

INTRODUCTION

There was a time in France, we are told, when it was possible to say at any given point during the day what every schoolboy in the country was reading. However enviable such curricular certainty might seem to Basic Writing teachers in this country during these times, it is clearly not at this point remotely possible. As yet, the teaching of writing to unprepared college freshmen is too loose and unstudied an experience to allow for uniformity even within programs, let alone among them. Colleges define “basic” differently, depending on the skills levels of their “regular” students; budgets for basic writing range widely from campus to campus, with some large enough to support two and three semester sequences in writing and others too small to provide more than a small remedial fix-it station, manned (usually “womanned,” in fact) by one overworked paraprofessional; and then there are the predilections and resources of individual teachers or program administrators which lead to the choice of one path to competence rather than another, sometimes even tempting the choosers to believe they have stumbled upon not simply *a* way but *the* way. Beyond this, there are within the profession many unsettled and unsettling questions about the nature of competence in writing and the means to achieve it, about the needs of adult learners and the prospects of meeting these needs through *any* of the methods that have been tried so far.

Our purpose in inviting teachers to submit course descriptions for this issue was two-fold: first, we wanted to document the diversity of outlook and design that seems to us to characterize basic writing teaching at this time; and second, we hoped to find individual accounts of courses that would of themselves be useful to all teachers, if only to remind them that there are many ways to climb Mt. Fuji. From among the many articles that were sent in, we have therefore chosen six which propose quite different paths to competence in basic writing.

We cannot claim that these are newly-broken paths. The reader will recognize in most of them familiar strategies and emphases. Indeed, what begins to appear to be the major “innovative” task in basic writing is to determine (1) what of the available knowledge about the teaching of writing can be put to use in basic writing and (2) how that knowledge

and the methods it has generated can be adapted to the needs of basic writing students. For the two most important facts about these students is that they are adults and they are in a hurry to master what their more fortunate peers mastered over many years of direct and indirect instruction. Being adults, these students can take conceptual short-cuts that younger learners are not ready to take. What children might learn through drill and long exposure to special forms or styles, basic writing students can approach through analysis and self-guided practice. And being in a hurry, these students require that their teachers select judiciously from among the many sub-skills of writing those that will enable their students to take the next step in whatever institutional framework they happen to be studying.

The differences we observe between basic writing courses and traditional composition courses and between one basic writing course and another grow largely out of teachers' responses to these facts of adulthood and limited classtime. Thus, while research has taught us much, for example, about the English spelling system and practitioners have begun to put that knowledge to use with young learners, we have yet to determine how best to adapt what is known about spelling to the needs of adult bad spellers, whose habits as speakers and writers are more deeply rooted, whose learning often involves *unlearning*, and whose goals must be realistically related to their situations (with greater emphasis, perhaps, upon proofreading and dictionary skills than upon habitual, drilled correctness, or upon reducing spelling errors rather than being free of them).

Each of the authors of the course descriptions that follow is in a sense proposing a hypothesis about what comes first for the basic writing student and is then suggesting a sequence and method for reaching this first station of competence. Each of the authors would probably agree on what a student must be able finally to do as a college writer, but s/he has chosen a different place to begin or a different method of proceeding from one point to the next. As her title suggests, Jeanne Desy proposes that the first competence, to which all others are subordinate and from which they are likely, in fact, to flow, is the ability to reason soundly. Her path therefore takes us into the territory of logic and rhetoric. To Dianna S. Campbell and Terry Ryan Meier, the central difficulties of their students with written English appear to grow out of their limited understanding of language—its varieties, functions, and distinctive grammatical features. Theirs is thus a course about language, an attempt to deal with error in a way that challenges students to think about more than error.

Marie Ponsot tells us of an intensive summer program that moves from the fable to the academic essay through a “paradise” of summer time and a livelier collegial atmosphere than the regular academic season generally allows. Helen Mills describes a system of instruction involving twenty-nine study units that are taught according to the principles of mastery learning. For her, the most effective “course” in writing is not a course but a sequence of lessons with highly defined, testable objectives that can be offered in a variety of combinations and according to different timetables. To Ann Petrie, the key skill for the beginning writer is the skill of thinking in consciously analytical ways, a skill that in her judgment requires students to have access to their feelings as well as their thoughts. She proposes a way of teaching the five-paragraph academic essay that develops analytical skills without cutting students off from the experiences that give rise to thoughts. Finally, Paul Pierog would have us attend more to interest and vitality in student writing. He concentrates on the responsibility of the writer to recreate that which was unique in the experience he is writing about, and he strives, through dramatization, coaching, and group writing and editing to teach the skill of imagining what it is like to be a reader.

Such diversity of purpose and method has many uses. It reminds us of what we are not doing and urges us to consider more carefully why we do what we do. It reveals to us how variously we perceive the difficulties of students and how differently, therefore, we define “basic.” It suggests, too, that while the remedial situation dictates that we reduce the universe of writing to “basic” subskills, the skill of writing seems to defy such reduction, impressing us again and again with its subtle involvement of various faculties and skills, some of which we as individual teachers decide to recognize and others to ignore, or to take note of “later.”

Such observations, rather than urging us toward a uniform system of teaching basic writing, should encourage us to explore further this many-mansioned skill we are learning to teach, and to view the variety we find wherever skilled and imaginative teachers are at work as a resource rather than a flaw.

The third issue of the *Journal* is to be entitled *Uses of Grammar*, and again we invite your contributions. We will be looking for articles that describe the effects teachers expect from grammatical instruction, that devote some time to the hypotheses that undergird particular uses of grammar, and that provide solid rationales for the sequences, strategies, and materials used.

MINA P. SHAUGHNESSY