



CCCC 2003: Reflections on Rhetoric and War

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Interchanges

CCCC 2003: Reflections on Rhetoric and War

The 2003 annual meeting of CCCC opened in New York concurrently with the U. S. invasion of Iraq on March 18, and many conference participants discussed the relation between rhetoric, the teaching of writing, and the war. On Thursday morning, CCCC Chair Shirley Wilson Logan officially opened the conference with a request: "Let us observe a moment of silence in order to experience the peace that I believe we all wish for during this time of conflict, turmoil, and strife for our nation and for the international community." In a preconference workshop on Wednesday, Ira Shor remarked,

With the mass media immersing us in prowar rhetoric to rally opinion in favor of the Iraq invasion, it matters now more than ever for writing classes to create forums where students experience and express a civic rhetoric that debates the urgent issues of the day. Problem-posing pedagogy is one way for the writing teacher to invite student debate without lecturing students on what they should say or believe.

In the sections below we have reprinted, by permission, some of the more memorable reflections on rhetoric and war made at the conference.

CCCC Welcome

David Bloome

President of NCTE

It is my official duty and pleasure to bring greetings from the NCTE Executive Committee and the NCTE presidential team, including Past-President Leila Christenbury, President-Elect Patricia Stock, Vice President Randy Bomer, and me.

The conversations you will be having over the next few days have the potential to be historic.

These conversations take place in a context of terror and war. It is not just the terror of smart bombs and imminent “shock and awe” bombing but also terror of airplanes crashing into buildings, bombs on buses, helicopter gun ships and tanks, bulldozers, and the fact that ordinary people just going about their daily routine may lose their lives and the lives of people they love. And were that all, it would be enough to make your deliberations over the next few days historic and courageous, but the terror is more pervasive. Teachers from preschools to high schools, to schools of education and the arts and sciences live under the terror of constant and ubiquitous surveillance and punishment—fail to teach the scripted phonics program, fail to teach from the prescribed list of “approved books,” speak a language other than Standard English, teach writing as culture critique, fail to lead your students in the Pledge of Allegiance, promote faculty or student unionism, and you put yourself at risk of being taken out of the classroom, suspended, fired, jailed, and/or made pariah.

What lies behind these terrors—what connects the terror of smart bombs and hand grenades with the terror of curricular alignment and accountability and other forms of educational surveillance, what connects phonics with military fatigues is the drive to make sure that people *stay in their place*.

Two weeks ago, my son Josh and I were in New York to join the 200,000 people here to voice our protest to the war we now have. The streets were crowded with people, but the police had barricaded the side streets and through bullhorns yelled at people to get off the street. But there was nowhere to go. At the corner of 53rd and 2nd, the police lined up their horses across the street and moved slowly toward the crowd, of which we were a part. Josh and I were swept off our feet, literally, and crushed up against a lamppost first and then

against a wall as the horses made to clear the street. For most people there was nowhere to go. So the horses, slowly, pushed into the crowd. A number of people were bruised, and a few were hurt extensively by the horses. The crowd began to chant, "Open up our streets. Open up our streets." But the police were determined to keep us in our place on the sidewalk; nothing was to interfere with the flow of traffic.

As multinational corporations continue to make large profits and as they continue to fill up the public spaces with their brands and with their tests, how dare we ask that schools have reduced class sizes, that classrooms have all the supplies and materials needed, that our children are healthy, that teachers have job security and decent pay, and that education be about something other than a test score? George Bush spent more than 100 million dollars to lose the election and win the White House; how dare we ask to have our voices and those of our students heard in the streets, at the UN, in our government, and in corporate headquarters? Colin Powell has ordered 200,000 soldiers to make war on the people of Iraq; how dare we ask for our students to have the same rights to affirmative action that he had? How dare we ask for the right to choose our own reading, to teach the books we select, and to decide for ourselves how best to teach reading and writing? It is all about place, keeping us and our brothers and sisters across the globe in our place. You can be on the sidewalk but not in the street.

