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What We Really Value

Bob Broad

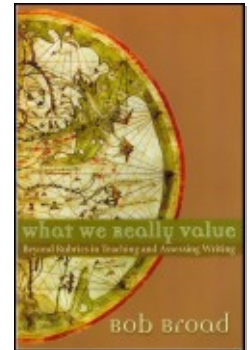
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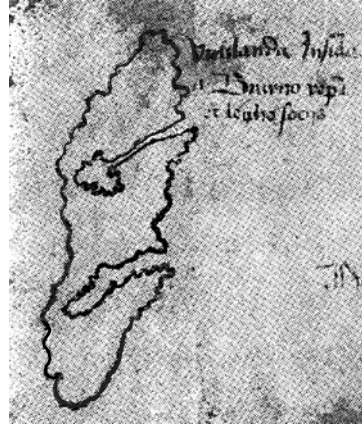


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PROLOGUE

In chapter 3 of *Drawing the Line: Tales of Maps and Cartocontroversy* (1995), Mark Monmonier tells the story of the Vinland Map. Released to the public for the first time in 1965, this map appears to demonstrate that Vikings not only visited what we now call North America centuries before Columbus



but also *mapped* that continent, which would make them—as far as we know—the first in history to have done so. What interests map specialists most about the Vinland Map is whether it is a genuine fifteenth-century document or a flamboyant twentieth-century forgery. And after thirty years of debunkings and rebunkings, cartographers still don't agree on this point.ⁱ

Luckily, I am not a cartographer, but a teacher and scholar of rhetoric with a special interest in writing assessment. I am therefore free to take a different sort of interest in the Vinland Map. It fascinates me as a dramatic example of representation based on what we would now consider woefully inadequate inquiry and information. Yet the cartography of the Vinland Map was quite sufficient to the time and purpose for which it was produced.ⁱⁱ

As early as 985 CE, Vikings explored the western reaches of the North Atlantic Ocean, including parts of North America. In the early fifteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church wanted to establish the scope of “Christendom,” its spiritual and material empire. On the basis of the Vikings' explorations, the holy mapmakers were able to offer the following information about the Church's western frontier in the form of the Vinland Map:

1. There's land over there.
2. It's a very big piece of land, even bigger than Greenland.

3. It has a couple of big bays on its east coast.
4. It's ours to claim.

I want to emphasize two aspects of this information. First, all these claims but the last was true, though the vast data they omit makes them seem ludicrous. Second, for the time in which it was composed and the purposes to which it was put, the Vinland Map served perfectly well. Only from our twenty-first-century point of view as inhabitants or neighbors of North America does the Vinland Map appear bizarrely inaccurate and useless. For people who need to live, work, or travel in North America, the Vinland Map does not suffice.

Now consider the familiar five- or six-point list found on most “rubrics” or “scoring guides” for writing assessment. These documents claim to represent a teacher’s or writing program’s rhetorical values, the qualities and characteristics for which readers reward or penalize authors. A currently popular example of a traditional rubric is Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory’s “6+1 Trait Writing” framework.

1. Ideas
2. Organization
3. Voice
4. Word Choice
5. Sentence Fluency
6. Conventions
7. Presentation

(2001)

Such concise lists of criteria may have adequately served the needs of writing assessment for forty years by making judgments simple, quick, and agreeable. As a guide to how texts are actually composed, read, interpreted, and valued, however, I propose that traditional rubrics are as dangerously unsatisfactory for purposes of contemporary rhetoric and composition as the Vinland Map would have been to Lewis and Clark or to someone wishing to travel Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles. My book proposes a method of inquiry into and negotiation of rhetorical values in classrooms and writing programs that should liberate composition from reliance on such Vinland Maps. After all, we live here.

NOTES

- i. Type “Vinland Map” into your web search engine to find illustrations and discussions of the map.
- ii. This Prologue discusses the Vinland Map, which is quite different from the map adorning the cover of this book. On the cover is pictured Pietro Vesconte’s beautiful World Map, composed circa 1321. The key similarity between these two earliest world maps is their incompleteness and inaccuracy by contemporary standards. The key difference is that the Vinland Map pictures what we now call North America, though in an unrecognizable form. North and South America are entirely missing from Vesconte’s map of the world, for he lacked the knowledge required to chart them.

