



2005 CCCC Chair's Address: Who Owns Writing?

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Douglas D. Hesse

2005 CCCC Chair's Address: Who Owns Writing?



who owns writing?

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CCC 57:2 / DECEMBER 2005

[sung]

My lord, what a morning.

My lord, what a morning,

Oh, my lord what a morning

When the stars begin to fall.

I've been nervous about singing spirituals since my junior year in a small Iowa high school, in a town fairly German and very white. My chorus teacher, Miss

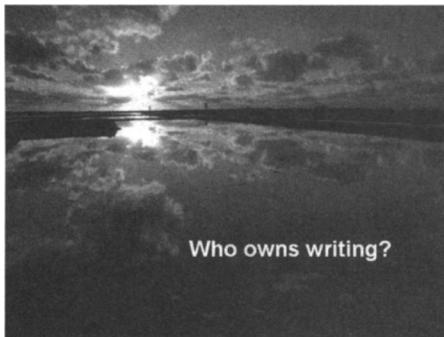
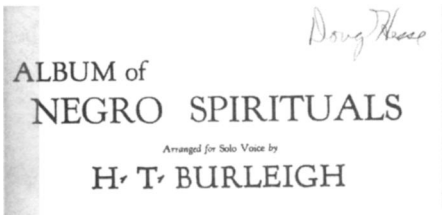
Eggleston, gave me H. T. Burleigh's 1917 *Album of Negro Spirituals*, and she told me to choose a song for the state music contest. Did I have the right to sing from that book? Did I have it here, just now? After all, the title of Marian Anderson's autobiography is *My Lord, What a Morning*. Anderson sang that famous 1939 Easter concert on the Mall in Washington, DC,

after the Daughters of the American Revolution denied her access to Constitution Hall because she was "colored." What have I done? What claims do I have?

Besides, the song itself perplexes me. It opens with grand affirmation, and then comes that pretty apocalypse: the stars falling. So the cause for jubilation is the end of the world, a dazzling end, yes, but an end nonetheless. In fact, it's possible to interpret those first lines not as laud but, rather, lament.

The current state of writing might be expressed in similarly conflicted terms. Probably at no recent time has it received so much broad attention. National commissions recommend resources for teachers and students. Higher education groups issue statements and formulate standards. Digital life fertilizes alphabetic literacy along with visual and aural. Writing Across the Curriculum enjoys rather a new

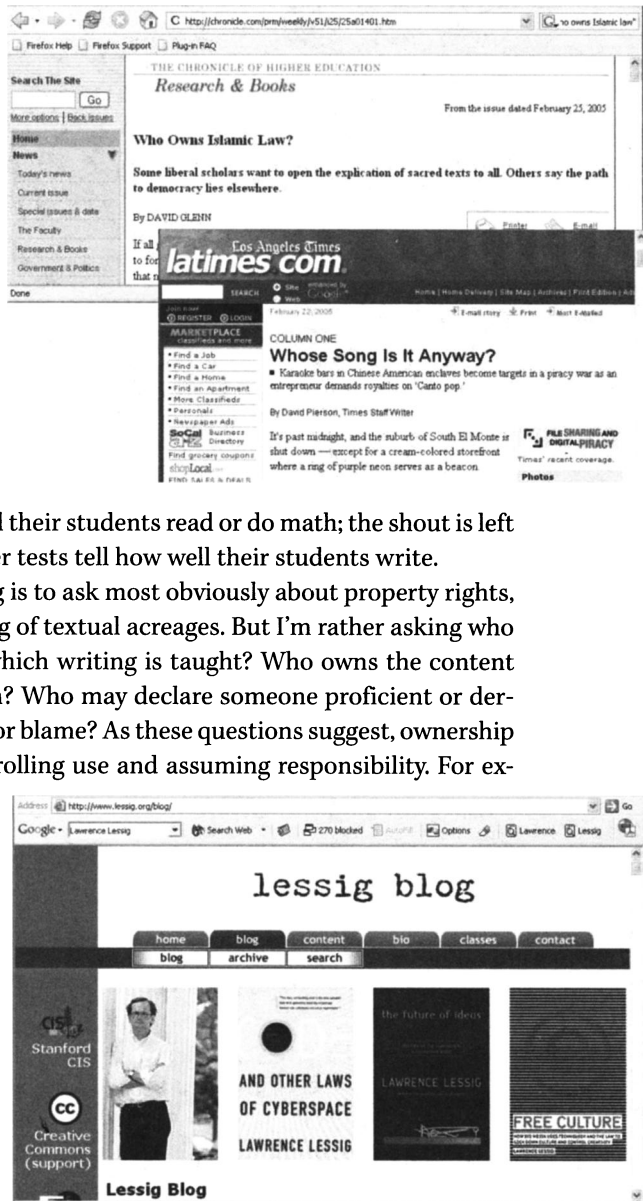
spring. The job listings for rhet/comp remain robust, and new programs, majors, and departments sprout around the country. Our work ought to feel more important than it has in quite some time. And yet, even with all this attention—in fact, perhaps even because of it—the stars threaten to fall on our familiar worlds.

