

# The Mission of the Center

by

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*The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, situated at the University of California at Berkeley and Carnegie Mellon University, has been a "home" for writing research for nearly ten years now. Freedman, in her retrospective commentary, illustrates that the goals set out in this 1986 piece, particularly the goal of full participation of classroom teachers in the research process, have remained a solid foundation for the CSW through the present. Freedman continues to direct the CSW and is a professor at U.C. Berkeley; Dyson and Flower remain Center researchers; Dyson is a professor at U.C. Berkeley, and Flower is a professor at Carnegie Mellon University.*

Writing is basic to our society. Written language allows us to come to know and understand our human nature. The primary mission of the Center for the Study of Writing (CSW) will be to help teachers transmit to our future generations not just the skill but the art of writing.

In order to accomplish this mission, the Center will work towards nourishing a "practice-sensitive" research agenda, and in turn towards creating a national community of "research-sensitive" teachers. In the area of writing, the time is right for achieving this goal. Through the National Writing Project, an already established international network of expert practitioners, as well as through other programs that have burgeoned over the past decade, we have begun the process of forming a community of effective teachers. The Writing Project and others will continue to build these efforts. The Center will supplement the research component of these teacher-development programs, so that researchers and practitioners can work together to make important differences in educational practice.

The Center expects to help *effective* teachers form a wider community of *reflective* teachers. Indeed, it will aim to change the nature of educational research and its relationship to practice in this country. The venture will involve an interaction between researchers and practitioners that will lead to the development of more sophisticated theories to guide our research and practice, and to increasing numbers of successful writers. If the Center succeeds, it will not only have planned but also

executed research programs that will have significant, immediate, and enduring impact on the teaching and learning of writing in the United States — across grade levels and ages and across disciplines.

The Center has three central objectives: (1) to create a "home" for writing research, (2) to create workable theories of the teaching and learning of writing, and (3) to ensure dissemination of rapidly growing knowledge. As a home for writing research, the Center will be a repository of practical and scholarly knowledge about writing and writing instruction and a gathering place for teachers and researchers. The planned research and development activities will lead to a new phase of theory development that sees writing as a rich social and cognitive process. Such theory development will be possible through the interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers at the University of California at Berkeley (UCB) and Carnegie-Mellon University (CMU), as well as with researchers at the Center for the Study of Reading (CSR) and Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). CSW will serve as a central reference point for research on writing that should not only stimulate further collaborative research but serve a major training function for both scholars and practitioners. For scholars, it will provide research training at the Center sites and the sharing of new knowledge through a variety of traditional networks. For practitioners, it will support the interpretation of research and the dissemination of new ideas.

### Basic Philosophy

The past twenty years have brought about dramatic changes in writing research — in the research questions asked, the approaches taken to answering those questions, and the kinds of implications drawn for teaching and learning. Since the 1970's, when the traditional emphasis on the written *product* gave way to a conception of writing as a process, researchers have begun to explore just what that process is — how a work of writing evolves over time and how this process is shaped by the developmental history of its writer. During the 1980s, an added research emphasis has been a concern with *context*, with recent studies examining how settings (homes, classrooms, workplaces, for instance) produce patterns of interaction that influence how people learn to write.

As we consider current social needs and look critically at our research history, we believe that two unproductive schisms have arisen. Studies of the writing process have become separated from studies of written products. And studies of classroom contexts are now in danger of becoming separated from studies of cognitive processes. We, therefore, suggest a view of writing research and of the teaching of writing that integrates process, product, and context. The Center's three inherited threads of research history (process, product, and context) will lead to the building of a theory of writing that accounts for both its social and cognitive dimensions.

Let us be more specific about what this conception of writing as a social and cognitive process offers us, and what it asks us to develop. First of all, the research will place instruction in writing squarely in its social context and help us see that learning to write is not simply skill acquisition, but learning to enter into writing communities that have their own rules and expectations. Most of us have to function in writing communities that range from the academic to the job-related to the social. In school settings, the implication is that students learn best when teachers treat (and students perceive) writing as a purposeful act.

Second, the research will give us a radically expanded look at the intellectual, and to some extent the affective processes writers go through. We have come to understand that the cognitive processes of writers do not exist in the abstract but are, in fact, influenced by the task to be accomplished, the people involved, and the wider social and cultural milieu. We need to understand why the same writer will perform well on

one occasion and not so well on another. Treating writing as a process linking context and thinking will lead both teachers and researchers to understand some of the dimensions of the instructional context that may support or inhibit developing writers.

