

EDITORS' COLUMN

As many of our colleagues have pointed out, definitions of the basic writer nearly always refer to social institutions and relationships of power. And yet we know that even as basic writing programs rely upon standards and definitions to function, students enter our classrooms with a full range of competencies, leading us to variously problematize the scenarios we have legitimated for sorting students. At the same time, students' backgrounds—their histories, interests, and locations in society—offer still more counter-narratives for considering their intellectual development. With more “time [taken] to know them” (Sternglass), we may obtain a broader view of students' experiences as they affect learning and their relationship to academic life.

This issue of *JBW* makes clear that basic writers do not act merely as recipients of programmatic direction. Their talents, engagements, and perspectives bear upon their learning in ways that change us as teachers, instructing us to modify our practices, and our notions of what is basic. Our lead article, “Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Literacy: Mapping the Interplay of Curricular and Extracurricular Literate Activities,” by Kevin Roozen, presents the striking case of Charles Scott, Jr., a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign from 2000-2005, whom Roozen followed in order to observe the pre-college and extracurricular influences that positively affected his path toward journalism. Roozen discovered a rich and inventive complexity of engagements on Charles' part as he sought to accede to the demands of entry-level, college writing while pursuing writing and public speaking goals of his own determining. For Roozen, the factors that designated Charles' writing as basic represented a limited, quite context-specific, range of abilities. Once recognized, the obverse sides of Charles' school literacy leads Roozen to conclude that “writing . . . is not so much about learning new practices in a new context as it is about coordinating and re-coordinating networks of multiple practices, artifacts, and identities.” And as our views of students broaden, so do our responsibilities. Our teaching must invite students to integrate the complexity of their literacies outside of school and optimize these resources. By doing so, educators may prompt students toward key roles in defining academic writing—“to contribute to, rather than merely reproduce, academic literacy—to make it their own rather than someone else's.”

In “Technologies for Transcending a Focus on Error: Blogs and Democratic Aspirations in First-Year Composition,” Cheryl C. Smith shares Roozen's view of students' ability to mutually determine instructional approaches while affecting the parameters of basic writing as traditionally constituted by the classroom

and academia. Smith's interest is in Web 2.0 platforms for social networking, including chat rooms, blogs, wikis, and sites like MySpace, which have captured students' attention, and generated waves of potential for renegotiating students' relationship to writing. Detailing her own experiment with using blogs in the classroom, Smith acknowledges how students' internet-related experience in communications bears upon a new engagement with literacy. First, as a component of classroom community, blogs have the capacity to re-situate students in relation to error. Students who blog in connection with their courses may gain access to academic discourse in a mode that does not eschew error, as chat room- and blog-type writing openly includes error as part of its discourse style. Similarly, blogs offer a palpable invitation for expression of larger ideas, as in discussion posts, with blog-mates supporting and building upon one another's commentary in collaborative, written form. Thus Smith's point, "When students bring their known modes of expression into the realm of the unknown, it eases some of the dissonance they may feel when faced with the new challenges of college writing. They may even find surprising ways to make academic writing conform to their experiences." With greater insight into the extent of students' already vibrant internet literacy, writing teachers are empowered to cultivate the "democratic aspirations" of teaching as articulated by John Trimbur.

In "Assessment of Generation 1.5 Learners for Placement into College Writing Courses," Kristen di Gennaro continues in the spirit of Roozen and Smith by demonstrating that we must keep our notions of whom we teach flexible and open to inquiry. Just as Roozen calls us to consider the range of variables determining students' identities and capabilities, di Gennaro cautions us against assuming that we understand the ESL learner by way of the popular label Generation 1.5. A survey of the research on L2 learners highlights the impressive range of second language learners' cultural and educational backgrounds; these factors manifest as various strengths and needs within the ESL student population. The implications are for improved assessments, which in turn might more productively impact placement and curriculum. Di Gennaro elaborates on the relevant variations in background, including the length of time L2 learners have been in the United States; whether they have obtained an American high school diploma; proficiency in the L1; and the level of aural versus written proficiency in the L2. When teachers and program directors neglect these factors for placement, instruction is directly affected: An L2 student who has been in the United States for many years, but who has learned English principally through immersion and auralness, may resist a curriculum that assumes he or she is a newcomer to this country. Or an L2 learner fairly able to demonstrate written proficiency in English may be at a loss in classrooms where aural comprehension and cultural understanding

of the U.S. are assumed. Di Gennaro therefore recommends a more culturally and experientially sensitive platform for placement, including questionnaires, as well as more research into how different writing patterns may encode aspects of students' sociolinguistic backgrounds.

Susan Naomi Bernstein's "Material Realities in the Basic Writing Classroom: Intersections of Discovery for Young Women Reading *Persepolis 2*" offers another instance of the self-reflective practitioner thinking back, thinking more deeply, about who the struggling writers in our classrooms say, or demonstrate, they are, as opposed to institutional or programmatic prescriptions of identity. During the Fall of 2005, Bernstein took special notice of five women in her first-year, first-quarter basic reading and writing class at a Midwestern resident college as they were encouraged to make the extracurricular of their lives bear upon their transition to college life. Bernstein uses theories of intersectionality to emphasize the inter-relatedness of all the social, cultural, and other factors that shade the borders of identity for many students, especially basic writers who strive to transcend their marginal status as students in remediation. The female, mostly minority, students of Bernstein's class seemed to feel and express their marginality quite poignantly, as they were among the last cohort of students admitted to the university through open admissions. At the same time, various economic factors of this Midwestern, rust-belt region impacted their sense of options for the future. Bernstein's creative use of *Persepolis 2*, a graphic novel—which as a genre embeds many intersections, of text, visuality, and nonlinear form—proved highly effective for enabling students to deal with the many interstitial gaps and overlapping layers of their own identities, making possible the construction of meaning and identity simultaneously. Students' roles in determining their course assignments and curriculum were thus of a piece with the generative activity of exploring de-centered subjectivities—their own as well as those of Marjane, the novel's main character.

In another sense, an inquiry such as this, focused on contradicting the notion of any one notion of the basic writer, is largely about asking students to talk back to what's been said of them, or to them, about who they are. The last article of this issue, Maria Ornella Treglia's "Feedback on Feedback: Exploring Student Responses to Teachers' Written Commentary," unequivocally demonstrates that students are constantly registering our impressions of them, interrogating our responses, and responding. In her study of fourteen students from two first-year composition classes, Treglia found that students are ever attuned to teachers' tone and direction as it concerns their writing, such that students see the connection between their teacher and themselves as a relationship, one that requires—as part of the larger act of "thoughtful response"—respect that is

reflected in the right choice of words. Focused on the type of teacher response students preferred, Treglia found that they most appreciated mitigated response (“I like how you Perhaps you should”) versus unmitigated response. And as we hear elsewhere in this issue, students’ backgrounds—their past history with writing and the academy, their status as second language learners, as well as their understanding of social norms—are a key element in how students read teachers’ comments. Treglia reminds us that responding to student writing is really a “two-way communication” that must include teachers’ respect for their students, their awareness of response as “intellectual interaction,” and their valuing of students’ choices.

Obviously, we have many reasons for keeping the question of “who is the basic writer” framed in the particularities of students as much as possible. We must consider our students—their backgrounds, interests, talents, histories, locations—even as they change as circumstances alter, trends emerge, technology proliferates, and the material conditions for our teaching, and students’ learning, seem to shift beneath our feet. It may at times feel overwhelming to constantly consider teaching at the threshold of change and students’ continual process of becoming. For now we might let the authors of these pages lead us for part of the day.

—**Hope Parisi** and **Rebecca Mlynarczyk**