

**The Changing yet Enduring Nature of Writing and Rhetoric: Findings from the
Stanford Study of Writing**

WDHE Conference, London, June 29, 2010

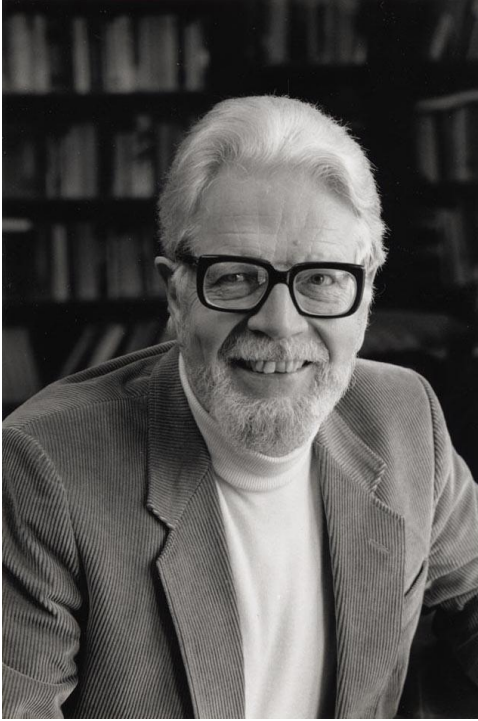
Andrea A. Lunsford

When I joined the Stanford faculty in the spring of 2000, I began preparing for a longitudinal study of writing to begin in the fall of 2001. I could not have known that I the 189 randomly-selected students in the Study would arrive on campus just a few days following the 9/11 bombings or that I would come to know so many of them so well that I am still in close touch with them today. Who were these students? The group is roughly half male and half female; its members come from 33 states and 9 countries; they speak 17 different languages. Well over 90% arrived on campus with their own computers and all of them reported using the Internet and Web regularly, if not daily. Students in the study represent a wide range of ethnicities: like the larger class, 57% of the students in the Study are non-White. Their majors ran the gamut from computer science to music to international relations to Spanish to physics, with many of the declaring double or even triple majors: by graduation, their majors ran parallel to those of the overall Stanford student body: the largest number of majors—33%—comes from math and science; the second largest group, 24% of Study participants, is made up of social science majors; and engineering and computer science together are represented by 20% of our students. Only 11% of our students are majoring in the humanities, a group that is smaller than the 13% of our students who are pursuing cross-disciplinary majors. We have one student, for example, who is majoring in music, science, and technology,

and we have several students double-majoring in subjects like English and Linguistics, and Biology or Economics and History.

So that's the group that I followed officially for nearly six years and from whom I collected over 15,000 pieces of their writing, from both in and outside of class. Of the 189 students, I got to know the 36 students in the interview subgroup best: while all 189 students filled out questionnaires twice a year, only these 36 sat down for extensive one-on-one talks. Believe it or not, we are still coding data from the Study, but all of the surveys have been analyzed and all the interviews transcribed. So we have been able to draw some conclusions that we believe will hold after all our data are analyzed and all our numbers crunched.

I will come back to the Study and the student participants in a bit, but first I want to back up and talk about the backbone of our writing program at Stanford—and that backbone is rhetorical theory. Our belief is that rhetoric provides a foundation for students, one that—once they understand its power—can help them sustain their writing and speaking development not only across the college years but far beyond. But “rhetoric” is a contested term, to say the very least, and at the beginning of our classes, many students regard it as the equivalent of a “bad word.” What students have in mind is the kind of rhetoric rhetorician and literary theorist Wayne Booth called “rhetrickery,” the cheating rhetoric that deals in lies, deceptions, and cynicisms. (*The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.)



