

**‘Writing to Learn, Writing to Teach:
Writing Process for School Community Development’,
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Introduction

I am delighted to be here today. Thank you for the invitation to speak to you about a subject that I feel passionate about: the teaching of writing. The original title of my talk was *Teaching Writing in the 21st Century*, but as I developed these ideas, I felt compelled to add *Learning* to the title. Writing is central to learning and thinking and the digital age that we are now living in affords us the opportunity to rethink some of our basic notions about learning, as well as to expand our understanding of writing.

Today, then, I am going to speak with you about three interconnected ideas:

- the importance of teaching writing to all young people,
- the importance of rethinking how we teach writing given the new technologies that are available to us,
- and the opportunities for teachers and teacher educators to make a significant difference in learning for both today’s students and today’s teachers by paying attention to the first two points.

Background on the teaching of writing

I know that issues of language learning are important to you in several ways, including the importance of writing in both English and Maltese for young people in

Malta today. While second language issues are also of great importance in the US, the focus of this talk is on learning and the centrality of writing to thinking and learning. I do not want to minimize issues of second language learning, but I do want to share with you my excitement about some new ways to think about actively engaging all students in learning.

For many years, the teaching of writing has been ignored in American schools. The emphasis on improving student performance and achievement has largely centered on reading and mathematics. However, writing and the larger umbrella of communicative competence may provide the crucial distinction between a perfunctory education and one that prepares young people for success both in the university and the workplace. I believe writing has become *the* crucial skill for the 21st century. The inclusion of a writing program implemented across all grade levels and disciplines can be found in some schools in the United States, but in general the approach to writing instruction is fragmented and subject to the pressures of other curricular demands – i.e. “We don’t have time to teach writing because we have so much to cover.” This last point led to the creation in the United States of the National Commission on Writing in America’s families, schools and colleges. Initiated by the College Board, the organization that is responsible for the SAT, GRE and other entrance exams that universities use for placement and admissions, the Commission has issued three reports, the first of which, I believe you are familiar with, and is about to issue one other. The first report identified four major areas:

- Increased time spent in classrooms on writing

- Assessments that measure writing directly
- Implementation and expert use of technology
- Professional development in the teaching of writing

Taken together, these reports have triggered a national conversation about the importance of writing and the teaching of writing for today's students. To quote from the title page of *The Neglected R* – “Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many.”

Analyses of state and national literacy measures in the United States demonstrate that there is a significant gap for many young people in their competence and skill with both higher-level reading comprehension and writing tasks. These concerns about student achievement however, are not really new, even though the spotlight is shining on writing as a critical component more than ever before. What is really new are the changes in our global society related to the use of technology – and the recognition that the old technologies of pencil and pen are fast being replaced by email, blogging, Instant Messaging (IM), hyperlinks, digital stories, and yet to be invented new approaches to communication and writing online.

Simply put, hours and hours of many young people's time are being spent on writing and composing using these new technologies. (I know less about how this is playing out in Malta today, but I logged on to “aboutMalta.com” and noted the existence of the Maltese blogosphere. I also know that some of this is invisible to those of us older than 25!) Here is a quote (taken from this web site on August 23, 2005):

“New blogs are booming in Malta, even though this phenomenon is still in its infancy here. The Maltese blogosphere is really different since it brings together Maltese people

living in Malta, Maltese people living abroad, foreigners living in Malta and even foreigners who are linked in a way to this country. There is actually a list of the Maltese blogs on the Internet, available on <http://www.aboutmalta.com/INTERNET/BLOGS>, and it lists about 70 blogs, discovered by bloggers Robert Micallef, Martin Debattista, Pierre J. Mejlak, and Toni Sant. But it is probably not exhaustive since it is very difficult to know about all of them, as there are several blogs providers on the Internet.”

So what does all of this mean for those of us who teach writing and who design programs for new and experienced teachers?

