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2009 CCCC Chair's Address

The Wonder of Writing

Editor's Note: This is a written version of the address Charles Bazerman gave at the CCCC meeting in San Francisco on March 12, 2009.

My friends, I thank you all for giving me the opportunity to serve in the cause of writing. We share a wonderful calling and a great adventure. We draw strength from a great power. Five thousand years ago, the Mesopotamian farmer making clay pebbles to keep track of flocks: could he imagine we would wind up here? Who here can imagine what the built symbolic world will look like five thousand years from now—or even in a century?

Our thinking, our social interactions, our life projects, have transformed with literacy as an infrastructure of our lives. Few in the developed world still are farmers. Most now live urban lives, sitting in offices, staring at pages, typing at keyboards, communicating with others at a distance, and participating in complex knowledge-based activities and institutions. Even farmers now grow crops by the book, have literate ties to legal, political, and financial authority, and carry out personal values and commitments in text-saturated worlds. Over the next century how will our activities, our cognitive development, our relations, our political and legal arrangements, and our cultural environment evolve in conjunction with the built symbolic environment?

Writing has been considered sacred, for it sets us apart from the moment, creates an expanded reflective space where we can be more thoughtful, more persistent in our inquiry, more planful in our statements and actions. Reading and writing are associated with inwardness and personal development. Writing facilitates building a parallel world of knowledge that allows us to monitor,

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project, and influence the here-and-now world in which we live. Writing makes communion, bringing together people across space and time in shared attention, meanings, imagination, understanding, and action. As teachers of writing, we are bearers of this transformative technology, leading current and future generations into more refined skills, deeper understanding, more complex cooperation, new adventures, greater communion.

Writing is not biologically inevitable for our species. Humans lived perhaps a hundred thousand years without picking up a stylus. Many have lived successful and happy lives never having seen a book or tapped a keyboard. Writing had to be invented, from small beginnings and cascading innovations—material, symbolic, and social. Nor is it inevitable that every child will learn to compose in this medium. Young people need to see writing in their worlds to imagine its possibilities; they need access to tools in order to learn to use them; they need nurturing, training, mentoring; they need endless hours of work, practice, and development. They need to train their eyes to distinguish small marks arranged in a line; to train their fingers to manipulate pencils and keyboards; to train their minds to interpret signs of sounds, to form signs into words, and to attach words to complex meaning. They need to train their imaginations to attend to virtual worlds and to assess messages from seemingly nowhere. As their writing life develops, their minds need to grow so as to hold in consciousness long strings of temporally unfolding meanings, to build text and conceptual structures, to integrate large amounts of information, to live in relation to events, organizations, and people far away in time and space. And much more. We barely know the dimensions of skill that contribute to higher levels of participation in the many domains of writing we have created. What does a judge need to know to frame a just and persuasive opinion that will settle the matter at hand and serve as precedent long in the future? What does a poet need to know to capture the imagination and spirit of readers? What does a journalist need to know to be able to present what is timely for public life? What does a theorist need to know to advance research and provide guidance for social problems and policies?

Everyone in this room has come to love this world of writing. We have made it central to our identities—as individual writers, as teachers, and as investigators. We all, in our varying ways, have experienced the great power writing has to expand our emotional, intellectual, social, and material lives. Yet writing has become so multiform in its elaborations, in the social and cultural realms it has transformed, that we each have tasted only fragments of its variety. Nonetheless, in whatever aspect we have explored writing, we have all come

to appreciate craft and the commitment to text; awareness of audience; and forethought about situations and goals. We all have struggled with the process of birthing texts and have reflected on how to make the process more effective and less painful. We are all aware of the mentoring and support that allowed us to reach this point. As well, I hope we have all been touched by the joys of spontaneity, flow, and discovery and have felt touched by the muse. While our experiences and knowledges of writing are particular, even idiosyncratic, we share a common knowledge of what it means to be a writer and the kinds of work it takes.

Writing exists at the intersections of individual and social, of intentions and uptake of others, of agency and conformity, of form and meaning, of pattern and novelty. Writing exists at the intersections of the spontaneous and the planned; of the conscious and the nonconscious; of our histories, presents, and futures. It is easy to get lost in the funhouse of text, particularly if we forget the intersections that writing binds together. Even the private pleasures of fiction exist at the intersection of mind, experience, history, emotions of reader and writer, and the inventive tools of text—along with cultural practices, commercial markets, and material means of production and distribution, not to mention cultural sites of education, discussion, and promotion that maintain the taste and market.

