

San Jose State University

From the Selected Works of Ryan Skinnell

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Why Studying Writing Matters

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ORGANIZER'S MESSAGE

Prof. Dr. Shazra Munnawer

Dean FHS, NUML

Amid the push for science and engineering and the pervasive pressure on many students to obtain, above all else, career skills from their basic education, our country risks marginalizing humanities and social sciences. We cannot allow that to happen. These disciplines play an important role in educating students for future leadership and deal most directly with the human condition. Social Sciences and Humanities is fast becoming a neglected discipline in the wake of the emergence of newer disciplines related to industry and IT providing greater job opportunities across the globe. An isolated effort has been made in Pakistan through the setting up of Council of Social Sciences (COSS); but it is yet far from achieving its goals. With time, HEC is also cognoscente that universities have shifted their thrust to business and IT related disciplines. There is no denying the fact that social scientists can play a pivotal role in gearing citizens towards an understanding of human behavior, whether they be consumers, employees, soldiers, managers or regulators; and also the behavior of people collectively, within organizations – whether these be companies, armies, universities, or regulatory authorities; and that languages are a bridge of fraternity and solidarity among comity of nations. While academics of Social Sciences and Humanities are striving to come to the fore, there is a requirement for resurgence of the two highly important faculties; wherein the need to provide a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas.

Conference Overview

Scope of the Conference: Social Sciences and Humanities – history, literature, languages, art and philosophy focus on lasting challenges relevant to all of us: creating lives of purpose and meaning, appreciating diversity and complexity, communicating effectively with others and overcoming adversity. Ultimately, our ability to work meaningfully with others determines the success of our enterprises, and that ability is honed through humanities and social sciences. Most successful careers, including the ones in technology and engineering, do not result simply from technical knowledge. They require leadership skills, social and emotional intelligence, cultural understanding, a capacity for strategic decision-making and a global perspective. In other words, success in life requires a sensibility about the world and one’s place in it that humanities seek to cultivate, as well as an understanding of economic and societal context that social sciences provide. Leadership today requires addressing the challenges of an increasingly complex and interconnected world, whether the challenges are in business, health, education, technology, law, social justice, environmental protection or dozens of other fields. Most students today aspire for careers in multiple fields across the span of their lives. Our universities should develop students with skills and capacities that will serve them well in multiple settings and cultivate a passion for lifelong learning, which they will need to thrive in a world requiring constant adaptation. One of the lesser-known areas in higher education is the extent to which humanities and social sciences are evolving and innovating to meet this objective. Time-worn distinctions between “hard” and “soft” disciplines are blurring as faculty develop new ways of integrating technology into research, pull multiple disciplines together to solve problems, and apply the knowledge created to challenges in the broader world. This conference will provide a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas to promote intercultural cooperation in the rapidly changing and communication-driven society.

Objectives of the Conference

The objectives of the conference are:

- 1- To bring together leading academic scientists, researchers and research scholars to exchange and share their experiences and research results about all aspects of Social Sciences and Humanities.
- 2- To provide a premier interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary forum for researchers, practitioners and educators to present and discuss the most recent innovations, trends, and concerns, practical challenges encountered and solutions adopted in the field of Social Sciences and Humanities.
- 3- To attract research communities to promote connections between theory and practice and explore different perspectives on the application of research findings into practice.

Relevance and Scientific Significance of the Event with Reference to Existing National Needs:

