

Episode 63: Susan Naomi Bernstein

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode I talk with Susan Naomi Bernstein about the history of basic writing programs, challenges and advantages of basic writing, educational justice, and future directions for basic writing studies.

Susan Naomi Bernstein lives and works in Queens, New York. From 2013-2018 she co-coordinated the Stretch Writing Program at ASU-Tempe, and taught writing and literary studies courses in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas. She co-facilitates a writing workshop at a senior center in Queens, and has worked as a teaching artist for Writers in the Schools in Houston, Texas. Her book is *Teaching Developmental Writing 4e*, and she writes a blog for Bedford Bits. Her other publications include "Theory in Practice: Halloween Write-In" in Basic Writing e-journal, "An Unconventional Education" in *The Journal of Basic Writing*, and "Occupy Basic Writing" in the collection *Composition in the Age of Austerity*.

Susan, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I'd like to start by talking about basic writing programs, and the history of basic writing. Do you mind providing a brief history of basic writing programs in higher education?

SNB: The history of basic writing programs or BW programs in higher education intersects with social movements for reparations and restorative justice for ongoing and historical educational and social injustice. In the 1960s, BW was part of a movement to create equitable access to higher education for BIPOC, poor and working class, queer and disabled, and other people who were historically closed out of post-secondary institutions by the material realities of White supremacists and elitist etiologies of higher education.

That said, I would suggest that there are many histories of basic writing, and that much depends on who is writing those histories and how basic writings historical contexts are evoked. For example, histories recounted by students and teachers of basic writing might be framed, and would be framed, quite differently from basic writing histories written by writing program administrators. Additionally, any history of BW in higher education needs to be grounded in a clear understanding of historic and ongoing inequities in K-12 public schooling in the United States.

By the second decade of the 21st century, many four year colleges had eliminated basic writing and many two-year colleges no longer offer open admissions. For K-12 public school histories, I would recommend Bettina L. Love's book, *We Want to do More than Survive: Abolitionists Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. I'm reading that right now. It's amazing. I love it. I've been waiting for a book like this. It's just really pulls so much together. Valerie Kinloch book *Harlem On Our Minds: Race, Place, and the Literacies of Urban Youth*. For a history of BW grounded in U.S. social justice movements, I would recommend Conor Tomás

Reed's article, "The Early Formations of Black Women's Studies in the Lives of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan and Audre Lorde." What Reed does is that he doesn't look at it from a writing studies perspective. He looks at the perspective of social movement at City University of New York. That's what it is. It's how basic writing grew out of social movements.

Really kind of look at what you're doing and why you're doing it. If you're saying that, as I've often heard people say about basic writing, "Oh, well it's too late. It was an experiment that failed." I'm like, "What are you talking about? What are you talking about?" It's about what Bettina Love focuses on – *potentiality*, right? It's not about numbers. It's not about enrollment management. It's not about kind of isolating, or they say, "Oops well, this doesn't look so good. So let's move a little money around." I've seen this in so many places. Let's get rid of things that could be looked at as remedial, rather than redefining it. Rather than making it more assets-based, it's instead, "Well, we don't want anything that looks like a deficit and anyway, it's not working. So we're just going to toss the whole thing." Rather than trying to think about, well, what do we need to do to make it better so that it is more inclusive, more equitable and more diverse in that it envelops, it works with, it is informed by more folks rather than fewer.

Moving from that I would generally recommend, and this has been informing everything I've done for the last four years, I would recommend James Baldwin's activist writing on bearing witness to Black lives and White supremacy, especially his *Collected Essays*, the American library edition that Tony Morrison edited, and his previously uncollected essays in *The Cross of Redemption*. I loved that book.

SW: What are some of the biggest challenges to basic writing programs?

SNB: The most significant challenge is that the burdens of administrators are borne by students and teachers of basic writing. This isn't new with me. Mina Shaughnessy wrote about this half a century ago and not in *Errors and Expectations*, which of course is problematic, but her essays and her speeches and her writing outside of *Errors and Expectations*. It uses words like democracy, it identifies problems that we also now are facing. Half a century ago, Mina Shaughnessy identified the problems of basic writing or the challenges were being borne by students and teachers and unfunded mandates basically.

One of those burdens is the misperception of basic writing as remediation. Basic writing courses need to be fully funded and to be offered with full credit for graduation and transfer. That's a big, big problem. That made them easier to eliminate. You just chop off the no credit end of it and your problem is solved. You think your problem is solved. Something like directed self-placement, also not unproblematic, but nevertheless, creating a system as fair as possible with fully funded support services for tutoring, advising, counseling, and unimpeded access to healthcare, food, and housing. Sure, I'm leaving out other things as well. This would be for me the ideal model. Just the whole person, right? I mean the whole student and community concurrently. Basic writing courses and support services would be informed by a deep, deep awareness of racial and economic injustice, and the intersectional needs of queer and disabled people, and people from religious minorities.