This view of rhetoric is not a new one. In fact, although rhetoric is one of the oldest disciplines in the history of the western world, that history reveals a continuing tension and ambivalence over how to define the subject. Some 2500 years ago, Aristotle argued that rhetoric was the art of communication, that it provided a means of creating and sharing knowledge on any subject as well as a means of self-defense against the manipulative use of language: rhetoric was, Aristotle said, “the art of coming to sound judgment.” In Plato’s early works, on the other hand, rhetoric is a mere “knack,” a bag of cheap tricks that is related to the truth in about the same way as quackery is related to medicine, chocolate “flavored” candies to the finest Cadbury bars. This tension over definition has persisted down through the centuries and is reflected today in the fact that while we at Stanford teach courses in rhetoric and writing, following Aristotle’s definition, as the great art of ethical communication and persuasion, our local newspapers

report daily on the latest blast of what they inevitably refer to as the “mere rhetoric” emanating from various political groups.

Ethical Rhetoric or “Rhetrickery”



This tension over what rhetoric is was at work in the 2008 U.S. election: was it McCain’s “straight talk express” that was capable of getting at the real truth hidden behind the veil of language; was Obama’s eloquence a sign of a fine-tuned intelligence—or just hot air? This tension, in fact, reflects western culture’s deep ambivalence toward the nature and power of language: is language the embodiment of truth and action—what the anthropologist Malinowski defines as the very foundation of democratic order in human affairs—or is language a smokescreen that hides or conceals truth, mere “hot air” that acts as a barrier to communication rather than the enactment of it. When I ask my students to consider how they would define language (and rhetoric), I often represent these two very different view through phrases they will know: phrases like “In the beginning was the Word or “I give you my word of honor” reflect the powerful and

honorable view of language: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but *words* will never hurt me” represents just the opposite view. I find that students today often hold both these views, without realizing how contradictory they are.

Such conflicting attitudes toward language and the art of rhetoric are also reflected in the history of a number of disciplines, including philosophy and English studies, not to mention rhetoric. Indeed, we can find both attitudes vying for dominance throughout western history, as indeed they are vying today. In spite of the very real dangers of oversimplification, the point I want to make is just this: when rhetoric is defined as the art of ethical communication and persuasion—what I think of as the “word of honor” view, then it provides a strong and positive catalyzing force in democratic education and society, one that aids in forging shared values and maintaining the social order and one that can underpin sustainable writing development. On the other hand, when rhetoric is defined as a bag of tricks, the veil of truth—the “mere words” view, then as a discipline rhetoric is of little real importance to student writers, to higher education or to democratic society, and its negative powers go unrecognized and unchecked.

Of course, such an either-or view is unlikely to hold sway: in fact, “rhetickery” and “ethical rhetoric” co-exist in uneasy tension. But we can find times when an ethical rhetoric played a key role in education—that is, a time when higher education rested on the assumption that language is our most powerful socializing tool. The model I want to use for this illustration comes from eighteenth and early nineteenth century North American instruction in rhetoric and writing. As I have already suggested, this model of instruction placed rhetoric at the center of the curriculum as that art which taught both the principles and practice of ethical communication and persuasion in any field. Second,

this model put major emphasis on oral, participatory discourse. And students spoke, in their class discussions and public disputations, on matters of social and political significance: to use Richard Weaver’s phrase, their words held consequences. This emphasis on oral communication in open public forums demonstrated to students just how powerful language could be by stressing the relationship between words and their immediate effects on an audience.

The ethical use of rhetoric and writing “cultivates the memory, the reasoning powers, the powers of extemporaneous expression, and the ability to defend views.”

