangers—both teachers and students—however warily, approach one another, learn and change from their encounters with one another, and learn and change the language in working with it. To demonstrate both the value of such images for teachers of basic writing and some of the problems which they present, I want to look at the implications which viewing the “territory” of basic writing as a borderland and the teaching of writing as negotiation has for the most high-profile issue in the teaching of basic writing, error (cf. Horner, 1992; Hull, 1985). Those writing on error have taken approaches aligned with the different views of basic writers described above. Those influenced by theories of cognitive development have used basic writers’ apparent inability to “see” their errors or correct them as further evidence of students’ cognitive immaturity. In response, such teachers have devised exercises to develop cognitive and perceptual skills in students (Goldberg, 1985; Gorrell, 1981). Laurence, arguing from Piaget that “perception interferes with cognition and cognition interferes in perception,” has argued that BW students’ inability to recognize and correct their errors indicates that their “perception remains in the preliminary *centered* stage” (1975, pp. 30, 32). In this stage, “A student sees a word or object in one way, his way, and visual and cognitive exploration is unfocused and unsystematic. This student may perceive letters and parts of words, but recognition will not itself result in meaningful interpretation. . . . perceptions are not analytic” (p. 31). To encourage “*de-centration*, the ability to see words in new ways,” she has recommended exercises in which students circle different examples of different grammatical constructions (pp. 35-37).

Other researchers, rejecting the notion that students suffer from cognitive immaturity, argue instead that basic writers’ errors are comparable to the errors of anyone learning a second language. Researchers have used the technique of error analysis, borrowed from the field of second-language acquisition, to argue that BW students’ errors are indications of

their attempt to approximate written discourse (Bartholomae, 1980; Kroll & Schafer, 1978; Schwalm, 1985; Shaughnessy, 1977a; Tricomi, 1986). The advantage of this approach, Kroll and Schafer explain, is that “instead of viewing errors as pathologies to be eradicated or diseases to be healed, the error-analyst views errors as necessary stages in all language-learning, as the product of intelligent cognitive strategies and therefore as potentially useful indicators of what processes the student is using” (1978, p. 209). And other scholars have convincingly argued that we see the problems of basic writers in terms of different interpretive communities. Lees (1987), for example, has argued that “errors” are socially constructed by the interpretive community of proofreaders. In this view, the problem for BW students is one of not yet belonging to that interpretive community, with its ways of seeing which allow members to construct and eliminate errors. In both these views, basic writers are granted a degree of respect as cognitively mature adults. Their problems are re-imagined as comparable to the problems of social outsiders—foreigners learning a new language, or pledges seeking initiation into a different interpretive community.

These latter views, however, confront the ethical dilemma of requiring native speakers of English to use the conventions of Edited American English to represent their own language. Lees has observed that one of the reasons basic writers have so much trouble with error is that “[i]n learning to identify a familiar form as an error . . . a learner not only moves into an interpretive community but moves out of one as well. . . . To make such a move at all, it appears the learner must give up a system, a set of assumptions, a way of proceeding: one that already works, or seems to” (1987, pp. 226-27). Persuading such writers to make such sacrifices is hard work. Those attempting to justify the teaching of EAE to such students have alternatively argued the status of EAE as a separate, politically neutral language—the English “grapholect”—or argued for the acceptance of the dominance of EAE as an historical *fait accompli* (Epes, 1985; Eskey, 1976). Shaughnessy, for example, argues that “mastery of formal written English [is] the language of public transactions—educational, civic, and professional,” “a claim upon a wider culture” (1977a, pp. 125, 126). But like those who reify the medium of “literacy,” or American culture, this reifies “the language of public transactions” as a static entity to which students must needs submit (Lu, 1991).