Here I'm going to go a little autobiographical on you. It's always hard for me to know whether I should bring this up. It's not about me, but I have a much clearer understanding of the why's of why I got involved in this. I have ADHD and generalized anxiety that weren't diagnosed until I was fifteen years out of grad school. I had no accommodations, which is why I'm such a big believer in them. The other thing about that was that in kindergarten, in the 1960s, they were doing lots of experiments with us.

One of the things that I was able to be involved in back when I started school, they weren't teaching kindergartners how to read as a matter of course. That came later. Because of my hyper focus on things like books and magazines and things like that, they thought, "Oh, well, let's put Susan in this experimental class where we're teaching kids how to read." That saved me. That saved me because I learned how to read and learned how to write. Once I did that and we left that school district and moved to a much more conservative school district that wasn't doing anything like this, they were like, "Whoa, you're sort of ahead a grade level." That saved me when other things started tanking. It was literacy stuff that and I was like, "Whoa, that's like super important."

The other part is that back in '60s and '70s, there were some things that we're totally missing now. College needs to be free, as CUNY was for many folks until 1976. Or more fully subsidized. Free is better obviously, but more fully subsidized by state and federal funding. That's how it was for me. When I was an undergraduate in the late 1970s, one-third of my tuition was paid for by a needs-based state scholarship. While I still had loan debt, the indebtedness was much less onerous than student indebtedness in subsequent generations. Now especially, students financial burdens and family responsibilities are an additional challenge for basic writing programs. Invisible, not invisible to many of us, but invisible to some folks who are making decisions. If my dad hadn't had access to low cost education, a generation before me coming out of New Deal stuff, I wouldn't be here talking to you right now.

I mean, that stuff is intergenerational and significant. It breaks my heart isn't the right word. Enrages is a better word. It enrages me that that's gone. It just enrages me now that it's more necessary than ever. It's also more absent.

SW: You co-coordinated the Stretch Writing Program at ASU-Tempe from 2013-2018. Can you talk about the advantages of this model?

SNB: Programs like Stretch, which at ASU-Tempe offered full credit for an extended, two semester version of first-year writing, were one means of offering reparations for longstanding inequitable conditions of K-12 public schools. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to talk about Stretch in the past tense because at the end of this academic year, 2020-2021, Stretch will be dissolved and eliminated from ASU Writing Programs.

Students were placed in Stretch through standardized test scores, and that's a practice which is rightly perceived as structurally racist. It's good to get rid of that part, but it's only for Stretch for U.S. high school grads, or GED recipients. I know I'm leaving out other folks that that impacts. But Stretch for international students will still use test scores to place people. You'll be able to place into Honors First-Year Writing at ASU through your test scores. So it's only being

eliminated for one group of folks. Although directed self-placement might work really well for a program like Stretch, this option isn't going to be used. The reasons given for eliminating Stretch include the explicit racism of test score placement and that the existence of Stretch perpetuated structurally racist practices.

I'm struggling with that one. Stretch was one of the few programs that offered full credit. I mean, back in my own coming up, and Stretch was before ALP (Advanced Learning Plan) for instance. It's extended time, which I'm going to talk about in a sec here. What Stretch did really was offer extended time for writing practice over two semesters with full credit for graduation and transfer for each semester. Because of historic and ongoing inequalities in U.S. public schooling, extensive writing practice might be absent or is often absent from K-12 public school education, even more so now with remote learning with folks not having access. Mina Shaughnessy called basic writing “compensatory education” to address the inequities in public schooling that creates historic and ongoing barriers to public higher education.

Extended time might sound familiar because it's usually used as an accommodation recommended for people with disabilities, for school, and for employment. However, “extended time” is not referenced in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, or the amendments from 2008. The ADA does address the fact that redress is needed for schedules and policies that block equitable access to education and employment for people with disabilities. In that regard, extended time might be seen as a best practice of Universal Design. That's the thing about the curb cuts that benefit people without disabilities, for instance, people who are pushing children in strollers, or pulling suitcases on wheels, and so on, extended time serves students who, for any reason, benefit from changes to entrenched schedules and policies.

In other words, what I'm thinking is that extended time allows a person with disabilities to do the same job as everybody else. To learn, to have access to the same degree, the same benefits. You could say it allows for those kinds of experiences, but it extends it so that you have more time to take it in. More time to practice if you need it. The need for equitable access to extended time for writing practice is deeply intersectional, obviously.

SW: Your teaching and research interests center on language, race, and educational justice. What does it look like to take an educational justice approach to teaching basic writing?