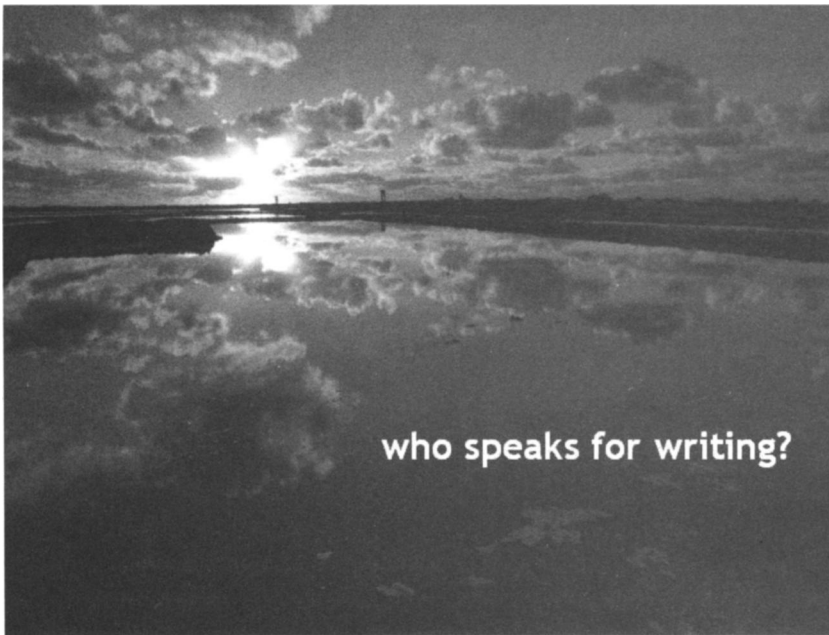


I've chosen such a pushy title that I'm tempted to stalk it through the guise of narrative and metaphor. But let me take it head-on. Who owns writing?

I'm not the only one these days to own owning. The president prods us toward an ownership society, albeit one that limits who can own what. On the one hand, individuals should own responsibility for their finances in retirement. On the other, they shouldn't own stem cells or, if they happen to be gay or lesbian, marriage licenses. Teachers shouldn't own how evolution is taught, or not. Teachers may only whisper how well their students read or do math; the shout is left to No Child Left Behind. Other tests tell how well their students write.

To ask who owns writing is to ask most obviously about property rights, the buying, selling, and leasing of textual acreages. But I'm rather asking who owns the conditions under which writing is taught? Who owns the content and pedagogy of composition? Who may declare someone proficient or derelict? Who may assign praise or blame? As these questions suggest, ownership has the double sense of controlling use and assuming responsibility. For example, I can paint my kitchen whatever color I choose but I also have to shovel my sidewalks in January. I might ask, who speaks for writing? Who has the right? Who can be heard? These are not the same questions. Does CCCC speak for writing? Am I thus, here, our synecdoche, our avatar? Ah, vanity.





I've posed a largely impossible question, of the form that Wittgenstein declares is best answered by rejecting its very asking. Who owns writing? The possibilities are everyone, no one, someone, and "it depends." Your answer depends on whether you derive it through Wordsworth, Barthes, Althusser, or Rorty. You'll be disappointed or relieved to know that I'm not going to trace these positions this morning. What I will do is suggest that those who *teach* writing must affirm that we, in fact, *own* it. The question is what we should aspire to own—and how.

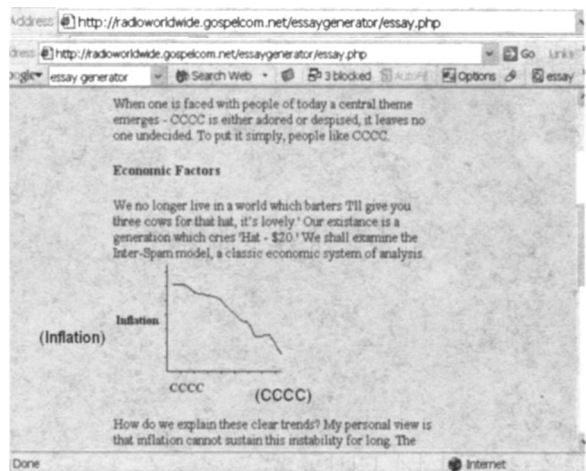


There's a parlor game that many of us have played, with each other and with our students. Call it "beat the digital grader." The rules are simple. Access a computer program that scores writing, and write the worst possible essay that receives the highest possible score. Even undergraduates can get pretty good, as through trial and error they discover assumptions built into the program. These include sentence length and variety, diction, correctness, the presence of semantic chains, and so on.

Last fall several of us on the WPA listserv played an opposite variant. Someone had created a Web site called the “Essay Generator” (Mullen), which invites you to enter any topic and receive an essay in return. The site isn’t very sophisticated, which is part of the fun. Its database stockpiles sentences: several possible first sentences, several second, and so on. Each essay has three headings: Social Factors, Economic Factors, and Political Factors. Each essay has a graph. Each essay ends with a fictional quotation. Each essay has three references.

Consider, for example, the essay I “wrote” about CCCC, if by wrote you might stretch to mean “typed the topic into a blank.” It begins, “Issues surrounding CCCC can never be over analyzed. Advancements in CCCC can be linked to many areas. Though CCCC is a favourite topic of discussion amongst monarchs, presidents and dictators, CCCC is featuring more and more in the ideals of the young and upwardly mobile.” The essay continues “Relax, sit back, and gasp as I display the rich tapestries of CCCC.”

My essay on CCCC even includes a graph. As you can see, as CCCC increases, inflation declines. I can only surmise that after Alan Greenspan retires, Jay Wootten should take his place.



