2017 CCCC Chair’s Address

Because Writing Is Never Just Writing

The number one phrase that makes me groan: “My students can’t write.”

Here are two illustrations of what I mean: One is a description of a concern raised at the 1962 CCCC; the other comes from an October 2016 issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education (Teller). Clearly, the idea has legs.

I’m betting we all have our own examples, too. Here’s one from me: a faculty member from another department approached me at a reception with a variation on the phrase: “Why can’t my students write? They’ve taken writing courses. Their writing just needs to be clear and concise. Why can’t they do that?” This lament, this story that students “can’t write,” works from the premise that writing is “just writing.” It’s a thing that writers bang out. It is constituted of words that are clear, that mean the same thing to everyone, that are easily accessible and need only to be plugged into forms.

CCC 69:2 / DECEMBER 2017
But as writing professionals—and this is the phrase that I use to refer to us writing instructors, consultants, tutors, students, administrators—we know that writing is so much more. It’s a strategy that can be used for learning, a way of negotiating identities within and around specific contexts, a representation of ideas, a way of participating in ideologies, a strategy for movement. We build on these understandings as we work with writers every day in classrooms, writing centers, workplaces, community sites. We build on them as we work with faculty colleagues to use writing as a strategy for learning and exploration—even (especially) those who complain that students “can’t write.” All of these uses of writing make the point:

Writing is never just writing.

Our research, our teaching, our discussions of what we do and why we do it are suffused with illustrations of how writing is never just writing. I have a file of examples, images, and ideas like this one from students around the country. They are representations of existing concepts of writing studies or new ones, or habits of mind that writers have found especially significant.

These illustrations and examples come from the places and the people I know best, the focus of my work: faculty colleagues, graduate students teaching first-year writing, undergraduates. But the idea that writing is never just writing also matters—a lot—beyond the classroom. In the current political moment, writing has been implicated in efforts to make bigotry, violence, misogyny, homophobia, Islamophobia, and other forms of injustice part of what’s considered “normal” political discourse.

The examples I’ve just provided might not seem to be about this moment—and yet, in some ways, they are. They show how people have engaged
with elements of the idea that writing is never just writing to dig into critical questions: How does writing create perceived realities? How does the circulation of writing perpetuate and amplify these realities? How can we use writing as a strategy for growth, participation, or change? The recent election and its aftermath have continued to show us that some of what we believe about writing might not be as widely shared as we’d presumed: for example, that evidence matters for writing, or that effective writing creates opportunities for reasoned discussion.

These challenges are uncomfortable, even scary. We could say that they are troublesome. They contradict fundamental beliefs, challenge our understandings of how things work. They point to problematic dilemmas for writing professionals. As the chair of this organization devoted to writing and composition, I’m privileged to speak to you at the moment of these dilemmas so that we can think together about this thing, writing, that is so much more than what it seems on its surface. The remarks I’m sharing with you build on Joyce Carter’s keynote address at CCCC 2016. Joyce also focused on the current moment and outlined two modalities for grappling with it: advocacy and innovation. Joyce focused on innovation. I’ll shift to advocacy.

To do this, I’m going to lay out some troublesome dilemmas and then talk about how we can advocate for the idea that writing is never just writing within and among them. This will involve working from our disciplinary identity, then making connections with others. Will this be easy? Perhaps not. But as a former presidential candidate said in his first run for office, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

It’s time to get to work.

**The Dilemmas**

I’ll focus now on the dilemmas. When I talk about these, I could discuss some that emerged so starkly from the presidential campaign. What to do about the power of social media, the proliferation of fake news, the circulation of non-fact-based evidence? These are huge issues. But I’m going to keep my attention grounded and follow the advice that I give to students and colleagues so often. I’m going to focus on what I know.
No matter what jobs I’ve taken on, I’m a writing teacher. I’m also a writing researcher, a writing program administrator, and, right now, what I think of as an administrator beyond writing. But at the core of all of these roles is my identity as a writing teacher. From this role, I look at things that are sometimes considered mundane: how literacy is defined and by whom, how it’s taught, how it’s assessed. I look at these in conjunction with the people who matter most in my work life: college teachers and undergraduate students. This means that I ask questions about how to make a difference to conditions surrounding teaching, learning, and literacy development for these students and their teachers.