May your conversations about composition, communication, and education over the next few days be "out of place"; may they move from the "sidewalk" to the "street." I know they will be historic, being here, today, in New York City under Code Red; they cannot be otherwise.

A Matter of Life and Death: Public Debate in a Culture of Consent

Diana George

We live today in a dangerously *polite* society. This is a culture that asks us to trust authority, have faith in expertise, and stand by government decisions. It is a moment in our history when Americans are urged to *shop* in response to threats against the nation.

In February of this year, Robert Byrd—hardly a radical Senator—charged his fellow legislators with "sleepwalking through history." At the brink of something the current administration has called *pre-emptive war*, Byrd noted that

the Senate stood, “for the most part, silent—ominously, dreadfully silent. There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war. There is nothing.”

What does that have to do with teaching composition? I would argue that it has everything to do with the business of teaching about language, about conducting public debate, and about how the absence of public debate contributes to what I would call a *culture of consent*. In such a culture, teachers are hesitant to make students (and themselves) uncomfortable by bringing up harsh politics, racial inequity, or public policy.

And, in such reluctance, I would argue, we risk teaching our students not to engage in public debate at all but, instead, to support (if only tacitly) the status quo, to trust that what is being done in our name is being done in our best interest.

Mine is a call to bring hard topics back into the classroom—those topics that seem tired and canned (gun control, reproductive rights, the death penalty, for example) as well as topics that seem hard to contain (international interventionist politics, world English, sweatshop economics, and more).

Michael Moore’s documentary film *Bowling for Columbine* is a good example of how someone can take one of those canned debates, gun control, and refuse to submit to the familiar terms of the question. Instead of arguing yes or no (for or against gun control), he challenges his audience to ask *why*. Why does this country have a history of gun violence when other countries with as much violence in their past, some with a boatload of guns to match, do not experience the same level of gun violence?

Why? Now, *that’s* a question that’s going to take more time to work through than pro or con/yes or no/for or against. Handled inside the classroom with rich resources and thoughtful teachers, that’s the kind of question that need not lead faculty to run to TurnItIn.com to check whether or not their students are stealing arguments from the Internet.

That’s a question that is going to take some deliberation, and real deliberation rarely lends itself to plagiarism (a topic that has once again become a popular one in our journals and conferences).

When I initially proposed this paper, I had in mind the work I have been doing with my friend and coauthor Diane Shoos on visual representations of the death penalty and what those representations—everything from lynching photos to Hollywood films—have to do with the state of the popular debate about death penalty legislation in this country.

I wanted to know—given the very real arguments being conducted in courtrooms, mostly concerning who should be executed and when—how that debate could come down in popular representations again and again to the very simple question of whether or not everyone on death row is guilty. I wanted to know what it means that these film stories typically pose an innocent prisoner facing the death penalty and rarely (*Dead Man Walking* is a notable exception) put the guilty in the center of the story.

Does that mean that we think it's okay for the state to execute the guilty? That is a question most frequently left unaddressed, and that is the hard question. It's also the question I would want students to ask.

Since I proposed that paper, however, much has happened in this country to prepare us for war, and so my remarks have had to expand to address those events. In that time, the uses of language to presume consensus and the role of the media in selling the notion of a consensus have been powerful and yet can easily go unexamined. I'd like my students to pay attention to how the media decides what is newsworthy and what goes unquestioned. What must it mean, for example, when the nightly news covers the "fact" that this country will attack Iraq as an inevitability, makes brief mention that millions of Americans oppose such an action, but goes on to explain when the attack will likely occur, then takes up the rest of the broadcast with features on weaponry, military gear, and "life" in military camps.

What does it mean when the sole coverage of opposition to this action is relegated to a human-interest story at the end of the evening news in which a member of Voices in the Wilderness is portrayed as tragically standing in opposition to members of her family who support military action? Where is the discussion? Where is the public debate? What are the basic assumptions from which such coverage emerges?

I want my students asking those questions as a part of understanding how language works, how argument is made or not made, and why it is crucial to question the language of power.

