

# Writing in the World of Knowledge:

Finding one's Voice in School, the University, Career, and Society

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**Charles Bazerman**

University of California, Santa Barbara  
bazerman@education.ucsb.edu

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**Abstract**

Voice and knowledge are intimately connected. Learning to write gives us voice beyond the range of hearing and takes the adventure of language across time and distance, placing us in social worlds and social projects with people we cannot see and sometimes cannot even imagine. While early childhood literacy education, helps young children express themselves and grow the motive to write out of personal and play relations, as schooling continues those motivating experiences decreases and writing becomes a narrow exercise mostly associated with assessment rather than accomplishing real life interests. Yet writing outside of school is intimately related to participating in society, and skill in writing gives one voice in professional and civic communities. Writing in school needs to be connected to real life uses and intellectual growth of students. Writing should be supported at each level of education, express and share meanings of importance to students, connected with thinking and knowledge is subject areas, connected with reading, and address situations outside of school important to students.

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Voice and knowledge may seem the opposite of each other. Voice many think of as subjective; knowledge as objective. In this view, voice is what comes from inside us and expresses our deepest feelings and desires. It is what we feel and tell ourselves, it is what we express to those closest to us, and if we have the talent and art of a poet, what we share with the world. Voice, when it emerges, carries our individuality and our authenticity. It is what we sound like when we are being most ourselves. Knowledge, on the other hand, in this view, is about the world outside of ourselves, seen with our eyes open as an object, from a distance. Knowledge lives in our brain and not our heart. It is not what we feel, but what we must say if we are to be objective. Knowledge is the world of science and has the dryness of old people. Knowledge lacks distinctiveness and individuality; it is mechanical and alienated. It has the sound of textbooks and encyclopedias, and not of poems.

But actually I think voice and knowledge are intimately connected. This connection is useful to understand so we as teachers can help our students take charge of the power of writing and grow into people with powerful voices in our societies. I want to present a practical picture of how we can approach the teaching of writing that helps our students write about the world and in the world with engagement and commitment, along with knowledge, discipline, and professional responsibility. Helping our students develop knowledgeable voices is important both for individuals and society.

The concept of voice I will elaborate is consistent with that presented in the chapters in

a recent volume *University Writing: Selves and Texts in Academic Societies* (edited by Castello & Donahue, Emerald, 2012), and my own open access volume translated into Spanish *Géneros textuales, Tipificación y Actividad* <<http://www.tam.org.mx/wrab-lat/novedades.html>>. If you want to explore the ideas in this talk further those would be a good starting place. But here I will get into the topic in a somewhat different way.

The learning of language is an adventure—an adventure of expressing our needs and ourselves, of naming things in the world and seeing them more clearly; of engaging with others; of hearing what we ourselves say and coming to know what we feel and believe; of seeing how others respond to us and the identities we adopt; and of seeing how we may carry out our purposes, sharing, and cooperation with others more deeply by using language more purposefully, precisely, and persuasively. Learning of language is an adventure of learning to be in the world and being with others and being ourselves.

Learning to write gives us voice beyond the range of hearing and takes the adventure of language across time and distance, placing us in social worlds and social projects with people we cannot see and sometimes cannot even imagine. As teachers of language we have the joy of helping others embark on that adventure and we have the opportunity to reflect on our own passage by watching how others make the journey.

In early childhood literacy education, influenced by the findings and practices of emergent

literacy, we have learned how to help young children express themselves and grow the motive to write out of personal and play relations with those around them. The child's delight in learning the mechanics of writing, letter production, spelling, basic sentence formation is now infused in many classrooms with the joy in learning how to communicate and express, the joy of imaginative play, and the joy of social relationships.

But then, perhaps when children reach nine or ten or eleven years old, in many schools in North America the joys of writing vanish. I am not sure whether this problem exists in Colombia, but I would not be surprised if it did. As writing demands increase in middle school years, when children are about nine or ten years old, and learning in other areas also faces increased demands, writing instruction becomes separated from the impulses that give it life. Language arts in the first language become separated from other school subjects, as the focus in the other subjects is directed to the content of the subject.

Attention turns to the information about geography or science or history presented in the textbooks and then reproduced through student exercises and examinations. Students still read subject matter materials and write notes, exams, or even reports about these materials, but the reading and writing are treated as relatively unproblematic, and they are little instructed, supported, or reflected upon. Reading and writing are treated as fully accomplished skills of instrumental value only. There is little consideration that subject matter reading may pres-

ent new challenges of complexity or meaning (beyond subject specific vocabulary), and that writing requires new skills of organization representation of material, synthesis, evaluation, development of arguments, using sources appropriately, or using evidence. Students in their subject writing are often asked only to reproduce statements from textbooks and other instructional materials, or at best asked to explain those materials in their own words to check understanding.

