

## An interview with

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NCoW



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CCCC+

*On June 30, 2007, Brad Lucas interviewed Pete Vandenberg by telephone while Pete was driving cross-country from Texas to Illinois (before flying out to the WPA Conference in Tempe, Arizona). Their conversation here focuses on the National Conversation on Writing, DePaul University, and his new work for the CCCC.*

**[Lucas:] How did the National Conversation on Writing (NCoW) come about? Who is involved, and where are things now?**

[Vandenberg:] It's a video project we're working on to support the WPA subcommittee that Linda Adler-Kassner runs, the Network for Media Action. It's pretty much her brainchild, and the idea is to connect the discipline and the profession with the larger public—to get the word out about what we're doing and why.

I think the perception is that the university functions as a barrier between writing professionals—maybe academics of all stripes—and the general public. And there's not much connection between what we do and what the public perceives about writing. It follows out of work like Peter Mortensen's piece "Going Public."

I got involved with NCoW because of a video project I did three years ago. I took my camera around the country and set up on street corners, asking people for their perceptions about literacy, their remembrances of writing instruction, and a general sense of whether there's an illiteracy epidemic in the country. I made a 22-minute film with an undergraduate student of mine, and that was screened at CCCC, and it was kind of grounded in Mortensen's initial call to make these connections with the general public.

Linda was there when we showed that film, and in that movie we used some quotations from her book (with Susanmarie Herrington *Basic Writing as a Political Act: Public Conversations about Writing and Literacies*, Hampton Press, 2002). When the NCoW project came up, she asked me to help, so I'm now doing all the video editing.

People from around the country are asking a series of questions to writers (both academics and non-academics), and we're editing all of that footage together to give a general perception of writing across the country. We'll be taking tapes through the summer and encouraging people to get involved. It's something that virtually anybody with access to a camera and a microphone can do.

Darsie Bowden and I collected around fifteen tapes full of video from different people, and we put together a 10-12 minute sampling of what we might do with the final project. We showed that at CCCC 2006 in New York, and since then we've gotten three or four more tapes. Some more are in the mail right now, and at WPA in Tempe people will be bringing tapes. Darsie and I will be showing an updated version of the in-process project at WPA, and then we'll show the final version this November at NCTE.

One of the challenges in putting this together is to try to regularize the diverse video formats, the lighting, and all sorts of other differences. We're struggling with it, so it's a little bit of a patchwork project, but I think that's what's going to make it unique and ultimately reflective of all the different points of location that are reflected in the piece.

Darsie has an MFA in film from Southern Cal, and her area of specialization is screenwriting. She's doing the story-boarding and the script—finding a theme—and then stringing the clips of video together. I'm doing all of the technical work. Of course, there's an epistemology of editing. It's kind of a heuristic or productive activity to engage in the editing. We're essentially collaborating, with Darsie taking the lead on writing the piece and me taking the lead on editing it together.

### **Do you hope to get this out to audiences beyond CCCC, WPA, MLA, and other academic circles?**

Yes, I think the ultimate goal is to figure out how the piece can be shown in public places as a way of generating conversation between academics and the general public. We talked about showing just the partial project at a library or something in Tempe during WPA, but I don't think that's going to happen because we have so much to do. For NCTE in New York, we'll try to show it in some public venues. The piece will have a life after that as a way to kind of jump-start conversation. But, you know, there aren't a lot of venues for this kind of work. More venues would be great.

There are really two big issues surrounding the NCoW project. One concern was the extent to which we needed permission to do this kind of work, and if it is covered by institutional standards for protecting the rights of research subjects. When some individuals asked their institutions, they got conflicting answers. Some people were obligated to go through their Institutional Review Board, and some schools didn't require it. The second big concern was how work on NCoW was going to count in promotion and tenure decisions. Would it be a worthwhile project for people to engage in professionally, or would it be seen as a waste of time (or even counterproductive)?

