

## Challenging Our Labels: Rejecting the Language of Remediation

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For the past ten years, more than 60% of incoming freshmen have been placed in English courses labeled “remedial” at California State University, San Bernardino. Most published articles about this statistic have been written by professional educators; little has been said by the people experiencing it firsthand. We five were not happy with the consequences of these placements and wanted our voices to be heard. We did research and put ourselves in situations where we could gain more knowledge about the practices and language of remediation. We were shocked to discover how many people are ignorant of the definition or meaning of remediation. We add our scholarship to challenge this view of students and the language used to describe them.

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Even though most California State University campuses no longer offer remedial English courses, the university’s system-wide English Placement Test (EPT) continues to designate between 50–80% of first-year students enrolled on its twenty-three campuses as remedial writers, although sometimes using the label “not yet proficient.” English departments have resisted these categories in various ways, and now most of them have adopted local enactments of what Arizona State University calls “stretch” programs (Glau) in which students do substantive text work that is not, and is not named, remedial. On our campus, students are directed to one-, two-, or three-quarter first-year writing (FYW) courses in which they are taught in the same cohort by the same instructor.

However, on our campus, as on many others, despite these curricular and pedagogical changes, the language of remediation has continued to be imposed by institutional structures in both official communications and campus conversation—again, even though our English department has not offered remedial writing courses for several years.

Based on our EPT scores, we five FYW students were categorized as remedial. The implications of that assessment became clear to us in unexpected and conflicting ways. For example, although documents from the Chancellor’s Office as well as communications from our home campus personnel used the term *remedial*, we were assigned to a three-quarter (thirty-week) FYW “stretch” course, listed by the English department as nonremedial. In fact, far from being remedial in either its topics or its pedagogy, our coursework helped us to challenge the language of remediation that continues to mark students like us and our writing.

Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs’s *Writing about Writing* unmasked the language of remediation for us and for our professors, class TAs, and writing center tutors, pushing us all not only to stretch our own ideas about labeled writing populations but also to speak out to the academic community about how institutional language constructs students and shapes their relationships with their families, with other students, with professors, and within the professions they plan to enter.

As we read Deborah Brandt’s work on literacy sponsorship and Jean Anyon’s descriptions of socioeconomic-status (SES) differentiated high school curricula and pedagogy, we began to challenge CSU’s administrative labeling practices, showing how these labels isolate and limit students.

This has come to matter enormously to us, and thus we offer the following narratives, which have helped us to better understand the importance of language and labels. We hope to challenge others to think about how the language they use each day shapes writers and the writing that takes place in their spaces. We begin by explaining how we came to *feel* remedial and how that constructed us as students and writers, then show how those perceptions clashed with our experiences in our FYW class. Next we describe our research into labels and labeling. We conclude by showing some of the impact we believe our work has had locally and by challenging others to join in this work in their own spaces. We especially hope that we can encourage students who have been labeled remedial to realize that they are not alone and that they don't have to accept someone else's label.

### **Why Did We Feel Remedial When We Were Not in a Remedial Course?**

Even “remedial” students can read signs! Even before we arrived on campus, we knew that we were remedial. And if we didn't, we quickly learned who we “really” were, and it wasn't pretty.

**Sonia:** As a first-generation college student, I had been told by my parents that they would always try their best to support me and to help me reach my goals, so receiving an acceptance letter from a four-year university was the best feeling ever. My parents were beyond excited and proud of me. Any chance they had, they told people that I got accepted to a four-year university and that not many people can get in, but I did because I worked hard for it. Two weeks later, when I received my EPT results, I was confused. I didn't know what my scores meant until I went to orientation and found out that I was placed in what they called a remedial course for English. I was speechless. The word *remedial* hit me like a brick. I knew I was being accepted by Cal State, but when I found out that I was placed in a remedial English course I began to question myself—if I were worthy of their sponsorship. I didn't have the courage to tell my parents that their daughter needed to take a “remedial” course. Just the word itself was disappointing and made me feel embarrassed. That was two years ago. Even though I have successfully passed my English course and Cal State no longer labels me remedial, my parents still don't know that I was in a remedial class, and I don't know if they ever will.