Students are usually not asked to evaluate materials, apply that knowledge to situations in their life, put together ideas in new ways, or come to individualized opinions, so that writing in subject areas becomes divorced from anything the students might want to express or what they may be thinking. Writing in the subject areas loses the sense of expression, of student voice, of saying something. Writing stops becoming a vehicle of thought, of creativity, of originality, of communication; writing loses its joy and motive. Writing becomes a means of display for assessment.

Then within the language arts classroom reading often becomes separated from writing, as students are asked to read ever more complex and sophisticated texts, often by literary authors. Students may be asked to summarize or explain the literary texts, but they are not in dialog with them, nor are they expected to produce the same kind of texts that they are reading. Voice is something that is reserved for the privileged literary author.

Further, if writing instruction does continue,

there is increasing attention to meeting requirements of formal correctness, whether of grammar, organization of genre. There is less concern for what students actually say than that they say it correctly. In terms of voice, this means that voice is not heard; only deviation from proper voice is heard, corrected, and punished. Students are not encouraged to build their own views ideas, and motives for communication. They are only asked to be able to produce performances that will pass examinations. As students pass from middle school to high school this is increasingly the case.

Fortunately, in Colombia that is not the case. The Catedra UNESCO, REDLEES and other recent educational policy initiatives are bringing writing back into secondary and university education as a preparation for professional careers. But now this leaves teachers in Colombia with the question of how should writing be taught. Should it be taught as correction and refinement of proper linguistic form in first and second language? Should it be taught as a general skill? Should it be taught as expression and development of thought and identity? Should it be taught in the context of specialized disciplinary and professional practices?

But before I discuss my suggestions on this important and practical topic, I want to take a few more minutes to talk about the way writing is used in society once students leave education and enter into the systems of power, influence, work, and personal development.

Writing outside school means engaging with complex social networks, knowledge, evidence,

and ideas. It involves decisions and taking action on the basis of knowledge and thought. It relies on being heard and paid attention to. It requires courage to assert one's voice and requires the confidence to overcome uncertainties and anxieties. But command of relevant knowledge, being able to represent and organize that knowledge purposefully in relation to one's interests, the situation, and the needs and interests of others gives one the confidence to assert one's voice, to call attention to what one has to say.

Let me give some examples. The most obvious is academic scholarship and research. As a researcher one must of course have the knowledge of one's field, the findings, and the theory, and know the techniques of research. Then to contribute one must be able to identify an area we do not know enough about, where knowledge is somehow missing or failing. One must know where to gather evidence, how to collect it, transcribe it, analyze it, and then represent it as persuasive within an argument about a new idea or phenomenon, of interest to one's scholarly field and meeting the current standards of evidence and reasoning of the field. Through this process one gains voice and reputation, and even power in one's profession. One can say more and bolder things on more occasions of influence. But what one says must always remain grounded in the knowledge of the field that one is contributing to, or one risks losing credibility.

Scholars and scientists have a passionate engagement in their work and the knowledge they uncover. They do not lose their voice and selves by become objective in their knowledge- they rather become strongly identified with

their work. Their selves become realized and enriched through engagement with the knowledge field.

Teachers of those disciplines, including those same scholars who are advancing that work, also usually love their fields and are passionate in their desire to communicate both the knowledge of the field and their emotional engagement in the field to their students. They try to express their understandings of the ideas of the field, the power of the findings, and the excitement of discovery and inquiry to their students. Expression and identity for both teacher and student are formed in the situation of classroom interchange. The classroom interaction is ideally an interchange over ideas of importance in the field. Sometimes this is conveyed purely through the powerful voice and presence of the professor lecturing with clarity and inspirational excitement, but students also need opportunities to engage with the ideas and express their growing understandings with those more expert in the field, whether the professor, graduate assistants, or others. In this way writing in the disciplines becomes a vehicle for students to formulate and share their ideas, inviting response from others.