William McGuffey, author of *The McGuffey Readers*,
1836

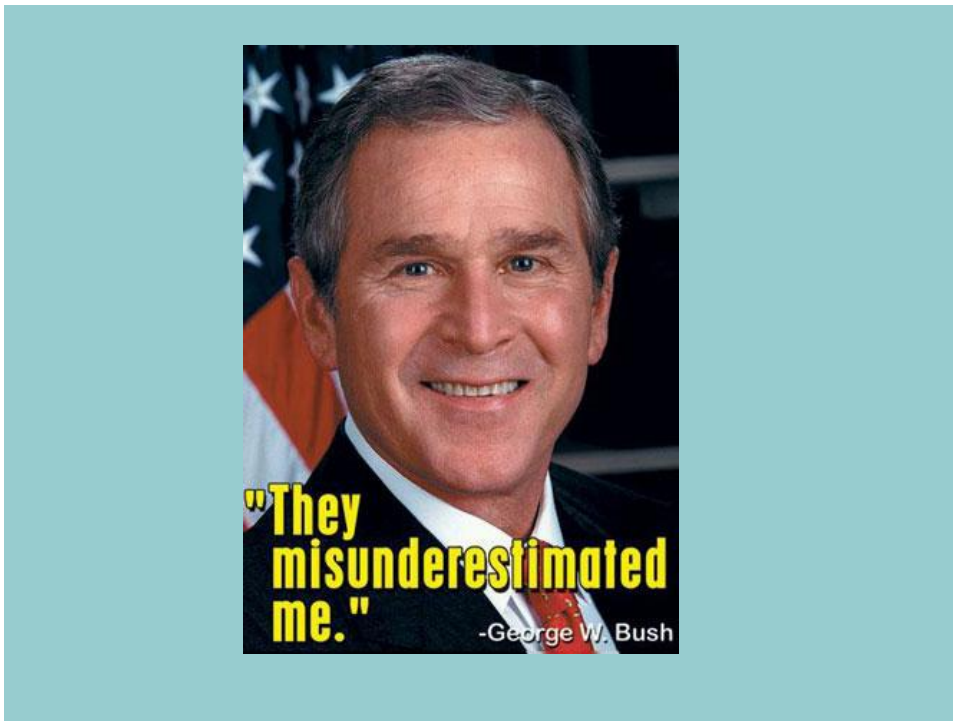
In an 1836 report evaluating higher education, William McGuffey praises this practice of classroom speaking, saying that it “cultivates the memory, the reasoning powers, the powers of extemporaneous expression, and the ability to defend views.” Unless students can exercise all these abilities, McGuffey warns, they are “not suitably educated.” (Transactions of the Western Literary Institute, 1836, p. 241.) Reinforcing these speaking activities were the arguments students were invited to write, and especially the

many student speaking societies where students practiced their abilities to participate in civic discourse.

I do not want to present a sentimental or nostalgic view of this 18th century model of rhetorical education in the U.S.; certainly such a model was far from perfect. Just to mention one tiny little flaw, it excluded women and all people of color almost entirely from the activities I have described; to name another, it was based far too much on persuasion as the end of rhetoric and on agonistic means of securing agreement. Nevertheless, I find it instructive to look back to this model because it posited rhetoric (in terms of both oral and written discourse) as central to the university curriculum; because its primary emphasis was on participatory discourse; and because it viewed language not as “mere words” or manipulative techniques but as a powerful agent for forging common values and strengthening the democratic fabric of society.

What, you may well ask, happened to this model of instruction? Answering that question would call for a much longer talk, but I can say that the growing hegemony of writing, which ironically led in higher education to a move away from the production of discourse (the rhetorical approach) to the consumption of discourse (the literary approach); the move to embrace empiricism; and the huge surge of enrollments in universities, which led to larger and larger classes, all helped to contribute to the eventual demise of this model of rhetorical education. More specifically, where speaking and writing had once been rhetoric’s mean to a desired end—the production of public discourse on subjects of vital importance to individuals in a democracy—increasingly, form took precedence over substance and the writing done in the new “composition” classes became a series of sterile exercises on subjects like “on spring flowers.”

Instruction in writing, divorced from its original purpose in the rhetorical tradition, shifted its emphasis from finding and sharing meaning to completing grammar drills and producing “correct” essays on a set topic. This emphasis on form or style unrelated to a theoretical framework that linked thought, language, and action represents the ultimate trivialization of the rhetorical tradition and a form of instruction that could never possibly lead to sustainable writing development.



