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The Persistence of Institutional Memory: Genre Uptake and Program Reform

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> If we fail to recognize how much the use of a technique, however simple, has displaced, translated, modified, or inflected the original intention, it is simply because we have *changed the end in changing the means.*
>
> —Bruno Latour
> "Morality and Technology: The Ends of the Means" (252)

Contemporary theories of genre, like those guiding the research in Coe et al.'s anthology, *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre*, can offer much to writing program administrators. For these theories teach us that institutionally entrenched genres have a way of surreptitiously reconstituting social relations that the readers and writers who take them up might otherwise reject (see especially Freadman "Uptake" and Paré "Ideology"). Jeanne Gunner's request that WPAs think of their writing programs as a "social genre" operates with similar assumptions. For Gunner, genres' "recognizability" can be extended to recurrent social formations of people and activities; that is, WPAs and students and teachers and administrators know a first-year writing program when they see one (11). But Gunner's aim is to problematize that "knowing" as the usually unconscious exercise of "culturally sanctioned assumptions," and to ask WPAs to be reflective about "the social institution that writing programs materially constitute" (7-9).

One important subject for such reflection is the fact that writing programs are, like most large social organizations, materially (re)constituted in the everyday uptakes of recurrent textual forms. It is by and through quite literal systems of genres, after all, that the "usual administrative tasks" of "testing, placement, grade dispute adjudication, TA preparation, faculty

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development, evaluation, curricular development, assessment, and so on" get done (Gunner 10). As we know, these genre systems' "automatic, ritual unfolding makes them appear normal, even inevitable" (Paré 59); through such ritualized uptakes, Anis Bawarshi notes, readers and writers mobilize the "ideological interstices that configure, normalize, and activate relations and meanings within and between systems of genres" (653). Given that so much of the work of WPAs is necessarily done with institutional genres, it is worth considering whether the tacit social relations that genres reflect and produce have something to do with the "climate of disappointment" Laura Micciche describes as pervading WPA scholarship, particularly where it addresses the work of program reform (432). For in reading about this work, we need not look long nor particularly hard to find stories of frustration, thwarted plans, and unanticipated consequences: missions unaccomplished, data co-opted, initiatives thwarted, reforms foundered, and such successes as we can claim are often deeply qualified, if not pyrrhic.

As Anthony Giddens has written, "the escape of human history from human intentions, and the return of the consequences of that escape as causal influences on human action, is a chronic feature of social life" (7). The story that follows shortly (although still in the "qualified success" subgenre, to be sure) will move some administrative genres into center stage to try to explain why "qualified" habitually marks WPA successes, and to show how the unanticipated consequences of genre uptake help ensure that such successes continue to be "qualified" ones. A theory of genre that could, as Giddens might say, "de-routinise" the textual forms in which our work is constituted and enacted might also make us more aware of the other forces we take up when we take up genres and might even make some consequences more anticipatable.

I'll very briefly offer an example, one that also serves to introduce a term I'll be referring to later. "Directed Self-Placement" (or DSP) is a composition course enrollment alternative to placement testing in which first-year students, usually equipped with materials that invite them to consider their prior reading and writing habits and experiences and outlines of the kinds of writing coursework available at their institution, place *themselves*. In *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*, Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles anthologize a compelling series of arguments for DSP, which they see as creating "a more direct relationship between students and writing curricula" (51). As they put it, such a move "peels away an entire complex of concerns and activities—an entire industry, really—that discourages us from attending to the only really important variables: our students and our curriculum" (51).

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Royer and Gilles's own contribution to this anthology is particularly interesting for its concern with a genre local to Grand Valley State University—specifically, the "slips of paper" that WPAs used to place in students' admissions portfolios to announce their placement into this or that first-year writing course (slips of paper that, in the hands of students angry about their placement, positioned administrators to defend the student's placement with a certainty they didn't feel (65-6)). DSP obviated these "slips" by assuming that students can be "thoughtful about their own experiences and abilities and act responsibly in their own best interests" (64). That "slip of paper," for Royer and Gilles, was a material embodiment of their institution's presumptions about its students and the reliability of its assessment mechanism. In their telling, the disappearance of this local genre signified a larger shift in the work of that particular writing program—and a telling one at that, since a "slip" could scarcely accommodate the ways in which GVSU students are now asked to work out their own assessment of need for writing instruction. The point I take from Royer's and Gilles's experience is that, inasmuch as their daily uptakes and institutional imbrications permit time and space to be reflective about them, WPAs should think carefully about the genres through which their administration is enacted and by which it is conditioned. For if genre conventions organize social relations among students, administrators, and faculty, changes in such conventions can be signals of, and possibly provocations for, changes in social relations.

