“authorize[s] readers to raise questions of their own, to revisit past practice, to have different kinds of conversations with students” (15). The essays in this collection give us a motive and a vocabulary for such activities.

San Marcos, Texas


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This collection of essays presents a variety of arguments, many by prominent scholars of basic writing, for whether, how, and why students otherwise designated “basic writers” (and, in one case, those designated “ESL”) might be “mainstreamed” into “regular” composition courses. While all of the essays are new to this collection, several authors rehearse or draw extensively on previously published work. The collection is not a comprehensive gathering of all seminal work on the mainstreaming debate: relevant work by such figures as Peter Dow Adams, David Bartholomae, Tom Fox, Karen Greenberg, Judith Rodby, and Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson, for example, is discussed in many of the collection’s chapters but not included. Nonetheless, the book provides compositionists attempting to better understand what mainstreaming basic writing might mean with a useful introduction to such matters.

Gerri McNenny, the book’s editor, opens with an overview of recent shifts in the political climate and public policies prompting or even forcing many mainstreaming efforts and identifies some of the key issues. Following this overview are seven chapters comprising Part I, “The Controversy Surrounding Mainstreaming: Theory, Politics, and Practice.” These chapters present not simply arguments for and against mainstreaming, but also arguments about such arguments on the basis of analyses of national trends, local institutional histories, and reviews of the scholarly literature. In Edward White’s “Revisiting the Importance of Placement and Basic Studies: Evidence of Success” (a revised version of his 1995 essay “The Importance of Placement”), White reviews statistical evidence from the Institutional Research Office of the California State University and reports from the New Jersey Basic Skills Council on the effects of remedial writing programs on student retention. While cautioning that “[w]e must be careful about generalizing from the California and New Jersey programs” (27), he concludes these do demonstrate success in helping students remain in school. In sharp contrast, Ira Shor, in an extended elaboration of arguments he has made earlier (in “Our Apartheid” and “Illegal Literacy”), denounces basic writing courses as part of a long tradition of using literacy instruction as a means by which to justify and
reproduce economic inequality by failing students and then blaming them for not “meriting” better jobs (34). While admitting that “[n]o one plan for change will work anywhere, everywhere, or all the time” (48) and cautioning, “My criticism of the history and politics of writing instruction is not a criticism of my colleagues, full-time or adjunct” (47), he nonetheless condemns alternatives to mainstreaming as inherently oppressive.

Mary Soliday’s contribution, “Ideologies of Access and the Politics of Agency,” a reprise of some of the arguments she makes in her important book, The Politics of Remediation, points out that the identification of student access with the fate of remedial programs neglects other, more powerful, factors determining students’ educational careers, particularly the “devastating economic privatization of public higher education” (57). Using the recent history of remedial programs at CUNY, she demonstrates how an “ideology of access” has held basic writing programs solely responsible for student performance while, in fact, students have tended to be “held back” because of their need to work in order to pay for mandatory remedial courses and newly imposed tuition charges. In other words, it is the “privatization” of the costs of public education that has significantly impaired student access to and success in higher education. In the next chapter, Terence G. Collins and Kim Lynch critique both David Bartholomae’s “The Tidy House” and Ira Shor’s “Our Apartheid” for what they see as a tendency in these influential articles and in the mainstreaming debate generally to posit a “[conveniently] homogenized basic writing status quo against which mainstreaming is placed as a universally desirable fix” (73). They call for caution and attention to the specifics of local institutional circumstances in judging whether, or how, to “mainstream” students. Using the history of the basic writing program at the University of Minnesota’s General College (where Collins works as Academic Affairs and Curriculum Director), they argue that for that institution’s students, basic writing has created “a best possible realization of the kind of writing course that serves a ‘basic’ or developmental student,” and that mainstreaming courses like those described by Grego and Thompson, Soliday and Gleason, and Greg Glau “have done precisely the same thing,” i.e., “created the best site-specific social and intellectual writing situation possible for [their] students” (emphasis added, 83).

Reporting some of the findings of a longitudinal study conducted on the effects of Georgia Southern University-Statesboro’s basic writing courses, Eleanor Agnew and Margaret McLaughlin, in “Those Crazy Gates and How They Swing: Tracking the System That Tracks African-American Students,” shift the focus of the debate, arguing that those debating mainstreaming need to pay greater attention to the means by which students’ writing is assessed. Noting that one of their institution’s administrators unwittingly described a student’s exit essay he’d failed two days earlier to be “‘wonderful,’ and clearly a passing essay” (87), they warn that too often writing assessments used to place students are unreliable and invalid, allowing evaluators’ prejudicial attitudes toward AAVE to reign freely and thereby
“contribut[ing] to the widely recognized cycle of academic failure and high attrition rates for Black students” (86).

