

EDITORS' COLUMN

The beginning of a new semester is a particularly apt time to reflect on what slips beneath the surface of visibility in the classroom. There are certain ways we see students right from the start, based on the little we know about them. We know, for example, the demographic information we get from class lists, such as declared areas of study or class year. We know what students tell us in initial introductions and profiles they may write. And we build assumptions about them based on attitudes, postures, behaviors, and comments that come out during class. Where students choose to sit, how they contribute to discussions and interact with classmates, if they linger to speak with us after class—all of these factors contribute to our view of students and help build our sense of who they might be. But the information we use to construct our understanding of students consists of carefully filtered details. That is, their written profiles and behaviors in class are performances of a school identity aimed at a very particular audience—the one holding the red pen. For while we are constructing our view of them, students are busy forming their own ideas about us, based on our performances.

As we do this dance in the classroom, we draw from everything we have learned over the years about human behavior in school and classroom dynamics. That is, our knowledge of one another is at once deeply informed by experience and profoundly limited in scope, bounded by fourteen weeks and the academic spaces we share. Hopefully, our assumptions develop throughout the semester, growing with each class discussion, interaction, conference, and assignment. But even as our knowledge of one another expands, there is almost certainly more that we do not know than we know. Similarly, there is likely more institutional or social influence behind our ways of knowing than we may recognize. The articles in this issue explore different ways that our work with students and their writing is laced with the invisible and bears traces of social and academic structures that we may not be actively aware of. We see students and their writing, we respond to and evaluate them, hopefully we value and learn from them. But just as important as what we see and directly respond to are the gaps, the traces of the unknown that may be asking for recognition (or not), and the potential they bear for the construction and negotiation of identities.

Our first article calls these gaps and traces “the unknowable, uncodable, behind-the-scenes space.” In “Beyond the Dark Closet: Reconsidering Literacy Narratives as Performative Artifacts,” Shereen Inayatulla puts the ubiquitous literacy narrative in conversation with coming out narratives to

explore how tropes of darkness and enlightenment play out in both. In each case, these tropes lend themselves to narrow, totalizing interpretations of an individual human experience. Still, as Inayatulla points out, discussions of coming out narratives have begun to offer a more nuanced view of the closet as not only or always a space of darkness and oppression. As Inayatulla argues, “the closet, taken *not* as a site of unawareness, can redirect the ways in which darkness in literacy narratives is depicted.” Inayatulla challenges assumptions about how literacy maps a trajectory from darkness to light to explore how a writer’s experience with literacy and its sponsors might be captured—and reclaimed—in the literacy narrative assignment. Writers may choose to perform identities and experiences in order to trace “truths” about literacy that do not correspond to common cultural assumptions about enlightenment through language acquisition and education. Inayatulla calls for a reconsideration of the literacy narrative assignment to liberate writers, not only from limited expectations of their experiences, but also from teachers’ internalized narratives about students’—and our own—enlightenment.

Thomas Peele and Melissa Antinori also look at common assumptions about how and why students write. Peele and Antinori see a lack of transparency about faculty and administrative agendas when it comes to student writing, fueled by discrepancies in their priorities and expectations. The lack of transparency, however, has positive results for Peele and Antinori, laying the groundwork for an initiative using the power of technology and social networking sites (SNSs) to bridge the reading and writing that students do at home and in school. In “iBooks Portfolios: Interface, Audiences, and the Making of Online Identities,” the authors describe this initiative: students receive iPads loaded with the iBooks platform for the purpose of creating a portfolio of their work. Peele and Antinori report finding that the iPads “provided a context in which students could, if given the chance, make use of the rhetorical skills they’d honed voluntarily on SNSs and apply those skills to their academic writing.” As they develop iBooks Portfolios, students craft identities that blur the lines between online and academic spaces. In the process, they draw from divergent networks and literacies and transcend some of the unseen agendas that quietly shape and delimit what we value in writing for school. That is, writing spaces and practices that tend to remain invisible in school are afforded value in the iBooks Portfolios.

Like Peele and Antinori, our next author, Kendra N. Bryant, explores the role of technology and SNSs for developing students’ authorial identities in college and beyond. In “‘Me/We’: Building an Embodied Writing Classroom for Socially Networked, Socially Distracted Basic Writers,” Bryant

acknowledges the value of social media in offering accessible platforms for writers. She worries, however, about how these platforms may interfere with our efforts to build communities of trust and collaboration in face-to-face writing classrooms. Bryant describes a reality that will be familiar to many of us: “teachers often enter into silent spaces in their classrooms, where students are not discussing the latest reading, reviewing last night’s homework, or even gossiping about the latest reality television program, but are sitting there, ‘alone’—distracted and reaching for a sense of belonging via texts, tweets, selfies and Facebook updates.” Bryant addresses her concerns about building class community in the age of Facebook by drawing on Janet Emig’s theory of embodied learning to develop a curriculum in which students blog together. In this blogging classroom community, students and teacher work collaboratively, support one another’s efforts, and reveal personal parts of themselves in order to build a collective based on compassion, individual humanity, and belonging. The goal is to provide a space where writers can be known, understood, and encouraged in ways not possible in disconnected spaces, be they virtual or physical, home- or school-based.

Finally, Katie Fargo Ahern underscores the metaphorical workings of the often invisible assumptions we carry into the classroom. In “Seeking Texts in All Available Forms: Invisible Writing and a New Reading Rhetoric of Sight and Sound,” Ahern explores our largely unexamined reliance on metaphors of sight to articulate the work we do with basic writers and readers. When we use words like insight and clarity to describe how we want students to perceive meaning in a text, or how we want them to articulate their own meaning so that it may be perceptible to others, we imagine this work as an act of seeing, which “has become metaphorically synonymous with knowing.” To push back on the ascendancy of sight in our constructions of reading and writing, Ahern develops the concept of invisible writing “to encourage student readers to find new ways to ‘see’ forms of writing *as* writing” and “to reconfigure 111 and shift the idea of a *lack* of sight or *lack* of perception from the reader to the text.” The goal, she says, is “to have students understand texts as possessing contingent, complex qualities that they as readers must seek out, perceive, name, listen for, and explore in their analysis, rather than to see themselves as so named, basic readers.” In this description of reading practice, students are agents of their own knowledge construction, bringing to the surface and actively shaping their own narratives of reading and writing.

Seeing out, perceiving, naming, listening for, and exploring—these are the things we imagine ourselves doing as scholars and teachers. In the articles

featured in this issue, we can trace a conviction that students should have access to the same kind of intellectual authority, should not have to submit to being “so named, basic.” Such labels bear a heavy burden of institutional and social assumptions, not to mention the weight of accumulated, negative self-perception. The authors here push back against the pervasive, unexamined notions about “skills” and what a basic writer “needs.” They seek instead to privilege basic writers’ agency to perceive for themselves, name themselves, and listen for and explore their own narratives—released from some of the blindness and distraction that encumber one another’s fuller stories, both in our classrooms and the wider world.

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