WPAs know very well that course names and numbers matter; job titles and signature blocks matter; program and job descriptions matter; and that, as Susan Wyche warns, "once constructed…these labels exert a social grip that makes transformation difficult" (93-4). Experience has also taught them to be wary about the ways in which cultural nostalgia "creat[es] and rationaliz[es] institutional inertia" (Rodby 108). Since the conventions of genre systems are both the operational context in which names (and misnomers) circulate, as well as the material embodiments of institutional ideologies, they are thus important sites for our critical attention. As a case in point, the cautionary tale that follows describes one writing program's rationale for and attempt at mainstreaming basic writers, and the consequences of its decidedly unwary uptake of the very genre system the reform was targeting.

Taking Up Basic Writing Reform at UWM

Each fall, about 5500 students entering the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee take the English Placement Test (EPT), the invisible hand of

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the University of Wisconsin System's academic literacy training. UWM's First-Year Writing Program (FYWP) has—along with the rest of the UW System—relied on this test to sort cohorts of first-year students since 1977, ample time for it to become a fixture complete with people who depend on it for their livelihoods, spaces devoted to its distribution, proctoring, and assessment, and institutional dependence on anticipated revenue streams generated by testing fees and the hundreds of students it tracks into non-credit remedial courses. All this activity is marked, typically, by a rhetoric of inevitability. Here, the UW System's "Office of Testing and Evaluation Services" website describes the work of a committee known as the "College Writing Association," which helped develop the EPT in "the early 1970's":

> The Association decided…that one of its immediate tasks was the construction of a placement test whose content and standards would suit the particular needs of the University of Wisconsin System and would be completely determined by practicing classroom teachers of composition. This test would have as its major purpose the identification of those students who need immediate remedial help and, at the other end of the scale, those students who could justifiably be placed into advanced courses. ("Background of the Test")

Student "need" for remediation (like the justification for "advanced" placement) precedes and is identified by the test—rather than being constructed by it—much like the scale on which their "need" gradates into the abilities of those designated "advanced," whose placement is the justice they are due.

And how does the EPT go about assessing this need? Among the "Sample Items" offered on this webpage are "English Usage Items," in which students are asked to identify which underlined section in a sentence contains the "deviation from standard written American English," e.g.:

While inspecting the ranks, the officer seen that the new recruit *had laid his rifle .*
_A. B. C.

in the mud and gotten it dirty. No error.
D E.

The test also features "Sentence Correction Items," which ask "students to select the most effective expression from among five choices," for example:

In the smaller towns of Wisconsin*, where one can quickly walk* to the greening hills of Spring.

A. , where one can quickly walk
B. where one can quickly walk

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C. , where one can quickly walk,
D. one can quickly walk
E. one can, quickly walk

("Sample Items")

To take the second example on its face, if we assume that this author has completed his or her sentence, then the answer is "D." (Of course, making that decision is also to change the intention of the sentence, which some test-takers might be reluctant to do.) More to the point, answering the question means theorizing its author's intentions, which opens up rather than closes down the range of possibilities of which "expression" is most "effective." For example, does the author intend to continue the sentence, and is the error that there is information to be supplied? If so, then the answer is obviously "A." Conceivably, this statement might even be a response to a question, *e.g.,* "Where's a good place to take walks?"—in which case there is no error at all.[1] Like other versions of this ubiquitous genre, the standardized EPT is capable only of assessing its subjects' ability to make decisions about sentences divorced from any context (other than the answering of test questions and perhaps imagining the intentions of test-designers).

