

Commentary: Rhetoric/Composition//Academic Institutions/Cultural Studies

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This commentary takes as its point of departure a moment in the mid-1970s, when some of us who were working in a writing program at the University of California, San Diego, decided that our most pressing pedagogical concern was that our predominately middle class, overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white students (many of whom were in training to become scientists), who could write reasonably error-free sentences and paragraphs, could not write well, because they did not know much.

There are three different uses of the word "write" in the preceding sentence. A "writing program" is an institutional structure: a group of employees, with a budget, space and the rest, created for a set of institutional purposes. One of those purposes of the La Jolla writing program was to train freshmen to write well enough so that their writing skills were not an obstacle to their further education. The opposition "train/educate" points to the instrumental, service, function of the institutional unit. The employees (also, for the most part, white non-Hispanic and middle class) were graduate students, the cost of whose education was partially defrayed by their work as writing instructors. This was another purpose of the program.

To "write reasonably error-free sentences and paragraphs" is another use of the word "write." In the classical tradition of the West this falls under the rubric of grammar: the training received by children not so much as part of education as its prerequisite. The issue of "error," on the other hand, points to a specific historical situation in this country, the last third of the twentieth century, say, when it became expected that most young people would finish high school and go on to college. This transition in the education system reflected the transition from a largely industrial economy to a post-industrial, service and information economy. Unfortunately, the public schools were not functioning in such a way as to adequately prepare most of their students for the expectations of colleges. Universities reacted to the lack of adequate preparation of increasing numbers of their students by deciding that they themselves must create courses to prepare young people for the education that was seen as the proper purpose of post-secondary study. Circa 1965, non-credit composition classes for a minority of students who could not demonstrate writing competence (in this sense of the word "writing") were replaced by for-credit composition classes for all students except those who could demonstrate writing competence. This transition on the educational level reflected a transition on the level of the economy between the industrial and post-industrial mode and as such deployed an increasingly specialized set of uses of the term "education."

The third meaning of writing in the first paragraph above is that in the phrase to "write well." As the graduate student instructors in the program were drawn overwhelmingly from humanities departments, our idea of good writing was bound up with the Western humanistic tradition, in which good writing is seen as a manifestation (and demonstration) of a humanistic education. By good writing, then, we meant (without at the time thinking of it in these terms) rhetoric. In antiquity rhetoric was education, the leading out of the child from the private world of the family (and the family's responsibility for suitable training) to the social and political worlds. Learning to write well, which meant, on the one hand, a complicated technique, and, on the other hand, a

discrete (primarily literary) body of knowledge, was the necessary preparation for what was seen as the only truly human existence: that of a participant in the social life of the community and the political life of the state. It went without saying that this condition was open only to a very small minority: comparatively (or absolutely) wealthy free males. Over two millennia, the association of the ability to write well in this sense with the social and economic privilege that were usually required to make it possible created a link between writing well and, on the one hand, class, and, on the other hand, education itself.

Observing, in the late-1970s, that our privileged students did not write well, in spite of their ability to avoid basic errors, we concluded that what was lacking in their writing was knowledge of that cultural tradition that has been intimately entwined these two thousand years with the concept of good writing. In other words, we believed that if they were better educated, they would write better. We therefore turned our instructional efforts from the training in grammar that our students did not need to the general and common education that they lacked. Lists of books were drawn up, lectures provided, material was presented from which our students could draw in order to demonstrate the education-effect demanded by our own educational preconceptions, rooted, as they ultimately were, in the tradition of classical rhetoric, modified by the intellectual atmosphere of the University at that time.

Most of the La Jolla writing instructors were students of literature or of linguistics. Some were studying history or philosophy. At the UCSD of that period—the UCSD of Marcuse, Jameson, Eagleton, Fabbri and Schiller—these four disciplines were closely related. They formed, in fact, a more or less unified whole that was something very like what a few years later became Cultural Studies. Because of this our "writing" courses differed from one ancestral form, Freshman "English" (with such manifestations as Harvard's Daily Themes), in that the books read were not exclusively literary. Our idea of education, and, hence, many of the books we gave to our students, was drawn as much from history and philosophy, from Critical Theory, as from the great books of the literary canon. And whereas the great books of the literary canon, as deployed in courses like Harvard's Daily Themes, were implicitly expected to inculcate a certain world-view, many of the books deployed by Critical Theory made ideology explicit. Our students read these; we read them; we began to connect our studies as students—dare one say as scholars?—with our work as teachers.

As we studied the books and articles of our teachers, which seemed so much of that exciting intellectual moment, we gradually realized that they constituted not so much a break with the past but its recuperation. Not everyone can hold in consciousness the German philosophical tradition together with, say, the English literary canon and the odd scraps of art history, musical theory and organic chemistry that sometimes seem required for proper understanding of the summative works of our culture (such as *Gravity's Rainbow*). But aspirations to do so are emblematic of what it might mean to be well-educated, and their manifestations, however partial, are the rhetorical foundations of what I am calling here good writing. One of our students found the crucial grammatical point here, as students will, when he asked Marcuse whether what Marcuse was attempting to convey would not be better communicated if he used shorter sentences, fewer allusions. Marcuse said that writing that way was useful for certain purposes, but not, "unfortunately," for his.

In the 1980s teachers of college writing found themselves in an institutional context where the imperatives of funding and the norms of university life had led to the creation of writing programs that were independent or semi-independent of English departments. Our more or less amateur musings about the teaching of writing were gradually replaced by empirical research and—in some places, such as the University of Southern California—associated with work in Classical and Modern Rhetoric and Critical and Literary Theory. Empirical research in writing and the study of rhetoric and theory, often today thought opposed, in the English departments of the time combined to form a discrete field of study separate from the study of literature. At the same time, the requirements of the school reform effort led to the involvement of university-based scholars with the in-service professional development of elementary and secondary school teachers and, in some cases, with issues of adult basic literacy. These, in turn, provided research opportunities which further professionalized the field.