That trivialization, in my view, eventually led to the shocking degradation of language on display in the discourse of U.S. government officials during the Bush administration, and to the seeming inability of the American public to mount a critique of such debased language or to offer a viable alternative to it. Eighteen months into the Obama era, we are seeing the huge effort that it will take to shift this view of language.

At my home university, we have been working hard to establish a rhetorical tradition that can teach students the arts of self-defense Aristotle attributed to rhetoric, but

to go far beyond that in fashioning strong ethical arguments of their own and to build a framework that will lead to sustainable development. Toward that end, every student at Stanford takes two courses in Rhetoric and Writing, courses deeply informed by the findings of our longitudinal study and ones we hope will introduce them to the powerful principles of a rehabilitated rhetoric and give them an opportunity to practice those principles in a number of settings and across a range of genre and media.



The first course, Program in Writing and Rhetoric 1—or what the students have nicknamed “Power”—focuses on teaching students to conduct sophisticated rhetorical analyses of arguments they find all around them and then to carry out a major piece of research that culminates in an argument of their own design. In rhetorical terms, this course focuses on the first two “canons” of rhetoric, invention and arrangement—with a modicum of attention to the third canon, style.

PWR 1

Focus on Invention and Arrangement

- **Rhetorical analysis**
- **Putting sources in conversation**
- **Research-based argument**

For the Writing and Rhetoric 2 course, we shift our attention to the fifth canon of rhetoric, delivery, which today is often known as “performance studies.”

PWR 2

Focus on Delivery

- **Translate written to oral**
- **Prepare presentation script**
- **Use new media**
- **Perform!**

Students in this course continue to study principles of rhetoric and to carry out research on a topic of social significance. But in addition to producing a traditional academic essay on this topic, they must grapple with a new question: what media and genre should they choose through which to present or “deliver” their research? Thus they are beginning to learn about the rhetorical strategies appropriate to oral and multimedia or web-based presentations of research. Throughout both courses, the focus is on understanding the power of language, on learning to think critically about how others use language to influence or manipulate us, and on learning to prepare and present powerful, and ethical, arguments of their own—in written, spoken, and multi-mediated forms. Here is student Jacqueline Pham, who wrote an essay on graphic novelist Neil Gaiman’s use of Shakespeare in his *Sandman* series.

Jackie Pham
English 87Q
Research Paper
February 13, 2006

SHAKESPEARE AND GAIMAN: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS ATTAIN IMMORTALITY

“I would give *anything* to have your gifts. Or more than anything to give men dreams that would live on long after I am dead.”

-the character of Will Shakespeare
in “Men of Fortune,” Issue 13 of *The Sandman*

With words reminiscent of Marlowe’s Faustus, the character of William Shakespeare made a pact with Morpheus, the Lord of Dreams, in Neil Gaiman’s “Men of Fortune” to create dreams that would guide men’s imaginations for centuries to come. Both William Shakespeare and Neil Gaiman mastered the art of bringing words to life, each in their own fashion. Shakespeare had a knack for writing enthralling plays that helped lift the genre out of the pits of common folks’ entertainment to the pinnacle of English literature. Four hundred years later, comics rose from gaudy children’s “literature” to a serious art form capable of charting new territory, thanks to artists like Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware and Gaiman.

And here is her “translation” of this opening into a script for oral presentation:

Jackie's essay "translated" into oral script

[Slide 0: Title slide]

[Slide 1: Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Faustian words cel]

"I would give *anything* to have your gifts. Or more than anything to give men dreams that would live on long after I am dead."

Meet Will Shakespeare, a character from Neil Gaiman's comic, *The Sandman*. As a down-on-his-luck "playwright," Shakespeare wants more than anything to write as well as his friend Christopher Marlowe. With these words (point to slide), Shakespeare makes a pact with Morpheus, the Lord of Dreams. In exchange for inspiration, he writes two plays for Morpheus, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. Gaiman showcases each play in two issues simply called "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "The Tempest." Instead of merely repeating Shakespeare's words, Gaiman gave them his own distinctive touch.

