6 Is All Knowledge Provisional?

> Would you rather have *heard* Lincoln's Gettysburg Address or would it be better sitting in your room quietly reading it?
>
> —Diane

When we approach a piece of writing with what Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch call an Ideal Text in mind, the writing becomes little more than a reflective surface, giving us a version of our ourselves. If we wish to view writing as creative and meaningful, then as readers we need to view it, and the writers who produce it, with very different expectations. Reading ought in part to be an act of discovery. Moreover, we ought to view students' work as worthy of our exploration. "Students come in with frames of reference, sets of ideas, whole structures in their minds," says Marlene. They do not come to us "vacant." Of course, to deny that we readers help shape that "structure" and give meaning to the text is to lose sight of the complex negotiation that takes place between readers and writers.

Our discussion of that negotiation takes on a more philosophical dimension when Marlene discusses her work on critical thinking. Specifically, she has found it useful to approach a piece of writing by asking questions like the following, each of which implies an "element of reasoning":

- What is the purpose?
- What is the point of view or frame of reference of the writer?
- What is the evidence that supports the argument?
- What are the assumptions underlying the argument?

Behind the critical thinking approach, she says, is the fact that "every single piece of reasoning has these different elements. . . . An object to be figured out, some data, some experience of it; some reason for wanting to figure it out; some question we want solved." Granted that each discipline carries its own "logic," there must be, she claims, a common, universal framework to that logic. At the heart of the "elements" is the belief that all objects have "something to figure out." In fact, all objects have "a logic." Peter is quick to seize upon that point:

> You say a discipline has a logic, but here [on Marlene's handout] it says an object has a logic. I find it interesting because it is a kind of William James concept, a reciprocity between the knowing mind and the object known. There is in fact an internal logic to the object, that

> the knowing mind somehow needs to discover. . . . He's discovering, not creating.

Peter goes on to draw a connection to the romantic view, whereby nature has inherent meaning—which can be reflected or illuminated by the knowing mind. It is interesting that Peter moves from recognizing the reciprocity between the knowing mind and the object known to emphasizing the meaning inherent in the object itself.

What drives Peter to highlight that fact is the "act of faith" implicit in it: we can come upon the truth of things. Moreover, as Marlene adds, not only is the object knowable "but *I* can know it." Our students too can know it. For Marlene, as well as Peter, such a notion carries with it a refreshing optimism. As community college teachers, we are likely to be motivated by the belief that our students can, given the opportunity, get to a workable set of "truths."

It is ironic, then, that Marlene is the one who seems to undermine that very optimism. All along in these discussions she has talked about the importance of historical perspective and of history as an artifact, a construct of interpretations. Now she goes further to say, "This framework [that is, the "Elements of Reasoning"] shows how relativistic the truth is, that everyone's got a point of view, that you have to look deeper and see where arguments lead." In saying so, Marlene is actually following up on something that Chris has said earlier:

> Richard Paul [a proponent of critical thinking] makes a mistake when he says there's an object to be figured out at the start. That is open to discussion. The [view] in the twentieth century is that we construct the argument.

Marlene and Chris's view of knowledge does not sit well with Peter, who, on hearing Marlene use the term "relativistic," again speaks passionately about knowing as an "act of faith":

> Don't we have to have a faith in knowing? Don't we have to say that we both discover and create? If we assume that we create entirely, then there is no possibility of achieving anything except what's in your own consciousness. You have to posit an external truth. Otherwise everything else floats in your own consciousness.

Those who hold to the view that knowledge is socially constructed do not, of course, deny external or material truths. In fact, scholars who have posited a view of knowledge as provisional—Richard Rorty, for one, comes to mind—may be seen as following an established American tradition of pragmatism (West 1989). It is useful to believe that truths are formed by and within human communities, supported or rejected by members of

such communities. Such notions, when accepted, then become part of the "normal" (in Kuhn's sense of the word) thinking of that community, guiding its members from day to day (Kuhn 1962). Everyone indeed may have an opinion on a matter but opinions gain currency only when a consensus builds around them, a consensus tested and supported by the authority of the best available evidence.

While Peter may be confusing a consensus view of knowledge with a relativistic view, he is right to voice concern about "breaking faith" in our confidence in our capacity to get to the truth. Diane reminds us of this point when she speaks about the peculiar situation confronting our students:

> . . . our students are in a society that alienates them from reading and writing. They don't write letters; they use the phone. They don't take minutes at a meeting; they use a tape recorder. They don't read a newspaper; they listen to the TV or radio. . . . It's not unusual for people to say [they've] never read a novel.

The "alienation" that Diane speaks of is from a stable, authoritative form of truth, for that is what the conventionally printed text has provided. Of course, Diane does not mention the writing that students *are* doing: through e-mail, chat programs, list servers, to mention just a few stations on the information highway (Faigley 1992). Electronic communication—most spectacularly, through computer networks—has rendered the written text less permanent, less reliable than ever before.

In light of these changes, Peter raises a related question: "How do you defend reading and writing?" Diane seconds Peter's question by asking, "Why write instead of talking into a tape?" It is true that all of us sitting in this room are committed to teaching reading and writing in their conventional senses. All of us know the good that can come from these activities. But, having said that, I take these questions not as mere "devil's advocacy." As committed as we all are to the conventional processes of reading and writing, perhaps we all feel the need to recognize the changing nature of literacy in the last years of the twentieth century.

