The Diversity of Writing

CHARLES BAZERMAN

In October 2001, Charles Bazerman, an affiliated scholar of the South Coast Writing Project and one of the world's leading authorities on writing across the curriculum and writing in the academic community, delivered the keynote address to the Conference on Writing as a Human Activity at the University of California, Santa Barbara. An abbreviated version of his remarks on the diversity of writing appears below.

As even casual readers of the daily press know, Americans are concerned about the state of literacy education. Too often, however, discussion of this issue finds its expression in simple answers, as though only a few uniform, easily identifiable skills were involved in being literate. As though drills and testing would advance literacy. As though fear of poor scores would motivate the learning of reading and writing. As though learning to write had nothing to do with having something to say to real people in real, complex circumstances in order to accomplish real tasks that depend on and invoke much local as well as extensive knowledge.

Those of us who regularly struggle as writers and who puzzle over the meaning and value of texts in all fields know otherwise. We know that growth in reading and writing comes only from the motivated struggle to accomplish things through our words, to learn from and respond to the words of others. Writing and reading involve constant, multidimensional problem solving. Only through struggling to say what we want or need to say do we learn to be better writers. Only through deep engagement with the meanings others offer us do we learn to be better readers. And we rarely pay serious attention to other people's advice, or look up language rules, or work on our skills except when they are immediately needed for the task in front of us. The only meaningful test and the only meaningful reward are whether we have communicated clearly and sufficiently.

Those of us who work with writers and readers, including students in our writing and language arts classes, know the same truths hold for them as for us. Those general things that we can hold students directly accountable for through standard measures are few, and skill in even these things rarely comes from the exercise and test regimen. We know that students only really begin to work on their writing and to grow as literate beings insofar as the literacy tasks become important to them. And they only attend seriously to the advice, correction, or even dialogic support we offer them insofar as the tasks in front of them have so focused their minds that they need to draw on every relevant resource they can get their hands on.

The beauty of the written language is that it is so engaging, so organizing of ourselves and our attention, such a site of growth of intellect, self, and identity. Writing is a means of becoming, of putting new selves on the line, of drawing on all that others have said.

The things people do with written words in the world are wonderfully various. Novelists and scriptwriters amuse us according to our varied tastes. Journalists create continuous representations of the events in the world and pass comment on the stories they tell us. Policymakers gather and assess information to make decisions. Legislators create laws and negotiate the terms with their colleagues to get them approved. Those laws regulate all spheres of our lives, but if we need to plead our situation before an agency or courts, lawyers will help us

formulate our brief. Technical writers inform us how to operate our computers, even design the interface to make them self-explaining. Scientists argue for new claims and display the results of their investigations. Corporate and organizational workers propose and carry out projects, report and record information, maintain lines of decision making. Spiritual leaders remind us of wisdom from books and create new words of guidance. Lovers struggle to tell their hearts. Children expand their imaginations, puzzle through the quandaries of history, take part in the social life of schools and clubs, and display their knowledge and understanding. Literacy is a rich and wonderful set of practices tied to the diversity of modern life.

But what makes a person skilled at any one of these diverse tasks is quite different from what makes a person skilled at any other. Even that which makes us successful in any one instance is often different from that which makes us successful in another instance of the seemingly same activity Each instance of writing brings forth different thoughts, different solutions, different relations among people. Each is a part of a way of being. The diversity of writing is part of the diversity of the human adventure.

This writing adventure is not one we undertake in isolation. It is easy to forget the role of writing in bringing us into new relations with others. As we sit at our desks attempting to write, we may indeed feel isolated, even abandoned or abandoning, for we are looking to find a connection to the world that we have not yet made. In front of us, we confront a lonely struggle with an empty page, a blank screen, as we try to imagine ourselves in relation to an unseen audience. To create that connection—that lifeline—is the challenge. This strong emotional sense of writing as the private, lonely task of looking within has deeply imbued writing pedagogy and research.

But, we have, I believe, barely begun to understand how tenuous the relations are that we create by the thin line of words. People may or may not look at our words, and if they do it is with varying degrees of attention, from various stances, with various projects and interests in mind. Writing pedagogy's early response to that fragility was to train and thereby reinforce sets of cultural judgments about some easily noticed features of texts that identified what counted as educated, intelligent writing worth attention or, conversely, marked ignorance, lack of cultivation, lack of intellectual and social class. Such training in social propriety offers a narrow target of acceptable behavior, of behavior that will keep a person within the social network, within the world of people who count, who are attended to, who are not excluded out of hand.