How does writing serve to coordinate meanings and interactions rather than only inscribe individuality? One answer is that of classical rhetoric that sees agonism and competitive struggle through language leading to wiser communal judgment and deeper bonds of affiliation and value. Such competition for truths, near-truths, and truths of the heart are most effective in structured institutions that bring divergent parties together and focus exigencies and decisions—such as courts, parliaments, political campaigns, scientific communities, or commercial markets. Competitive representations are embedded in and rely on cooperative processes: mutual attention, practical and conceptual alignment over tasks, shared recognition of meanings and experiences, forms of social accountability for our representations and actions, identification and intelligibility of differences, formation of shared concerns and cumulative cultural knowledge, and much else to create the common spaces of communication.

Many literate interactions are based on such cooperative acts as answering questions; giving accounts of where we have been and what we have seen; providing, storing, coordinating, and making information accessible; offering directions and instructions, mutual planning and designs. Of course, within these coordinated tasks individuals may have differing views and interests.

Representations may be tinged with those differences and interactions saturated by competition for control of the reigning representations. Recognition and evaluation of these differences are part of reflective participation and action. To facilitate expression of difference, we may want to structure events and relations to focus the contestation and adjudication—offering criteria and procedures of accountability and judgment. Yet still the overriding tasks are cooperative, into which the agonism is harnessed and domesticated.

I have pursued this question of cooperation and agonism in part to contest (within this forum of disciplinary discussion) some common assumptions about rhetoric and suggest that cooperation is at the heart of rhetorical contestation. Rhetoric requires an effectively socially structured agora dependent on social good will and constant monitoring to work effectively—even as rhetoric helps construct and maintain that community. Even more, though, I have pursued this question of cooperation and agonism to indicate how complex and sensitive our literate communicative systems are, even if many structural conditions are invisible to us most of the time. Yet these too must be maintained and developed through an understanding of how literate communicative systems work. Further, for any individuals to gain voice in these systems, they must know how to play, and the more deeply they understand the game, the more effectively they can make their moves.

If literacy is defined as only reading and not writing in the earlier grades, the consequences go far beyond lack of needed skills and practice. The absence of writing over the years limits the opportunities to form an articulate self knowing how to make deeper sense of information, how to compose extended thought in response to others' extended thoughts, how to enter as participants into literate domains of society and action. Nor is there opportunity to experience the power of a focused, timely piece of writing to transform situations. A child who reads without writing may eavesdrop in the world of literacy, but this child is neither seen nor heard. When someone is talked at and cannot answer, she rightly feels her view is not understood, the conversation is not about her, and she loses interest and wanders off. Reading without writing has the same effect. As writing educators, we have a stake in bringing a vital connection between reading and writing in primary and secondary education so that students will come to higher education with already empowered voices to address new tasks.

It is no wonder that we have made voice and empowerment our mantras in higher education writing. Too often students have not yet had the writing experiences or the skills to gain voice and feel the power of writing—except

perhaps the thin and fearful voice of the accused under examination. Our concern for voice and empowerment has supported students as they learn through writing to build identity and assert the great diversity of peoples that populate our campuses and nation—whether important identities are formed around affiliations of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, belief, aesthetics, or intellectual pursuits.

But voice and empowerment are not enough, particularly if we think the voice and power are only from within. If we neglect the intertext and the social situations from which we draw and into which we write, we fail to recognize the very playing field and the very games in which we are engaged. Further, writing to situations means we are embedded within situations, their structures, the relevant knowledges, and the unfolding state of moves, discussion, and action. In the world of literacy, situations are often expressed through texts even as ambient worlds are referenced, characterized, or otherwise entextualized to be brought into the literate discussion. So reading, information, knowledge, inquiry, social relations, and social action should equally be our mantras—to prepare our students to be powerful voices in society.

The history of writing has not always been associated with such a vision of participatory democracy and communal knowledge. Early in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and MesoAmerica, literacy became an instrument of church, state, and wealth, organized through hierarchies of scribal classes and authoritative texts. Authorship rights were few, and rights of distribution were even more restricted. Even the democratizing potential of print, accompanied by an increasing market of readers, was constrained by attempts at state control in a fractured Europe and a more centrally controlled China. As print and paper costs decreased into the nineteenth century, brand name marketing of authorship reified a difference between those who published and those who read publications—turning literacy into a spectator sport.

The constraints on authorship, distribution, socially acceptable contents, and socially intelligible genres limited possible messages, roles, and actions. Yet insofar as one was able to write meanings that threatened belief, cultural norm, or political and social power, one placed oneself on the line, so to speak, to pay the price of the meanings one brought into being. Durable words could serve as witness against one's character, integrity, or legality. We should remember that the system of copyright in England started with registration of publications to control sedition.

