EDITORS' COLUMN

As the Fall 2008 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* goes to press, we celebrate a historic U.S. presidential election while, at the same time, reeling from a global financial crisis and economic downturn. The current political and economic climate differs dramatically from the world of the late 1960s and early 1970s that gave rise to the basic writing movement. And in this increasingly uncertain world, it is difficult to anticipate BW's future. Yet the underlying rationale for this field—the need for a well-educated and literate citizenry—is more pressing than ever. And so the question arises: How can we, as practitioners and scholars in the field of basic writing, work most effectively to support and promote this end? Surely, one of the keys is to communicate more effectively—with one another, with the wider world of university administrators and public policy makers, and with the general public. The articles in this issue suggest some promising directions for this wide-ranging conversation.

One way to begin is to share what goes on in our classrooms and institutions with one another. The first three articles accomplish this goal by using qualitative, ethnographic approaches to look closely and analytically at the experiences of individual students or teachers. In the lead article, "Roberta; or, the Ambiguities: Tough Love and High-Stakes Assessment at a Two-Year College in North Georgia," Spencer Salas reports the insights gained through a five-semester study of a full-time, temporary adjunct (and former community college student). Though there have been numerous studies of individual ESL or BW students, many of them with an activist orientation, comparable attention has not been paid to their teachers. This article, characterized by the kind of thick description advocated by Clifford Geertz among others, paints a portrait of Roberta, a hard-working, dedicated, and effective ESL teacher (as judged by the consistently high passing rates of students in her classes). But, as Salas's narrative unfolds, we see that she, like her students, is enmeshed in a web of seemingly contradictory forces—many of them related to the complex system of assessments students must pass to exit her course. According to Salas, Roberta has dealt with these contradictions by "improvising" a construction of her professional identity in which she sees gatekeeping as advocacy, embracing both roles as she attempts to shepherd students through her course and into the college mainstream. But, at the end of a tough semester, the emotional cost of this complex and improvised professional identity is clear.

In the next article, Nancy Pine focuses on the experiences of a single student enrolled in a service learning section of a basic writing course. "Service Learning in a Basic Writing Class: A Best Case Scenario" looks at a student called William,

who used his required service—tutoring a first-grader in a local elementary school—as a bridge to academic writing. Unlike his classmates, William chose this section of the BW course because of the required tutoring component, and he was the only student in the class who used his tutoring experience as one of several "texts" in the required research essay on literacy or education. In her conclusion, the author raises important questions about how to effectively integrate service with academic writing. As often happens in ethnographic studies, we are left with important teaching problems to contemplate.

"The Role of Talk in Small Writing Groups: Building Declarative and Procedural Knowledge for Basic Writers," like the previous article, focuses on one student's approach to writing and revising a required essay. In this case, the emphasis is on the role of talk in a small writing group led by a skilled teaching assistant. Using the linguistic frame of conversational analysis, author Sonja Launspach includes relevant excerpts from the small group talk to show how the student, Ricki, gradually and with guidance from her group leader and peers deepens her understanding of the essay assignment and the conventions of academic discourse. In analyzing this case, Launspach distinguishes between declarative knowledge—knowing *what* to do—and procedural knowledge—knowing *how* to do it (in this case, knowing what strategies to use in accomplishing a particular writing task). Readers are able to observe Ricki's apprenticeship as she begins to acquire the meta-discourses that will help her move successfully into the academic mainstream, supporting the author's conclusion that "for basic or inexperienced writers, access to talk in peer groups enables students to construct meaning in social interaction through collaborative learning, facilitating their participation in the larger academic conversation."

