

Back to Basics: How Class Conflict Is Recreating Basic Writing

Jessie Casteel



"Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained." James A. Garfield

Let me begin with a bold declaration: Developmental education is the most crucial educational issue in America today – and I say this not because I am unaware that we have many serious current educational issues, but because this one area has an overwhelming impact on so many others. Providing effective developmental education would contribute to the alleviation of many of our most thorny and urgent social and economic problems. If we fail to maintain a commitment to providing effective developmental education and supporting the needs of developmental students, we will find it difficult, if not impossible, to make progress in addressing many problems to which lack of education is a contributory factor: unemployment, crime, poverty, racial tensions, the unequal distribution of wealth, and citizen disengagement from politics. Unemployment, crime, and poverty are all closely intertwined with educational levels. With developmental education acting as the gatekeeper to a college education, many would be locked into a virtually inescapable lower socioeconomic status if that

gate were to narrow – or worse, slam shut. The unequal distribution of wealth, which has reached such disparity that we are experiencing increasing numbers of protest movements on the subject, is obviously the end result of that same connection between education and socioeconomic status. Citizen disengagement from politics is the natural consequence of being faced with a world in which one cannot take part, but it also arises from our increasingly restrictive and byzantine voting regulations, which target those already alienated by education and economics. Once a feeling of affect is undermined in one area, it is unsurprising that this feeling should diffuse into other arenas. Race relations is also bound up in our treatment of developmental education, because "we have created a competitive, hierarchical higher education system which dispenses privilege on the basis of measures – the GPA and standardized test scores – that put our two largest racial minority groups at a competitive disadvantage" (Astin 1). Unequal schooling at the primary and secondary levels leads inevitably to unequal measures, and therefore to an unequal access to college-level education. Developmental education is our last stop on this railroad, our last chance to even out inequities in the system. Without the support it provides, many would be

thoroughly disenfranchised from all sectors of American life, both to their detriment and that of our society as a whole.

To explain how the connection between a more educated populace and widespread prosperity works, it is only necessary to look back to our relatively recent history. The 1944 G.I. Bill revolutionized American education. Colleges and universities admitted veterans who fell short of admissions criteria, only to find that these individuals "systematically outperformed their selectively admitted classmates" (McCabe and Day 3). Not only were these veterans given access to educational opportunities which were, in many cases, beyond those that they and previous generations of their families had enjoyed, but because of increased supporting programs these under-prepared veterans largely made up for their previous educational lack and excelled in the college and university environment. Increased numbers of postsecondary graduates moved into new opportunities, resulting in more productivity, a larger tax base, and more prosperity in all sectors of society. This great success led to an embracing of the principle of free and universal access to education for the good of all. The civil rights movement opened the doors even further. expanding opportunities to previously underrepresented groups (3).

This last half-century of educational inclusion has revealed both success and failure in our struggle to meet the needs of our students; from the embracing of the principle of free and universal access to education, we have slowly shut that open door more and more. In recent years, developmental education programs have met with waning support, and even outright hostility, from the legislative bodies that once provided them with funding. Colleges with inadequate developmental education programs have experienced the negative side of open

admissions: the revolving door. Retention rates for developmental students is often worryingly low; I know that in my average class of 20 developmental students, an average of five will have dropped or disappeared by the end of the semester, and up to another five will not pass with a grade high enough – C or above – to move on to regular composition. And my statistics are considered good for my department at Houston Community College. Admitting students without sufficient support for their educational needs leads to lower retention rates and requires either lowering academic standards to allow for easier course criteria or failing many students from courses for which they are not prepared. On the other hand, successful developmental education has proven itself capable of answering these challenges, which will become even more vital as our society and economy change.