The study of adult literacy and the provision of programs to enhance it marked the transition between the era when basic education was not universal for children in the developed world and that when basic education had become universal—a situation which resulted in a gradually aging cohort of unschooled adults to study and teach. The beginnings of the study of adult literacy were also, to some extent, a manifestation of the needs arising from the immigration to countries providing universal basic education of people from countries or regions in which basic education remained lacking. In the United States both these conditions pertained into the late-twentieth century; the first (the existence of unschooled adults), primarily due to the fact that education was not compulsory for African-Americans everywhere in the South until the 1970s; the second, primarily due to accelerating immigration from Mexico and Central America. Over the past decade the cohort of non-schooled African-American adult learners has passed from the adult basic education system. They have been replaced by immigrants and those I have elsewhere called the schooled illiterate: those who have completed their basic education in schools where the literacy instruction provided has been inadequate.

Looking about us today, it seems that the study of writing can best be understood in the context of the system of schooling in this country and as such presents the opportunity for understanding that system and its results. Studying—and teaching—writing as the ability to produce more or less error-free sentences and paragraphs, leads to the study of literacy as such, bound up as it is with questions of class and race. Studying good writing, that epitome of education, and teaching students to write well (the product and sign of education), lead to the study of education, of culture—high, popular and commercial—and the study of the displacement of both high and popular culture by a commercial culture with hegemonic ambitions.

The inadequacies of public education, from the point of view of students of writing, again can be divided between the categories of grammar and rhetoric. Taking grammar first, all too many children in hard-pressed schools do not yet receive adequate instruction in basic literacy. Most can read and write—word by word or sentence by sentence—but do not do so easily, do not do so well enough to use literacy as a basis for further education, citizenship or work, and do not enjoy reading and writing. This is not conceptually a difficult problem to solve. It is, in the main, a matter of the inadequacy of funding for the schools serving children whose home environment does not provide a culture of literacy. This inadequate funding, in turn, I would argue, is unnecessary: this is a rich country. We choose to underfund public schools serving minority and

impoverished children. It is a manifestation of the cultural association in this country between poverty and race and the consequent reluctance to provide adequate funding for the education of impoverished children, balanced by the willingness to provide greater amounts for prisons, foreign adventures and the like. Although the issue is complicated by varying regional attitudes toward Hispanics, in general the situation can be summarized in terms of race: we would rather build prisons for African-American men than provide good schools for African-American boys.

The inadequacies of elementary, secondary and post-secondary education, in regard to the classical ideal of rhetoric outlined above, are cultural in another sense. The traditional dichotomy between high culture and popular culture has been replaced by one between specialist knowledge of the arts, humanities, social or natural sciences and a commercial product. We now live in a warm, perhaps one should say hot, atmosphere of commerce, where each element of both high and popular culture has been matched by something, often with the same name, the purpose of which is to be bought. Folk music, for example, was once music that people played for themselves. It was a characteristic, and an expression, of certain communities. Today it is a minor category of the worldwide entertainment and music industries, something bought and sold. This process has come to seem perfectly natural, the expressions of the economy on the cultural plane rapidly becoming familiar, rapidly coming to seem like a kind of second nature.

The sheer multiplication of commodified cultural products absorbs the time and attention both within and outside the academy that might otherwise be devoted to a broad education, or, rather, to an education per se. Post-secondary education becomes increasingly specialized, instrumental, increasingly dominated, on the one hand, by preparations for commercial employment, and on the other hand, by a narrow specialization in the arts and sciences. The result is what we see around us: senior corporate managers who make decisions affecting millions of people on the basis of short-term balance sheets, artists ignorant of history, historians ignorant of science, scientists unable to distinguish between the arts and the humanities.

This state of affairs makes it increasingly difficult for our students—their teachers, public officials—to write well. Writing well is not merely a matter of writing correctly—it is not simply a technique. It is a manifestation of participation in a particular civilization. It is, as a matter of fact, an essential component, part of the definition, of civilization. This was dramatized for me a few years ago when I made an attempt to learn something about classical Chinese scholarship and I realized that understanding one poem or another, one painting or another from that tradition first required an immersion in Chinese civilization as a whole. So it is with any fully elaborated civilization. Bad writing, writing that is not merely incorrect, but which demonstrates a lack of familiarity with the writer's own civilization, is a manifestation of something that is not civilization at all. The usual word for that is barbarism.

A quarter century ago my colleagues and I thought that the way to improve the writing of our students, who were working hard to become engineers and scientists, was to broaden their education to include as much of the humanities and arts as possible. Today there seems to be a consensus in favor of the narrowing of education in the elementary and secondary schools to what can be cheaply tested; to narrowing undergraduate education to those courses that will lead as quickly as possible to corporate employment or professional degrees. And yet the Ming literati tending their gardens in Suzhou were not alone in believing that society is continuous, that

disorder at the political center is both reflected in and caused by disorder at the sentence level. A poem, a drawing in black ink of bamboo and pines, the refusal to participate in an unjust administration: these can be political acts. Restricting education to employment training, discrediting all that does not yield a profit, communicating through the repetition of short and increasingly brutal slogans: these can be political acts. Somewhere along the continuum from the grammatical concerns of basic literacy to the lifelong study of a fully developed rhetorical culture there is a point at which our work takes on an importance beyond its role in the academy and becomes in itself political.

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