

Editors' Column

Although the phrase, “basic writing,” is used primarily in the United States and Canada, the complex reality to which it refers is increasingly a worldwide concern, as we were reminded during a writing workshop in Besançon, France this past August. Colleagues informed us that there is now a numerous cohort of adolescents and older who speak fluent French, but “cannot write” well enough to meet the demands of secondary and higher education in a modern technological society. Furthermore, several of the participants in our workshop taught in programs for members of ethnic and racial minorities for whom the acquisition of “literacy” in French raised complex questions of personal and cultural identity. Sound familiar?

It seems unfortunate that the *JBW* discourse community, which more or less overlaps with teachers of ESL, does not yet include teachers of “basic writing” who are working in French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish throughout Europe and South America. There are also colleagues engaged in similar enterprises in Israel, China, South Africa, and other countries in Africa and Asia.

Our visit to France reminds us that we should not only perceive basic writing as a layer of the “English” curriculum in North America, but also as a more universal enabling discipline which exists both within and across linguistic and cultural lines. We would welcome submissions which embody or extend this awareness.

We turn now to a brief summary of the articles in the present issue. If there is any motif or emergent theme, it could be the various resonances of Mina Shaughnessy’s work.

In the first article, Ann Berthoff argues that teaching reading and writing is not, as the deans would have it, a matter of correcting errors or teaching the five-paragraph essay, but a philosophical enterprise founded on notions of the *Ineinandersein* (in-one-

anotherness) of the personal and public, the now and then, the here and there, the particular and the universal, and the individual and the group, and where language is a process of making meaning and interpretation is a logical condition of signification.

Patricia Laurence presents the view that recent reassessments of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* and the field of composition in the 1970s overlook the historical and political forces of institutions that helped shape the rhetoric and methodology of the individual practitioners, scholars, and researchers at the time.

Reconsidering Shaughnessy's metaphor of likening the experience of basic writers to that of "uncultured natives" under European colonization, Pamela Gay advocates "a new pedagogy of voice in a dialogized classroom space that we keep constructing and reconstructing together from our different locations, a nexus of identities."

In a reply to Patricia Bizzell (*JBW*, Fall '91) about the uses of political issues in the composition classroom, Bill Bolin warns that teachers can guide students too strongly toward certain political views at the cost of depriving these students of a more real sense of empowerment by sharing classroom authority.

Emil Roy presents research to validate and refine a computerized system for grading placement exams by comparing computerized ratings to holistic scores, grades earned in writing courses, and other measures. The study concludes that, while textual traits linked to levels of writing ability can be quantified, further research is needed with larger populations and greater numbers of textual traits to sort levels of writing ability accurately.

Jane Hindman contends that our evaluations of student writing come not from some transcendent or fixed quality of excellence, but from our own discursive practices by which we authorize ourselves within our own discourse communities. She argues that for basic writers to be agents of their own authorization, they need explicit knowledge of these practices, and proposes a language-centered curriculum to accomplish this purpose.

In the final article, Lynée Gaillet draws between the 19th century Scottish philosopher, George Jardine, and modern basic writing theorists and practitioners, particularly Mina Shaughnessy, with respect to their creating similar plans to meet the needs of students who did not possess the prerequisites necessary to benefit from traditional modes of instruction.

— *Bill Bernhardt* and *Peter Miller*