Much is to be gained from qualitative research as reported in articles such as these and a similar case study in our Spring 2008 issue.[1] By creating detailed and nuanced portraits of individual teachers' and students' experiences, such articles help us to see specific experiences of teaching and learning within a wider social and educational context. To use the terminology of Donald Schön,[2] most teachers are skilled at reflecting *in* action, responding to the constant questions and decisions that arise in the course of a teaching day. But studies such as the ones just mentioned provide a valuable opportunity to step back and reflect *on* action, entering into other teaching worlds to reflect on what is happening there

[1] Roozen, Kevin. "Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Literacy: Mapping the Interplay of Curricular and Extracurricular Literate Activities." *JBW* 27.1 (2008): 5-34.
[2] Schön, Donald A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action.* New York: Basic Books, 1983.

and consider the social and educational issues being raised. We carry these worlds with us as we re-enter our own classrooms, and they often help us to see more clearly or question more incisively. They are, in an important sense, part of our ongoing professional conversation.

Yet, as some have rightly argued, research that focuses on the individual will not get us very far when reasoning with administrators and public policy makers. Laura Gray Rosendale makes this point in her 2006 *JBW* article.[3] While recognizing the importance of ethnographic studies of individuals or small groups, she feels that if the field focuses too much on local knowledge and individual cases, we run the risk "of abandoning the important national and global concerns that have defined our discipline for many years and have been fundamental to making successful arguments on behalf of our students" (19). If we are to effectively make our case with those who control the budgets and set the public priorities, we need to speak their language—a language of outcomes and pass rates, a language based on numbers. And this is exactly what Sugie Goen-Salter does in "Critiquing the Need to Eliminate Remediation: Lessons from San Francisco State." Reviewing the long, unsuccessful history of the California State University system's attempt to eliminate remediation from its colleges, Goen-Salter and her colleagues at San Francisco State asked if they could "eliminate the 'need for remediation' by providing students with an enriched literacy experience during their first crucial year of college." This enriched experience integrates the teaching of reading and writing and enables students to fulfill both the remediation and first-year English requirements within one year. In the seven years since the first pilot section of the Integrated Reading/Writing Program, Goen-Salter and her colleagues have assiduously collected comparative data on "outcome measures" to document the program's success in terms of retention rates, test scores, pass rates, and dis-enrollment rates. These data, often expressed in charts and tables, speak effectively to state and university officials. What began as a small pilot program is now the approved, credit-bearing course of study for all incoming students at San Francisco State judged in need of remediation. Goen-Salter ends with a powerful call for BW scholars and teachers: "I hope we can find in this story the grounds to advocate for higher education as *the* appropriate location for basic writing and to advocate, in turn, for the resources necessary to theorize, develop, and sustain a rich variety of approaches to basic writing instruction—instruction that might justifiably focus on reading as well as writing."

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[3] "Back to the Future: Contextuality and the Construction of the Basic Writer's Identity in *JBW* 1999-2005." JBW 25.2 (2006): 5-26.

As we ponder the future of basic writing, it is important to remember, and at times to reassess, the past. In "A New World: Redefining the Legacy of Min-Zhan Lu," Brian Ray takes another look at the well-publicized debate of the 1990s in which Min-Zhan Lu, among others, questioned the legacy of basic writing's founding mother, Mina Shaughnessy. In her 1991 *JBW* article, "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy," Lu criticized Shaughnessy's approach to student error as one that isolated language from meaning and minimized cultural and linguistic differences. Supporters of Shaughnessy rose to her defense, but the debate eventually ended in stalemate. In this article, Ray proposes that the views of Shaughnessy and Lu are actually not so far apart when viewed through the concept of linguistic charity, which he feels "offers a refreshing new direction for discussion regarding the ambiguous and often controversial role of Standard English in our pedagogies."

This issue of *JBW* concludes with News and Announcements. Readers are asked to respond to the National Survey of Basic Writing Programs (http://comp-pile.org/cbw/), a user-friendly questionnaire designed to collect facts about the current state of basic writing—where it takes place, what constituencies it serves, how it is changing.

Finally, we return to the question with which we began: How can researchers committed to basic writing work to promote the best interests of the students we serve? It is important for scholars to do what we advise our students to do—consider purpose and audience when writing. The articles in this issue suggest that authors are following this advice, reaching out to different audiences with different methods and writing styles, reflecting on the past history of the field and suggesting positive directions for future classroom approaches, research, and social activism in 2009 and beyond.

—**Rebecca Mlynarczyk** and **Hope Parisi**