I also look at public policy associated with each of these. It’s from this vantage point, especially, that I see all matter of challenges to the idea that writing is never just writing. These stem from and loop back to a dominant story crafted and repeated by a sprawling network that I think of as the Education Intelligence Complex, or the EIC.

Like its namesake, the military industrial complex, the EIC is a collection of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), granting agencies, businesses, consulting firms, policy institutes, actions, and actors. The story it tells is called The Problem with American Education and How to Fix It. Elements of the story include what education is and isn’t, what learning should and shouldn’t be, and why. This story matters—for us writing professionals,
for our students, and for what we are able to do with and around writing.

The EIC’s story can be traced through countless documents: policy reports, white papers, testimonials, books, news stories. It begins with the failure of the American educational system to prepare students for the world of work and holds out the threat of economic peril as a consequence. Because students don’t know the right things, it says, the US economy is going to be in trouble.

This story is clear in *A Nation at Risk*, a 1983 report published by the US Department of Education. It said that students aren’t learning enough, and what they are learning isn’t what they need to. The problem is with the delivery model—classes and curricula are too disconnected from the requirements of work and not tailored enough to individual learners.

An influential 1996 report from the National Education Summit, a gathering of governors and corporate leaders, explained the implications for the economy. “Corporate leaders question how much longer we can compete effectively in a global economy,” it said (1).

While those two early reports laid the blame at the door of high schools, the story quickly moved to colleges. *Ready or Not*, a report published in 2004 by the influential NGO Achieve, for instance, said that the “American high school diploma signifies only a broken promise” (American, 1), and built the bridge to postsecondary learning. It said that most high school students “need remedial help in college” and most college students “never attain a degree” (6).
The story then moves to solutions. Because teachers, schools, curriculum, and systems are failing to produce students who meet the needs of the economy, those invested in the economy must step in. With their input, institutions need to do the following:

- educate to discrete and measurable competencies needed for workplace success;
- outline clearly defined pathways for measuring these competencies;
- identify measures by which achievement of competencies will be indicated; and
- use those measures and their achievement as a basis for continuous improvement.

This is the story told in documents like *A Test of Leadership*, the report from the Spellings Commission. Since then it’s also been told by so many EIC initiatives, projects, and reports that they’re hard to count. You can see it in commercial-grade competency-based education, in the manic drive to define and assess learning outcomes at the core of institutional accreditation, in standardized assessment processes, in products that provide comparative data like the College Scorecard, in every ranking and rating system out there. Each of these are enactments of neoliberalism as Nancy Welch and Tony Scott (2016) have described it, the belief that private interests and products associated with that interest will propel the public good.

This, then, is the plot: The Problem with American Education is that teachers, curricula, and schools are failing. Students are not learning what they should to participate in the economy. This puts the nation at risk. How to Fix It involves policy initiatives and data systems that can take this messy mass of humans, ideas, processes, and goals and instill a rational sense of order around them through what Randy Bass and Bret Eynan call “unbundling” (5), separating the elements associated with demonstration of learning into discrete, disaggregated, and granular segments that can be easily packaged, delivered, and measured.

This is a very different story about learning than the one reflected in our research. The title of that story, with a nod to the National Research Council (Bransford et al. 1999), might be something like: How People Learn: Time, Location, Troublesomeness, and Embodiment. The dilemmas I’m raising emerge from divergences between this story and the one told by the EIC.
When we talk about learning, we discuss it as process and product. Learners develop abilities to identify and make conscious choices about meeting expectations for writing within specific sites—college courses, community sites, workplaces. Importantly, this development involves troublesomeness. Here, though, troublesomeness is important for learning. It leads learners to question assumptions they’ve made, to shake up what might have been inert, to adapt or change prior knowledge. Learning involves being comfortable with the discomfort that this invokes, because this discomfort is critical for changing one’s mind—and real learning happens when that change occurs, when learners develop new or deeper ways of thinking and doing.

