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New Conceptual Frameworks for Writing Center Work

by Nancy M. Grimm

About the Author

Nancy Grimm has directed the Michigan Tech Writing Center for more than twenty years. She is a Professor in the Humanities Department at Michigan Tech, and her scholarly interests include literacy studies, composition theory, and writing center theory. She has won two awards from the National Writing Centers Association for outstanding scholarship on writing centers, one in 1996 for a *Writing Center Journal* article, and one in 1999 for her book, *Good Intentions*. From 1990-1994, she edited *The Writing Center Journal* with Ed Lotto and Diana George.

We cannot remake the world through schooling, but we can instantiate a vision through pedagogy that creates in microcosm a transformed set of relationships and possibilities for social futures, a vision that is lived in schools.
— The New London Group (19)

It is a pleasure to be in Las Vegas for the International Writing Centers Association Conference and an honor to be invited to give this address. Thank you, Michele Eodice, for the invitation, and thank you, Claire Hughes and colleagues, for all the hard work involved in creating a successful and welcoming conference.

I would like to extend a special welcome to the undergraduates here at this conference. I realize that for many of you, this may be your first—and, maybe also, your last—writing center conference. Some of you may go on to academic careers, maybe even a few of you will direct a writing center some day. Most of you, however, will follow careers in other economic sectors, and that's a good thing because the

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understandings you gain from writing center experience prepare you to critically and creatively engage the future. My argument in this talk stresses the importance of paying attention to the conceptual frames we use to understand the world, our work, and the impact of our work on the world, and this attentiveness to conceptual frameworks is important in all careers.

When the undergraduate writing coaches I have known return from a conference like this one, they frequently express surprise about how much writing centers vary from campus to campus. They learn that not all writing centers have the same approach to scheduling or the same policies or the same tutor education program. They learn that people who work in writing centers don't even call themselves the same thing: some are tutors; others are writing assistants, writing fellows, writing consultants, or writing coaches. There are a number of reasons for the differences among writing centers. Factors such as local contexts, financial considerations, and institutional missions can have a major impact on the direction of a particular writing center. But even more powerful influences are the unspoken assumptions that guide the practice—assumptions about students, about language, about literacy, and about learning.

To illustrate how these assumptions shape a writing center, I will take you on a quick mental tour of three writing centers where I have worked. The first was comprised of two spacious rooms. One room had a desk, a small table, and shelves upon shelves filled with boxes of tapes and workbooks. The other room consisted of twenty-five small carrels, each stocked with a suitcase-sized tape player and five-pound earphones (state-of-the-art technology in the 1970s!). This writing center took such an extreme non-directive approach that it actually put tutors and students in separate rooms. The tutors met with students only after they had completed skill-and-drill remediation lessons in the separate auto-tutorial lab that was free of the distraction of human interaction. The director of this center was a kind man, but like most of his department colleagues, he was not convinced that these students belonged at the university; thus, he was reluctant to assign university personnel to work with them. In this writing center, English was not conceptualized as a living, changeable language. It was static, mummified, standardized, reified

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in grammar books. Students who spoke or wrote English that was marked by other languages, neighborhood dialects, regional and class differences, cultures other than white American, were considered illiterate. As you might have already guessed, this way of thinking about students, language, literacy, and learning did not produce good results. Nothing really changed: the isolated students' oral and written language remained the same even after they successfully completed the drills; the problematic attitude of the faculty toward these students remained the same; and the students' ambivalence about the university remained the same.

The second writing center looked much different from the first. It consisted of one carpeted classroom with about eight rectangular tables where tutors and students could sit side by side. It was a quiet, orderly space where a tightly knit group of white people cared for each other and for their white tutees. This writing center embraced a nurturing vision of students and offered hour-long one-to-one tutorials to work with students on writing and revision tasks. In this writing center, we thought of students as "needing our help," and we focused our promotional efforts on all the ways we could help them. However, one way we would not help them was to proofread or edit their papers, so we persisted in making careful distinctions between the help we were prepared to offer and the help they sometimes wanted from us. Learning to develop, focus, organize, and support ideas was understood as a social activity, but learning to edit and proofread a draft was something a person had to learn on his or her own. Those persistent markers of racial and class identity, neighborhoods, cultures, and languages other than English were called Lower Order Concerns, and this was a Higher Order writing center. Because we were all nice people, we were unaware of how this understanding of our work elevated us and diminished the students who made requests for "proofreading."