On Writing Well

Recently, I had the opportunity to re-read William Zinsser’s wonderful book, *On Writing Well*, first published in 1976. Let me quote from his introduction to the recent 25th anniversary edition. He begins by describing the history of writing in his life from the pen and typewriter to email and the Internet and then says:

“To me this is nothing less than a miracle, curing overnight what appeared to be a deep American disorder. I’ve been repeatedly told by people in non-writing occupations – especially people in science, technology, medicine, business and finance – that they hate writing and can’t write and don’t want to be made to write. ... Then along came e-mail and all the formalities went away. ...E-mail writers are like people who stop a friend on the sidewalk and say, “Did you see the game last night?” WHAP! No amenities. They just start typing at full speed. So here’s the miracle: All those people who said they hate writing and can’t write and don’t want to write *can* write and *do* want to write. In fact, they can’t be turned off. Never have so many Americans written so profusely and with so few inhibitions.” Zinsser concludes with:

“... E-mail is also where much of the world’s business is now conducted. Millions of e-mail messages every day give people the information they need to do their job, and a badly written message can cause a lot of damage. (Not to mention the damage done when you send a “reply all” by mistake! Employers have begun to realize that they literally cannot afford to hire men and women who can’t write sentences that are tight and logical and clear. **The new information age, for all its high-tech gadgetry, is finally writing –based.** Email, the Internet, and the fax are all forms of writing, and writing is, finally, a craft, with its own set of tools, **which are words.** Like all tools, they have to be used right” (pp. ix-xi).

During the last election in the United States, I spent some time reading blogs from Berkeley students. The quality varied from the “incompetent to the incoherent” to quote a headline in the *Economist*; but then there were some extraordinary blogs – powerful, passionate, brilliant insightful, wise beyond the writer’s years. Just ponder for a moment these legions of people writing into the unknown to speak to anyone ready to listen, and expecting a response. Just try to remember before this phenomenon and *imagine imagining* that idea. And it’s all about writing! While reporters who call me at the National Writing Project are still asking “is writing important,” these bloggers are creating new scenarios. Perhaps every person will end up (on-line of course) with a life-long portfolio of ideas, thoughts, rants, celebrations, displays of deep knowledge, and, in short, rhetoric, in the Aristotelian sense.

And it's not only content. Writing, and the rules about writing, evolve, particularly in English (described by many as among the more promiscuous languages) in part because so many nations are inventing their own versions of it, particularly the spoken versions. Many years ago, I spent some time in India, where I traveled to several of the major cities. In every place, I met people who spoke English, and who loved to argue in English. The version of English, however, the uses of certain syntax, vocabulary and even some rhetorical devices seemed new to me. Versions of English are alive and well across the world and, though I have spent only a short while in Malta, I think there may be versions here too. Certainly as another billion people have decided to learn English, it will contain many variations! Should we be concerned about these differences? I don't think so. In terms of language, I think English is particularly lucky not to have an academy of what's right and what isn't to slow things down [as the French do?]. Some of these changes in writing online may be irritating to those of us who teach and who are older than twenty: I asked one young member of my family why he refused to use capital letters at the beginning of each sentence. He paused and said, "If you explain to me what a capital letter does that a period hasn't already accomplished, I'll consider it!" ...I couldn't!

This **IS** an exciting time. Technology is making it possible for everyone to write and our students and the public are experiencing a host of new opportunities to create texts in multiple ways using tools that didn't exist when Zinsser first wrote about writing in 1976. In many ways, our task is more complex than when paper and pencil and typewriter were the only tools available. Our work to improve the "craft of writing" in

Zinsser's terms – learning to use the tools of writing well – for different audiences and purposes with this increasing array of technology at our students' fingertips is daunting. And supporting students in overcoming their fears of thinking and of expressing their ideas is as important as ever, if not more so. Zinsser is exactly right; the technology has allowed many people to overcome the fear of writing. But fear of **re-writing** has not vanished, nor has the agony that often accompanies it. In learning to write, it still comes down to the essence of hard work that technology can support, but can't replace.

Rethinking Learning in the Digital Age

Before we talk further about writing, let me turn to my second point about teaching and learning. In 1997, Mitchel Resnick, a professor at the Media Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote:

“First, the good news: in the years ahead, the declining cost of computation will make digital technologies accessible to nearly everyone in all parts of the world, from inner-city neighborhoods in the United States to rural villages in developing nations. These new technologies have the potential to fundamentally transform how and what people learn throughout their lives. Just as advances in biotechnologies made possible the ‘green revolution’ in agriculture, new digital technologies make possible a ‘learning revolution’ in education.

Now, the bad news: while new digital technologies make a learning revolution possible, they certainly do not guarantee it. Early results are not encouraging. In most places where new technologies are being used in education today, the

technologies are used simply to reinforce outmoded approaches to learning. Even as scientific and technological advances are transforming agriculture, medicine, and industry, ideas about and approaches to teaching and learning remain largely unchanged.”