"Why write?" Given who we are, the question might seem heretical. Yet it is clearly important that we ask it and try to answer it. If nothing else, the challenge posed by nonprint media forces us to consider closely what happens when we write, a process that we rarely reflect upon. Peter, for his part, responds to the question "Why write?" by becoming philosophical: "[Writing] allows us to develop or create for ourselves a means of accessing part of our nature and part of the world. Otherwise they remain inaccessible." Seeing writing as a means to access "part of the world," Peter seems to echo Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo's notion that in

writing the word we write the world as well (1987). It is true that for Freire and Macedo writing is transformative, a means of changing conditions in the world, whereas Peter speaks only of "accessing" the world. But in an institution—such as a community college—where access leads students to gain power over their lives, Peter's view of writing has as much transformative power as in Freire and Macedo's view.

Moreover, if access to the world leads to transformation of that world, then having access to "part of our nature" might have a similar effect on our own consciousness. Peter notes this phenomenon when he says, "The advance in human consciousness occurred when somebody put down a symbol and somebody knew what it meant." Rather than view writing as merely a technological innovation, Peter, like Walter Ong, sees writing as altering fundamentally our sense of ourselves (Ong 1982). After all, when that symbol became understood by another, the writer's consciousness expanded to include that other.

Jerry reminds us that, when we write, the whole person comes into play: "Your mind, your emotion, your vision, your physical [nature]." Writing is then truly "composing," a bringing together of disparate parts. It becomes, in Wordsworth's terms, a means of joining thought and feeling, of recollecting emotion in tranquility. Wordsworth reminds us of the power of writing to offer a deepening perspective on the fleeting moment, and I am thinking of that notion during an exchange between Diane and Chris. Diane, in considering the differences between reading a written text and listening to a spoken performance of that text, asks, "Would you rather have *heard* Lincoln's Gettysburg Address or would it be better sitting in your room quietly reading it?" Her question implies a privileging of the speech as it was given—who wouldn't want to have been present at that momentous occasion? But Chris refuses to take the bait. He notes that the speech when delivered had little effect on the immediate audience (in fact Lincoln may have had the audience of posterity in mind). "It was only through the historical perspective [provided through] reading," he adds, that the power of the speech was felt.

Chris goes on to say that writing provides a form of argument that visual media cannot: the argument implied in subordination of clauses and sentences, for example. Moreover, a written text, Diane reminds us, lends itself to analysis more readily than a spoken performance. And it offers the opportunity of revision, of a second chance.

At this point, Kathy takes issue with our assumptions about the nature of reading and writing. She recently worked with a blind ESL student for whom writing and reading would seem to be quite different from our conventional views. "Legally," she says, such students "write if they can

compose." They may have a scribe who writes down what they dictate. Kathy found herself in the position of allowing a student to complete a writing course without writing, as it were.

And yet all these complications and philosophical points aside, each of us—especially at the community college—will have students who wonder why we are asking them to write in our courses. It is a legitimate question for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which is the real possibility that few of them will write when they leave the classroom. And even if employers do ask them to write, is our response simply the utilitarian one?

When I ask Jerry why he has his students write in his statistics course, he can hardly rely upon a functional response (students most definitely will not learn to write memos in his course). Instead, Jerry speaks of writing as a "mental exercise" and as a "record" of their thinking. Judging from the assignment on comparing populations, we might also infer that for Jerry writing offers students an opportunity to interrogate arguments and claims made in the world outside the classroom.

For Pat, writing in dental hygiene has two purposes: integration of material and assessment of students' clinical and course performance. Through writing, students come to see the connectedness of what they are learning. They are able to connect classroom reading and lecture material with problems that they encounter in their clinical work. And they are assessed on the basis of their written accounts of that work.

Diane, whose nursing students write up rather detailed care plans for their patients, admits that the question—Why write?—is one that she wrestles with. "Why do we put ourselves through reading these care plans every week?" she asks. The patient care plan requires that the writer detail, in strict sequence and with considerable precision, the treatment given to each patient. The demands of the form on both students and teachers are formidable. She wonders aloud whether a recently developed electronic care plan would make more sense, given the rigors of a nurse's work. Still, in thinking about the peculiar advantages that writing offers, Diane sees the strengths of the care plan as a written document in large part in its humanity:

> You need to treat the person who has that disease. Machines don't do that . . . [Machines] don't worry about the fact that there's nobody home but the five kids. [They] don't worry about the fact that [patients] have been beaten up at home and don't want to go home.

Beyond the detail and precision, writing, for Diane, "treats the person." It is a human and humane technology, a window into the soul of the writer, of the subject, and of the reader.

For Kathy, writing has less to do with expressing one's humanity than with creating opportunities for students to become clear thinkers. When

I hear Kathy say this, I wonder whether, in asking ESL students to write in English, Kathy asks more of them than to be clear. Is she not asking them, in fact, to familiarize themselves with, and adapt to, our culture? Interestingly, Kathy construes my use of the word "culture" to refer to that of the academy: "As a teacher of ESL students and as part of the community college, my responsibility is to help them enter the academic community."

Whether it indeed be adapting to the culture of the academy or to the broader culture of English speakers, writing for these students becomes a powerful tool of assimilation. Perhaps these are the students referred to when Peter says that writing "creates a new consciousness" or when Chris says that by writing "you become."