Medical doctors also make decisions and take actions in a world of knowledge. They must constantly keep up with latest findings and treatments, at the same time as they need to pay close attention to the knowledge of the patients contained in the records and through tests and procedures they order. They also must record what they find and do accurately in order

to inform the next medical professionals who will work with the patient (as well as to leave records for medical research, hospital supervision, and legal accountability). So even if they are not medical researchers they must read and write about knowledge to act authoritatively and accurately, and in order to carry out the passionate commitment and identities as health-providers for patients and as part of the medical system. Otherwise they lose their voice, and perhaps their jobs, as doctors.

Journalists also are passionate about telling stories about the world, people, politics, government, finances, sports, whatever their beat is. The more they know about their beat, the more they can understand and tell stories. And the more they know where the good stories that will engage and enlighten their readers are likely to be. They know where to go to learn more about those stories so they will have interesting, authoritative, and important details to report. While there is a market for people to keep repeating uninformed ideological opinions, these people speak only to the convinced and do not change public knowledge. Their voices rattle around in an echo chamber. But writing real news requires being knowledgeable and acquiring new knowledge to share with the public. Authority, reputation, and spread of one's voice grow with the knowledge one has to offer. Even commentators become evaluated on how deeply and thoughtfully their opinions are grounded in knowledge of issues and events.

Business people, as well, must know about their industry, their organization, their clients,

the economy, finances, specifics of their products and designs, and many other things in order to write persuasive proposals and trusted reports and to make confident and effective decisions. The same immersion in knowledge and social systems holds for members of all professions and powerful social roles, whether government officials, rock concert organizers, or social issue advocates. Even when writing to reflect on our lives we try to come to more realistic representations of our knowledge of our lives, and we also often try to integrate our personal experience with knowledge from elsewhere, whether friends or self-help books. Further, the research on trauma writing suggests that the personal writing is most effective when we do manage to tell a coherent and realistic story, making sense of our experience.

As we take on roles in the world, we engage within social and knowledge systems within which we must gain authoritative and compelling voice to be successful and fulfill the potentials of our desired identities. In all these instances our writing is evaluated by whether it is smart, wise, well-informed, and most importantly, gets the job done—that is, it is evaluated by the meaning and the meaning's effect on events. Failures of formal correctness, while they may remove some credibility from the author's voice, are not the most important issue. The most elegantly and perfectly written document may be seen as irrelevant, uninformative, or useless, if it does not speak to the situation accurately and clearly with all relevant knowledge, or does not have clear consequences for future action.

### The Lesson for Education

So now, let us go back to think about education and the kind of experiences that will prepare students for these roles. The main lesson is that *writing should be connected to real life uses and intellectual growth of students*. Writing should be tied to students developing voice in the discussions that are meaningful for them. In fact, entering into discussion on the topics of their learning through writing is one of the best ways for them to find meaning in their subjects, rather than learning just to memorize and repeat, without thought or personal connection.

This lesson has six consequences: 1) Writing should be supported at every level of education in both language arts classrooms and other subjects, as students will constantly face new challenges at every level and must solve new problems in their writing. As students' knowledge and educational settings develop, students' voices also need to change and grow to be able to say new things in more sophisticated ways about more complex and difficult concepts on the basis of greater knowledge and theoretical understanding. 2) Students should throughout their education be asked to express their understandings and ideas in writing, and to share the ideas with their educational peers and mentors. These opportunities to express their ideas should be in contexts that invite exploration and are not in danger of penalties for wandering from the "right" understanding or answer. 3) Writing should be connected to thinking about subject matter, evaluating and coming to opinions about learning and applying it to situations that are meaningful for them. 4) Writing

should be embedded within reading-reading which presents issues, knowledge, and ideas. Students should be encouraged to answer back and build upon their readings. 5) Students should see that expression comes not just from the heart, but also through the mind, and that the mind is most active when it is driven by the heart and thinks through the situations the heart makes important. 6) Writing should regularly address issues and situations in the world outside of school that the students will find significant and for which they want to be developing robust voices. I will now look a bit more in detail at each of these and suggest some of the kinds of educational practices that can advance each of them.

### ***1. Supporting Writing at Every Level of Education***

Writing takes a lifetime to learn, through solving new problems in new situations and learning the skills, knowledge and practices appropriate to new tasks and new communities. As students move through their education, from one level of institution to another, they meet new expectations and must address intellectually more demanding tasks. Further, as they enter into disciplines in higher education and post-graduate education, they take on roles of increasing intellectual complexity and responsibility, requiring judgments, evaluations, and assertions in dialog with the received and emerging knowledge and discussions of their field, in accordance with the specific criteria and practices of their fields. Postgraduate dissertations and theses are notoriously challenging and many advanced students who have proved to be suc-

cessful writers to that point do not finish their degrees because they cannot complete writing their dissertations.