Writing plays a critical role here. When we work with students to study writing, we are helping them look at how expectations for writing or products of writing reflect deeper commitments and epistemologies, at how what is written tells us about how people work with and from expectations. All of what I’ve described here expands on the story about learning that runs through our research and teaching, that learning is

- located in specific places,
- develops over time, and
- is demonstrated through embodiment.

Writing, everywhere through this process, is never “just writing.” It’s a way of navigating contexts, negotiating identities, developing knowledge, demonstrating participation. From this perspective, we engage with students in our classes, our writing centers, our writing across the curriculum work.

From this perspective, we also study the rhetoric that is used to describe learning and consider its implications for writing. And it’s from this latter perspective that we can see how the rhetoric used by the Educational Intelligence Complex repeats the impulse to disaggregate, to make granular, to create lines that are as straight as possible from students’ characteristics and prior performances, through education, into career.
To show you what I mean, let me provide some illustration.

I’ll begin with excerpts from a promotional video about a predictive analytics program called Degree Compass (“Predictive”). Tristan Denley, a mathematician who created Degree Compass, said he wanted to apply design principles to a thorny problem: How to help students intelligently find their ways through a four-year degree? Degree Compass draws on data like course enrollments, student characteristics, and degree choices to answer the question. It processes these through an algorithm to provide information to students and advisers about which courses are most appropriate, which will be most useful to advance students toward a degree, and in which they are likely to perform better.

D2L, a company that acquired Degree Compass in 2013, included the video that I am going to quote from in its marketing materials until recently. But the video has now been removed from the site. D2L has also recently deleted the name “Degree Compass,” instead referring to “Learning Analytics for Education and Enterprise.” Nonetheless, I’ve chosen to begin describing the EIC’s story with a few moments from the formerly prominent video because these capture the dilemma I’m describing here.

I also will share with you that I and others had the opportunity to interview Denley about Degree Compass (2016). In an hour-long discussion he described how the system works, asserted strenuously that it was meant to be used to provide information to people and not replace them, and discussed how to avoid unintended consequences. But the video that I’m going to quote from, which features Denley discussing Degree Compass, includes none of this richness. Instead, it markets the product by situating it within the EIC’s story about The Problem with American Education. If you feel like multitasking while I discuss these three moments, I invite you to do an internet search for the key terms I’ll mention from the video:

- “Time is the enemy,”
- “higher education is a maze,” and
- “technology data higher education.”

You’ll find that your search returns links to EIC documents, statements, and so-called solutions that repeat the story I’m describing.

In the opening of the video, Denley recaps the problem: “One of the things that we really know is that when it comes to higher education, time
is the enemy. The longer it takes a student to actually complete a degree program, the less likely it is that they will ever complete that degree.”

A second moment from the video provides a visual metaphor: “Rather than higher education being sort of a nice clean path toward a degree . . . for [students], it’s very much a maze.” It then highlights how technology can address the problem. “When students actually follow the advice the technology provides we can take about a whole semester out of [their educations]. A whole semester of work, a whole semester of tuition . . . and a whole semester of not earning the salary that you would earn when you get the job afterwards. . . . Degree Compass really does suggest courses in which students can be much more successful with a better than 92% accuracy.”

The video, then, reflects the EIC’s story: The Problem is the structure of higher education, and the technology can tackle that problem. But the video says that the technology does this by straightening out what’s described as a “maze” into a chute that moves students from college entry to work, and by taking classes and enrolling in majors where students “like them” previously have been successful.

This idea of steering students to what seems to suit them and creating structures to move them through those paths quickly is also echoed in initiatives like Complete College America’s *Guided Pathways to Success,*
or GPS. Through this effort, as CCA describes it, students choose a meta-major whose goals are aligned with industry expectations so that they are workforce-prepared upon graduation.

To be sure, Degree Compass and GPS don’t dictate the content of courses. But when these products and initiatives are encapsulated and packaged within the EIC’s story, the nuances disappear. Their story also doesn’t include time, location, embodiment, or encounters with troublesomeness that are central to learning in our story. Instead, these are stripped or become elements of what is represented as the problem, part of what make higher education a maze that produces confusion, debt, and students’ abilities to contribute to the economy. Real learning, successful learning, looks like the straight line that will move them through, from college to career. This is a much different story about successful learning than the one we tell, and it’s one of the dilemmas we need to wrestle with.

