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Twenty-First-Century Writing/ Twentieth Century Teachers?

by Ian Barnard

Today, in the 21st century, people write as never before—in print and online. We thus face three challenges that are also opportunities: developing new models of writing, designing a new curriculum supporting those models, and creating models for teaching that curriculum.

— Kathleen Blake Yancey, “A Call to Support 21st Century Writing”

It’s the late 1980s. I am teaching first year college composition to a small group of students seated in clusters around big wooden tables in a room high above the Pacific Ocean. The sun is streaming into our classroom. Periodically, as I walk around the tables, or when I pause at the huge windows while students write, I take in a view of the sparkling water. Our writing and discussions weave in and out of each other, as do academic and social discourses and subjects. We voice concern about one of the students who hasn’t shown up. It’s an early morning class, so someone offers to knock on the missing student’s dorm room door to make sure she hasn’t overslept. Halfway into class another student steps out to the laundry room during the break to transfer washing to the dryer.

Changes in education, institution, and politics encompass more than the current California budget crisis, the infantilizing desks at which my students now sit, class size, and the missing ocean view. Why are the shades consistently drawn in the classrooms where I teach today? Why do we assume that “distraction” is an impediment to learning and writing? Why shouldn’t student writers not also enjoy a room with a view? Why are there no classrooms in the dorms? Why is learning and writing disconnected from my students’ everyday lives?

Time constructs neat binaries. The days always seemed to be sunny. I don’t remember teaching in winter (or perhaps winter is always sunny in La Jolla?). I don’t remember if the missing student had indeed overslept. And I don’t remember if the student who stepped out to transfer her clothes to the dryer returned to class on time.

Now I write with my students.

As the present rushes to reconstruct the past even in its attempts to remember and reclaim it, the self undoes history, and history rewrites the subject.

My students are writing in their everyday lives—indeed, their everyday lives are written—but we (teachers—writing teachers, in particular—and education administrators, no doubt nudged by politicians and “the public”) have to a large extent failed miserably

in embracing and capitalizing on that writing: email, text messaging, instant messaging, blogging, twittering, responding, video gaming, Second Lifeing. Andrea and Karen Lunsford’s recent longitudinal study of Stanford students has shown the lie to the given that students today don’t write as much as they used to (they are writing much more). Are we becoming the stodgy, ungenerous, rigid English teachers that we ourselves were the victims of as children, obsessed with demanding the grammar with which we write and speak?

Not quite: multiple cell phones ring at Department meetings; a cell phone rings in class—the teacher’s. As I write this, teachers are rushing out the room to check their text messages.

Power, you say. It’s about teaching the language of power.

Mr. Harvey says for the fiftieth time this year:

“No one will want to give you a job. You sound uneducated. You will be looked down upon. You’re speaking a low-class form of good Standard English. Continue and you’ll go nowhere in life. Listen, students, I’m telling you the truth like no one else will. Because they don’t know how to say it to you. Speak Standard English. DO NOT speak pidgin. You will only be hurting yourselves.” (Yamanaka 9, italics in original)

Do we teach students to be racist because racism is a dominant ideology in this culture? Ah yes, George Bush certainly was a master of Standard (white) English

What about pleasure?

It’s about the test, you say.

Have the standardized tests created us or have we created them? And who scores them? And who trains the scorers? Who trains the scoring leaders? How does one get to be a scoring leader? A trainer?

What about multi-modality? About multitasking? We eat and write and listen to music and talk on the phone and take care of our children at the same time, so why shouldn’t we give our students—native multi-taskers for whom technology is not a Second Language--the same benefit of the doubt?

But Aristotelian rhetoric also constructs neat binaries. And hostile audiences. In real elementary, middle, and high schools every day, teachers defend their students’ use of iPods and cell phones in class. “We” and “you” cross, fragment, and divide. Students police each others’ sentences; teachers who are themselves English Language Learners become the most uncompromising advocates of “Standard English” (sometimes in grammatically “incorrect” sentences).

It’s the late 2000s. Late in the afternoon. I am conferencing

with a student. I purposefully open my office door. We turn our attention to his "paper." It is full of interesting points, it has statistics and graphs, but he can't figure out how to organize everything. The points seem to be in random order. Perhaps this isn't an essay, I say to him. I don't think it's linear. It seems like the chunks of information you have here could be usefully read in any order. And readers might usefully make recursive connections amongst the different pieces. Hypertext. Perhaps this would work better as a web site than an essay. Might you consider reworking it as a web site rather than as an essay?

He looks at me flabbergasted.

Later that day I receive an email from a student criticizing me for focusing on grammar in my response to her thesis draft.

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