When I asked a recent class to identify where public debate takes place in this culture—where larger political or social discussions might happen—the students flatly denied there was such place, unless possibly the Internet, and that, they said, was too often just a lot of people talking to each other, sending satire and jokes and some petitions (which they didn't trust because they figured those were marketing scams) and a lot of information (which they also weren't sure they trusted because who knows who writes that stuff).

Addressing hard topics and complicated debate in the classroom might mean looking at the work of someone like Barbara Ehrenreich who asks hard questions about welfare in this country. She doesn't argue for or against welfare programs. Instead, she asks "how?" and "what?" For Ehrenreich the issue is not a simple matter of how many people continue on the welfare rolls—the question most frequently addressed in the media and by government officials—but, instead, what are the causes of poverty in this country? *How* is it possible to live on minimum income work? Once you ask how and why, you are into a very different kind of discussion, one that rarely surfaces in broader public debates on welfare in the U.S.

For many, "situating learning" means to take students into the places where they can do community work or see a community at work. We situate practice, as well, inside the classroom every time we examine real, ongoing debates that are, in some instances, quite literally a matter of life and death. When we examine news reports for how they are constructed and for what is actually said; when we study debates going on in our courtrooms and legislatures; when we set argument within its historic, cultural, and political contexts and refuse to rest on the common terms of a debate, then we situate learning.

What better time to be a rhetorician—to examine terms and phrases like *pre-emptive war*, *welfare reform*, or *privatization of Medicare*? What better time to be a composition teacher—to teach the power of language, the value of debate, the importance of deliberation, careful analysis, and thoughtful response?

Excerpt from "Who's Afraid of Politics? The Feminist Body in the New World Order"

Nancy Welch

When I think about that good-enough, fade-away teacher Michelle mentioned, I want to laugh—nervously and not because I think this is funny but because I'm still shaky from the experience of having become visible to a group of young men on my campus. These young men hang posters proclaiming "Bomb Iraq Now." They are the authors of Web logs or "blogs," sites that devote considerable space to railing against politically active women faculty. One "blogger" recently referred to me as a "stupid bitch" whose "ass" should be "fired" for helping to organize a protest against Dinesh D'Souza. Another convinced a columnist from the city's newspaper to run a piece about "extremist faculty"

whose antiwar views silence students, the columnist naming a colleague and me as prime, pernicious examples. Given that my colleague and I were both on sabbatical at the time, the charge took me by surprise as did the phone call from another colleague who scolded, “How could you let yourself be talked about that way?” It’s been an awakening to realize that I could be so visible to a group of young men I could not pick out on the street or identify in a line-up.

Actually I think it’s because I have never met them that their words feel especially threatening, taking on muscle and weight, particularly when I’m crossing the campus after dark or working in my office on a Saturday afternoon. True, I am not subjected to the witch-hunt that’s recently deported Arab and Muslim students by the hundreds; I have not been publicly harangued as an anti-American foreigner as a friend was by Rush Limbaugh on his nationally syndicated radio program. I have tenure, a union, and a U.S. passport. These faceless bloggers haven’t come up with words that can really hurt me. But it’s also true, as Michael Moore’s exposé *Bowling for Columbine* amply dramatizes, that violence in the U.S. is no social aberration. In this hyper-imperialist moment, it’s the norm. The commands that these young men issue—“Bomb Iraq now”; “Fire her ass”—cannot be separated from their desire and ability to align themselves with those empowered to make such words so.

Yet even as I feel the need to tell this story in a way that suggests the tie between U.S. militaristic violence and the reproach (and repression) of visibly deviant bodies, I’m also dissatisfied with it. There’s so much this story leaves out: for instance, my students’ positive responses to seeing me, a teacher of rhetoric, as one who also grapples with the rhetorical problems of oppositional speech. I worry, too, that the story may leave the impression that I’m a pacifist, which, my deep concerns about imperialist and sexist violence notwithstanding, I am not. I wouldn’t want any story I tell to suggest that I believe that violence is genetic or hormonal, rather than historical and systemic.

