

Virginia B. Smith

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today, not just because of the importance of the subject of this conference, but because it honors Mina Shaughnessy. Mina and I crossed paths a number of times over the last several years. We were first introduced at a Carnegie Corporation dinner by Alden Dunham, of Carnegie. Both the corporation, through its financial aid, and Alden, through his personal interest and encouragement, had supported each of us: Mina, for her book about teaching writing, and me in my work at the Carnegie Commission.

When I transferred from the Commission to the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), it didn't take me long to remember Mina and realize the help that she could provide for FIPSE. She became first an informal counselor, then more formally an adviser to the Networks project at Bronx Community College, and finally a member of FIPSE's board. Her counsel, seldom lengthy, was unusually wise and always resolutely, though realistically, optimistic. But I cherish her memory most because she was one of those rare people who put into practice three critical values, values which might almost be viewed in today's society as endangered species. And, because I am not an expert on literacy in any sense of the word, I thought I would talk about the broad values that motivated Mina's work and life and which, I think, are so important to society today.

Characterized briefly, her three beliefs were that teaching makes a difference, that the individual is important, and that literacy is power. Who wouldn't agree to the importance of those beliefs, but when we try to implement these values, they quickly lose ground to competing demands for resources, time, and energy. We are often forced to assume that implementation is complete when only the most minimal threshold of accomplishment has been reached.

Virginia B. Smith is President of Vassar College.

If we really believe teaching makes a difference, why in higher education are we so preoccupied with gauging the potential ability of students to learn, rather than assessing our own abilities to teach. We often hear professors say, "Send us better students." Rarely do we hear them say, "Send us students with great need, students who challenge our ability to reach and teach them." Rarely do we hear that teaching is a craft we can learn, by a scholarly approach to pedagogy, just as we can learn by a scholarly approach to the development of cellular life or any other field of inquiry; and rarely do we hear that teaching underprepared young adults how to write may be a profound task, not a simple task.

Not until we reverse these attitudes will we buttress and make meaningful the tenet that teaching does, indeed, make a difference. And this Mina stood for—in her speeches, in her writing, but most importantly in her actions. She called for the development of a pedagogy for illiteracy, for analysis of errors in writing that would inform the hierarchy of tasks in teaching writing. She called for teachers of writing who would "grope [their] ways into the turbulent disciplines of semantics and linguistics for fuller, more accurate data about words and sentences; . . . pursue more rigorously the design of developmental models; . . . examine more closely the nature of speaking and writing and define the subtle ways in which these forms of language both support and undo each other."¹

Mina saw clearly the relationship of expectation to learning. Teachers, frustrated by a multiplicity of errors, may lower their expectations and thereby contribute to the failure of their own teaching. That teachers' efforts are conditioned by their own expectations is beyond question; learners' efforts are also conditioned by the teachers' expectations. Central, then, to a belief in the effectiveness of teaching is awareness about expectations and how those expectations have been formed.

Historically, American expectations have had a profound impact on education. Believing in democracy, we expected that education would be a key element in our life, but not expecting much of women, we did not initially include them in any of our colleges; and expecting little of slaves, or fearing too much power from literacy, we did not teach slaves to read and write. It was overexpectation, however, which gave us the cruelest disappointment. We expected to teach everyone to read and to write, to use education as a road to social justice, to teach the skills needed in our economy, to wipe out unemployment, and to do it all overnight. Failing to

¹ Mina Shaughnessy, "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 27 (October, 1976), p. 237.

reach these goals easily, we are now adjusting our expectations downward, perhaps to another extreme.

Our legislatures seem to be giving up on support for programs that aid the underprepared young adult. Our high school competency tests may be set at levels that are too basic. Having hoped too much, now, to save ourselves, we may be hoping too little. Were we wrong in our expectations, or did we allow too little time, or apply insufficient or inappropriate effort? There is a subtle difference between hope and expectation. We wait almost passively for a hope to be fulfilled, but an expectation arises because of some action on the part of those with the expectation. What right have we to expect? What have we done to lead us to expect? Implicit in these questions is the assumption that what we do as individuals will alter the outcome, and this of course leads to the second value that I mentioned: that individuals are important, that what an individual does can have an impact on the course of events.

The complexity of modern life makes it extremely easy for us to feel that the individual no longer has any control over her own life, or any power to make a change that could affect others. The acceptance of the system as a given and the necessity for adapting to it as best we can inevitably lead to a sense of depression and the curtailment of creative thought and energy that could improve the system.