The third writing center is a diverse, busy, often noisy, public space with many large windows instead of solid walls. The work of this center is visible to all who pass through the hallway. Many domestic and international cultures, dialects, and languages are visible and audible, embodied by the people who work there, as well as by the resources collected there. A large Geochron clock hangs

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on the major wall, representing the movement of time in the world. The staff is large and diverse, a mix of many different disciplines and racial and cultural identities. Distinctions between higher and lower order concerns are not an issue in this writing center; writing coaches respond to the queries that students bring, and these queries are as likely to focus on context, on multimodal texts, on oral presentations, or on knowledge-management challenges in a lecture-based course as they are to focus on a draft being revised for an English class. The students who work in the writing center are often students who used the writing center, particularly during their first two years in college when they were negotiating transitions between home literacies and academic literacies and coming to understand the power relations of the university. In this writing center, communication problems are understood as emerging from competing contexts with implicit expectations about appropriate genres, styles, and discourses rather than from a lack within students or from a failure of their previous schooling. Students are understood as shuttling back and forth between contexts (Canagarajah, "Toward") and developing the competencies to engage productively in the power relations of these contexts. Writing coaches are the experienced travelers who can make explicit the often unspoken conventions, values, styles, and assumptions of competing discourses.

These three seemingly distinct writing centers are actually different versions of the same writing center at the same university operating under different assumptions about students, about language, about literacies, and about learning. I have worked in all of them, and I have directed two of them. In the first version, protecting standard English was the core value; one might say that this writing center operated under what Brian Street calls the autonomous model of literacy in which the literacy of the dominant class is believed unproblematically to be the only true literacy. Those students who didn't use this dominant literacy were conceptualized as lacking any literacy at all, and they were contained lest they contaminate the elite users. In the second writing center, the core value was teaching writing as a process in a student-centered environment. The realization that this pedagogical approach was most suitable for white monolingual users of English was slow to arrive, yet it did

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thanks to the persistence of multilingual and bidialectical writers who challenged our taken-for-granted assumptions.

In the current version of the center, the core value is productive and flexible engagement with linguistic, social, racial, and cultural diversity. Communication problems are understood as arising from competing (and often confusing) contexts rather than created by negligent or lazy or underprepared students. Multilingualism and bidialecticalism are understood as norms rather than aberrations. Literacy learning is recognized as a profoundly social and transformative undertaking in which learners shuttle among discourses. Interestingly, this current version of the center received a corporate donation that enabled a major expansion and renovation. According to the donors, this writing center was operating on assumptions about the salience of linguistic, racial, cultural, and social diversity that are valued in global workplaces. The donors were pleased to see that the students who worked in the center, both those who use the center and those who are employed as writing coaches, were developing competencies that workplaces valued. They were learning to question their assumptions, to shift perspective, to transform their thinking, and to generate new understandings. In fact, all of us, the old-timers like myself as well as the novice coaches, were learning and changing in this environment and fundamentally shifting our focus from an academic skills/writing process version of literacy to a consideration of epistemologies, power relations, identities, and ideologies that circulate in different discourses. It was a far deeper learning than I experienced in the former versions of the writing center and probably also a more radical learning than the corporate donors understood.

So far, my narrative about these three writing centers may sound like what Peter Carino calls "a neat march of progress from current-traditional gradgrindianism to theoretically sophisticated nurture" (11). Carino reminds writing center scholars to look beyond progressive narratives to see the synchronic history of ongoing writing center efforts to address issues of clientele, staffing, and institutional identity (11). The current version of the writing center I describe here developed from a process of asking questions about clientele, staffing, and institutional identity along with a willingness

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to question foundational assumptions that typically guide writing center practice. Real change occurs when we examine and revise what George Lakoff calls the unconscious cognitive models that we humans use to understand the world. Significant change in any workplace occurs when unconscious conceptual models are brought to the surface and replaced with conscious ones.