Playing the Essay Generator got me thinking. What if you had a computer generate an essay that was then scored by another computer? So I went to a computer scoring test site. From the choice of three topics, I selected “aphasia,” which I then plugged into the essay generator.

"An essay on aphasia: Man's greatest achievement? Perhaps not, but can you afford not to read on when I am about to tell you about aphasia?" The essay concludes, "How much responsibility lies with aphasia? We can say that aphasia has a special place in the heart of mankind. It fills a hole, ensures financial stability and statistically it's great."

|An essay on aphasia

Man's greatest achievement? Perhaps not, but can you afford not to read on when I am about to tell you about aphasia? At first glance aphasia may seem unenchanting, however its study is a necessity for any one wishing to intellectually advance beyond their childhood. While much has been written on its influence on contemporary living, spasmodically it returns to create a new passion amongst those who study its history. It still has the power to shock those politically minded individuals living in the past, whom I can say no more about due to legal restrictions. At the heart of the subject are a number of key factors. I plan to examine each of these factors in detail and assess their importance.

Social Factors

Comparisons between Roman Society and Medieval Society give a clear picture of the importance of aphasia to developments in social conduct. I will not insult the readers intelligence by explaining this obvious comparison any further. When blues legend 'Bare

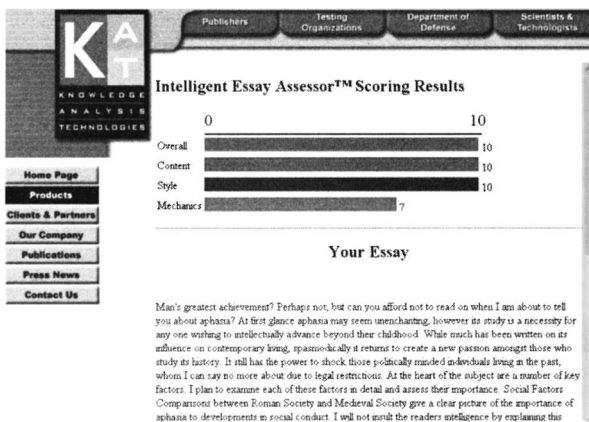
Conclusion

How much responsibility lies with aphasia? We can say that aphasia has a special place in the heart of mankind. It fills a hole, ensures financial stability and statistically it's great.

I will leave you with the words of Hollywood's Britney Paltrow: 'I would say without a shadow of a doubt: aphasia ROCKS!!! [3]

I then cut and pasted that essay into the Intelligent Essay Assessor (Pearson), with one modification: I cut out the graph because I wasn't sure if the site would know what to do. The results are before you.

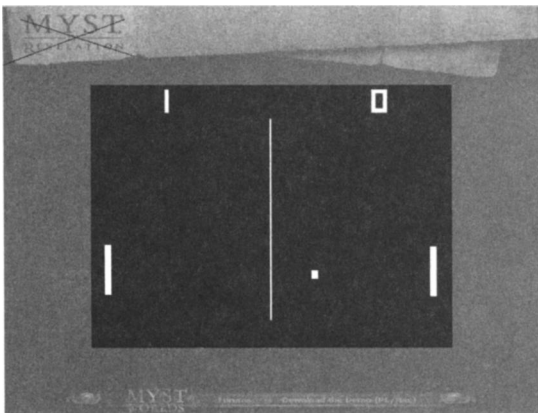
As you can see, according to the Intelligent Essay Assessor, the Essay Generator writes pretty well, though it could use a little help with grammar and mechanics. Still, it sure knows its aphasia.



Now, I want to be precise about why I've told this story. I'm not making a broad claim about the Intelligent Essay Assessor. I tried this just once, and maybe I fluked out. In fact, I'm not even questioning the present or potential sophistication and prowess of machine-scoring software. Let's just imagine that programs might well pass a version of the Turing test, producing scores indistinguishable from a trained writing teacher's. In short, for the sake of argument, let's imagine the achievement of a certain machine dream.

This dream would, on the one hand, promise "objectivity" and precision. It would replace the judgments of human readers. After all, teachers are both rotten with imperfection, to twist Kenneth Burke (16), and also desiring of health insurance. This dream would, on the other hand, "free" teachers of grading, allowing them to teach rather than to judge. But teach what and to what ends?

More to the point: how would students understand writing if, "when it counted most," writing was something done to be rated by software? Perhaps this would only confirm the view that most students already have, namely that school writing is an exercise to produce required textual features rather than to achieve further rhetorical ends. After all, they know too well five-paragraph-themism and its gang. They know pedagogies where the what and why of writ-



ing are subordinated to the formalistic how, where writing likens to old school math minus the word problems, the manipulation of symbols to achieve an answer, just don't ask why. In the machine dream, writing would become a sort of dull game, an interaction with software to produce a score. Its consequences

would be all regulative, something done to get through a gate. That's the worst-case scenario.

Ultimately, in terms of students' perceptions, I can predict two others. In a best-case scenario, students would perceive writing for computer programs



~~forecast~~

as a kind of interesting dummy-exercise preparation for "real writing." They would seamlessly translate making for machines into performing for people. In a middle-case scenario, students would experience writing as a forked activity. Down one road would lie writing as a dull activity whose sole function is to generate a score. That's the way of school. Down another road lies writing to accomplish something in

a world of writers and readers. School would have almost nothing to say to this world.



who owns writing?