[Slide 2: statement of thesis, support]

--along with one of her slides



"Men of Fortune," Issue 13,
Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*.

What is involved in this second-level writing and rhetoric course is very intense work on writing and speaking and presenting, with a focus on noting the rhetorical strategies appropriate to each and how to think “kairotically” about rhetorical performance.

Developing this new required rhetoric and writing course has challenged all of us who teach in it to reject what Booth calls “rhetrickery” and to expand our knowledge of what he calls a “listening rhetoric,” that is a rhetoric that aims at understanding the arguments of others before attempting to work for change. In addition, we have had to learn quite a lot about how rhetorical strategies work in new mediated discourses, for central to the development of such new literacies, is the mobilization of “very different kinds of values and priorities and sensibilities than the literacies we are familiar with” (7). New literacies—those encouraged by Web 2.0—are “more ‘participatory,’ ‘collaborative,’ and ‘distributed’ in nature than conventional literacies. That is, they are less ‘published,’ ‘individuated,’ and ‘author-centric’ than conventional literacies.” They are also “less ‘expert-dominated’ than conventional literacies” (9).

New literacies involve, in other words, a different kind of rhetorical mindset than literacies traditionally associated with print media. In their introduction to *A New Literacies Sampler*, Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear contrast what they refer to as a “physical-industrial” mindset—the mindset that I certainly grew up inhabiting—with a “cyberspatial-postindustrial mindset” (10).

New Literacies

- Characterized by “cyberspatial post-industrial mindset
- Collaborative, distributed
- Participatory and performative
- Less expert-centered
- Not bound by traditional notions of intellectual property

According to Knobel and Lankshear, those whose experience grounds them primarily in a physical-industrial mindset tend to see the individual person as “the unit of production, competence, intelligence.” They also identify expertise and authority as “located in individuals and institutions” (11). Those who inhabit a “cyberspatial-postindustrial mindset,” in contrast, increasingly focus on “collectives as the unit of production, competence, intelligence” and tend to view expertise, authority, and agency as “distributed and collective” (11).

Students in the Stanford Study of Writing clearly exhibit the mindset Knobel and Lankshear describe: they work in teams on everything; they work effortlessly across genre and media; they seldom hold to traditional notions of copyright and textual ownership; and perhaps most important, over and over and over they tell us that good writing is writing that “makes something happen in the world,” that is, good writing is performative. As illustration, let me introduce you to a few of these students and the

work they are doing with writing and rhetoric. Here, for example, is the work of several students taking a PWR 2 course on the rhetoric of advertising. Not content with doing the course assignments alone, these students set out to use the skills they were learning to create ads of their own—ads that would, in turn, parody their course, PWR 2.

**Took PWR 1.
Didn't take PWR 2.**

Dick and Jane:
a (rigorously supported)
study in psychic trans-
relational gender modes

Don't quite know how to give the presentation that's going to blow your audience away? Find out the answer in PWR 2.
pwr.stanford.edu

PWR STANFORD UNIVERSITY
PROGRAM IN WRITING AND RHETORIC

"Some people say they would rather die, than speak in front of people.
So this means, that **if they were at a funeral,**
they'd rather be in the coffin than giving the
eulogy." ~Seinfeld



We prepare you for the eulogy.

www.pwr.stanford.edu

PYVR 2

Get a clue with PWR 2:



All the presentation skills and confidence to **"totally nail it"**

A class to match every style.
Shop online at pwr.stanford.edu

PWR
Present your best.

These “spoof” ads were created by groups of students completely outside of class, working together on their laptops and making use of software programs like PhotoShop—and they were producing discourse just the way ancient rhetors did, rather than merely consuming the writing of others. And they certainly were practicing “new literacies”—that is, literacies that are participatory, collaborative, and most of all, deeply performative.

Note also that these students don’t blink at using photos they took from the Web. Indeed, no finding was more interesting to me in our longitudinal study of writing than the notions students held about textual ownership. In short, we found that the deeply participatory nature of electronic forms of communication provides new opportunities for

writerly agency, even as it challenges notions of intellectual property that have held sway now for over 300 years, leading to diverse forms of multiple authorship and to the kind of mass authorship that characterizes sites such as Wikipedia and Google News.



