

Michelle Hall Kells and Valerie Balester, eds. *Attending to the Margins: Writing, Researching, and Teaching on the Front Lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. 188 pages. \$25.00.

Susan Gardner and Toby Fulwiler, eds. *The Journal Book: For Teachers of At-Risk College Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. 208 pages. \$24.00.

In recent years, writing teachers and writing program administrators have noticed changes in the student body at the college and university levels. Our students tend to be older, learning disabled, physically challenged, female, minority, immigrant, etc. This change will continue as students once on the margins of the academy become the center of our classrooms. In her essay in the Kells and Balester collection, "Speaking Back with Authority: Students as Ethnographers in the Research Writing Class," Donna Dunbar-Odom writes that this change in our student body is also transforming our ideas about teaching. She quotes Henry Giroux and his advocacy of "border pedagogy": "What is being called for [. . .] is a notion of border pedagogy that provides educators with the opportunity to rethink the relationship between the center and the margins of power" (qtd. in Dunbar-Odom 7). Critical literacy is concerned with questions of power and equity and represents one response to the changes in our student population. Other teachers are responding by exploring approaches that have been successful with a variety of students.

Both approaches are represented in the two books under review. The first book, *Attending to the Margins: Writing,*

Review

The Blurring of the Margins and the Teaching of Writing

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Researching, and Teaching on the Front Lines, is a research-based collection dedicated to Paulo Freire and his ideas concerning critical literacy. As Ira Shor explains in the preface, Freire believed that "our responsibility as teachers was to develop *critical subjectivity* that connects student experiences to reflective habits of mind and to projects for change" (viii). This theme of critical subjectivity weaves through each of the essays in the anthology. The second book, *The Journal Book: For Teachers of At-Risk College Writers*, advocates that teachers of at-risk students incorporate journal writing into their classroom repertoire. Both books redefine commonly used terms such as "at-risk students," "basic writers," and "non-traditional students," terms central to education and composition. Both also are dedicated to teaching and retaining the changing student body now entering the academy.

In *Attending to the Margins*, editors Michelle Hall Kells and Valerie Balester draw on well-known authors in the fields of critical pedagogy, literacy, and discourse analysis to frame the text and its two sections. Shor writes the preface, while Victor Villaneuva and Akua Duku Anokye serve as the commentators for Parts I and II, respectively. Two themes evident in the collection are a focus on the margins and the personal. Kells and Balester write that all of the teachers in the collection describe themselves as working and living in Gloria Anzaldua's *la frontera*. As the editors explain, Anzaldua's metaphor is central to the anthology and its focus on the notion of margins "as enabling and disabling fictions" (xviii). Kells and Balester say they hope to challenge common attitudes about the educational margins of open-admission institutions. They emphasize that open-admission sites are central to the history and practice of composition studies. Another theme in the collection is the significance of personal experience. The authors in the collection challenge the idea that the personal is a developmental first step along the pathway to the analytical. Instead, the teachers in the collection begin with the personal: "In all cases, they [the teachers] state or imply that students need to retain their sense of self, origin, identity as they venture into new discursive territory" (xviii). Students' experiences and lives are then validated as they move into academic writing.

The anthology includes many interesting articles, and they all, in various ways, echo the collection's themes. As Villaneuva explains, Part I, "Edge City: Class and Culture in Contact," is made up of "stories of critical consciousness in Edge City" (5). This section includes articles by teachers who are consciously moving the "Edge" to the "Core." Here is a sampling of

the essays in Part I: Donna Dunbar-Odom discusses how she uses ethnography as a way to validate students' experiences while getting at academic discourse; Caroline Pari provides concrete examples of critical literacy by describing three student-generated units that are grounded in students' political and social views; and Randall Popken shows how developing writers draw on their experience with previous genres as a way of writing their way into a new genre.