This is by no means a novel critique of standardized tests (see, e.g., White 34). My point in critiquing this particular one is to contextualize a phenomenon to which I will return below: the depth to which this genre's construction of student "need" permeates the ways in which this program conceived of administering students' writing. For while it is certainly questionable what the EPT tests, there is no question that its "findings" have serious consequences for those it places. Table 1 shows how the EPT placed 5603 first-year students entering UWM in the Fall of 2005, with the attrition and failure rates awaiting them there.

Not only do failure and attrition rates increase the lower in the sequence students are "placed," the two rates actually *diverge* as placement drops; that is, it becomes less and less likely that a student who remains enrolled and completes the course will pass. The disparate impact on the bottom two-fifths of these first-year classes (and those "fifths" and that "bottom" are EPT-constructed, of course) was the more poignant and pointless because of several years' worth of innovations on the "095" side of the divide, innovations that had steadily brought the curriculum of English 095 more and more closely in line with the recursive, assignment-sequence-driven portfolio required of students placed in English 101. Mirroring the national trends Peter Dow Adams notes in "Reconsidering Basic Writing," these innovations' steady erasure of the pedagogical and curricular differences between

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these two "levels," meant that by 2002, credit (and a slightly smaller class-size) was really the only difference[2] between the two courses (23-24).

Composition Sequence Placement of Fall 2005 Freshman Class by EPT Score	Percentage of Class "Placed"		Mean Rate of Attrition Fall 02 to Spring 04	Mean Rate of Failure Fall 02 to Spring 04
Exempt from FYWP	23.8%		—	—
English 102 "College Writing and Research" 3 Graduation Credits	22.7%		8.5%	8.75%
English 101 "Introduction to College Writing" 3 Graduation Credits	34.1%		8.75%	14.25%
English 095 "Fundamentals of Composition" 0 Graduation Credits	16.9%		11.9%	20%
English 090 "Basic Writing" 0 Graduation Credits	2.4%		22.45%	39.45%

Table 1. Comparative Failure and Attrition Rates in FYC Courses by EPT Placement Score

Although students placed into English 095 performed very differently from peers directed to English 101, mounting anecdotal evidence from teachers familiar with the curriculum of both courses indicated that they saw little difference in the preparedness and skills of students placed into either course.[3] As the learning outcomes and pedagogies of these courses converged, an unanticipated consequence emerged, as then-WPA Bruce Horner explained at a May 5th, 2006 meeting of the L&S Chairs and Directors. As he explained, the rationale for some years had been:

> That if we can't give these students graduation credit, the least we can do is give them the experience of a college-level course. Further, we've made a concerted effort to assign our most highly dedicated and informed instructors to teach these courses. One result has been that while students placed into

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> these 90-level courses appreciate the respect the demanding curriculum pays them, they resent not earning graduation credit for what they rightly perceive to be college-level work. ("Re-Placing" 1)

The curricular renovation of sub-100 level classes and unofficial re-placement of students tracked there by the EPT together produced evidence that verified what program administrators had long suspected: the consequences of placing students in English 095 were unwarranted by the EPT's inability to make such a distinction in the first place.

A Mainstreaming Pilot and its Assessment

Since 1993, Rodby & Fox, Soliday & Gleason, and others have confirmed the unsettling conclusions Adams drew from nearly ten years' worth of pass and articulation rates in the first-year writing program at Essex Community College. After closely reviewing the rates in which students placed in lower-level basic writing courses went on to take—let alone pass—"college level writing courses" (29-33), it appeared that "students' chances of succeeding in the writing program [were] actually reduced by taking basic writing courses" (33). To test whether these findings could be replicated at UWM, program administrators asked the College of Letters & Science for permission to pilot a study to:

> Determine whether students ordinarily placed in English 095 would be better served by enrolling in English 101 and a one-credit supplementary course, English 105 ("Editing College Writing") to provide necessary assistance to ensure their academic success in English 101. English 105 is a one-credit course that focuses on revising, editing, and proofreading academic writing. (Horner and Bott 1)

The proposed small-group workshop supplements a mainstream composition course is modeled on Grego and Thompson's "Writing Studio" course at the University of South Carolina (66-73). Much excellent work has already been done on studios (see also Tassoni & Lewiecki and the Grego & Thompson volume *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces*), and so I need not deal thoroughly with them here. Rather, I wish to note that even while challenging the EPT's ability to distinguish between these two groups of students, this proposal also presumes that students designed "remedial" by the EPT would need something "supplementary to" English 101 in order to pass it. This surreptitious persistence of the designation "095" shows the extent to which the genre of the placement exam continued to shape our operating assumptions about our students' "needs."

