Don Rothman

Ten Years to Build a Bridge Ten Miles

Rothman delivered the following paper at the annual Writing Project Directors’ Meeting, held at the National Council of Teachers of English annual convention in Los Angeles, California, November 1987.

I first became interested in bridges when I realized that the best way to get out of Brooklyn, where I lived until I was almost seventeen, was to cross a bridge. Through the begrimed windows of the BMT subway as it crossed the Manhattan Bridge, I could see into sweatshops where sewing machines, steam presses, and endless racks of clothing flickered by like frames in an old movie. A sign fixed atop one of these factories stays in my mind: “BELIEVE ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND YE SHALL BE SAVED.” My parents ignored all questions about its meaning. I couldn’t tell if it was their reluctance to talk about Jesus with me or if the grammar embarrassed them. It wasn’t until I started imitating the odd usage that I realized how deeply it bothered them. I noticed that sign for years. Everyone in my family noticed it. From the bridge I saw a world that co-existed with the one I knew but was distant and strange. Since then bridges have helped me meditate on the spaces between communities.

Surely Writing Project directors have seen themselves as bridge builders. Maybe the metaphor describes how the Writing Project has linked colleges and universities with schools, professors with school teachers, researchers with practitioners. I want to talk about a bridge that took ten years to build. It has both symbolic and practical dimensions, suggesting a way to view our work from a global as well as local perspective. It is a bridge that suggests connections not only between colleges and schools, but between writers who have been censored, banned, exiled, and even executed and teachers struggling in this country to connect literacy education to democracy. It is also a bridge that helps us redefine our origins and our aspirations.

I’ve been considering the lineage that has shaped my Project, realizing that while our goals are defined by the context of our work, we occasionally discover, perhaps somewhat mysteriously, new origins. For the first few years whenever someone asked me how the Project got started, I talked about the legendary efforts of Jim Gray and his colleagues at the Bay Area Writing Project. It wasn’t until the personality and politics of my own Project became more well defined that I realized another lineage needed to be traced as well. Put simply, we inherit a great chunk of our past, both as individuals and as institutions, but we also choose to place our work in a tradition that inspires us, that gives historical meaning to our efforts. I’m reminded of Janet Emig’s wonderful line from *The Web of Meaning*: “. . . Those who neither know nor acknowledge their intellectual origins are the true bastards of the world” (1983, p. 165). I can’t ignore the fact that my son told everyone his name was Rickey the year Rickey Henderson stole all those bases. At ten years old he claimed an alliance that helped him steal bases in Little League.
I want to describe briefly how I happened to get involved in starting the Central California Writing Project in 1977. This lineage will move us towards how our collective work might fit into a national reassessment of education that places active citizenship at its center.

I came to UC Santa Cruz in 1973 from Merritt College in Oakland, California, a community college where the Black Panthers did much of their organizing in the late ‘60s. My years spent studying Elizabethan revenge tragedy had something to do with my decision to work with traditionally under-represented students in higher education. I joined the faculty of Oakes College, then under the leadership of J. Herman Blake, a sociologist who co-authored *Revolutionary Suicide* with Huey Newton. He was doing oral history research with the descendants of slaves in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. He knew Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, perhaps the most important training center for civil rights leaders in the era of the Freedom Schools. In 1977, UC Santa Cruz was fortunate in having Carl Tjerandsen as Dean of Extension. He knew Horton and was writing an important book on education and democracy, *Education For Citizenship* (Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, 1980) analyzing Highlander’s and other groups’ contribution to liberatory education.

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One rainy day in January 1977, Tjerandsen called me over to his office wanting to know if I would be interested in starting a Writing Project site in Santa Cruz. We spoke of my commitment to literacy education as part of effecting social and political change. He knew that my writing classes encouraged students to confront the subtle forms of censorship that had silenced them. I told him the project that I envisioned would explore with teachers the role of writing in a democracy. He assured me that was his commitment as well.

So the Central California Writing Project was born eleven years ago with several sets of parents. The literacy education work of the Freedom Schools in the South; the tradition of education for political and social change found at Highlander; Merritt College in West Oakland where my first students were Black Vietnam veterans hoping to piece the fragments of their lives together by writing; Oakes College at UC Santa Cruz, committed to building on the strengths of under-represented minorities; and the Bay Area Writing Project: all of these are part of the Central California Writing Project’s lineage.
As the work of Paulo Freire became more available in the U.S., we came to understand that our efforts in the schools were related as well to the literacy campaigns in Brazil, Chile, Guinea-Bissau, Cuba, and later Nicaragua. I was cautioned several years ago at a California Writing Project Directors’ meeting not to adopt as relatives those international educators working at such basic levels of literacy. Despite the warning, I’ve continued to see our own collaboration with American teachers as part of a global effort to empower people to find their voices, to become agents for positive change, to see themselves as the creators of history and not simply as spectators.