In the 90's, the field of inquiry into basic writing shifted to reflect a preoccupation with its social mandate, specifically the potential for basic writing to establish a more equal, empowering space for under-represented student populations and more ready, broad access to formal education which might thereby lead to positive, egalitarian change both within and without the sphere of academic discourse. Ten years ago, this focus on the mission of basic writing refined into more specific explorations of different subgroups of basic writers and teaching practices, but most of all, it saw the birth of the explicit debate over mainstreaming, the practice of eliminating basic skills courses and redirecting those students into regular coursework. Proponents of mainstreaming claimed that it would eliminate the ghettoizing effect of developmental education, while opponents maintained that it would only set the most vulnerable of our students up to fail. Sheer numbers, among other concerns, complicate this argument. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, almost all community

colleges and many universities offer developmental education courses to assist students who would likely otherwise be unable to successfully complete a post-secondary degree (National Center for Education Statistics). Some estimates put the number of students of developmental level who would succeed without developmental education courses as low as 10%. Boylan points out,

Education estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that, depending on the state and the type of institution, anywhere between 16% and 40% of each year's incoming students for any given institution are, to some degree, inadequately prepared for college level academic work. ("Making the Case" 3)

Developmental education is of particular concern to community colleges, where the majority of developmental students are now enrolled (McCabe 15). Approximately 60% of students enrolled in two-year institutions across the nation test into developmental education courses. Without official support, the more privileged students may still hire private tutors; the less privileged must founder or struggle through as best they can alone. Therefore, developmental writing classrooms now, more than ever before, reflect fundamental socioeconomic inequalities in our educational system, making questions of a social mandate still vital today. Returning to Boylan,

Contrary to some public opinion, developmental students are not some vandal hoard that has invaded higher education from a hostile foreign country. They are the working poor, the middle class, and occasionally the wealthy classes. They are absolutely not, as one misguided politician called them, 'the welfare mothers of higher education.' ("Developmental Education" 4)

To use this term is to reveal the same encoded racism and classism underlying the original usage; just as welfare recipients were demonized as lazy African-American women undeservedly leeching off of the system in order to further marginalize the actual recipients and dismiss their needs and concerns, the same pejorative term serves the same purpose with developmental education students. However, our current social, political, and economic climate, especially issues of failing funding and legislative priorities, inevitably recasts our approach to developmental education, and to its potentials and pitfalls, and necessitates the search for complex, novel solutions to these concerns within the framework of a pragmatic reexamination of the options still available to educators today.

Demographic and economic forecasts predict a new America in the 21st century. We are shifting increasingly to skilled jobs rather than unskilled, and our most rapidly growing sectors of employment require post-secondary education of their workers; it is increasingly difficult to secure a living wage without at least a bachelor's degree. The number of available blue-collar jobs sinks ever lower, and even jobs that used to require only a high-school diploma now require a bachelor's. In fact, one of my developmental writing students last semester told me that he returned to school because his employer, Church's Chicken, would not allow him to apply to be an assistant manager unless he obtained a college degree. Additionally, technology is evolving rapidly, which continues to raise the competencies required to succeed in our modern workforce. A modicum of computer literacy is expected in most jobs now, for instance. Lack of a higher education is therefore a serious barrier to all but the most low-paying employment. Such jobs are unlikely to provide non-poverty wages, or, for that matter, health insurance, retirement benefits, or job security. We must concentrate on

improving our human infrastructure if we hope to maintain, let alone improve, the quality of life for the most vulnerable members of our society.

However, it is not even only these segments of society that are at stake with the success or failure of developmental education, but society as a whole. Rather than regarding the issue of developmental education as solely an issue for developmental students, or even for the socioeconomically disadvantaged as a group, "we need to understand that we and the society and our democracy have an enormous stake in what happens to these students" (Astin 10). Demographic predictions say that by 2020, we will have twice the elderly population we currently do, and we will have become a "majority minority" society, with much of our population growth consisting of immigrants from developing countries. If we are to support ourselves going forward, we are going to need a skilled, educated workforce capable of sustaining our economy with fewer individuals of working age supporting a retired population than ever before. According to Hodgkinson, we are "entering an era in which youth will be in short supply in America.... In 1950, seventeen workers paid the benefits of each retiree. By 1992, only three workers provided the funds for each retiree and one of the three workers was a minority" (9, 3). By 2020, this is predicted to drop to as little as two workers to support each retiree (3). Of these workers, a great many will have grown up in poverty and lacked for educational opportunities, and even many of the more privileged will still have failed to master basic literacy and problem solving skills (Hodgkinson 10). "Of all factors, poverty correlates the most closely with academic deficiency from kindergarten to college," so it should come as no surprise that lack of developmental education to address educational deficiencies should result in poverty, and thereby in the failing prosperity of our entire system.