A second dilemma is posed by divergent visions of how students make choices about the directions that they take as learners. In our story, study after study makes the point that successful learners and writers bring together their identities and the contexts where learning takes place. This synergy represents the enactment of choice and agency. But for the EIC, choice is to be guided by big data and analytics systems—in fact, predictive analytics systems are often invoked as a starting point. Guidance from these systems, their story goes, will point students in a direction that will ultimately be profitable, then reduce the time that it takes them to earn a degree or credential that they will use to get to this profitable moment.

The differences between the roles of choice and agency in these two stories can be quite stark. In the end, predictive analytics systems are sophisticated sorting mechanisms. Researchers Solon Barocas and Andrew Selbst explain that the purpose of such systems is to “provide a rational basis . . . to distinguish between individuals and to reliably confer to the individual the qualities possessed by those who seem statistically similar” (677). The conferring of these qualities occurs through the algorithmic processing of quantitative data by machines. But the research on learning and writing provides abundant evidence of learning that is very difficult to quantify, and perhaps even more difficult to incorporate into an algorithm that would be sensitive to time, location, and embodiment. Informatics researcher Simon Buckingham Shum makes the point beautifully: “data points on a graph are
tiny portholes onto a rich human world,” but they “do not do justice to the complexity of real people, and the rich forms that learning take” (Shum).

There are other problems associated with the way these data are used in predictive systems, too. The predictions generated by software are correlational, not causal. This slide, from a site I highly recommend called Spurious Correlations, illustrates the problem.

![Graph showing per capita cheese consumption vs. number of people who died by becoming tangled in their bedsheets.](image)

Sure, there’s a very strong correlation between per capita cheese consumption and the number of people who have died from being tangled in bedsheets. But it’s hardly going to lead any of us to make decisions about cheese consumption for our personal sleeping safety. However, if a low-income student from a high school in California’s Central Valley decides that she wants to be a physics major, the correlations there also aren’t likely to look good. When predictive analytics are done crudely—when the data are bad, when the algorithms are incorrect, or when they fail to take into account consequences, as would be the case if this student were told that physics probably wasn’t going to be right for her—results can be enormously problematic.

Barocas and Selbst make the point eloquently: it’s possible for the recommendations that emerge from predictive analytics systems to be “simultaneously rational and unfair” (Schauer qtd. in Barocas and Selbst 688). Rational because they are statistically sound and seem neutral; unfair
because they perpetuate inequalities and make “certain individuals ‘actu-
arially saddled’ by statistically sound inferences that are nonetheless inaccurate” (691).

This is why data scientist Cathy O’Neil refers to these systems as “weapons of math destruction.”

Many of these models, she writes, “encode human prejudice, misunderstanding, and bias into the software systems that increasingly manage our lives.” Ideas about data-guided choice embedded in the EIC’s story about The Problem with American Education and How to Fix It, then, are quite different than the one that runs through our research, teaching, and thinking about learning and writing.

A final aspect of the dilemma opened by the divergent stories about what learning means told by the EIC and in the research on writing and learning concerns whose expertise is most valued. Even if the prediction or the data provided via an analytics system is a recommendation to a teacher, it may be, as Ben Williamson says, “designed according to the values and assumptions about learning and pedagogy held by technical experts” (139). IBM’s Watson Enlight is an illustration of this possibility.

IBM says that Enlight provides teachers with “a comprehensive review of relevant data to understand each student’s strengths and areas of growth.” It gives teachers “curated, personalized learning content and activities aligned with each student’s needs” (IBM Watson). The combination of data analysis and technologies in Enlight, says IBM, will provide teachers with a comprehensive understanding of their class “from a single source”; “actionable insights” provided “on demand”; and materials for teachers to “craft targeted learning experiences on-the-fly” from the Watson Education Library. Since Watson will provide the curriculum, “the teacher role changes to a higher value plane, with less focus on lesson creation . . . and an increasing focus on facilitating. . . . Tasks considered of value today will change in terms of how we come to perceive value over time.” And this includes tasks associated with writing. “In the future,” IBM says, “systems will be capable of analyzing essay-style answers, which will permit teachers to spend more time on higher value
activities” (IBM Education 12). It’s just writing, after all—so it can be dealt with by nonhumans.