To make this point, let me introduce you to one of the participants in our longitudinal study, Mark Otuteye, a computer science student who wrote a spoken word poem during the first weeks of his first year. (Here’s Mark at our Writing Center along with his Mom and a fellow student poet. Mark was the most prolific writer in our study: he contributed over 500 pieces of writing to our database!) Titled “The Admit Letter,” this poem was performed by Mark later that year during Parents’ Weekend: it opens with a “so-called friend” saying to Mark “Oh sure, you got into Stanford: you’re Black.” What follows is Mark’s imagining of what his “so-called friend” thought his admission letter to Stanford might have said. The two imaginary versions of the admit letter that Mark performs are biting—and very, very funny; together, they not only put the so-called

friend in his place but manage to send up the University as well. On the Stanford campus, news of this poem spread like proverbial wildfire and Mark was called on to perform it in numerous venues. In one such venue, the poem changed significantly: now it was performed by Mark and a Chicana student, who powerfully wove together versions of their “admit letters.”

“The Admit Letter” went through additional permutations during Mark’s college career, and during one of the interviews with him I asked “So is this poem yours? Do you own it?” In a lengthy conversation, Mark said that he considered the poem to be his—but not *exclusively* his; in fact, he said, his work is usually written and performed collaboratively, and he sees it as part of a large poetic commons. In short, this student was already effectively moving into new media literacy and into new territory regarding textual ownership. Mark’s poem also illustrates what students have told me over and over again: that “good writing” is performative, it makes something happen. Mark’s poem certainly did that (in fact, it is still being performed on campus).

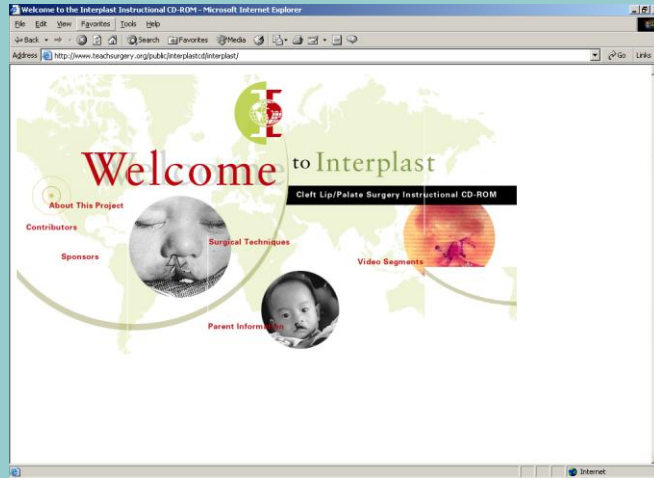
But the students in our study used writing and rhetoric to make things happen in many other ways as well.



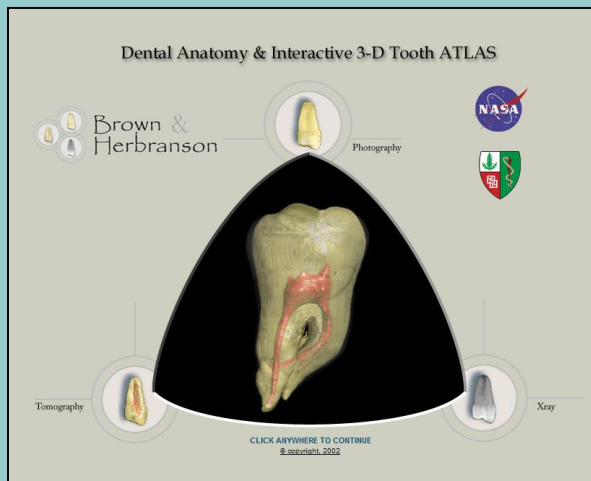
Amrit Rao

Meet, for example, Amrit Rao, a student who majored in biology in preparation for medical school—and who has gone on to investment banking and business school. Outside of class, Amrit was a member of several important groups: Doctors without Borders; Student Global Walk for Aids, and so on—and he worked with members of these groups, using his knowledge of technology and new media, to engage in very practical rhetorical discourse. He used writing to make something happen in the world.