**Esther:** Like Sonia, once I received my acceptance letter I was proud of myself that I had made it—against all odds I had made it. In fact, I was not aware of what the term *remedial* even meant until I came to orientation at CSUSB. But I quickly learned. As I sat through the dean of the natural sciences' speech, I heard him use it about classes that were not “college level.” I remember the dean making specific remarks about these courses, that if you had to take any remedial classes you were already behind on being able to graduate in four years. This meant if you were not enrolled in Math 110 or English 107, you were behind. As I sat there looking at my paper that had on it the classes I was eligible to enroll in, I felt ashamed. My paper had 102 for English, while everyone around me had a 107 on theirs. I felt so embarrassed. I had never wanted to run and hide so much as I did at this moment. Already behind, and I had not even started? Hearing this come from someone of such power made me feel as though I was no match for all the other students who had placed into “college-level” English. My first thought after hearing this was, “Oh, great, now I must take high school English all over again.” Being labeled remedial shook my confidence as a student because all my life I had been told that going to college was basically not an option for me. Then once I finally made it, I had to carry with me this “remedial” label which shows people that I wasn't good enough to be a regular college student, that I was underprepared and needed fixing. Feeling accepted and welcomed to the university is very important as an incoming freshman. Once

I left that orientation, I knew I would still have to demonstrate to the university administrators as well as myself that I belonged at CSUSB. The feeling of not belonging created an unnecessary barrier for me as a student because of the negative impact the label “remedial” carries.

**Arturo:** When I went to orientation, I was extremely confident because my hard work in high school, resulting in a high GPA, allowed me to gain acceptance into every school I applied to, and I chose Cal State, San Bernardino. When I received my schedule, I saw that I had an English 102 class and a Math 90 class. I had no idea what those meant, but the orientation instructor told us that students who were placed below Math 110 or below English 107 were in “remedial classes” and had one year to pass them or else they were kicked off the campus. Like the others here, these words stung so much because I had worked so hard to get here, only to find myself at the bottom of the food chain, which meant being looked down upon by everyone. I felt like I did not belong at this school.

As soon as I got home and told others about my classes, they scrutinized me intensely. My father even told me to go to a community college because he thought that I should not be in Cal State if I was a “remedial” student and that I would be discriminated against there. However, when he left me at my Cal State dorm, he said, “I know you are better than the label, but now you just have to prove to them how much you want it.”

My first reaction to the orientation adviser’s warning about finishing our “remedial” classes within one year or being kicked out was shock. The next was shame. But then I began to feel afraid—afraid that he was right to segregate me, that I would never be good enough to fit in. This fear either makes or breaks students because they can carry it for the rest of their college career, creating a sense of helplessness that may ultimately cause them to drop out: if they’ll never measure up, what point is there in continuing? Luckily, I instead used fear as motivation. I allowed it to consume me and become an obsession, the reason I got up every morning. My fear and anger of never measuring up in the eyes of my peers and superiors, due to the discrimination that came with the “remedial” label, made me want to do my absolute best to prove them wrong by working that much more on my craft—because in my eyes, failure was not an option.

Being discriminated against is painful, especially when it jeopardizes people’s futures. It’s been three years since I was labeled, and I’ve accomplished so much during that time. However, despite my accomplishments, the label still stings as much as it did at first. That fear of never measuring up, never being good enough, still consumes me to my very core. It shows up in my schoolwork, even in my day-to-day behavior. I’m constantly second-guessing myself; the question *Do I belong here?* will probably be in the back of my mind for the rest of my college career and maybe even my professional career. Much like so many others, no matter how much I fight against it, trying to prove that I’m not “remedial,” that label has become part of my identity because of the internal scars it’s inflicted. Not everyone has the good fortune to be stubborn in facing and enduring the label, in trying to prove it wrong, which is why all of us feel so keenly about this project.

**Brisa:** When I started college, I did know what remediation meant because of an explanation from my high school AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination, a college-readiness program) teacher. He said, “When you place in remedial it means that you have to take extra English classes in order to be considered a ‘real college student.’” That shocked me because I had worked so hard to get into a university, only to find out that I was not a “real college student” after all. Like Sonia, I was too embarrassed to tell anyone in my family that I was remedial because I felt guilty. I almost felt ashamed when I told people what school I was going to because I didn’t know if one

small move could jeopardize my university standing. I couldn't enjoy my first year in college because the thought of being kicked out of the university followed my every move. If I had any doubts about what the university thought about me, they flew out the window when I was sitting in my philosophy class and another student asked the professor a question about the *Crito*. He answered, "It's not like you are remedial!" That made me feel ashamed, lower than the other philosophy majors. I'm not saying that professors should watch every word they say in their classes, but it was another reminder that even though I was sitting in the same classroom with "regular" students, I would still be looked down upon if anyone discovered that I was remedial. I hoped no one would find out, and I wondered whether the philosophy major was off limits to people like me. It made me sad but also mad. I never knew how much a simple word could affect me until I was labeled remedial; I still feel the loss of that pride I had when I was first admitted. Instead of identifying as a legitimate student with my school—which is an important element in persistence—I still sometimes feel like a fake, as if someone will discover that I don't really belong. I think that even when I receive my diploma, I'll still be looking for the attachment that reads "provisional" or somehow not-real.