### **Anything surprising in the footage you've gotten so far?**

The thing I'm noticing the most—and it's not really surprising, I guess—is that when academics think about writing, they tend to think in fairly narrow terms. The folks that have contributed so far have not really gotten very far from what you might expect. We had a whole lot of interviews with other academics and folks who write stories and poems, and that's interesting, but it continues to illuminate only what we do and the restrictive nature of what we do, who we are, and the kinds of writing we come in contact with. So, the most striking bits of video are from people who have academic training but are decidedly nonacademic in their orientation. We're really hoping that we'll encourage the academic contributors into getting outside of their comfort zones and talking to people who are working in genres that are not academic or not academically created.

### **Do you feel like talking about recent changes at DePaul? What's been going on with you, your colleagues, and the program?**

We're really excited about what's happened. We've split from the English department.

There are seven of us who have dissertations in rhetoric and composition. Darsie Bowden and I are there. Matthew Abraham, Christine Tardy, and Melinda Turnley all did their Ph.D. work at Purdue University. Julie Bokser did her work at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Shaun Slattery did his at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. We just hired two new faculty members who are coming in the fall: René

Agustín De los Santos from University of California, Santa Barbara, and a young professional technical writer from Penn State, Tony Ceraso. So, there'll be nine of us in the fall with dissertations in the field, and we're really excited about having a group of people that is larger than you'd find in some Ph.D. programs.

Our proposal came as something of a surprise to some folks in the English department, but there's not really a handbook to follow for separating departments. I think it's always a little bit messy, but we're looking forward to opportunities to collaborate with the people in English. I personally feel that some of the personal relationships that have become strained through the process are probably going to strengthen again when we're not actively involved in competing with each another for courses and departmental resources and that sort of thing. So I'm looking forward to a brighter future for both the English department and those of us in the new department that will be called Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse.

We're calling it Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse because we wanted a name that would signify meaningfully for us, for students, for the rest of the university, and for the broader profession. We thought those three terms were really valuable to keep linked together. Writing is, of course, important to everything we do, and we feel like that's a term that students are going to recognize. But we're also at a school where writing is lapping up on all shores (as it does everywhere, of course), and we thought it might be inappropriate to call a particular department a writing department when the university is trying to stress writing across the curriculum. We feel the same way about a program. You don't want a B.A. or an M.A. in writing when you also have writing-intensive courses across the discipline. So we thought that we wanted to modify that term with a couple of other terms, and we thought that rhetoric, of course, is central to what we do, and we engage in rhetorical study a little more broadly than writing, and in conventional terms we didn't want to be constrained by other people's expectations that writing only meant the alphabetic. Finally, we see discourse as a broader, more expansive term that in some ways incorporates the other two, and it also makes room for the ways in which we'd like to grow (e.g., Christine Tardy works with English as a Second Language, and her work is really at the intersection of rhetoric and composition and ESL, and we want to make sure that she has kind of conceptual elbow room to work there).

### **Are you still in the same college, or have you moved to a more cross-discipline position?**

We're still in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. At the same time that we're becoming a department, the communication department, which split off from English in 1987, is now becoming a college in its own right. So not only is the English department breaking, but communication is moving into a school of its own. So I think that also creates some interesting opportunities for us—also some challenges—because we lose some of our closest non-English colleagues. They'll be separated from us by college boundaries, so we maybe won't see as much of them. In the same way that we're expecting to work better with English, the new program could create some different kind of channels that allow us to link with folks in communication, as well.

### **How is the new department related to things like your first-year writing program, your writing center, and your graduate-level offerings?**

First-year writing moves entirely with the new unit as well. Over the past couple of years or so, we made an effort to split first-year writing from the English department with the idea that it might function better, both for students and for the larger institution, if it were cut loose and linked with the liberal studies program, of which it is a part. When we got the opportunity to form as a new department, we of course sensed the value of keeping first-year writing connected to the larger disciplinary interests of rhetoric and composition.