But especially I’m dissatisfied with this story as it stands now because by accepting the disembodied, anonymous, and seemingly omnipotent threat of “Bomb Iraq”/“Fire her ass,” I wind up implying that for all of us who are too vulnerable to revel in the role of lone lefty hero, our only recourse is retreat. There is danger in dwelling too much on an utterance divorced from its larger context. This larger context includes, to be sure, the few who have a material interest in bombing Iraq, gutting academic freedom, rolling back civil and abortion rights, and further and further stratifying this society into the handful who have and the many who have not. This larger context *also* includes *the many women* and *the many men* who have every reason to oppose such an

agenda. Fearful of the few on my campus who harass women faculty and students, I may miss the many men who are organizing with women to march against this war on all its fronts—and who are doing so because these assaults, from Afghanistan to Iraq, from the right to strike to the right to an abortion, are against their interests too.

So while I have given some thought, and worry, to those who call me a stupid bitch and while I understand why Asian and Arab friends especially are concerned with appearing as unnoticeable as possible while flying or while crossing the border from Canada, I'm arguing that we need to use these circumstances to look outward (and this includes outward beyond the confines of patriarchy theory) to others who also do not benefit from this new world order. What might we lose in vulnerability and what might we gain in power through becoming visible *together*? I think here, for example, of the thousands of Arab- and Muslim-Americans who turned out for the 100,000-person-strong Free Palestine rally last April in Washington, DC, despite the very real threats of detainment and deportation under the USA Patriot Act—a dramatic example of collective visibility. The story I've just told needs to be expanded to include this possibility of collective visibility, the needed counterweight to individual vulnerability.

Although then, as Michelle and Lil suggest, such a story becomes something not fully recognizable among teachers of composition and rhetoric, too unlike our dominant stories of successful teaching and learning. After all, this isn't the story of the critical warrior doing daily battle with students' false consciousness nor of the handmaiden to students' most sincere and true expressions, nor of the bitch pedagogue who lays on the line what female students have to do for individual, conventional achievement. This is also not the story of the fractured, excessive postmodern feminist enthralled by the shifting slipperiness of her own selves and significations.

To be fair, postmodern feminism has been my training. Lately, though, I'm not sure how much good it can do me or my students. It doesn't tell me what to do, for instance, when I look at facts such as these: while the number of high school and college graduates in the U.S. workforce increased dramatically between 1979 and 1999, wages declined for nearly three-fourths. Between 1984 and 1996, the number of people needing work consistently exceeded the number of full-time job openings 14 to 1 and the number of "livable wage" jobs 97 to 1. A survey of new economy employers in the 1990s found that what they most valued in potential employees was not a college degree or prior technical experience but the "skills" of punctuality, good attitude, and acceptance of the

wage scale. Ultimately, argues Gordon Lafer in *The Job Training Charade*, what people most require in order to resist, survive, and thrive in such conditions is “not the discipline demanded by employers [and taught and tested in new economy curricula] but the solidarity required for collective mobilization.” To this I would add that what we and our students need most to resist, survive, and thrive isn’t the writerly pursuit of textual fragmentation and generic migration—not if such a pursuit is allowed to proceed free from considering that we live in a country where power over language and images is increasingly consolidated, borders are strictly policed, and capital has more free flow of movement than many—most—bodies. We have been, as Kristie Fleckenstein and Mary Ann argue, too exclusively, even fetishistically attached to alphabetic literacy. Or I would say too exclusively attached to individual rhetorical practices within just a handful of institutional situations, composition’s forays into collaborative writing and extra-curricular literacy instigating only a partial challenge to parochial and privileged individualism. As we think about what will be necessary to tell counterstories of teaching and learning, we might consider the literacy practices and rhetorical understandings required in an age where the need for solidarity, organization, confidence, and creativity is paramount and where the history and examples of collective argumentation and mass action are largely suppressed.