D’Eloia, alternatively, acknowledges linguistic change and the need for tolerance of linguistic diversity but defends teaching EAE nonetheless, not to maintain the status quo but for the sake of individual students’ lives:

It will be important that middle class Americans learn to tolerate a broader spectrum of linguistic diversity, at the same time that upwardly aspiring minorities make linguistic accommodations [sic] toward the standard, es-

pecially in writing. While it is true that broad scale linguistic change is the product of social change, it is equally true that linguistic change toward control of the standard facilitates social mobility and social change for individuals. (1975, p. 9)

D'Eloia might well be accused of sidestepping the political controversy associated with issues of teaching EAE here, but such sidestepping is understandable given the kinds of choices that *seem* to be available. Either we abandon BW students to “their own” language conventions and the consequences which currently follow upon use of those conventions, or we accept the unjust dominance of EAE in order to enable “social mobility and social change for individuals.”

But again, this dilemma results from a series of reifications: the student is imagined as belonging entirely to a particular language community itself imagined as completely separate from the language community and practices of academics or “literates,” a community whose own ways are imagined as fixed and with members assumed to be in unconditional possession of those ways. But if, as Bartholomae claims, “the borderlines between our work and [the work of basic writers] are not as clear as we like to assume,” then the problem of basic writing becomes not one of who belongs where, and the terms for granting possession of a fixed territory or membership in a given community, but rather how we and our students can negotiate in the border country to produce different sorts of work at different times and thus, construct different sorts of communities: what conventions or practices might be accepted, by whom, and under what conditions, for a given writing. One BW student, writing about the situation of a writer like himself, describes the problem thus: “He tries different methods to find out which makes society understand his work. He tries to reach this goal, so he can be on the border line of what society wants and what he wants” (quoted in Lees, 1989, p. 144). In response to such students, I don’t think we should attempt to identify “what society wants,” handing him a map of what we think goes where. Nor would I recommend offering such students maps of multiple sets of fixed conventions, each with its appropriate place, as is sometimes suggested (Shaughnessy 1977a, p. 121; D'Eloia, 1975; cf. Lu, 1991; Pratt, 1987; Lees, 1989). As Lees has recently argued, both such responses require that we pretend to a certainty about conventions that the history of writing and the research on reader responses to writing deny, and both thus treat the writer as powerless in the face of such conventions (Lees, 1989, pp. 151-52). Testimony to the effect of such treatment is offered by the BW student quoted above, who, having outlined a “trial and error” method for a writer to use to survive on the “border lines,” warns,

but if the trial and error does not work, and [the student] is in my position of not knowing how to express himself my [sic] using the exceptive method of the society, he would have pity for himself, he would be up late at nights asking God for his help. . . . it would hurt him so bad that he would just don't know what to do. While the writer that is not stuck would have some freedom in the way he wrote his works. (quoted in Lees, 1989, p. 144)

Though such testimony could be used to support pedagogies aiming simply to teach “the exceptive method of the society,” I would argue that the real problem for this student is that he imagines that such a method exists and that to progress on the road to writing freedom, he must somehow acquire it. Lacking that method, he imagines himself as powerless, pitiable, reduced to praying as a last resort. On the other hand, note that he characterizes the “writer that is not stuck”—the sort of writer he would presumably want to become—not as one in possession of such a method but as one with “some freedom in the way he wrote his works.” To convince this writer that he is not powerless, we will have to also grant that he too has “some freedom” and respond to his writing accordingly. Giddens warns that “[a]n agent who does not participate in the dialectic of control, in a minimal fashion, ceases to be an agent” (1979, p. 149). As I have argued elsewhere, to prevent such an eventuality in students requires that we encourage their participation in such a dialectic, recognizing and getting them to recognize their potential as agents in their writing (Horner, 1992). This does not mean we ignore points of difference, problems we or other readers have with their writing. It means rather that both teachers and students need to focus on such points of contact, the borders where different and shifting sets of conventions conflict, and to practice negotiating those differences. This means drawing attention, in class, to conflicting ways particular readers have of responding to particular textual conventions, asking not just what difference a particular writing practice—say, fragmented free modifiers, or ways of citing another text—can make, but to whom, and when, and why it might make such differences (cf. Yelin, 1978; Harste et al, 1984, pp. 27-29, 202-203; Delpit, 1988, pp. 293-296). We can make explicit the perspective we adopt in “proofreading” papers and ask students to compare that perspective with those which make less likely the “discovery” of errors. Rather than responding to their texts in isolation, we can interview students about why they’ve followed the particular notational practices they have, and we can explain what of those practices bothers us and which delight us and the reasons.