We also wanted to make sure was that the director of first-year writing was in control of the hiring, evaluation, and general supervision of the first-year writing faculty. In the past, that task had fallen to the English chair, and it was difficult for the first-year writing director and the English chair to coordinate on staffing and other kinds of issues. It was likely that people would be hired into lines created by first-year writing, but then served the interests of the English department. So, we'd have people on full-time

contracts based on their ability to teach upper-level English courses when faculty went on leave and so forth, and that was not serving first-year writing. We think that now we'll have a really good relationship between first-year writing and the new department, because the director of first-year writing will have a great deal of autonomy in running that program.

The Center for Writing, which was actually just approved last August, is disconnected from any department. As the director, I report to an associate vice-president in Academic Affairs. The budget and everything is separate from any of the colleges, so it really serves the wider university and has this role of assisting faculty or integrating writing into their courses. It also includes our former university writing centers (our two locations at Lincoln Park and the Loop). We have a staff of 40-50 peer tutors, both undergraduates and graduates, who work for the center.

The one connection to the new department is an agreement that we have between Academic Affairs and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences: that the director of the Center for Writing will always come from among the tenured writing faculty. We're essentially connected in that way, and we think that rhetoric and composition will continue to influence the way the university approaches writing in its largest manifestation.

The former English department had a program called Master of Arts in Writing with three concentrations: technical and professional writing, writing theory and pedagogy, and literary writing (what we were calling creative writing at DePaul). Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse will take half of the rhetorical theory core and two of those concentrations, Writing Theory and Pedagogy as well as Professional and Technical Writing. So we'll be constructing a new master's program that will be comprised of that former core and those new concentrations.

The Master of Arts in New Media Studies is an interdisciplinary program that's situated in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The program draws on the faculty in English (now Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse), communication, and art and art history (art and art history is splitting into two departments at DePaul).

So New Media Studies (NMS) is really kind of up in the air right now. The thing we know for sure is that as I take over chairing the new department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse, Sean Slattery will be assuming the NMS directorship.

Since the program's inception three years ago, more than 75% of the courses offered with NMS designations in the program have been taught by faculty members who are going to be in the new unit. That's not in any way to disparage the contributions of faculty in communication, or art and art history, but we really feel like the primary impetus for that program has come out of the writing faculty, and it really represents a great opportunity for us, and we're very much interested in the way that we can continue to shape and develop NMS at DePaul. We see opportunities for lots and lots of cross-listing there with our professional and technical offerings in the new M.A., and also in the kinds of things that we want to do with teaching writing at the graduate level.

**Have you written anything about the creation of the Master of Arts in New Media Studies? Has anything been documented in terms of how that program was put together?**

Beyond the proposal documents, I don't think anybody has written anything scholarly on the development of the program. Roger Graves, who was a faculty member at DePaul for eleven years, was the initial director of the program. He was one of the people that was primarily involved in developing the proposal and the program's initial execution. (He just left two years ago to take a position directing the writing program at the University of Western Ontario.)

**I know that folks at campuses all around the country are interested in doing these kind of collaborative ventures, and I'm curious how you all went about it. Was this something that just emerged as a brainchild out of the folks in English, or was it something that stemmed from mutual interests in different disciplines?**

I think people in different fields were starting to talk about this—different fields and different departments. art and art history, of course, had been using computers in pursuit of their graphic design courses, and they were teaching video art and that sort of thing. Communication was offering some courses in journalism, and they were becoming interested in things that were developing under the rubric of convergence journalism. And those of us in writing were feeling just kind of generally constrained by the way we'd been positioned in the English department, preparing students—particularly at the undergraduate level—to produce academic discourse. At the graduate level we were kind of bundled together with creative writing and so it was really constraining to think about how writing is being re-thought and re-mediated in digital environments. And so Roger Graves, Heather Graves, and I were involved in the initial meeting that eventually formed that committee that eventually formed the program. Our motivation came from trying to find an outlet for work that we wanted to do, the pedagogical work that we wanted to do outside of English. I think that was something like the case for everybody that got involved from all the different departments.