The dynamics of power with which literacy has been associated historically have in fact established roles for most people that make it easiest to

submit to being inscribed by others into the book of life, accepting the places assigned—with only limited options to influence that inscription. Nonetheless, the increasingly democratic access to means of inscription and distribution over the last few centuries has been accelerated rapidly by digital technologies that put publication on every desktop. These technological changes have been accompanied by social innovations that have provided opportunities for people to gain literate voice, place, and significant action. But the promise of interactive technologies has yet to be fully realized. Often interactivity provides only a simulacra of choice in a world of commercial entertainment or bureaucratic cooptation. Effective action, as always, requires deep understanding of the game, one's opportunities, and the strategic potential of one's available moves. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but the pen like the sword takes a deft hand won through long training. While today the material means of global communication are cheap and widely available, using the power they make available requires skills gained through education and focused experience—and requires the courage to wield it.

The history of writing has advanced through the courage and imagination of individuals to assert meanings, identities, roles, and actions in intimate and larger public spaces, expanding the possibilities of expression and participation for individuals and communities. These may be as grand as fifty-six colonial subjects signing a Declaration of Independence or as local as a child attempting to write a word of unsure spelling, a middle-schooler writing up an interview with a classmate, or a young journalist hoping a first story meets approval. Every piece of writing states in public that we believe, desire, represent, act, and are willing to be held accountable. Every text arouses anxiety over judgment even as it holds the promise of connection.

Our task as educators is to assist people learning to assert their place in this world. We are their guides, coaches, and mentors as they learn to take place, find meanings, and accomplish work of personal and communal value. Our reward is to share in their pride and strength as their writing connects them with others. To do that, however, we increasingly have to assert ourselves as a professional force in the academic and educational policy worlds. This is not easy for us. In the last century and a half when disciplines and professions have gained power, we have been under the shadow of a discipline about which we have many ambivalences, one that in fact refused to recognize our role in the profession for most of the previous century. As we have been moving toward professional autonomy, beginning sixty years ago with the first rump meeting of what was to become the CCCC, we knew we wanted something different

from the discipline that housed and subordinated us, more in tune with the needs of all students, more attached to the work of the world, less preaching a gospel of elite culture, less centered on the teacher's cultural authority, more attached to giving voice to all. We had a different version of scholarship, different goals for our research, a different culture. This new culture is what we cherish in the CCCC. But English departments and the MLA are not the only model, are not the only way of being a discipline and a profession. We can craft our own disciplinarity and professionalism from the many models the university houses containing elements that are consistent with our disciplinary culture.

Some disciplines are practical (as engineering), some are student or client focused (as clinical and counseling psychology), some are collaborative (as most of the sciences), some are fundamentally interdisciplinary (as ethnic studies or geography), some are activist (environmental studies), some are even pedagogic (as in education schools). Yet they all research, have professional requirements and expectations, assert strong public voices on policy and professional needs, and gain full and distinct places in faculty senates and university arrangements. They know they need these things to carry out their work and have faced the fear of stepping up to power. From this platform twenty-four years ago, Maxine Hairston challenged us to make the psychological break from English. To complete that mission, we need to define ourselves as our own profession on our own terms.

As members of this profession, we all share experiences: teaching many sections of remedial and first-year composition with a hundred papers to grade every week; serving on endless committees to develop programs in the face of institutional resistance; writing assignments and teaching materials; sharing ideas and praxis at conferences and in journals. In these experiences we take delight in watching students grow, a delight that makes even the most repetitive of teaching always fresh and motivating. Yet we also need to reach beyond our practical experiences to do research to learn with greater certainty and public persuasiveness facts essential to carrying on our work. As researchers we need to understand more deeply the lifelong paths that bring people to this power of writing and to understand with greater specificity where this power resides in our society, how it came into being, and the means of activating it. For me, the attempt to understand how to help students led to a world of intertexts, disciplines, and social systems. It led me backward into the formation of scientific discourses, forward into how these are mobilized for large tasks such as acting about our environment. It has also led me to investigate how we change as people by engaging in knowledge-based literate practices.

Research into formation of disciplines and knowledge has heightened my appreciation of the importance of taking seriously our profession, research, and social role. Our profession has the responsibility for building the skill of all to participate in the powerful interactions of our documentary society. Our responsibility for the human infrastructure is as great as engineers' for the material infrastructure. Our work is as essential to issues of social power as economics and political science. Our field of writing is as concerned with individual well-being and spiritual growth as psychology, philosophy, or medicine. Our field is as central to the production of knowledge as any discipline, for we study and teach the very medium in which knowledge is formulated. Our persistence in U.S. higher education, despite our subordinate role and great cost, comes from our core importance. Higher education that produces critical, articulate, inventive individuals is dependent on writing. This is now increasingly being recognized in many countries where writing is being made a priority, despite there being no preexisting institutional place for its instruction. This recognition seems driven by some of the same forces that have been operative in the United States: democratization of higher education and society, new interactive technologies, and formation of global communication and knowledge economies.