Marti Singer’s “Moving the Margins,” the chapter concluding Part I, provides an instructive, if sobering, tale of the vicissitudes of those writing teachers and program administrators committed to the literacy education of all their students. Singer tells the story of her experience at George State University adjusting and readjusting her professional identity and her composition curriculum over a twenty-year period in response not only to changes in her understanding of composition pedagogy, but also, and more prominently, to changes in students, state mandates, and institutional structures. Working in quick succession, first for an administrative “unit” of a free-standing “Division of Developmental Studies,” then for its successor, the “Division of Learning Support Programs,” and then for the “Department of Learning Support Programs” housed within the university’s College of Arts and Sciences after the “Division of Learning Support Programs” was abolished a few years after its inception, Singer recalls her efforts and those of her colleagues to help students pass a Board of Regents exam required of all students in Georgia’s state-supported colleges and universities, improve placement procedures, develop a “support” course for students in first-year composition, adjust to a variety of students’ and composition instructors’ perspectives on writing, make the switch from a quarter to a semester system, measure the effects of writing curricula on student retention and GPA’s, and train graduate students.

I present this lengthy, though in fact significantly abbreviated, summary of Singer’s story because it provides an important reminder that both courses in “basic writing” and efforts to “mainstream” students formerly designated “basic writers” all too often represent strategies developed and implemented in hurried response to circumstances not chosen by either composition teachers or their students but others—deans and provosts, political appointees, state legislators. And no decisions on whether to “mainstream” occur in an immaterial vacuum. In a chapter later in the book, Mark Wiley observes that there is an unfortunate tendency to categorize participants in the mainstreaming debate in terms of whether they argue for or against mainstreaming, understood in some monolithic, acontextual sense. However, it is more appropriate to understand the debate in terms of whether mainstreaming and basic writing courses are approached as structures operating transhistorically on but not within history or, alternatively, approached historically, as specific strategic constructions.

Framed this way, arguments like Shor’s, despite their apparent grounding in history, can be identified as ahistorical to the extent that they fail to distinguish among or recognize the histories of the specific basic writing (and mainstreaming) courses and programs they review. Instead, in such arguments, the specific historical effects of certain writing programs are redefined as their “function” for a society presumed to operate in a condition of homeostatic stasis behind the backs of its members. The specifics of how individual programs were initiated, developed, or changed are elided, as is the agency of those involved in these programs.
Alternatively, arguments about basic writing and mainstreaming by writers like Adams, Collins and Lynch, Grego and Thompson, Soliday and Gleason, Rodby and Fox, and even Bartholomae (in “The Tidy House,” contrary to Collins and Lynch) approach both basic writing and mainstreaming precisely as strategies that, by definition, must of necessity be questioned for their efficacy at achieving particular, intended goals and for the unintended effects they are likely to produce. Both those calling the strategic value of courses in basic writing into question, as Bartholomae does in “Tidy House,” and those defending specific basic writing programs, as Collins and Lynch do in this volume, are aligned in judging basic writing courses and programs (and, by implication, mainstreaming efforts) in terms of what specific material embodiments of such efforts might have accomplished for specific students and programs, not in terms of the social function basic writing, or for that matter a mainstreaming program, is imagined to fulfill.

While an anti-functionalist, materialist reading of basic writing and mainstreaming might seem to yield perverse curricular bedfellows (Bartholomae and Collins, for example), it can also enable us in our work as composition teachers, scholars, and program administrators to make more precise judgments of composition curricula, programs, theories, and pedagogies. It’s worth recalling that the concepts of “basic writing” and “the basic writer,” like mainstreaming, were “invented” as alternatives to prior institutional arrangements and theoretical constructs—“bonehead” and “remedial” English and their “illiterate” denizens, for example, or “revolving door” admissions policies and “sink or swim” composition curricula superficially similar to mainstreaming. Maintaining a sense of the status of both basic writing courses and mainstreaming efforts as strategies developed and worked to different effects in different circumstances can lessen the temptations to either jump on the mainstreaming bandwagon as the newest (and illogically therefore deemed “best”) approach or defend in knee-jerk fashion current basic writing programs as universally guaranteed remedies for the ills imagined to threaten us and our students.

