



*College Writing, Academic
Literacy, and the Intellectual
Community: California Dreams
and Cultural Oppositions*

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After forty years of teaching university writing courses, with a half-dozen years as the director of my campus writing program, several terms of office chairing or serving on college and university committees that oversee campus and university writing requirements and credit policies, and more than a quarter of a century directing a Writing Project site, working with writing teachers at every level of education (and in the meantime publishing essays and textbooks on the teaching of writing), I might reasonably be expected to have some definitive answers to the question of what is college writing. Unfortunately, my years of experience and research have mainly shown me why it is so difficult to answer that question, why the question itself may not be meaningful, and why college writing remains such a problematic domain for college and university policy makers who would like some authoritative basis for making decisions about such related questions as what counts as college writing as distinct from what constitutes precollege or remedial writing, what distinguishes college writing from high school writing, and what students engaged in or completing college writing courses should be expected to know or be able to do.

In this chapter I want to address these and some related problems that have perennially vexed college writing programs and those who oversee them, not to offer the last word on any of those questions, but to interrogate and possibly reinterpret them in ways that may illuminate our understanding of the problematic nature of college writing and its relationship to the teaching of writing at other levels of education. My discourse will be anecdotal as well as theoretical, and much of it will take as its starting point two problematic documents—a generation apart—in which the collective engine of higher education in the state of California conspired to define college writing for the guidance of those who prepare students to engage in it and to establish some rational basis for policy on questions about funding and the award of academic credit for various kinds of writing courses.

When Is It a College-Level Course and When Is It a Precollege Remedial Course?

I'll begin with the practical and economically pertinent question of what defines a college writing course or a creditable college writing course as distinct from a course that represents a remedial writing course and therefore one that either should not be counted as transferable from one college to another or that should not be counted as a baccalaureate-level course in computing student credits toward college graduation. The economic ramifications of this question are enormous for colleges and state educational systems that worry about it, because it impacts the credits granted to transfer students from community colleges to four-year colleges and it can mean that large numbers of first-year students will be enrolled in writing courses for which they will not or should not receive credit toward graduation. The persistent hope of many cost-conscious university administrators in California over the past two generations has been to distinguish what is remedial from what is college-level instruction in order eventually to outsource all remedial instruction to the community colleges, which are legislatively mandated and funded (as the university is not) to provide a number of remedial and non-baccalaureate-level courses to students who need them.

From the perspective of auditors or any politicians who might ask about the cost-effectiveness of state-funded, degree-granting university programs, any courses that use faculty resources without producing credits that advance students toward graduation are wasted courses and improperly used resources. Thus, if the problem of distinguishing between college-level and precollege- or remedial-level courses can be finessed or ignored in periods of budgetary plenty, it is certain that it will command attention in periods of budgetary famine.

Nor would it occur to any university administrator or state auditor or to most academics in most disciplines that the task of distinguishing between college-level and remedial (or precollege) instruction in writing should be a particularly problematic one. It certainly seemed self-evident a generation ago that colleges and universities should be able to define a baccalaureate-level course in terms of the course content or focus of instruction and in terms of the prerequisite skills and knowledge that the course required of students who enrolled in it. Hence, in the early 1980s, in response to academic senate debates at a number of University of California campuses about the dubious status of courses designed to enable students to meet the university-wide Subject A requirement (a writing proficiency requirement that students must satisfy before enrolling in standard university-level first-year English courses), and at a time of ballooning enrollments in remedial writing courses at campuses of the California State University, the state administrative apparatus in higher education in collaboration with the academic senates of the University of California (with 8 general campuses), the California State University (with 23 campuses), and the California Community College System (with 109 colleges) appointed an intersegmental committee of faculty and administrators to resolve the perplexing but apparently answerable question of how to define a baccalaureate-level writing course and the level of student knowledge or skill required for enrollment in such a course.

After some months of consultation and two statewide conferences to allow for articulation and discussion among educational segments, a report was published by the joint academic senates of the three branches of public higher education in California under the title, *Statement of Competencies in English and*

Mathematics Expected of Entering College Freshman (1982). Most of the pages of the report were actually devoted to appendices describing the placement tests in writing used at various campuses (this was five years before the University of California established its university-wide writing proficiency examination) of the three segments of higher education in California, and presenting sample papers from each segment representing four different levels of student performance (“clear pass, marginal pass, clear fail, marginal fail”) on those tests, along with comments explaining the reason for the ranking.