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This conceptual baggage did not, however, prevent us from reconfirming the findings of other mainstreaming studies. During the four semesters of the pilot study, 4347 students designated "ready" for English 101 by the EPT passed English 101 at a rate of 81%, and were retained at a rate of 93%. Meanwhile, 213 students whose EPT scores designated them as "need[ing] immediate remedial help" in the form of English 095 volunteered for the English 101/English 105 alternative. 75% passed and 96% were retained. Another 48 students whose EPT scores tracked them into English 090 volunteered for 101/105 after completing English 095; they passed at a rate of 58% and were retained at a rate of 93%.[4]

It was therefore clear that the EPT could *not* identify with any accuracy which students "needed immediate remedial help," since students who "could justifiably be placed in advanced courses" were only slightly more likely to pass English 101 ("Contents of the English Placement Test"). Students constructed as especially "at-risk"—that is, as needing *two* semesters of remediation prior to credit-bearing composition courses—passed English 101 portfolio review at 58.3%, almost precisely the same rate (-1.5%) as this "group" of students (as constructed by the EPT, anyway) passed English 101 *after* taking English 095, confirming our suspicions that the net effect of English 095, whatever its intention, was to "slow…progress toward earning a degree" (Horner and Bott 3).[5]

As we began to translate our data into language suitable for presentation at the 2005 CCCC and the 2006 CWPA, my colleagues and I were at pains to argue that the volunteers for this pilot study were not unrepresentative—on grounds of being somehow more "motivated" or in some sense "better students" than those who elected to remain in English 095. We argued against essentializing what it means to "volunteer": there could be no accounting for parental involvement, discrepancies in advisors' knowledge about or enthusiasm for this option, the likelihood that this or that student lives in a home in which official mail is routinely opened or the validity of standardized testing is questioned. It was, thus, not at all clear that only the best and brightest of the students designated "095" participated in this course, nor was it fair to say that they were being compared to four cohorts of 095 students from whom the cream had already been skimmed.

Ironically, the obligation we felt to rationalize a valid sample blinded us to the fact that this student population *was* unrepresentative; in fact, for two reasons, they were even more "at-risk" than the general L&S population (at least as conventionally constructed by UWM). First, about a third of the total participants were part of the "Academic Opportunity Center," a provisional-admittance program that provides "access to UWM for students who have academic potential but whose prior education may not

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have adequately prepared them for college." A third of our cohort, thus, consisted of students designated both "in need of" 095 and more generally under-prepared for work at UWM. Second, as UWM's Black & Gold Commission found, "UWM continues to lose over 25% of its entering freshmen by the second year. The percentage of new freshmen not returning rises to over 35% for new Latino freshmen and 45% for new African-American…students" (2). Table 2 shows the distribution of L&S's population by ethnic heritage during the four semesters the pilot was underway, with the corresponding percentages among the pilot cohorts.

Fall 2004 – Spring 2006 Undergraduates Self-Identifying as:	%* of L&S Mean Undergraduate Population (6980):	%* of L&S Pilot Volunteers (271):
American Indian	0.7%	2.6%
Asian	2.3%	1.5%
Southeast Asian	2.0%	8.9%
Hispanic	3.4%	7.4%
Black	5.8%	19.6%
White	83.7%	58.7%

Table 2. Comparative Distribution of Ethnic Heritage: Pilot Cohorts/L&S Population. *Numbers do not add to 100% because of the ~2.2% who decline to self-identify.

That this population of students piloting our alternative to basic writing contained, respectively, 2 and 4 times the percentages of populations the Black & Gold Commission designates as "at-risk" suggests that this designation is somewhat less essential to them, and rather more essential to the places they are tracked.