- Amid the push for science and engineering and the pervasive pressure on many students to obtain, above all else, career skills from their basic education, our country risks marginalizing humanities and social sciences. We cannot allow that to happen. These disciplines play an important role in educating students for future leadership and deal most directly with the human condition. Social Sciences and Humanities is fast becoming a neglected discipline in the wake of the emergence of newer disciplines related to industry and IT providing greater job opportunities across the globe. An isolated effort has been made in Pakistan through the setting up of Council of Social Sciences (COSS); but it is yet far from achieving its goals. With time, HEC is also cognoscente that universities have shifted their thrust to business and IT related disciplines. There is no denying the fact that social scientists can play a pivotal role in gearing citizens towards an understanding of human behavior, whether they be consumers, employees, soldiers, managers or regulators; and also the behavior of people collectively, within organizations – whether these be companies, armies, universities, or regulatory authorities; and that languages are a bridge of fraternity and solidarity among comity of nations. While academics of Social Sciences and Humanities are striving to come to the fore, there is a requirement for resurgence of the two highly important disciplines; wherein the need to provide a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas.
- It is expected that ICSSH will provide an insight into old and new trends, local and global tendencies, progressive and conservative views, stabilization and destabilization patterns, national and global identities.

It is also expected that ICSSH will promote intercultural cooperation in a rapidly changing and communication-driven society with cross-border and culture-convergent encounters, to re-examine and re-define key questions on our existing agenda, as well as to identify new collaborative and networking opportunities, both of which will inform future directions of research and development.

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“Why Studying Writing Matters?”
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In the past 150 years, the most commonly required course in American higher education has been first-year composition. Millions of US students have been required to take some form of the course, and Brereton (1995) calls it “the largest single enterprise in American higher education” (pg. x). First-year composition, as the name implies, is usually required in the first year of college. Generally, it is an introductory writing course intended to prepare students for writing tasks they will be asked to undertake in college and their future careers. For the last century, first-year composition has been required for the majority of post-secondary students at the majority of US institutions. Harvard University, for example, is routinely ranked as a top five university in the world. Still, nearly every matriculant, regardless of their already impressive qualifications, is required to take Expos 20—Harvard’s version of first-year composition. At the same time, virtually every community college—schools obligated to enroll any student who completes high school equivalence—also requires first-year composition.

First-year composition in America is not precisely my topic. I intend to make assertions about the importance of studying writing beyond the first year. But a deeper understanding of first-year composition’s place in the US is useful for understanding writing instruction and research in higher education more generally. So I want to begin with some additional historical background to contextualize the argument I plan to make about the value of studying writing.

For starters, it is important to note that first-year composition is not strictly a US phenomenon. Post-secondary writing instruction is becoming an increasingly common international requirement. Universities in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, South America, and North American countries besides the US, are beginning to install first-year writing requirements (Thaiss, 2012). So while some of the issues I discuss are specific to the US, the implications are increasingly global. First-year writing requirements take on different characteristics in different places, but there is a recognizable consistency from one region of the world to the next.

The feature I want to focus on is the tendency to characterize first-year writing as preparatory. In fact, from first-year composition’s invention at Harvard in the late 1800s, the course has at least tacitly

implied a form of remediation. Historians of rhetoric and writing have argued for decades that Harvard's course was the model for all subsequent first-year composition courses in the US, and by extension for most courses worldwide. When the first-year course was designed at Harvard, there were indications from faculty and administrators that the requirement was intended to "fix" underprepared students. That is, students supposedly came to Harvard with a shocking inability to write at a college level, and first-year composition was intended to remedy the failures of secondary school teachers and cure deficient students.

I recently argued that Harvard's course played a different role in the late 19th century (Skinnell, 2014). Before the mid-1800s, Harvard students came almost exclusively from local, elite academies. By the 1890s, a rising proportion of Harvard students came from geographically dispersed public schools. Increased matriculation from public schools and enhanced geographic mobility were national trends in US higher education. I contend first-year composition was designed to entice geographically dispersed, public high school graduates to attend college.

Whether the first-year writing requirement was a punishment or an enticement, however, there has nevertheless long been the sense that post-secondary writing instruction is for novices. Expos 20, for instance, is supposed to "teach students the fundamentals of writing academic argument" (Harvard, n.d.) The belief that writing instruction is only appropriate for teaching students "fundamentals" is widely generalizable. And until relatively recently, first-year composition has often been the only explicit writing instruction universities offered.

