



What are we doing as a research community? Introduction

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What Are We Doing as a Research Community?

Introduction

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On March 16, 1988, in St. Louis a workshop, organized by an ad hoc group calling itself the Research Network, was held prior to the annual CCCC meeting. The following symposium consists of the plenary papers distributed prior to the workshop and a description of the day's discussions.

The Research Network had developed over the previous year out of discussions among a number of people in the area variously called, among other things, composition, teaching of writing, rhetoric, study of written language, or literacy studies. Although we could not agree on a common name, we all recognized that we were part of a common enterprise that both makes knowledge and uses that knowledge to help people write better. The proliferation of work over the last two decades in this loosely defined area gives the impression that we have been giving birth to a research discipline.

Yet the communication patterns within this area have been such that we have had few opportunities to address fundamental issues about who we are, what we do, why we do it, and what we have to do with each other. The development of different approaches to the study of writing processes, written language, texts, and the teaching of writing has led to not-always-productive competition and mutual misunderstandings of each other's work. The recent increase in publication opportunities has allowed us to read each other's work more easily, but we still do not have much opportunity to discuss seriously our agreements and differences.

The pre-CCCC workshop was our attempt to foster such discussions. The day consisted of alternating sessions of large and small group discussions developing out of the five papers distributed beforehand. The authors of these papers represent some of the many approaches currently taken toward research: psychological, linguistic, pedagogical, historical, and cultural. They were asked to describe what their research issues were and why they approached those issues through the methods they used. As you read these papers, you will find they have all accomplished this task in enlightening and provocative ways. They provide much insight into their research and have opened the way for thinking about how each of their work fits with the work of others.

Some common threads run through these essays that bespeak the need and the readiness for the kind of fundamental discussions that we hope this symposium initiates. Each of the authors recognizes a variety of approaches to understanding writing, and some indeed advocate or employ several methods even within a single research design. Moreover, each recognizes the contingency and limitations of his or her own research methods and understands how varying research issues, assumptions, philosophic underpinnings, social projects, and institutional locations may lead to very different kinds of research. No one claims a method which grants ontological or epistemological primacy. Yet each author takes a somewhat embattled stance, as though his or her particular approach is not being accepted for what it is and can do. All feel they have been unfairly cast into some narrow, stereotypical parody of their position, and all seem to appreciate the chance to explain their work to a broad cross section of the profession. We seem ready to learn more about each other, and in doing so learn more about ourselves in the acts of explaining, contrasting, and making connections.

One final common element among these essays bespeaks the growing maturity of our field. Each presents a serious project that goes far beyond the immediate issue of what to teach on Monday but still sheds light on that most practical daily question. In proposing ways of investigating written language, its production, and consequences, each illuminates the enormous socio-psychological power embodied in writing and deepens our appreciation of the importance of the teaching of writing—the task which has set all our inquiries in motion.

The Research Network will again meet in a pre-CCCC workshop in March 1989 in Seattle. We look forward to the discussion continuing in this and other forums, through this and other organizations. We have much to gain by talking to each other and by putting ourselves on the spot in each other's presence. We may never agree on a common name for our enterprise that will encompass its great variety, but we can come to work through in common what we all do, variously.

“Cultural Criticism”:

A Social Approach to Studying Writing

Patricia Bizzell

College of the Holy Cross

If one wants to know how people learn to write, exactly what, then, does one need to know? As I argued in a 1982 essay reviewing the work of Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, scholars have tended to take one of