[sung]

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child

A long way from home,

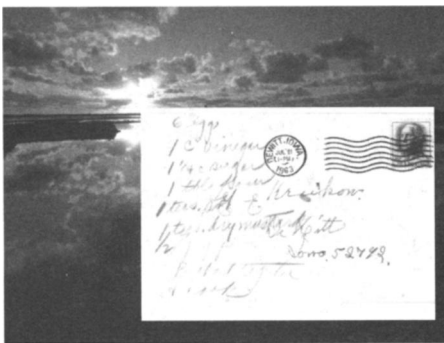
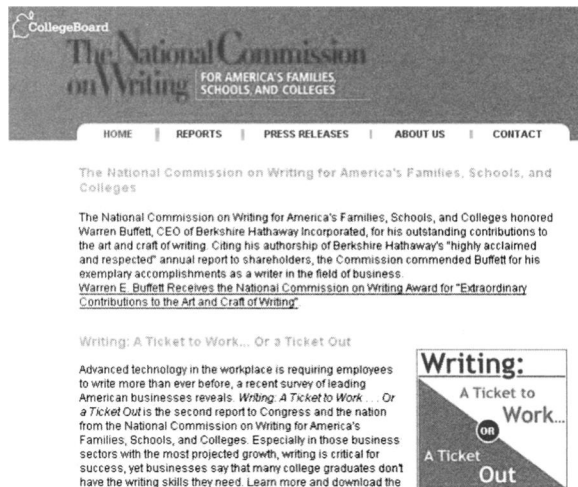
A long way from home.

For decades, the press, both popular and academic, has pundited why Johnny can't write and what Maria, his teacher, should do about it. On the academic side, we have the Association of American Universities' *Standards for Success* (Conley), the AAC&U's "*Writing and the New Academy*," Achieve, Inc.'s *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* and, of course, the studies welling from SAT and ACT as they add writing samples.

Consider the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges. The 2003 report, *The Neglected "R,"* calls for doubling the amount of time students spend writing, for providing "the financial resources necessary for the additional time and personnel required to make writing a centerpiece in the curriculum" (3), for assessments of writing that are "fair and authentic" (29), and so on. Its fall 2004 report, with the foreboding title *Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . or a Ticket Out*, underscores the centrality of writing on the job. It concludes that "individual opportunity in the United States depends critically on the ability to present one's thoughts coherently, cogently, and persuasively on paper" (5). It wants writing for "all segments of the population" (19), reiterates the plea for more time and atten-

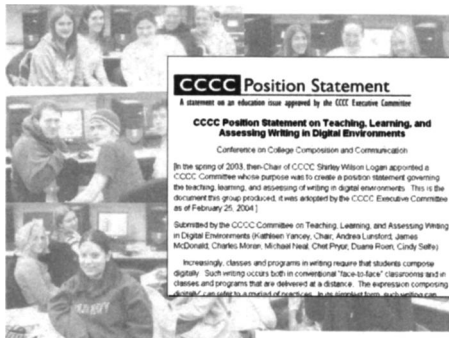
tion, and, while it emphasizes grammar, also mentions rhetoric and logic, albeit scantily.

As you can see, there's much to celebrate in these reports, even common cause to make. And yet I'm a smidge wary. Probably some of it is plain old male turf protecting. After all, CCCC didn't get that national press. What are these guys doing on our land? Worse is



the guilt of missed opportunity; why didn't CCCC issue national statements on writing? And, worst of all, is the simultaneously salving and smug sentiment that even if CCCC had been there first, it wouldn't have mattered: who pays attention to writing teachers?

So, I confess ignoble motives. But we're justified to be a little cautious, for example, about the commission's fondness for technological fixes. Consider the call that "the nation should invest in research that explores the potential of new and emerging technologies to identify mistakes in grammar, encourage students, to share their work, help assess writing samples, and incorporate software into measuring student writing competence" (23). That simply doesn't square, for example, with the CCCC statement on "Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments." The commission's methodology is narrow, too, relying on business leaders' reports of satisfaction with worker writing rather than the messier—and more telling—study of writers themselves. Further, and more subtly, as John Trimbur and Anne Gere have illustrated, writing too often has served as scapegoat for American productivity. I'm no economist, but I doubt that, should everyone achieve marvelous writing skills, everyone will thus have a ticket to salaried work.



~~we have a moment~~



... and we have Yancey



and we have you

Still, I want to see this glass as more than half full. Let's ascribe the best intentions to the National Commission on Writing. Let's imagine its decision to feature the economic dimensions of writing is but a first step. Let's call it a shrewd political and rhetorical strategy. Let's assume that the commission might next turn to other spheres of writing beyond school and work. My question: Can we, here, first articulate those other spheres? Can we complete and speak for the

whole of writing? Can we speak to and for the America of writing beyond this room? Can we—and I'm meaning the collective we of CCCC—can we ungate our separate intellectual estates, at least enough to say, together, this is what writing is, all of it, and this is how it matters?