The equation of post-secondary writing instruction with first-year composition has resulted in a similar equation with entry-level work and remediation. In other words, studying writing in higher education is codified in first-year requirements as a thing you learn prior to content—prior to history, literature, and so on. In the US context, professors, administrators, and even students often believe writing is a thing they should have learned *before* coming to college, and studying writing is therefore a regrettable corrective. Obviously this implicit logic is contradicted by the nearly universal requirement of first-year composition—surely not every college student is deficient. Nevertheless, tacit beliefs about writing instruction's remedial quality have consequences. Specifically, writing instruction in US colleges and universities has either taken the form of creative writing courses for students who want to learn to write poems and/or novels, or it has been relegated to the first year of college. And although creative writers are seen as pursuing a craft, it is not unusual to hear faculty and administrators describe students who need or want "non-creative" writing instruction beyond the first year in terms of

deficiency. Rhetoric and writing scholars call this the “deficit model” of writing instruction (Crowley, 1986).

The effects of this model have marked the US higher education system for decades. Until very recently, writing instruction has been all but absent from upper-division, graduate, and professional contexts in higher education, even though there has been a sharp increase in writing requirements for students and professors around the world. For instance, post-secondary faculty are seeing significant rises in publication expectations globally, and failure to produce research articles has serious consequences. Still, even with the critical expansion of academic and professional writing requirements, and even with the increasing presence of students in US institutions who need writing instruction beyond the first year, writing instruction has largely retained the complexion of remediation—as a thing people should have already learned.

But writing is not a thing people should already have learned.

In the past several decades, writing researchers have carefully documented the significant challenges of writing, even for professional writers. We know, for instance, that writing is not a discreet skill—good writing is *not* a goal you achieve once and for all. Meaningful writing is highly contextual and relies on sliding values of genre, purpose, audience, and language. These aspects of the writing situation change virtually every time a writer writes—even in different stages of the same project. In other words, research tells us that learning to write is a lifelong process. It is not a thing that should have already been learned—ever.

Writing researchers have also documented the reality that drilling students in grammar, usage, and mechanics “skills” do not transfer well to actual writing. They can sometimes be useful for language acquisition, especially for writers writing in non-native languages. But however important language acquisition is, it also does not transfer directly to writing situations.

A third lesson researchers have learned is that writing is not a simple act of transcription. In rhetoric and writing studies, we have long assumed a “write-to-learn” model of instruction. The write-to-learn model disputes the “genius model” of writing, which rests on the belief that good writing records good thinking. The “genius model” assumes thinking good thoughts is the truly important work and writing is a subsequent, mechanical act. The write-to-learn model, on the other hand, asserts that writing contributes to learning and changes what is being thought. Writing helps writers process complex information and learn. As Miller (2005) argues, there is value in using writing “as a technology to think

with rather than as a tool for succinctly recording the thoughts of others or as a weapon for fending off other points of view” (pg. 174). For most people, writing is recursive and generative. It is not subsequent to thought—it is thinking.

These lessons, and others learned by rhetoric and writing specialists in the past few decades, directly contradict the prevailing assumptions that inform most first-year composition requirements. Writing is not a set of skills that can be remedied. It is complex, multidisciplinary, and ecological, and writing research must encompass multiple disciplines, theoretical frameworks, and international perspectives in recognition of writing’s complexity.

Developing a more sophisticated research infrastructure is necessary, but my objective is rather more modest. I am advocating for more people in higher education to take up the study of writing as a necessary part of what they teach and study. This would entail learning relatively basic terminology (e.g., genre, argument, style, audience, and purpose) to determine explicitly what writing is, what it does, and how it works in relation to disciplinary research. By studying writing more explicitly, we stand to (a) become better writers, (b) become better teachers because we can teach students about discourse conventions alongside disciplinary knowledge, and (c) understand our individual disciplines better by recognizing ways writing connects what we do to how we do it. But even for people who prefer not to *study* writing, it is still an opportune time to reorient our understandings of what writing in colleges and universities should be. It is time to shed the negative sense that writing instruction equals fixing deficiencies, and realize that studying writing is a crucial, and ongoing, process for students and faculty alike.

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