The cyclic relationship between educational achievement and socioeconomic status has long been established, and current population trends suggest increased poverty among the growing numbers of under-prepared Americans if we cannot meet their educational needs. Falling wages and increased economic uncertainty among unskilled workers is widening the gap between 'haves' and 'have-nots'" and undermining the ability of our workforce to support our society. (McCabe and Day 5)

If we cannot be moved by the individual betterment of these people's lives, perhaps we should consider that they will soon constitute the few pillars who will be holding up our sky. We need these workers to advance to better jobs, so we need them to have the skills necessary to do so. The more successful we can make them, the stronger we will be as a nation and the better our quality of life will be as a whole. Allowing the growth of a permanent, disenfranchised underclass serves the long-term needs of no one.

It is also important to explore how developmental students come to be where they are in the first place. It is certainly inarguable that all K-12 schools are not created equal. Even the most cursory glance at the distribution of funds between public schools would be enough to explode the myth of equal access to education. To use a local example, no one is going to claim that the caliber of education at Sam Houston High School is equivalent to that of Lamar High School. It is no coincidence that in 2006 Sam Houston High School, with a student body composed of 78.1% living below poverty, had dropout rate 18.3%. In comparison, at Lamar High School, where the student body was composed of 42% of students living below poverty, the dropout rate was 7.3% ("Project Grad" 2). This is to say nothing of the disparity

that exists between public and private high schools; while some public schools struggle to literally keep a roof over their students' heads, cramming them into classrooms at up to sixty students per class, many private schools can afford tiny class sizes and laptops for all their students. It is no great surprise that an overcrowded, underfunded system that operates by standardized testing and prioritizes passing students along at any cost produces students who have more experience with bubbling in a Scantron form than they do with writing. More privileged students, even if they do not flee to private schools, already have a better chance at a higher quality of education at more affluent public schools like Lamar, and can afford to offset any disadvantage by hiring tutors or providing access to supplemental preparatory programs.

Of course, it is also vital to address the fairness of how students become categorized as developmental once they reach the university setting. Agnew and McLaughlin's research supports that the evaluators of the placement essays, which land students in basic writing courses to begin with, grade essays with signifiers of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) particularly harshly. For instance, an essay that includes the more AAVE common phrase 'they be going' would be graded lower than 'they has been going,' even though both display nonstandard verb usage. They call for a review of placement standards, clearer criteria for moving on to first year writing, and an abolition of exit essays. I have to admit that I suspect they are correct that the developmental classification process is arcane and largely unexplained, because the precise evaluation standards are not laid out anywhere in my department, nor are the expectations for moving on to first year writing. I know from simply speaking to other developmental writing professors in my department that we have all

formulated our own ideas about these things independently, and those ideas differ rather wildly; our standards are anything but standardized. I think it is possible that Agnew and McLaughlin are correct that race plays a part in this subjective process, as well. I find it especially suspect that at my institution, the student population of developmental English classes is approximately 4% white, as opposed to around 25% in regular freshman composition classes. Furthermore, the history of developmental writing courses at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, for instance, demonstrates a striking parallel with the history of desegregation. This history is appalling in its blatant racism; I find it especially striking that the same year African-American students were first admitted to ULL was the same year courses in developmental writing were first established and given the pejorative name "remedial" (Greene 71), and that the recent abolition of their developmental writing program has effectively cut the racial diversity of ULL radically, serving as de facto resegregation.

