EDITORS' COLUMN

This special issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* is entirely dedicated to the proceedings of the 2014 Language, Culture, and Society conference which was held at Bronx Community College of the City University of New York. The theme of the conference, storytelling and academic discourse, sought to generate conversations around questions that are fundamental for writing instruction: How do we conceive academic discourse? How do our conceptions inform our teaching practices? Are academic discourse and storytelling compatible? If so, what are some points of contact, and how can they benefit our students? How do we take into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of our students as we bring academic discourse—and possibly storytelling—into our classrooms?

While these questions are certainly not new, they are all the more relevant today, given the exponential increase of linguistic diversity that characterizes current demographic trends and given the persistence of a shocking achievement gap. As more and more students find themselves struggling with the demands of college writing—and in too many cases, dropping out as a result of this struggle—it is important for basic writing scholars and practitioners to question traditional conceptions of academic discourse and their implications for access to higher education. The articles in this special issue take storytelling as the starting point for devising innovative theoretical and pedagogical strategies for making academic discourse more inclusive.

In "Storytelling and Academic Discourse: Including More Voices in the Conversation," keynote speaker Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk contextualizes the theme of this special issue in a series of conversations that have led to theoretical milestones within composition studies. In keeping with the theme, Mlynarczyk's contextualization is embedded in a story she tells about how discussions of "personal, narrative writing" versus "so-called academic discourse" have shaped her career as scholar, writing instructor, and textbook author. Mlynarczyk became "fascinated with the stories students tell" in the 1980's, after she began teaching ESL at CUNY's Hunter College. This fascination led her to question the "false dichotomy" between "personal and academic writing" since the early 1990s. In the early 2000s, she reexamined "influential debates about the relative merits of 'personal' or 'academic' writing between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae." This reexamination led to her conviction—which she still holds today—"that students cannot write a strong, convincing argument unless they have first grappled with the subject in a deeply personal way." In this special issue,

she argues compellingly that blurring the boundaries between storytelling and academic discourse is consistent with a translingual approach to writing instruction "that insists on viewing language differences and fluidities as resources to be preserved, developed, and utilized" (304).

My article, "Bridging Literacy Practices through Storytelling, Translanguaging and an Ethnographic Partnership," delves further into the notion that "language differences and fluidities are resources" for the acquisition of academic discourse. I tell the story of a learning community I designed to increase success rates among Spanish-speaking ESL students at Bronx Community College by linking an ESL course to a Spanish composition course for native speakers. In addition to teaching the ESL course, I participated in the Spanish composition class as a language learner and formed an "ethnographic partnership with his students" based on storytelling to explore how notions of effective academic discourse at Bronx Community College vary from the notions students had to abide by in the secondary schools they attended in the Dominican Republic. This exploration placed students in the position of experts within academic discourse, made them aware of clashing discursive conventions they need to navigate as transnational citizens, and allowed me and the Spanish instructor to refine our translingual pedagogical alliance.

In "Storytelling as Academic Discourse: Bridging the Cultural-Linguistic Divide in the Era of the Common Core," Ching Ching Lin takes on the "narrow construct of academic discourse" promoted by this educational policy which "prioritizes argument as 'the most important skill of incoming students'" and often dismisses storytelling as an inferior form of academic discourse." Drawing on Bahktin's theory of dialogism, she argues that in order to move away from a "false dichotomy" between narrative and argumentative writing, a "dialogized notion of storytelling" should be seen as a "generic template for academic discourse that is flexible enough to represent 'various points of view, conceptual horizons' . . . [and] 'expressive accents.'" To illustrate this point, Lin discusses how she, as a high school teacher serving a multilingual student population, was able to engage her students in a dialogized storytelling process that actually helped them meet the learning outcomes mandated by the Common Core curriculum.

In "Staging an Essay: Play and Playwriting for Redirecting Habits of Mind," David Ellis and Megan Murtha look at storytelling and academic discourse from the perspective of playwriting. Building on cutting-edge findings from neuroscience, they argue that an excessive emphasis on certain rhetorical mechanics of traditional academic discourse, such as the five para-

graph essay and the use of drills, creates a "mental set effect" which interferes with "the acquisition of the critical thinking needed for college writing." In order to break this "mental set effect," they have found it productive to scaffold the process of writing an academic essay with playwriting exercises where abstract ideas are turned into fictional characters which students put in conversation with each other. Using excerpts from their students' writing, Ellis and Murtha show us that by imagining and embodying ideas through characters in dialogue, students "conceptualize a more cohesive understanding" of the ideas they grapple with in their essays. By doing so, students are able to enter the "parlor" of academic discourse, which, drawing on Burke, Ellis and Murtha conceive as "an imagined physical space where embodied writers or ideas can be placed in conversation with each other.

Shoba Bandi-Rao and Mary Sepp's article, "Designing a Digital Story Assignment for Basic Writers Using the TPCK Framework," brings issues of technology and multimodality into the conversations of this special issue. These authors propose digital stories as a way to bridge the divide between academic discourse and storytelling because in this day and age, a "mono-modal approach" to academic literacy, "that emphasizes printed text, reading comprehension, writing, and vocabulary," is not sufficient to meet "students' discursive needs," which involve multimodal literacies. In addition, they show that digital stories can be particularly effective in helping basic writers engage with academic discourse by promoting self-efficacy and self-directed learning. Their discussion of how they incorporated a digital storytelling assignment into a basic writing curriculum reveals "multimedia resources catered to the needs of students through the use of images, storyboards, and recorded narratives" and that "these tasks helped students describe with details, organize and develop ideas, and review their writing mindfully."

While the strategies each article presents for making academic discourse more inclusive vary greatly in terms of theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical approaches, a common thread runs through all the arguments. In order to increase success among basic writers, scholars, instructors, and policy makers need to move away from narrow conceptions of academic discourse that do not reflect the sociolinguistic complexity of our current student population. Whether it be through translanguaging, dialogism, playwriting, or digital storytelling, these articles make the following point loud and clear: far from being incommensurable, storytelling and academic discourse are complementary for creating meaningful intellectual conversations that can include more non-mainstream students.

—Andrea Parmegiani, Guest Editor