Bridge to a New Society

When we talk about helping students use the written word to learn, to explore new ideas, to persuade and influence other people, we are also talking about the sort of society we want to live in. When we say that teachers in our Institutes discover the rewards of writing, we are describing a commitment to a certain sort of society, one in which, despite our gender, class, and ethnic differences, we can seek to communicate with each other. I want to draw out some of the consequences of our pedagogy and by doing so describe why the bridge to teachers working in bilingual and ESL classrooms can be a bridge to a new sort of society—one in which active citizenship is not just available to those with white skin, but is truly pluralistic. The bridge that took ten years to build connects the Writing Project with teachers in Watsonville, Castroville, and Salinas, California, where the children of migrant farmworkers are finding their public voices in Spanish and English, despite enormous legislative and social efforts to thwart them. Just as Mina Shaughnessy’s work in the Open Enrollment program in New York City, largely involving minority students, helped transform the teaching of writing to all kinds of students around the country, I believe Writing Project work in language minority classrooms will turn out to deepen our understanding of how to teach writing to all students. It will also help us think more imaginatively about the role of writing in a democratic society.

The nineteen bilingual teachers who collaborated in this past summer’s Institute at Santa Cruz told stories that need to be part of our dialogue about educational reform as they are now part of our Writing Project history. The teachers I worked with this summer spoke eloquently of their own painful censoring—their histories as students forced too early in their lives to abandon the language of their families. And they spoke of how their constant and much needed defense of bilingual and multicultural education drains them of energy that could be directed elsewhere. These teachers understand how too many minority children in the U.S. are excluded from being active contributors to this society by school experiences that lead to failure. They understand that writing has a special place in a curriculum designed to empower students.

The Writing Project’s efforts to help young people express themselves in school and, eventually, in public should be seen against renewed efforts, whenever we hear the cry for reform, to replace dialogue with dictates and collaboration with isolation. Our celebration of children’s thinking and of their creative expression cannot survive locked
in our classrooms. If we want freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press to prevail, in and out of schools, then as teachers we must make sure our own voices are heard in public. We must, finally, ask how the Writing Project not only offers our colleagues across the curriculum insights about reforming education, but also empowers teachers to be more effective, active citizens. We are taking our own literacy seriously when we write for local newspapers and are committed to educating a public whose support we need. Our Santa Cruz Writing About Teaching Collaborative was formed to publish newspaper and magazine articles about education. These teachers realized that they needed to write more than the assignments they gave their students. They needed to address a public that will never understand what teachers know without this writing.

It became clear this summer in working with minority teachers who have become highly politicized, in part because of the bilingual education controversy and the English-only initiatives, and in part because of their own experiences with racism, that publishing their most important writing would immerse them still further in political struggle. But by not doing so they would continue to be misrepresented in the press and victimized by reporters, politicians, and parents who do not know what teachers are thinking.

When Lupe Mendoza, a student in my basic writing class a half dozen years ago and now a bilingual teacher in Salinas, published the two poems below in a local newspaper, she wanted her voice to be heard in a community that seldom reads teachers’ writing. The translation from the Spanish is the work of several freshmen currently in my writing class.

*Mis Palabras*  
*(My Words)*

My words don’t betray me.  
They sing what I feel,  
Talk what I say,  
Tell what I think.

My words are born  
In the womb of my being;  
They are sown in the heart;  
And as I write them  
They blossom like a flower.

The word is  
The culture of the people,  
The voice of thought,  
And the world of a mind.  
My Mexican words,  
*Latinas* and *Chicanas*,  
Sing what I feel,
Talk what I say,
Tell what I feel—
They do not betray me.

_Grita Contra El Silencio_
(_Shout Against The Silence_)  

Sisters,
Brothers:
    Where do you hide?
    I cannot hear you.

It is said that we live
In an alien land.
The truth is that
They’ve silenced us.
It seems that no one
Wants to hear us.
Let us raise
Our voices.
Together we’ll conspire
Against silence.
Written words
Speak louder and
Travel further
Than the liveliest voices.

Write.
Write your words.
Cry out
And be free.