Cynicism about our powerlessness as individuals is, perhaps, the greatest deterrent to improvement for both the society and individuals. The acceptance of defeat before trial is particularly prevalent in lower socio-economic groups and also among underprepared students. Recent ACE statistics on freshmen attitudes reveal that over 50 percent of the entering freshmen felt that they had no power as individuals to change society. Education is committed to the belief that the individual can both be changed and have the power to help others change. It is sobering to think of teaching classes in which 50 percent of the students do not accept the central purpose of education.

When I first went to the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, I was told that with our very small level of funding—it was only \$10 million at that time—I should not give very many grants because the money wouldn't have an impact if given out in small amounts. This position is quite consistent with the philosophy in Washington and with the general push given by Congress to federal programs. One suggestion made to me as the new director was to fund ten projects at a million dollars each. It was argued that this would cut down overhead and staff time; it would make certain that each of the projects was reviewed at length; and it would be easy to explain to Congress. To be effective, it was assumed, a project

would have to be expensive and flashy. We chose the other road—to make small grants to a large number of projects. In many cases we were backing grass roots efforts by individuals. When last year's report on FIPSE by an outside evaluation agency was released, we were all pleased to see that our system of choice had indeed paid off. Not only was FIPSE suggested as a model for other federal programs, but it was clear that many of the projects were continuing to benefit students after the FIPSE funding had ended.

When faith is put in the individual at the operating level, investments and experiments have results. The idea that a panacea may rest in a system or a mass application of funds fails to take into account that human problems usually must be solved through human action and therefore are rarely responsive to grand, impersonal schemes. In Washington, FIPSE was not popular among some of the more committed and better credentialed analysts who were selling, at that time, megasystems. Megasystems are often the response when no one has yet solved the problem at the individual or operational level. That problems of literacy have not been solved before in this nation may well result from our tendency to propose generalized solutions without first analyzing the problems at the level of the individual.

Our response to the need for better secondary education, and for more higher education in the late 50's and early 60's, did not sufficiently consider the relationship between human problems and the need for solutions to those problems to be on a human scale. James D. Conant, in 1959, suggested that our high schools could be better if they were bigger. At the time he made this recommendation, less than one-fifth of our high schools met his size criterion. Now that we have greatly reduced the number of high schools and increased their sizes, we are not so certain that the anticipated benefits are being realized. A recent study suggests that bigger schools do not result in higher scholastic achievements, nor do they produce students who do better in college. Certainly, our own experience in college classrooms would reinforce the results of the study. It is ironic that not many years after Conant's report a new report, *Youth Welfare Policy and Transition*, prepared for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, stated that American high schools are too large.

Mina was concerned with whether the individual student, particularly the student with educational problems, could receive proper attention in massive systems. It was because of that concern that she encouraged Alison Bernstein [then program officer at FIPSE] and me to put our thoughts on this problem into a book, which was subsequently published as *The Impersonal Campus*. It was Mina's encouragement which led us to dedicate that book to her. Of course, her encouragement to write about issues and experiments was deeply tied to her belief in the power of literacy.

Too often we think in terms of functional literacy as the ability to read enough to take directions on a job, or to get around town, or to fill out census forms. Mina said, "Some people—English teachers among them—have even insisted that writing is a skill not everyone can acquire or needs to acquire especially in an age when television and tapes have liberated speech from transiency and telephones have reduced the burden of ritual and routine correspondence."² But to think of that side of literacy as the only one needed by some is to deny to that portion of our population the real power of literacy.

Certainly, the necessity for writing is substantially reduced in modern society; it is even reduced in massive systems of higher education. Certain types of pedagogy, of necessity, reduce practice with writing. For instance, large lecture classes almost necessitate short answer tests; as the class grows, assignments for written papers decline. When I was hiring people at FIPSE and the Carnegie Commission, I discovered that many were college graduates who had never written a paper and who had taken all of their examinations through multiple-choice questions or other short-answer forms. They had found a way to move through four years of college and earn a bachelor of arts degree or bachelor of science degree, more often the latter, with no experience in writing.

It is possible to teach youngsters about reading through "Sesame Street" and perhaps it is even possible to teach them to write words through "Sesame Street." But reading as a tool, unless it moves quickly to writing, can be simply a passive experience. The expressive experience—that active process of struggling with one's own responses and ideas, and putting them together in a way that someone else can read and ponder—is the side of literacy in which real power lies. As Mina pointed out, "It is in the nature of writing to encourage individuals to discover and explore their own hunches, to ponder over their own words, to respect their own thoughts enough to entrust them to a written page."³ Thus the ability to write is intimately tied to the power to refine one's own thoughts, to develop them sufficiently to permit them to be examined for more than a fleeting moment.

I often wonder whether the Gettysburg Address would have any force for us today if it had only been spoken and not circulated and studied by generations of students. Would Tom Paine's utterances have sparked a

²"The English Professor's Malady." Address at the Association of Departments of English Conference, Albany, New York, June 1977.

