

EDITORS' COLUMN

The last couple of issues had us feeling justly proud but also exhausted. Partly because it was our own resolve, partly because it was what was in the air (or at least in our mail), we found ourselves publishing a number of very good but also very expansive views of the field of basic writing. Wrong as we knew the feeling to be, we found ourselves wondering what more was left to say. It took the authors in our present issue to tell us.

What we needed – what, we daresay, the field needs – is a shift (and multiplication) of perspectives. When we ask where we are in basic writing these days, the question tends to be tinged with a sense of crisis, a conjuring of political forces at work, often against us. And all that is no less true than it was. But the present authors remind us that where we are is also in the classroom, confronted with students who defy and overturn our generalizations, making us look at ourselves, our systems of support, our own pedagogical practices. And the more specifically and reflectively we can look, the better.

Laurie Grobman leads off the issue by calling our attention to just how victimizing generalizations about our students can be. In “(Re)Writing Youth: Basic Writing, Youth Culture, and Social Change,” she is not speaking just of basic writing students but of the whole youth culture, often defined (and maligned) as disposed to violence and irresponsibility. Drawing on the work of Henry Giroux, she calls for a critical pedagogy that allows students to resist and rewrite such definitions of themselves.

Definitions are always based on relationships, and Ann Tabachnikov, in “The Mommification of Writing Instruction: A Tale of Two Students,” reminds us that the student-teacher relationship often partakes of a relationship still more primal. As a particularly close look at two students shows us, the “mommification” not only complicates behavior, but can, on reflection, lead to a complicated understanding of behavior.

Culture is also a powerful shaper of behavior in student-teacher relationships, of course, and Raul Ybarra makes that his focus in “Cultural Dissonance in Basic Writing Courses.” Here too we have a particularly close look at a student-teacher relationship – in this case, one in which the author is neither student nor teacher (nor, for that matter, disinterested observer).

In “How Soft Is Process? The Feminization of Comp and Pedagogies of Care,” Wendy Ryden gets personal about the teacher’s perspective, but hers is, again, a perspective on perspectives. What is it that makes students see a teacher as “hard” or “soft”? Is it a stance?

A strategy? A gendered destiny? A mutual decision? A search for answers complicates our ideas of who or what constitutes authority while blurring the lines between what is public and what is personal.

Ideas of authority and ownership are also important to David C. Fletcher's "Tutors' Ideals and Practices." Tutors occupy a potentially fascinating mediating position between the worlds of student and teacher, often drawing on what is seen as successful from both. As two carefully examined case studies reveal, the results can be revelatory, often all the more so when characterized by conflicts between theory and practice.

The ultimate shift in perspective (and practice) may be Linda VonBergen's "Shaping the Point with Poetry," and the shift may be still more radical than the title suggests. The change of strategy we are invited to consider represents not just a shift in discursive fields but also in discursive aims, as students adopt imitative and referential approaches to writing that is so often, in basic writing classes, expressive and confessional.

Astronomers have long known that a key principle of relativity is parallax: a shift in perspective due to a change in the position of the observer. We welcome you to the parallax views of basic writing instruction in this issue, new alignments of thinking about our students and ourselves, closely observed.

— George Otte *and* Trudy Smoke