

Summary of meeting about teaching college writing at Ford Foundation headquarters in New York, June 21, 1985

Most of those attending the meeting represented major universities: Michigan, Iowa, North Carolina, Texas, Chicago, Harvard, Yale, U.C./Davis, U.C.L.A., Brown, and Carnegie-Mellon. There were also two representatives from Tugaloo College and one from a community college. Several of the Ford Foundation staff sat in on the meeting during the day. The meeting was chaired by Peter Stanley, head of Ford's Culture and Education Program and moderated by his associate, Nancy McCarthy.

Stanley set the context of the meeting by saying that Ford is interested in promoting the effective teaching of writing. The Foundation knows there is chronic concern about people not being able to write, but has little idea of what is needed. They make two assumptions:

1. It is impossible to separate the ability to think and the ability to write.
2. Effective citizens need a general understanding of the logic of discourse; they need the capacity to comprehend layers of meaning and to articulate that meaning.

Ford wants to know what is going on in the teaching of writing and to know what are the most vexing questions connected with that teaching.

At the end of the meeting it was evident that the most vexing question is, "Who is going to teach writing and how is that teaching going to be valued and rewarded?" The Ford people are concerned about how they are going to work with university English departments to improve the teaching of writing if the politics of those institutions cause the teaching of writing to be devalued. And yet that's where they have to go because that is where current research on the teaching of writing is being done and where advances have come from in the past 10 years. Some progress has been made; the presence of 10 tenured professors and chairmen and a dean from major universities around that table testifies to that. Yet Ford is concerned about training teachers to teach writing better if they are going back into institutions where they cannot succeed.

Major points made by faculty at the meeting:

Students want to learn to write more than faculty want to teach them to write. E.g., there are now 2000 journalism majors at the University of Georgia, not because those students want to be journalists but because they want training in using the language.

Problem is not just that an ever-increasing number of minorities are coming to college, especially in the Southwest.

Even students from the mainstream culture and so-called privileged backgrounds have almost no experience in reading and creating sustained discourse. Marius, the director of writing at Harvard, estimates that only one-third of their students can construct an argument. Thus our students are not prepared for the intellectual inquiry and discourse required by college work.

Joe Williams from the University of Chicago argues that those of us at major universities have a special responsibility because it is the graduates of our universities who do the significant writing that shapes our culture. They are the policy makers. They are also the ones who set the criteria for good writing and who end up teaching others to write because people come to them from college with inadequate writing abilities. Business has taken over the teaching of writing by default, employing consultants to do what the universities have not done.

Richard Lloyd-Jones of Iowa said that people tend to take it for granted that an educated person can write. Writing is the enabling craft that makes it possible for all other knowledge to exist. Thus it doesn't belong anywhere and no one is willing to claim it. It's considered everyone's responsibility so it ends up being no one's responsibility. A generation ago students' writing was less of a problem because most college students had enough contact with a faculty person who wrote well so that the student absorbed that person's values and learned by emulating the professor. Now we have a generation of students who don't want to be like their professors; they would like to have their competencies, but they reject them as models. This generation has to be taught how to write.

One problem is that it's hard to define writing as a specialty--it steals from everywhere. Yet universities want subjects to be "department-able" and have a body of abstract, specialized knowledge that they can categorize. They are slow to realize that there is major research to be done in writing itself and in the teaching of writing; the field is just emerging. Speech communication departments have moved in this direction as they have legitimized the study of oral communication and interpersonal communication on the graduate level. Faculty in writing need to define their body of knowledge and the directions for research. Our major asset is the centrality of writing to the information society.

Another problem is that both academics and the community tend to define writing in instrumental terms; to see it as a skill to be acquired once, like typing or driving a car; to define writing courses as "service courses." Inevitably, such attitudes oversimplify writing and denigrate those who teach it. Jay Robinson thinks Michigan made a serious mistake in validating this view by setting up the English Composition Board, staffed entirely by non-faculty. He believes faculty in writing need to work with other disciplines to show them how language advances their disciplines and to help them explain their work and justify

it to the community.

Today there are strong pressures from outside to prepare people to function in a developing information society. Their push for applied humanities focuses on writing, but universities mostly are not responding. Lanham of U.C.L.A. says that universities are the most inelastic and unresponsive of all institutions to outside pressures, and administrators tend to be primarily fire-fighters who don't take the initiative to set directions or establish long-range goals. English departments in particular are determined not to be pressured by the needs of outside groups.

Ford wants to support programs to teach writing and to teach others to teach writing in places where the study of written communication is viewed as a discipline. Want to get other foundations involved and in general raise the status of the teaching of writing and the research that supports it. They see no point in enlightening individuals if the institutions themselves remain largely unchanged.

Maxine Hairston