

# Writing is like the air we breathe in the academy

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The present interview is a review, reformulation, and update specially conducted by Charles Bazerman for this publication. It originated from a conversation held during one of his visits to the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, where he holds an Honorary Doctorate.<sup>1</sup> The conversation took place at the Facultad de Ciencias de la Comunicación, in 2018, during the Jornadas “El lugar de la escritura en los procesos de formación. Aportes para enseñanzas inclusivas en todas las disciplinas” organized by RAILEES, which were hosted by this university.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the talk, Dr. Bazerman, drawing on his extensive experience, discusses topics related to the teaching of writing within the disciplines and across the curriculum, as well as the role of teachers in supporting students’ literacy journeys to build their voices and participate critically in the academic world and society.

*Fabiana Castagno:* – One of the thematic lines that is a subject of sustained conversation in RAILEES relates to addressing the links between

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1 Editors’ Note: The conferral of the highest distinction awarded by this institution took place during the “Jornadas” that led to the establishment of RAILEES in 2016.

2 Editors’ Note: The interview was documented audiovisually with the purpose of producing a teaching resource for the Writing Center of that institution and was conducted in coordination with a department of the Ministry of Education of the Province of Córdoba.

teaching and learning processes and literacy practices. Based on what we have been discussing throughout the “Jornadas” and your extensive experience related to the teaching of writing across the curriculum<sup>3</sup> and in the disciplines, we would like to revisit this issue from the perspective of teaching. So, if the goal is to teach students, why is it important for teachers to consider themselves as writers? What is the role of writing in a teacher’s life?

*Charles Bazerman:* –First, I want to say how happy I am to return to Córdoba. I’d like to thank you very much for your invitation and for all the people who’ve helped make this journey possible. It’s a beautiful city, and the programs that you are engaged in have grown so much since my last visit two years ago. It’s a great delight to be here again.

Now to your question. Education is all about helping students become all they can be, to help them develop their thinking, their skills, their perceptions of life, and their ability to participate in society. Each teacher pursues these general goals through their own subject area that they are committed to. But why should a teacher of biology or history be concerned about writing when they should be concerned about biology or history? But really, they are the same thing. First all these fields have developed through writing that has presented findings and ideas in books, journals, and other formats. Knowledge is argued for, evidence is presented, ideas are elaborated, and agreement is reached through writing, then this knowledge is offered to students through textbooks and other readings. Teachers in all subject areas produce, consume, and assign writing.

Writing is like the air we breathe in the academy. But that air is a bit different in each room. In each area, the books and articles make different arguments, present different data, and speak to different criteria than in each other area—so reading and writing become specialized beyond the general basics learned in language education. It is more than a matter of specialized vocabulary. Each field has a different kind of reasoning and makes a different kind of sense. So, learning to read and write in academic

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3 Editors’ Note: The Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, in an inter-institutional project with colleagues from other Argentine and foreign universities, translated one of his landmark works into Spanish under the title “Escribir a través del currículum. Una guía de referencia” as an open-access digital book, which is available at: <https://n9.cl/qkqb9>.

fields requires more advanced and specialized literacy skills, tied to the practices of each field. Students will not learn to think, write and understand in these fields unless they produce texts for their fields.

If a teacher is not comfortable with writing, if a teacher is nervous, or hates writing they might say “I’m a mathematician, I’m a numbers person” or “I’m an engineer, I like to make things with my hands. I did not choose to go into Spanish, or English, or a writing field, I chose to go into my field because this is where my talents and interest are. I don’t get much from those language fields.” If the student hears that from their teacher, what they might say is “this teacher who represents their field doesn’t think writing is important and doesn’t have many good feelings or ideas about writing. Then, why do I as student need to learn to write?”

Actually, writing is already in your life. You probably love your subject, whether biology, or geology, or physics, or history. If you are asked by some friends to explain a concept, you are composing some ideas. The more you can share the things you love in your field, why the field is important, and what the ideas are, the more you will be able to convey to your students those same ideas. Even when you are writing your lessons for your students, you are writing.

