

Where We Are

Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due: Mainstreaming at California State University, Chico

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Students Teach

It was 1986. I was just out of graduate school. I had firm ideas about equity, fairness, justice. But I essentially knew very little about institutions, and actually not that much about composition either. I had good instincts about students, especially ones that didn't fit into university well, because I was one. In my first semester of teaching in the fall of 1986, I taught English 16, "Intensive Learning Experience." It was for students who, according to the official documents of the day, "exhibited multiple skill deficiencies." This diagnosis was determined by the English Placement Test that separated out students in the lowest quartile for this course. Students called it "double bonehead," because it was two courses below the credit bearing first year composition course.

I taught English 16 like a regular class because I didn't know how to teach it any other way. Basically, we read articles that were interesting and that I guessed were relevant to students. Then I asked them to write about what they thought about the article or what it could inspire them to write. I responded to their writing as usual, with questions about what they wanted to do with the piece, which they found puzzling ("Hand it in? Get a grade?"). I didn't really see many multiple skill deficiencies. They seemed a lot like the students I taught in graduate school except they were smarter about race and culture because they were culturally diverse. One of the students, Luz, got my attention. She was a little edgier about the position of the class than the others, wondering why she wasn't receiving credit, why the placement test was so weird, why we were doing the same thing as her roommates in regular first year writing. She had stood in line, taken mandatory tests, been put into courses she didn't sign up for. She had good questions.

Another semester, I thought I found a student with actual multiple skill deficiencies. His name was Erdis and he would not write more than four sentences at a time. He didn't really say much either. I tried to connect with him, but he clearly wasn't that interested. About halfway through the semester, I was reading the newsletter from the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and enjoying this essay about what it was like to be African American on Chico's

mostly white campus. When I got to the bottom of the essay, the author's name was Erdis. He was published and could write just fine.

Students taught me another time a couple of years later. A graduate student of mine teaching the "single bonehead" class (forgive me, but that's what the students called it) fielded the same complaints about the course as Luz. She advised her students to write letters and asked me where to send them. I advised them to send them to the Chancellor's Office of the California State University System. A couple weeks later, my Dean called me in and said that while he appreciated student activism, the bureaucrats at the Chancellor's office got a little offended and told my Dean to lasso me. Of course, the letters were effective; they critiqued the placement test and the whole BW system. Apparently, they could write, too.

Institutions Resist

When Judith Rodby and Thia Wolf joined the department in 1989, things began to move. In the early 1990s, Rodby took my position as Basic Writing coordinator when I became the WPA. She experienced the same commentary from students about the lack of credit, the arbitrary nature of the placement test, and the fact that the curriculum was as rigorous as regular first year composition. Though both colleagues helped with thinking through the problems with basic writing, Judith Rodby took the lead. She was particularly brilliant at showing the nonsensical institutional reasoning that justifies basic writing, as in this passage from her 1996 article, "What It's For and What It's Worth":

. . . the no-credit arrangement was continually naturalized through a series of circular moves: We were told that remedial courses cannot receive credit because they are remedial and the university does not give credit for remedial courses; we were also told that our campus cannot give credit for those courses because we only offer one semester of freshman writing for credit, and so those courses must be classified as remedial. (108)

She was also prone to saying things such as, "the definition of basic writer is someone who is in a basic writing class. If you don't have a basic writing class, you don't have basic writers." Rodby and David Bartholomae, in separate pieces, argued that basic writing is an institutional structure that, in Bartholomae's words:

. . . 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, way back then in the 1970s. We have constructed a course to teach and enact a

rhetoric of exclusion and made it the center of a curriculum designed to hide or erase cultural difference, all the while carving out and preserving an “area” in English within which we can do our work. (18)

Our basic writing program was populated by students whose families spoke another language at home, were students of color, and were first-generation college students, illustrating Bartholomae’s point. This fact also made changing the system more urgent.

Persistence Rewards

From the beginning the motive for mainstreaming basic writing at Chico was equity and fairness. Institutions, as I’ve argued elsewhere, are designed to maintain homogeneity (Fox, “Standards”). Changing it was no small effort and was met with resistance on our campus, in our university system, and from colleagues in the field.

Once mainstreaming was established, its success was undeniable. Students still had to take the CSU system’s placement test (and pay for it), but we ignored the results. Students who “failed” the test did as well in the first year composition course as those who “passed.” We expanded our adjunct workshops (originally designed to support basic writing with extra instruction) to all students (for more detailed histories of mainstreaming at Chico, see Rodby and Fox “Basic Work” and Fox “Basic Writing”).

The basic values of equity and fairness remain central to the writing program at Chico, in the capable hands of faculty in rhetoric and composition hired in the last decade. The connection with the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) remains strong and has resulted in another radical innovation, the “jumbo.” Kim Jaxon led the effort to draw upon the collegiality among students in Chico’s excellent EOP Summer Bridge program by creating a large enrollment composition class (around 100 students) that meets two times per week in a large room and one time per week in a workshop of 9-10 students. Because the students are already familiar with each other socially, they are lively, engaged, and supportive of each other’s success.

In the fall of 2018, the English Placement Test was eliminated as a requirement for California State University system, in part because of mainstreaming and similar programs at CSU campuses and in the state community college system. This is consequential change and, if accompanied by thoughtful pedagogy and curricula in writing programs could significantly increase access.

Works Cited

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