

# EDITORS' COLUMN

We swear: it wasn't millennial fever – the Y2K bug everyone did have to deal with – that made us do it. The idea for this special issue took root early in the development of the Fall '99 issue. The real impetus was that issue's challenge to us to find an appropriate way of following it up. It had precisely the interrelated themes our field and readership need to take into account: the "disappearing" of basic writers and basic writing programs by political mandate, considerations of basic writing's relations to assessment and academic discourse, above all, several janus-like looks at the way basic writing and basic writers had been and should be defined. An issue that rich made us think: was there some way to make the interrelations (especially between the field's past and future) still more explicit, its exigencies still more compelling? We listed the people readers of *JBW* might particularly like to hear from, some who had helped to define and others to interrogate this field so full of change. The list begat a letter inviting contributions to an issue that would look both back and ahead. (The letter mentioned that, for thirty seconds, we thought of nominating the theme "Whither Basic Writing?" – and then realized what a bad, sad pun we had stumbled on.)

The excitement we felt at the generous acceptances escalated considerably as the articles themselves came in. Journal editors are often blessed with fortuitous connections, articles in the same issue that somehow seem to speak to each other, but we had never seen this to such an amazing extent. These articles light up each other in so many ways we finally decided the only acceptable arrangement would be something as emphatically arbitrary as alphabetical order. We are tempted to urge that where to begin in this issue and what to read next might be best determined by casting lots. Like some modern day Book of Changes, the issue invites individualized, almost infinite pairings and groupings, comparisons and cross-references. All the articles have much to say about where basic writing should go and has been, that much more to say when the thoughts of one article are seen to send ripples through others. We hesitate to say much more than this, but we also concede that it's the editors' duty to give reductive little sketches of what rich canvases actually represent.

Some of the authors locate a future for basic writing within the larger landscape. Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner suggest that the whole academy, caught up in the advocacy of diversity, of student-centered learning, of border crossings and hybridities, ought to be drawn to basic writing and basic writers – and drawn as much to learn

as to teach. Patricia Bizzell, seeing monolithic ideas of academic discourse as possibly mythic and increasingly untenable, notes that increasingly mixed discourse(s) should invite a reconception of the work of basic writing, especially the old call to inculcate correctness. Susan Miller invites us to look beyond the walls of the academy to other sites of instruction and shared interest; if, as she suggests, basic writing is the canary in composition's coal mine, the re-situating she proposes has an interest ranging well beyond basic writing.

There are other visions of moving beyond and leaving behind. Ira Shor, whose labeling of basic writing as "Our Apartheid" (in the Spring '97 *JBW*) has sparked such controversy, does not so much revisit his argument as confront it on personal terms, forced to advise students who have slipped past basic writing to regular composition and so seem guilty of what he calls "Illegal Literacy"; their plight has him puzzling through power of tests to create what he calls "structured inequality." Judith Rodby and Tom Fox have a happier tale to tell, but one that is very much to the same point: their experience at Cal State, Chico, suggests that mainstreaming low-scoring students does work, particularly when students are provided support that chimes with but also expands our notions of sound pedagogy.

Other scholars argue for holding to the hard-won space that basic writing represents. Keith Gilyard, a supporter as well as an evaluator of a key mainstreaming experiment, resists embracing Shor's vision of a future without basic writing, a vision he feels may erase or erode too much. Like Gilyard, Deborah Mutnick finds Shor's questions more useful than his answers; if basic writing is "our apartheid," she suggests that its elimination will result in something less like the desegregation of higher education than its resegregation. Terence Collins and Melissa Blum may make this point most poignantly, showing what the loss of basic writing meant to students who had only a taste, a peek through the open-access door, before political change slammed it shut.

As for why such estimable teacher-scholars reach such different conclusions, William DeGenaro and Edward M. White argue that these spring from still deeper divergences, disparate and even incompatible roles and first premises, with the consequence that our scholarly discussions may be more circular than constructive. Lynn Quitman Troyka also sees the urgencies of basic writing as rooted in research, but for her the story is more of missed chances than missed meanings, of failed opportunities to tell the story of basic writing (or at least set it straight); seeing a problem may not solve it, but it does create the hope of finding a solution, maybe even before it's too late.

As we said, these little thumbnail sketches are inevitably reductive. Bizzell, Miller, or Lu and Horner should not be thought to have less to say about research than Troyka or DeGenaro and White, for

instance, and all the pieces speak to the debate about the status of basic writing - some more directly but none narrowly - and so throw off implications and ramifications. Most of all, all these pieces resonate and reverberate with and through each other. Read them as you will. Create your own ripple effect.

-- **George Otte** *and* **Trudy Smoke**