Let your words
Shed your pain,
Tell your frustration,
Speak of your joy.
_Mexicanas,
Latinas,
And Chicanas._
Let me hear you.
I want to cry out with you.

I remember a Watsonville High School history teacher whose deep sobbing didn’t keep her from telling us about her “field trip” to the Watsonville Cannery while the eighteen-month strike was still going on. Eighteen hundred mostly Hispanic women on strike for eighteen months! She valued her students’ writing and understood that research papers
could emerge from oral histories and on-site observation. Her students were motivated to learn more about the reality of the strike since their entire community was suffering. For some students the research project meant that schoolwork could be meaningfully connected with their families’ and friends’ lives. They knew all about I-Search papers and oral history projects.

When Delia Mendez and several of her students were arrested for getting too close to the cannery gate, it was an ex-Watsonville High School student, now a policeman, who explained to his former social studies teacher that his boss wanted to make an example of her. (Talk about the true bastards of the world!) I want to make one point: At the moment Delia Mendez was arrested, teachers committed to making literacy and writing part of active citizenship education shuddered. When she talked of this during last summer’s Institute, her message was clear: It is risky to focus our intellectual lives on the realities of our communities; it is risky to make academic work responsive to the controversial but central concerns of our students and their families. But despite the risk, perhaps because so much really is at stake, teachers who value literacy must be enemies of injustice. We must tell our students that we write to avoid the humiliation of silence in the face of cruelty and oppression. And our efforts as teachers must include writing for a public that needs to hear from us.

Delia Mendez almost lost her job. Some will say she should have been more careful—not gotten quite so close to the cannery gates. Others, like those described in a new report for the American Way called “Attack on the Freedom to Learn,” will say that teachers have no business opening their classrooms to such issues. These are the Phyllis Schlaflys who tell us, “It is a sin to worry.”

But people committed to the free expression of ideas, people in Writing Projects around the country who stand for a pedagogy and a vision of education that will strengthen our democracy, must applaud the risk Mendez took and understand it as a risk to help our students deal with the world they live in, a world they need to understand if they are to become actively involved in changing it. But many of us need the lineage I spoke of earlier, the bridges to other projects and other courageous efforts, to gain the confidence for this work.

**Illiteracy as Censorship**

Through our partnership with teachers in largely Hispanic schools, I am discovering that the illiteracy in our communities is accompanied by a silence that resembles censorship. I have come to hear teachers’ silences as censorship as well. Many colleagues in Delia Mendez’s district came to her support, but many also opted for less controversial projects the next year. Is their retreat from the issues of the day a form of censorship? Can we trace the writers’ blocks of our high school and college students back to the silences of the adults around them?
The teachers at a magnet bilingual elementary school, also in Watsonville, who chose not to salute the flag every morning, held on to their jobs by the skin of their teeth a year ago. That was a victory—but the chill that settled over the school as good teaching and patriotism were confused silenced many others. And there’s the lesbian teacher who recently wrote in a local paper, under a pseudonym, about her own “unnatural” silences (as Tillie Olsen calls them).

But despite the risk, perhaps because so much really is at stake, teachers who value literacy must be enemies of injustice...And our efforts as teachers must include writing for a public that needs to hear from us.

Democracy demands the sort of vigilance for free speech and freedom of inquiry that Writing Projects thrive on. We are important sites for democracy by the very nature of our enterprise. But we can’t assume that our work inside school is enough to keep those freedoms alive.

Let me close—fearing this has become a “believe on the lord” type sermon—with some powerful lines from an essay by Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer included in the anthology They Shoot Writers, Don’t They?, a text that should be required reading in our Projects. Galeano tells us that:

“Freedom” is, in my country the name of a prison for political prisoners and “democracy” the name for various regimes of terror; “love” defines the relation of a man with his car and “revolution” is understood as what a particular toilet soap achieves and “happiness” the sensation you get from eating sausages. “Peaceful country” means, in many places in Latin America, “ordered cemetery,” and where it says “sane man” one may have to read “impotent man.”

He continues:

By writing it is possible to offer, despite persecution and censorship, the testimony of our time and our people—for now and for posterity. One may write in order to say, in a sense: “This is where we are, this is where we were; we are like this, this is what we were like.”

The bridge that took ten years to build is a bridge that brings together teachers whose struggle to teach is often also a struggle for equality and justice. It is also a bridge to people in the past who have fought for the same goals and to writers in other countries whose own struggle to make their ideas public should help us, writing teachers and Project directors, see more clearly what we are about.
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References