I've been thinking about the term "writing" in light of George Lakoff's work on conceptual frames. Famously, after the fall election, Lakoff discussed



The Circulation of Composition

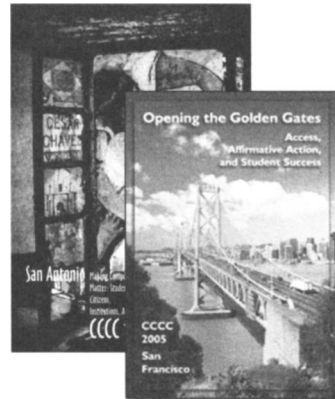
The Canons of Rhetoric

The Deicity of Technology

how the very terms being used to characterize issues frame the possible ways of thinking about them. If an issue is framed as "tax relief," then the range of desirable actions is constrained; who could oppose "relief?" I'm wondering if the word "writing" may frame our work in

ways that aren't always desirable. The term seems neutral enough, but it may well carry the sense of inscribing words on paper; that is, it may focus attention on the physical act of graphemic production, separate from thinking, with all the focus on correctness. I'll note that "writer" functions as a different frame in our culture than does "writing." The latter refers to an activity or product, while the former is an identity—and a top-level one at that, on par with "electrician" or "manager" or "teacher" or "scientist." But writing is a different frame. By embracing parts of recent reports that make sense to us, we may be perpetuating that frame, perhaps to our detriment. The double bind is that if we critique aspects of these reports, we may seem oddly opposed to writing, shirking the most fundamental aspect of our identity.

Now, in response we could reject the term "writing" and reframe our work as "composing". This oddly retrograde strategy would, on the one hand, open a broader textual territory. On the other, it would carry the heritage of compos-



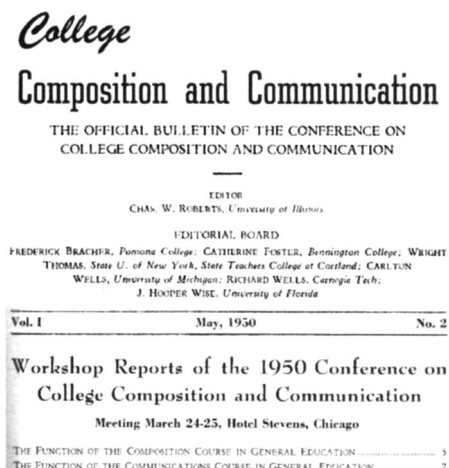
*Made
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ing as an academic enterprise, a school subject and one generally gotten out of the way during the first year.

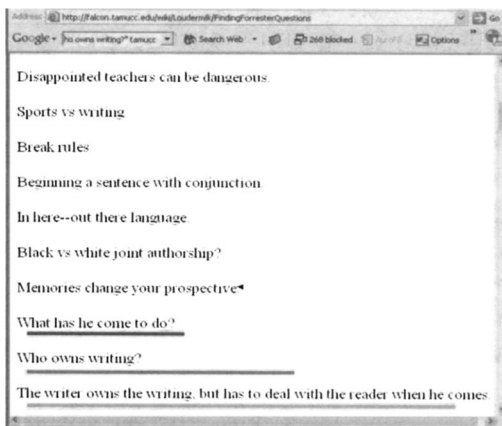
Composition is in our name, after all. CCCC was formed in 1949 to address primarily administrative issues in first-year writing. Convention fairly obliges the Chair at this point to retell the founding of the tribe, but I'm simply going to say that we began as a conference on the school subject of composition.

Our originary self-naming signals the borders of our terrain: not creative writing (but maybe creative nonfiction) and not journalism (but maybe civic discourse). Yes to "advanced composition," though that idea has been vexed, and "yes" to technical communication, although there have long been tensions between writing as a liberal and as an applied art. And rhetoric? As method? Content? History? Our borders aren't fixed. For example, with Writing Across the Curriculum, we annexed new space or reclaimed old—some of us have chosen to leave English department homelands for that new territory.

What composition owns is marked partly, then, by what parts of the college catalog it controls, whom it hires, and what its budgets say. By these terms, owning the resources of



writing has generally been like owning an aging minivan. To provide students the intellectual transportation they deserve and need would really take something safer, more dependable, and more comfortable. But other parts of the institutional budget have needs, too, and the writing program is asked to get around with whatever



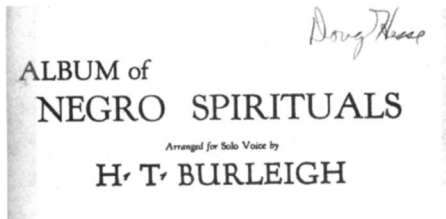
parts it can scrounge. Composition turns out to be a cheap way to provide small-section experience to lots of students, generating more revenues than it costs. The more subtle dimension of ownership relates less directly to material properties than to intellectual ones. Here, the question is, "Who owns the idea of writing?" In January, I got an e-mail from a liberal arts dean at a state university. Her faculty were embroiled in a debate about the nature of the writing course. As she put it, "We are struggling with the tensions between teaching writing as inquiry and teaching writing as technical skill," and she asked me to suggest an outside arbitrator. I suspect all of us have experienced local versions of this debate, which begins with grouching about undergraduate writing and leads to calls for discipline, rigor, and attention to the basics in English 101. Against colleagues with all-too-common sense, we muster theory and research. We pull George Hillocks off the shelf and worry that 1986 seems ever longer ago. All the while, even as our field matures, we perversely have less respect.

But in many ways lately, we've had less heart for these kinds of fights. Many of us have advocated scrapping required first-year comp for parts and

"We don't give a damn what the teacher thinks, what the teacher feels," Engelmann said. "On the teachers' own time they can hate it. We don't care, as long as they do it."