Resnick offers these suggestions:

“**Rethink *how* people learn.** ...Students can become more active and independent learners, with the teacher serving as consultant...Instead of dividing up the curriculum into separate disciplines, we should focus on themes and projects that cut across disciplines...we should let students work on projects for extended periods of time.

Rethink *what* people learn. Schools must prepare students with the new skills and ideas that are needed for living and working in a digital society.... Many ideas and topics that have always been important but were left out because they were too difficult to teach with only paper, pencil and blackboard are now accessible through digital technologies.

Rethink *where* and *when* people learn. Most education reform initiatives assume that learning takes place between 8 am and 3 pm...”

Well, if we are around children, particularly adolescents, we know that 8 am to 3 pm are perhaps their worst hours. Personally, I like to work from 5 am to 9 am. What is now true is that we can select our best hours for our own learning. Digital technologies allow us to work on schedules much closer to our own needs.

Using technology to promote writing and learning

Talking theoretically is one thing; demonstrating actual practices is another. I am excited about the possibilities of the new technologies for both teachers and students, particularly because the teachers in the National Writing Project are excited about them. When I see teachers engaged and excited – and I can also view their work and their students’ work – I can see even more opportunities unfolding in the years ahead.

Let me show you a few examples of what I am describing:

Bearing in mind that there are three principles that govern these new learning environments. First, that they involve collaboration, second that problem solving is at the base, third they make use of media broadly defined. So that a typical example might contain the development of a presentation containing images, text, video and sound. As in the real world, the results in the virtual, both text and visuals underlie and inform the theory, the story and the explication.

On the EDUTOPIA web site, a creation of the George Lucas organization (think Star Wars movies), teachers are discovering worlds that previously were only available through extensive research in large university or big city libraries, and then only after enormous investments of time and energy. Here is a quote from a teacher, Marilyn Wall, in a remote rural area of Virginia: “My students often think of their futures in limited terms – working on farms or in poultry houses, driving a truck, or working in a small family-owned business. Stars, planets, and astronomy are topics not usually discussed at the dinner table, certainly not as leading to possible career choices. That is until my students and I connected to NASA’s K-12 Quest Initiative. ... NASA created a telecast called “Live from the Stratosphere” and invited students through the Internet to conduct a

global star count. The teacher continues, “My students felt like real research scientists as they entered data on a star census map.” ...”For my students in the Shenandoah Valley, technology has become the equalizer, bridging the gap between culturally advanced urban students and culturally disadvantaged rural students.”

In the Bay Area Writing Project, teachers have been working with NASA to develop lessons for their elementary K-5 students. They have been studying Saturn’s rings in a project called NASA Cassini-Huygens Mission and *Reading, Writing, and Rings*.

Outside of science, Web logs or Blogs and associated technology such as WIKI (server software that allows users to create and edit web page content and organization) are causing an explosion of collaboration and a “virtual” thinking, problem solving, raising questions, arguing and presenting of ideas than, I venture to say at any time. As I said earlier, during the last Presidential election, I spent time reading blogs from many sources – much of it mediocre, some of it brilliant, but all of it energetic and democratic. And it is about writing, and it increases fluency, and if you say foolish things, you will hear about it, though it doesn’t prevent them from being said. It is a true test in the market-place of ideas. Here is an excerpt from an article by Bonnie Azab Powell called “the best of Berkeley Blogs:” “there are certain things that a blog can do better than a print newspaper. We can cover a local event in more detail, like when we posted 24 photos of a (student) protest and if we’re talking about the state budget we can link to an

LA Times article about it or the budget itself, which even online newspapers rarely bother to do.”

I invite you to type blogs – Malta or any other country - into Google and sample for yourself. This and other online sources are becoming a powerful new voice and further herald the decline of traditional print sources. I noted in the NY Times recently that sales of all the major newspapers in the US are down again, as more and more people are reading their papers on line (aided considerably by the very good quality of displays now), or simply giving up on newspapers entirely. Given the ever downward directions of the popular press, I’m not surprised.

Change, though, is always difficult. But remember that our new teachers probably used their first computers sitting on their parents laps! They are also more used to rapid change and changing technologies. Let’s make sure that our younger colleagues are involved in discussions of reform.

Through my work and that of my colleagues in the National Writing Project, I can tell you that we still meet teachers trapped in the fear of writing themselves and teachers who have limited access to technological tools. And for those of us fortunate enough to have overcome some of our fears and to have access to good computer equipment, there is always the next hurdle to leap.

