

EDITORS' COLUMN

As we commemorate the publication of the twenty-fifth volume of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, it seems appropriate to reflect on the state of basic writing today. Thirty-one years have passed since this journal was founded in 1975 by Mina Shaughnessy—*JBW*'s first editor—along with eight female colleagues at CUNY's City College of New York.¹ In some ways, the field of basic writing, always contested and endlessly under construction, appears in 2006 to be besieged from all sides. In recent years, the United States has experienced a proliferation of government-mandated high-stakes tests at all educational levels. Not only have these tests caused many students to be labeled as not competent in writing, but they have also influenced definitions of competence in writing. Testing formats that are economical or logistically convenient for large-scale administration have often led to a constricted, impoverished definition of writing, thus devaluing the very competence they were designed to ensure.

To further complicate the situation for the faculty and students who are affected by these problematic definitions of competence in writing, legislatures in several states have passed laws forbidding "remedial classes" in four-year institutions or prohibiting academic credit for basic writing courses. CUNY itself, whose Open Admissions policy was implemented in 1970, has also undergone changes in recent years. On May 26, 1998 (and again on January, 25, 1999, after a legal challenge to the first vote), CUNY's Board of Trustees voted to phase out all "remediation" in its four-year colleges by January 2001. In practice, this meant that only students who passed all three of the University's assessment tests (reading, writing, and math) upon entrance could be admitted to a bachelor's degree program in one of the four-year colleges. Others would have to begin their studies in an associate's degree program or in one of the University's community colleges.

Despite these setbacks, however, the field of basic writing seems to be experiencing a resurgence of energy and commitment from scholars and practitioners across the country. In response to legislative mandates banning "remediation" from four-year institutions, faculty committees are developing creative and academically sound programs to offer students BW support as well as academic credit. Often, this involves removing "remediation" from separate "skills" departments and instead offering regular English Department courses, which carry at least partial academic credit. For descriptions of such innovative

¹ Sarah D'Eloia, Virginia Epperson, Barbara Quint Gray, Isabella Halsted, Valerie Krishna, Patricia Laurence, Nancy Lay, and Betty Rizzo.

approaches, see “Integrating Reading and Writing: A Response to the Basic Writing ‘Crisis’” by Sugie Goen and Helen Gillotte-Tropp (*JBW* 22.2: 90-113); “It’s Not Remedial: Re-envisioning Pre-First-Year College Writing” by Heidi Huse, Jenna Wright, Anna Clark, and Tim Hacker (*JBW* 24.2: 26-52); and “Arrested Development: Revising Remediation at John Jay College of Criminal Justice” by Mark McBeth in this issue.

Another positive sign is the development of graduate programs or courses in basic writing (see Barbara Gleason’s article in this issue) and an impressive number of print resources including the second edition of *The Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Basic Writing*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Gregory R. Glau and published in 2005. Yet another sign of interest and commitment is the CBW (Conference on Basic Writing) listserv (<<http://www.asu.edu/clas/english/composition/cbw/listserv.html#subscribe>>), which enrolls approximately 450 members and has seen many spirited exchanges in recent months on such topics as course and curriculum design, assessment policies, and pedagogical practices.

To help us take stock of the current state of basic writing, we invited a number of scholars to contribute to this issue. The articles that follow describe important trends in BW today and assess causes for concern and for celebration as we look ahead. In “Back to the Future: Contextuality and the Construction of the Basic Writer’s Identity in *JBW* 1999-2005,” Laura Gray-Rosendale examines how the identity of basic writers has been portrayed in this journal in recent years. She follows three lines of thought, each of which uses a contextual model to construct the basic writer’s identity. While Gray-Rosendale sees an admirable and salutary focus on students’ own voices and self-identification, she also identifies a danger: where attention is so narrowly focused and contextualized, it becomes more difficult to recognize the impact of broader patterns, affinities, or policies or to form alliances for public, political purposes.

This public, outward-looking face of basic writing is precisely where Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington focus their analysis in “In the Here and Now: Public Policy and Basic Writing.” Examining the premises of several influential policy documents, they argue that BW professionals must learn how to address such public statements effectively. Extending a line of thought developed by Stanford Goto in his 2001 *JBW* article, “Basic Writing and Policy Reform: Why We Keep Talking Past Each Other” (21.2: 1-20), Adler-Kassner and Harrington advocate eschewing academic complexity in favor of courses of action that are strategic, evidence-based, and—most urgently—immediate.