The marginalization of developmental writing instruction also contributes to the marginalization of the students themselves. Developmental writing instructors, just as any instructors, have long believed that there is an inverse correlation between class size and student success. The existing research also suggests that the most successful developmental programs employ the highest percentage of full-time faculty (Gerlaugh et al. 3). Recent research also suggests that overuse of part-time faculty has a negative effect on student retention (3). However, respondents to a recent study on developmental education in community colleges indicates that only 21% of all developmental courses are taught by full-time faculty (3). I know it is common for full-time regular English faculty to avoid teaching developmental courses; my own colleagues often call the experience of teaching such courses too

frustrating or demoralizing, or sometimes simply too boring. More than any other type of course we offer, developmental writing, therefore, is likely to be taught by adjunct instructors. And even among adjuncts, developmental education is considered the least desirable of assignments, so it often attracts only those who could not secure regular composition assignments. Of course. I am not at all suggesting that adjuncts are, by definition, incapable or unmotivated instructors. However, the combination of skyrocketing demand and the stigma – and lower pay resulting from a two-class maximum load versus a three-class maximum for regular composition – of developmental assignments has sometimes led to instructors who are entirely unqualified to teach developmental classes. For example, in the spring semester of 2011, I shared my office hours with another adjunct teaching developmental writing. I was surprised when she asked for my lesson plans and advice, because, as it turned out, though she was conscientiously trying her best, her sole qualification consisted of a Master's degree in theater set design, and she had no idea what or how to teach her assigned courses. Certainly it doesn't help the marginalization of developmental students to likewise marginalize their instructors. How does it make any logical sense to expend the least effort and resources on those who need it the most?

Much of the recent opposition to developmental education comes from cost concerns, although some proponents argue that developmental education accounts for a small fraction of the current expenditures of public colleges (Gerlaugh et al. 2). Critics contend that developmental education diverts human and financial resources from other, and presumably more important, academic priorities and uses public funds to pay a second time for training in academic skills that students should have acquired in high school (Astin 2). Over the last

few years, media reports have indicated a tightening of educational policies in some states, including policies aimed at reducing or eliminating developmental course offerings at public 4-year post-secondary institutions and shifting the responsibility for developmental education to community colleges or private colleges. For example, after a monitoring period of three years, the Board of Regents of the City University of New York (CUNY) approved its new remediation plan in 2002; this plan was aimed at raising admission standards for baccalaureate programs and eliminating most remedial courses from the system's senior colleges, while continuing them in community colleges, immersion courses, and other programs (Hebel 1). Some states have also tightened existing policies, such as limitations on the time that students are permitted to spend in developmental courses and the use of public funds on those courses. In 1999, the California State University system implemented more restrictive time limits on remediation as part of its push to reduce the number of entering students who enrolled in remedial courses to 10 percent by 2007 (Hebel 2). In Massachusetts, "state colleges and universities limited the number of freshmen who could enroll in developmental courses to 10% in 1997, and 5% thereafter" (Weiner 100). As of this year, in Arizona, Colorado, South Carolina, and Utah, "senior colleges expect community colleges to perform all the remedial services; in Florida, only one state university still has authority to offer basic skills instruction" (101). In some states, developmental education programs are even being pushed out of community colleges. Connecticut passed a bill this year that eliminates all developmental courses from public colleges and universities by 2014, allowing only labs or counseling support to fill the void (Young 1).

It is not surprising that we are coming increasingly to this pass. The first Issue Paper in

response to the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Education set the context by casting the "very existence of basic writing as a major reason for American postsecondary education's 'diminished capacity'" (Carter 15). As the Issue Paper explains, "Several institutions of higher education are admitting students who lack adequate preparation for college-level work, thus expending precious resources in remediation" (15). It is quite possible that pressure over these currently scant resources may force us to exclude an even greater number of minority and poor students in order to raise retention rates, as often happens in secondary schools operating under similar pressures. Here in Texas, public schools needing to enhance their statistics for funding reasons have managed to raise their apparent test scores and graduation rates by

dubious means: retaining students, moving at-risk students to special education, or perhaps even 'suggesting' they attain General Education Diplomas (GED) instead. Such moves have not been uncommon in our state as students in special education programs are not required to take and pass TAKS and those who drop out but obtain GEDs within a year will not be counted as 'drop-outs' on the school's performance record. (Carter 2)