You may know the movie based on the true story of Apollo 13, a voyage to the moon in xxx. If you have seen it, you may remember a wonderful scene - when the space craft was in great danger, the director of mission control brought his team together in Houston, gave them the same equipment and supplies the astronauts had in space, and

said over and again “WORK THE PROBLEM.” I think education problems could do with some thinking like this. This approach could operate at every level, and would help those not teaching in classrooms to reach a better understanding of what teachers are trying to do. Many times the solutions in education suffer from an enormous failure of the imagination.

Professional development (and lifelong learning) in the 21st Century

Imagine a system of professional development as part of a larger system of professional learning for teachers across their careers. Not the *ad hoc*, fragmented system that exists today in the United States (I don't know enough about how the system works in Malta). Imagine one that works the problem and embeds inquiry into the process. Imagine some of the non-teachers making decisions about our schools and classrooms trying to “work the problem.” All teachers, of course, need a way to participate in the building and sustaining of professional learning communities *throughout* their careers and writing project professional development in the teaching of writing needs to be part of that system.

Of course, the central challenge for such a system of high quality professional development is implementation – one challenge that we know well. And “working the problem” is what implementation is all about. In a recent report from California's Center for Teaching and Learning on the “status of the teaching profession 2003” researchers identified three central challenges to providing quality professional development across the state:

- Poor working conditions, competing time demands and the too many beginning teachers in low-performing schools.
- The diversity of the workforce in terms of experience, assignment, location – in other words, the “one size fits all problem.”
- State and federal standards-based reform and testing requirements that have narrowed the breadth of professional development offerings.

The National Commission on Writing’s second report on writing in the business world was drawn from a survey of representatives of the business community, from the top 120 American corporations employing nearly eight million people. To underscore the fact that Zinsser’s point about writing is understood broadly, let me read you a quote from this report:

"With the fast pace of today's electronic communications, one might think that the value of fundamental writing skills has diminished in the workplace," said CEO Joseph M. Tucci, chairman of the Business Roundtable's Education Task Force." Actually, the need to write clearly and quickly has never been more important than in today's highly competitive, technology-driven global economy."

Two conclusions from this survey will suffice here:

- People who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired, and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion.
- "All employees must have writing ability.... Manufacturing documentation, operating procedures, reporting problems, lab safety - all have to be crystal clear."

Despite all of this attention, it will still take a concerted effort to “place writing in the center of the school agenda” and to bring about such changes for every student in America. Many of you have been engaged in this work for some time and you know how

difficult it is. However, **the new information-age IS writing-based** and we must find ways to teach writing well to all students.

The **future of professional development** in writing then has to take into account the new demands on teachers, the new tools available, and the possibilities they offer in helping students learn to write well, not just to write for enjoyment and connection to others. People born in 1980 may have grown up with computers and may now be working as teachers, but they are also faced with new problems, challenges, and demands for helping all students to succeed. The daily job of teaching hasn't gotten any easier, although the new technologies may be changing the nature of the enterprise.

The sheer dynamism of education – new populations of students, new technologies, new curriculum, new and changing assessments - means that the *ad hoc* nature of professional development, the instant fix has to go. Professional development *must* become a central part of the education system, it *must* be a significant part of every teacher's life, and it *must* stand as the intellectual center from which instruction and achievement can flourish.

Teaching writing in this new age

So how then are we to teach writing in this new age? First, I believe we must take the time to understand and become familiar with the contexts for learning that young people are deeply involved in. Perhaps we should begin with the kind of learning that engage our youth for thousands of hours. James Gee, a noted linguist and educator, has written that video games are one of the more powerful learning tools that youth spend time on. I have agreed to be on a panel to discuss this proposition later this year, and in my preparation,

and on the recommendations of two or three people under the age of 25, I bought three video games: *Half Life 2*, *The rise of Nations*, and *Myst 4*. As a new learner to this environment, I spent a few days getting nowhere and with a rising sense of frustration, I called my step-son for help. “Why are you doing this on your own?” he asked. “Get on line, get new information, join a community that is already playing this game.”