In “Reasoning the Need: Graduate Education and Basic Writing,” Barbara Gleason traces the history of the master’s degree program in basic writing at City

College, CUNY, initiated by Mina Shaughnessy. Although policies, both local and national, come and go and programs shift and evolve, BW students remain—in degree programs, college preparatory programs, GED programs, and secondary schools. In arguing for the importance of master's programs to prepare not only the instructors but also the administrators, researchers, and scholars of basic writing, Gleason makes the case for the significance of BW scholarship and the necessity for it to be recognized by the larger field of composition and rhetoric and by the institutional bodies where it is studied and formulated and where it is implemented in practice.

The next two articles look at specific basic writing curricula that have been developed by thoughtful and well-informed faculty with the goal of better meeting students' needs and, at the same time, responding to evolving institutional circumstances. In "Arrested Development: Revising Remediation at John Jay College of Criminal Justice," Mark McBeth begins by reviewing the history of basic writing within the CUNY system and then goes on to describe a new course at his college that provides students with a rich intellectual experience while also acknowledging their need to pass the gatekeeping writing exam. This curriculum, according to McBeth, "gives students and instructors a curriculum that does not teach *to* the test but, instead, *with* it."

Working within quite a different context at Texas A&M University at Commerce, Shannon Carter, in "Redefining Literacy as a Social Practice," describes an innovative new curriculum designed to help basic writers develop "rhetorical dexterity." Based on both the New Literacy Studies and activity theory, this carefully sequenced approach begins by having basic writers analyze a discourse they know well, such as fan fiction or football. Students gradually build on this work until they are eventually asked to apply what they have learned from analyzing familiar discourses to understanding the relatively unfamiliar conventions of academic discourse. In her conclusion, Carter argues that through participating in this pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity, students gain "a new understanding of the way literacy actually lives—a metacognitive ability to negotiate multiple literacies."

The multilingual, multicultural nature of student populations at colleges across the country—one of the defining features of the early Open Admissions era—is even more pronounced in 2006. In "Teaching Multilingual Learners: Beyond the ESOL Classroom and Back Again," Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack take a close look, through the lens of their own qualitative and longitudinal studies of former ESOL students, at how such students fare in so-called mainstream courses. They highlight the students' resourcefulness in fulfilling course requirements and emphasize just how much these students have to gain from being asked to do a

substantial amount of writing in courses across the curriculum. Their conclusion is one that all of us should find heartening: “when faculty transform their pedagogy to meet the needs of ESOL students, all students benefit.”

Despite the signs of renewed energy and activity that are evident in this special issue of *JBW*, it is important to remain vigilant. The political climate in the United States in 2006 is a conservative one. With politicians and boards of trustees increasingly involved in decisions on educational policy, we should not be too sanguine about the future of basic writing. As Gray-Rosendale and Adler-Kassner and Harrington urgently remind us, teachers, researchers, and administrators who share a commitment to providing educational opportunity and sound pedagogical practice for a diverse student population must be actively, strategically, and passionately involved in the decisions that will affect the future of basic writing and basic writers.

With this issue, we welcome a new Associate Editor, Hope Parisi of CUNY’s Kingsborough Community College. Hope’s career has centered on basic writing and composition in her work as the Academic Director of Kingsborough’s Reading and Writing Center since 1995, as instructor of a graduate practicum for KCC teaching interns, in her published articles, and currently, in her contributions to a soon-to-be-launched central-CUNY website on the CUNY ACT Writing Exam. She will be closely involved with editorial processes and will be working directly with authors of accepted manuscripts. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, a Research Associate at New York University’s Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, will be joining our Editorial Review Board.

Finally, it is with regret but also pride that we say goodbye to Johannah Rodgers, one of our two editorial assistants. In fall 2006, Johannah completed her Ph.D. in Composition at the CUNY Graduate Center and accepted a position at Manhattan College. Congratulations, Johannah, and thanks for your many contributions to *JBW* in the past three years!

—**Rebecca Mlynarczyk** and **Bonne August**