—Siegfried Engelmann

Quoted by Daniel Radosh in "The Pet Goat Approach." *The New Yorker*. 26 July, 2004: 28.



spending the capital on elective courses, first-year seminars, or WAC programs. We've come to shorthand these familiar arguments, grounded in theory and fueled by despair with the conditions for adjuncts, as the abolitionist movement, a very

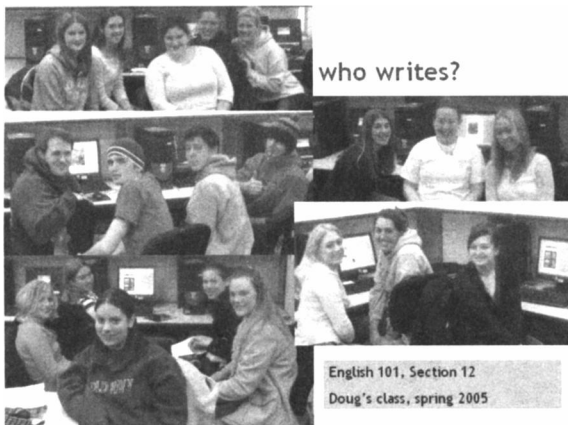
historically charged frame. The term is hyperbolic to the point of being unethical, promising the end of enslavement for both students and teachers, trading the title to the plantation of English 101 for new intellectual acres. These new lands may include a graduate program or a vertical undergraduate one, even a major, multiple courses, not one or two. The richest programs of our futures feature writing in a welter of circumstances and genres, creative, journalistic, and professional, as well as civic and academic. They feature work in



design—visual and aural as well as verbal. They fully imagine students in complicated worlds of school and work and politics, yes, but also passions, relationships, and art. They teach writing to *these* students and not to compliant essay generators producing scripts for Intelligent Essay Assessment.



And yet still remains, for most, English 101, composition, our legacy. For much of its history, English 101 was seen as a sort of giant stem cell whose nurturant



medium could be the modes of discourse, current-traditional formalism, literary new criticism, process instruction, rhetorical analysis, or whatever. Students could be transplanted from English 101 into whatever circumstance. In a certain longstanding view, process is process, rhetoric is rhetoric, composing is composing, and whether the target discourse is a term paper, a political blog, or a poem, the skill universally develops through the activity itself. In a

certain other view, more recent, so profoundly contextualized is all writing that it resists any pedagogy, let alone any generalizability.

So it is today that we see a national spectrum of first-year writing requirements. At the ultraviolet is the highly focused universal course: this kind of discourse, through these assignments, in this sequence, toward these ends. Its apogee is the standard syllabus—though standard at School X is often sub at School Y. At the infrared is decimalized 101, an array of options, perhaps

equivalent in the amount of writing or some other dimension, but otherwise each boldly differing from the other. Just choose one. Between these two ends—of Calvinist predestination and Unitarian free will—are not only significant theoretical differences about the nature of learning to write, and not only the curricular rights of individual teachers, but also the very nature of our field and the role of CCCC.



Tier 1 Writing at Michigan State—Ten Choices

110 Writing: Science and Technology involves drafting, revising, and editing compositions derived from readings and discussions on American science and technology to develop skills in narration, persuasion, analysis, and documentation. Instructors can organize course readings around any combination of the following topics: language and invention, pre-industrial culture, machine technology, energy and environment, information technology, and social and ethical issues related to science and technology.

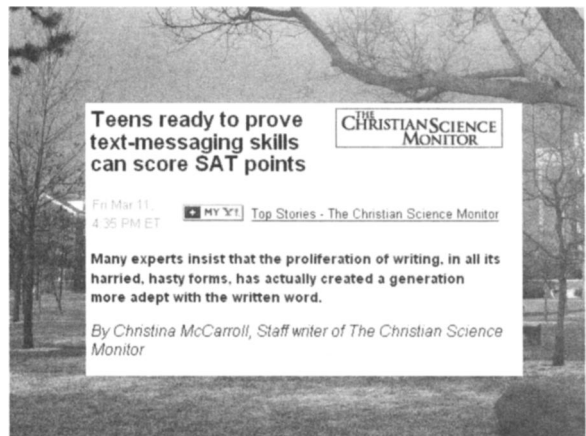
115 Writing: Law and Justice in the United States involves drafting, revising, and editing compositions derived from readings on American law and justice to develop skills in narration, persuasion, analysis, and documentation. Instructors can organize course readings around any combination of the following topics: founding principles of law, rhetoric of law and justice, gender, class, race, and age; civil rights and privacy; land and treaty policy; separation of church and state.

125 Writing: The American Ethnic and Racial Experience involves drafting, revising, and editing compositions derived from readings on the experience of American ethnic and racial groups to develop skills in narration, persuasion, analysis, and documentation. Instructors can organize course readings and cultural information on these ethnic and racial groups: African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, European immigrants, Hispanics.

130 Writing: American Radical Thought involves drafting, revising, and editing compositions derived from readings on American radical thought to develop skills in narration, persuasion, analysis, and documentation. Instructors can organize course readings around any combination of topics: conquest and revolution, natural rights, socialism, technology and its problems, radicalism of the 1960s, and capitalism and expansionism. The course will examine the assumptions and positions of radical thinkers and organizations as well as assess their impact and influence on social change and policy.