This was my first lesson. These new technologies have enabled, indeed demanded, a learning community. So following this advice, I found information on the web for neophyte players and I started advancing rapidly. One of the ways that these games are categorized is by whether they are shooter games or not. The first one I played was definitely a “shooter” game, not something I particularly enjoy, though as I became more proficient, I enjoyed even those challenges. But, I asked, am I learning anything? Well, at the heart of the games that I played I spent a lot of time solving logic problems. To get from A to B and then on to C etc, I had to determine the underlying logic of my “enemy”, pick up clues left for me to find, and then proceed to rescue, destroy, or unlock the major secret hidden within. Another game, this time a non-shooter game, asked me to develop and build a city within a certain historical context; I choose Roman Britain. I was to understand the level of knowledge and available technologies, build a city, populate it, defend it against my enemies, and grow and prosper. This game had a larger appeal for me, but I still was left with some uncertainties about the learning. It was difficult, I did have to learn and understand the rules of the game, and in that way it is not unlike what young people have to do to be successful in school. They have to learn the rules of the academic game. Many do, as we all know, but what we may not know so

well, is why so many do not do well, or do not seem to learn in the ways that we teach. Even the successful ones often complain that school is boring, but necessary. But if we are to educate more people to a higher level than ever before, we should perhaps look for a closer alignment between the way so many young people learn on their own, and the way we are trying to educate them. Perhaps we need an academic version of, say history, that will use a similar discovery and learning process with additional web-based research processes built in. So far, my looking at software has turned up nothing that approaches the sophistication of these games for education.

John Seeley Brown, the chief scientist at the Xerox Corporation makes a cogent point regarding learning during the school years: “learning by doing with others offers students the opportunity for in-depth enculturation into a particular practice, where one *learns to be* a physicist, social scientist, historian, etc., in contrast to just *learning about* such professions. Students could absorb the social and practical aspects of a profession (its practices) and gain tremendously from their proximity to practitioners, especially when they can watch, listen, and peripherally participate. Enculturation is crucial to such learning, since relatively little of the complex web of practice can effectively be made the subject of explicit instruction.” This certainly describes my experience in learning the intricacies of the video games. It is perhaps only in graduate school that practice and theory are strongly linked in the way that Seeley is suggesting.

But the essential periods of learning all take place long before graduate school, and if we believe, as I do, that a significant number of young people are giving up on school learning long before that, then we should perhaps look at the ways that are the

most engaging for them outside of school. Here we can see enculturation going on in many arenas. Seeley goes on to say that, “we are witnessing a profound blurring of the classical boundaries separating teaching, learning, research, administration, communication, media, and play, all brought about by new technologies. For today’s students... (technology) is not so much a tool as it is a way of life.” When you consider this lecture, for example, with a few Power Point slides, how much longer will this form last, will there be a significant increase in my (our) uses of technology for me to transmit the information that I am delivering today? What would a complete technological presentation of this material look like?

As I said before, I am aware that change is difficult. In an earlier life, I was an electronics engineer. It has stood me in good stead. I have not resisted changes that involve technology, though at my age, I still prefer to sit and read a book in my spare time than almost any other activity. I am also aware that the challenge for educators is that we need a more highly educated population than ever before, and that traditional methods of schooling that worked for a small minority are failing in that task to educate sufficient numbers. Literacy, the ability to think on paper, the ability to analyze and problem solve through the expression of words and images is, and will be for some time, an essential survival skill. Failure to use what excites the learning of millions of young people is, I believe, a serious mistake. Bill Gates issued a warning regarding high schools in the US: He said,

“When we looked at the millions of students that our high schools are not preparing for higher education – and we looked at the damaging impact that has on their lives – we came to a painful conclusion:

America’s high schools are obsolete.

By obsolete, I don’t just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed, and under-funded – though a case could be made for every one of those points.

By obsolete, I mean that our high schools – even when they’re working exactly as designed – cannot teach our kids what they need to know today.

Training the workforce of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today’s computers on a 50-year-old mainframe. It’s the wrong tool for the times.

Our high schools were designed fifty years ago to meet the needs of another age. Until we design them to meet the needs of the 21st century, we will keep limiting – even ruining – the lives of millions of Americans every year.

Fifty years ago, it was possible to leave school at 15 or even earlier, get a job at an auto plant and earn enough to raise a family. That has not been true for some time now.

We must change the way we teach, we must place writing and literacy, the most powerful tools for thinking in the hands of every child. Only then can we compete as a society and only then can we offer opportunities to young people that allow them the choices to participate and succeed in our new and complex society.

Thank you.