Jeanne Gunner and Gerri McNenny

RETROSPECTION AS PROLOGUE

When we approached Jeanne Gunner and Gerri McNenny about their possible contributions to this special issue, we didn't know if we should ask for something on the order of an introduction or something more like a postscript. It turns out they did a bit of both, composing separate but complementary pieces. We've decided to frontload them, though they are (as Jeanne's individual title suggests) afterthoughts. Jeanne Gunner, formerly of the UCLA Writing Program and now Core Composition Director at the Santa Clara University, Chair of the Conference on Basic Writing from 1995-1997, offers the unusual opportunity of examining the motives, personal and professional, for mounting such an enterprise as the workshop represents. Co-Chair of Conference on Basic Writing, Gerri McNenny is Director of Composition at the downtown campus of the University of Houston and is hard at work on an anthology of essays treating mainstreaming vs. tracking BW students; she chooses to highlight the issue of class, certainly the prominent note struck that day (perhaps because it seemed relatively undernoticed before), and her discussion provides an excellent overview of and introduction to the presentations of the other participants.

Jeanne Gunner

Afterthoughts on Motive

The CBW-sponsored workshop, "Race, Class, and Culture in the Basic Writing Classroom," at the 1997 CCCC in Phoenix, came about for many professional reasons. Applying for a slot on the conference program, Gerri McNenny and I wrote that the session would take the place of the national CBW conference, which was becoming increasingly difficult to organize and increasingly expensive for members to attend. We also cited the need for our members to meet as a group, to have a place at the conference where the discussion would be focused on basic writing, where the central topic would be the emerging issues in the field, mainstreaming being the center around which these issues have recently coalesced. In the session, the theory and practice of mainstreaming were to serve as the basis for political critique of various orders: analysis of class, identity, and cultural awareness in instructors' own experience; presentation by CUNY researchers speaking from the historical site of open admissions and assessing their current mainstreaming project; and an historical analysis of basic writers' social and educational context, which was to serve as a basis for formulating one's own personal and professional stance on mainstreaming in relation to issues of access and institutional status.

In inviting the workshop speakers, we were quite aware of the political truism that the voices heard are the voices that validate. To have our issues "spoken into existence," in a sense, we looked in some

cases to have speakers who themselves wield some professional and institutional power. Victor Villanueva, Gary Tate, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Ira Shor: were they themselves not so committed to inclusiveness, our invitations to them would really have been a kind of exploitation, of their names, status, and labor. Jane Maher brought with her the power and historical record invoked by the name of Mina Shaughnessy; if our field has icons, then Shaughnessy's image is clearly the pre-eminent one. Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason provided the power of empirical research and FIPSE sponsorship, in their reports on their project. Our intentions were not elitist; Gary's co-presenters John McMillan and Elizabeth D. Woodworth and Jackie's co-presenter Rebecca Taylor are new members of the field, whose contributions to the day and to the national discussion were and are important. But in addition to the goals we reported to the CCCC selection committee was the motive of using the workshop and its participants to signal the topic's importance in the profession at large, and our list of speakers was one element of this desire to enhance the status of the workshop—to give it national prominence.

For most of us, I expect the workshop served other professional purposes as well. In my case, I was looking for what I initially considered a kind of professional synthesis. I used to define myself primarily as a specialist in basic writing, since my teaching, conference papers, publications, and professional affiliations at one point related almost exclusively to the BW field. As my career path shifted to writing program administration, however, I, with only occasional awareness of the fact, distanced myself from basic writing. I continued to teach the courses, but increasingly my professional conversations shifted to new topics; other, seemingly more central writing program issues demanded my time and attention; and WPAs, in conference sessions and journals, seemed not to address basic writing as a field. The debates over such BW concerns as access and mainstreaming took place in other professional arenas, despite the obvious connection to the administrators who oversee the curricular and faculty issues that these topics necessarily invoke. Only at the first CBW-sponsored workshop at the 1996 CCCC in Milwaukee, organized by Karen Uehling, Geoff Sirc, and Sylvia Holladay, did I begin to question the seemingly unintegrated, parallel relationship between basic writing and writing program administration, and to sense a need to draw these parallel lines in the conversation into some more dialogic relationship.

At the 1996 workshop, I served as a respondent to a paper presented by Charles Schuster on the WPA and basic writing. It was clearly a kind of first: because most BW instructors seem not to become WPAs, and most WPAs seem not to teach BW (in each case, for fairly obvious reasons related to the politics of rank and subject), little opportunity for exchange between the two groups had ever arisen. If we consider

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the ways in which basic writing figures into articles in the WPA journal over the past decade, we see that the field and its students are defined in limited and limiting ways—for the most part, they are objects in a discussion of placement, testing, and program assessment. Only in the past two years do discussions and program descriptions of mainstreaming projects appear in the WPA literature (see Cambridge et al.; Elbow; Grego and Thompson; Glau). If BW occupies a vulnerable and marginalized institutional position, then surely this vulnerability results in part from its alienation from the administrators best positioned to defend it. Helping to organize "Race, Class, and Culture in the BW Classroom" would be helping to bridge the two fields.

But I have to revisit the question of motive yet again, for what I brought away from the actual workshop experience enables me to see the motives I've cited above in yet a new light. In all cases, my motives include in some degree a concern for status: for BW as an academic field, for BW instructors and students as members of the field—and for me as someone whose identity is to a degree bound up in it. The workshop helped me to see that I am drawn to BW in part because I at once identify with and rage against the outsider status its members continue to have attached to them, a position that entails a sense of lost agency, of powerlessness. This identification and rage, I see now, is personal as well as intellectual. In the presentation by Tate, McMillan, and Woodworth, we were asked to consider in writing how the stories we tell about our backgrounds influence our teaching and life in the academy. Part of my story reads, "I'm acutely aware of my difference from my middle and upper class students, who make me uncomfortable: I am both threatened by and sometimes despising of them . . . . I grew up about eight miles from Princeton but never once considered applying there; it was another world that didn't exist for me. I'm conscious always of having my degrees from what a former English Department colleague once called, 'Oh, your *state* university' . . . . With [BW] students, I'm aware of feeling relieved to deal with those who are also different. The marginalization of BW students has ironically created a safe place for me in the academy." Again writing from experience, this time in response to Royster and Taylor's presentation, the same themes appear: "I realize my own rage at the system, at being disenfranchised by my rank, field, and gender."

So perhaps my real reason for organizing the workshop with Gerri was an unarticulated sense of conflict over my own social position, in the field and outside it, accompanied by a felt desire for agency, for power—the power to bring about change, to regain a sense of agency. If in my work I have overtly protested the assigning of low status to BW, I have felt oddly alienated when I have moved outside it—into the world of the WPA, for instance, which is less familiar on the levels of class origin and relation to power (no surprise that my work in this

field is dominated by criticism of its hierarchical systems). My desire for synthesis of such realms reflects this anxiety over identity and status; like many BW students, I'm attempting to negotiate multiple cultural contexts, some of which I have experienced as conflicts of allegiance and a hierarchizing of personal and professional worth.

For me, the workshop was a wonderful vehicle for exploring the implications of the professional lives on the boundary that I and, I expect, many of us in basic writing contend with. By creating a space for the personal in the professional discussion, the workshop succeeded, not only as a forum for basic writing teachers, but as a catalyst for those of us challenged by it to reconsider identity, action, and interaction; to see the boundaries that we construct, and have constructed for us.

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