However, even arguing that developmental education is necessary *somewhere* is not enough. Even states that do not follow Connecticut's model and eliminate developmental education entirely are tending toward segregating these programs into community colleges. But the argument that developmental courses and programs should be offered solely by community colleges rather than by universities reflects a misapprehension of the practical realities of higher education. If all the university students who needed some form of academic support in

order to succeed were relegated to the community colleges, several unfortunate results are possible. Boylan argues,

If anywhere from 16% to 40% of incoming students were denied developmental courses or services and directed to community colleges and not admitted to universities, many of these institutions would either have to shut their doors or dramatically decrease their courses and services. Developmental students simply represent too large a percentage of many freshman classes for many institutions to eliminate them and still function as a university. ("Making the Case" 4)

Without accepting students in need of at least some developmental courses, many institutions would simply not be able to enroll enough students to fully support themselves at current levels. Furthermore, if all developmental students were relegated only to community colleges, these institutions would, in most cases, be paralyzed by the influx:

Many community college administrators already complain that they cannot provide enough developmental courses and services to meet the needs of students currently enrolled. Having to serve hundreds of additional under-prepared students would, in all likelihood, overwhelm the capacity of many community colleges to provide effective developmental education. (4)

I know my own institution is already choked with an almost unmanageable number of developmental students, to the point that it is difficult to find enough qualified instructors to meet the demand. Therefore, the only way in which students normally served by universities could be adequately served by community colleges instead would necessitate large-scale revision of our higher educational priorities. We

would need to take resources currently assigned to universities and reallocate them to the community colleges, creating a massive dislocation of university resources within state systems and thereby aggravating the funding shortfalls in four-year state universities.

Even the funding dilemma and problem of overwhelming enrollment numbers are not the only issues, however. Proponents of shifting the responsibility for developmental courses to community colleges argue that these students "could later transfer to state institutions once they have mastered basic skills and completed the transfer curriculum. Unfortunately, current research indicates that students who enter community colleges are far less likely to attain a baccalaureate degree than those who enter 4-year institutions" (Grubb 199). This is particularly true for minority students. According to the National Study of Developmental Education, only about 10% of the underprepared minority students entering community colleges intending to transfer to a senior institution actually end up doing so. Forcing those less prepared students who desire a baccalaureate degree to enter first through a community college would most likely reduce the number of baccalaureate graduates in a given state. Boylan, Bonham, and Bliss argue,

It would also have a greater negative impact on the educational attainment of minorities. Although white students are still the majority of those served by most developmental programs, minority students represent a disproportionate share of developmental education clients. Minorities, therefore, would be among those most adversely affected by such a solution. Substantial numbers would either not be admitted or, if admitted, would have no services available to help them overcome the academic effects of prior racism and discrimination. (32)

Developmental education's practical position within the university is intensely complicated today by the frequently failing support of legislators and vanishing funding; localized answers are becoming ever more necessary as educators struggle to deal with these concerns. There are several solutions currently being tested in the field of developmental writing education, such as institutional partnerships, altered course design, revised assessment systems, and increased writing center involvement. Developmental writing programs generally approximate one of five models: the prerequisite model, in which basic writing students take a course before the standard first-year composition course; the stretch model, in which basic writers take the standard first-year course over two semesters rather than one; the studio model, in which the standard course is augmented by additional hours of small-group work; the directed self-placement model, in which students are guided in making their own choice about which writing course in a sequence they would like to take; and the intensive model, in which the basic writing course mirrors the standard course but with additional instructional time or writing activities tailored for basic writers. There are strong advocates for each of these models, all of whom offer compelling arguments for the superiority of their methods. Singer, for instance, suggests instituting co-courses and studio models, establishing a robust writing center, and using placement essays simply to identify students who need extra institutional support rather than actually using them for course placement. Uehling advocates mainstreaming basic writing students via combining basic writing with first year writing into a six-hour cocourse; above all, she stresses maintaining close ties between community colleges and universities to allow for a means of easier educational access. and consistent motivation for students who are non-traditional or struggling, more diversity for

the university, and training grounds for basic writing professionals in the university graduate programs. Her co-course proposal would seem to both provide students with the motivation and validation of a regular college course and the extra instructional support of a basic writing course. The notable thing about all of these models is that they have all produced success in terms of higher student retention and passing rates.

