and remedial writing” (316). I hear you, then, suggesting a more far-reaching moral to your story—but I wish you would say it outright: that we in higher education must be willing to take a few steps down the path blazed by so many elementary, middle, and high-school teachers—that is, in learning to teach mixed-ability classes. Surely there is a much wider range of abilities in many middle and secondary schools than there is in most colleges and universities. Think of all the students who don’t go on to college.

What justification do you see, really, for remedial classes at the college level, or at least for remedial classes for students who are capable of vigorous language use—students who can say what they mean, who can look at data and reach conclusions, and who can get meaningful words down on paper—even if they write extremely poorly? Why should very poor writers be taught in some different place and manner from very strong ones? And even if we conclude that very poor writers need special or different treatment, why should we assume that the special treatment should take the form of segregating them to themselves—instead of giving them supplementary help while they are in classes with writers of all abilities?

Note these passages from the recent resolution passed by NCTE: “RESOLVED, that NCTE support curricula, programs, and practices that avoid tracking, a system which limits students’ intellectual, linguistic, and/or social development; that NCTE urge educators and other policy makers to re-examine curricula, programs, and practices which require or encourage tracking of students in English language arts; that NCTE support teachers in their efforts to retain students in or return students to heterogeneous English language arts placement . . . ” (College English, Jan. 1992, 40). As long as five years ago, sixty representatives of the seven main professional organizations in English at the English Coalition Conference discussed tracking at length and voted unanimously to urge colleagues to move against it. But, as an indication that we seem to have more trouble imagining heterogeneous classrooms in colleges than in schools, the Conference resolution is titled “Tracking at the Elementary and Secondary Level,” and there was an unpublished paragraph in the full report that exempted college teachers from having to teach heterogeneous classes. (See The English Coalition Conference, ed. Richard Lloyd-Jones and Andrea Lunsford, NCTE and MLA, 1989, 40; and Peter Elbow, What is English, MLA and NCTE, 1991, 32–38 and note 3, 42.)

I know that it would seem a large and radical step to move away from remedial writing classes in colleges. To draw the minimal implication from your story would seem to me at once too timid—yet impossible: in effect, “Let’s segregate poor writers to themselves in remedial classes, but let’s make sure their teachers never treat them as cognitively deficient.” Lots of luck! Especially when teachers of remedial classes are often the least well paid and the least respected.

I hear your admirable research suggesting a goal that would in fact be easier to attain, yet far more exciting: heterogeneous writing classes. Of course this would involve some deep rethinking of how we teach, and some restructuring of various curricular and bureaucratic arrangements. Certainly poor writers should get supplementary help; certainly they should have to meet the same standards; probably many of them would have to stay longer in the course or meet more days a week. But isn’t rethinking what your article is all about?

Besides, think of how much money and time colleges and universities spend on placement testing—all for a dubious process. That money could be used to help us begin to learn from many of our colleagues in elementary, middle, and secondary schools how to teach heterogeneous writing classes.

I would appreciate some of your thinking on these matters.

Reply by Glynda Hull, Mike Rose, Kay M. Losey, and Marisa Castellano

We thank Peter Elbow for his kind words about our article and for the thoughtful way he raises a very critical issue. The short form of our response is this: while we think Professor Elbow paints remedial programs with too broad a brush—some programs are better than others and some are sites of valuable work—we agree in principle with a lot of what he says.
We hope his letter stimulates further comment. One possible next step would be to collect descriptions of college programs where there has been an attempt to disband remedial courses and create heterogeneous courses in their place. Then we could talk from cases.

We do have one concern, however, and we raise it not to diminish Professor Elbow’s suggestion, but to place it in a broader institutional context. As problematic and counterproductive as some remedial programs and courses can be—and several of us have been very critical of them—they, in general, assure a place in the curriculum for instruction geared toward a wider range of student need than is typically addressed in the lower-division course of study. It is here where the analogy with tracking in the schools, though certainly apt, begins to strain a bit. As schools detrack, they are still held legally responsible—thanks to a range of hard-won state and federal legislation—for providing assistance to various groups of students with special needs. There is no such legal imperative compelling post-secondary institutions. In fact, there are strong forces in many colleges and universities to limit access to students who are underprepared, or at least to restrict or diminish their services. If remedial programs were disbanded, other permanent structural—not ad hoc or experimental—guarantees would have to be put in place. Tutorial centers, as Professor Elbow suggests, could play a major role here. They certainly have the expertise to do so. But many centers are not in a position—and even with additional staff would not be in a position—to provide a coordinated, consistent, and ongoing adjunct to a major instructional program. The passing on to a tutorial center of responsibilities that should be met in the curriculum complicates instruction. Students can get lost in the process, and the program itself—because it involves multiple departments and units—is vulnerable to turf wars, shifts in budget priorities, and institutional inertia.

A related concern. Remedial programs provide at least the possibility of a space within the faculty (marginal though it may be) where people interested in working with underprepared students can come together. Though some of the practices and theories that one finds in remedial programs are problematic, even harmful, there is no other departmental niche that provides the opportunity to discuss and advocate for these issues.

If we could think about Professor Elbow’s proposal while keeping these institutional dynamics in mind, then we could begin to reconceive remediation, and, as he suggests, that would be exciting. But such reconceptualization, to our way of thinking, would have to include basic structural—if not legal—guarantees that the thrust toward access and achievement for students from a wide range of backgrounds will not be compromised.

---

A highlight of spring in New York for anyone interested in writing is the annual conference of the CUNY Writing Centers Association. This year it features Ira Shor, College of Staten Island—CUNY, author of Empowering Education. Dr. Shor is well known for his writing and lecturing on the philosophy and practice of Paulo Freire; his newest book is a call for concern among educators. The Conference theme, “Critical Times—Critical Teaching,” echoes these concerns for all who teach in colleges or high schools today.

Kingsborough Community College—CUNY will host the conference on March 4, 1994. The recently completed Conference Center, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, is accessible by car via the Belt Parkway and by subway and a short mini-bus ride to the campus. For more information, please call conference co-chairs: Lucille Nieporent (718) 368-5405; or Steven Serafin (212) 772-4212.