



Why Writing Matters

Diane Stubbings

Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne

dstubbings@student.unimelb.edu.au

Review of

Delbanco, Nicholas. *Why Writing Matters*. Yale University Press, 2020.

At its heart, Nicholas Delbanco's *Why Writing Matters* is a love story: an honest and heartfelt expression of one man's passion for language, and for the art and craft of writing. Discursive rather than didactic, meandering rather than meticulously structured, *Why Writing Matters* is part memoir, part essay collection, part insight into decades of writing pedagogy. It is a work driven by a belief in the transformative power of words, and the profound personal, cultural and historical shifts they inspire. As a piece of writing it is, in and of itself, a fine example of what it preaches. Every sentence is beautifully formed, every word wielded with skill and care. And if it has a take-home message, it is that "the mastery of written discourse is neither instinctual nor automatic. It takes time to learn" (250).

Perhaps best known in North America, Delbanco is a respected novelist, teacher, essayist and scholar, and *Why Writing Matters* draws on his own published articles about writing – in particular his column for the *New York Times* – as well as his decades of teaching at institutions such as Columbia University and the University of Michigan. Given this context, what is especially satisfying about *Why Writing Matters* is Delbanco's acknowledgement of his own ongoing education in the art of writing, particularly the constant learning that comes through the act of attentive reading: "Writing and reading are ... two sides of the same coin. The latter depends on the former; the former makes no difference where the latter ability does not exist" (xiv-xv). Noting what he perceives as a misleading distinction between teachers and students, Delbanco recounts in generous detail what he has discovered not only from those he has taught, but also through his interactions with teachers and mentors such as John Gardner, James Baldwin and John Updike, from whom he learned the importance of "attention to language ... unswerving devotion to craft ... [and] a faith that writing, in times of trouble, might count" (12).

If there is a theme running through *Why Writing Matters* it is that of the tension between originality and imitation, particularly the way that tension pervades how we understand creativity and its

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genesis. Delbanco is clear from the outset where he stands: "... the art of writing still seems to me to be grounded in an act of imitation: mimesis rules the form" (xii). It is though imitation, he asserts, that originality is discovered, an argument he forcefully defends with the example of a student in his "Strategies in Prose" class, who, through "borrowing the syntax and inflections" (130) of William Faulkner, discovered her own unique voice as a writer:

To watch the young writer discover their own particular voice is to listen to them practice scales and start out often croakingly until they grow full-throated. For once we recognise a predecessor and acknowledge influence, it begins to wane. This is an alchemical process—a pattern of growth and transformation—that every teacher witnesses and all students know. (101)

It is this perspective on writing – on the importance of imitation as a tool of writing pedagogy – that informs Delbanco's view of writing as an apprenticeship, "the time-honored mode of study that absorbs the work of others till it becomes one's own" (109), and that eventually, with constant study and practice, may lead to mastery.

One of the exemplary aspects of *Why Writing Matters* is the attention Delbanco pays to the importance of sound writing pedagogy: to teach writing well, he submits, is its own art, something that is too often lost sight of in the quantitative academic environments in which many of us find ourselves. Further, the teaching of writing is not about turning out an assembly line of writers who merely parrot their teacher's voice (an experience too common in some of our teaching institutions, and one that hinders the development of some potentially talented writers): "My idea of a successful workshop—with, say, a dozen students—is one that produces twelve separate styles, twelve voices achieved and distinct" (216).

The other valuable element of Delbanco's teaching philosophy – a note that stems from his espousal of imitation – is his advocacy for the importance of writers situating themselves among the body of their fellow writers, and thereby identifying the specific branches of the literary tree along which they have evolved. It is an approach which underlines how everything to do with writing is "interlinked and has some prior resonance; all of us live with the past" (45), while also reinforcing that one of the fundamental duties of the writing teacher is to identify literary and cultural forebears: "... each line has antecedents, and every tale a shadow-companion. There are precedents and prior usage everywhere. We come from what went before" (243).

There is a pleasant candour to Delbanco's account of his own pretensions as an emerging writer: "The young man's fancy is poetic, and his models are Rimbaud or Keats. Mine were, at any rate; my first compositions were suicide notes" (14). I did, however, find myself growing impatient with some of his own channelings of other writers' voices (included at some length). There is a fine line between demonstrating a valid point and showing off, and too often Delbanco's inclusions tend to fall within

the latter category, distracting from the overall effectiveness of his discussion. There is, for example, limited value (for this reader at least) in observing as he revises one of his early failures.

Readers who are interested in the writing life will want to devour this book in its entirety. Others will prefer to dip in and out of it, particularly teachers of writing who will find in some of its chapters useful provocations for class discussion. Delbanco's extended delineation of his "Strategies in Prose" class also offers a productive pedagogical method that other teachers may wish to appropriate and adapt for their own needs. What is particularly constructive about this mode of teaching is its ability to provide a framework within which students might safely experiment as they seek to discover who they are as writers, reminding them in the process that perceived failures may stem not from any lack of ability, but rather from not yet knowing what it is they want to say and how best to say it.

As well as his passion for words – for the gravitas they possess when they are "transcribed on paper or parchment or marble or slate"; for their "claim to consequence" (xvii) and their potential to "alter old assumptions and entrenched institutions" (64) – an occasionally downcast Delbanco also recognises, "Bad writing is everywhere" (180).

We do ourselves no damage by attending to our rhetoric; the reverse is also true. Inaccurate language, whether critical or creative, can do actual harm. When we fail to attend to precision and the truth of discourse, we put community at risk ... At present ... our language is under assault. (176-77)

There is perhaps no better example of "why writing matters" than the political abuse of language and discourse that is currently infecting our daily lives, and no greater hope than that, through the effective teaching of writing, we may enable voices with the force and leverage to resist such abuses.