**DeShonna:** When I was graduating from high school, the majority of the teachers pushed students into going to a junior college not only because of price but because we would learn more there in order to transfer to a four-year university as "equals." Already I felt remedial because I could see that going into college meant going into a hierarchy. You take a placement test and find out where you fall in that hierarchy. Then once I got my results and saw that I would be taking remedial courses, I knew for sure that I was not considered college level. Shocking, because no one had said that this test would rank us as remedial or not; it was instead described as showing whether or not students should take a freshman English class. I did not want to skip that class and didn't think that I would be looked down on for taking it.

Having graduated high school with honors and thus gained admission to any CSU campus I chose, I thought as time went on that maybe I had escaped CSUSB's hierarchy. But once I got to campus, the orientation session let me know that although I may have had a great past, the EPT made me remedial now. The counselors placed me in a thirty-week English class and emphasized that failing to complete remedial classes in my first year would get me kicked out of school. As a pre-nursing student, they stressed, I had no room for failure. I began to feel less and less sure of myself. They actually told me that because I had to take remedial courses, most likely I would in fact not even make it into the nursing major. This bothered me because the orientation staff, without knowing anything about me, judged my lifetime capabilities by one inaccurately described placement test. Although they may have thought they were doing a good deed in being realistic and welcoming students to "the real world," they were only increasing the odds that I would fail by *predicting* that I would fail. The remedial title somehow also entered into the social fabric of the school, so that even in places like the writing center, I felt that some tutors treated me differently from other students once they found out what English class I was in—even if I came with work from another class like philosophy. So for most of that year, I went into the writing center only to fulfill assignments for my English class.

So—we all had plenty of people to tell us that we were remedial and exactly what that meant: not-good, fake, damaged, unlikely to succeed. We were embarrassed; we felt marginal, inferior, and alienated. Some of us were angry, but more of us just decided that we had to play the university's

game. However, the labels mattered so much to our identities that when other students asked us what “English” we were taking, we avoided the questions or we lied.

### **And Then We Showed Up for Our First “Not-Remedial Remedial” English Class**

We came through the door not knowing what to expect, but expecting it not to be good—and again we were confused. Our professor didn’t seem to have heard that we were remedial. When we began reading and writing, she kept pestering us about “exigency,” which didn’t seem like something we remedial students should have. It didn’t seem like something that went along with the Google definition of remedial as “1. Giving or intended as a remedy or cure. 2. Provided or intended for students who are experiencing learning difficulties.” What we were called and what we were actually doing in class just didn’t add up, so we spent a lot of time wondering what we were being cured of, and exactly what “learning difficulties” had placed us in what the university, at least, thought was a remedial English course.

**Sonia:** I can still remember how nervous I was that first day of our class; my heart was pounding so fast that I thought I might explode as I sat there looking around. The classroom little by little started to fill in, and the professor came in and gave us our syllabus and explained what we would be doing for the quarter. I was shocked when I started reading the syllabus. I thought it would have a lot of grammar lessons or basic instructions on how to do an essay, but it didn’t. It had a lot of reading passages and articles by scholars like Michel Foucault, Peter Elbow, James Paul Gee, and many more. Why were we reading these scholars if this was a remedial course?

What surprised me the most was the professor. She never treated us like remedial students. She believed in us and knew from the beginning that we had a lot of potential. She gave us work that many other professors wouldn’t give their first-year students. At the end of class, I knew that I wasn’t a remedial student and neither were my classmates. We were labeled by the school, but our work said something else. It showed that we were capable of being scholars.