In the next section of this talk, I identify three of the *conscious* conceptual frameworks that I have used to replace the earlier unconscious assumptions that shaped the work of the writing center. These conscious frameworks profoundly alter assumptions about students, about language, and about literacy learning that were prevalent in earlier versions, and they signal awareness of twenty-first-century linguistic and cultural realities. As I identify each framework, I will cite some of the research that supports the framework; I will show how each framework has changed the practices of the Michigan Tech Writing Center, and I will speculate on how these changed practices provide undergraduate tutors with critical competencies that are important in global workplaces.

Framework 1:
A Twenty-First-Century Writing Center
Works within the Context of Global Englishes

In early versions of the writing center, we operated on unarticulated assumptions about English as a national language and the US as a monolingual nation with an agreed upon national standard of academic English. Research indicates that this unspoken assumption is out of sync with current linguistic realities. For example, linguist Braj Krachu reports that English is used by more people in the world than any other language, yet "its mother-tongue speakers make up only a quarter or a fifth of the total" (28). Moreover, Krachu observes that people in countries like India, Nigeria, Singapore, and the Philippines learn specific varieties of English, varieties that are first South Asian, African, or Southeast Asian. In the world at large, English is used not just to communicate with Americans or Brits or Australians but to communicate with speakers of other languages. New literatures are written in English, and the historical, cultural,

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religious, and political assumptions in these literatures reflect the context in which the literature is written. Even within the United States, many families may use English as a language of wider communication yet speak a language other than English at home. Paul Matsuda cites the 2000 US Census that indicates "more than one in six people five years of age and older reported speaking a language other than English at home" (qtd. in Matsuda 641). According to Krachu, mother-tongue speakers of English have trouble accepting these sociolinguistic realities due to "issues of attitude, of power and politics, and of history and economics" (357).

John Trimbur has argued that the US has always been a multilingual society but that we have engaged in a "systematic forgetting of the multiple languages" spoken and written here, creating a profound ambivalence toward multilingualism (577). This ambivalence included national language policies that led to the erasure of many indigenous languages and African languages. Children in American Indian boarding schools were severely punished for speaking native languages. Slaves who spoke African languages also received harsh punishment, including having their tongues cut out. Because this history is not taught, Americans have a linguistic culture based on folk beliefs, stereotypes, and faulty assumptions that allow us to use language to make judgments about an individual's suitability for employment as well as an individual's intelligence, habits, and values while we claim to be using neutral criteria. In fact, linguist Debbie Cameron says "linguistic bigotry" is one of "the last publicly expressible prejudices left to members of the western intelligentsia" (12). Min-Zhan Lu illustrates the traveling power of linguistic bigotry through images of a South Korean oral surgeon measuring the length of a four-year-old patient's frenulum after an operation to give the tongue more flexibility for fluent English speaking, surgery motivated by the assumption that the next generation of fast capitalists not only need to learn English but also speak it with the "correct" accent (606).

When a writing center embraces multilingualism rather than monolingualism as a conceptual norm, many things change. Most importantly, the writing center begins to actively recruit tutors who speak other languages and other varieties of English. Not

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insignificantly, the racial composition of the staff changes. The writing
center becomes a place where multiple varieties of English are spoken
rather than only historically privileged varieties of English. The newly
recruited writing tutors might not necessarily come with transcripts
bearing "A"s from traditional English classes, but because they have
always negotiated more than one language *and* more than one dialect,
one culture, and one identity, they have developed the metalinguistic
ability to identify tacit attitudes, values, and belief systems operating
within a given context. Within this conscious conceptual framework,
writing center workers who are monolingual, like myself, have some
hard work to do. We need, as Min-Zhan Lu puts it, "to call into
question our learned distaste toward nonidiomatic English lexicons
and grammar—our learned inclination to view them as either exotic
or downright stupid, nonsensical, incorrect" (613). Within the
framework of Global Englishes, a writing center needs to develop
new ways of responding to requests from novice users of English
who want help "proofreading" their papers. The consequence of not
proofreading is politically significant, and in the context of linguistic
bigotry it is unfair to simply deny the request. Moreover, within this
framework, writing centers are obligated to launch campus-wide
educational efforts to combat the power of covert language prejudice.
What might those efforts look like? At Michigan Tech, undergraduate
writing coaches have offered first-year orientation sessions that
focus on the attitudinal shifts needed so that monolingual students
can learn from international multilingual faculty who speak varieties
of English unfamiliar to Midwestern American students. At the
Oregon State University Center for Writing and Learning, Wayne
Robertson wrote and directed a film in which international students
and language professionals raise the questions that educators need
to begin asking ourselves if we want to create writing environments
that are fair for multilingual and bidialectical students. This film has
been used extensively for tutor and faculty development, providing a
model of how writing center research can not only change a campus
context but also alter the professional understandings of composition
studies.