If there is no explicit support and attention to writing, most students will not understand the new demands being placed on them nor will they know the means to meet those demands. Rather they will attempt to repeat older patterns and will not rise to the new challenges. They may even be stigmatized for lack of intelligence or talent for their area.

Further, instructors in various subject areas, when they find that students do not have the means to complete writing assignments may lower their expectations and decrease the amount of required writing. They may also move to other forms of assessment that do not require writing, such as multiple-choice exams.

### ***2. Expressing Understandings and Ideas in Writing to Peers and Instructors***

As their educations advance, students are surrounded more and more by authoritative knowledge presented by their instructors, textbooks, and other sources. They are overwhelmed and lack authority to articulate their own thinking. If students do not understand the material well, it is especially risky to reformulate that material or discuss it. Even minor variations may mangle the idea and expose lack of understanding. So the only real safe course from the student point of view is verbatim repetition.

Teachers as well, in assessment situations, will recognize and reward phrasing that they

think shows understanding, but that phrasing in fact is that from the books. Even in student writing that is not fully coherent, instructors will recognize and reward with partial credit echoes of things said in the book or the class. As a result students ventriloquate the words of others and have little chance to come to their own understandings and evaluations of knowledge, and will not develop their own voice.

We need to recognize that students will not be fully in control of nor fully understand ideas that are new to them. If they try to rearticulate those ideas in their own words, the initial reformulations will be imprecise and not well elaborated. If they try to apply the ideas to their experiences or to problems of importance to them, the applications are likely to not be fully articulate or accurate. If they have questions about the reading, the questions may be ill-formulated and critiques are not likely to rise to professional standards. They need to work through their thinking in discussion and writing in order to develop their own voice in dialog with authoritative knowledge. But in high stakes situations, it is unlikely they will take the risks that will help them become independent, creative, and careful thinkers. Thus students need to be given opportunities to explore their understandings, responses, and thinking in low-stakes situations where they feel safe to try to come to their own terms without being judged or penalized. As they come to know what they think and gain confidence of their ideas, they will be able to express them more fully and articulately in more formal situations.

Such low stakes opportunities to formulate

thinking can be in ungraded reading notebooks and response journals, in freewrites that might come in the middle of the class and then initiate small group discussion, in exit cards where at the end of a lecture students turn in unsigned a list of key points or open questions in their own words, in ungraded virtual forums, or in many other ways where the only requirement is to participate, and the only feedback, if any, is informal and has no consequences for grades.

This process of coming to voice in the face of authoritative knowledge is a long one, extending throughout one's career as one confronts more and more knowledge of greater consequence, and the responsibility for one's words increase. Developing warranted confidence in one's views is aided by continual opportunities to test out one's understanding and thinking. These opportunities need to be a continuing part of the developmental intellectual experiences of education.

### ***3. Connecting Writing with Thinking and Knowledge in Subject Areas***

The content students are learning about in their various subjects presents real challenges to thinking and important consequences for understanding the world students live in. The subjects also introduce students to new, more sophisticated and specialized modes of thought. If writing remains only about the kinds of readings and issues presented in the language arts classroom, students are not be asked to think about some of the more novel, difficult, and motivating ideas they are coming contact with, and some of the ideas that are most likely to



engage their curiosity and imagination. Ideally this should be done with the cooperation of teachers in the subject areas who are most familiar with the contents of the courses and the modes of reasoning appropriate to the field. To gain their cooperation it is important to do it in ways that advance their own interests in helping students understand their fields, and in ways that will not significantly increase their workloads. Short, informal assignments or tasks, that are treated more for their communication and ideas, as information about how students are understanding, rather than large graded papers can be a successful way to introduce writing in those classes. More detail and ideas are available in the open access *Reference Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum* <[http://wac.colostate.edu/books/bazerman\\_wac/](http://wac.colostate.edu/books/bazerman_wac/)>.

#### **4. Connecting Writing with Reading**

Students will best comprehend both the knowledge-embeddedness and the dialogic nature of writing if writing tasks are parts of sequences of reading and writing in response to each other. Too often we ask students to write on a new topic with little preparation, engagement, or discussion. This is like asking them to constantly start fresh relationships without any knowledge of the situation or participants. No wonder their writing is often vague, halting, and awkward. When one is in the middle of a dialog which one is informed about, one has a better idea of what one wants to say, what the relevant facts and ideas are, and what is likely to be persuasive and interesting to one's audience. Further, within most situations in life as well as the academic world, one's writing needs to

build on an integrated understanding of the relevant knowledge of the field. In the classroom, it is through readings students build their sense of what is known and relevant in a domain. The more there is dialog with texts and knowledge, the more students will develop their voices with respect to the reading. And the more they will see that knowledge is part of their understanding of, response to, and means of addressing life. More detail and ideas are available in the open access *Reconnecting Reading and Writing* <<http://wac.colostate.edu/books/reconnecting/>> .