Statement at the Progressive Caucus

Charles Bazerman

As the turmoil of the Vietnam war years faded, I discovered literacy as a cause one could pursue within the system, even though with some institutional struggle. But that struggle sometimes paid off and could be carried on locally within the politics of campus governance. I had not been out on the streets in thirty years. But last summer as the junta in the White House was setting its minds on war, if you remember even without congressional approval, I soon began to feel that I had to be out on the streets again—that I could not let this outrage go unmarked; that these incompetent bullies could not be allowed just to walk over the constitution and the hard-won lessons of the twentieth century; that aggression, first strike, pre-emption should be allowed—and those bastards were claiming it as a new principle. This new principle would give license for any country to act violently on its fears and imagined interests and not on any proven violation of national sovereignty. In a new century where

limited resources would increasingly become matters that would without cooperative planning turn nations against each other; in a century where environmental problems would require the highest degrees of cooperation to keep the planet habitable; in a world where extreme differences of affluence made volatility visible through extensive communications; in a world where people were already being drawn into extreme ideologies that focused and transformed their discontents into motives for terror; in such times, this Bush doctrine would give license to new horrors. Having seen the downward spiral of the Middle East in the last fifty years, I saw Bush and Cheney and Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz drawing us into that spiral by adopting the same stances and policies that had led Israel into endless conflict, militarization, and brutalization of their society. After 9/11, as awful as that was, I saw American exceptionalism kick in full tilt as we claimed no one had ever been injured before as we had; no one had more cause for vigilante justice than we had; everyone should salute to our pain. But all that had happened was that we were introduced to the insecurity most of the world lives in. We couldn't bear living in a difficult world, and we had a cowboy-crusader shallow enough to think he could conquer all evil. Instead of facing the difficulties in all their complexities, we have turned the whole world into our enemy.

So I have become enraged, and in my rage I had to act. I was fortunate though to have friends equally upset and to live in a community that was quick to see the foolishness. So by September 2002 a number of us on campus had begun talking about creating teach-ins, lectures, speak-outs, and rallies. And downtown, the community had begun a series of marches that have continued weekly for the last twenty-six weeks. The marches at first were small—200 to 300. But we persisted and now they range between 1,000 and 5,000, depending on the events and weather. The city council was one of the first to pass a resolution. During the fall electoral campaign, we pressured our congresswoman off the fence to oppose the war resolution. There has been a close connection between the downtown leaders and the campus group.

Meanwhile on campus we also started small. A core of about four of us organized a first planning meeting that drew about twenty faculty. We immediately established a listserv that quickly grew to about a hundred and has grown to slightly more than that—faculty, staff, and students. This has been a very useful means to share events, information, and news stories. The list is not moderated, but it has stayed active and on focus with traffic of from five to twenty messages a day, but no one complains about the amount of traffic. Core planning fell to a fluid group of three to five of us who met weekly for an hour.

We also saw that our first task was to get students engaged. We created a speak-out event in the plaza in front of the student center. That drew about 200 people, more faculty and staff than students. But we began to identify some student leaders through organizing this event, and others started to come forward as did members of the staff. So the core planning group now consisted of a floating group of students, staff, and faculty. We constituted our group as the Campus Community Peace Group, largely to facilitate booking of space. In the fall we also organized a formal panel that drew quite well—200 in the main room and another 50 or so in an overflow room with video feed. The videotape went to our local access channel and other outlets. We also were making connections with knowledgeable faculty members who were willing to talk.

Student engagement began to build with students organizing a concert rally in a park in the college town just by the end of the fall term. Also there were a number of other talks, panels, lectures through traditional academic units, which we helped publicize, occasionally adding a vigil or information table.

This winter term, many more groups and students became engaged. The CCPG now serves more to share information, provide support, and coordinate where useful among the multiple active groups. We sponsor some events, but the biggest events are now sponsored and organized by the student groups—such as the March 5th walkout, which pretty much shut down the campus. About 1,000 high-energy students marched, rallied, and took part in teach-in events. Faculty offered support by releasing classes, setting assignments around the events, and leading workshops.

