

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF BASIC WRITING?

Writing this at the end of my seventh full “volume year” and for what will be the last issue of *JBW* I edit, I feel as if I am in a different world from the one in 1994 when I went for several interviews to be chosen as co-editor of the journal. Then I was asked by each new interviewer, “What is the future of basic writing?” At that time, I knew of the political turmoil that had created the field, but I had no idea that in the seven years that I would co-edit *JBW*, first with Karen Greenberg and then with George Otte, the entire field would be transformed—in fact, the entire world would be transformed and basic writing would only be one small part of that transformation. Perhaps it is because I am in New York City and have faced the September 11th tragedy head on with students, colleagues, friends, and family, but I feel that I am writing from a totally new perspective, almost with new eyes. What once mattered so much has taken on even greater meaning: the mission of open admissions to extend access to higher education to a broader population in a world of terrorism, war, misunderstanding, and mistrust becomes even more critical. For me and many of my colleagues, during the days that followed September 11th, the college classroom presented a forum for frightened, overwhelmed students and teachers to talk and write about what had happened, what it meant, and how we might or should respond as individuals, as members of a society, and as a country as a whole. The classroom became a site of anger, fear, and ultimately healing, if not always of understanding in a world turned upside down.

The sense of global upheaval has been exacerbated by local changes, above all institutional changes within CUNY that mean open admissions as it was once envisioned is gone. How do I reconcile my belief in the power of education with the realization that the basic writing students with whom I worked for so many years are no longer part of the senior college environment in the CUNY system, the system in which I have spent most of my professional life? This is a difficult task. Preparing to step down from my editing position at *JBW*, I have decided to look at the journal itself to see if it can provide some answers and some hope for me. I thought that I would review the past seven years for you as well, the readers I have always respected and have gotten to know over the years.

When Karen and I first took over the editorship of *JBW*, we entered with some trepidation and enormous awe of the editors who had come before us. Most recently it had been Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller, and before them Lynn Troyka, Sarah D'Eloia, and Mina Shaughnessy herself. We knew the journal was the major voice for a field of teaching, learning, and scholarship that had only recently gained acceptance in the academic world. We entered into our responsibility with great pride. Our first issue included some of the best known voices in our field at that time: Lynn Z. Bloom, Alan C. Purves, Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau and Gordon Brossell, Joseph Harris, Lee Odell, and J. Milton Clark and Carol Peterson Haviland. The essays discussed the importance of the naming of the journal, tried to define the students we teach, and attempted to establish what the place of basic writing was and should be. In that issue, in what has become a seminal essay, Harris asked a question on which I have been reflecting ever since: "But what if students were viewed ... as dramatizing a problem that all of us face—that of finding a place to speak within a discourse that does not seem to ignore or leave behind the person you are outside of it? If this is so, then the job of a student writer [perhaps also of writing teacher?] is not to leave one discourse in order to enter another, but to take things that are usually kept apart and bring them together, to negotiate the gaps and conflicts between several competing discourses" (31). Although Harris's call to create a space to make conflicts visible has its own power, to me the task of bringing together things that are usually kept apart and negotiating the gaps and conflicts between them seems especially apt and urgent these days.

The third and what regretfully turned out to be last issue that Karen and I edited together dealt primarily with evaluation and assessment, issues that continue to be crucial ones for placement, retention, and mainstreaming of students. In the fall 1996 issue, George Otte and I started to co-edit the journal. Along with his vast knowledge of the field, George brought his energy and vision to begin the transformation of *JBW* into the more theoretical and political journal that it is today. After paying homage to our extraordinary founder with the excerpt from Jane Maher's biography, *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*, our first issue together featured essays on identity and politics in basic writing. We both participated in the CBW-sponsored workshop on basic writing at the 1997 CCCC in Phoenix entitled "Race, Class, and Culture in the Basic Writing Classroom" and were honored to be able to publish the essays that emerged from that remarkable day. In that Special Issue of the journal, along with Jeanne Gunner (now editor of *College English*) and Gerri McNenny, Gary Tate, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason, and Victor Villanueva, Jr. among others, we published Ira Shor's essay, "Our

Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality," in which Shor wrote about the Twin Towers of tracking and testing, "towers [which] rose from an American foundation of low-spending and hostile-management directed to non-elite students" (97). Shor accused basic writing of undergirding an undemocratic and elitist system as "a containment track below freshman comp, a gate below the gate" (94). That issue also contained the first cumulative index for *JBW* for the full first 15 volumes from 1975 to 1996.

