

## EDITORS' COLUMN

*JBW* began publication nearly 30 years ago. Its emergence both acknowledged the unprecedented scale of the Open Admissions project then transforming the City University of New York and other large public institutions and also extended the discussion about teaching these students, who represented a new constituency for public education. As we approach the milestone of our 30<sup>th</sup> year of publication, we might speculate about the sense of contingency that still characterizes the field after these many years. In "Paradigm Clashes Among Basic Writing Teachers: Sources of Conflict and a Call for Change," Ann Del Principe, writing about the profound differences between basic writing teachers whose teaching has been informed by scholarship in composition and basic writing, and those who have developed their pedagogy informally and sometimes in relative isolation, concludes, "There is some irony to the fact that the majority of basic writing courses may be taught by faculty who are unfamiliar with basic writing scholarship." Indeed there is. Moreover, not only are BW faculty still likely to be self-trained, they are especially likely to be untenured faculty, graduate students, adjuncts, "part-timers"—contingent faculty in a contingent field.

Basic Writing is the field that was supposed to go away, vanish, become obsolete as soon as the schools solved the "problem" of student literacy or until state mandated testing finally succeeded in bringing everyone to the "standard." Although reasonable people might have concluded long since that BW is here to stay, something—call it wishful thinking, political expediency, or persistent delusion—continues to impel the search for a simplistic answer or a shortcut that will render basic writing unnecessary. If BW programs are to face limitations, as they have in the California State system, it is more likely because of fiscal constraints and newly imposed limits to access than to the success of testing programs or a dramatic improvement in secondary education.

Texas in many ways has led the way in articulating very specific standards and requiring statewide testing to insure that students are competent. In "Teaching and Learning in Texas: Accountability Testing, Language, Race, and Place," Susan Naomi Bernstein reminds us that Texas has provided the model not only for other states individually but for national policy as well. At the same time, she describes with considerable poignancy the situation of her Latino/a students who, despite having met the high school standard, discover when they enter college how limited their preparation and their education have been, specifically because of the pressure to teach to the tests. Bernstein's piece illustrates not only the constraints the state mandates have placed on the high school curricu-

lum, but also the failure of the system to implement expectations for students that acknowledge or nurture the strengths they have brought with them or that challenge their capacity for intellectual growth.

Ann Del Principe's piece, "Paradigm Clashes" also considers expectations, both the constricted expectations that some BW teachers or programs have for students and the correspondingly low expectations for those hired to teach basic writing. Del Principe speaks for those teachers of courses labeled "remedial," "developmental," or "basic" (and often assigned zero credits) who conceive of their work as the beginning of students' college experience, and not as a pre-college trial period. Rather than settle for the minimum competence often encouraged by standardized tests, they design curriculum characterized by rigor, intellectual challenge, and high expectations, as well as by carefully structured scaffolding and support. Del Principe considers the substantial obstacles to making this approach the norm, and while she is unable to offer a conclusive solution, she offers a deeply felt and strongly argued statement of the problem.

Both Virginia Crisco in "Rethinking Language and Culture on the Institutional Borderland" and Sara Biggs Chaney in "A Study of Teacher Error: Misreading Resistance in the Basic Writing Classroom" discuss expectations with an eye to repositioning students in the institution so that they may not only assume genuine authority over their own education but also have a discernible impact on the institution and the experience of students overall. Like Bernstein, Crisco looks specifically at a Latino/a population, while Chaney's essay moves from a case study of a resistant student to a more general analysis of the place colleges and universities assign to students and the possibilities for repositioning them.

Jane Maher's subject, teaching in a women's prison, involves the most complex and controlling set of physical and psychological constraints. Maher describes students whose lives, even before prison, were subject to the buffeting of every imaginable negative force, and who now experience almost total control by their environment. Still, here where expectations might be the lowest, education can be, as Maher demonstrates, truly transformative.

Like Bernstein's piece, these essays by Crisco, Chaney, and Maher show students reflecting on their own education, as well as on their goals, their learning, and the obstacles to learning. In many ways, Basic Writing as a field has moved from dependence on a set program of study to a recognition that students need to engage the process, as Chaney, Crisco, and Bernstein argue. In a way, we have resisted the enforced contingency that characterizes BW programs by embracing instead a deliberate contingency in our theorizing. This is not because we lack knowledge, but rather because we now understand the need to

make room in the work for the students, not only as objects but instead as subjects, as actors, as players in our curriculum, pedagogy, and institutions. The making of knowledge in composition, to use Stephen North's, term, has become the work not only of teachers but also of students. Exactly how to accomplish this in any one specific setting or situation is, we now understand, not fixed but to some degree contingent. More than 20 years ago, Ira Shor began to argue for student empowerment and attempted to persuade teachers that transferring power in the classroom made learning possible. As Virginia Crisco in this issue and Laura Gray-Rosendale and her co-authors in an earlier issue (22.1, Spring 2003) have shown, however, the way to accomplish this transfer and the learning that it enables is not always and everywhere the same. Students' cultures, besides their immediate effect on the students themselves, affect the classroom profoundly. Our work needs to acknowledge this reality. Seen this way, contingency becomes a strength—an enabling constraint.

Sounding once again the theme of constraints and expectations but turning for a moment to this journal, we are happy to announce—although readers have surely already observed—the debut of the first stage of *JBW*'s new cover and interior design. Looking for a way to update the appearance of *JBW* but constrained by limited funds, we asked Judith Wilde, who directs the Graphic Design Program here at Kingsborough Community College, if students in the program might be given the task of redesigning the cover and logo as a class assignment. After some discussion of constraints and expectations, Professor Wilde and Olga Mezhibovskaya, an instructor in the program who had actually begun her Kingsborough career as a new immigrant in our ESL program, presented the assignment to their students. We found many of the designs appealing, but finally chose Kimon Frank's because it seemed to characterize the fresh, slightly edgy quality we were looking for. To Kimon Frank, the student designer whose work was selected—and who, coincidentally, had been a successful student in KCC's basic writing program—our admiration and thanks.

—**Bonne August and Rebecca Mlynarczyk**