

## *Editor's Introduction*

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# Teaching Beginnings for Multicultural Reform

**A**T THE RISK OF GOING TO THE WELL ONCE TOO OFTEN WITH JOHN ALBERTI'S award-winning *College English* essay, "Returning to Class: Creating Opportunities for Multicultural Reform at Second-Tier Schools,"<sup>1</sup> I've got say I couldn't read this issue of *Open Words* without recollecting Alberti's call for English teachers to "revers[e] our perspectives" on college life in order to take "second-tier schools as the norm in higher education." Such a reversal, he points out, raises opportunities for English Studies to ground itself in "the key questions of access and cultural democracy that have always been at the heart of the multiculturalist movement" (563). With this issue of *OW*, such a reversal is more than underway.

For the authors of the essays collected here, teaching begins with the interests and concerns of students historically considered nontraditional; and the authors use this point of departure to articulate alternatives for English pedagogies that affirm historical trends of exclusion, sometimes even in these trends' very attempts to ensure student agency. Resisting the stereotypical (white, middle-class, native-speaking) representations of elite research institutions and liberal arts colleges more often than not posited as the norms of higher education, students at the center of this issue of *OW* are African American, they are working-class, they are minority language learners. At the heart of their teachers' considerations, these students' experiences call into question and in some cases alter pedagogy. They demystify common elements of English instruction—process pedagogies (Gillam), prewriting activities (Fredericksen and Baca), group work (Hidalgo), end comments (Virtanen)—and call attention to the political ramifications of these practices and to representations of them that buttress "first-tier" views of higher education.

The articles in this issue, as in prior issues, indicate not only a reversal in perspective away from these "first-tier" views and discussions of pedagogy that result from them, but also an acknowledgement of the many beginning points to which democratic teaching responds, an acknowledgement that situates teaching in the lived lives of a diverse citizenry rather than in connivance with the elitist standards of a mythical average norm. For Hidalgo,

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1. John's article is referenced in the introduction to *Open Words* 2.1 as well.

Gillam, Virtanen, Fredericksen and Baca, elements of college writing instruction do not fall prey to what Paulo Freire would call a “technistic vision of education,”

which renders it purely technical, or worse yet neutral, [and] works toward the instrumental *training* of the learner. It assumes that there is no longer any antagonism between interests, that everything is more or less the same, and that all that really matters is solely technical training, the standardization of content, and the transfer of a well-behaved *knowledge of results*. (98)

These instructors situate their practices within the “antagonism of interests” too often flattened in “best practices” genres that uncritically assume a neutral backdrop to good teaching. Together, these articles help manifest the type of norm Alberti identifies in his *College English* article, a norm reflective of the complex human geographies we’d all like to chart and encourage with each new issue of this journal.

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## **Works Cited**

Alberti, John. “Returning to Class: Creating Opportunities for Multicultural Reform at Second-Tier Schools.” *College English* 63.5 (2001): 561–584.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Heart*. Tr. Donaldo Macedo and Alexandre Oliveira. New York: Continuum, 1997.