135 Writing: Public Life in America involves drafting, revising, editing, and publishing written compositions derived from readings on the American civic tradition and community service-learning experience to develop

Consider just one dimension of contention. Composition has variously concerned itself with five spheres, albeit in different proportions: the academic, the vocational, the civic, the personal, and the belletristic. I'll point out that these spheres can sort into two categories: those concerned with obliged discourse (to which I'd assign the vocational and the academic), and those concerned with self-sponsored discourse (in which I'd place



Teens ready to prove text-messaging skills can score SAT points

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Fri Mar 11 4:35 PM ET **MY Y!** Top Stories - The Christian Science Monitor

Many experts insist that the proliferation of writing, in all its harried, hasty forms, has actually created a generation more adept with the written word.

By Christina McCarroll, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

the personal, the belletristic, and, perhaps surprisingly, the civic). By obliged, I mean writing that institutions require and sanction, whether through pay or grades. By self-sponsored, I mean writing that people do for reasons of expression or social affiliation, not for direct material consequence. Note to audience: I know all about invidious binaries, and I could deconstruct the concept “self-sponsored” as totally as anyone in this room. My division is heuristic.

For various reasons, I think that as a profession we must continue to own up to the demands of obliged writing on our students. But we must also attend to self-sponsored writing, not only as target discourses but also as increasingly important forms of action in the world.

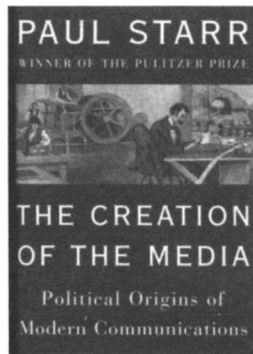
I want to say more about one kind of self-sponsored discourse: the civic. The nature of the civic sphere has long been spectral—and not just for writing teachers and students. Paul Starr’s masterful history of the rise of “the media”

and their relation to governmental and entrepreneurial ownership makes clear that the current issues of access and influence have existed since at least the seventeenth century. Still, for years before the late 1980s gave us discourse communities, compositionists invoked “the general educated reader” in a comfortably assumed public space. Judging from our anthologies, “general reader” really meant

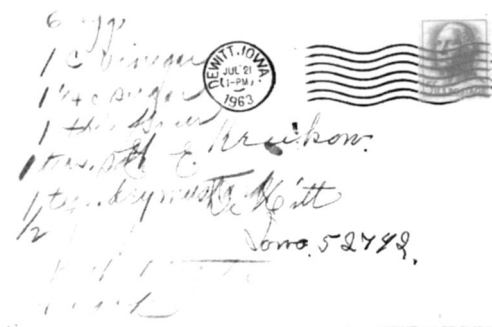
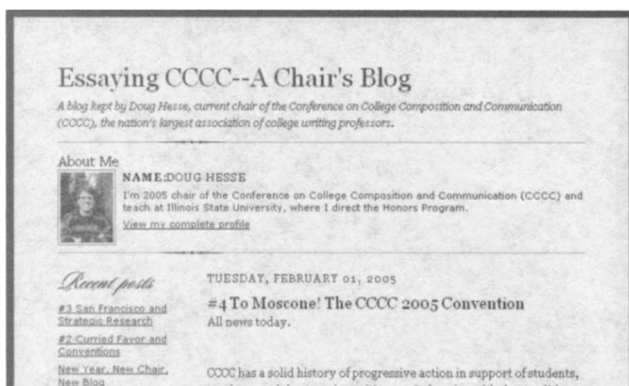
subscribers to *Harpers* and the *American Scholar*. But as models for first-year student writing, entering this civic Pleasantville has never been realistic. To expect first-year students to produce texts like those from paid professionals is like expecting first-year math students to perform as actuaries or first-year psychologists to save marriages. Recognizing this, at least subconsciously, we often have tended to distill civic writing into a school genre. That is, we have students write *about* the civic sphere, not *in* it. In like fashion, our new fine fondness for visual rhetoric manifests itself considerably more in the analysis of, rather than in the production of, images.



welcome to KAIROS ,



New technologies have shifted the possibilities and terms, not by exploding the media as the civic sphere but by fracturing it. Take blogs. People have analyzed, celebrated, and fretted about more thoroughly than I can here the relationship of the blogosphere to traditional journalism. I'll simply note the blogger's relative independence from institutional strictures, at least in terms of access to readers. Independence has costs, most substantially a preestablished readership and a



source of income. But that seems little to hamper it. Blogs, like e-mails, like letters, like poems, like diaries, are self-sponsored activities. My goodness. That people will write even when not obliged!

Blogs and other sites of civic discourse are not far removed, I suggest, from writing done for personal and belletristic reasons, the well-

ing desire to write oneself into the world by creating textual artifacts. This desire—and I'm perfectly happy to grant it as socially constructed, though I'm also happy to grant it as a quality of being human—is manifested in all sorts of activities. Consider, for example, the rise of journal keeping and scrapbooking, which have taken on fascinating social dimensions as well as, alas, commercial ones.

