

EDITORS' COLUMN

We write this column at a time of great change for the institution of public higher education in the United States and, most particularly for us at CUNY. For the first time in almost three decades, starting in the spring 2000 semester, CUNY will not allow the admission of "remedial" students to four of its senior colleges: Baruch, Brooklyn, Hunter, and Queens Colleges. Much debate has occurred since the "no remediation" policy was passed by the CUNY Board of Trustees in January 1999. The last step in the process took place this past November 22nd. As Karen Arenson wrote in the *New York Times*, "The New York State Regents...cleared the way for the City University of New York to begin to exclude students from its bachelors' degree programs who cannot demonstrate that they are ready to begin college-level work in both mathematics and English" (23 November 1999:A1+). Looking at this sentence, we notice several problematic phrases. What does it mean to say students "cannot demonstrate" readiness—and who gets to determine that? Is there a generally accepted definition of "college-level work"? We might benefit from doing a close analysis of this and other articles on CUNY to understand the cultural dynamics at work in the demise of basic writing and remedial programs in the senior colleges.

Using just such a close analysis, Gail Stygall examines a similar situation that she faced at the University of Washington. Her description of the political climate that existed as the public considered the 1998 Washington State Initiative I-200 affirms the role of media in influencing voters. The question put to the voters was whether "government should be prohibited from discriminating or granting preferential treatment on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in public employment, education, and contracting." Stygall uses the tools of critical discourse analysis to illustrate how an article in a major Seattle newspaper, which seemingly supported the rejection of I-200, in fact ended up arguing for it. The initiative was passed by more than half the voters. The effect of this anti-affirmative action initiative has been a 31.6% decline in enrollments of new underrepresented freshmen at the University of Washington from 1998 to 1999.

The need to understand the values inherent in and the complexities of language use are presented in a different but related way in Jane Hindman's essay, "Inventing Academic Discourse: Teaching (and Learning) Marginal Poise and Fugitive Truth." Hindman contends that as long as we English teachers alone decide what is good writing and assign grades for it, we cannot de-center authority. Nor, therefore,

will we be able to enable real change in the students' understanding of standards and means of evaluation in the university. She describes a collaborative project in which students learn to "read" placement exams, to negotiate possible scores, to discover what is valued in the academy, and ultimately to evaluate the essays. Particularly instructive in the project are those instances when students rate an essay a "1" and teachers rate it a "4" (the lowest and highest possible scores respectively).

Learning to understand and respond to writing while working in a group is the focus of Laurie Grobman's essay, which describes how students learn to respond to their peers' writing online. She explains how by working with a peer response leader (a sophomore student guide), students in the peer response group learned how to discuss each other's writing electronically. Grobman presents the difficulties that emerged from the project and then makes suggestions intended to improve the relationship between peer response leader and peer response group and to make this model even more effective

In light of recent political actions at CUNY and elsewhere to eliminate basic writers from senior colleges, Linda Adler-Kassner urges student-centered research both as a means of protecting programs and knowing our students better. Her article focuses on interviews with two students placed in basic writing classes. What is especially revealing is that these students, Tom and Susan, do not know that they are, nor do they see themselves as "basic writers." They realize they are not in the "regular" first-year composition course, but they do not know that the "Writing Techniques" class into which they have been placed is basic writing. When they are asked about what it means to be a basic writer, Tom says that it must mean "writing simple," and Susan says that it must be a person who "writes things just...like their given assignment." Are Tom and Susan basic writers? What does this term mean to us today and what has it meant over time?

The next two essays provide reflective, historicizing answers to such critical questions. What has *JBW* meant to the definition of basic writing? What has it meant to the students, teachers, and researchers involved in basic writing programs? By categorizing articles that appeared in volumes 1 to 17, Susanmarie Harrington examines the role *JBW* has played in constructing the basic writer. Harrington's examination of general trends looks particularly at the inclusion of student voices in research. Beginning with the notion that "*JBW* institutionalizes basic writing," she has become increasingly concerned that as we have begun to publish more theoretical articles and essays on teacher expectations, the students have become invisible. Urging more "student-present scholarship" (she

explicitly has Adler-Kassner's and implicitly Grobman's and Hindman's – sort of research in mind), Harrington's exhorts us to realize that such scholarship is especially critical at a time when politicians are controlling the fates of our programs and students.

The Harrington essay connects directly with Laura Gray-Rosendale's "Mapping Our Discursive History: The *Journal of Basic Writing* and the Construction of the 'Basic Writer's' Identity." Gray-Rosendale reflects on the role *JBW* has played in basic writing history from 1975 to the present by focusing primarily on a 1978 text by Louise Yelin, the Myra Kogen/Janice Hays debate of 1980, and a series of articles that articulate the conflict model. It is her contention that these texts disrupted and contested previous theories of basic writing that, in fact, it should be the function of *JBW* to disrupt, call into question, and contest the metaphors and previous constructions of our field.

So it is that this issue of *JBW* has at its heart self-reflection and close analysis: the close reading of public documents, the examination of the language of inclusion and exclusion, the deep description of students, and a discursive history of *JBW* itself. At this moment, as the place of basic writers is being questioned, as public higher education is being restructured nationally, and as *JBW* nears its twenty-fifth birthday, we must consider and question what our role will be in the next century – whether, indeed, our students will have a place in the postsecondary education of the future.

-- Trudy Smoke and George Otte