To be sure, there are users and producers of data and analytics systems who have taken into account many of the possibilities I’m outlining here—I’ll discuss some shortly. But here, I want to make the point that separate from that production or use, the rhetoric of these analytics applications often perpetuate the EIC’s story of The Problem with American Education and How to Fix It. This story and the materials associated with it sometimes run very counter to definitions of learning suffusing our thinking and our practice. As they seek to make granular this process, the choices students make, and the work of teaching, they also disassemble the rich and meaty ways in which writing is never just writing.

It’s in the face of dilemmas like these, which perpetuate the EIC’s story, that we need to consider how to advocate, starting with the idea that writing is never just writing. This advocacy matters—for our professional lives, our colleagues, our institutions. Because if writing is not understood as a powerful tool, a strategy, a representation of ideas, a vehicle for action and change, if it is seen as “just writing,” then the ability to approach writing as a subject of study, as something that must be understood and used within contexts, over time, for purposes, will fall away. That will make it harder for those people we work with most, students, to act as agents—whether they’re navigating postsecondary education or a political climate that seems like it’s going to require some tricky moves.

**How to Advocate: Because Writing Is Never Just Writing**

**Sources on developing strategies for action**

- Everydayadvocacy.org
- *Stir It Up: Lessons in Community Organizing and Advocacy* (Rinku Sen)
- Wellstone Action resources (http://www.wellstone.org/resources/)
- *Beautiful Trouble* and beautifultrouble.org
- Frameworks Institute: frameworksinstitute.org
- Marshall Ganz’s work
The question, then, is how to advocate—and that’s what I’ll talk about next. Successful advocacy means working toward strategies, long-term goals, through particular tactics. Developing these strategies and tactics takes discipline, and that’s the first thing that we need to learn. The Taking Action workshops at CCCC 2016 introduced a framework for developing strategies and tactics, and Carolyn’s theme of Cultivating Capacity does this, too. We’re also developing resources for taking action with the CCCC Executive Committee this year. NCTE has a resource for action-taking strategies called Everyday Advocacy. I list the URL for that site, as well as other sources that you can look to for developing strategies for taking action.

As these sources will tell you, all advocacy extends from principle. Our principles are reflected in our disciplinary identity. And here’s the first take-away from today’s presentation:

Through this identity, we can make a difference in the face of these dilemmas and others that pose challenges to our roles, and to the students we teach. Through this identity, we can convey why understanding that writing is never just writing is so important for so many.

When I invoke our disciplinary identity, I’m referring to three parts that come together in our fundamental commitments as writing professionals. Each fills in the dimensions of the idea that writing is never just writing.
The first of these parts is an interest in the insides of things. In our teaching and our research, we look at how writing works, how writers go about the activities of writing, the roles writing plays for people, in situations. For example, we look at how writers understand assignments, or how they go about producing text, or how they use writing to motivate change. We teach students to study writing in specific places, then practice with the conventions associated with what they see. This interest in the insides, in how writing works and what it does, helps us describe to ourselves and others that writing is never just writing.

The second part of our disciplinary identity is constituted from our expert knowledge. Participating in this knowledge leads us to particular ways of looking at the things that we are interested in, to particular ways of interpreting what we learn as we examine those things, to ways of describing what we know. When I talk about these things we know, I refer to them as threshold concepts. This term refers to fundamental concepts that participants in disciplines see through and see with.
Some of the threshold concepts of our discipline are on this slide. Within our discipline, others have also used other ways to condense and explain our expert knowledge, like keywords. Here I point to work both by Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg and a new collection by Iris Ruiz and Raúl Sánchez. All of these efforts pull together the field’s expert knowledge into accessible terms.

Our expert knowledge, reflected in threshold concepts or keywords, helps us understand and convey how writing is never just writing. They help us say things like this: writing is social and rhetorical. Qualities of good writing are shaped by people, with purposes, in specific places. Writers must recognize that to produce what’s considered “good writing” requires the ability to analyze expectations in specific locations. To do this, writers must approach writing as a subject of study and an activity. Through study, writers identify expectations; they engage in activity that involves making choices about content and form. But these choices aren’t neutral. The writing they ultimately create reflects their analysis of and choices about expectations. Their writing, then, is never just writing—it’s a complex activity through which they’ve made their ways.