Taking Up Institutional Genres

We thus had ample evidence to challenge the EPT's construction of student "need." But as the four semesters of the pilot ran out, institutional preparation for Fall 2006 proceeded apace. All over campus—and in blameless ignorance of our pilot students' demonstration that they did not need the course—English 095 began to be reconstituted in a vast network of administrative genres: course catalogues, teaching schedules, administrative hires and job descriptions, the *Student Guide to the First-Year Writing Program*, advising bulletins, and EPT cut scores. For English 095 was, of course, still *there*: as lines of text the publisher of the UWM Course Catalogue

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was busy formatting, as something that was designated to happen in certain hours in certain classrooms, as a course certain teachers had requested to teach, as a "place" into which the first cohorts of EPT-test-takers were already being sorted, and as a source of anticipated revenue already being earmarked and spent. While no one of these genres was the specific site of institutional memory, their collective effect was to dilute the reform of the program and to perpetuate the EPT's construction of our students, a construction that had penetrated institutional culture to an extent we neither anticipated nor were able to fully resist.

This started to happen as early as March 2005. In my capacity as then-Coordinator of English 105, I met with the Director of Enrollment Services and the administrator of the Testing Center, who were—to say the least—nonplussed at our list of objections to the EPT. As they explained, *they* didn't set the cutoff scores for composition placement; *we* did. They had been taking the FYWP's annual silence on the issue to signify our contentment with the status quo. As I wrote to update Horner and Bott afterward:

> We have a great deal more latitude with the EPT than we thought. That is, individual colleges in the UW system can (and do) set their *own* cut-off scores for different sections. We could, for example, pull several years' of raw EPT scores for 095; if a performance-pattern does emerge, we could use that data to lower the eligibility score for 101. A more dramatic version of this might involve lowering the eligibility score for 095 sufficiently to essentially erase 090. ("Meeting Minutes")

Armed with this information, we decided at our next meeting to "investigate the feasibility of adjusting EPT cut scores so that students who would normally place into 095 will place into 101" (Bott, "Minutes"), and this turned out to be relatively easy to do. As I gloated at the WPA conference in Chattanooga a few months later, "we didn't get rid of English 090; we just made it impossible to test into it, effectively moving about 1000 students from 095 into English 101/105. That is, we changed not the sequence of the courses, or the institution of standardized testing itself, but merely the official interpretation of what these scores meant" (Dryer, "Alternative").

You have no doubt spotted the contradiction: while reclaiming the power to tweak *how* the EPT placed students, we lost sight of the larger problem with using the EPT to place students at all. Nowhere in either of these meeting minutes nor in that breathless conference paper is there any attempt to preserve the variable of student *choice.* Which is a very curious thing, since our data was based on four cohorts of students who *did* choose

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for themselves whether they "needed" 095 or not. Or, rather than being curious, it is in retrospect an entirely predictable consequence of genre uptake: we "took up" the genre of the standardized test as our means of institutional reform, but in doing so, we also took up ways of talking and writing about ends that effaced the whole question of students' choice—foregrounding the "studio" aspect of our reform at the cost of effacing its "DSP" aspect.

This is not to say that what became known as the "require vs. recommend" issue was never contested, as indicated in Horner's email to the two Associate Deans for L&S, the Director of the Writing Center, and the incoming Director of Composition indicates:

> These changes are a result of findings from teh [sic] pilot study to date indicating that there is no significant difference in performance between students who place into English 095 and those who place into English 101. Briefly, we're imagining shifting almost all 095 students into 101, with provisions for them and their fellow 101 students to enroll in sections of the one-credit 105 course, and reassigning students now in English 90 into English 095 (effectively making 095 into 090). This would be done by adjusting the EPT cutoff scores to redirect students from the courses in which the current cutoffs place them. ("Changes")

This sense that students might self-select 105 ("provisions for them and their fellow 101 students to enroll" as opposed to "being enroll*ed*") is also evident in the handout the WPA team drafted to guide this meeting. Figure 1 shows the "conclusions" section of this handout, which appeared before analysis of the data described above.