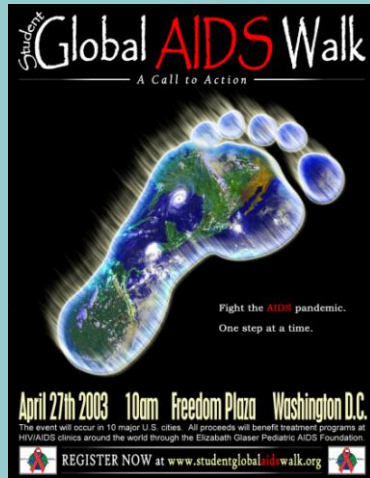
One of Amrit Rao's Collaborative Websites



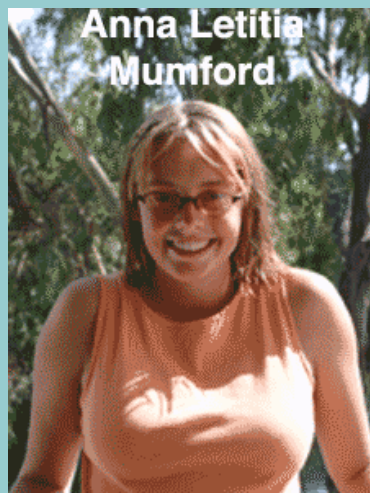
Amrit's Collaborative CD Project



Student Group Global Aids Walk Poster

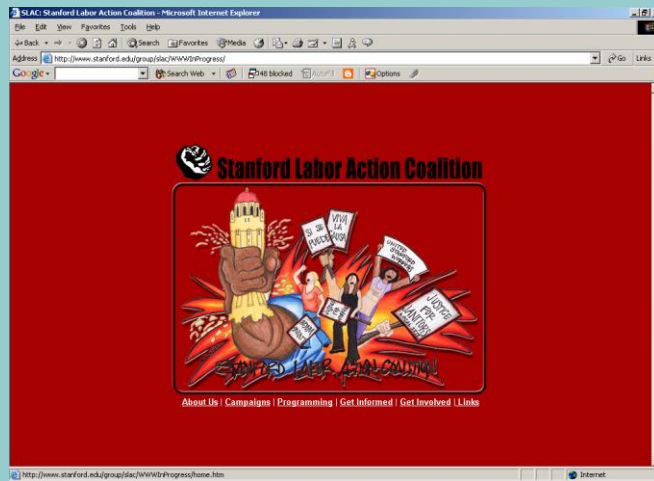


The same is true of Anna Mumford, who studied political science and feminist studies—and was out to change the world.



Anna was a founding member of the Stanford Labor Action Coalition, and together they created websites, distributed flyers, wrote pamphlets and newsletters—even held hunger strikes—in order to force the University to negotiate with its temporary workers for more fair pay.

Anna's Collaborative Website for SLAC



Low-tech but very effective SLAC Flyer


STANFORD LABOR ACTION COALITION

STANFORD TEMPORARY WORKERS DESERVE BETTER...


Temporary workers at Stanford are hired to fill permanent jobs for months or even years, yet they receive low pay and no health benefits. These workers have absolutely no job security, no medical benefits, and most make only \$8 an hour (far below a living wage in Silicon Valley). Many temporary workers don't just have to work for themselves but have families who depend on them. Without health coverage, many families must use the emergency room for health care resulting in higher health care costs for taxpayers.

64% of Stanford temps have been at Stanford for more than 6 months. **94%** would prefer permanent employment. **73%** can't make a living wage. **68%** have no health insurance. **46%** struggle to pay on housing with another family to afford rent.

