

EDITORS' COLUMN

Recently, one of the *JBW* co-editors attended a workshop for administrators of programs focusing on college access and success. During the discussion, a workshop leader observed, "You don't use the term 'remedial' do you?" "No," the *JBW* editor responded, "but politicians do." At about the same time, a query appeared on the listserv of the Conference on Basic Writing, asking if anyone had a source for the representation of open admissions students entering the university as "barbarians at the gates." In the flurry of responses, it became clear that, whether or not one could locate an exact source, this was a view of their students that early advocates of open access were forced to confront on many campuses.

If politicians, elitist academics, or others choose unflattering terms for basic writers, this is not surprising. They select the vocabulary that most closely conforms to their other concerns. Those whose agenda, whether for philosophical or budgetary reasons, requires exclusion speak of basic writers needing "remedial" or "high school" work. They express concern about lowering "standards" for entrance to higher education and about "diluting" instruction for all, should too many "deficient" students be admitted. On the other hand, those whose agenda leans toward inclusion speak of "opportunity" and of "working from students' strengths." If they speak of standards, it is standards measured after instruction, after the "developmental process" has had a chance to work, to add value. The students remain the same; it is the lens through which they are viewed that changes.

Knowing that the research offers evidence that students respond to the expectations—even when not expressed—of their teachers, we understand that terminology has power to shape the students' response and their ultimate level of achievement. Terminology also reflects where the speakers or writers locate their primary interest. If the focus is primarily institutional or disciplinary, the student is more likely to be viewed as "remedial." When students are the focus, they are more likely to be termed "developmental."

The endless debate and discussion in our field about the terms "basic writing" and "basic writers," provides another illustration of the power of terminology and of connotation. The fields of basic writing/composition and ESL are atypical disciplines in having a dual focus: on disciplinary knowledge and on pedagogy. Or to state it another way, the material of these disciplines always includes the "who" and the "how"—who is the learner and how will that learner achieve competence?—as well as the "what." These signature questions thus locate students centrally in the enterprise.

Rebecca Mlynarczyk, *JBW* co-editor, leads off this issue with a new take on a related and long-contested set of terms in "Personal and Academic Writ-

ing: Revisiting the Debate.” The discussants her title refers to—Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae—touched a quandary that continues to perplex and to elude resolution. Is the student, in basic writing or composition, to be seen primarily as a person approaching the act of writing or is she to be seen primarily in terms of the task to be learned—academic writing? By reframing the discussion in terms offered by Jerome Bruner and James Britton, Mlynarczyk is able to situate herself *between* these two positions. Combining psycholinguistic theory with findings from her qualitative research, she is able to locate herself meaningfully between the student and the task and to recast this long-standing but still meaningful distinction in a useful way.

In “The Synergy Program: Reframing Critical Reading and Writing for At-Risk Students” April Heaney also engages in redefinition. Noting the common perception of “at-risk” students as lazy or intellectually less capable, she proposes an alternate interpretation: “not as a deficiency in writing structure or mechanics, but as a deeply held attitude of un-investment in the writing process.” Heaney links that attitude on the part of students to their perception of the distance between the world represented by academic writing and their home culture. From the perspective of these students, an investment in the writing process and a consequent increase in proficiency offer the prospect of widening that distance from their home culture even further. In describing the Synergy Project at the University of Wyoming, she explains how the faculty construct a learning community experience that focuses on the students, helping them to explore their anxieties about acculturation and giving them space and support in coming to terms with these concerns.

Heaney’s “at risk” students at Wyoming represent a small proportion of the university’s student population. Rachelle L. Darabi examines “Basic Writers and Learning Communities” at her institution, Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW), an open admissions college. “Underprepared” is the term she uses to describe them. Referring to the issues we have been discussing, Darabi says, “Thus, we find ourselves at a point of tensions, wedged between the need for an educated society, the need of universities to uphold standards but at the same time educate those whom they admit, and the pressures on and from government to show greater effectiveness (that is, to retain and graduate more students) at lower costs. Such tensions have caused changes in basic writing programs at many universities.” Like Heaney and her colleagues in Wyoming, Darabi and her colleagues have found in the learning communities model a way to increase retention through increasing student success and engagement, and she presents findings of a promising research study.

In her article “In the Service of Writing and Race” Angelique Davi offers perhaps the most oblique description of basic writers: “Students in this course are accepted into the university through the Contractual Admissions Program (CAP), a program designed for students whose academic profile might otherwise

impede their access to higher education.” They also tend to be students of color, often economically disadvantaged, and in both of these ways they are in the minority at the college. Davi’s title highlights the mix of factors that comprise the CAP program at Bentley College—an augmented basic writing course that incorporates service learning and engages students in reading, writing, and deep, critical discussion of issues of race, class, and gender. She argues that the service learning helps students develop confidence and enables them to identify and take pride in the role they play in the community. The reading and writing assignments build proficiency in academic literacy and critical thinking. Moreover, they help the students address issues that present obstacles to their formation of an academic identity and their success at the college and beyond.

John Paul Tassoni in “(Re)membering Basic Writing at a Public Ivy: History for Institutional Redesign” raises many important questions about how we write the history of basic writing and how we situate ourselves institutionally in participating in or reacting to this enterprise. Tassoni’s institution, Miami University of Ohio, in staking its claim to be considered a “public ivy,” had trouble reconciling this identity with the existence of basic writing on its campus. The faculty and administration had effectively, and largely unwittingly, screened the existence of a basic writing course, even from themselves. Because its value—and even existence—went unacknowledged, Tassoni argues, the basic writing course “was merely retrofitted to an English Department’s goals, rather than integrated into its mainstream business.” In other words, the institutional self-perception, rather than a study of the needs of the students, underlay curricular decisions. In uncovering the defensive amnesia of his university, as well as the true history of the basic writing students and course, Tassoni offers a powerful analysis of the place of basic writers in the university.

Several of these writers have noted the current challenges to basic writing. Their commitment both to the student writers and to their home institutions are vital to ensuring continued support for this still much-needed effort. Keeping both the needs of the students and integrity of the institution clearly in view also probably offers the best hope for the success of the students since it forces us to define both the learner and the task in terms of one another. At the same time, the terminology we use to describe basic writing (as well as basic mathematics and reading) remains an issue of concern. The language that is used in conversations between practitioners and those who fund or provide institutional support for basic writing may, as John Tassoni details so compellingly, in the end drive the enterprise. Maintaining the integrity of the work while communicating effectively with those who see it with different eyes presents a critical challenge to those of us who work in basic writing.

—**Bonne August** and **Rebecca Mlynarczyk**