In the next issue, Karen Greenberg and Terence Collins responded to Shor, reminding him that without basic writing, thousands of students would not have been admitted to colleges. Moreover, Collins with some prescience warned that we must "be careful in how we mount educational critique from the left, that in impolitic critique of Basic Writing, we risk crawling into bed with the very elements of right wing elitism which access programs and many Basic Writing programs were founded to counteract" (99).

I remember feeling torn by the powerful discussion that had ensued among these three great thinkers in our field. Strangely, though, I was left thinking, but what about the students? What do they think? How are they affected by this important debate? And then fortuitously, Marilyn Sternglass's remarkable study, *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level* was published and Sternglass was the keynote speaker at the 1998 CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS) Conference. We immediately approached her to see if she would be willing to revise her keynote speech for publication in the Spring 1999 issue of the journal. She agreed and along with this inspiring essay, we published in the same issue, for the first time in the journal's history, a review of this book (by Daniela Liese). In Sternglass's essay, she tells us about Joan, a student who had entered City College as a basic writer with a visual disability, family problems, and little confidence in herself. We are told that "Joan wrote her papers at a nightstand in her mother's room where the lighting was bad, using a blue ball-point pen.... She used paper with big lines, probably because of her vision problems" (14). We get to know and admire Joan and are delighted to read that after six years Joan graduated and found a job as a full-time counselor in a methadone clinic where she was earning over \$25,000 along with benefits. Sternglass brought this student alive and reinforced the life-transforming effect of higher education. After acknowledging the threat that basic writing and open admissions itself were facing, Sternglass asserted that the first year of college "should provide the opportunity for those students who have been inadequately prepared for the college experience to begin to acquire the skills and knowledge they need that will grow as they continue their studies Time is on the stu-

dents' side but they need to be given the requisite time" (20). Yet we suspected this was the very thing that they would soon be denied. And many of us feared that other students much like Joan would soon be denied admission to senior colleges.

Our next several issues examine what, in the Fall 1998 issue, Susanmarie Harrington and Linda Adler-Kassner termed "'The Dilemma that Still Counts': Basic Writing at a Political Crossroads." In that issue, Jeanne Gunner, and Laura Gray-Rosendale as well as Harrington and Adler-Kassner critiqued what has become the iconic discourse of Mina Shaughnessy — the errors and expectations we associate as defining points for our basic writers. We ended that issue by republishing Shaughnessy's seminal essay, "The Miserable Truth," her 1975 commentary on "the growing national indifference to open admissions" (107). That Fall 1998 issue marked the 20th anniversary of Shaughnessy's death, yet the extent to which conditions critiqued in her past writings (and in this piece in particular) mirrored our present seemed uncanny and unsettling.

Extraordinarily, in light of the political moves to eliminate basic writing and therefore basic writers themselves, we continued to receive submissions of essays telling us about basic writing programs that were not just surviving but innovating, programs that introduced technology (Susan Stan and Terence Collins, Spring 1998; Jeffrey T. Grabill, Fall 1998; Sibylle Gruber, Spring 1999; Laurie Grobman, Spring 1999; Judith Mara Kish, Fall 2000; Patricia J. McAlexander, Fall 2000), moved toward more dialogic/collaborative approaches (Pamela Gay, Spring 1998; Laurie Grobman, Fall 1999), brought together high schools and colleges (Mary Kary Crouch and Gerri McNenny, Fall 2000), taught basic writing through literature and through reading (Rosemary Winslow and Monica Mische, Fall 1996; Mary Hurley Moran, Fall 1997; Linda Von Bergen, Spring 2001), and looked at ESL basic writers as they moved through their college courses (Vivian Zamel, Fall 2000).

