EDITORS' COLUMN

Starting in mid-April, the Conference on Basic Writing listserv (CBW-L) had one of its recurrent (but always edifying) bouts of defining Basic Writing. The discussion ran for weeks, unfolding the established dynamics of such conversations: registering the difficulty of defining basic writing (especially in light of local definitions and institutional differences), the danger of such definitions (in that they paint a target so many in political and academic circles seem to be shooting at these days), the temptation to devise some other, better term (and the difficulty of that).

We read these posts with interest because they characterize a recurrent concern — maybe *the* recurrent concern — of *JBW*. Scarcely an article (much less an issue) does not raise the matter of definition (with its attendant difficulties and dangers). And we realized that the question of definition unites what may otherwise seem to be the disparate articles in our current issue. We knew, moreover, that this was to some extent our doing, and so something we should address.

The current issue marks two major changes for the *JBW*. Regular readers know that the previous issue saw Trudy Smoke stepping down from her seven-year stint as co-editor. And so this issue is the one in which Bonne August, Chair of the English Department at Kingsborough Community College and a longtime worker in the BW field (with special expertise in assessment), steps up. Much more could be said about Bonne, descriptively and prospectively, but she shares her co-editor's view that editors should seek a kind of invisibility, a cultivated unobtrusiveness (save in brief prefatory remarks).

Bonne had been having conversations with Gay Brookes, editor of *College ESL*, another CUNY-supported journal that may (for reasons best given by Gay in her chosen time and place) be unable to publish worthy submissions. Would *JBW* consider some appropriate for its readership? We have indeed considered and published ESL-focused work in the past (and "English as a second language" is indeed an interest mentioned in our call for articles), but now we found ourselves wanting to highlight and not just acknowledge this interest. Thus the second change: we want to stress our interest in accounts of ESL research and instruction that seem especially relevant to work in BW because of the overlap and interface between the fields, ever less distinct, ever more embroiled with the difficulties of definition and the (often related) vulnerabilities of their special populations.

Above all, of course, the real point of interest is pedagogy — what we can learn about effective teaching from each other. The articles written by ESL instructors in this issue seem especially impressive cases in point, so we'll take them up first, though it means treating our contents in reverse order for a change.

In "What Is Learned in Sustained-Content Writing Classes Along with Writing?" by Marcia Pally, Helen Katznelson, Hadara Perpignan, and Bella Rubin, the fascinating question of the "by-products" of effective instruction is taken up: what, by the students' own accounts, happens in terms of personal growth and increased capacity for interaction when a course combining sustained treatment of specific content and a host of academic skills "takes"? The news is heartening but not without surprises.

The same could be said of "The Power of Academic Learning Commu-

nities," Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk and Marcia Babbitt's account of a program that takes students who, to some, would seem the least likely to succeed and turns them into success stories. The key, as the authors stress, is the way learning communities cultivate the interdependence and collaboration of students who could not be more diverse or at risk—who literally come from different cultures—and so we must be all the more grateful that this account is so clear about its principles and methods.

These "ESL" articles are preceded by an article from a team of authors who, in a sense, blazed the trail for their inclusion. In 1998, Eileen Biser, Linda Rubel, and Rose Marie Toscano published "Mediated Texts: A Heuristic for Academic Writing" in *JBW;* the article looked at using a special method — rough translations as rough drafts — as a learning and writing strategy for a special kind of ESL student: the student whose first language was American Sign Language. Here, in "Be Careful What You Ask For: When Basic Writers Take the Rhetorical Stage," they give a compelling account of what happens when a student writer from their circumscribed instructional setting enters the realm of public discourse and political controversy.

The positioning of students—and the challenges of definition—would seem no less critical in "Ways of Taking Meaning from Texts: Reading in High School and College," by Hugh English and Lydia Nagle, a college and a high school teacher respectively who explore the relatively unmapped territory that is what students make of what they read. They use the testimony of the students themselves to provide us with a taxonomy of motives and methods students bring to bear on their reading. Though high school and college may seem different worlds to students whose ages diverge only by months, we should not be surprised to see that, on both sides of the supposed divide, students' strategies do not differ radically—nor seem as rich as we might hope.

Part of the problem may be a lack of the sort of capital Charlotte Brammer refers to in the title of her article "Linguistic Cultural Capital and Basic Writers." Tapping into one rich vein of definition, a seam mined by Mina Shaughnessy and other pioneers in the field, Brammer sees Basic Writers as branded by the features of their writing, features showing how far they are from learning the ropes and mastering the codes of the academy. This is problem-defining prior to problem-solving, for she also argues that the solution is explicit instruction in these codes, instruction that can be seen both as a return and an advance.

What it also represents, of course, is one form of the special support that defining Basic Writers as such justifies. The irony, as Scott Stevens points out in "Nowhere to Go: Basic Writing and the Scapegoating of Civic Failure," is that BW placement can become the opposite of a strategy of support: it can seem to blame as well as stigmatize the victim, ultimately addressing the problem by removing the students who supposedly incarnate it. What this lead-off article reminds us is the dark side of the success stories that conclude this issue: those little (and not so little) miracles of personal growth and academic achievement were made possible by defining students as special populations with special needs, but such definition can also paint them as targets, marked as unwanted, presumably unable. As ever, we must foster those acts of (good) faith that allow for miracles without disallowing and disappearing those defined as entitled to them.

-- **George Otte** *and* **Bonne August**