Ironically, Ed White (see “Defining by Assessing” in this volume) would argue that those sample papers and explanatory comments provided the true or most valid answer to the question addressed in the report about how to define college-level competency in writing, but the report proper focused instead on the brief statement of competencies, which purported to define college-level writing in terms of eleven “Writing Skills” said to be “fundamental for successful baccalaureate-level work.” These include the ability to generate ideas, to formulate a thesis, to construct a coherent paragraph, to organize an essay logically, to use varied sentence structure, to select appropriate words, to adjust word choice and sentence types for different audiences and purposes, to avoid plagiarism, to use evidence to support opinions, to use a dictionary, and to proofread and revise. Students whose prose didn’t demonstrate such abilities could be said to require remediation in pre-baccalaureate-level courses; courses designed to teach these skills of academic writing were therefore said to be remedial. Likewise, courses that directed instruction toward more sophisticated rhetorical, logical, and conceptual matters were properly designated college-level courses, appropriate for students who had already mastered the fundamentals of style and structure that were said to be the marks of college-level writing.

State educational agencies heralded the new statewide document on college writing as a major intersegmental accomplishment marking the beginning of a new era of intersegmental articulation and rational vertical curriculum development in composition. Intersegmental statewide conferences of writing teachers were convened at various campuses of the University of California to introduce the new intersegmental statement of com-

petencies in writing to teachers at every level of instruction and even across the curriculum. Teachers at every level enthusiastically attended these conferences and happily met in warmly collegial sessions where college and university writing instructors and interested professors from a variety of disciplines sat side by side with elementary, middle school, and high school language arts teachers to discuss how they could all use the new intersegmental document to guide curriculum and instruction in the teaching of writing, and where (at least at the conference I attended, and, no doubt, at others) the college composition teachers were initially shocked but then wildly amused to hear an elementary school teacher modestly and hesitantly observe that the standard for college-level competency in writing as defined in the new intersegmental document described what she required of student writers in her 6th-grade class (thus contradicting Ed White's presumably unassailable assertion in his chapter in this volume that the only thing we can say with assurance about college writing is that it is distinct from the writing of young children).

This observation was then seconded by a number of upper-elementary and middle school teachers (mostly from our local site of the National Writing Project), who claimed that they too expected students in their classes to learn and exhibit all of the same competencies apparently expected of entering college students (apt word choice, sentence control and fluency, paragraph coherence, organizational and argumentative logic, observance of conventions, ability to proofread and revise, and so on) and that their writing instruction generally focused less on basic skills of transcription than on more substantive concerns such as the development and relevance of ideas, adequacy of information, and rhetorical effectiveness. It would appear, therefore, that they too were conducting their classes at a level appropriate for a fully creditable college or university class, according to the specifications of the intersegmental document on college-level writing instruction.

Moreover, they observed, the basic skills on which remedial writing classes were apparently expected to focus seemed to them (as it did to many specialists in the teaching of writing) an inappropriate focus for writing instruction at any level, if students were ever to learn how to write effectively. Thus the definition

specified for a remedial course as distinct from a college-level course seemed a recipe for ensuring the continuing remedial status of the very students who were forced to enroll in those courses to correct their need for further remediation. To add to the deconstructive findings of the discussion groups, many college teachers (from a number of disciplines) in these same intersegmental groups began to acknowledge that many of their upper-division students—students who were getting by in college with satisfactory grades—appeared not to have mastered some the competencies that were presumably prerequisites for writing in college and that elementary teachers were claiming to have taught successfully to students in grades 6 through 8.¹

As far as I know, nothing was ever formally published (and has never been published in any form or forum until now) reporting on how elementary and middle school teachers at various regional conferences had exposed the nakedness of the imperial intersegmental statement of 1982 on remedial and college-level writing in California. But I distinctly remember that after what was touted as the first round of a year-long series of regional intersegmental conferences on remediation and college-level writing, the university and the academic senates of the other units of higher education in California suddenly and mysteriously lost interest in sponsoring follow-up conferences or in continuing to advertise or distribute the intersegmental booklet they had formerly announced and distributed as a uniquely valuable resource for teachers of writing at every level of education.

