The Power of Language

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About the Author

Shanti Bruce, Ph.D., associate professor and coordinator of writing program at the college, serves as chair of the college’s M.A. in Writing program. She received her Ph.D. in English from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She published ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors (Heinemann, 2004 and 2009) and Creative Approaches to Writing Center Work (Hampton Press, 2008). Both books won the International Writing Centers Association Outstanding Scholarship Award for Best Book. In 2012, Bruce published What Every Multilingual Student Should Know about Writing for College (Pearson). She was a keynote speaker for the Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association Conference, featured speaker for the European Writing Centers Association Conference, and plenary speaker for the Midwest Writing Centers Association Conference. Bruce also serves on the executive board of the Southeastern Writing Centers Association and the steering committee of the National Council on Peer Tutoring in Writing.

The Power of Language

by Shanti Bruce

Below is a transcript of the 2011 Undergraduate Convocation ceremony speech given by Shanti Bruce, recipient of the 2011 Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences Full-Time Faculty Excellence in Teaching Award, to welcome students and introduce the college theme.

I am extremely honored to have this opportunity to speak to you today. Thank you, Dean Rosenblum, for recognizing the work I do with students, which I consider to be the most important work I do. I am humbled to receive this award. For I am but one of many faculty members who work each day to create learning opportunities for our students. Thank you, as well, Dean Rosenblum, for the myriad ways in which you support my teaching and the teaching of my colleagues.

To my colleagues: Thank you for the work you do each day in your classrooms and in your scholarship. You impress me, and you inspire me, and I am proud to work alongside you.

I extend a special thank you, today, to Dr. Marlisa Santos, director of the Division of Humanities. You have been a wonderful example of leadership for me, and I deeply appreciate your professionalism, your support, and your kindness.
It is my pleasure, now, to welcome all of you to this Convocation ceremony, and most especially, welcome to all of the students. On behalf of myself and my fellow faculty members, I welcome those of you who are new to college and to our campus, and I also welcome those of you who are returning after the summer. It is you who make up our diverse student body. It is you, all of you, who bring with you interesting life experiences that enrich our class discussions, and it is you who we watch, with pride, as you work, study, and grow in each of your chosen disciplines.

Learning is a lifelong process, so whether this is your first semester in college, or your last, I invite each of you to take full advantage of the opportunities that are given to you, as well as those opportunities you must work hard to obtain. Learn all you can while you are in college, and push yourself to achieve what you are truly capable of. Don’t settle.

In addition to welcoming you, our students, I also get to introduce this year’s theme: Truth and Power. Each year, the college chooses a theme around which we create courses, assignments, and events. We read about and discuss various aspects of the theme, and through these discussions, we challenge ideas, question beliefs, and learn from each other. As we participate in our various academic pursuits, the theme brings us together, and we are reminded of how great it is to work with ideas within the world of a university. Though united by the common goal of the pursuit of knowledge, we each have our distinct areas of interest and expertise. We look at the theme through the various lenses of our disciplines. This year, there will be fascinating discussions of truth and power as they relate to math, science, and technology; social and behavioral sciences; the arts; and the humanities.

My area is writing, and so, language is at the heart of what I do. It is what I study and what I teach. For me, it is what comes to mind when I hear the words “truth” and “power.” Language is a powerful force. Language has changed societies. It has preserved history; it has revised history. It has brought worlds together, and it has been used to tear people apart. Some in power have tried to keep literacy from those they wanted to oppress. They feared the knowledge and power that comes with understanding and using language.

As you advance in your studies at Nova Southeastern University, you will learn the language of your chosen discipline, and with it, you will gain the power to communicate with others in that discipline and to ultimately contribute new knowledge.

I believe it is important for all of us to be aware of the power of the language we use and the power of the language we hear. Linguist Deborah Tannen emphasizes the power of metaphors and the way we connect with them. She believes “politicians realize how much of their leadership depends on the power of language.” In particular, the “persuasive power” of language. She points to one interesting political example.

When there was a movement to repeal the inheritance tax, the people working for that wanted to change the name because they realized how powerful language can be. They didn’t want to call it an estate tax because, as Tannen points out, “an estate is something rather large, and if you are the average working person, you don’t have an estate, and so, you don’t feel implicated by that estate tax,” and the reality was that a person had to inherit over a million dollars before this tax kicked in.
But, Tannen said, “call it a death tax, and suddenly, everyone is implicated. We all die. We all find death repellent, and so, how awful to tax death!” She concludes, “In the choice of words, people can really manipulate” public opinion.

I encourage each of you to think critically about the language you hear, and to also think carefully about the language you use. Barbara Radloff studies racism and sexism and said, words are “powerful tools by which a civilization perpetuates its values—both its proudest achievements and its most crippling prejudices.” Words are so powerful that people fight for freedom of speech but also for the regulation of “hate speech” that may incite violence.

Language can define power dynamics. The words we use can show respect, or they can belittle. According to the National Crime Prevention Council, “cyberbullying is a problem that affects almost half of American teens,” and this bullying centers on the offensive language used to describe and deride a teenager online.

For those who are abled in different ways, a push has been made for the more respectful “person first” language so that people are known by their names first and not by what others might consider to be a disability. The American Speech-Language-and Hearing Association’s first principle regarding person-first language says “Disabilities are not persons, and they do not define persons, so do not replace person-nouns with disability-nouns.”

New language can bring with it new concepts, and phrases we have committed to memory, such as “I have a dream” are powerful in their ability to bring to mind images, places, people, political and social movements, and they can inspire us to keep working for positive change.

I will leave further discussion of this year’s college theme, “Truth and Power,” to you, your professors, and the distinguished speakers who will visit us and enlighten us this year, and I will close by asking each of you to think critically about the language you learn, to think critically about the language you hear and read, and perhaps most importantly, to think critically and carefully about the language you choose to use. When you write or talk or text or post or tweet, what will be the consequences of the words you choose? What will the words you choose say about you, your beliefs, your education, your culture, your care for others? Will you use the power of language to make others feel something or learn something or to challenge the status quo? How will you use the power of language?

References

