

Barbara Quint Gray

## INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1974, Mina Shaughnessy suggested to some of her colleagues that we establish a journal, a vehicle that would carry the spirit of inquiry about teaching basic writing beyond the confines of the small group that met with her to consider our common concerns as basic writing teachers and out to the larger world of faculty who were beginning to share the need to teach skills of literacy to their students. We were, as a body, astonished by Mina's suggestion: it was at once so simple, so right, so previously beyond our thoughts. But by then we had all worked with Mina for some time in the basic writing program that she administered at The City College, and so we were accustomed to Mina's acute vision, to her ability to present us with possibilities beyond our boldest imaginings, to her talent for seeing in her faculty, as well as in her students, power to become more than any one of them, independently, would have ever suspected they could.

The idea of the *Journal of Basic Writing* grew into its concrete realization in Mina's living room, where we decided on its format, parceled out the tasks that lay in its initial production, and met again and again to review our progress and refine our directions in those early days when basic writing was not yet the realm of professional and scholarly commitment that Mina helped to make it. When Mina moved from the City College English Department to establish the CUNY Instructional Resource Center, the *Journal* moved with her, both because it was a resource and because it was, in some sense, hers—conceived out of her imagination and growing under her watchful eye, albeit possessed of its own will and judgment, for better or worse.

When the editors decided to devote an issue to basic writing programs around the United States, we did not foresee that by the time it was completed, Mina would have died. Yet, there is a sense in which the topic is particularly fitting for the issue in which we bid her farewell, for

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although past issues have presented different approaches to error, or different rationales for courses, different principles of evaluation, or different methods of utilizing different grammars, there is probably not a program presented within these pages that has not felt the influence of Mina's vision of student potential.

The programs that we offer here were not chosen because they were in any sense her programs or programs that she necessarily knew or endorsed. But, in calling for and reviewing papers for this issue, and in communicating with their authors, we learned again what we had already known: that Mina's work, as presented in *Errors and Expectations* as well as in the countless talks she gave, papers she wrote, and meetings she attended across the country, infuses basic writing programs in ways that they can identify and credit as well as in subtle and indefinable ways. The very term "basic writing," now in general use, was her term initially and grew out of her refusal to see the students who studied that subject as remedial, or handicapped, or deprived except in the sense that their previous education had failed to serve them.

Programs that address the concerns to which Mina was committed are only beginning to develop. Indeed, the one she shaped is less than ten years old. The programs we present here were selected on the basis of the apparent quality of the program as well as of its written representation. The selection does not attempt to be representative, or balanced, or to suggest that these are the six best or most successful programs. They are offered, instead, as sample possibilities among many, perhaps artificially frozen in time by the act of writing about them, probably already somewhat altered by the demands of the students and the institutions that they serve. They cover a broad spectrum, from the COMP-LAB program at York College, which provides individualized exercise on basic elements of standard grammar in a laboratory setting, to the DOORS program at Illinois Central College, which applies Piagetian theory to teaching rhetorical skills. They include two different approaches to developmental writing at large state universities, one comprehensive English-as-a-Second-Language program, and the Expository Writing program at New York University, which constitutes one response to the growing national sense that, even at private, selective institutions, freshmen need considerable work to develop their writing skills.

A call for essays on the same theme a year or two from now would undoubtedly yield different products and reflect concerns perhaps only now beginning to be felt. But it is certain that programs currently in

effect as well as programs under development are indebted to Mina for her modest but deep conviction that faculty, not students, need to be remediated if writing is to be taught well, that the overwhelming majority of semi-literate students that populate basic writing classes can become articulate writers if their teachers can only discover sufficiently effective ways of leading them to that goal. In offering this review of basic writing programs, the editors record Mina's passing from our midst and express our gratitude for the beginning that she gave to us and to the field of basic writing.