This story, which, I confess, I tell with pleasure as a story at least in part about the humble wisdom of classroom teachers and the foolish hubris of academic bureaucrats, will be misleading if it is taken merely as a story of academic ineptitude, rather than as a story about the genuine difficulty of specifying levels of competence in writing that might distinguish college-level writers from precollege writers or the curriculum and content of college writing classes from high school college preparatory writing classes. Quite aside from the fact that the celebrated document on college-level competencies may have identified the wrong competencies, every experienced teacher who has taught in a range of secondary schools and colleges knows that any attempt to define the boundary between college and high school writing instruc-

tion or student writing, without reference to the particular schools and classes to which the definitions apply, is likely to yield misleading generalizations and educationally dubious policies about student placement and academic credit. High school English teachers who moonlight as composition teachers in local colleges often report that their baccalaureate-level college classes are much less sophisticated than the tracked top-level classes they teach in the neighboring high school. Equally dramatic contrasts are frequently observed, of course, by teachers who move in the other direction or from one college to another or one high school to another or even between different college preparatory classes within the same comprehensive high school.

Thus, while it is reasonable to assume that there is as vast a difference between college and high school writing courses as there is between most colleges and most of the high schools from which they recruit their students, it is nevertheless impossible to construct a general model of high school and college instruction or competency in writing that will be sufficiently predictive of the actual performance of students and teachers and college communities to render the model educationally useful or accurate in making policy decisions about academic credit or course equivalency for any individual students or for all secondary schools and colleges. Decisions on such matters will always have to be made to serve bureaucratic efficiency rather than educational purposes, except insofar as bureaucratic policy wisely allows and encourages academic administrators to make policy decisions on a case-by-case basis, using as evidence, wherever possible, the actual writing produced by the student seeking credit for having completed a college-level writing course (see Ed White's essay in this volume).

College Writing as Academic Literacy: A Second Generation Definition

It took exactly twenty years, or one generation, before the state institutions of higher education in California—again under pressure to reduce or otherwise reallocate the responsibility for providing remedial instruction in writing for college students entering

the higher education system—attempted to produce another and more authoritative document specifying what constitutes college-level competency in composition and what therefore defines the instructional responsibility of high school college preparatory writing courses, which are presumably designed to turn out students who are ready to perform at a level of competency expected of entering college freshmen. The new document, published in 2002 by an official statewide higher education body known as the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (ICAS) and authored by a joint committee of faculty (all of whom regularly taught writing in their courses) representing the Academic Senates of the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges, carries a title that reflects both the interests of the key faculty members who shaped the content of the document and the aims of the faculty organizations that sponsored it: *Academic Literacy: A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California's Public Colleges and Universities* (presently available online and from outreach offices at the University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges).

That is to say, the intellectual aim and admirable achievement of the ICAS document and of its expert authors is to describe the academic literacy tasks and underlying intellectual competencies that are typically required of students enrolled in introductory college courses in composition and across the academic disciplines. But the political and economic assumption apparently made by the document's sponsoring institutions of higher education and evidenced in the second part of the document's title is that it is the responsibility of secondary schools to equip students with these very skills and competencies *before* those students enter California's institutions of higher education. Presumably, then, it is not the responsibility of colleges and universities to teach the same skills, except in remedial courses that cannot or should not count toward a baccalaureate degree and that in a well-ordered educational system (as university administrators and faculty senate committees, not to mention legislators, continuously remind university directors of composition) should not be the financial responsibility of a university program. The document is itself deliberately silent about the economic and

political issue of remediation, but its sponsors acknowledge their agenda in this regard in a preface over the signatures of the academic senate chairs of the three sponsoring higher educational systems, where the document is introduced as “an update of the original 1982 *Statement of Competencies in English Expected of Entering College Freshman*,” a document I have already described, that was explicitly conceived by university administrators and sponsoring academic Senate committees as an effort to reduce the expensive problem of remedial writing courses across California’s higher education system and particularly to reduce the need for basic writing courses (courses satisfying the infamous Subject A requirement) on the campuses of the University of California.