Further, sharing your experiences with other teachers can become a great joy. When you start to open up what is actually going on in your classroom, you begin describing the details, what worked in the classroom, what you said that caused a negative reaction, what questions you asked that opened up many ideas in your students. The more you can explain and write stories about your teaching experiences, the more you can grow as a teacher, and the more you become a reflective professional. Writing is a chance for you to really look at your life and reflect on what is happening, seeing your experience mirrored back to you in your words and the words of your colleagues.

*Fabiana Castagno:* – So, based on what you’re suggesting, how is writing related to the teacher’s discipline and the task of teaching?

*Charles Bazerman:* – Your students, as they write about your subject, learn to think about your subject. Writing helps them remember the facts,

and helps them remember the things you say, but even more, it helps them make connections and their own sense of the material. Students remember more when they connect things. Ideas grow in their minds, and the material becomes a way of seeing the world. By helping your students write, you are helping them to see the world in the way you have developed through your study of your subject—whether psychology, physics, or literary studies. The concepts of your field, which at first may just be words to them, become magic lenses to see the world through concepts. Through learning to write using the concepts and ways of reasoning of your field, your students gradually come to see and make those concepts their own. and are able to incorporate those ideas into addressing the questions and problems they see around them.

Through their writing you can also identify what the students don't quite understand yet, what misunderstandings they have, or what implications they do not yet see. Their writing will give you insight into how you can redirect and deepen their understanding, thereby improving your teaching and their learning.

*Fabiana Castagno:* – Are you asking teachers to become Language teachers? Isn't writing the responsibility of Language teachers?

*Charles Bazerman:* – Some things are admittedly the language teachers' responsibility. In students' earliest grades, teachers offer basic lessons of written language--spelling, expanding vocabulary, general vocabulary, grammar, legibility, neatness, and so on. Also, language teachers introduce students to imaginative literature, narratives, and other cultural documents. That is their realm. But some language experiences only happen in your area: conceptual terms and formulations, specialized forms of reasoning and thinking, particulars of knowledge, ways of describing things that your field provides. The language teacher cannot take care of that. Even if they would try, only you would really be interested in discussing those specialized ideas, and your students would likely accept only your authority in the area. If the English or Spanish teacher were to teach biological terms, the students would say "oh it's just something else to memorize." The writing would not be a way of seeing, and doing, and thinking. Only you can evaluate and support how

students are making sense of your subject, how they are entering into the knowledge of your field.

What makes writing difficult is thinking about what you are going to say, what kind of ideas you are going to formulate, to whom, how will this communicate to readers, how will you organize ideas and information, where has the discussion gone so, and what you will add to the discussion. These hard, more advanced questions are embedded within the work of the disciplines, and help students write more intelligently in their subject area. So, when you work with student writing, you are not being a language teacher, you are being a history teacher; you are being a political science teacher; you are being a math teacher.

*Fabiana Castagno*: – You believe that students should write in all the disciplines and across the curriculum. Why and how should this be done?

*Charles Bazerman*: – Each field has its way of thinking and reasoning. If students don't articulate their way of thinking and connect it to the material you offer, then they are not developing in that field. This is true even in fields that are not primarily verbal, like music, dance, or athletics. In such fields some of the most accomplished people also are the most articulate. They can explain what they are doing, understand how to improve, and know how to communicate to others to develop their natural talents.

History and political science are examples of fields which work more directly with words. Through the narratives and concepts of these fields, students learn more than just facts to repeat. They learn about the history of their country, the history of the world, the way countries interrelate, the way people interact with politics, how they can communicate in their community about the issues that are of importance to them. In another kind of example, some of the most enthusiastic advocates for writing across the curriculum have been people in the health professions, because they know how important it is that the patients' records are kept well, how communication between nurses and doctors and other health professionals occurs, how work is reported, and how the information needs to be interpreted in relation to the latest research findings. People in the health professions know these communications can affect life and death.

*Fabiana Castagno:* – In an interview conducted here two years ago, you said that the texts we assign for reading and writing will determine how we interpret the world. Could you elaborate a bit more on this statement?