It was a great step forward in our pedagogy and in our understanding of writing when we moved our attention back a bit from the page to the person struggling with it. Previously, such attention was granted only to those most securely accepted within the world of the literate, the highly esteemed literary artists, already authenticated as producing socially valued, meaningful text. Since we already knew that Hemingway's writing mattered, the process of how he wrote it let us glimpse his genius. However, even Hemingway, we found, did not fill the page all of a sudden from an unsupplemented and spontaneous native gift. Even these works of genius were the products of extensive work over time.

It was a further major step to turn our attention to all who struggle with writing. When we did that, we noticed that even the most easily stigmatized writers were more than that to which their too-easily-characterized traces on the page allowed them to be reduced. This was the startlingly magnetic message of Mina Shaughnessy's work. In recognizing that even the most basic writer approached the task of writing with will and intelligence, we became more skeptical about traditional judgments based on the page. We also recognized that potential writers, beginning writers, basic writers, writing students, had more resources to draw on than we had given them credit for. Their abilities to think went deeper than the words they were putting on the page. We recognized that writers were diverse individuals with diverse ways of writing.

Yet we continued to view writing as a lifeline thrown out from an independent self onto the great undifferentiated ocean of language. On the other shore, there were readers, but they were barely distinguishable. Accepting this metaphor at the university meant we continued to teach writing in classrooms isolated from all other engagements, to collections of people gathered randomly for the purpose of learning to write. But as we recognized that people wrote for other people and that the teacher with a red pen was not a universal audience, we realized that the classroom itself could constitute a community of readers and writers. Such classes were based on self-expression and comprised a diverse collection of expressive individuals, supporting and appreciating each other. When successful, that community of expression could become a powerful and motivating force for learning to write. We had diversity in the individuals collected in the room and in the emergent characteristics of the community they formed, but this

pedagogy still offered a uniform path and a uniform goal for learning to write, a single kind of writing drawing on a particular range of skills and motives. Some committed to this pedagogy held that it offered the core skills for learning to write in all ways. If students learned to write in expressive genres, they would be able to write in all forms. Thus, while we had a diversity of writers, we still had a uniformity of writing, activities, and paths of learning. At the university, writing communities still gathered within classrooms, each with a couple dozen chairs, blackboards, maybe an electronic bulletin board, and a door that closes on the world.

That kind of classroom writing experience offers important opportunities. First, before one can learn to write many ways, one must learn to write one way. Secondly, a sense of success in writing in any form of writing can provide some confidence to address other writing tasks. Thirdly, it is easier to understand and participate in writing that circulates in a small, local group than in a large, dispersed group where only the most indirect and institutional forms of communication are possible. And lastly, the process, student-community, expressivist, door-closed writing class can support learning of specific things of general value, such as a sense of what intensive literate engagement is; recognition of moments of success; the necessity to think about situations and audiences; evaluating the continuity and sequence of claims; attention to syntax and its manipulation; even the social value of accepted forms.

The writing and language worlds in which our students actually participate, however, are far more diverse than dreamed of in the basic first-year writing course. We've learned that our students are variously motivated and influenced, that their past experiences and future plans shape their discursive worlds, as do their current engagements in other courses. The needs and lives of non-native English speakers and speakers of non-standard dialects have highlighted this diversity. Writing instructors and researchers also started to notice that working-class students who were the first in their families to access higher education stood in different relation to expressivist, individualist culture than did students raised in middle-class education-saturated, creativity-valuing households. We also started to notice the different dynamics at play in writing classrooms on different campuses—in a community college classroom where there was one primary industrial employer for the region or within the flagship residential liberal arts university in a state or at a large, diverse, urban commuter college.

Writing programs within career-based degree programs, such as in preparation for health care professions, helped make visible specialized needs, motivations, and orientations toward writing and helped awaken teachers of writing to the diversity of writing. While such programs had previously existed (especially in technical communication and business communication) the new attention to student perspective, identities, and concerns directed us to see the different trajectories of writing and learning to write within these specialized programs.

The writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the professions movements opened our eyes wider to the great variation of writing that goes on even within a single campus as students move around campus. The earliest investigations in WAC research literature examined the bafflement of students as they move from discipline to discipline, confronting, for instance, the differences of scientific writing from the writing they were asked to do for their humanities courses. Studies of writing across the campus help us understand how variations in writing are integral to, even constitutive of, different ways of life.

Considering one case, we can see that a report written by a social worker about a client is more than an objective representation of some easily determined state of affairs. It is a complex enactment of the social worker's position within, attitudes toward, and attempts to work within the social services bureaucracies; it is an expression of his relations with his client; his understanding of how the current document will play out within the client's file and in events that will follow as the document is read. The client record creates the institutional identity of the client with consequences for the future relations between the person and institution. All these realized activities and commitments are drenched with ideological representations, compliances, and resistances.

And so it is, differently, for each of the many forms of writing in which people engage. These forms have developed over the 5,000 years of literacy in conjunction with the social, cultural, political, and economic systems for which writing has become the lifeblood. Systems of religion, law, finance, medicine, journalism, government, social service, cultural production, and recreation are built on and maintained by texts. These texts also tie our lives to people and places far away, throughout our nation and world. In the United States, our economy and national well-being are monitored from national capitals thousands of miles away.

As the forms of literacy have become more varied, the demand for literacy has increased. Indeed now it is near impossible to live any but the most marginal existence in

the developed world without twelve or sixteen or twenty years of schooling. Just a century ago, only people in a very few professions needed more than an eighth grade education, and many people were affluent, respected members of their community with no ability to read and write.

But the modern world demands that each child somewhere in the early years begins to find an entry into the complex world of literacy. By the age of five, students enter the organized worlds of literate practices in school. School as an institution has developed some simplified and regularized patterns of literate participation and pathways for success. However, even though school is its own institution with its own developed practices, values, and evaluations, in some ways and in some degrees schooling is always responsive to the literacy practices outside its doors. Schools have regularly included in their range of materials and activities fragments of community life—scriptures; newspapers; work in community; visits to museums; descriptions of life events; letters to family, community leaders, celebrities. Teachers intuitively have used points of contact with the world as opportunities for meaningful writing. Information technologies are now bringing classrooms ever more in touch with the texts of the world, opening a broadband highway to bring the texts of the world into every classroom. The trajectory of the development of each of us as writers is a history of increasingly complex and deepening engagements with particular segments of this complex symbolic environment, engagements that coincide with our engagement in the social and cultural and economic, and civic possibilities of our time. Our profession has the task of assisting people, young and old, as they move into new or deeper literate engagements as part of the expansion of their lives.

Schooling, and particularly literacy education, is at the heart of the variety of modern life. Schooling allows children to enter literate worlds and careers far from the lives of their parents. Literacy education is at the core of the American mobility machine. Higher education especially is the great re-sorter of our society's life chances. Now, when adults feel stuck in life, the most common cure, after buying a lottery ticket, is to return to school, to re-mix life chances through developing new spheres of literate skill and practice.

As teachers of literacy we have the exciting project of participating in the great diversity of the modern literate world, helping people build lives within worlds of symbols and interaction.

Reductionist views of writing just miss the whole wonderful point.

CHARLES BAZERMAN presently serves as a professor and chair in the Department of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of the seminal work *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (1988). His most recent book, *Constructing Experience,* is a collection of articles he has written over the past twenty years on the teaching and learning of writing and on problematic issues in rhetoric and composition.

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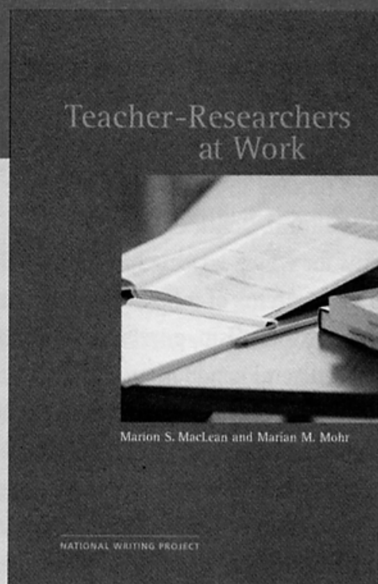

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