

## INTRODUCTION

A policy of admissions that reaches out beyond traditional sources for its students, bringing in to a college campus young men and women from diverse classes, races, and cultural backgrounds who have attended good, poor, and mediocre schools, is certain to shake the assumptions and even the confidence of teachers who have been trained to serve a more uniform and prepared student population. For the English teacher, the shock and challenge of this diversity is experienced first through the written words and sentences of the new students, for here, spelled out in words, woven into syntax, is the fact of inequity—in our schools and in the society that is served by these schools. Here, for example, are two high school graduates from the same city and school system writing about the economic value of a college degree:

- (a) A high school graduate with superior aptitude should by all means go on to college. Having superior skills, this student will probably excel in college as well as upon graduation from college and be able to find work. The superior student might not seek employment upon graduation, but instead pursue advanced graduate work.

Another type of student is the high school graduate who lacks the necessary skills for college work. In some instances, with remedial work, such students might eventually succeed in college. For the most part, however, college is wasted on those unprepared for it. This type of student would do better to seek employment upon graduating from high school.

The real problem lies with the average student. Most of these students would well appreciate the value of college and are also more or less equipped to exist under the college system. Unfortunately though, it is this type of student that suffers most when seeking employment after college. Due to the scarcity of jobs, most of the good jobs have already been taken by those with superior ability. Thus an average student is the one who should seriously debate whether to attend college or seek other employment.

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*Mina Shaughnessy is director of the Instructional Resource Center of the City University of New York.*

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(b) I feel that for a young person. Who has just completed High School and wishes to attend college. To get a higher education that this move is a very wise one. I know for a fact that there are people. Who have attended college and have received a college degree. Who are receiving the same pay as high school graduates. A person who has a chance to attend college should do so. This opportunity does not happen everyday and not just anyone. College is so of an orientation course. It also broadens your views, helps you cope with things you will face in the future.

College English teachers who encounter passage-*b* writing for the first time are not likely to know where to begin or even whether to begin. Everything in their training and experience leads them to suspect that students who write such passages are not very bright and that no amount of instruction, especially at this late stage, is going to matter. Should such teachers be faced, as they well might be in an open admissions classroom, with a number of writers of this caliber, they may simply go on teaching the same course they taught before, yielding nothing to the inferior preparation of their students, insisting, rather, that maintaining standards is a matter of no one's budging except the new student, or they may decide to abandon the old standards, not because the standards are invalid but because they are now inexpedient, given the new students' academic difficulties and the limits these seem to impose upon their futures.

Both approaches offer an escape from the students themselves, dismissing either their past academic experience or their incipient excellence. Yet the third approach—setting about in as thorough and deliberate a way as possible to teach the students what they haven't learned (or to unteach what they have)—leads into unmapped territory. Little of what the teachers learned in graduate school will seem of much use. At first they may search for The Answer or The Formula in books (about linguistics, perhaps, or psychology or sociology), discovering in the process the extent of their ignorance about language and the hopelessness of finding The Way in those shifting and turbulent disciplines. They will search their own experience as writers or editors or students for a better understanding of the skill they thought they could teach. They will ponder over students' papers or pounce upon some illuminating remark that slips out in conference. They will be alternately exhilarated and downcast, and almost always vulnerable. But if they stick with their decision to teach, they will slowly begin to discern a "logic" to their students'

difficulties with writing, a path that leads inexorably back through all the schoolrooms where these students did not learn to write but learned instead to believe that they could not write or even make sense of the confusion of do's and don't's they mistook for the subject of English.

The plight of such students—of young men and women who want to be in college, who have the intelligence to do college work, but who are not skilled enough when they arrive on campus to survive in a rigorously academic environment—has begun to reshape the freshman English course in many colleges, expanding it, linking it to the work being done in other disciplines such as linguistics and psychology, and most important, challenging teachers who came into their departments of English to teach poems or novels, plays or criticism, to take a closer look at the job of teaching writing.)

It is to such teachers that the *Journal of Basic Writing* is directed. The editors of the *Journal*, who are in this first issue its contributors as well, have all been teaching writing for the past five years or more in the Basic Writing Program at City College, a program that serves over 3,000 students whose needs as writers range from instruction in the rudiments of writing (English 1) to the acquisition of a style of discourse appropriate for professional and academic work (English 2 and 3). A parallel (but extended) sequence of courses serves foreign-born students, who make up about 10 percent of each freshman class.

Aware by now that teachers who teach across such a range of skills and experiences can expect to confront more questions than they will ever be able to answer and abandon more strategies than they will ever finally accept, the editors nonetheless believe that much can be gained by the exchange of observations and theories among such teachers. This is in fact what happened initially among the editors themselves, who after several years of talking together about their experiences in the classroom decided to prepare short papers for their meetings so that their ideas might be more carefully explored. This first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* grows out of that exchange and begins with the subject that in one way or another dominated many of the early discussions about student writing—the subject of error.

Error may seem to be an old place to begin a new discussion about teaching writing. It is, after all, a subject English teachers already know about. Some people would claim that it is the English teacher's obsession with error that has killed writing for generations

of students. Yet error—the unintentional deviation from expected patterns—dominates the writing of many of the new students, inhibiting them and their readers from concentrating on what is being said. And while no English teacher seems to have difficulty counting up and naming errors, few have been in the habit of observing them fruitfully, with the intent, that is, of understanding why intelligent young adults who want to be right seem to go on, persistently and even predictably, being wrong. Most of the articles in this issue are trying in one way or another to deal with this problem. The opening and concluding articles take up some of the social and pedagogical issues that hover about the subject of error.

The next issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* will be entitled *Courses*. Its purpose will be to discuss specific hypotheses about the way students learn to write and to describe courses that grow out of these hypotheses. Subsequent issues will be devoted to *Order* and *Vocabulary*. The editors hope that other teachers from other open admissions campuses will want to contribute to the *Journal* and thereby enlarge the experience of us all in what is, in some ways, a new profession.