So what do writing center undergraduate tutors gain from
working in writing centers that recognize multilingualism in positive

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ways? The challenges encountered in today's workplaces often result from strained communication between people from diverse cultures, disciplines, language backgrounds, and perspectives. Whether your future workplace is a hospital operating room, an airplane control tower, or an international information systems network, your job success will depend on your ability to develop positive working relationships with people from historically, culturally, linguistically, and economically different backgrounds. I offer my cousin Anne as one example. Anne works as a nurse anesthetist at a hospital in central Illinois. She must process the accented English of a Jordanian surgeon through his surgical mask, even with the background music commonly played in operating rooms, even when she's tired and her neck hurts from constant turning to look at monitors, and even though they've skipped lunch again because of emergency surgeries. People in operating rooms don't tell each other to work on their English; hospitals do not refuse to hire doctors and nurses because they have accents. Instead, they make connections across cultures and train themselves to listen harder because people's lives depend upon it. That's the reality of globalized work, not the theme-park fantasy of multicultural menus, music, and costumes. And that's the reality that your work in a writing center prepares you for. I hope you represent it well in your job search materials.

Framework 2: In a Twenty-First-Century Writing Center, Literacy Is Understood as the Ability to Negotiate More Than One Discourse System and More Than One Mode of Representation

In early versions of the Michigan Tech Writing Center, we operated on unquestioned assumptions about advanced literacy being mastery of print forms of standard academic discourse, particularly the version of academic discourse prevalent in English departments. In the twenty-first century, researchers argue that any literacy pedagogy that emphasizes only one mode of discourse, one mode of representation, and one standard of one language will leave students disenfranchised. Because of the multiplicity of communication channels and the

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significance of cultural and linguistic diversity, they advocate the concept of multiliteracies rather than a single form of literacy. The international group of literacy scholars known as the New London Group argues that there can no longer be one set of standards or skills that constitutes the ends of literacy learning. In fact, within a multiliteracies framework, there can no longer be an end of literacy learning but rather an ongoing effort to navigate a multiplicity of discourses. The New London Group redefines literacy as the ability to negotiate multiple dialects, registers, contexts, hybrid discourses, visual and iconic meanings, as well as differences in relationships among people, language, and material objects (14).

Suresh Canagarajah adds an important dimension to this new vision of multiliteracies when he observes that "in order to be functional postmodern global citizens, even students from the dominant community (i.e., Anglo American) now need to be proficient in negotiating a repertoire of World Englishes" (591). His point suggests a curious inversion of how we typically think of who needs a writing center. Those of us who speak only English and only one variety of English and only one discourse need to become more proficient at negotiating a variety of Englishes and discourses. Writing center work certainly provides opportunities to develop that proficiency. In fact, those who develop reputations as "really good tutors" are those who exhibit the intuitive strategies, the attitudinal resources (including patience, tolerance, and humility), the interpersonal strategies, and the cooperative values that Canagarajah says are key to effective communication among multilingual people (593). Other compositionists are making similar arguments. Summing up contributions to a recent cross-language forum in *College English*, Bruce Horner observes that "students need to learn to work within and among and across a variety of Englishes and languages, not simply to (re)produce and write within the conventions of a particular, standardized variety of English" (570).

If these scholars are right, and I think they are, we have an interesting inversion of the typical negotiations, representations, and relationships that occur in writing centers. If the dynamics of globalization, interdisciplinarity, and intertextuality require us all to become proficient in negotiating a variety of discourses, dialects,

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accents, and meaning-making repertoires, then perhaps the students who will need the *most* help becoming functional global citizens will be the predominantly white and middle-class students who come from the vast suburban and rural areas of this country, students who, either due to the isolation of financial privilege or to the isolation of financial struggle, have had the least exposure to difference. Rather than representing the multilingual and/or bidialectical students as "needing our help," we need to think of our work in writing centers as an ongoing development of proficiency in multiple literacies and discourses. We need to represent writing centers as sites of learning for all, including faculty members who are interested in revising teaching practices and curricula to take into account the domestic and international diversity of twenty-first-century students.