DePaul has a real strong interest in interdisciplinary programs, and because it offers relatively few Ph.D. programs, it relies on income generated by master's programs. So, if you have a good idea, and you can make a case for bringing in students, it's not really a big hurdle to get programs approved at DePaul. So we had a ready-made kind of audience there on the part of the dean and the college curriculum committee. We ran into our biggest problem at the university-level curriculum committee, and ultimately they were very helpful to us—they just wanted to make sure that the program was well thought out. They had questions about the appropriateness of the degree to the jobs that the students would take on.

You know, the field has developed so rapidly that if you go back even three or four years, the term “new media” signifies in strange ways for people. The most common question we got was, “Five years down the road, won't you be wishing that you had not called it New Media Studies?” And we convinced folks that we thought that was a pretty good term for it. But there was a lot of just basic opposition that came from a lack of understanding, I think, at the university level. So I wouldn't say that we had a tough time getting things through.

### **What about the reception of folks from other disciplines, like art, journalism, and so on?**

That's interesting. I was recently leading a new media workshop at Texas Christian University, and we were talking about creating interdisciplinary connections and breaking down disciplinary silos, and I made a point that over the last four or five years, I think I've learned more—stretched further as a scholar—by looking at work that's been developed in all these different disciplines. And I think whenever you say the term “new media” to someone else, you're inevitably engaged in a kind of interdisciplinary project. No particular discipline has ownership of it.

Being brought into contact with a lot of different folks and a lot of different perspectives has led to a few difficulties. For example, folks in the art department felt that if you were going to offer a graduate-level course in graphic design, that students should be required to have undergraduate preparation in graphic design. It's taken a couple of years, really, to bring some of those folks around to the idea that you can do introductory work in graphic design at the graduate level—and do that legitimately without having prerequisites. That's going to streamline the program a fair amount.

We have students that come in from all sorts of different disciplines with different methodological orientations, so it's very difficult to imagine that you must have students with one particular background. I think we've taught ourselves about interdisciplinarity in the process of getting this program up and running over these first couple of years.

### **Now that you've had a couple of years behind you, is there anything you would have done differently?**

I don't know. I don't think so. I mean, maybe that's a surprising answer, but I think things have worked pretty well. Had we tried to do this simply with writing faculty, we wouldn't have had enough folks to get it



off the ground that way in the beginning. But I think also had we done it that way, we would have missed the richness—you know, what we've learned from people in these other fields.

We have faculty in Communication, names that people in rhetoric and composition will recognize from Rhetoric Society of America (RSA), like Lucy Lu and Barbara Willard, who's an officer in RSA right now. Those folks are right there on campus with us. In a way, we were disconnected from communication while we were in English, which prevented us from ever getting together. And really, we made New Media Studies to create outlets where we have conversations and input from those folks. I don't think we would have gotten that another way.

I personally have learned a tremendous amount about design from the people in art and art history that contribute to the program. Of course, the students feed back a lot of that knowledge to the faculty. Students are taking courses from people in all three of the fields, and then they come into our classes, and we have rich discussions. We continue to learn from those different fields through the students. That's been troubling at certain times, but absolutely essential to the quality of the program now, and what we've learned while doing it.

### **I'm sure you've seen some of these students graduate in the past year or so?**

The first potential graduates emerged last June. We had eleven graduate from the program. This year we had our first NMS graduate go on to a very prestigious fellowship at Michigan State, so we're excited about that. We think that student's success is very definitely a product of his interdisciplinary training. He had taken some of these art classes as well as classes with me and other people in writing, and then a couple of people in the communication department took him under their wing. He had experience in exactly the kind of work that he wanted to do at the Ph.D. level. I think that the interdisciplinary preparation was maybe most valuable to him. He wrote a great personal statement that fully elaborated that interdisciplinary connection, and I know that our letters of recommendation did as well.