The WPA team argued that the evidence sufficiently demonstrated that: a) students designated "095" by the EPT could pass 101, and b) to enforce such placement, given the stakes, would be not only arbitrary but unjust. We faced the counterargument that the evidence did *not* sufficiently demonstrate that students designated "095" could pass 101 without 105, an argument tacitly supported by what was couched as the "prohibitively difficult" tasks of administering a class that was "recommended." It would be, so the arguments went, too difficult to staff, to find rooms for, to train teachers for who might not know whether they were needed until the last moment prior to the semester, to reserve rooms for that might have been used for different classes that *were* required, and so on. Besieged by these arguments—arguments that demonstrated in sum that the institution was not prepared to accommodate anything approaching DSP—we emerged from the meeting with edits to our proposal, as shown in Figure 2.

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Accordingly, we recommend that the EPT cut scores be reconfigured for the following placement of students in the First-Year Composition Sequence:

ENGL Standard Score	**Placement Code**	**Course Placement**
150-290	1	095
291-380	2	101 (105 recommended)
381-460	2	101
461-520	3	102
521-850	4	GER Satisfied

Consequences of New Cut Scores

- Students who previously placed into English 090 will now place into English 095.
- Students who previously placed into English 095 will now place into English 101.
- The Testing Center will send the names of students who score between 291 and 380 to the FYC Director, who will send those students letters recommending that they also enroll in English 105.

Fig. 1. Detail from Handout for EPT Adjustment Meeting, 03/09/06

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that this tactic accomplished two important things—it relocated several hundred students out of difficult, non-credit-bearing courses where previous populations faced double the fail rates and triple the attrition rates of those rewarded with credit-bearing placement and halved the time spent being "remediated" of several dozen others. However, it could not avoid coding these students as "different" in some way, locked into taking another course that someone else has decided that they "need"—despite the fact that the our findings were based on cohorts of students who had determined a measure of their own "need" for writing instruction.

It is clear that the genre system of the standardized placement test had long since accreted around itself a whole web of rationalizing discourses; those "logistical" objections raised at that meeting were surface manifestations of its construction of certain writers as "basic." (We arrived, that is, at

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461-520	3	102
521-850	4	GER Satisfied

Consequences of New Cut Scores

- Students who previously placed into English 090 will now place into English 095.
- Students who previously placed into English 095 will now place into English 101 *and 105*.
- The Testing Center will send the names of students who score between 291 and 380 to the FYC Director, who will send those students letters ~~recommending~~ *informing them* that they *must* also enroll in English 105.

Fig. 2. Detail from Revised Handout for EPT Adjustment Meeting, 03/09/06

the same realization as Judith Rodby did a decade ago—only now with the terms reversed: "[placement testing] was, more than anything else, a function of the institution, a category that worked primarily to promote other institutional functions, such as [basic writing]" (108).) Our uptake of the EPT as a mechanism of reform meant taking up the same nexus of institutional relationships in which it existed—one predicated on the assumption that students are unable to assess their own needs for writing instruction.

Even the welcome announcement in which we learned that the Provost had authorized our reform relied on this assumption. The Provost, wrote the Associate Vice-Chancellor, was persuaded that the effects of adjusting the EPT for the next term would "meet exactly the goals of 'Access to Success' [an initiative to increase matriculation and retention of historically

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underserved populations], namely, enabling students to complete remedial work and get into college level courses as soon as feasible" (Williams "Change"). Our data, Williams reported, persuaded university administration that "090 is unnecessary"; "that current 095 placements are also unnecessary"; and that "this change is clearly one that is advantageous for students" ("Change").

Upper administration made the right decision; moreover, they pressed for immediate action despite significant revenue loss from discontinued sections of English 095. Yet as the goals of "Access to Success" are here defined (for "students to complete remedial work and get into college level courses as soon as feasible") the invocation of "remedial" effaces much of what the pilot demonstrated: that these students did not require "remediation"—not as defined by the work they produced.