There is no doubt that some of the skills and competencies called for in the ICAS document are presently and appropriately taught and required of students in college preparatory high school classes and even in middle school classes (or earlier) for students headed for an academic track in high school. The writing competencies identified by the ICAS document include, for example, the following (slightly rephrased for economy and felicity):

- ◆ Generate ideas for writing by using texts in addition to past experience or observation
- ◆ Duly consider audience and purpose
- ◆ Employ a recursive prewriting process
- ◆ Develop a main point or thesis
- ◆ Develop a thesis with well-chosen examples
- ◆ Give reasons and employ logic
- ◆ Vary sentence structure and word choice as appropriate for audience and purpose
- ◆ Revise to improve focus, support, or organization
- ◆ Proofread and edit to correct surface errors

But we move into a much more problematic borderland region of the academic universe when we come to the more subtle and advanced skills of writing and many of the competencies that are

identified by the ICAS document with “habits of mind,” “critical thinking,” and the “reading writing connection.” Under these various rubrics we find such competencies as:

- ◆ Structure writing so that it moves beyond formulaic patterns that discourage critical examination of the topic and issues
- ◆ Critically analyze or evaluate the ideas or arguments of others
- ◆ Synthesize ideas from several sources
- ◆ Conduct college-level research to develop and support . . . opinions and conclusions
- ◆ Critically assess the authority and value of research materials that have been located online and elsewhere
- ◆ Read texts of complexity without instruction and guidance
- ◆ Experiment with new ideas
- ◆ Generate hypotheses
- ◆ Synthesize multiple ideas into a theory
- ◆ Challenge and interrogate one’s own beliefs
- ◆ Respect facts and information in situations where feelings and intuitions often prevail
- ◆ Demonstrate initiative and develop ownership of one’s education

I do not believe my experience or perception eccentric when I assert that in forty years of teaching college students at three highly respected and very selective research universities, I have never taught a first-year- or sophomore-level English class (and I’m talking exclusively about nonremedial classes in literature as well as in composition) where most of my students arrived at my class experienced enough and competent enough in academic literacy not to need intensive instruction in the very academic literacy skills, competencies, or habits of mind described by the list above as prerequisites for admission to college courses.

And what are we to make of the competency that with no apparent irony is identified explicitly as “conduct college-level research to develop and support . . . opinions and conclusions”?

Can colleges and universities reasonably expect that students will acquire college-level competency while they are still in high school? Well, yes, by the logic of this document, which insists at every point that its thoughtful and well-researched catalog of the skills, competencies, and habits of mind that are required for effective academic work in college ought to be instilled in and acquired by students while they are still in high school. “All the elements of academic literacy,” the ICAS document authoritatively announces in speaking of skills and competencies that are required for success in college-level courses (2), “are expected of entering freshman across all college disciplines. These competencies should be learned in the content areas in high school. It is therefore an institutional obligation to teach them.” That is, it is the responsibility of the institution of the high school to teach them.

Thus the corporate voice of higher education in the state of California says precisely the same thing I remember some disgruntled faculty members saying to me during the years when I was the director of Composition on my own University of California campus. Virtually every term, one or more of the teachers—most of them recent recipients of the PhD in English, teachers we had hired specifically to teach writing courses and especially our sequence of first-year English courses—would come to my office to complain that the students in their various first-year English classes were not ready for the course, because these students had no idea how to frame a coherent argument, could not interpret the assigned texts, needed help in reading conceptually complicated material, or seemed disinclined to grapple with complex or subtle intellectual problems. My response to them was very close to what I would also like to say to the institutional sponsors of the ICAS document on academic literacy. If students could do all of these things at the time they entered your class, why would we need you to teach them?

The Discourse of a Culture and the Culture of Discourse

I do not mean to argue here that most of the skills, competencies, and habits of mind necessary for successful work in college should

not be nurtured and taught in high school. The recent success of an “academic writing task force” of high school teachers, representing sites of the California Writing Project, in developing assignments, assessment tools, and instructional strategies for teaching academic writing in high school demonstrates that high school students can and actually want to engage in much more sophisticated reading, writing, and thinking tasks than are ordinarily set for them in high school. But this does not mean that the academic skills and competencies expected of students in college and university courses are likely to be taught and learned in high school in a way that will satisfy the expectations of most college and university faculty members or that such skills can be taught and acquired in high school in a way that will ever relieve college and university faculty of their own responsibility for teaching the same constellation of skills.