This past year we've had a great deal of success in getting students accepted into Ph.D. programs out of our M.A. in writing. For example, last year we had six M.A. graduates accepted with teaching assistantships or fellowships. One student was the first to have a digital portfolio, and she was accepted into Ohio State, and we were just overjoyed by that. She was accepted by at least six schools, and I think that had everything to do with her online portfolio. People at these various schools all mentioned her digital work. So, I think this has convinced us that we need to be getting more of our writing students' work online and bringing them, really, into doing the same kind of work that the NMS students are doing. There'll be great possibilities for connections there.

One of our significant challenges is to help students figure out how the program connects to particular kinds of jobs. Students who are approaching a professional M.A. want to imagine a clear trajectory into a particular kind of job in the same way that a nursing degree leads to a job in nursing. But we have to tell students with the M.A. in New Media Studies that what it really does is enhances any degree orientation that takes up New Media Studies as a part of its business. They feel like they have to explain the degree to potential employers. That makes them a little nervous, so we're trying to figure out how to approach that aspect of it, but I think that's just something that's going to come in time.

### **I'd like to talk a little bit about your work with CCCC. You just joined the executive committee this past year.**

NCTE last November was my first CCCC executive committee meeting. The initial meeting, then the discussion and preparation leading up to it, was quite an education. I'm really excited and kind of humbled to be engaged at that level.

There is a tremendous number of really smart people involved. The perspective is much different than it is when you're operating as a scholar, trying to address a scholarly audience—much different than it is when you're working at an institution, trying to figure out how you fit in locally. And, you know, I have to say that some of the issues that the executive committee takes up are matters that I have thought about

in the past, like how to keep folks connected to the discipline, how to keep people in the organization, how to struggle with where the conference should be held from year to year.

I've thought about these issues in the past but never been hailed by them—not with the same sense of exigency, you know. I think a lot of people see discussion about these issues on listservs, as I have, and you follow them and make judgments based on your own perspective.

For the most recent CCCC, for example, there was a lot of discussion about how expensive New York was. New York is expensive. But that means one thing if you're on the West Coast, or even somewhere in the Midwest. It means something different if you're on the East Coast. Yet, once again, it was one of the best attended conferences ever because such a concentration of population there in the Northeast that can go to a conference there. For some folks who can drive in day to day, it's actually less expensive. So there's an interesting kind of balancing act when you're trying to figure out how to address a national audience and respond to everybody's concerns with kind of delicate matters. That's been really fascinating to me so far.

### **How is this different from other kinds of committee work? Are the stakes higher? What has the experience been, compared to what your expectations were before November?**

Well, frankly it was more work than I anticipated, and I don't mean to sound unwelcome about that in any way. In my opinion, that sense comes from the perception of responsibilities that you have. It seemed like extra work because I suddenly felt responsible to people in a much different kind of way.

For one thing, it's just the business of looking around the executive committee table and seeing these folks that you have always looked up to as not only disciplinary experts, but real leaders. Then, you realize that when they're heading up subcommittees and that sort of thing that you're at the cusp of building a new kind of reputation at the national level, so you want to be responsive to those folks in that way.

But you're also thinking about the real gravity of the decisions that you're making. You suddenly feel like you're caretaker of this organization that's been around for almost sixty years now, and we hope it'll go on for another sixty years. You know, it can be kind of a big, unwieldy thing. I think it's in the organization's best interest to be responsive to folks in mainline composition studies, rhetoric, and professional and technical writing, but figuring out how to do that is difficult. So the work seems more pressing, more onerous in some ways, just because those responsibilities are so much greater than they are at the local level—where things are still important, but in some ways more concentrated.

I've also gotten an orientation in the real rigors of parliamentary order. It's been surprising in the sense of the rigor with which the meetings are carried out. I'm getting kind of a baptism in Roberts Rules of Order, you know. I don't think I've ever been on a committee so carefully run. People really have input, and there's broad discussion that goes into these issues. And I think the organization is looking for a way to make the interactions between the officers and the broader executive committee. I think everybody is really committed to strengthening that relationship. I know I am, and I think everybody's working on that.

