

Newsletter

Conference on Basic Writing

A special interest group of CCCC



Spring 1996

From the Chair

Over the years, the executive board of CBW has wrestled with a continuing question: what might/could/should happen with this organization? CBW is a small organization, if not in actual numbers, then in scope. It does not aim to duplicate the work of CCCC, its "parent" organization, nor to compete with such basic writing outlets as the *Journal of Basic Writing*. As chair, though, my role in the organization is in part to continue raising the question. And the answer that occurs to me is that CBW should continue to do what CBW has always done best.

And that, I feel, is the CBW SIG--the Special Interest Group meeting at each year's CCCC. In my opinion, the single most useful function this group engages in is providing a meeting place for people interested in basic writing. They may be interested because they have taught BW classes for years and have made BW the center of their professional lives, or because they are about to begin to teach them and are seeking information and support from experienced BW teachers. They may be famous researchers we all read and whose ideas inform our classes, or graduate students who will be the next generation of famous names. They may be BW instructors with

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Pre-CCC Basic Writing Workshop

Karen Uehling

The conference on Basic Writing is pleased to announce/report its first pre-CCC workshop. (Due to the vagaries of bulk mailing and other factors beyond our control, many of you may not receive this newsletter until after the Conference, but nevertheless you may enjoy reading about the workshop.) It is entitled "Interrogating the Boundaries of Basic Writing" (Workshop # W-13) and will be held on Wednesday, March 27, 1996 from 9-5. See page 24 of your *Convention Preview*. CBW sees this workshop as answering the need voiced by so many at last year's CCCC for basic writing teachers to have a national forum for their discipline.

At its 1995 CCCC Special Interest Group meeting, the Conference on Basic Writing was mandated by its members to organize a conference in the coming year. Constraints on time and money made a charge daunting, however; so it was agreed that an all-day workshop prior to CCCC 1996 might serve as an attractive substitute for a national professional meeting, allowing participants a chance to hear informed opinions about the field and to interact with each other to further the professional dialogue around basic writing. CBW

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ideas they wish to share on pedagogic and curricular innovations, or those who seek to defend traditional approaches. They may teach graduate students or freshmen, at community colleges or research institutions. What they have in common are professional and personal concerns related to the field of basic writing, all of which can be shared in the meetings CBW organizes.

At CBW SIG meetings, our shared concerns form the center of discussion. And I think this claim holds true even when our meetings have dealt with the powerful tensions of our field--with race and basic writing, with curricular change and basic writing legacies. Last year, the politics of mainstreaming proved a uniting topic, even as different point of view made for intense exchanges. CBW does a great job of enabling such exchanges to take place. Talking to BW colleagues--a form of information exchange equally or more useful than journal articles--I learned about other institutions, about professional conditions, about political critiques. CBW has one of the richest membership bases of any discussion group I know and offers one of the best educations about a field and a discipline as a result.

My experience with the group tells me that CBW also does inclusion very well. In its democratic structure and attitudes I find the group refreshing; there is no professional competition, no cult of personality, no bias towards or against a particular orientation within teaching or research. The connections made possible by the annual SIG meeting are

what kept me coming back year after year, till I ended up on the Executive Board, and now as chair. Clearly, we're a grass-roots kind of organization.

And now on Milwaukee, where I hope as many of you as attend the CCCC this year will be at our SIG meeting as well. It will be a time for socializing and professionalizing--for sharing ideas and experiences, for discussing the battles we face locally but which have national implications. We'll have a chance to take up the issues emerging from the pre-convention workshop (described by Karen Uehling elsewhere in this issue of the *Newsletter*). Reserve the usual Thursday night SIG slot; what might/could/should happen with CBW will be happening then.

Jeanne Gunner
UCLA

**Basic Writing Workshop,
continued from page 1, column 2.**

appointed Geoffrey Sirc of the University of Minnesota and Karen Uehling of Boise State University to serve as program chairs for CBW and to submit a proposal.

At the urging of Nell Ann Pickett, Chair of the 1996 CCCC, CBW later combined our workshop structure with another workshop on basic writing proposed by Richard P. Friedrich of Herkimer Community College in Herkimer, NY, and Sylvia A. Holladay of St. Petersburg Junior College in St. Petersburg, Florida. We were delighted that we could combine the two proposals coherently. We now have speakers and respondents representing a broad spectrum of institutions: two - and four-year colleges, and MA- and Ph.D.-granting universities from the west, midwest, east, and south.

The workshop's goal is to provide basic writing teachers with a series of position papers (and responses to those papers) charting the profession today, as well as to allow ample time for colleagues around the country to react to and discuss the issues raised. We have invited presentations from national leaders on a series of topics crucial to basic writing instruction: an introduction about who basic writing students are and what basic writing programs should aim for; a discussion of how basic writers are mainstreamed at one institution; the use of the writing center, not only as a support service, but as an opportunity for curricular transformation; a pedagogical reflection on the current place of grammar in the basic writing curriculum; an administrative view of

basic writing in the larger institution; the politically charged atmosphere in which basic writing exists; and a final response/planning process.

Workshop participants will first hear a paper presentation on a given topic from a provocative voice/s in the field. Next they will hear two brief responses to each paper, further exploring an issue's complexity; respondents will include one two-year college person and one four-year college or university person. Finally, conversational break-out clusters will allow each participant to react to the discussion and inform fellow participants about local institutional conditions.

**Workshop Title: "Interrogating the
Boundaries of Basic Writing"**

Brief Description: There is no regular national conference for basic writing teachers this year, and many in the field regret the inability to meet with like-minded colleagues, so this all-day workshop will act as a place for basic writing teachers to hear speakers and respondents lay out a sense of the field of basic writing in the mid-nineties (theoretically, pedagogically, and institutionally) and confer with each other on their perceptions of both where we are and where we should be. There will be ample time for colleagues around the country to react to and discuss the issues raised.

See Workshop Schedule overleaf.

Workshop Schedule

Co-Chairs:

Richard P. Friedrich

Herkimer Community College, Herkimer, NY

Sylvia A. Holladay

St. Petersburg Junior College, Gulfport, FL

Geoffrey Sirc

University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN

Karen Uehling

Boise State University, Boise, ID

Wednesday, March 27, 1996

- 9:00-9:20 Introduction and welcome
Greetings from the Chair of CBW, Jeanne Gunner of UCLA
- 9:20-9:30 Sylvia Holladay: **"Basic Writing Students: Who They Are and How or If They Differ from Other Writing Students"**
- 9:30-9:40 Dick Friedrich: **"Basic Writing Programs: What They Do and What They Should Aim For"**
- 9:40-10:40 Tom Fox and Judith Rodby, California State University--Chico, Chico CA:
"Main streaming Basic Writers"
Fox and Rodby will discuss how their freshman writing program is structured so that basic writers are main streamed. They will present assignments and activities that have been successful as they have worked with "basic writers" in freshman writing and in the adjunct workshops that support their work in the course.
Respondents:
Angela Harris, Herkimer Community College, Herkimer, NY
William Jones, Rutgers University--Newark, Newark, NJ
Conversational break-out clusters
- 11:00-12:00 Nancy Grimm, Michigan Technological University, Calumet, MI:
"Writing Centers and Teachers of Basic Writing: 'Talking Back'"
Grimm will focus on the ways writing centers and teachers of basic writing might work together to question the problematic subjectivity created for students called basic writers and redirect attention to problems with systemic and institutional practices.
Respondents:
David Healy, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN
Ruth Morris, Greenville Technical College, Greenville, SC
Conversational break-out clusters
- 12:00-1:00 Lunch

- 1:00-2:00 Rei Noguchi, California State Univ., Northridge, CA:
"The Basics of a Writer's Grammar in Basic Writing: How Much and How"
Noguchi will address the limits of grammar in writing instruction and offer some time-efficient ways of teaching the basics of a "writer's grammar" through a hands-on demonstration.
Respondents:
Evelyn Finklea, St. Petersburg Junior College, St. Petersburg, FL
Karen Uehling, Boise State University, Boise, ID
- 2:00-2:15 Break
- 2:15-3:15 Charles Schuster, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI:
"Basic Writing: a WPA Point of View"
Schuster will offer a view of the place (or place lessness) of basic writing from the perspective of the Writing Program Administrator. Soliciting responses from a number of administrators, he will offer insight on such issues as basic writing's relation to the larger composition curriculum, the credit/non-credit issue, placement, institutional credibility, success rates, and main streaming
Respondents:
Jeanne Gunner, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA
Sylvia Holladay
Conversational break-out clusters
- 3:15-3:30 Break
- 3:30-4:00 Ira Shor, CUNY & New York Graduate School, New York, NY:
"The Politics of Mainstreaming Basic Writers"
Shor will focus on the politics of mainstreaming basic writers, moving from notions of the marginalized outsider to notions of the "contact zone"
Respondents:
Peter Adams, Essex Community College, Baltimore, MD
Karen Greenburg, Hunter College, CUNY, New York, NY
- 4:00-5:00 Sylvia Holladay and Dick Friedrich:
"Action 60"
Holladay and Friedrich will lead a response/planning process which will continue the wheels turning to solve at least one of the problems. Suggestions will move on to the CCC Executive Committee.

R * E * V * I * E * W * S

Recent Articles on Basic Writing

Sally Harrold

As I read through periodicals to select articles to review, I noticed many shared a common stance: a questioning of the current assumptions of writing teachers and the field of composition. This desire, then, to alter our vision--whether it's reshaping our sense of history, looking beyond what we've seen before, or examining the assumptions in how we teach and relate to students--is the common thread in the articles I've chosen. I'd welcome your comments about the reviews and your suggestions for articles or books you'd like reviewed in future issues. My address is:

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1988 Newmark Ave.

Coos Bay, OR 97420

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The first article, **Anne Ruggles Gere's "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extra curriculum of Composition"**, discusses one way our professional assumptions have limited our sense of our professional history, keeping us from appreciating literacy practices outside academia. A revision of her 1993 CCCC Chair's Address, Gere's article defines and illustrates what she calls the extracurriculum of composition, "the self-sponsored pedagogically oriented writing activities outside the academy [throughout our country's history]" (80), in this case writing groups and writing publications from the Colonial period

to the present. These groups, Gere argues, met (and meet) many goals composition teachers have: good feelings about self and writing; desire to improve writing; publication possibilities; and a sense of writing's personal and communal importance (78). Cutting across race, class, and gender lines, this extra-curriculum, Gere asserts, should be included in our history of writing instruction. Its longstanding presence should encourage us to ask how "we can learn from and contribute to composition's extracurriculum in our classes" (86). Gere suggests that writing centers might serve as the site of such learning, a place for the "... eliding of distinctions" (87) between public and private life, between formal writing and writing done for personal reasons. Writing centers, then, because of their unique position in the academy, might serve as places where we could work with and learn from the extracurriculum. If we choose to do that learning, we in the academy can work to make writing and our understanding of writing more democratic.

Deborah Brandt in "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading" also urges us to broaden our understanding of literacy practices, particularly as they relate to the cultural practices of reading and writing, so that we can "better understand what is compelling literacy as it is lived" (477). Her report of interviews with forty Dane County, Wisconsin, residents revealed discrepancies, both in the ways people remembered reading and writing and in the family support for each activity. Reading was social and endorsed by family, as well as school. Writing, on the other hand, was more solitary, less actively supported and shared in the family, and

thereby a more secretive and rebellious activity. Defining oneself as a reader, thus, was (and is) easier than defining oneself as a writer. Realizing the very complex relationships between these two activities--achieved by Brandt's moving outside the classroom and interviewing people about reading and writing in their lives--again illustrates a new vision, in this case, a more democratic and a more comprehensive view of research, as well as of literacy.