The third part of our disciplinary identity is a sense of responsibility for writing, writers, conditions for writing, and consequences. When I invoke responsibility I look to Tara Fenwick. For her, responsibility is a set of actions that emerge from and are attuned to possibilities available within specific sociomaterial conditions—say, those associated with the EIC’s story of learning and its implications for writing. To engage in re-
sponsible action, we must be sensitive to the diversity of people and ideas circulating in these conditions, open to possibilities for collaboration, and willing to develop principled connections between our interests, our expert knowledge, and diverse people and ideas. When we collaborate with diverse peoples and ideas and develop principled connections, we are engaging in what Fenwick calls “knowing in practice” (184–202) around the idea that writing is never just writing.

This latter point is especially important. Writing, after all, doesn’t belong to us. It truly is everybody’s business. Deborah Brandt eloquently reminds us that writing has always been “less for good than it is a good” (5). She also shows us how we understand this good, this business, in ways that others do not. Our sense of responsibility and our knowing in practice help us understand why the idea that writing is never just writing is so important.

Our advocacy must start from this disciplinary identity. Then we need to learn more about where we want to advocate, about the ideas and principles held by people in those sites. In this talk, I’ve focused on the Education Intelligence Complex. I’ve especially honed in on the story that it tells about American education and the rhetoric that it uses to tell this story, since I think this story suffuses discussions about writing and learning at all levels. It’s reflected, for instance, in the comment “My students can’t write.”

To learn more about the EIC’s story and the policies and practices that extend from it, I tend to start with sources like these:

- Inside Higher Education
- Politico Morning Education
which take me to hundreds more. But you might want to focus your advocacy work in a different place—a department, a writing program, or an institution. The important thing is to learn about the values and principles that drive that place and shape its stories, no matter what the place is.

Then, we need to consider what issues we want to address and how they are associated with those values. I’ve used data analytics as my focus issue here. That might not be the issue you want to attend to—and again, that’s fine! If you do want to start digging into data analytics, here are some of the sources that have helped me.

- SoLAR (The Society for Learning Analytics Researchers)/Journal of Learning Analytics
- The Council for Big Data, Ethics, and Society/white paper from CBDES, “Perspectives on Big Data, Ethics, and Society”
- “Critical Questions for Big Data” (article by danah boyd and Kate Crawford)
- Code Acts in Education (Ben Williamson’s blog)
- Simon Buckingham Shum’s website/anything he writes or refers to
- Work by Tara Fenwick and/or Fenwick and Richard Edwards
- Weapons of Math Destruction (Cathy O’Neil)
- Sorting Things Out (Bowker and Starr)
- Spurious Correlations (Tyler Vigen)
- Statistics Done Wrong: The Woefully Complete Guide (Alex Reinhardt)
But back to advocacy. Once we’ve identified a location, learned about the values and principles of that location, and identified an issue, we can start putting this into motion.

This means starting from our disciplinary identity—our interests in the insides, our knowledge, and our knowing in practice. Optimistically it means trying, if possible, to make connections between our values and principles and those held by others. From here, we can introduce the concept that writing is never just writing and explore why it matters—to writers, for writing, and for the roles that writing plays. Of course, we also need to work from our disciplinary identity to fact-check, too—to ensure that assertions being made about students, writing, or writing classes are based in evidence and not what an official associated with the current administration called “alternate facts.”

What I describe here—especially trying to build connections with those whose stories and values initially seem different than our own—might seem risky. But to not make this attempt, to connect only with those who share our ideas and ideologies, replicates the same issues with predictive analytics that I described earlier—it leads us back to ourselves, creating the filter bubble that we heard so much about after the recent election. Additionally, it’s from this risky place, these attempts to put our knowledge into practice with others, where we can most effectively advocate. Again: I’ve focused on big picture EIC issues and stories here, but this work can be located anywhere. This is something that all of us can do. And this is another important takeaway:

No matter what our position in the field, when we make alliances through our disciplinary identity to advocate, we can make a difference.