*Charles Bazerman:* – As we learn the words of a language, we start to be able to see objects in the world that correspond to the words and concepts. When a little child learns the word car, the thing coming down the street to them is no longer just a red thing, a metal thing, a thing with wheels, but it becomes all the things that are represented by a car: a vehicle, something dangerous, something fast or attractive, a symbol of power or wealth. The concept of car attaches to other related concepts and, helps organize thinking, and interpret experiences in daily life. The psychologist Vygotsky talked about spontaneous and scientific concepts. The spontaneous ones are the ones we come up with every day as we try to organize our experiences. Our spontaneous concepts are influenced by the language we learn to use from around us everywhere. He says that at first we use words in interaction, but eventually the words reformulate our perceptions and thinking. The same thing happens later as we learn the concepts of schooling and academic disciplines, what he calls scientific concepts: they reorganize our perceptions of life. Compare how a physicist thinks about gravity compared with a person who does not know physics. Daily experience lets us all know that things fall down towards the earth, and that's what most people think of as gravity. But to someone who knows classical physics, gravity is the attraction between two different masses. A small book seems to fall to a big earth, dropping to the ground, but actually the earth is also falling toward the object. Physicists see gravity as a relationship. Contemporary physics make the relationship even more complex.

Let me give another kind of example. When we were young our friends enjoyed the same things as us and we were able to talk about things in similar ways, but those who went on in education started to see things differently than their friends who went to work early. Then classmates at the university also started to think differently than each other depending on what they studied. Some became lawyers, and for many years read and wrote about law. Years later if we converse with them socially we may observe that they think like lawyers. Or if they studied and went into

work in economics or finances they might seem to see things in terms of wealth and economic exchange. And literature specialists are caught up in a world of creative writing. In fact, each may make new friends in their respective fields, in part because those people think about things in ways that are now familiar to them. Through education and the texts students read and write daily, students become exposed to and engaged with these different ways of thinking.

*Fabiana Castagno*: – Why should a teacher be interested in their students' writing? (especially when this writing shows that the student does not fully understand the discipline)

*Charles Bazerman*: – Seeing how your students' ideas are growing takes more than correcting the grammar or seeing if students have the right answers. Their writing is a communication from them to you, about how they see the subject and what it means to them. Their writing reveals the current state of their thinking about the subject and how they are connecting their understanding of the subject with the world they observe and experience. You might be really pleased with those students who show exceptional understanding, and even write new and insightful things. But not every student does this. Some students show misunderstandings, or show partial understanding. If so, what they write lets you know how you can help them improve their understanding and make deeper connections. If you are not paying attention to the thoughts they are developing, no matter how limited or faulty those thoughts might be, you are simply asking them to repeat back to you the words you tell them. Repeating back the words of "the right answer" doesn't necessarily help expand their viewpoint or reorient their thinking. The answers that are less than excellent may be the ones that help you the most as a teacher of biology, history, or mathematics.

*Fabiana Castagno*: – What does writing reveal about how students construct their knowledge of the discipline and their own voice?

*Charles Bazerman*: – Let's talk a few minutes about the development of the students' voice. Voice is saying something that will be heard and that expresses your perspective. If students are reading textbooks and

listening to lectures only to repeat back those words, they are like spectators, not using the knowledge in ways meaningful to them. But when they start to put the ideas together in their own way, they are starting to find meaning in the subjects. Unless they start to find their own words, they are like the people who watch sports but never play, and see the game in a limited way of “who’s winning, who’s losing, who has the ball.” The more you play the game, however, the more you understand what the players are doing, the decisions that they are making, the importance of their movements, and how amazing a play might be. You learn to appreciate the game on another, more realistic level, and you get ideas about how you can improve your own game.

Let me place increased literacy engagement in historical context. Five thousand years ago, writing started as a form of agricultural record keeping. Most of life had nothing to do with writing. Over the years, writing has come to affect, even saturate, almost everything. Even personal relationships are mediated by the apps we have on the phone, psychologists who give us advice about life, the novels we read, and the scripts behind the movies we watch.

