

**METAPHORS AND MATERIAL
REALITIES FOR BASIC WRITING:**
An Introduction to the BWe Double Issue

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Volume 8-9 (2009/2010): Double Issue

As we begin this new decade of the 2010s, we honor more than a decade of *BWe: Basic Writing e-Journal*. This special double issue of *BWe* 8/9 (2009/2010) offers several new features, beginning with new sections on **Pedagogy**, edited and introduced by Barbara Gleason, and **Book Reviews**, edited and introduced by Sonya Armstrong and Kathleen Baca. In Gleason's introduction to the Pedagogy section, readers will find helpful synopses of each new article, as well as connections among these articles and their contributions to the field. The Book Reviews present new books across a range of topics and disciplines. Each review draws on relevant theories and practices applicable to basic writing, and, by implication, invites readers to envision and develop our own theories and practices for the field.

As we move begin this new decade, we also hope to encourage all of us to become more proactive in the field. To this end, we have created a new **Comment and Response** section. Our first featured essay, by Sugie Goen-Salter, responds to an article published in *BWe*, Volume 7, entitled "[Toward a Social Justice Policy](#)." Readers may recall that our the last issue of *BWe*, I presented an argument for CBW to create and adopt a Social Justice Policy Statement. The proposal garnered some exciting discussion, including Goen-Salter's more formal response, which we are delighted to include in our Double Issue.

In "[Toward a Social Justice Policy](#)" I argued that, "students enrolled in Basic Writing courses must not be seen as marginal or expendable, but as vital, contributing members of their college communities" (Bernstein). Goen-Salter, as part of her response, reminds us that we must "also grapple with basic writing's regulatory, and hence exclusionary, function." Indeed, basic writing as both disciplinary and material reality, as suggested in this double issue, presents the reader with contradictions to ponder and blank spaces yet to be filled.

Often we can envision how and why to fill blanks spaces by considering the relevance of metaphor. In their introduction to the 2008-2009 edition of the *Journal of College Literacy and Learning*, new editors Eric Paulson and Sonya Armstrong consider the power of metaphor to create an "editorial vision." "Metaphors...are part of everyday thinking," Paulson and Armstrong write, "whenever we use something we already know, in order to make sense of something new" (1).

Indeed, previous editors of *BWe*, as well as our authors for this issue, have engaged in the process of metaphor making. Editors Linda Adler-Kassner and Greg Glau, in the first issue of *BWe* in 1999, use metaphor to create a mission statement for the journal. *BWe*, they suggested, would be “fighting the good fight.” In the following years, editors described new issues of *BWe* as a “work in progress” (Reynolds and Lalicker 2004), “an expansion of our campus conversations” (Bernstein and Baca 2007), and “a kaleidoscope” (Bernstein and Carter 2008).

The articles in our double issue suggest a shifting of students’ and teachers’ identities and modalities of writing through the inclusion of metaphor. For example, Penny Freel, writing and receiving letters from her students, reinvents herself through metaphor. While remaining embodied as Basic Writing educator, Freel adopts the guise of *Mrs. Freel*, who becomes a metaphor for the larger audiences and purposes that her students face as writers in the academy. As the metaphorical audience *Mrs. Freel*, Freel becomes freer to model revision strategies, suggesting to one writer, “For a student who thinks in metaphor and creates such wonderful and powerful pieces, your ideas are diminished by the Oh! so many comma and grammatical errors” (“Freel Letters”). Donning the guise of *Mrs. Freel*, Freel transforms into a metaphorical audience, a character in the drama of her students’ writing.

Other articles in this issue present metaphor through the complexity of genre, and modalities of creativity as inspired by new media and cultural studies. Deborah Mutnick’s student, “Daphne,” writes in her literacy autobiography “I spoke the truth; put words into metaphors that made people interested; changed the English secondary discourse and empowered discouraged illiterate minds” (“Still Strangers”). Stafford Gregoire, using both words and visual images, demonstrates the persuasive power of metaphor, as he writes, “The aim of this exercise is to expand this compositional form allowing students to keep their native ‘colors,’ or critical thinking skills, vibrant in the ‘industrial washing machine’ of contemporary society or popular culture” (“PowerPoint Reflection and Re-visioning in Teaching Composition”).

Indeed, mindful of Aristotle’s rhetorical practice of finding “the available means of persuasion in any given case,” Conference on Basic Writing, founded in 1980 and now in its third decade, has also taken a new name: the **Council on Basic Writing**. In our early years, before the Internet revolution, the Conference defined a yearly face-to-face gathering of basic writing educators eager to share information, which was then circulated as a newsletter to the membership. Eventually, the yearly conference was folded into the day-long workshop at CCCC (Uehling). Our move from “**Conference**” to “**Council**” signals the transition to our multimodal age, as does this issue of *BWe*. We no longer gather once a year, but every day of the year, via our electronic connectivity and awareness.

This electronic gathering began on June 16, 1999, at the dawning of the Age of the Internet. Conference on Basic Writing co-chairs Linda Adler-Kassner and Greg Glau welcomed Basic Writing teacher-scholars to a new online publication, *BWe: Basic Writing e-*

Journal. Hypertext ruled the day, and readers of this first edition moved back and forth between links to access the articles. If that process now seems old fashioned, the difficult issues that Adler-Kassner and Glau introduced remain in the present tense.