³"The English Professor's Malady."

nation if they had only been television speeches? To some extent, the quality of ideas in the nation today has declined as the ability to reach people through modern technology has increased. The current illusion is that satisfactory communication can take place orally. We must ask the question whether oral communication is by its very nature lacking in vigor, precision, and depth, and thereby doomed to be temporal and shallow. But of course.

The real power of writing can be experienced only if we employ appropriate vocabularies to articulate concepts. Many of our college students fail to achieve satisfactory levels of writing for their particular colleges, not because they can't write, but because they don't know the relevant vocabularies. Vocabularies are specific to fields, sometimes strangely so. I remember when I was heading the United States Observer Delegation at the UNESCO Conference on Innovation in Bucharest, everybody was asking if the United States was going to make an "intervention." I thought this a very weighty question and figured we would have to discuss it at length before deciding whether an "intervention" would be made. Then I discovered it meant a "speech," so I said yes, and then learned that a "speech" in official international conferences was a written statement which is reviewed by a great number of people and put into the record.

In one of Mina's speeches, which were, fortunately for us, written, she also showed concern for vocabulary. She said, "... we need above all else to take a closer look at vocabulary, which is of course critical to the development of complex concepts, the maturation of syntax, and the acquisition of an appropriate tone or register. . . . We have done little to describe the common stock of words teachers assume students know—proper names, words that have transcended their disciplines, words that initiate academic activities (document, define, etc.), words that articulate logical relationships, etc. In short, the territory of academic rhetoric—its vocabulary, its convention, its purposes—is waiting for an Aristotle."⁴

For us as educators, then, the challenge is to equip our students not only with writing skills, but also with the ability to acquire future vocabularies. Society changes swiftly, and with those swift changes comes the need for new vocabularies. Even now, and certainly in the future, full powers of literacy require a revised scientific vocabulary and compendium of concepts. A new awareness of technology and its importance in our lives,

⁴ "Some Needed Research in Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, 28 (December 1977), p. 320.

including computer literacy, and a new international literacy are also required. Scientific knowledge not only grows; its orientation sometimes shifts dramatically. Thirty years ago, who talked about pollution? Perhaps if the vocabulary of pollution had been more broadly shared at that time, we would not find ourselves talking so much about it today.

The operative vocabularies in any society depend upon the state of knowledge in that society. To the extent that any portion of the society is cut off from that expanding and changing knowledge, it cannot participate in the society and in the decisions of the society in any meaningful way. In science the shifts have been broad and often revolutionary. Think for a moment of how vocabulary in discourse must have changed when we discovered that not sin but germs caused disease, when we came to know that illnesses resulted from physical rather than metaphysical causes. And today we must incorporate new vocabulary and new concepts as science establishes that pollution causes disease and illness, that chemicals and invisible rays affect our well-being. We moved from a vocabulary of mysterious unseen forces causing illness to tangible physical causes, and now must alter our vocabulary again to take in the new, unseen forces.

Modern communication also increasingly requires computer literacy, not necessarily a mastery of a computer language but knowledge of computer capabilities and limitations. Reliance on computers in daily life will become the norm. With that reliance we may alter our thinking modes, that is, shift to binary analyses. Will that shift necessitate remedial education for solving problems that require more complex patterns of thought? Our most stubborn social problems cannot be solved with simple yes-no, in-or-out responses. Or, in another aspect of modern technology, will we lose the cyclical concept of time, as we switch from reading clock faces to digital screens? It is possible that technology will require new ways to fill in the subtleties of reasoning and thinking that are lost by precise and limiting forms.

The United States is moving into a new era, and that new era will require shifts in our vocabulary. Words like "independent" and "dependent" will need to be replaced by better understanding of words such as "interdependent." The fundamentals of Middle East politics and economy must be mastered. Today the United States, as a result of increases in its Chicano, Cuban, and Puerto Rican populations, has the seventh or eighth largest Spanish-speaking population in the world. In 1976 there were thirty million people in the United States whose native tongue was not English or who lived in households where languages other than English were spoken. In short, ethnic and cultural diversity is far from decreasing and may well increase in the future. We will probably have to include in our literacy criteria for the future the command of two languages, not one.

As society changes, the standards for literacy will change with it, but whatever its current form, its importance to this society remains central. Alice Chandler [Acting President, The City College of New York] told us as she opened the conference that the relationship between democracy and literacy runs deep. I would say that without the empowerment that literacy gives individuals there can be no democracy, for it is that empowerment that makes it possible for us to share not only values, but concerns, and finally to move forward to shared solutions of our problems.