**Arturo:** Coming into my FYW class, I was so furious that the only thing I was interested in was proving to Professor Hanson that I could write just as well as, if not better than, any one of her students in the non-“remedial” ten-week course. I refused to accept the mediocrity, the failure, the being looked down on that I felt the university was assigning me. I was determined to prove not just to my professors and everyone around me but especially to myself that I belonged, that I was an equal, normal college student. But as we began to read John Swales, James Paul Gee, Deborah Brandt, Ann Johns, Sherman Alexie, bell hooks, Mike Rose, and others, I noticed that Professor Hanson believed in us, saw us as normal, and challenged us. One way she did this—beyond having us read difficult, “real” work—was by asking us, surprisingly, what we would say back to them, and how they might speak to us in response. She challenged us to prove we were not the label by first using the work to prove it to ourselves. She assigned us work that even graduate students did, and then had us apply those concepts in everyday life in order to prove to others that we were not “remedial.” I started to feel more confident—even proud. My dad was right: we were better than our labels, and now we had to work harder to challenge the entire structure of academia and prove who we really were—which, ironically enough, we discovered in our “remedial” class.

**Esther:** As I stepped into my remedial English class, I was so sure I would be going over exactly the same material I had gone through in high school—because obviously I did not learn it the first time and I needed to go over it some more in order to be ready for “college-level” English. I was shocked when our professor did not hand out a grammar book and start teaching us how to

construct sentences or how to properly use a comma. Instead she began by having us read scholarly journals and think critically about them. These journals were a new genre of writing we had never been exposed to. It was difficult to understand exactly what the authors were saying, but class discussion brought the meaning clearer and clearer as we began to adapt.

I was even more surprised when we began to read Jean Anyon's essay "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work." She writes about the difference in the teaching methods elementary teachers use, differences that depend on the economic status and social class of the community in which a school is placed. The "executive elite" method of teaching is for schools in wealthy communities, where students are imagined as leaders, to learn to challenge and remake others' rules rather than just follow them. "In the executive elite school," Anyon writes, "work is developing one's analytical intellectual powers" (83). As we read Anyon, I could see that in K-12 I had been taught to be a follower, an obeyer; but in my FYW class, I was finally being challenged to think in more depth about the assignments, not just follow grammar rules. As the class proceeded and the level at which I was being challenged increased, I began to wonder who exactly decided this class was remedial. No one in our class needed to be cured of anything, and as far as I could see, no one had learning difficulties. We were all able to keep up, and we all worked together to unpack the readings. The term *remedial* implies that we are not at the college level, but in my "remedial" class all we ever did from the first day was college-level work.

**Brisa:** I took the remedial class, but to me it felt nothing like I thought a remedial class would be. We were reading everything from Gee to Foucault, and we were breaking the high school habit of Jane Schaffer paragraphs by writing college essays. I didn't feel like a remedial student because of all the difficult reading that I was doing; when I asked my peers, none of them were reading what I was. I began to enjoy doing difficult work, to read in between the lines, to think critically, and to feel confident in my writing. I no longer felt that my essay was controlling me. I knew what I wanted to say, and I knew how to translate it into my paper; I controlled what I wrote.

**DeShonna:** When I entered the opening ten weeks of our thirty-week English course, I thought this would be easy, especially since I had graduated high school with honors. However, my professor did not do the expected grammar drills but instead told us this class would be no different from the English class that any incoming college students take, except that our class was stretched over a longer span. We would get a chance to learn in more depth, she said, which would help us excel in college. As the weeks went by, we learned a lot about the academic community and read articles that graduate students said they were having difficulty with. This led me to question why we were considered "not yet proficient" by the English department and remedial by everyone else, especially when my English class pedagogy was more advanced than some of the classes I saw "proficient" students taking. After icebreakers in class, I finally felt that I could speak on remediation without feeling ashamed. I began to wonder why over half of Cal State students were being labeled remedial, why the majority of the students who are defined as remedial are minorities, and why students who start off being classified as remedial and not yet proficient end up with lower retention rates (Tierney and Garcia 2).

However, exigency took on life when our professor offered us extra credit to attend the Celebration of Writing for FYW and said that she hoped we might get excited about entering the contest ourselves. Us? Remedial students earning writing awards? It became even more confusing when during the awards ceremony, one of her colleagues in the composition department gave a speech celebrating the successful elimination of remedial classes on our campus. "What?" we

demanded during our next class. How could she make that claim when we were all acutely aware of our own remedial status and the remedial status of our stretch class? Yes, we had begun not to feel remedial while we were actually in class, but we sure knew we were outside of it.