It is from this perspective that the chapters comprising Part II of the collection, “Alternative Configurations for Basic Writing,” should be read. Four of the five chapters in this section present specific curricular programs, with the fifth chapter consisting of a brief concluding overview of the collection’s arguments by Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald, the book’s associate editor, from the perspective of the histories of basic writing programs at a variety of institutions. Barbara Gleason’s “Returning Adults to the Mainstream: Toward a Curriculum for Diverse Student Writers” describes an introductory writing course she taught for the Center for Worker Education B.A. program within the City College of the City University of New York for “returning” or “nontraditional”—i.e., “adult”—students with widely varying educational backgrounds and writing experience. Based on a course she and Mary Soliday developed for a mainstreaming project (described in their article “From Remediation to Enrichment”) that involves students in exploring their own literacy experiences and conducting ethnographic projects, Gleason argues for the
use of assignments that are sequenced to build on these students’ strengths with oral forms of communication and to give students both quick “success” and increasing intellectual challenge. Conversely, Rosemary Winslow and Monica Mische, in an extension of an earlier article (“The Hero’s Performance”), describe a course at a small, private university for traditional-aged students labeled “at risk” that focuses less on improving students’ writing than on changing student identity through a curriculum based on hero “identity quests.” Viewing their students as “individuals immersed in a mix of institutions in culture and society who did not know which way to turn to respond to daily and multiple conflicts,” Winslow and Mische focus their course on helping their students not only to read and write more complexly for their coursework, but also to determine their educational goals and resolve conflicts interfering with pursuit of those goals (148). The course uses small (fifteen-student) seminar meetings, even smaller (four to five-student) group writing workshops, frequent conferences, and assignments involving students in investigating hero myths, writing “creative” texts in response to paintings, and analyzing the architecture of Washington D.C.-area galleries, memorials, and museums.

In “Mainstreaming and Other Experiments in a Learning Community,” Mark Wiley reports on several related curricular changes at California State University, Long Beach, including the mainstreaming of basic writers, the reduction of the university’s basic writing curriculum from two three-hour courses to one four-hour course, and, more prominently, the inclusion of basic writing students in the school’s “Learning Alliance,” a version of learning communities in which students enroll as cohorts in several courses their first year in addition to working closely with advisers, participating in extra-curricular and community-service activities, and potentially serving in their junior and senior years as peer mentors to other Learning Alliance students. Finally, Trudy Smoke examines her own and other attempts to mainstream ESL students, who, Smoke notes, are as difficult to identify as “basic writing” students and are often as reluctant to take ESL courses as students are to be placed into basic writing.

All four of these chapters tell stories of “success” — increased student retention, improved academic performance, better writing, more satisfied students — tempting readers to take measures similar to those outlined in these chapters. Yet doing so would ignore the specificities of local institutional conditions. For example, Gleason’s course, designed for adult returning students, is probably a poor match for the confused, traditional-aged students for whom Winslow and Mische’s course was designed, and vice versa. It is particularly heartening, therefore, that Wiley and Smoke especially take pains to warn readers against such temptations. (Fitzgerald echoes these warnings in her concluding chapter.) Wiley explicitly refuses to draw any “grand conclusions” from the positive results of the experiments described, warning, “I do not hold up our learning community as ‘the model’ to be replicated,” and advising that “we must consider the structures we have in place on our respective campuses” to determine whether these meet the needs of basic writing students, and the sorts of curricula and pedagogies that
would work best with those students (187, 188). Smoke similarly observes that “we need to look carefully at our own institutions before we decide on the best option for placing ESL writers in composition classes” (209).

As these writers emphasize, it is important that we not lose sight of the strategic and contingent character of these projects. At the same time, it is also true that whatever their genesis, mainstreaming projects, like the inception of basic writing programs, are yielding significant insight into students, writing, the teaching and learning of writing, and academic institutions and institutional practices. The stories Gleason, Winslow and Mische, Wiley, and Smoke tell of the implementation of mainstreaming projects (and the contexts of their implementation), however useful these projects might be for those participating in them, are of particular value for the insights they provide about the heterogeneity of students and, therefore, the limits of categorizing them, the many and often overlooked strengths as well as “needs” students bring to our classrooms, and the challenges of finding ways to draw on those strengths in the design of our own institutions, programs, and courses. Compositionists can draw on these insights whatever the institutional structures with which they individually happen to be working and whatever decisions they happen to be considering regarding mainstreaming.

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NOTES

1 I argue this point more extensively in Chapter Four of Terms of Work. For a general critique of functionalist analyses, see Anthony Giddens’ Central Problems in Social Theory.

2 Of course, a materialist argument can be “rendered” into a functionalist one. Bartholomae’s “Tidy House,” for example, has come to stand for an unqualified call to abolish basic writing, despite (or by neglecting) his statement, “Would I advocate the elimination of courses titled ‘basic writing’ for all postsecondary curricula beginning next fall? No. I fear what would happen to the students who are protected, served in its name” (“Tidy House” 20). I anticipate that many of the chapters in this volume will be read similarly despite the authors’ efforts to disavow such interpretations.

WORKS CITED