The local genre of the Course Action Request (the official document through which courses at UWM are renamed, become prerequisites, enter or leave general-education requirements, and so on), cemented this construction for posterity. The "Reason for Action" it provides the Faculty Senate reads:

> In an effort to streamline completion of the English Competency Requirement, the Department has eliminated English 090. Students who need remedial work will being [sic] in 095 and then move into 101/105. A pilot study has shown this sequencing to be as or more successful than the old 090, 095, 101, 102 requirements. (Jo)

To be sure, the CAR is almost as tightly constrained as a haiku (it limits course descriptions, for example, to "25 or fewer words"). As such, a more detailed Reason for Action—one that did justice to the complexity and significance of our findings—was unlikely. Yet this convention reflects notions about the brevity with which objectives for a postsecondary class ought to be described, notions that remain widespread in part because they are maintained *by* the persistence of such conventions. And it was this convention that enabled startling (to us) assumptions to enter, as it were, "naturally": a) that the purpose of our pilot was to "streamline" students' passage through the writing program; b) that eliminating 090 was our motive and not an unanticipated consequence; and c) that remediation is a need independent of the EPT's construction of it. That is, nowhere in any of these constructions is there a suggestion that there was something counterproductive about the older practices of placing students. 101/105 is not an alternative *to* 095, it is the place where students go after 095, and so on.

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Among the lessons we might have taken from Rodby and Fox's work at CSU-Chico was that "standard, monologic institutional methods for communicating with students about writing assessment and placement…[tend] to reinforce both students' estrangement from the academic institution and the institution's assumption that it knows all it needs to know about student writers' needs" (68). As it turned out, taking up institutional assumptions about placement meant more than reenacting tired narratives of student "need"; it also meant effacing the intellectual work represented in the hundreds of entry, mid-term, and exit qualitative surveys easily available in my office files during this entire process.

Our inability to take up *that* genre as evidence was unfortunate since any of the survey data might have taken this decision in a different direction. For example, one question on the exit survey read, "Now that you are nearly done with 101/105, how do you feel about your decision to take it, rather than 095?" Of the 197 responses on file, representing nearly 80% of the students participating, not *one* expresses any regrets or even ambivalence about taking the course. And while many responses were perfunctory (*e.g.,* "fine" or "happy"), many took the opportunity to explain why they felt the way they did. 51 mentioned "credit" as one of, and most often, the *only* reason for feeling that they had made the right decision—a number that dwarfs the 8 who said they were glad they took English 105 because it helped them pass English 101.

But it was no coincidence that we stopped talking about students' self-placement at precisely the time we started talking about using the means of the EPT to achieve the ends of program reform. As Gerri McNenny argues in her introduction to *Mainstreaming Basic Writers: Politics and Pedagogies of Access*, "any decision to mainstream basic writers will always be contingent on site-specific configurations, including the political and economic circumstances that define the mission of the institution and the cultural, social, and intellectual situatedness of the student populations" (2). McNenny rightly directs attention to local conditions. To the configurations she notes, we must add our uptakes of institutional genre systems—for it is the assumptions they reflect and the practices of reading and writing into which they draw their users that these "sites" are produced.

Coda: Toward Creating Uptakes for Students' Writing

We were not alone in reconsidering the placement of "basic writers" at UWM. Concurrent with our pilot study, an "Enrollment Management Steering Committee" was posing itself a similar question. In the first draft of their report, "Undergraduate Student Retention at UWM – a work in progress!", they asked: "Given our vision to improve retention/graduation

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rates, what do we know about the linkage between student retention and 'preparation' indicators that we review for admission status?" (1). They, too, presented tentative findings about the dismal retention rates of students with ACT scores below 16. Despite the encouraging way in which the Committee scare-quotes "preparation," they do not go on to question the ACT's construction of a certain *kind* of "preparedness," advising instead that "consideration must be given as to whether UWM can and should be the entry point for this group of students" ("Progress" 3). Two months later, UWM's Chancellor took up the Committee's data in his Plenary Speech in order to draw his own "preliminary conclusion": UWM's attrition problem is a problem of (and for) students who were "severely under-prepared to do college-level work when they were admitted to the university" (Santiago). And when the Steering Committee finalized its report three months later, it suggested that such students are "prime candidates for…transition programs with MATC [a local technical college] and perhaps a revised first-year curriculum appropriate to student preparation" ("Installment" 3).

