

Editors' Column

We are honored to have been selected as the new editors of *JBW*. The previous editors—Mina P. Shaughnessy, Sarah D'Eloia Fortune, Lynn Quitman Troyka, and Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller—have shaped the professional lives of just about every teacher who ever taught basic writing. From these five editors, our profession inherits a rich intellectual history, a critical consciousness, and an obsession with crafting powerful prose.

In 1975, Mina Shaughnessy began *JBW* in response to a momentous change in higher education. We, too, begin our editorship during a time of change and turmoil, a time of reassessment, restructuring, and reevaluation. In her first *JBW* "Editor's Column," written exactly twenty years ago this month, Mina wrote the following about the journal's focus:

The plight of such students—of young men and women who want to be in college, who have the intelligence to do college work, but who are not skilled enough when they arrive on campus to survive in a rigorously academic environment—has begun to reshape the freshman English course in many colleges, linking it to the work being done in other disciplines such as linguistics and psychology, and most important, challenging teachers who came into their departments of English to teach poems or novels, plays or criticism, to take a closer look at the job of teaching writing.

Two decades and thousands of scholarly articles later, many students are still experiencing this "plight." And many teachers still need "to take a closer look at the job of teaching writing."

Despite all of the critical insights into writing gained from research in composition, psychology, and applied linguistics, many basic writing courses are still remedial, many writers are still subjected to skills/drills pedagogies, and many schools continue to define student writers as "basic" based on their ability to identify and correct errors on multiple-choice tests. Our goal for *JBW* thus remains much the same as Mina's: to provide a forum for colleagues to discuss programs and

pedagogies that enable students to use writing to evolve a more thoughtful and satisfying intellectual life, in and out of the academy. We also believe that *JBW* plays an important role in enabling us to examine and reflect upon the nature of our students, the structure of our programs, and the politics of our profession.

JBW serves a unique readership: teachers, researchers, and administrators dedicated to helping college students improve their writing skills and thus achieve full participation in the academic community. In the past, these readers have expressed a desire for the journal to address the particular needs of their students, whether these students have been labeled as “basic” writers or “inexperienced” writers or “nontraditional” writers or—as Mina labeled them—“beginners.” Because so many teachers depend on *JBW* to chart the course of scholarship in basic literacy, we are hesitant to broaden, diffuse, or change the journal’s focus or direction. Moreover, we hesitate to meddle with Mina’s legacy.

However, as basic writing teachers and administrators, we are constantly questioning the appropriateness of our courses, methods, and materials. We have listened carefully (and uncomfortably) to our colleagues’ critiques of basic writing. Within the past two years, colleagues whom we respect and admire have spoken at various conferences about the need to reenvision basic writing. Some have characterized basic writing programs as tracking systems which serve to preserve the idea of nontraditional students as being “different.” Several scholars have asserted that basic writing courses “ghettoize” students, prevent them from joining the mainstream of college-level courses, and often serve as obstacles rather than opportunities. Others have challenged our profession to provide evidence that basic writing courses “work.”

We have begun questioning whether our definitions are still accurate, whether our placement procedures are still valid, whether our strategies do, in fact, still work. Basic writing programs and teachers have changed much over the past decade (probably in response to the institutionalization of basic writing as a legitimate field of study). If *JBW* is to remain the leading scholarly journal in the field, it must be proactive and give voice to our profession’s changing concepts of literacy and basic skills education. Thus, we hope to solicit reasoned, scholarly examinations of the ways in which the construct of basic writing has changed and is continuing to change. We welcome

essays examining the social and psychological consequences of being labeled a basic writer. We are particularly interested in essays that explore the politics of basic writing. We also look forward to seeing essays that analyze program evaluation, re-think program objectives, and critique program models—essays that help readers figure out whether their programs and courses have or have not met their objectives. Most importantly, we hope to see essays that examine the concept of basic writing and that explore new ways of helping underprepared, inexperienced writers.

Recently, several colleagues have proposed a change in the journal's title. In 1975, the term "basic writing" helped teachers move from a remedial paradigm to a developmental and humanistic model. In 1995, we may need to change paradigms again, to emphasize similarities and inclusion over differences and exclusion. A new title would underline the fact that all freshman writers have strengths and weaknesses and can benefit from working with concerned and respectful readers.

Of course, the current title does have the advantage of designating a niche for the journal to fill. When we asked colleagues to consider a new name for the journal, many responded with a simple word: "Why?" Thomas J. Farrell, added the following comments:

The name "Journal of College Writing" does not name a niche, but an expansive territory—all writing in college. We already have two NCTE journals that presumably cover that expansive territory, *CE* and *CCC*. Why do we need to have another journal cover the same expansive territory? As to the name "The Journal of Teaching and Learning Writing," that name is still more expansive. Who would want to subscribe to or even regularly look at a journal that would include articles about teaching and learning writing at any and all levels of schooling?

And Mike Rose warned of a different problem:

I do like the idea of your taking these issues head on and thinking about the title of the journal. But I also think that we must not succumb to the danger of denying that some students come to us with significant difficulties, and we need to address these. Otherwise, we make changes in titles, in programs, in instructors—and our students still come out not writing well.

We invite readers to speculate on the wisdom of changing *JBW*'s title. We also invite you to submit essays that address the shifting definitions and status of basic writing and essays that confront the concerns of administrators and legislators. These are the issues addressed in the first collection of essays that we have had the privilege of editing.