SNB: Oh, wow. It's really linked to my suggestions for reading in basic writing histories. My philosophy of educational justice draws deeply on the work of Bettina Love, Valerie Kinloch, and James Baldwin, of course, as well as on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's conception of Beloved Community, which is what we've been working on in class for a long, long time. It's Dr. King's concept and the philosophy behind it is enacted really well by John Lewis' idea of “causing good trouble,” and then Bernard Lafayette's idea of the work he's done with the Selma Center for Non-Violence and Reconciliation, “the journey and not just the destination.” This singular space of reading, writing, teaching, learning that happens embodies the process of Beloved Community in classrooms, whether face-to-face, which I dearly miss, but it also has to happen in remote learning, too.

One of the things I did was I compiled a video archive of students' multimedia work in response to our coursework from face-to-face learning. I went back through my archives I digitalized from the spring of 2004 to the spring of 2020 in face-to-face learning. I made a video from those multimedia compositions that were done in response to coursework. That includes, for a year and a half, I taught with students from the Gila River Indian Community in southcentral Arizona, as part of my responsibilities at ASU. I was an outsider coming in with so much to learn.

SW: What's the future of basic writing studies, or what future directions would you like to see scholarship and basic writing programs take?

SNB: It's got to be...it started out as action research and activist practice. This is what Bettina Love talks about, what Valerie Kinloch talks about. This is what it's got to be. This is what it's got to be. It's got to be informed by our current and ever evolving historical moment. It's got to be involved. It's got to be with an understanding of what happened and why it didn't work. Folks working on it have to be unafraid to challenge...I say "unafraid" and I totally, I'm like shaking all the time. I'm like, "Oh no, I didn't say it right." I'm going to use the word sacred because it involves potential, right? It involves something that's larger than us. That's larger than enrollment management. That's larger than universities. It involves the whole of the culture, all of our history and all of what is going to come.

As a teacher and as an administrator, it's got to involve your whole self and be informed by your life. That means that you have to look at your life in the way that Baldwin talks about to really, for White people especially, look at our own histories. Where are the gaps and absences? What are the stories we've been telling ourselves? What is missing from those stories? It's got to be informed by that. Most of all, I'm leaving out the most important part, it's got to be, it's got to be centered on students and what students need and where students are coming from and what they bring with them. It's got to not be a deficit thing. We have to stop looking at it as deficit model. It's got to be like Bettina Love says, it's got to be an assets-based model. That's what I see it as. All the places, all the points where it failed, were the, "Oh, well," or the idea of, "This is a failed experiment," or "It was too late for folks."

Some of the reading that I've been doing, I went back and I read about what CUNY was like before open admissions. I read some of the arguments in regular New York Times articles, that are not so different from now, in the early 1960s about what CUNY was like before. In reading James Baldwin's biographical history stuff that he, at one point, had thought about going to City College, but he couldn't get in because he didn't have an academic diploma. He worked when he was in high school and he went to an elite high school. Most of his classmates were Jewish. Stan Lee graduated from the same high school a couple of years before him. He had to work. He had eight brothers and sisters. He had to help support them. He was growing up in Harlem and his family was working class, and there was a lot of suffering. City College had a requirement of, I believe, it was an A- average and what was called, at that time, an academic diploma, which would now probably become a Regents Diploma if I remember right. He couldn't go. In a way that was good for him because he was able to leave us so much. In another way, he shouldn't have had to suffer and no one should have to suffer.

I'm not even sure if it would be called "basic writing" even. What it should be doing is alleviating suffering and not contributing to it. Everything needs to be offered for credit or the credit system needs to be imagined. I was the beneficiary of much work that was pass-fail. It meant it gave room to experiment and to find out more about what education could be. That's what the future has to be. It's got to be equity, inclusion, diversity. It can't just be performative. It's got to be active, it's got to be a real thing and viewed in everything.

SW: I've got to ask, what would you call it? Obviously the label basic writing can be problematic. The same can be said for developmental writing. So if you had to rename basic writing with something that better reflects its core values and potentiality, what would it be?

SNB: I don't want to say life, everything. I don't want to do that. Right? I don't want to be all woo-hoo about it. I'm also trying to think, well, what would students want? With every label that we've given it, it sounded really good. Like "basic writing" did back when Mina Shaughnessy was working on it. It sounded great then, but now of course with time. I guess I would want to leave it open for every community to create what it needs. For communities in conversation to create what they need, rather than have it be administratively imposed. It would be horizontally organized in a perfect world. It would be consensus based. It also offers hope for the future. That's why it's got to come from communities and conversation with each other. To give it a name at an administrative level, an administrative title or category of education means that it's easy to get rid of.

Ibram X. Kendi talks about good policy, right? Anti-racist policy. It's got to be inclusive, not just performative, but like a real thing. We all need to be making it, making history, students, us, together. All of us together have to work together to make history, to create history that probably in future generations, people will tear apart and tell us everything you did wrong and yay, good. There's got to be a record of it. There's got to be a record of it. We all have to contribute to it. No one person can do it alone.

SW: Thanks, Susan. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.