It may even be unrealistic, if not foolish, to expect some of the more sophisticated of these skills to be taught and learned in high school at all. In what imaginable school district, for example, will we be able to find significant numbers of college preparatory high school classes where most students are being taught (and actually learning) to structure their writing so that it moves beyond formulaic patterns that discourage critical examination of the topic and issues? And in what state anywhere are public high school students generally being taught to read texts of complexity without instruction and guidance or to challenge and interrogate their own beliefs or to demonstrate initiative and develop ownership of their own education?

Those may be habits of mind that inform the performance of highly competent students in college (and surely they appear among the most talented students in high school classes as well), but they are also habits of mind that to a very large extent distinguish the culture of the university from the culture of the high school. Public high schools and school boards throughout California and in virtually every other state (especially in an era of government-mandated assessment programs) typically favor and provide substantial funding for the purchase of formulaic programs of instruction in composition for high school students—programs that are designed to substitute obedience in the application of a formula in place of any act of independent or

critical thinking. Of course, smart, experienced, professionally sophisticated high school teachers, who are themselves writers, know the advantages of helping student writers learn to be guided more by the shape of their reflective thought than by a prefabricated outline. But such teachers will be the first to admit that their instruction generally runs counter to the culture of their school and even the culture of their department and certainly to the current national culture of assessment.

In fact, the function of the first year of college for most students from most high schools—when they look at it retrospectively—turns out to have been largely to debunk much of what they learned in high school, to get them for the first time to challenge and interrogate their own beliefs, to prod them for the first time toward taking charge of their own learning, and to initiate them into an academic and intellectual community, which is to say, to an entire culture whose most distinctive features are those that render it wholly unlike the culture of the high school. Nor is there any generation in the history of public education in America for which this hasn't been true.²

Moreover, insofar as a culture is defined largely by its discursive practices, the features that most fundamentally define the genres of academic discourse in the university, including the ways speakers position themselves in relation to their audience and authorities in their field, precision and exactitude in expression, a critical stance toward received opinion and one's own assumptions, a sense of responsibility to contribute to an ongoing discussion or debate on a significant question, and many of the other practices identified by the ICAS authors with *academic literacy*—all of these are cultural practices that can only be learned through participation in a culture as an active member, including the practice of participation itself. Nor would it be incorrect to claim that one of the principal aims of a college education in any field is to initiate students into the discourse and discursive practices of that field, just as it is the particular function of first-year writing courses to initiate students into the discursive practices that are shared across the disciplines and define the broader culture of the university community.³

Having criticized placement and credit policies based on unsustainable generalizations about the academic culture of high

schools, I am nevertheless now arguing—I hope not inconsistently—that it is fair and reasonable to acknowledge that high schools and colleges—most especially research universities and highly selective colleges, but virtually all colleges in their official aspirations—represent different kinds of academic and intellectual communities. One could fairly say, in fact, that most high schools (excluding highly selective independent schools and a few highly specialized public secondary schools) do not identify themselves at all as intellectual communities and may not even serve primarily as academic communities.

Public high schools are supported by local communities as institutions designed to reflect and preserve the parochial values of the community and of the parents who send their children to local schools, where they expect local community values to be confirmed and reproduced, not to be interrogated and culturally analyzed. Critical thinking in most high schools and in most state documents on curriculum standards refers to such formal operations as providing reasons to support a claim. It does not entail questioning the efficacy of the reasons or the values that constitute the warrants for the reasons. Colleges and universities—particularly research universities and highly selective colleges—are typically charged with the responsibility of advancing the frontiers of knowledge, which includes a mission to teach students to question their assumptions, to challenge commonplace wisdom, to interrogate the values and ideology of their own community and tradition as well as those of communities and cultures that are alien and even threatening to them. Such interrogations would not be tolerated in most high schools in most communities, where the thinking it characterizes would be regarded as dangerous if not seditious (see Blau, “Politics and the English Language Arts”).