What you have there is a big group of really committed people, each one wanting to do the best that they can for the organization. And that leads to some real productive disagreements. Maybe not everyone would agree, but I think one big issue that the organization faces right now is stronger connections between the officers and the executive committee at large, which is really important to getting kind of a broad base of interest on the table.

### **What sort of things are you working on for CCCC 2008 in New Orleans?**

With New Orleans right now, folks are trying to make sure that we are very respectful of what has happened there—respectful of what the city was, and respectful of the individuals who made it up and are no longer there. We want to be responsive to the challenges that the city is facing. We very definitely want to go there, and we want to deposit money from all parts of the country into the economy there, but

we want to take care that we're not just going in and taking advantage of the situation or coming to New Orleans exclusively as kind of an exciting party destination or something like that.

**So working with CCCC now, and after having served as Editor of *Composition Studies* for several years, along with this other work, let me ask you some broad questions: Where do you see the field heading? Where do you see your own work heading?**

I don't know—those questions are really intimidating, I think, because I've done a number of different things over the years. I've published, I've edited a journal, I've written articles and edited books, and all those things feel like different parts of the big picture, but the big picture keeps changing all of the time. It's kind of impossible to say that the aggregate of your experience leads you to a privileged kind of perspective. I mean, now that I've been focused more intently on New Media issues over the last two or three years, I wonder about the discussions that I've fallen out of. I wonder in what way some of these other discussions have evolved.

I think you tend to see the big picture from where you're standing, of course, but I think we have to find ways to continue to address writing in digital environments. And I think one of the biggest challenges that we face there is the fact that most writing is taught by adjuncts. In some ways it's fair to say that our adjunct population has not been trained to do this kind of work. Whether that's because they're more senior folks who didn't have opportunities as they were going through school, or whether it's because institutions aren't interested or able to help remediate adjuncts to do this kind of work, or whether it's because so many first-year students across the country are being taught by teaching assistants who don't have access to the training and resources to do this kind of work. There are a lot of different reasons for this challenge that we face. But I think that's the biggest challenge facing writing instruction now, in terms of digital media. It's not *what* to do, because we have that pretty well in hand.

I've done a number of different variations on a class that I taught called "The Rhetoric of Graffiti," connecting the semiotics of graffiti to service learning. I've shot just hours and hours of video on location, in different parts of Chicago, interviewing graffiti writers and community groups. I'm starting an independent study when I get back to Chicago with a student on that work, trying to begin to put together a webtext that will include HTML and video and a lot of PhotoShop work. So that's a project that I will be working on while I'm doing this administrative work.

We have a proposal in for CCCC next year to talk about the process of developing the new unit, and we're hopeful that will get accepted because we're interested in continuing to talk about that. But I think the other things that I had in motion will probably go on the back burner while we're getting the department up and running.

I'm working with two graduate students on a web text on audio-visual conferencing. At DePaul we're not able to get tutors out to our suburban campuses. Over the last two years we've been connecting our tutors with students at those campuses, connecting them by webcam and voice. It's a way to offer full face-to-face tutorial sessions to these suburban students, and we're working on a webtext on that right now that we think theorizes the value of audio-visual conferencing over e-mail conferencing. Our general argument there is that it best approximates the value of face-to-face. We did a presentation on this at the National Writing Centers Association's conference in Houston this spring, and we hope to have that web text finished over the summer, and we're going to look for a good online journal to submit that to.

What I'm facing now personally is this task of trying to imagine a continuing scholarly agenda in the face of all this administrative work that I have coming down the pike. I'm hoping to continue working on some of these multi-media projects that I've started. I've got a couple of things that I have to work on to finish, but I think what we've started here with the new unit is really going to require a lot of my attention over the next year and beyond.