

Review

Ritter, Kelly. *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard, 1920–1960*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2009. ISBN: 0809329247.

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The August 29, 2009 front page of the *Arizona Republic* had a headline that may be similar to one in your local paper: “ACTs suggest many Arizona students not college-ready.” The article complains that one quarter of Maricopa County’s (Arizona’s most populous county) “2006 high-school graduates who entered Arizona universities or colleges had to take a remedial math class and a quarter had take a remedial English course” (A12).

Sound familiar?

I know it will to Kelly Ritter, who just published *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard, 1920–1960*. But while readers might expect such statistics from Arizona—which, after all, consistently trails the whole country in educational funding—Ritter’s book focuses on Yale and Harvard and provides a thoughtful look at the two Ivy League institutions’ approaches to *their own* basic writing students, as well as an insightful commentary on where we are in terms of students labeled “basic writers,” and in the end, she makes thought-provoking suggestions on where we ought to head in the future.

But first: *basic writers* at Harvard or Yale? I know, you may be *shocked*, *shocked!* that two such elite institutions of higher education might actually accept writers who carry such a label—but they did, and still do, and while one (Harvard) has always offered a public and thoughtful approach in terms of offering (and sometimes insisting on) extra help for their student writers, Yale was not always as forthcoming.

Ritter begins *Before Shaughnessy* by outlining her own experience teaching basic writers at three “distinctly different universities,” which helped her understand how local considerations of students, faculty, and institutional history worked together so that each university “presented its own version

of ‘basic’ writing—and basic writers” (1). Ritter now believes, as many of us do, that “basic writing is *exclusively* an institutional construct, a locally specific course designation that . . . develops from . . . the unique culture of each institution (9). Her experience also led Ritter to ask the same question that many of us have: “What is really *basic* about these students?” (5) and is there really

a universal need, an agreed-upon societal and institutional demarcation for “basic” writers that diagnoses a lack of something specific and transferable from educational site to educational site [and if so] then why does the course vary so dramatically from institution to institution? (7)

Ritter notes that James Berlin initially pointed her to the history of writing instruction at Harvard and Yale, writing that in his *Rhetoric and Reality* Berlin mentioned that Yale “in the late twenties introduced a noncredit course called the ‘Awkward Squad’ to provide remedial instruction” for students seen as deficient in their writing (9).

Ritter provides a thoughtful and complete look at the history of basic writing students at both Yale and Harvard, as part of her main argument that students labeled as “basic writers” always exist at all institutions, and that individual approaches to helping (or not) such students is always local and political. Ritter also makes a compelling argument that the view of basic writing students as not quite ready for first-year composition, however defined and institutionalized, mirrors the literature/composition dichotomy we are familiar with, with the teaching of literature somehow seen as higher and more important than the teaching of rhetoric. Ritter notes that Yale “school administrators resist[ed] declaring expository writing as a ‘legitimate’ course at the first year level” (12), preferring, as they do to this day, the study of literature over the study of writing. Harvard’s way of working with its own students seen as “deficient” in their writing took a kinder and gentler approach—sometimes cajoling students to get the extra help the college offered, sometimes nicely insisting on that extra help.

Ritter’s first chapter of *Before Shaughnessy* centers on the location of composition and basic writing, and she uses several lenses to examine basic writing. Ritter examines the history of the field through “three recent books . . . that provide the theoretical staring points” for her exploration of location, as these three texts “attempt to situate basic writing within a larger social enterprise that invokes the intersection of the real and the imagined” (21):

- Mary Soliday’s 2003 book, *The Politics of Remediation: Institutional and Student Needs and Higher Education*

- Lisa Ede's 2004 text, *Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location*
- Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington's 2002 book, *Basic Writing as a Political Act: Public Conversations about Writing and Literacies*

These three perspectives of examining basic writing and its history and especially how basic writing and basic writers might be “located” are intermingled with a rich history of the field. All of this leads to Ritter’s assertion that while the iconic Mina Shaughnessy’s work “reified the pedagogy and, by extension, the politics of the basic writing classroom, by classifying the basic writer not as *deficient* but as *underprepared*” (29), we also need to realize that basic writing did *not* start with Shaughnessy. Ritter suggests (as others have) that in fact Shaughnessy’s landmark work had the unintentional effect of “effectively eras[ing] the history of basic writers and writing programs that existed before CUNY” (31).