### **We Did Research on Labels and Remediation and Became Even More Confused**

Our professor didn't have any answers that satisfied us, but she agreed that we could take it on for our winter-quarter research project. Because we found the disjunction between what the institution said about us, what we were learning in class, and what we thought about ourselves puzzling, irritating, and at times enraging, we decided that we needed to look beyond our own experiences to the work of those we were now describing as "other scholars." We were especially attracted to Brandt's work on literacy sponsors, Gee's on identity kits, Anyon's on how different educations prepare and predestine students, Elbow's and Rose's on the effects of remediation and labeling, and that of some of our fellow CSUSB students.

**Brisa:** Things just didn't add up. I learned while researching my remediation paper that over 60% of students place into some kind of remedial class in CSUSB (California State University). This shocked me when I thought about my philosophy professor's comment about remedial students: didn't he know about the 60%? Had my adviser missed the prerequisite for philosophy majors that said, "No remedial students permitted?"

I also was confused when I read Elbow's comment that "the teachers of remedial classes are often the least well paid and the least respected" (588). When we discussed this in class, it seemed to us that if professors had the option of teaching a remedial class or a "regular" writing class, most often they would pick the regular class. How is that supposed to help us with our confidence, knowing we aren't usually first choice? We enter as remedial students, so since we are considered unprepared, wouldn't it make sense to have the most prepared professors teaching us? Although our professor was new, we were lucky in the sense that she actually wanted to teach our class. She wanted to teach our class because she was excited about us all learning together. Had she and my philosophy professor ever met?

**Arturo:** I was so furious when I began our class that I hardly could believe Professor Hanson when she told us that she did not see any of us as "remedial students." I was amazed when she asked us if we wanted to do a paper on the topic of "remediation" for our term paper. I thought if I was going to prove that I wasn't a remedial student, I would need to interview as many students, professors, and administrators that were directly associated with the label as I could, so I did just that. I interviewed over a hundred college students, most of whom said a lot of the same things that my peers and I said: remediation means that you don't really belong, are doing "basic" work, and are less smart and less likely to succeed. When I asked the composition professors who have direct contact with students, they said that they don't look at incoming freshmen as anything but developing writers. Even the chair said, "The content of the courses in our stretch program is university level and not remedial." So why were we being labeled?

To find out I spoke to one of the college deans. He argued that, while it is not good that there is a negative connotation to being in certain classes, "the fact of the matter is that students in these classes need additional help in these subjects." When I asked him whether the EPT is flawed, he said that every test has some flaw in it, but the EPT is an "adequate" test that has been working for a long time, and there is no reason to discontinue its use. He said that there could be improvements

to better evaluate students coming out of high school, but he had to work within the framework of the budget, and as of now the EPT is the best way to evaluate students.

The EPT was created many years ago to help the university place students in FYW classes that would give them the best chance to succeed as college students; that was its only purpose. However, this two-part exam—a multiple-choice grammar, usage, and critical thinking test, plus a thirty-minute essay—has become much more than that. Now it is seen as a proficiency test, one students can fail. Worse, it uses predicted outcomes to designate a system-wide “failure” rate of 50% or higher, depending on the population of individual campuses.

Further, the language the Educational Testing Service (ETS) website uses and the way the CSU system interprets the test conflict in how they present information about the test to incoming students. ETS tells students that the test is not for admission but simply helps determine which courses best match their level of performance in English (ETS). Prior to the test, I was told how insignificant and easy it was. The ETS website even tells people not to stress about the test, so when I went to take it, I was extremely confident. I followed the advice and relaxed—until none of the test was as I expected. The multiple-choice section asked questions unlike anything that I had seen before, even on the SATs and AP tests. The essay question took awhile just to figure out what I was being asked to write about—which wasn’t even being looked at by the graders, who were looking more at grammar. I did not finish the test because it took me a long time to figure out how I wanted to tackle the topic. When I write, it takes me hours just to write the first draft, which usually has numerous grammatical errors. How could I have been accurately evaluated by a test that eliminated that normal, extended writing process? Even more irritating was how my results hinged on the performance of others taking the test that day via the system’s predetermined “failure” rate.

Only after I had taken the test did I realize the importance of the very different language employed by the CSU campuses. They look at it as an evaluation as opposed to how the ETS presents it. There the language of remediation and the costs of failure are alive and well. I learned that EPT scores like mine result in students being unjustly labeled and prejudged prior to stepping foot inside a classroom of the university—to which they were already admitted prior to the test.

