

EDITORS' COLUMN

These are exciting times for basic writing. Less than two years ago, the Executive Board of the Council on Basic Writing (CBW) sensed an “increasing invisibility” of the field at the convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). In response to the perceived invisibility, the Board drafted a “sense of the house” motion: “Be it resolved that basic writing is a vital field and its students and teacher scholars a productive force within composition; is under attack by exclusionary public policies; and therefore must be recognized publicly and supported by CCCC as a conference cluster and with featured sessions” (Executive Board). The motion got widespread support and was unanimously passed at the 2011 CCCC business meeting. As a result, a surge of presentations dedicated to basic writing enlivened the 2012 conference schedule.¹

At the same conference, Mike Rose won the Exemplar Award and spoke with Lynn Quitman Troyka and Peter Adams on a featured session, “Should Basic Writing Be Placed on the Endangered Species List?” Rose talked about the lifelong orientation to school that privileged children generally receive, both at home and in the classroom, where they are routinely given the sense that they belong in college, that they will thrive there and enjoy it. Less privileged students may not be given this sense of belonging, and if they get to college and are identified as underprepared, instructors tend to focus on techniques, skills, and strategies with them. But such students need something more than techniques, Rose insisted: They need an orientation to school and the support to cultivate a set of beliefs related to their intellectual abilities and rightful belonging in higher education.

Not unlike our students, those of us working in the field of basic writing have faced marginalization and misunderstanding within our institutions and departments. We were even beginning to feel invisible among our peers at one of our most important professional gatherings. The resulting CBW motion gave voice to these feelings, just as Rose gave voice to many of our students’ experiences with their own invisibility at school. Basic writing and its teachers—and, most importantly, its students—share a common struggle with their sense of belonging in academia. Our current, exciting moment in basic writing is proving that our energies have not flagged. We are still advocating for increased visibility for ourselves, our programs, our students, and our research.

¹ This Fall 2011 issue goes to press in the summer of 2012 and thus marks events that occurred in March of 2012.

This issue of *JBW* captures the spirit of the moment through personal and historical accounts of our field, stories about programs, and tales from the classroom that theorize the work of basic writing and imagine future iterations of programs, pedagogies, and research. To preface the accounts you will read, we wish to briefly gesture to this journal's history. In the introduction to the very first issue of *JBW*, Mina Shaughnessy wrote about the experience of basic writing teachers encountering new kinds of students, maybe for the first time: "They [the teachers] 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" (2-3). To say that students learned to believe they could not write is not far from saying they learned to believe they did not belong. Sadly, this belief extends far beyond the "vulnerable" teacher and student struggling together to re-imagine the terms of success: of what it means to write, to fail, and to learn. Since *JBW* was launched in 1975, deep-seated beliefs about who belongs in school—and who doesn't belong—have contributed to the dissolution, simplification, or shrinking of countless open admissions policies, assessment procedures, and programs.

Bruce Horner puts these kinds of losses in perspective in "Relocating Basic Writing," adopted from his presentation at the annual CBW workshop at CCCC 2012. Horner tenders a hopeful narrative of basic writing's struggles, which he locates in a history of resistance, reform, reversals of reform, and repetition. Horner is not discouraged by the fact that we may need to fight (or feel like we are fighting) some battles again and again. With each effort at change, we alter the ground, culture, and history of our field and our programs, *relocating* basic writing through the "struggle over literacy: its geography, its boundaries, its residents," as well as through our local teaching practice, "itself a site for producing and revising knowledge about reading and writing." Horner pushes us toward a complex definition of basic writing that emphasizes its commitment and responsibility to those identified as outsiders, to democracy, and to justice.

Shawna Shapiro picks up on Horner's claims about how change is done and undone by looking at one program's resistance to reform, "despite substantial evidence that its curriculum and policies were ineffective." In "Stuck in the Remedial Rut: Confronting Resistance to ESL Curriculum Reform," Shapiro explores why an ESL program might cling to the traditional, remedial model—in spite of all the research and evidence in support of alternatives—

and offers an explanation that looks beyond instructional modes. Writing programs, Shapiro argues, are more than sites of instruction; they take on a specific role and identity within the institution, which has its own beliefs about language difference. Programmatic reform, therefore, cannot happen by looking exclusively at instructional and assessment methods. Speaking of the particular program she studied, Shapiro says, “In order to move forward with curricular revision, the program needed to develop an alternative understanding of its function within the institution. This was an arduous and risky process.” She tells the story of this process and its risks, and draws out the lessons for curricular reform efforts in basic writing.

Reform is hard, not only at the programmatic level but also in the individual classroom; teaching practices, like program structures, can become ossified and resistant to change. Ronna J. Levy looks at the challenge of changing how and even *what* we teach. What happens, for instance, when focused reading instruction drops out of the developmental English equation? Can students learn to write better if they do not have the tools or confidence to read their own and others’ texts? And how can a basic writing instructor with little recourse to methods for teaching reading bring it back into the equation? For Levy, these questions lead to Literature Circles, an approach developed for teaching younger students to read that emphasizes reading as a collaborative process. In “Literature Circles Go to College,” Levy shares her experience in transferring Literature Circles to her urban community college classroom, where students quickly became more active, engaged readers because they “had to collectively construct knowledge for an audience of their peers and, as a result, their acts of reading moved beyond the space where texts are vessels from which students extract, spew, and promptly forget information and became acts of dynamic composition.” By theorizing reading as a dynamic and creative act, Levy’s research provides valuable insight into the reading-writing connection and its importance to basic writers.

With our final article, Matthew Pavesich returns us to a broader focus on basic writing and its programs, taking up Horner’s call to look closely at our history, the meaning and impact of our struggles, and our relationship to democracy and justice. In “Reflecting on the Liberal Reflex: Rhetoric and the Politics of Acknowledgement in Basic Writing,” Pavesich tackles the uncomfortable conflict between the liberal tradition and educational justice: “while liberalism’s supporters equate with justice its commitment to the equal treatment of all people, clear-eyed accounts tell us something different: that for many liberalism offers only the injustice of assimilation.”

In response to the problem he identifies, Pavesich advances a “renewed politics of basic writing” informed by political theory, particularly Patchen Markell’s *politics of acknowledgement*. Pavesich grounds his political vision in the story of one basic writing program’s radical reform, during which he and his colleagues confronted the “inevitably liberal” institution and the limitations of “alternatives.” As Pavesich makes clear, the resulting program and its corresponding politics demand, “contextualized rhetorical action in constant need of revision.”

When Pavesich emphasizes the importance of action and politics subjected to constant revision, he evokes the idea of having to continually “relocate” our research, programs, and teaching practices. Horner “claim[s] basic writing. . . as part of a tradition of refusing to settle for fixed designations of what is and isn’t literacy, or illiteracy, fixed designations of who is and isn’t educable or worthy of education, and fixed designations of what we do and don’t know about literacy and its learning and teaching.” The articles in this issue suggest that, as we resist invisibility for ourselves and our students, we must also resist stasis and stale paradigms. The energy of our current moment in basic writing is infused with the language of change: reform, redefinition, revision, the refusal to settle for fixity. The “sense of the house” motion helped ignite this energy, which continues to transform the work we see presented at CCCC. Howard Tinberg frames the 2013 call for proposals as a “call for expansiveness” and puts unprecedented emphasis on basic writing, suggesting how quickly revision can happen and how current, resonant, and potentially far-reaching are our concerns. Yes, Horner cautions that the elation of success may be short-lived, that change can be reversed and transformation is cyclical. But having to return to the fight is no reason to lose hope.

—**Cheryl C. Smith** and **Hope Parisi**

Works Cited

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