To offer some of that rich history and to employ the lenses of the three texts noted above, Ritter examines in detail how composition socializes students to a particular university and what that institution values. She also examines how some students, presumably Harvard and Yale students, supposedly do not need such socialization, and how some systems are more uniform than others—thus insuring seamless articulation and transfer of courses—but such systems cannot “take into account the specific local needs [and] myriad values of the students attending” as well as ignore “the diverse *histories* of a particular program or its students” (18). In addition, Ritter analyzes what is *valued* at the institutional and local level and the history of those values. And she examines how community may influence where a basic writing course exists and how it is viewed: Those courses “set off” and seen as separate from other writing courses clearly are even more marginalized. All of this (and much more, for Ritter is nothing if not a complete and thorough researcher) leads Ritter to conclude that part of our basic writing history existed “at less selective *as well as* elite institutions” (41), arguing that

Yale and Harvard’s basic writing students [. . .] also underwent a “political process” of social construction in that they were marked as “deficient”—in Yale’s case via their collective label of the “Awkward Squad” and in Harvard’s case through follow-up courses such as English “D,” designed for students who received a grade of “D” in the standard first-year writing course, English A. (41–42)

But before she focuses on basic writers at Harvard and Yale, at the center of Ritter's text is Chapter 3: "Before 1960: The Rise of the Boneheads." Here she outlines how "clarity and correctness of expression were virtually synonymous with [. . .] notions of proficient English composition" (48); how only when students could compose "clean, unadulterated prose" could they be allowed to study literature and other "higher-order thinking tasks" (49); and how introductory classes "rested at the bottom of the educational hierarchy" while "so-called remedial pedagogies, such as English composition (néé rhetoric) resided [. . .] in the curricular basement" (49). Ritter examined our academic journals of the period and found that most early scholarship consisted of "opinion essays" that fell along the line of, "Here's what I do with my *remedial* students" (50). Ritter finds that three key issues about basic writing and "underprepared" students held sway:

- Institutions saw writing as a secondary-school skill, which meant that students who required writing help in college were essentially "making up" work they should have completed (a notion held today by many state legislators). And, of course, Ritter takes note of the blame game that still goes on today: Students could not write effectively because high schools didn't teach them to do so.
- As we still argue today, the issue of whether basic writers should have separate classes or be "mainstreamed" was a point of contention.
- And, institutions struggled over how to integrate underprepared students into the curriculum at large—whether to accept them into academic programs or move them off into academic centers or tutoring systems. Or, simply to not accept deficient students and, as the University of Illinois did in 1960 and as CUNY did some forty years later, just eliminate programs seen as remedial. (51–52)

Ritter's chapters on Yale's "Awkward Squad" (chapter 4) and Harvard's various extra classes (chapter 5) that at one time ranged from English B through English F, are filled with rich detail and thoughtful inquiry. Ritter agrees, for example, with John Wozniak's characterization that while Yale and Princeton "favored wide reading, literacy composition [and] no formal rhetoric," Harvard and Columbia "favored copious writing, logical composition, [and] some rhetoric"—so the basic goals and approaches of the institutions were to some extent opposite of each other, which of course filtered-down to how they worked with basic writers. Wozniak quotes James Berlin in suggesting that Yale and Princeton, since they viewed themselves and their curriculum "as the preparatory site for an elite, aristocratic group of individuals" (74), that Yale "chose to create sites of remedial instruction that existed 'off the books' rather than bow to the more progressive (and practi-

cal) composition curricula found at sister Ivy institutions, such as Harvard” (75). Students identified as deficient in their writing were “remanded” by their writing instructor to get extra tutorial help, which consisted of drilling “weekly in spelling and grammar until such time as they were deemed fit to be allowed back into the mainstream” (81). Ritter quotes a 1929 essay by E. S. Noyes, who writes in the medical terms commonly used to describe basic writers, that “once in the squad, a man stays until he is cured [and if he] suffers a relapse later in the year, he may be remanded back into the squad” (84).