The Cultural Challenge of College Writing

Insofar as I have been critical of the California intersegmental document on academic literacy for attempting to pawn off on the high schools the responsibility that belongs to institutions of higher education to teach students the skills and habits of mind—the discursive practices—that colleges and universities expect their

students to exhibit, I may be accused of and I am willing to plead guilty to the charge of having committed the intentional fallacy. For while the document insists that it is the responsibility of the high schools to teach these skills and continually refers to the list of skills as representing the competencies required of *entering* college students, it never asserts that colleges should therefore be relieved of their responsibility to teach the same skills and competencies to college students. It is my knowledge of the history and funding sources for such documents that leads me to be critical of what I take to be the document's bureaucratic intention. In the meantime, however, it also seems clear to me that the faculty authors of the document did not themselves share the intention I am attributing to its sponsors. And for this reason or for reasons having nothing to do with intention and everything to do with execution, I think there is good reason to celebrate what the document achieves in cataloging the skills of academic literacy and the underlying habits of mind that together define what the document calls *competencies* and which we can call *discursive practices* (both terms are apposite for their respective auditors), and in also calling upon high school teachers in every discipline to teach these same competencies and practices.

Read as an articulation document outlining for high schools the discursive practices that students should be taught and experience in college preparatory courses, the document constitutes a worthwhile effort to reform the intellectual culture of the high school and to lend the collective authority of the state's institutions of higher education to the teaching practices and intellectual goals of the best informed and most literate teachers in high schools—teachers whose practices and values may well put them in an oppositional relationship to the practices of many of their colleagues, to the official curriculum of their school, and to the newer standards promulgated by state agencies and presumably tested on state-mandated standardized assessments.

And what the oppositional posture of many outstanding writing teachers may suggest is how much the character of intellectual discourse or the discourse taught in college writing courses and valorized implicitly and explicitly in research on college writing is a discourse that positions the writer outside of the American cultural mainstream represented most notably by the culture

of the American high school and by what we might characterize as the discourse of Main Street and middle America.

But, of course, there is nothing uniquely American about the opposition between what I am identifying as intellectual discourse or the discursive practices of the intellectual community and the contrasting practices of the public at large, or more distinctively, the discourse of the marketplace and the bureaucracy. The intellectual community—distinguished by discursive practices or habits of mind that entail interrogating commonplace assumptions, questioning the values of the community, moving beyond formulaic patterns of thought to examine issues and topics critically, and experimenting with new ideas (see the ICAS list above)—has always been and must always be in something of an oppositional or critical stance with respect to whatever constitutes the prevailing or conventional culture of any community.

In a politically healthy community, intellectuals are celebrated and protected precisely for the critical and challenging role they serve and teach. In corrupt and pathological societies—like totalitarian and fascist societies—intellectuals are among the first groups to be declared enemies of the state and among the first citizens to be sent to concentration camps or gulags, as they were in Hitler's Germany and in Stalin's Soviet Union, and as they continue to be in every regime built on the manipulation and contempt for citizens and for truth.

College writing, I am suggesting, is a species of intellectual discourse, and the powers of language and mind that it calls upon and develops are those that enable students and citizens to become participants in an academic community that is itself a segment of the larger intellectual community. But colleges and universities do not define the intellectual community and they do not constitute the only sites for initiating new members into that community. Many leading intellectuals—certainly in the generation ahead of my own—were never college students, yet became leading American intellectuals and eventually distinguished university professors. I'm thinking of literary critics like Phillip Rahv and R. P. Blackmur (both of whom were my own teachers), both of whom edited leading intellectual journals before and after World War II, and ultimately became powerfully influential and widely published literary critics and professors of literature,

though neither of them had ever enrolled in an undergraduate college or university program of study.

Not only is it the case that colleges do not own and are not the only sites for cultivating intellectual discourse; it is also the case that most people who attend and even graduate from college do not take up all or most of the practices that define intellectual discourse and never become members of the intellectual community. Indeed many college teachers of composition can hardly be counted as intellectuals themselves and surely some colleges can hardly count themselves as intellectual communities, while some secondary schools or communities of teachers that include elementary teachers surely qualify as intellectual communities.

Among the many contributions that the National Writing Project has made to the American educational community, one of the most profoundly important, enduring, and revolutionary is the concept that a writing project site is most fundamentally a community of teachers that serves as a professional and intellectual community—a community whose members are drawn from the ranks of classroom teachers who teach at every level of education from elementary school through graduate school, but who are linked by their common commitment to improving their own professional practice by sharing their teaching practices with each other, by interrogating and reflecting on their practice through their conversation and writing, and by regularly sharing their writing with each other—including the writing they do in their roles as reflective practitioners, researchers, and creative writers. In this way communities of writing project teachers who teach in kindergarten through grade 12 along with their colleagues who teach in community colleges and four-year colleges and universities have become the kind of intellectual communities that colleges and universities themselves have always claimed to be and have frequently aspired to be, but in their modern corporate and bureaucratized incarnations have often failed to become, except in certain privileged and protected precincts of their institutional structures.

