

Editors' Column

The retirement from active teaching of several *JBW* board members and the increase in submissions by graduate students who may not even have been born when we taught our first basic writing class, remind us of the passing of time. Indeed, it is now more than twenty years since open admissions programs in American universities proliferated. And it is more than a decade since basic writing as a practical and theoretical discipline began with the publication of *Errors and Expectations* and the first issues of *JBW*.

Recalling the temper of the classroom in those early days with memory's notorious selectivity we may be tempted to focus only on the approaches and practices which have survived into the present, forgetting the many "bright ideas" which seemingly vanished along the way. For example, we can remember the unbound enthusiasm of university vice-presidents, deans, and even some teaching faculty in the late sixties and early seventies for "teaching machines" and "programmed learning." Intellectually supported by the then still fashionable psychology of behaviorism, this brave new technology promised a tireless, mechanical alternative to grammar instruction and drill that would save money (no more teachers!) into the bargain.

Ironically enough, when we contemplate those sites where the teaching of basic writing is perhaps growing most rapidly today—in the workplace and in prisons—we see the revival of these outmoded and reductive pedagogies, primarily in computer programs devised by self-styled "experts" with no knowledge of our field and its evolution over the past decades. Of course, the jargon has changed. "Individualized instruction," "empowerment," and other buzzwords have replaced the Skinnerian slogans of twenty years ago, but the technological fix to provide the "drill and practice" that students supposedly need in order to "learn how to write" seems to have returned, stronger than ever.

Part of our professional responsibility as teachers and scholars of

basic writing is to exercise our sense of history. If we do not make the effort to distinguish between what is new and valid from what is old and discredited in the applications of technology to basic writing, who else will? Who else can?

We turn now to a brief summary of the articles in the current issue. If there is any latent theme, it would be the awareness that, among all the resources and instructional techniques we count on to develop our students' writing abilities, we need look no further than the cultivation of our students' own voices, and all that this cultivation implies, as the most significant and comprehensive vehicle.

In the first article, Brenda Greene finds that basic writers can identify and propose solutions to writing problems, both their own and others, on the lexical, syntactical, and semantic levels of discourse, when they are motivated and given adequate opportunities to do so. The results of a research project reveal that basic writers need to see their texts as meaningful and worthy of being read, and to this end, should be given frequent opportunities to become experienced readers of texts, using their intuitive awareness about textual problems to learn more about the structure of language and the recurring patterns in writing.

Eleanor Agnew reports that former basic writers perform quite well in the workplace some five to ten years later for several reasons: they are praised and motivated to do so through such incentives as job security, reputation, and promotion; they are given enough time to write with flexible deadlines; they are free from final, irrevocable grades; they often seek and gain the informal help of others; and, most significantly, they have a thorough knowledge of their subject matter and their audience.

Carol Peterson Haviland and J. Milton Clark present the results of a three-year project that asked students to collaborate directly in producing more effective essay questions, particularly with respect to their content, phrasing, and number, for the college's exit examination from the basic writing program. The results of the study brought significant shifts in testing procedures and practices: the college abandoned the use of essay questions altogether and adopted the use of a reading passage to which students would respond.

Andrea Lunsford argues for a new construction of writing, a new scene of writing, based on the awareness that knowledge, self, and intellectual property are socially constructed on a fundamental level. As such, writing and the field of composition studies must evoke scenes not of individualism or assimilation, but of collaborative construction and transformation, scenes which ultimately

challenge the entire academic hierarchy and status quo of the university.

Nancy Lay reflects on how she learned to speak English as a child by helping out after school in her father's grocery store, frequented by customers from many lands. The store became a "living language lab," with a multitude of opportunities to listen carefully, try out new vocabulary, clarify and repeat words and phrases, and gain confidence. Professor Lay goes on to reflect on the comparative virtues and shortcomings of college language labs and conversation "circles" using native speakers.

Zoe Keithley reports on the results of an extensive questionnaire showing that among instructional factors and activities that basic writing students experience as most helpful in improving their writing are the acceptance of their own voice as a key tool and the connection between speaking and writing as a major working principle.

In a classroom assignment whose methodology is borrowed from the social sciences, Caryl Sills introduces inexperienced college writers to the process of arguing from firsthand experience by means of a collaborative process of data collection, analysis, summary, and selection of evidence for drawing conclusions, all leading to a hypothesis proposing change or approval of the status quo.

Word has just reached us and we are pleased to announce that Min-zhan Lu, assistant professor of English at Drake University, has been selected as winner of the third Mina P. Shaughnessy Writing Award, given for the best article published in *JBW* over the past two years. The winning article, "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence," appeared in Spring 1991 *JBW*. The award carries a cash prize of \$500 now provided by our former editor, Lynn Quitman Troyka, in memory of the founding editor of *JBW*. The panel of judges consisted of Nell Ann Pickett, Hinds Community College, Raymond, MS (Chair); Gary Tate, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX; and Elizabeth Ariel Berger, Greenfield Community College, Greenfield, MA. We greatly appreciate their hard work during the summer in choosing the winning entry.

—Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller