

Editors' Column

As we edit our second issue of *JBW*, we are aware of the serious challenges facing our profession, our students, and our colleges. Several hundred participants attended our basic writing panel at the 1995 Conference on College Composition and Communication last Spring. Most spoke with eloquent anguish about the dissolution of their programs and the loss of resources for basic writing courses across the nation. They, and we, are troubled by the devaluing of literacy and education as government and public priorities. We believe that basic skills courses democratize higher education by providing students with academic access and support. Thus, the role of *JBW* as a voice for our profession has become more critical. The journal must serve as a forum for writing educators to explore problems, to reflect on critical issues, and to envision change.

The essays in this issue make explicit the questions underlying current definitions of—and crises in—basic writing. The opening essay by James L. Collins rejects composition curricula and pedagogies that privilege the process approach over other approaches. Collins challenges us to rethink writing instruction, to adopt a poststructuralist appreciation of difference and multiplicity, and to increase our awareness of how culture affects language forms and audience expectations.

In the next essay, Norbert Elliot asks us to think about narrative as an essential component of literacy. He contrasts the devaluation of narrative in basic writing classes with a demonstration of how professional writers use narrative as a tool of legitimation. Elliot asserts the legitimating function of narrative for basic writers and describes how it enables students to explore the relations between their ideas and their lives. For Elliot, teaching narrative discourse to basic writers is a step toward participatory democracy.

The next three essays relate these theoretical concerns directly to classroom practice. Relying on the power of music to motivate students, Sarah Coprich Johnson tells us how to engage basic writing students in critical literacy. Johnson describes class activities and explains how different kinds of music can provide springboards for writing and help students

understand the connection between purpose and technique in the expression of ideas. In her essay on redesigning a writing program, Mary Segall explains why basic writing students should be placed in college-level, credit-bearing “intensive” composition classes. Segall offers evidence that students’ attitudes, motivation, and skills improve—while the college’s academic standards are maintained.

In his case studies of basic writing students, Eric Miraglia demonstrates the effectiveness of writing autobiographies as a means of assessment and self-diagnosis. Miraglia shows how the diagnostic autobiography can be a powerful tool to help students reflect on themselves as writers and to help teachers guide students in setting goals for their writing development.

The issue concludes with two essays on assessment. Despite research studies showing the inadequacy of multiple-choice tests for classifying students as basic writers, Thomas Hilgers tells us that 49% of American colleges and universities continue to place students based on their scores on multiple-choice tests. In his essay, Hilgers describes appropriate measures for assessing students’ writing and explains how the use of these measures would lead to improved placement and curricular decision-making. Edward M. White concurs with Hilgers; indeed White believes that effective placement procedures can increase students’ retention and success. White takes an historical perspective on composition instruction and evaluation, contrasting egalitarian educational policies of the recent past with present elitist approaches. Advocating continued funding and support for basic writing programs, White presents evidence of increased retention levels for students involved in two large basic skills programs.

The essays in this issue underscore our commitment to having *JBW* reflect the complexity, contradictions, and multiplicity of approaches and points of view that have made basic writing itself a site of struggle. We thank the authors for taking on the important controversies in the field and for entrusting us with their words. In addition, we thank the Consulting Reviewers who devoted much time and expertise to responding to multiple versions of the essays in this issue. Finally, we want to express our gratitude to Vice Chancellor Elsa Nuñez-Wormack for her support of the journal and to Ruth Davis for her remarkable editorial and organizational abilities.

—*Karen Greenberg* and *Trudy Smoke*