Lourdes Estrada
Lourdes has worked in Wilbur Dining hall at Stanford for more than a year and a half as a temporary worker. Before she came to Stanford, Lourdes worked for over twenty years in a fruit packing plant. When the plant closed, she went to a food service worker job training center and was promised a permanent job at Stanford. She was also promised ESL classes to help her improve her communication skills. Despite her hard work and commitment to Stanford, Lourdes has still not been offered language training or a permanent job.



Ana Ayala
Ana Ayala is a 23 year old temporary worker who was recently employed in the Wilbur Dining hall at Stanford. After becoming pregnant, Ana continued working as a dishwasher until she almost lost her baby due to the physical stress of heavy lifting for long hours without breaks. Her doctor told her that if she continued working, she would lose her baby. She had been working for 6-8 months on \$8 an hour, never received a raise, and left Stanford with the hope of getting her job back. Because she was a temp, Ana had no medical insurance and thus had to go into debt to help pay for the medical costs of her pregnancy. Fortunately, her daughter was born just a few weeks ago and Ana hopes to return to work in January to be able to support her new child.



Support Temporary Workers at Stanford
by signing the **ONLINE PETITION** at
www.petitionsonline.com/petition/stanfordtemps.html

Created by: Lorinda Solari@stanford.edu
*This flyer is based on testimony collected at Stanford by World for People's Union.

Mark, Amrit, and Anna—and dozens of other students I could describe from our longitudinal study—all represent what student writers and rhetors can do to make things happen in the world when they understand that written and spoken words have consequences; when they practice rhetoric rather than rhetorickery; when they listen to the needs of those around them; when they act as rhetors in the ancient sense of using ethical communication to arrive at sound judgment. And note that they are doing this rhetorical work both in and out of their classes. Our longitudinal study of writing has convinced me that this out of class writing is of great importance to students, that they often see it as of greater significance than their classwork for the simple reason that they can use it to get some good work done in the world. For that reason, we have added a strong out-of-class component to our campus's Hume Writing Center: here describe Open Mics for weekends; Spoken Word Collective; Film Lab; Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Project; Journal sponsorship; How I Write; PLUS Project WRITE and Ravenswood Writes.

So what seems to make writing development sustainable for these students? In sum, building bridges between their academic and non-academic writing; having opportunities to practice writing across a wide range of genre and media; working with others on writing and writing projects; seeing writing as epistemic, as capable of producing knowledge, not just recording it; and most of all, engaging in what my colleague and fellow researcher Paul Rogers calls “dialogic interaction,” that is the kind of one-on-one talk and talking back our students said led to the biggest breakthroughs and the biggest improvement in their writing. In the long run, students in our Study wanted to sustain their own writing development in order to pursue their goals—and these almost always had to do with “making something good happen in the world.”

When I am most down and out, when I feel as though I have spent my life working for goals that have been too often subverted or utterly dismissed by those in power, I think of these longitudinal study students I have gotten to know so well—of Mark and Amrit and Anna—and all the students who work in and through our Writing Center. In these very, very tough economic times, when universities and colleges are cutting programs right and left, they are the reason I continue to argue for not just the importance but the necessity of rhetoric and writing to an effective 21st century university; they are the reason I want the honorable and indispensable discipline of rhetoric not only to survive but to flourish; they are the reason I am certain I remain devoted to creating sustainable writing courses and programs like those I have described here.

Realizing such a desire demands, as the twenty-first century winds forward, a powerful art of survival. I am reminded that poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren's remark that our biggest challenge, in a new century, is "learning to live in the world." I believe that statement is accurate. But more important, I believe that, in the richness of its traditions, rhetoric is the art and the practice that can bring people together, that can forge assent, that can make (good) things happen in the world, and that can not only teach us now to survive but how to live—and live well and ethically and productively and sustainably—in the world. As such, I believe that rhetoric and writing are subjects infinitely worth studying and practicing and infinitely worth giving to our students who, by learning to live in this world, have a chance to change it for the better.