In a writing center that embraces a concept of multiliteracies, effective tutors learn to engage with difference in open-minded, flexible, and non-dogmatic ways. Effective tutors learn to shift perspective, to question their assumptions, to seek alternative viewpoints. These competencies are essential for ethical work, and they are practiced daily in a writing center, particularly in centers that value difference and creativity more than they value sameness and standardization. Through writing center experience, undergraduate tutors learn to analyze communicative situations to determine where necessary knowledge might be missing, and they develop strategies for supplying that knowledge. As peer tutors, you practice the competencies of critical and creative knowledge workers in a non-exploitive environment where you engage difference in supportive rather than just "productive" ways.

Framework 3: A Twenty-First-Century Writing Center Understands Students as "the Designers of Social Futures"

The New London Group envisions students as "active designers — makers — of social futures" (7). They introduce the notion that literacy education is not about having students learn to reproduce and recognize available designs but about having students enact

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the transformative possibilities in design. Within this conception of
literacy education, students are not simply passive bearers of culture
but "active and responsible cultural participants" (Cope and Kalantzis
204). *All* students, regardless of neighborhood, culture, or language
of origin, are understood as participating in social transformation.
They are not waiting on the sidelines for adulthood and/or an
institutional certification of having mastered a dominant literacy.
Another researcher, Alastair Pennycook, uses an analysis of hip hop
music around the world to illustrate the transformative, performative,
and transgressive possibilities of a literacy pedagogy that can replace
the assimilative version. His aim is not simply to use popular culture
to motivate students but rather to open up "possible languages and
identities" and to engage with "multiple ways of speaking, being, and
learning" (157).

What does this notion of students as designers of social futures
mean in writing centers? It suggests that a tutor's job is not about
making people "better writers" (North 438) but rather about learning
to identify and explain the challenges of shuttling back and forth
among literacies and about learning ways to mediate the different
values in those multiple contexts. It means writing centers no longer
need to think of student writers as flawed writers or inadequate
writers or undeveloped writers or lazy writers or naive writers,
conceptions that locate writing problems in students rather than in
competing, conflicting, and confusing contexts of meaning making.
It means that student writers do not need to have their identities
improved nor do they need to be coddled and/or frustrated through
nondirective "minimalist" approaches to tutoring (Brooks). Rather,
they need information about how competing rhetorical systems
operate and how to make decisions within these complicated contexts.
This calls on a tutor's ability to read between and behind the lines, to
identity the assumptions, values, and subtexts embedded in different
discourse systems and to explain in direct and concrete ways what
options writers have in these complicated contexts.

When we understand student writers as active designers who are
both capable of and interested in learning about the options they have
for making and interpreting visual, oral, and printed texts, we work
with them in more positive and productive ways than when we think

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of them as lazy or dependent, as the ubiquitous minimalist model of tutoring encourages. Recently, researchers Linda Adler-Kassner, Chris Anson, and Rebecca Moore Howard made a similar point in an article about reframing plagiarism. Rather than accept naturalized assumptions that represent students as web-savvy cheaters or as naïve innocents, these scholars challenge teachers to teach students "to recognize and adapt to the wide variations in the values informing the creation, use, and representation of text in the academy and the larger culture" (232). They rightly point out that writers need to learn "that textual practices (including those of source use and attribution) exist within rhetorical contexts and [to] know how to analyze and meet the expectations in those contexts" (241). In their argument, students are represented as capable of learning to make decisions within these complicated contexts with competing values rather than needing remediation, text checkers, or policing.