Award-Winning Scrapbook Pages
(Creating Keepsakes)
by Christine Keene (Editor)



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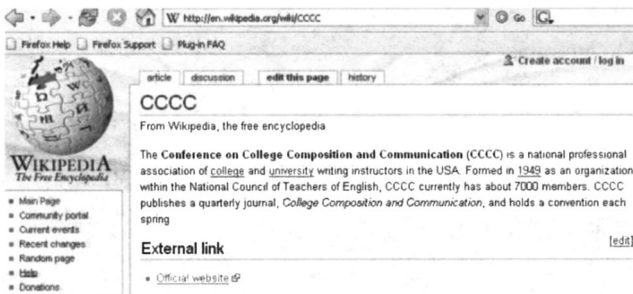
Or consider a Web site titled Companycommand.com. Two Army majors started it, on a civilian server, as a place for military officers to give and seek practical advice. I quote, "Amazing things happen when committed leaders in



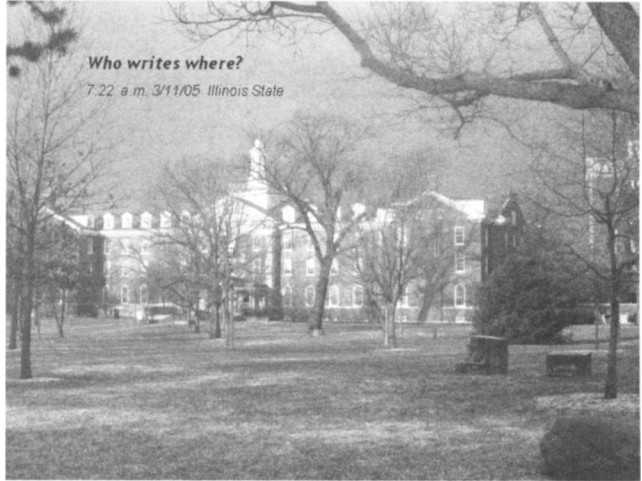
a profession connect, share what they are learning, and spur each other on." The quote could be from the 4Cs Web site. It proved sometimes faster for field soldiers to learn from CompanyCommand.com than through the chain of command. Now, when soldiers can circumvent a structure as hierarchical as the Army, it's little wonder that traditional media sources, from newspapers to record companies, are trying to figure out how to make a buck. An aside: The Army finally absorbed CompanyCommand, loaded it onto military servers, and sent its developers to teach at West Point.

One more example. Consider the online open-source encyclopedia, *Wikipedia*. As you probably know, anyone can post an article to *Wikipedia* and, even more tellingly, can revise what's there. Here's the entry for CCCC, which I put up a few weeks ago. You're all welcome to revise it. If traditional journal-

ism frets about blogs, and the Army buys Web sites, you can imagine the challenge that *Wikipedia* poses to *Britannica*. Instead of experts and editors sanctioning knowledge, we have all manner of autotelic encyclopedists, their texts shaped and refined by the digital hive mind.



I haven't even touched on the phenomena of webcasting and podcasting. I haven't explored the ways that composition has yet to embrace sound in the way it has sight, largely ignoring the spoken word, the word set to—and against—music. Instead, I'll just observe that writing in the civic sphere is now manifest as a self-sponsored activity to a greater extent than it ever has been. Yet most of us, and that includes me, teach as if the civic sphere were still institutionally sponsored, as if there were extractable principles, guidelines, and rules. In fact, our teaching arrangements, from the textbook industry to our plots in the college catalog, fairly depend on it. At stake are structures as fundamental as semesters and thrice-weekly fifty-minute classes.



I started writing the final version of this talk about 10:00 a.m. on Sunday, February 20, 2005, in Lane 4 of the swimming pool at the YMCA in Bloomington,



Illinois. I've sung in church choirs most of my life, less for the theology than for the aesthetics, and I'm singing in one now. But that Sunday morning, I went to the Y. Turning slow laps I saw the mural at pool's end, announcing the Home of the Waves. I remembered afternoons in this place a long decade past when my son and daughter were on the Waves swim team. Swimming had been different for me as a kid; no teams, no lanes, no times, no ribbons. It had been like baseball, kick the can, Johnny Come Over the Ocean, and most every other team sport, all self-orga-

[illegible]

who

owes

writing?

nized until high school. All except dodge ball. That one it took PE teachers to invent. Now is the age of clubs and traveling teams. There remain coachless realms, sure, but the DMZ of the SUV cleaves mere play from serious competition. That last must always be organized by others and always include a fee.

Now, I'm not going to go
Rousseau on you and dream

some prelapsad age of writing now sullied, like swimming, by coaches. I'm simply noting that the nature of an activity changes according to who organizes it and for what ends. We've known that since Werner Heisenberg and Vince Lombardi. Parents organize swimming and soccer and whatever "for the kids," but we do it also for ourselves, for what that experience afford us. Organization isn't a bad thing; whence else come orchestras or choirs?

However, it comes down to this. These days all sorts of interests would organize writing. Let's attribute good intentions to them all. But let's remember that my good intentions are likely not yours, that intentions are always cropped and framed by worldviews as basic as what constitutes the good society and what makes the good life. These views bend through the nearly translucent lenses of social and economic interests.

Make no mistake. We in 4Cs refract and frame no less than others. But we have something else—or if we don't have it, we have no particular right to be in this place, on this March morning. We have the lens of research and reflective



practice, polished carefully and long, intentionally scratched at times, even melted. Ours is the knowledge of what writing is and what it can be, the whole of it, in every sphere. Ours is the never-done knowledge of how writing develops, within a person or a populace. It is the knowledge of teachers' roles and families', of friends—and foes—of fertile textuality, of fulgent image, word, and sound. And with our knowledge comes responsibility, for writing, yes, but more for writers. And so it is that we singly and we together must own and own up to writing, not as colonists or profiteers, but as stewards. Let me, then, remediate that old spiritual:



[sung]

My lord, what a morning.

My lord, what a morning.

Oh, my lord what a morning

When the stars rise over all,

When the stars rise over all.



our students. ourselves. each. all.

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