I was astonished to find out that even on our campus there was a huge difference in opinion regarding the topic of remediation depending on who you talked to and their ranking in academe. However, I was less surprised when I read Rose’s statements about how academics get their ideas about students:

There’s not a lot of close analysis of what goes on in classrooms, [and] the cognitive give and take of instruction and what students make of it. . . . We don’t get much of a sense of the texture of students’ lives . . . but even less of a sense of the power of learning things and through that learning redefining who you are. Student portraits when we do get them are too often profiles of failure rather than of people with dynamic mental lives. (12)

Maybe the administrators should talk to the professors and the students and get some of that texture into their definitions. And maybe they should be reading what we read in our research.

**Sonia:** College students see themselves partly through the images and frameworks that are constructed by their literacy sponsors. Brandt defines literacy sponsors as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (334). Students might be sponsored by a scholarship, a sport, or their parents. The support they receive varies depending on the type of

sponsors they have. Reading Brandt helped us reflect on our sponsors. Our families believed in us, but when they learned that we were remedial (that is, if we told them), some were afraid and warned us to scale down our hopes. They didn't want us to take on higher goals until we were ready for them. Many family members and friends assumed that our placement was remedial for a reason. Most of our high school sponsors were like DeShonna's, who said that after high school we were meant to either get jobs or go to community colleges. Brandt argues that some kinds of literacy sponsorship, in privileging one kind of literacy, actually suppress others. Cal State's sponsorship was mixed: the administration was sponsoring us as somehow special or different, which wasn't a vote of confidence, but our professor saw us as smart and capable. At first we weren't sure whether to believe her, but since Professor Hanson was pretty powerful in her belief, we began to trust in what she and other scholars said about us. So our parents supported us in our literacy goals even though the EPT shook their faith; our high school and college administrators regulated and in some ways suppressed or even withheld literacy; and our professor and her colleagues and department modeled literacy and enabled us as literate persons.

**Esther:** Reading Anyon's "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work" was shocking and revealing. It was discouraging to discover that social and economic class differentiates teaching, so the school you attend can determine how well you become prepared to either go into the work force or attend college. Anyon spent a full year researching five schools with different economic backgrounds. She found that although the same material was being taught throughout the five different schools, *how* the students were being taught had a huge impact. Coming from a "working-class" school, I have been taught since I was a child how to follow rules and regulations. These are the steps working-class students are taught because we are expected to go into the workforce once we are done with high school as opposed to attending college. We especially don't learn that we are on the bottom rung of a ladder on which some other students are taught to become our thinkers and managers.

Students who come from a working-class school face a hard battle every day. By the ways we are taught and labeled, we face the oppression of being told we will not make it to college. Ever since I was little, I was told that people like me will find a job after high school, ending their schooling. When a high school teacher asked what I planned to do after high school, I told him I was hoping to go to CSU. He looked at me and said that if I wanted to go to a four-year university, I was in the wrong school. Our high school prepares students to go into the workforce or community college.

**DeShonna:** The disjunction between schools that Esther's high school teacher was pointing out is a function of what Gee calls "Discourses," and these differences also help explain validity problems with the EPT. A Discourse, according to Gee, "is a sort of 'identity kit', which comes complete with instructions on how to talk, act, and write as taking on a particular social role that others will recognize" (484). High school and college are two very different Discourses. When I entered college it bothered me that the community identified students as remedial based on invalid reasons—invalid because the EPT measures of critical thinking and college writing skills can, as Esther uses Anyon to point out, also be shaped by your socioeconomic status. As Anyon says, a major difference between elite and working-class schools can be instruction in critical thinking and writing. Working-class students may not be prepared to write as college students because they are not expected to go to college, having instead mostly been taught to follow directions so they can join the workforce. These different ways of teaching are creating students who work within differ-

ent Discourses, and why would we expect valid test results on potential for accomplishment in a Discourse many students haven't even been taught yet?

There are two other reasons that labeling incoming college students remedial is a bad idea. First, many universities, including some Ivy League schools, offer all students thirty weeks of writing instruction without any negative connotation. However, for many public schools, budget cuts discourage any course over ten weeks, which resonates with Anyon's assertions about socioeconomic status and education. This limitation contributes to the negative stereotype of students in the stretch programs. Second, psychology suggests that a critical period of identity formation occurs between the ages of thirteen and twenty, during which people (including the majority of first-year college students) clarify their values and try to experience success. They are also developing a sense of individuality, connectedness, and critical thinking. It's not the time to critically undermine student self-efficacy with spurious labels.