Writing: Negotiation in a Borderland

Let me illustrate with an excerpt from a student’s paper. In response

to an assignment, given about midterm, which asked students to discuss what Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* suggested about education, one student in an "intensive writing" class for beginning college students wrote:

In "Complexion" Rodriguez writes, "I consider the great victims of racism to be those who are poor and forced to do menial labor" (117). Through his life, Rodriguez comes to view those minorities who are less fortunate as victims of racism. He goes on to say "He was surprised to meet manual laborers with college diplomas" (133). Rodriguez views education as a means of avoiding this labor associated with racism. When I worked in construction this summer I was also surprised to work with a laborer that had a college degree from the University of Texas. He said that office jobs weren't what he wanted to do, so he was a laborer. I didn't consider him poor or underprivileged, because he had made the choice to stay in a profession that he enjoyed instead of using his education to pursue a job in which he could make more money. On the other hand, I also worked with several guys that were high school dropouts that I would consider poor, because they were working as laborers not by choice, but because their lack of education had limited their career options.

The misspellings, awkward syntax, and unconventional use of quotation marks might well lead us to view this writer as suffering from faulty perception and cognition, or as an alien to the discourse of the academy. His three spellings "victoms," "vicitms," and "laboroers" might persuade us that he is unable to "de-center" his perception of his writing enough to see the letters he has written (as might his silent alterations of Rodriguez's original text in his first quotation). And so we might assign him exercises to improve his skill at perceiving words and letters. His confusion of direct and indirect quotations might persuade us that he is a writer to whom, ironically, the conventions of writing are "foreign" and to whom they must be taught. Or, to lump together these two perspectives, we might label the writer an outsider to the "interpretive community of proofreaders," to whose assumptions, values, goals, and procedures he must be converted.

I would deny neither that the writer in some ways faces just these difficulties nor that the pedagogies suggested as remedies possess a certain utility for students facing such difficulties. However, I would object to the way in which both approaches position teachers as powerless conduits of hegemony and the student as an essentially powerless object on which that hegemony operates, a potential consumer of the products of the culture of high literacy but, like an impoverished nation, with little to contribute in return. We might better respond to this writer by acknowledging to him at the outset the reading of the relationship between the concepts of labor, poverty, and education he has produced and wants to offer. As Lees has recently argued, "The intriguing prospect for a developing writer may