The student association early in the term passed an antiwar resolution. This inspired some of us to introduce an antiwar resolution to our faculty senate legislature, which then convened a special meeting. As we were drafting a strong statement, a Nobelist on our campus was putting together a statement signed by forty-one U.S. Nobelists. This was a more middle-of-the-road statement, designed to gain wider approval. We decided to substitute that for ours because the prestige of the statement, the connections Walter Kohn and a couple of other signing Nobelists on campus had, and the broader appeal of the statement. We figured at the end of the day the headline would read, “UCSB Faculty Pass Antiwar Resolution”—which was exactly how the headline in the local paper read. The only opposition came from people who thought we should not make political resolutions. There was a bit of procedural confusion, but the senate chairman quietly supported us and arranged for an extraordinary meeting of the entire faculty senate, all professorial faculty. The resolution

passed 82–4. Then we had a supplementary electronic poll that showed approval of 176–16, with 37 saying the faculty should not engage in political resolutions..

One lesson we learned was that we had more friends in high places than we could imagine. As I was a department chair, I let my dean know of my intention to get involved. He backed me all the way and would check legal matters with the campus attorneys. And then because I respected our chancellor, I informed him, and he let me know that he thought the best way he could be useful was to maintain an open discussion environment. He also encouraged a number of campus units to bring important speakers to campus. The people in the community relations office provided all the media contact we could use. To someone living through the sixties, having an administration that would work for and with the movement was an incredible blessing.

One of the most important lessons of this was persistence. We were constantly unsure about where events would go and what we ought to plan for. But we just kept creating events with enough flexibility to react to the changing climate. It looks like now we will be heading into the long haul, and we will need lots of persistence. Although it is not at all clear how we can turn this country away from the disastrous path the Bush Junta has placed us on, we have no alternative but to keep on trying to find a way. As specialists in rhetoric and communication, we have useful knowledge about how to organize forums that will allow people to articulate and express the strong repugnance they have for the aggressive policies of this administration. As teachers of writing, we can help people develop their statements to make arguments in public forums. Only words, ideas, and forming of large, articulate national and international constituencies demanding a more civilized and tolerant world will stop the terror of those who think the world is to be controlled at the point of a gun. Now we see the real power of language, and we see the responsibility of our professional commitment to bring about a better world through fostering articulateness and communication. It is on this front we must now struggle.

Statement Accompanying the Sense of the House Motion¹

Nancy Welch

I want to give three reasons why composition teachers have a material as well as an ethical interest in opposing the U.S. attack on Iraq:

1. Our students, staff, and even colleagues who saw the reserves and ROTC as their only access to higher education are being called up and shipped out to fight a war that by this administration's own admission is about the control of oil empire and assertion of U.S. hegemony. In the name of students' rights to education without coercive military inscription, we need to oppose this war.
2. Our students, staff, and colleagues who are Arab, Muslim, Chicano, Philippino—any ethnicity, nationality, or religion the administration currently deems a threat to “national security”—are having their records scrutinized, their words and actions policed, and, in hundreds of cases from California to Florida, their bodies detained or deported. In the name of teaching against racism and in the interest of defending academic freedom, civil rights, and civil liberties, we need to oppose this war.
3. Our states are facing their biggest budget deficits since World War II, \$36 billion in California, \$11 billion in New York. I've talked with teachers at this conference who not only do not have a copying budget, they no longer have a functioning copier. I've talked with others whose universities are now able to claim financial exigency to launch attacks on tenure. Meanwhile, CNN reports that this war will cost \$90 billion—*per week*. In the name of funding our schools, not the Pentagon, we need to oppose this war.

I hope you will all vote “yes” on this motion and join us at 11:30 in the Hilton lobby for the United for Peace march. I'd like to suggest we take up this slogan: Money for jobs and education, not for war and occupation.

Note

1. The text of the Sense of the House Motion is printed in the minutes of the business meeting, also in this issue.