Ritter’s chapter on Harvard outlines the history of “English A” (drawing heavily on Robert Connor’s thorough research) and quickly moves to Harvard’s “pre/sub-English A courses,” English C, D and F (97–98), which appeared at various times in Harvard’s curriculum. Ritter argues that “there were, in fact, significant ‘social development’ aims in the creation and maintenance” of these courses (98) and especially when compared to Yale’s “Awkward Squad,” Ritter characterizes Harvard’s idea as “a much more progressive approach to lower-level writing instruction” (99). In 1914–1915, Harvard decided to create a committee and “instructors ‘shall be expected’ to refer ‘deficient’ students to the secretary [of that committee] who ‘may impose’ [on those students] special tasks, such as outside reading and reports . . .” (105). Ritter likens Harvard’s approach to today’s writing centers, where students received individualized help with their writing. When teachers did refer a student to the committee, their names were held in confidence (109) and teachers were asked to submit a form that noted student deficiencies. One such form looked like this one:

THE COMMITTEE ON THE USE OF ENGLISH BY STUDENTS

Requests the name of any student whose grade in your course is seriously affected by misuse of English, or whose English falls below a standard that you would consider acceptable at Harvard.

STUDENT’S NAME..... CLASS.....

PLEASE CHECK THE STUDENT’S DEFICIENCIES
ON THE FOLLOWING LIST:

- Misspelling
- Faulty grammar
- Miswriting (omission of words or parts of words, transposition of letters, etc.)
- Incoherence in expressing thought
- Unidiomatic language
- Faulty paraphrasing

Incorrect usage

Faulty or overcomplicated
sentence structure

Faulty organization of material

Extreme wordiness

COURSE

SIGNATURE OF INSTRUCTOR

Figure 1, page 107. A facsimile of the referral form sent to faculty at Harvard

Ritter notes that sometimes, this “help” for deficient students was discussed in the student paper, the *Harvard Crimson*, and she quotes a 1923 piece in the paper that editorialized how English F was “for students deemed to have ‘faulty’ use of English, but those men who are ‘really deficient in the use of English . . . should never have been admitted to Harvard” (121). The editorial does find some good use for English F, perhaps “as an elective course for foreign students” (121).

Ritter’s text concludes with some thought-provoking suggestions and questions, including relabeling *basic writing* as *introductory writing*, “a term that would encompass *all* versions of first-year writing at the college level, not just the first or lowest in the sequence” (129). Ritter argues that calling any particular student group

“something ‘special’”—even if that label is accommodating, welcoming, or generous in spirit—connotes a historical baggage that Mina Shaughnessy attempted to diminish but instead reified as a label only available to some and not others within first-year writing programs. (130)

Ritter suggests that we must “eliminate the *basic* label as not only a humane and communally responsible act but a practical and efficient one as well” (140), and she argues for a system of courses that will give writers help as they need it, one in which they can use “guided self-placement” to select and move through (and repeat, without penalty, as they see fit), and in which “no one is labeled as deficient for choosing to make a move in either direction, for any reason” (141). Altruistic? Of course. Possible? Only you can decide: read Kelly Ritter’s *Beyond Shaughnessy* and learn from her research and ideas. Indeed, Kelly Ritter’s *Beyond Shaughnessy* provides us with new information and a thoughtful historical perspective, and her examination of Harvard’s and Yale’s approaches to their own basic writers adds a new and rich strand to the complex mix we call basic writing.