be, in the end, the possibility that someone will listen, that someone will hear what he or she has to say. . . . to seem someone worth listening to” (1989, p. 161). And as Robinson and Stock have argued concerning marginalized high school students, “If we would be literate, and help others to become so, it is a time for thoughtful listening to those voices that come from the margins; it is time for reflective reading of texts that inscribe those voices as *centrally* human ones” (1990, p. 313; my emphasis). Such “thoughtful listening” requires that we position this student as a writer engaged in an attempt to make meaning. To do this would mean that we still attend to “errors” but in terms not of “de-centration” or “conversion” but of the specific forms of reading by particular readers. “Reflective reading” of his text would have to include explaining what might confuse or bother particular readers—most clearly for me in this case, the use of quotation marks to mark the citation to Rodriguez’s statement about manual laborers with college educations. Without identifying his use of quotation marks as violations of some absolute law, I could explain what those marks signal to me and other readers like me and the confusion that results for readers to whom such marks signal such meanings: who, after all, was surprised? Who is Rodriguez talking about if not himself? Of course, in this instance, given the social and institutional status of “my” reading, and given the student’s desire to persuade readers like me to appreciate his response to Rodriguez, he is likely to want to change to “my” ways of notation and spelling in spite of the fact that his own spellings and his marking of the second quotation clearly did not bother or confuse him. What we should be wary of unwittingly encouraging him to do, however, is to alter the reading he offers in obliging such “academic” readers. More than once in asking individual students about error-ridden passages, I have discovered how completely I’ve misinterpreted the student’s meaning, and how my unconscious assumption of the correctness of my own interpretation has stalled the interview. I have found it better, though less immediately efficient, to question the student as to why he or she uses a particular notation or syntax and the meaning he perceives from such notations and syntax (cf. Tricoli, 1986, p. 64). This can often lead to explicit negotiations comparable to those between writers and editors: “Can I get you to see X if I do A or B?” And it can lead to disagreements. My suggestions, however clever and well-intentioned I believe them to be, are not always taken. Instead, they serve as points of departure for exploring options and making decisions. In any case, however, the student remains positioned as having some say and some role to play other than that of apprentice or mimic—some freedom. That this freedom is not absolute, is conditioned in part by the shifting and powerful demands of others, does not render it empty but dynamic. In reinforcing the students’ sense of being in a position to negotiate, we enable them to see writing as a negotiating process

of bargaining as to what might count as what, to whom, for what purposes, under what circumstances.

There are numerous difficulties in attempting thus to position students and teachers. Perhaps most obviously, it directly contradicts common teacher-student relations in which teachers are granted, and are expected to operate from, a position of absolute authority on their subject. As a consequence, students might well be tempted to dismiss such non-absolute “positioning” as mere posturing (Boomer, 1993, pp. 7-10; cf. Delpit, 1988, pp. 286-291). Maintaining the distinction is both vital and an on-going task. Second, such positioning assumes the shifting identity of both teachers and students, an assumption with which few teachers or students are comfortable. Harris has remarked on the extraordinary persuasiveness of appeals to membership in a particular community (1989). Pedagogies denying the validity of such appeals must compete with pedagogies which make them; further, they must posit in place of such appeals a fluid, shifting sense of identity which flies in the face of what Harris calls the “myth of the autonomous essential self” (1989, p. 20). Though Harris claims social theories of reading and writing have helped deconstruct this myth for composition teachers, it remains dominant in much of American culture. Finally, acknowledging to students the indeterminacy of the outcomes of negotiations between readers and writers is to deny what many students presumably want—indeed, what any writer dreams of at least some of the time as an ideal: a sure thing, a proven method, the absence of conflict, contradiction, and tension, the achievement of perfect communication (cf. Lu, 1992). Indeterminacy doesn’t sell, a significant liability in a consumerist society.

In spite of these limitations, models of writing as negotiation and basic writing as a borderland offer significant advantages over previous conceptions of basic writers, basic writing, and the writing classroom. They acknowledge the play of power in language, the shifting nature of language practices, and the agency of both teachers and students. And more importantly, they position every student writer as a writer with “some freedom,” akin to rather than different from other writers in residing “on the border line of what society wants and what he wants.” I have been arguing that basic writers, like all writers, have “some freedom,” and that to act on that freedom is not a matter of sloughing off immaturity, neither does it require students to sell their souls. Students, like all writers, can negotiate as writers for particular positions for particular occasions, vis-a-vis particular readers, if only we can persuade them, and ourselves, that they can.¹

Note

1. Work on this essay was supported by grants from the Drake University Office of the Provost, the Drake University Center for the Humanities, and by the University of Iowa Center for Advanced Studies. For their suggestions and encouragement in response to earlier versions of this essay, I would like to thank Patricia Bizzell, Bruce Campbell, David Foster, Patricia Stock, and Thom Swiss. I wish to acknowledge particularly Min-Zhan Lu's contributions to the conception and revisions of this essay.

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