Because U.S. higher education has been in the writing instruction business longer and more intensively than anywhere else, we have some experience and knowledge to share and a platform from which to understand and learn fresh perspectives from elsewhere. First-year writing remains the largest part of our work and our main site of engagement with most students. Through the efforts of our classrooms, almost every college-educated adult has come to understand more about writing. The CCCC has further expanded its vision and domain. Our members now teach upper-division courses, professional and technical writing, writing across the curriculum, and writing in the disciplines. We offer majors and graduate degrees. We are engaged in developmental writing, outreach to schools and transitions to higher education, teacher education both in language arts and in writing in subject areas, community writing and service-learning. Every time we design a new program, project, or course for our campus we are extending the reach of writing in our society. Our work has become so varied that many specialized groups have grown under the CCCC umbrella and still regularly meet here even though they have their own structure of meetings and activities, such as the Two-Year College English Association, the International Writing Across the Curriculum Network, the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the International Writing Centers Association, the Association

of Teachers of Technical Writing. Even the extensive independent network of the National Writing Project was formed within the NCTE/CCCC community. All these groups with our aggregate history have fostered innovations in higher education and language arts: process, collaborative pedagogies, peer learning centers, WAC, portfolios. We need to work together to speak with coordinated voices for the interests of writing education.

Our increased opportunities and responsibilities to act are accompanied by a greater need for publicly persuasive evidence to warrant our practices. The depth of our professional experiences, insight, and generous intentions unfortunately convinces few beyond ourselves, and even among ourselves we could gain much by facing the refining fire of evidence. If we find standard forms of evidence and empirical argument reductive, it is up to us to provide more subtle and comprehensive evidence and a level of understanding that raises the debate.

In recent years members and leadership of the CCCC and parent NCTE have been advocating on issues of access and diversity, research, assessment, global connections, and twenty-first-century literacies. We have been gaining recognition of our profession within academic, policy, and governmental forums. I hope you all will participate in the National Day on Writing this coming October 20. You can post your own work in the gallery and assist others, you can create a class or group project, you can curate a hall. We are hopeful that wide participation and presence will build recognition for our field.

The NCTE's active office in Washington working with the NCTE Government Relations Committee has developed an exciting platform for this moment of transition in educational policy, closely linked to issues already emerging in Congress and the Department of Education. The platform supports fresh definitions of accountability and assessment, as well as research, to align these with our best professional experience and knowledge. The platform asks for literacy learning to be supported as a lifelong process, for the special needs of English language learners to be recognized, and for literacy education to address twenty-first-century needs. And significantly it recognizes that writing and reading are equal, interdependent components of literacy, and that writing instruction and research be supported at all levels. Our platform has already started to influence important discussions in DC, and we hope you can join us this April and in future years in our NCTE Advocacy Day in Washington.

When I ask each of you to increase your level of engagement in our organization and our profession, I know I am asking more from those who have already given the most. But it is only through all of us being willing to take on

the next level of burdens and challenges that we can create the conditions we know writing education needs to serve all as deeply as it can. Our particular talents may lead us to programmatic innovation, organizational leadership, public advocacy, publicly demonstrating the value of writing, community outreach, research, or our core work of supporting student learning. Whichever way we contribute, the flame is ours to carry.

A decade ago I wrote of the greatness of our subject and the limitations of our situation, remembering a sight that had impressed itself on me:

In Burma in the holy city of Pagan, a large Buddha sits in the Manuha temple, a building scarcely larger than the Buddha himself. The Buddha cannot stir without bumping into a wall, cannot even shake his head without being reminded of his containment. When you walk into the chamber you see only what is immediately in front of you—Buddha’s throne, or Buddha’s knees. You cannot gain any view of the whole. There is no room to walk around. To see another aspect of the great spirit you have to exit and enter through another door. Only one person can comfortably occupy each entrance. Two people crowd each other and spoil contemplation.

. . . King Manuha built this temple in 1059 A.D. while imprisoned by King Anawrahta. . . . Today it has become a political symbol, and small gifts to the temple are perceived as acts of defiance against Myanmar’s repressive military regime. (adapted from Bazerman 15)

Today I see the walls around writing starting to crumble, and I see the great spirit of writing shaking its head, flexing its knees. Those who sense its power are seeing more of the parts, more of its wholeness, and more of its consequence for the lives of our students, academic institutions, communities, and the world. In many aspects of our common life we are at a transformational moment. How fully writing is recognized and supported depends on our actions—to allow all to achieve their full communicative potential, social power, and intellectual and emotional acuity that writing brings, to allow all to cooperate knowledgably and wisely on our increasingly stressed planet. Let us grab hold of the moment to assert a vision of writing that all can understand and make use of in a practical way, so all will know the devotion this spirit deserves and the blessings it can bring.

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