Let me point to just a few illustrations of what I mean.

Faculty at Arizona’s Mesa Community College learned that their administration had opted in to Guided Pathways for Success, the effort I described earlier. The college emphasized knowledge, skills, and habits of mind. But when Alex Arreguin, Mesa’s WPA, started to meet with the teams building guided pathways, he found that they were focusing only on knowledge and skills, and that their definitions of those two things were driven by the needs of industry and of transfer institutions.
Alex brought the discussion back to habits of mind, drawing on threshold concepts of writing and the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (Council) to make connections between what faculty were thinking and our expert knowledge. He calls this a process of translation, asking “How do I package what I’m saying so that you’re hearing it within the language of GPS, but it also represents what we know?” Here, Alex and his colleagues worked from our disciplinary knowledge to help others define what they meant by “habits of mind,” drawing both on external sources like employer feedback and their own understandings. This kind of effort brings our knowledge and theirs into productive discussion about pathways.

Postsecondary writing faculty in Idaho have worked together to create The Write Class, a predictive analytics system for writing placement. But this platform reflects our expert disciplinary knowledge about writing success and placement. When they use the system, students reflect on actual course descriptions and self-assess their histories and confidence with writing. They can look at information about the courses and on what factors are used in the process of making the placement. The base algorithm was created by writing faculty and is regularly reassessed. The Write Class is also customized for each campus based on that campus’s population. Each campus also decides how to use it—for required placement or guided self-placement. And it builds reflection into students’ use of the software, incorporating questions about what they are doing as they think through their writing and reading practices. This also brings our disciplinary knowledge and the solutions proposed by the EIC, like the use of data analytics, into productive conversation.

Beyond writing courses, University of Michigan physics professor Tim McKay, thinking about how to leverage data analytics to address issues with achievement gaps in his courses, has developed a tailored coaching system called E Coach that uses predictive, quantitative, and qualitative data to develop coaching prompts customized to characteristics that correlate with learning achievement. We’re in the process of adapting E Coach at UC Santa Barbara for a biology course. Rather than promote it as a system, though, McKay understands that E Coach is a framework that must be adapted locally. The coaching prompts are developed through extensive interviews with students and faculty in the courses where the software is to be used, on the campus where it is to be used—it’s not a one-size-fits-all solution or set of language practices. The course, the students, and the
characteristics correlated with learning are flexible pieces that change in different contexts and are changeable within the system. This is the same flexibility that’s built into products like Eli Review, which provides an analytics-driven framework for peer review that writing instructors and students can customize together.

These brief descriptions don’t do justice to the richness of any of these projects, and I have not included many of the other efforts within and beyond our field that bring together our disciplinary identity with processes also used by the EIC. However, they all illustrate how it is possible to do tremendous work with elements currently associated with the EIC’s story. This reflects our disciplinary identity and the idea at its core: that writing is never just writing, but is instead a way of exploring, of representing learning, of participating in ideas and ideologies.

So, yes. It’s often true that writing is less for good than it is a good. But understanding how it is a good, what it is presumed to do for people in circumstances, how people are taught and learn to interact with those ways and how those ways are assessed is also a good. Because writing is never just writing. It’s our disciplinary identity—that combination of an interest in the insides, of expert knowledge, and knowing in practice—that allows us to do work for good with and through writing. This is what we bring, the unique contribution that we can make as writing professionals. Through our identity we can engage dilemmas, advocate for our beliefs, and make a difference. The sites of application, those places where we can make our work matter, are going to look different depending on where and who we are, the status that we hold, our strengths as people and as professionals. But across all of these sites of application, there is that shared focus on these things—writing, writers, and writing practices—that we care about, that we know make such a difference.

Because writing is never just writing.

Because writing is never just writing. And across these sites, we can help to ensure that this thing, writing, is constructed for good and with good in mind for its producers, for those who teach it, and for the contexts in which it circulates.
That is the challenge that lies ahead of the CCCC and, as CCCC members, of all of us.
We can meet it.
Let’s get going.
Thank you.

Acknowledgments
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Works Cited