For example, at the University of Arizona, the retention rate for developmental students was only 46%, compared to 81% for regular composition students. Concerned about this disparity, especially given that their developmental courses served a disproportionate number of under-represented minorities and firstgeneration students, they redesigned their developmental course in 2003 to a studio model with only 20-22 students per class and 10-11 students per studio group, and worked to remove any perception of remedial stigma from the course. Not only was the time to degree shortened, retention rates rose to 89% – not only well above where developmental students had been, but even above the rate of students in regular composition courses. Other similar examples raise the possibility that students who pass through strong developmental programs can not only handle regular coursework later in their college careers, but may even be better prepared to do so than their non-developmental counterparts. For instance, The National Study of Developmental Education indicates that, with the help of developmental programs, under-prepared students can pass courses and graduate at rates equal to or greater than those of better prepared students (Boylan, Bonham, and Bliss 27). While more research in this area is certainly called for, this possibility has the potential to redefine how we think about developmental students and developmental education. If we can strengthen our most at-risk students to the level at which

they are our least at-risk, this represents a fundamental social change in education and potentially in the class structure of our entire society.

Here in Texas, we are fortunate enough to have at least some funding support for basic education. In 2011, funds were made available for the Texas course redesign project, which included a number of basic education courses in its scope. Texas Women's University, UT-El Paso, UT-Brownsville, A&M-International University, Texas Southmost College, University of North Texas, North Central Texas College, Richland College, and Grayson College all secured funds from this project to redesign developmental education courses. By and large, these redesigned courses adopted co-course, technology assisted, individualized approaches ("Texas Course Redesign Projects"). In Houston, we are also piloting a new solution: embedding community college developmental courses within 4-year universities. As of the 2011 fall semester, Houston Community College has taken over developmental writing courses at Texas Southern University. Our instructors teach TSU students on the TSU campus in an attempt to make the best of current funding dilemmas; it is our hope that our close partnership will keep our students from feeling closed out of TSU proper while still providing the academic support that they need. New solutions such as these are what we are going to need to face the constraints opponents of developmental education have imposed on the system.

I will make one more bold statement. The success of these varied solutions attempted in different institutions certainly suggests that localized answers are possible, but is also highly suggestive of the fact that it is more important that we attempt to meet the needs of our developmental students through some concentration of support and attention than

precisely what form that attempt assumes. I think that a comparison of these myriad methods reveals that the crucial factor in their success or failure lies in a single, simple element: the amount of personal instructional attention available. The one common factor to all of our promising solutions is simply that. And so I assert that the solution we choose is not important, so long as it is centered on the availability of personal attention, whether it is from instructors, tutors, writing center professionals, or counselors. This is an element that our overcrowded public primary schools struggle and often fail to provide; it is no wonder that this lack is such a pressing need by the time students reach us.

Many researchers argue that developmental education is crucial for students lacking the required skills to succeed in higher education and provides the opportunity for those students to improve their own lives and the lives of their families. Without these programs, many people would never have the chance to realize their dreams of graduating from college or simply getting a better job. If current practices which disregard the needs of most developmental students through selective admissions, "by tracking them into community colleges, by hiring outsiders to teach them, and by continuing to support grading and norm-based testing practices in the lower schools that almost guarantee that large proportions of them will be discouraged from even considering further education beyond high school" continue (Astin 5), our current collective social and economic health can only deteriorate further. But, as Astin asks, "what civic interest is served by concentrating the least well-prepared students and the least resources in a separate set of institutions? How can such an arrangement be rationalized in terms of the larger interest of the community and the society?" (9). How many times must we prove that 'separate but equal' achieves separation, but never serves

the cause of equality? I would certainly like to believe that the sheer growing numbers of developmental students could shape the university into a more diverse, egalitarian space that serves the needs of the whole community, rather than only the privileged. I *do* believe that developmental writing has the potential to give disempowered students more social mobility and the confidence and voice to break into discourses that attempt to exclude them.



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