How then might this ability to read for more than what is on the surface and to identify the systemic values operating in particular contexts apply in your future workplace? The language of the new century workplace can sound so positive that you think you've gone to heaven rather than to work. Buzz words like "flattened hierarchies," "team leaders," "worker empowerment," "democratic distribution of knowledge," and "greater valuing of diversity" make one think that the collaborative model so valued in writing centers has displaced all concerns about privilege, hierarchies, and abuses of power in twenty-first-century workplaces. The work of literacy researcher Deborah Brandt offers a more complex behind-the-scenes picture of workers in the knowledge economy. Brandt notes that yes, the value of writing in the workplace has reached unprecedented significance, yet this use of literacy for economic production is not linked with the individual agency and self-expression that often characterize our teaching goals. Brandt reports that the work of writing, learning, and collaborating in the knowledge economy is not so much about "the worth or rights of the individual under development but rather in rationales of production and profit making" (194). She argues that this new reliance on writers as "tools of production" has created "unprecedented opportunities for intrusion and exploitation" (168), and she calls on us as literacy teachers and tutors to pay more

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attention to the complex mingling of self and system that writing involves. James Gee has made a similar argument regarding literacy education and the new work order. According to Gee, literacy educators must address two school problems. One is making sure that disadvantaged students are well educated enough to "participate in building and transforming our societies," and the second is making sure that advantaged students learn to "think 'critiquely' about issues of power" (63). Gee distinguishes critical (higher order) thinking from "thinking critiquely" to mark the difference between accepting the relations of economic power as "inevitable" and being able to critique unjust systems of power. Writing centers are well positioned to address both problems provided that they are willing to adopt new conceptual frameworks.

The ability to read, critique, and engage systems of power is something peer tutors practice in a writing center every time they discuss teachers' assignment sheets, interpret teachers' comments on students' papers, invite a student to talk about what's going on in class, or balance a student's interpretation with a teacher's. They learn that the message is not always on the surface but embedded in routine practices and tacit assumptions that need to be unearthed and discussed. Because they often work with students new to the system of higher education, they learn to denaturalize conditions they may have previously taken for granted. As they become more adept at negotiating accents, explaining cultural routines, clarifying without endorsing academic expectations, and negotiating persistent unrealistic expectations on the part of instructors, they gain the experience that will help them negotiate the socio-technical practices of their future workplaces, the ones that call on them to do more and do it faster, the ones that subtract time from their personal lives, the ones that attempt to subsume their identities into a corporate model.

I hope that my remarks have served to affirm the writing center directors in this audience who have moved writing centers in the direction where such understandings of students, language, literacy, and learning can flourish. I also hope they serve as a gentle yet persistent nudge to those who may have resisted them. I want to conclude with reference to Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1993 in which she reflects on the limits and the possibilities

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of the work we do with language.

Morrison begins with a story of an encounter between an old blind black woman, who is known in her rural community for her wisdom, and some teenagers who seem to want to challenge her authority. Targeting her disability, one of the teens says to her, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead." The old woman is silent for a long time, and the young people have trouble holding their laughter. Finally, she responds: "I don't know. I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it's in your hands. It's in *your* hands." The old woman's gentle yet stern reply shifts the focus from the teens' display of power to their responsibility for the bird, whether they found it dead or alive or whether they killed it or plan to kill it. Morrison speculates that the bird signifies language in this story, and thus the teenagers are asking the old woman if the language they use is a living or dead language: are they custodians of a corpse or are they holding something capable of generating new life and new meaning? One might think the story would close there, with its focus on the wisdom of the old woman, particularly her reprimand about the teens' responsibility.

But it doesn't. Morrison notes that the old woman has kept her good opinion of herself as well as her distance. And it turns out that the teens didn't have a bird in their hands after all. They say to her,

> Why didn't you reach out, touch us with your soft fingers, delay the sound bite, the lesson, until you knew who we were? ... you could not see that we were baffled about how to get your attention? ... Do you think we are stupid ....? How dare you talk to us of duty when we stand waist deep in the toxin of your past? Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong?

The young people go on to offer a full articulation of the hopeful yet historically real work that they know language can do. There is another long silence after the young people speak. The old woman ends the silence by saying she trusts them now, and Morrison's talk ends with the old woman observing, "Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done — together."

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Morrison's story is far more than an argument for a living language. It is an argument for the work that language can do, for its potential to bring divergent perspectives into contact with one another, for the possibilities of transforming perspectives and generating new understandings, particularly when we take the time "to understand other languages, other views, other narratives." Morrison argues against the use of language for domination. She further acknowledges how "complicated" and "demanding" it is to work with multiple languages, perspectives, and narratives, but as her final word (and mine) indicates, it is something beautiful that we can do together.

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