The third article is Gail Stygall's "Basic Writing and Foucault's Author Function." Stygall takes many institutional and professional assumptions to task by examining them through the lens of Foucault's author function. She asserts that

the institutional practice of basic writing is constructed and inscribed by the notion of the author function, and that the teaching of basic writing is formulated around the educational discursive practices necessary to keep the author function dominant. What I mean by *educational discursive practices* are those activities and talk about education that we experience as natural, normal, inevitable, and unremarkable. These are practices that we take for granted: one teacher for each classroom, the existence of classrooms and buildings made expressly to be filled with large numbers of students and correspondingly few teachers; grading and sorting students; separating students by age and grade level; dividing time into semesters and quarter, days into class periods;

homework and all those other aspects of the daily life of education that we rarely question. (321-22)

Stygall's article illustrates how the author function informs our practices in a discussion of a project in which graduate students in a course on basic writing that she taught corresponded with basic writers at two other institutions. Analysis of their correspondence revealed that the graduate students consistently generated nearly three times the text of the basic writers in their letters; they assumed the role of interrogator; and they constructed an educational identity for both themselves and the basic writers that retained difference as it denied it (323).

Stygall goes on to list the following implications for the teaching of basic writing, the first four touching on our evaluative assumptions and the last three on our institutional practices:

1. The transgressing of conventions is restricted to *authors*; we respond to basic writers' errors, not, all too often, to their content; we "place" students in basic writing courses by their transgressions; and we don't allow students ownership of their texts (324).

2. A discourse gives *authors* high prominence; basic writers study *authors*; marked improvement in their own writing is suspect (324-5).

3. The "construction of a rational being" is often reserved for *authors*; writing that isn't immediately and clearly connected to other passages is accepted for *authors*, but is evidence of deficiency for basic writers (325).

4. Although the unified voice is still "best", multivocality is accepted for *authors*,

but for basic writers it represents only lack of coherence (325).

5. Basic writing is NOT a temporary phenomenon; thus, it should receive permanent funding and tenure-track positions (339).

6. The practice of labeling needs examination to see whom it benefits (339).

7. Basic writing classes should be staffed with experienced teachers who can resist the institutional construction (see 1-4) of basic writers, not with inexperienced TA's and part-time instructors (339).

Although all seven points are part of the tacit knowledge that shapes institutional practice, the first four are points we can address individually, in our dealings with students, and particularly in our evaluation of their writing and in our curricula. I know that I found myself nodding ruefully as I read Stygall's original points. More difficult to address readily are the latter three points. Here, I think, is where research can lend support to our efforts to change institutional practices.

A case in point is Edward M. White's "**The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies: Helping Students Succeed Under the New Elitism**" which speaks to Stygall's sixth point: labeling, and more specifically, assessment and placement. White reports on two studies—one conducted in California in the late 1970's and one in New Jersey in the mid 80's. Both indicated that a solid placement program followed by a carefully designed instructional program enables many students who would not otherwise have done so to continue in school successfully. White's article provides data—not just suppositions—that well-designed placement tools and

remedial writing programs DO work, that careful labeling joined with a carefully designed program can enable students to succeed and to finish college.

All these articles ask us to examine our assumptions about our field, literacy, teaching, and our institutions. They show us ways to broaden our vision so that we see new sites of learning, new factors and relationships between reading and writing, and new ways that our assumptions and practices have limited those very students we have sought to help. These articles not only challenge us to continue to learn--about our work, ourselves, and our students--but also guide us in the right direction.

Works Cited

- Brandt, Deborah. "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading." *CCC* 45.4 (Dec 1994): 459-477.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition." *CCC* 45.1 (Feb. 1994): 75-92.
- Stygall, Gail. "Resisting Privilege: Basic Writing and Foucault's Author Function." *CCC* 45.3 (Oct. 1995): 320-341.
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Membership in the Conference on Basic Writing is \$5 for one year, \$9 for two years and \$12 for three years, and includes a subscription to the CBW Newsletter, Subscription address: Sally Fitzgerald, Div. of Language Arts, Chabot College, 25555 Hesperian, Hayward, CA 94545.