As Akua Duku Anokye explains, Part II, "A Nexus of Language and Learning Styles," "reveals teachers, researchers, and humanists who have paid attention, created dialogue, and interrogated fields of knowledge that serve as guides for *pushing the margins*" (91). Two insightful articles in this section on troubling subjects are by co-authors Margaret A. McLaughlin and Eleanor Agnew and collection co-editor Michelle Hall Kells. Both articles deal with linguistic prejudices and shame. McLaughlin and Agnew's article makes visible teacher biases toward African American language patterns, and Kells discusses the shame that some Mexican American students feel toward their own language. Both articles reveal the strong need for educators to keep pushing the margins.

The Journal Book: For Teachers of At-Risk College Writers also deals with students who have traditionally been at the margins of the educational realm: at-risk students. As collection editors Susan Gardner and Toby Fulwiler explain, the term has typically been applied to "high schoolers in danger of dropping out, but is not often applied to college students" (2). However, Gardner and Fulwiler say they chose to describe college students in the collection as at-risk because the term is appropriate. The students described in the collection are at risk of dropping out of their college writing courses, and because they face failure in these courses, they are potentially at risk of dropping out of college. These at-risk students include some of the populations discussed in the previous collection. However, as the editors point out, at-risk students also can include those with learning and physical disabilities, those who have had negative school or writing experiences, those who lack specific disciplinary literacy skills, and those mainstreamed into a regular class but who lack the skills necessary to succeed (2-3).

Gardner and Fulwiler advocate journals for at-risk students for several reasons. Among the main reasons are that journals are accessible, they validate students' individual thoughts and experiences, and they provide a place for students to develop fluency and to use narrative structures. Contributors to the collection are experienced teachers of at-risk students

from a range of college and university settings. The collection includes chapters on various students who might be called "at risk." It also includes essays from teachers who work with specific groups of at-risk students, such as deaf and learning-disabled students. In each chapter, teachers describe their work with these students, and they provide helpful and practical journal assignments.

The last chapter, the Afterword, and the Appendix are particularly helpful for those considering incorporating journals into their classroom or improving their current use of journals. In the final chapter, Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian Huot deal with tough questions related to the assessment of journals, and they provide some specific assessment options. In addition, Yancey and Huot ask teachers to think about what type of student is created by the assessment process: "In other words, what we do when we evaluate is to affirm a writer's identity; such identity making is always at the heart of education" (183). This quotation underscores the important and beneficial role assessment can play in a student's education process. In the Afterword, Fulwiler discusses teaching situations in which journals fail and provides specific strategies to overcome these failures. And in the Appendix, Gardner provides a checklist of issues to consider when creating journal assignments.

Both *Attending to the Margins* and *The Journal Book: For Teachers of At-Risk College Writers* would be useful for a graduate seminar on writing program administration, but for different reasons. *Attending to the Margins* would be useful to prospective WPAs who work at institutions that currently lack traditionally excluded students and those who deal with such students on a daily basis. The anthology provides new WPAs with a deeper level of awareness of what it means to teach students who traditionally have been at the margins of academia. The collection also offers helpful insights into how best to teach these students and various examples of different research methodologies to study this population. Thus, the anthology could be particularly useful for WPAs involved in curriculum development and research. I would recommend *The Journal Book: For Teachers of At-Risk College Writers* to WPAs who are more involved in the training of new teachers. The collection provides a range of practical activities and strategies that would be helpful to fledgling teachers of at-risk students. Finally, these collections should be useful to historians of the discipline because these students will be our future and thus our history.

These collections also are significant for writing program

administrators and teachers because they cause us to reflect on what we are doing. As a writing program administrator who works at an open-enrollment institution that is literally and figuratively on Anzaldua's *la frontera* (University of Alaska Fairbanks), I found that both texts led me to reflect on our composition program and my own teaching practices. These collections are important because they encourage us to envision and experiment with better ways to serve the traditionally underserved student.

Work Cited

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