We published essays that examined basic writing through the perspectives of class (Martha Marina, Fall 1997; Candace Spigelman, Spring 1998), race and ethnicity (Eleanor Agnew and Margaret McLaughlin, Spring 1999; Nathaniel Norment, Jr, Fall 1997; Steve Lamos, Fall 2000, Raul Ybarra, Spring 2001), and gender (Beth Counihan, Spring 1999; Ann Tabachnikov, Spring 2001; Wendy Ryden, Spring 2001). We looked at basic writing from the perspective of those teaching the deaf (Ellen Biser, Linda Rubel, & Rose Marie Toscano, Spring 1998). And all of this rich analysis is now acquiring a dimension of meta-analysis: we have begun to historicize our field (Susanmarie Harrington and Linda Adler-Kassner, Fall 1998; Laura Gray-Rosendale, Fall 1998, Fall 1999). These are but a few of the remarkable essays we had had the privilege to publish over the past five years.

George and I had decided that the Spring 2000 issue of *JBW* would have to be a very special one to commemorate the new millennium and the first twenty-five years of our journal. We invited ten of the most important scholars in our field to comment on basic writing at this crucial moment. Not knowing how to order these extraordinary voices, we decided to present them in alphabetical order and so we have: Patricia Bizzell, Terence Collins and Melissa Blum, Keith Gilyard, William DeGenaro and Edward M. White, Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner, Susan Miller, Deborah Mutnick, Judith Rodby and Tom Fox, Ira Shor, and Lynn Quitman Troyka. Arbitrarily or not, then, it is Troyka, former editor of *JBW* herself, who has the last word in that issue, and chooses to throw her spotlight on the teachers: "Usually unpublished (who has the time given their teaching loads of four or even five BW and freshman English-classes a semester?), they are ones who, student by student, make life-altering positive differences in the lives of students" (120).

I am reminded of a story about one of those dedicated basic writing teachers. This teacher, Hannah Zilbergeld Gordon, who has taught at Hunter College, Queensborough Community College, and Trouro College (sometimes all in one semester), ran into a former student in a library. The student had a young toddler with her and when Hannah asked the child's name, the former student said, "Hannah. I named her after you – you changed my life." This is a part of what teaching basic writing is about.

At the beginning of the essay, I referred to Joseph Harris's work, and it is probably fitting that I end this essay by circling round to Harris once again. It was what he wrote in that first issue, which I had the privilege to co-edit, that, in fact, inspired this essay: Harris's idea that students dramatize a problem we all face "finding a place to speak within a discourse that does not seem to ignore or leave behind the person you are outside of it." It may be purely serendipitous that in this issue, the last I will co-edit, Harris appears again and that once again what he writes affects me profoundly. This time Harris writes, "... my experience has been that for people to work through their intellectual disagreements in a serious and sustained way, they need to feel at ease with one another – not as members of some abstract, organic, disciplinary community, but simply as interlocutors who have agreed to hear each other out at this time and in this place" (5). He goes on to insist that "our job is not to initiate students into a discrete world we think of ourselves as already inhabiting ... but rather to help them find ways to use texts, practices, and ideas we have to offer in discussing issues that matter to them." And so it is with *JBW*: we offer a forum for ideas and discussion of issues that matter to us and to the future of higher education, and in this journal "we have agreed to hear each other out at this time and in this place." Through our work, we

have committed ourselves to our profession and to our students. I have learned much from the seven years that I have spent as a co-editor with the journal. I thank Karen Greenberg and George Otte for the wonderful experience of working with them. I leave the journal still in George's very able hands and am delighted that he will be co-editing the next issue with Bonne August, a fine scholar and dedicated teacher in our field.

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