#### **5. Including Knowledge, Readings, and Professional Thought as Part of Expression**

When I present students with an academic writing assignment, they often ask me do I want their opinion. I always answer yes, but I say it has to be their opinion in relation to the goals of the task. Even a paraphrase requires the students' opinion on what the meaning is and what is a good way to express that meaning; and a summary requires students to make judgments of what is important in an article and how the important parts fit together coherently. Other tasks might require an opinion as to which of two articles is more accurate or thoughtful, or how the ideas and facts of multiple readings fit together. Some tasks do ask students to present a view on what should be done in a situation based on all the facts of the case and all background knowledge and theories from a professional area. All these tasks require the students to think and present the results of their thought, but they each ask for different kinds of thought and opinions.

So in our assignments we should always recognize and make explicit to the students the kind of ideas, orientations, evaluations we want them to express in that task, so they will always see that writing is about expression, even if the expression may be narrowly focused. As students come to understand that writing is always about expression, they are also likely to become more committed to their writing tasks and work harder on them.

### **6. Addressing Issues and Situations in the World Outside of School**

School can seem a separate game, apart from the world, where the knowledge one learns has value only for passing exams and the only voice one needs to develop is that of the obedient student. If writing activities engage with the world the students live in or that they anticipate entering, or if writing addresses issues and projects meaningful to the students, the students will want to have their voices heard. The range of voices they will want to speak in and their commitment to what they want to say in those voices will increase and intensify. Further, they will want to have the strength of knowledge at their backs, and they will want to address what others have said and believe.

Classroom discussion on issues of importance to the students and their communities are, of course, one way to build this engagement, but projects can move beyond classroom reports or even debates about best policy. Those reports can turn into position papers, letters to newspapers, opinion leaders, and policy makers. They can also lead to the formation of ac-

tion organizations. Students also can interview writers engaged in the real world in roles that they admire or would hope to fulfill. Having students interview social researchers, or lawyers, or engineers, or leaders of activist organizations can make the role of writing very real and can infect students with the voices of the prominent people they interview. Having students do internships or practical writing work for organizations in their community will put them even more directly in consequential writing roles. They will work intensely with passion to figure out what they need to do to be of use in those situations.

Sometimes also students are already engaged in serious and intense writing outside of the classrooms which provide far richer experiences and teach them more about writing than what they experience in the classroom. On a recent visit to Argentina I found out that there has been little writing education in secondary or higher education, but there has been a very strong history of students engaged in political action and being part of university governance. So on campus after campus when I asked who were the strongest writers, I was invariably told it was the politically engaged students, especially those who were involved in university governance.

The political activities caught students up in reading and writing about many theoretical and practical debates as well as in writing public genres to gain support. These students read history, political theory, and the news. They wrote positions and manifestos and propaganda. Those students who joined university commit-

tees and senates read university documents and government policies. They reviewed budgets. They wrote responses and reports. They drafted legislation. You may think such documents would be boring, but not to them. They cared deeply about this work and they spent endless hours on these literacy activities. Some of these students were on the right, some on the left, and some in the middle. But all had an intensive literacy education that their classmates lacked-an intensive literacy education that set them up for important careers after they left the university.

### Final Thoughts

As writing educators we need to attend to many things, but at the core of what we do is nurturing the students' voices. We need to help them discover what they want to say, to whom, in what situations and social roles, and then helping them develop the technical ability to elaborate those statements persuasively and forcefully, harnessing the full strength of all the knowledge they have gained in their education. Their voices are to be found in how they position themselves in the social and knowledge worlds around them, and their voices grow with their experiences and their successful attempts at being heard. More specific issues of writing process, textual form, organizing and elaborating ideas, all develop through the practice of voice. You discover your writing voice by writing to real situations and having your voice heard. In the

literate world, if you don't have a written voice, no one knows you are there-you are invisible. But if you can express your ideas and interests forcefully, with knowledge and confidence, your voice gives you presence, allows you to assert your meanings into evolving events, and gains value for your views and interests.

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