Perhaps the most troubling issue for our profession, as Adler-Kassner and Glau note, was the release, on June 7, 1999, of the “The City University of New York: An Institution Adrift.” The Mayor’s Advisory Task Force on CUNY, as charged by then-New York Mayor Rudi Giuliani, argued that “CUNY does not carefully diagnose students’ remedial needs” (7; cited in Adler-Kassner and Glau 1999). The report further recommended that “students who require remediation should be given a range of remediation options funded by education and training vouchers from a mix of public sources, so they can obtain remedial services from the provider of their choice without depleting their college financial aid” (7; cited in Adler-Kassner and Glau 1999).

Adler-Kassner and Glau identify the rhetoric of “clinical medicinal,” a metaphor and a material reality that would, they suggest, initiate “additional damage to basic writing students and basic writing programs” (1999). In turn, Adler-Kassner and Glau suggested a new rhetorical metaphor, thus linking that first edition of *BWe* to both unity and struggle: “It’s time,” they wrote, “for those of us who teach basic courses--basic writing, and perhaps also basic math and all of the other courses labeled ‘remedial--to come together and fight back,” as Barbara Gleason’s [call for papers for BWE 10](#) suggests. *BWe* would be part of that fight, using the strategies of [“collect\[ing\] data,”](#) in addition to offering “communication across campuses, and perhaps across disciplines, so that we can cite successful efforts on other campuses, and know where to find good resources” (Adler-Kassner and Glau 1999).

At the inception of the era of the internet, *BWe* would offer a forum to spread these resources so that they would be more accessible to other teacher-scholars. The first edition modeled this accessibility by publishing papers first presented at the Conference on Basic Writing pre-convention workshop chaired by Gerri McNenny and Sally Anne Fitzgerald, “Teaching Basic Writing at the Point of Need,” on March 24, 1999, at CCCC in Atlanta, Georgia. These presentations offered firm evidence that the metaphor of “fighting back” could be transformed into the material reality of saving basic writing programs, most notably at the University of Minnesota’s General College, as documented by Terry Collins in [that first issue of BWe](#).

As this double issue goes to press, or rather, goes “live” (online), we note that the landscape has changed drastically in the last eleven years. General College at the University of Minnesota was abolished in June 2005, and open admissions at almost all of the City University of New York’s community colleges ended in the summer of 2009 (Foderado). In early May of 2010, CUNY created a system-wide waiting list for first-year students seeking admission for fall semester 2010 (Christ). In relation to these drastic changes, George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk in their new book *Basic Writing* (2010),

address historical developments in the field, and offer insights into a possible future based on that history. As these recent changes suggest, Otte and Williams Mylnarczyk write “the future of the field is far from certain” (187).

Yet in this present moment, as our 2009/2010 double issue suggests, basic writing carries on. Our authors, at the turn of the 2010s, are by turns optimistic, and cautious, offering clear pedagogical goals, theories and practices that illustrate vibrant possibilities for reinventing not only the field but for our individual classrooms. The cycle of teaching and learning begins again with each new class period. Basic writing still leaves its traces in the hearts and minds of students that enroll in the course, and from teacher-scholars that teach and learn along with our students, and that document our theories and practices along the way.

As we end one decade and begin another, I would like to offer an additional metaphor for basic writing, and for this new double issue. Basic writing continues to evolve like an old growth forest, an ecosystem that nurtures both the old and the new, and that recycles that which can no longer live on its own. The Vancouver, British Columbia Forest Practices Board defines an old-growth forest as:

A forest that contains live and dead trees of various sizes, species, composition, and age class structure. Old-growth forests [are] part of a slowly changing but dynamic ecosystem. . . . The age and structure of old growth varies significantly by forest type and from one biogeoclimatic zone to another.

Basic writing, as our authors suggest, contains old and new practices, can be simultaneously slow changing and dynamic, and may vary from one regional zone to another. The old growth forests generate controversies and fierce battles, as well, such as the endangered existence of the spotted owl, and the logging of ancient timber (Seattle Times Staff). Basic writing, like the oldest of trees, remains a necessity to the continued well being of the rest of the forest, a living, growing sustainable old tree—the one that provides shade and nutrients to new growth. Even as the oldest of trees stands vulnerable to logging, so basic writing endures in a multitude of new forms, or stands patiently in wait of moments more conducive to its continued thriving.



Often the forest cannot be seen for its multitude of trees. Large portions of the forest may be destroyed by natural causes like lightning strikes, or human-made catastrophes such as a lit cigarette, or a careless campfire left to embers that erupt in much larger conflagrations. Still—the trees regenerate and the forest grows. The trees are not reactive to crisis, but thrive in spite of crisis, even if at times they may appear to be dying out. So too, after more than a decade of online teacher-scholar theory and practice, the double issue of *BWe* that we are reading today offers continued promise of development and growth.

But does a tree falling in the forest make a sound if no one can hear it? Otte and Williams Mylnarczyk remind us that, in these times of “upheaval”, “More powerful models for providing BW instruction may emerge, as well as more unified support for an under-supported field” (188). So—let us refresh our screens, recharge our batteries, and mix (and remix) metaphors of our own. Let us recreate our thoughts as essays, articles, and book reviews—and submit them for publication to *BWe*. The futures of basic writing depend on it.

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June 14, 2010

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