That such plans would recreate the unworkable and exploitative practices that "basic writing" classes first emerged to redress is disheartening evidence of the power of the discourses of student "lack" (of ability, of contribution, of potential for or right to postsecondary education) to nearly effortlessly reproduce themselves (see Shor, 39-42). So it went: in January of 2007, a "UWM News Release" unveiled a new "guaranteed admission and transfer agreement" whereby undergraduates "can begin at MATC and be guaranteed admission at UWM, close to halfway done with their bachelor's degree." And in a story soon to be told by Katie Malcolm in her dissertation *Resurfacing: New Guides for Basic Writing,* English 105 was itself dismantled in the spring of 2008 for some of the same logistical and financial objections that greeted its short-lived institutionalization. Dispiriting, certainly. On the other hand, and to deliberately invoke Mina Shaughnessy's "tide" metaphor at the conclusion to "Diving In," we are justified in hoping that moving these students into 100-level courses moved them, as it were, to higher ground—providing them with some measure of protection from the forces that might sweep them away to more marginalized sites (295).

As a field, we are still grappling with the question of whether or not, as Rodby and Fox surmise, "basic writing [is] produced and reproduced by the context of basic writing courses," whether onsite or outsourced (87). To point out that what these contexts are assumed to mean—a beneficial safe house *or* oppressive bilking scheme, an opportunity for acclimation into university discourses *or* an exercise in ritual humiliation—is rarely represented in the words of "basic writers" themselves, is to make the obvious but necessary point that debates about these spaces should enlist the work

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and representations of those who have the most stake in them. In ongoing efforts to problematize the pictures of our students that standardized tests create, we might learn from our experience by turning to the intellectual work of students: close, comparative work on student writing generated by students whom such tests persist in constructing as "basic," and careful reading of their representations of their experiences in being thus constructed.

One way to change the culture of postsecondary remediation is to create conditions in which students admitted to the university are more able to remain and thereby change the culture of the university by and through their writing. That the culture of the university is reflected and perpetuated mostly by and through systems of genres in which these students do *not* compose is one way to understand how long institutional memories of "basic writer" will be and an urgent call to focus the work of institutional reform on those genres themselves.

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Notes

[1] Thanks to Bruce Horner for imagining this third "misreading."

[2] For example, by 2004 the "Critical Reading/Critical Writing Connections" portfolio outcomes for 095 were: "Make connections between the writer's ideas and the ideas of others and distinguish between the two; demonstrate an ability to use key ideas, terms, or concepts from reading one text as a critical lens to interpret other texts; demonstrate the ability to approach subjects from multiple perspectives; offer vivid, well-developed examples and details drawn from course readings, outside texts, or experience; and acknowledge and fairly represent differing interpretations or points of view." The same category of outcomes for English 101 portfolios were: "Demonstrate the ability to produce a critical interpretation of a text; provide analyses with reasoning and evidence appropriate to the context; approach subjects from multiple perspectives; use key ideas, terms, or concepts from reading one or more texts as a critical lens to interpret other texts; and offer thoughtful, convincing interpretations, analyses, or arguments that go beyond the obvious."

[3] In the Fall of 2003 alone, 14 students were—based on the strength of their first-day-of-class essays in English 095—were moved into English 101, and all 14 passed (Horner and Bott 3).

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[4] During these four semesters, 1251 students took English 095. The mean retention rate for those four semesters was only 82%, and only 82% of those *retained* passed—with zero graduation credits for their labor.

[5] Additional factors increase the warrant for this claim: 24% of those who completed the term but failed English 101 had below a 1.0 average for the term, which suggests problems larger than English 101; 27% of students who did not get credit for English 105 still passed English 101; and most significantly, 92.6% of the students who participated in the pilot who have taken English 102 (the final course in the first-year composition sequence) have passed. Their 4692 peers who followed standard placement into 102 (placing there directly with an EPT score of "3"or articulating into it after prior composition courses) passed English 102 at a rate of 87.2%. This last point further undermines the theory that their success in English 101 was due to the support of English 105, rather than their placement in a credit-bearing course.

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