Now if you don’t read and you don’t write, you are at the mercy of other people’s words. You can see this very clearly in terms of civic, political participation. If you cannot write and have not read about government and politics, how can you let your opinions be known, how can you influence others, how can you exert power in the political system? If I have a legal problem, I have to be able to write in my defense, or have a lawyer to write briefs and make my case. In the world of literacy, if you don’t write, you are not visible. Your writing voice is what gives you presence and allows you to pursue your interests and perspectives.

*Fabiana Castagno:* – A central task for teachers is related to the assessment of the writing produced by their students. What is the best way for a teacher to evaluate their students’ writing?

*Charles Bazerman:* – There are many ways of evaluating writing. Some clearly are the domain of language teacher, such as “have you learned this particular technical skill with language?” Some methods of evaluation,



however, have to do with cultural beliefs about what style of writing shows a more educated or more intelligent person. Such evaluations can mistakenly evaluate people's intelligence or talents on the dialect or style students have grown up with. None of these evaluations, however, should be your concern as a subject area teacher using writing. Your concern should be on how well students are communicating and elaborating their content, ideas, and thinking in your subject. You should evaluate the student texts as a biologist, as a political scientist, as a historian, as a mathematician. If students are not being articulate about their thoughts, are not being precise in their arguments, or are putting things together in a way that does not follow good thinking in your field--that is what you should respond to and evaluate the students on. It's not your primary responsibility to correct their spelling and grammar except insofar as it interferes with conveying their meaning. Your main perspective as an evaluator is considering the quality of disciplinary knowledge and thought expressed.

*Fabiana Castagno*: –How do Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) impact the ways of writing, reading, and thinking? How should schools address this?

*Charles Bazerman*: –Technologies of writing have been growing and changing from the beginning of writing five millennia ago. We no longer use clay tablets. The kinds of paper, pens, and pencils we have been using in schooling were invented only in the last couple of centuries. Even typewriters, invented in the late nineteenth century, are now obsolete. Word processing programs in the latter part of the twentieth century were already a big change for the teaching of writing because they made revisions much easier. But now we have the internet and search tools, we have social media, we have personal handheld devices, and since the time of this interview Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models have become readily available. The preparation, distribution, access, and storage of documents are now reorganizing all of our communications.

Of course, we should be educating our students for the world they now write within and will change further in the near future. We shouldn't be educating them for clay tablets. There are certain tasks that you still might use paper and pencil for; some evidence suggests that young

children learning to physically form letters helps literacy learning, so handwriting may have some continuing value. Most adults, however, now use handwriting rarely, with even shopping lists kept on handheld devices. So electronic technologies need to be introduced and used more thoroughly for writing, even though students also need to learn to be critical about devices and various communicative platforms and social media that are available to them.

Further, if students are doing most of their writing and revisions on computers, then their assessments also should be on the same devices with software similar to those they are familiar with, even though that might create some logistic challenges. If you take these electronic tools away from the students, can you really evaluate how well they are able to communicate in the contemporary world? Or are you saying I want to see how well you would communicate if you went in back in a time machine to the 19th century. That's a debate that's been going on in US testing world, but it's only a matter of time that the electronic side and all the electronic supportive tools will win, even though testing may try to drag them back.

*Fabiana Castagno:* – To conclude this conversation, I would like to briefly revisit the connection between the teacher's own writing and that of their students in order to enhance their work.

*Charles Bazerman:* – Ok, only as teachers become more comfortable as writers and understand the roles of writing in their own lives, can they then transmit their excitement and engagement to their students. Struggling with their own writing helps teachers appreciate how the students are struggling so that they can support student's emerging ideas. Your project works in a very similar way with the idea that the beginning of teaching of writing is for teachers to develop themselves as writers. To that you add a writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines orientation. I admire how much support you have from your educational institutions and government policies. Such a project may differ from what most teachers previously experienced when they were students and were simply asked to accept the authority of their fields, but now you are concerned with bringing all citizens into more complete participation in the modern world of knowledge. So I really appreciate what you are doing.