In my own case, the remedial label affected my identity formation in that the university's doubt whether I was a "real" college student weakened my own sense of identity and belonging as a college student. I started to feel like I had not accomplished anything in high school, and I felt powerless and confused, lacking confidence—and silenced, as I worried about telling other students and campus offices that I was in the stretch program. Gee argues that an identity kit for a role includes clothes, attitudes, language—both oral and print—and ways of interacting with others. Labeled a remedial writer, I started to wonder, "Well, am I remedial in my other classes as well? Will the teachers be able to tell I am a remedial writer? Can I even write a paper and get a good grade?"

### **Our Rebellion**

Scholarship had helped us understand the issues. However, all the work we read was written by professors and other scholars, not by students who have actually lived with the stigma of being labeled remedial. We wanted our voices heard, so first we presented our work at the 2012 International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Conference, which helped us complicate our thinking about institutional, tutor, and student language. Then Arturo entered his remediation research project into our campus's FYW Celebration of Writing and took home the first prize, which helped us believe in ourselves and our words. And then we proposed and presented a session at the 2013 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), where the audience response encouraged us to reach farther with our ideas. So we began writing, hoping to someday publish our work. That was our rebellion against the unfair label. In rebelling we came to believe we do belong in college. We believe that our work shows how student-initiated and carefully theorized resistance to institutional language helped us, and our professors, to reexamine our own acceptance of institutional labeling as well as to challenge administrators and faculty to label students accurately: as writers.

One of our favorite class quotes is from Albert Einstein: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." Gee's theory of identity formation speaks powerfully to labeling students as remedial, and it is why a university should put extra effort into understanding the effects of remedial labels on its writers. This could go a long way toward keeping students from feeling put down; they would be more motivated to meet the common goals of the other students in the university and not feel they are worth less than their colleagues. After all, college writing is very different from high school writing.

There is no way students should be condemned for not exhibiting characteristics of a style they have never been taught.

Fortunately for the incoming students who followed us, prior to our speaking out, numerous faculty members had already been laying the foundation to resolve the injustice done to us; all we did was bring it out in the open. In a sense, it was the perfect storm. The following year, things did end up changing at CSUSB, due in part to the implementation of a new initiative, directed self-placement (DSP), which gave students the opportunity to choose their own English placement. So throughout that year, our sophomore year, we asked numerous first-year students if any of them felt a “remedial” stigma related to writing; much to our surprise, they had no idea what we were talking about. Some even asked us to define the term. When we explained it and the effect it has had on us as university students, many were shocked. In speaking to them about the past, we felt as if we were telling a mythical tale because to them, last year was a page in an old history book. It was hard for them to believe because the present is so different.

Also in our sophomore year, though, the CSU system implemented the Early Start Program, a mandatory experience for students designated as “underprepared” by the EPT. They are required to attend a four-day class to “prepare” them for college-level writing. When we came to college, our university told us that our four years of high school hadn’t prepared us for college writing, yet they now believe four days will prepare new students. According to the composition faculty who have been working with us on this project, CSUSB and other CSU campuses with Stretch Composition and DSP have asked to be exempt from Early Start, but their requests have been denied. So now, even though several professors have commented that the work that came out of our class unmasked the harmful language regarding remediation and influenced both the professor-training materials and the ways Early Start classes are conducted on our campus, students in this year’s Early Start are still being discriminated against based on their EPT scores. Although they seem to have no awareness of the remedial label, they do know that their EPT scores were what required them to come to campus in the summer for the Early Start session. And while our faculty has worked hard to find and erase the language of remediation in our campus documents, it remains unchanged on the CSU and ETS websites.

We have helped to change the landscape, and even though Early Start may be the new obstacle that keeps students from equality, we are optimistic that it can be overcome as long as people keep speaking up. We hope that our class doing so will have some effect on other universities’ use of the remedial label. Seeing the interest in our presentations at the 2012 IWCA and the 2013 CCCC conferences gave us courage, and we encourage others to speak out. Being engaged as FYW students doing research that matters to us positioned us not just as research subjects for “real” writing scholars to study, but as scholars ourselves who can create knowledge and rewrite the terms of our own education.

As more of us let our voices be heard, there may come a time when all students are treated as normal. The scarring of the past need not continue in the future—a future which will be determined not just by administrators but by brave students who speak out and start making a difference.

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