### The Experimental Approach to Dissemination

Our decisions about dissemination reflect our larger decision that the mission of the Center for the Study of Writing is to materially affect the nature of both teaching and research. Dissemination is one major vehicle for doing this. Researchers working through the Center will be required to be accountable to practitioners. Likewise, practitioners have responsibilities for turning research into better practice, for helping formulate rich problems for research, for testing ideas, and for giving feedback to ongoing research. In essence, what we mean by reflective practice is for teachers to make the effort to observe students and the results of instruction, to experiment with new ideas, and to take informed control of their own decisions about teaching.

But how might this best be done? Traditional methods of disseminating research tend to encourage passive recipients, which often leads to research that makes no difference to practice; or the results go only to the lucky few who can attend a conference or an institute. Our dissemination plans combine traditional methods with (1) a series of seminars in many locations, designed not only to present research but to engage teachers in active participation in formal research, (2) a plan to build a two-way bridge between teachers and Center research by using teacher observations and feedback as part of the research process, and (3) experimentation with ways to develop self-supporting forms of dissemination, as well as an analysis of the costs and benefits of alternative modes. This aggressive approach to dissemination will begin the Center's efforts to more closely involve both researchers and teachers in the common goal of preserving the artful skill of writing for future generations.

## Afterword

Looking back at our original plans to set up a National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy almost ten years ago, I am amazed that we actually started with nothing and created a research organization that I hope has made some difference for teachers and educators concerned with writing and literacy instruction, and ulti-

mately for the children and adults in this country who are learning to write. From the start we eschewed the traditional concept of an ivory tower research Center that would disseminate findings for teachers to put into practice, from the top down, so to speak. We've steadfastly insisted that teachers are the professional decision makers in the classroom, that what university-based research offers are ideas and information about teaching and learning that inform rather than form teachers' decisions. Our sense in 1985 was that the community of writing teachers was generally too sophisticated for a research agenda that would tell them what to do in their classrooms and further our theories told us that there was so much variation from one classroom to the next that, to be successful, teachers would need to figure out what would work best in their particular classrooms.

After consulting with numerous practitioners, we thought we could contribute a "practice sensitive research" agenda that would yield information about such topics as how students learn and teachers teach, how writing functions outside of school, what our society wants students to know and be able to do. Such information, we thought, would form the basis for a community of highly reflective "research sensitive practice."

As I re-read our 1985 mission statement, I think that our insistence that teachers assume a professional role both as informed decision makers in their classrooms and as co-researchers are what has held the Center together and what has led to whatever impact we have been able to make. In 1985 many of my colleagues looked with disdain at our goals for collaborating with teachers, calling us naive and unrealistic. However, now that it's 1995, the broader field of education has realized the importance of teacher professionalization. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is fast becoming an established organization. And the national school reform efforts depend on a professional teaching force for their success (e.g., Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools, Levin's Accelerated Schools). In fact, along with the National Writing Project, we believe that a disproportionate number of teachers who are leaders in these reform efforts come from the area of writing.

Since our goal has been to provide resources to aid teachers in their decision-making, I will end these reflections with a list of some of the most recent books we've provided. We also produce Technical Reports, Occasional Papers, and audiotapes which can be ordered through the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy; books must be ordered from publishers:

### Books Reporting Center Research

*Collaboration through writing and reading: Exploring possibilities*, edited by Anne Haas Dyson (1989). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

*Multiple worlds of child writers: Friends learning to write*, by Anne Haas Dyson (1989). New York: Teachers College Press.

*The social worlds of children learning to write in an urban primary school*, by Anne Haas Dyson (1993). New York: Teachers College Press.

*The need for story: Cultural diversity in classroom and community*, edited by Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi (1994). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

*Reading-to-write: Exploring a cognitive and social process*, by Linda Flower, Victoria Stein, John Ackerman, Margaret J. Kantz, Kathlene McCormick, & Wayne C. Peck (1990). New York: Oxford University Press.

*The construction of negotiated meaning: A social cognitive theory of writing*, by Linda Flower (1994). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

*Making thinking visible: Writing, collaborative planning and classroom inquiry*, edited by Linda Flower, David Wallace, Linda Norris, and Rebecca Burnett (1994). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

*Exchanging writing, exchanging cultures: Lessons in school reform from the United States and Great Britain*, by Sarah Warshauer Freedman (1994). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

*Response to student writing* (NCTE Research Report No. 23), by Sarah Warshauer Freedman, with Cynthia Greenleaf and Melanie Sperling (1987). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

— Sarah Warshauer Freedman