Moreover, in functioning as productive intellectual communities where knowledge is produced as well as consumed, shared as well as honored, where learning is nurtured and disseminated

for its own sake and for the satisfaction and benefit of those who learn—and where all this learning and knowledge production transpires without the interference of hierarchies of power (such as administrators, teachers, students) and without bureaucratic or economic structures of reward or advancement, the writing project demonstrates—as workman’s circles and various groups of workers, and artisans have demonstrated throughout the past century and more—that intellectual communities and intellectual discourse may thrive and be acquired by community members in a number of settings outside the control of universities or any academic institutions.

What this meditation on the sites of intellectual discourse seems to be suggesting, then, is that what defines college writing is less essentially about what defines college than it is about what defines the discipline of writing. For it is the discipline of writing or writing practiced as a discipline of mind that makes writing the most effective tool for discovering and clarifying thought and thereby the principal instrument for intellectual discourse. Hence writing as intellectual discourse is nurtured and valorized and serves as the most effective instrument for sustaining the community of learners in those colleges and universities that function as legitimate intellectual communities, while its intellectual power may be ignored and regarded as subversive in academic institutions—like most high schools and, no doubt, some colleges—where education is focused largely on training students to standards of behavior and academic performance that are determined less by a transcendent commitment to liberating and refining thought than by a parochially defined and politically expedient interest in transmitting a given ideology and sustaining whatever happens to be the dominant bureaucracy of power.

Hence the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)—an organization of English and language arts educators representing all levels of education—takes a permanently subversive role with respect to most dominant regimes of American power in making two widely publicized national awards each year on behalf of the power of writing to clarify and liberate thought: the Doublespeak Award, an award of shame given each year to call attention to a glaring example of intellectually dishonest and deliberately obfuscating prose of the kind characteristic of politi-

cal discourse in George Orwell's novel *1984*, and the George Orwell Award, honoring an author or editor or published work that contributes to intellectual honesty and clarity in public discourse. With these awards, made by an organization and supervised by committees that include teachers at every level of education from elementary school through the university, NCTE demonstrates that the writing distinguished as college writing and celebrated as a discourse important to acquire and master for participation in academic and intellectual communities is not different from the writing that the discipline of composition or the broader field of the English language arts desiderates as the model for instruction and practice at every level of education, but differs instead from all the varieties of manipulative and ethically compromised writing that all students and all citizens in an intellectually healthy democratic society must learn to resist rather than produce.

Notes

1. Anyone skeptical today about the practicability of an elementary school writing program conducted at the level described by the teachers in my anecdote need only visit the classrooms of exemplary writing project teachers or Google the phrase *six traits writing* to see what has become the most widely used rubric for teaching and evaluating writing in the elementary classrooms of many teachers—the six traits rubric and instructional guide developed at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory specifically for use in the elementary grades. Those six traits include voice, word choice, ideas and content, organization, fluency, and conventions.
2. See Russel Durst's ethnographic study, *Collision Course* (1999), for a vivid account of the conflict between the culture of the high school or the home culture and the culture of the university.
3. In speaking of discursive practices that characterize the culture of the university, I may be accused of subscribing to what David Russell (60–65) characterizes as the myth of a universal educated discourse, which is often used as a rationale for the very institution of first-year English courses and what Russell and others regard as an equally misguided notion of what is known as “general writing skills instruction.” Without refuting his argument about how discursive practices differ across

disciplines and the activity systems they entail, I think it remains fair to posit a set of intellectual values, social responsibilities, and habits of mind that are valorized widely in the intellectual community and promoted across disciplines in the university, and that are represented by the list of competencies ratified by academics from widely disparate disciplines in the 2002 California intersegmental document. Just how extensive these common practices may be can be disputed, but surely some commonalities in values and practices are indisputable if not self-evident: don't distort the truth or misrepresent evidence, check and acknowledge sources, evaluate evidence, contribute to an ongoing discourse, recognize counterarguments, and so on.

Works Cited

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