In the opening essay, Lynn Z. Bloom reviews the twenty-year history of *JBW* to underscore the role played by the journal in establishing the discipline of basic writing and in distinguishing the scholarship in our field.

In "Teaching People Who Don't Write Good," Alan C. Purves explores the idea that the computer has changed the construct of writing. Purves states that writing today involves "the moving around of images" and has become "an act of visual composition and arrangement," a world in which "we are all neophytes." This leads him to suggest that *JBW* be renamed the Journal for Imagining Composition.

Gordon Brossell and Mary Sheridan-Rabideau assert that basic writing classes enable teachers to meet the needs of basic writing students and to provide them with extensive feedback better than in mixed-proficiency classes. In addition, they conclude that the community, support, and safe place provided by basic writing classes more than justify their existence in our colleges today.

In a reply to recent scholarship positioning the basic writing classroom as a site of struggle, a "contact zone," Joseph Harris argues for writing classes in which differences are articulated, but negotiation is also valued. He explains why teaching intervention and compromise can lead individuals, neighborhoods, disciplines, and communities to reach beyond their borders of separation.

Lee Odell counters the "deficit pedagogy" notion of teaching basic writing by presenting real-life assignments that engage students in complicated, interesting, and meaningful community-based writing—assignments that place students in "a climate of uncertainty." Odell states that such writing will prepare students to be literate citizens of the twenty-first-century society.

J. Milton Clark and Carol Peterson Haviland describe their collaboration on a project in which basic writing students, ESL, and non-ESL, worked together to interpret and reflect upon texts written in French, Chinese, and/or Spanish. In addition to expanding the students' ideas about writing, reading, and un-

derstanding, Clark and Haviland provide evidence that these collaborations transformed asymmetrical power and privilege relations in the classroom.

Now we would like to call your attention to an essay that appeared in the Fall 1993 issue of *JBW*: "The Vanishing Site of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*" by Patricia O. Laurence, who teaches at The City College of The City University of New York. This essay has just won the Mina P. Shaughnessy Writing Award chosen from articles published by *JBW* in the years 1992 and 1993. This \$500 cash prize is given to the author of the best *JBW* essay every two years (thanks to the support of Lynn Quitman Troyka). Pat Laurence's essay was selected by a jury of scholars which included Lynn Z. Bloom, Nondita Mason, and John S. Mayher (see announcement box on a previous page). We congratulate Professor Laurence, and we thank the jury for their invaluable service.

We also want to thank our predecessors, Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller, who brought a new critical consciousness to *JBW*. They did a superb job of broadening the journal's scope and audience. They traveled across the country, soliciting manuscripts from authors who represented different theoretical, academic, social, and political points of view. Under their leadership, the journal became a provocative forum for dialogue, research, and discussion about writing, basic and otherwise.

We are grateful to Peter and Bill and to all the other people who have supported *JBW* and who have been so gracious to us: Lynn Quitman Troyka, former *JBW* Editor; Marie Jean Lederman, former Dean of *JBW*'s publisher—the CUNY Instructional Resource Center; Elsa Nuñez-Wormack, the current Dean and CUNY Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs; Marilyn Maiz, former Associate Editor; Richard Mandelbaum, Copyreader; Mary Carney, Subscriptions; the superb *JBW* Editorial Board members (who also serve as Consulting Reviewers); and, of course, Ruth Davis, our wonderful Associate and Managing Editor.

We would also like to express our appreciation to the *JBW* Editorial Board members who have agreed to remain on the Board and serve as Consulting Reviewers during our tenure as Editors: David Bartholomae, Sarah Benesch, Nancy Carriuolo, Brenda M. Greene, Muriel Harris, Irvin Hashimoto, Warren Herendeen, Myra Kogen, Patricia Ondek Laurence, Elaine O. Lees, Andrea Lunsford, Susan Miller, Jerrold Nudelman, George Otte, Jane Peterson, Lynn Quitman Troyka, Evelyn Webb, and Harvey S. Wiener. We also thank the new members joining the

Editorial Board: Peter Adams, Akua Duku Anoyke, Chris Anson, Bill Bernhardt, Patricia Bizzell, Richard Courage, Donald Daiker, Suellyn Duffy, Sarah Warshauer Freedman, Jane Maher, Peter Miller, Nathaniel Norment, Jr., Nell Ann Pickett, Charles Schuster, and Tony Silva, Billie J. Wahlstrom. And we thank all the Editorial Board members who have served the journal so well in the past.

We end our column with the closing lines of the first issue of *JBW*; this issue ended with an essay on “Putting Error in Its Place” by Isabella Halstead:

There is no short-cut to teaching writing, and in my view, “skills” cannot be considered separate from all the factors that make up the process. This is particularly true for our students whose negative attitudes about writing are nearly insuperable obstacles. A student who does not want to learn something will not, and so our main concern must be to convince our students that writing—with all its components, including acceptable forms—is more than worth the effort. This can only be done when we make clear what it is for, by giving them the opportunity to sense what they have to say is worth listening to, that others are there, and the work involved in putting it in writing opens up new possibilities for communication. If we can do this, we may also find ourselves learning much more than we ever could about our students, their language, and, incidentally, ourselves.

Twenty years later, these words still ring true.

—*Karen Greenberg and Trudy Smoke*