

Professional Communication: The  
Social Perspective.  
ed. by Tyler ~~and~~ Thralls.

Foreword

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In the humanities we have a fear of the social. The humanities, we believe, constitute the place where the individual learns to express the self against compulsive society. The humanities recognize the imagination and its power to transform life rather than to submit to the social givens. We see the social opposed to the creative acts we prize and want to encourage in our students. To teach students to recognize and speak to the social is, we fear, to have them aim too low, to play other people's games, to enforce necessity rather than encourage possibility, to find a job rather than create a life.

Contemporary cultural and literary studies, even while contemplating the social, too often reproduce this terror of the social by suggesting that the social leaves no residue for the individual, for novelty. We are caught in hegemonies of our times and locales or inscribed in our socially constructed semiosis. Freedom is to be found, at best, in resistance and play.

The humanities have also defined themselves in contrast to the social sciences—those other people who claim to know something about being human, but do it in ways that threaten to diminish us by giving what we think of as reductionist scientific accounts. We have created a folklore

about the manipulative, number-crunching, positivist social sciences who have forgotten what it means to be human. This folklore helps maintain the humanities' claim to a unique and enduring role in the academy, with literature and other creative arts containing a truth not found elsewhere.

The professions suffer no better reputation than the social among the humanities, for although there are perhaps no more arcane professions than the literary theorist, the rhetorical analyst, or even the writing teacher (consider how our neighbors fear our bad opinion as much as they do dentists' and psychiatrists'), we like to think we are the champions of amateurism—just plain folks—and the integrated self that exists prior to and above modern differentiated society. We claim to offer a place where we can come to know who we are and what we mean, where the general polity can find its citizen's voice and discover its life affirmations.

But this antipathy to the social misses an important point. We are not ourselves because we set ourselves apart from each other. We become ourselves as we realize ourselves in relation to each other. The social is everything we do with each other and what we become as we do it. We individuate by identifying ourselves on a social landscape, a landscape we come to know as we interact with it. We discover and create ourselves and others by what we do with each other.

In our highly literate world, we create much of our interactive landscape through words and other symbolic representation, and we formulate our presence through those symbols that would be recognized by those around us. We become ourselves by using the common symbols for our own ends, but these ends we often discover as we interact with others. For what are most of our ends, once we get past the most rudimentary biological satisfactions, except to engage in cooperative, sharing enterprises with and for each other? As we learn to step into the complex world of society enacted in language and symbols, we find what we have to do with each other.

The developed arts and sciences, the differentiated communities and tasks of society, the specialized activities of professional life, the divisions of labor and the divisions of knowledge, the distinctive social groups and living units—these provide the locations we have established on which to make our lives with each other. It is in these socially structured locations that we make our contributions to society, find our satisfactions, gain some of our richest rewards for being part of the human experiment. The hopes and projects, needs and possibilities

framed within these social nexuses are what draw out our imaginations and motivate our doing. To dread the social is to dread life.

But if the social is the stage on which all is enacted, it is a complex and protean stage. It contains law and ideas and a history of techniques of mapmaking. It contains ethics and gender and government policy. It contains character and corporations and technology. It contains small groups and large groups and people sitting alone in their rooms. It contains biochemistry and astrology and hermeneutics. It contains people who affiliate with race, ethnicity, nation, religion, and universalist ideals. It contains prisons and guns and taxes and perjury and liability. If we are to understand writing as a social act, enacted in complex social spaces, we must understand all of this.

We can no longer view writing as a limited textual practice, understood only as the bounded rules of the page. Nor is writing to be understood only as the product of an isolated mind, churning out text in like manner in any conditions as a donut machine would as long as it is in working order, in satisfactory condition and provided with raw materials. Writing is potentially responsive to and dependent on everything that is on the social stage, everything we have put there through our complex history of civilization and everything we may not have made but that we have recognized and named as being there and thus have brought into our life activity—trees and insects and electrons.

More particularly, everything that bears on the professions bears on professional writing. Indeed, within the professions, writing draws on all the professional resources, wends its way among the many constraints, structures, and dynamics that define the professional realm and instantiates professional work. The more we understand about all aspects of the professions and their situation, the more we understand about the writing that creates intersubjective places of agreement, cooperation and confrontation in the middle of all these elements.

Thus adopting a social perspective on writing, far from being reductive, requires research to gather a museum of the entire human life world. We see some of that heterogeneity in the research and theory gathered in this volume. Yet we need to understand more, to be able to recognize all the available heterogeneous elements likely to influence any particular professional writing space, to be able to see the processes by which new heterogeneous elements are borne out of evolving human practices, to understand how heterogeneous elements are yoked together into an apparently homogeneous textual meeting place, a single representation that sits in the middle of complex realms of practice. We need to

recognize all that goes into local situations and opportunities and all that goes into the enduring practices of culture.

Yet while examining the proliferating human creativity and complexity that makes the most mundane of documents truly a wonder of civilization, we need also to look for fundamental human processes that might orient us to wide ranges of literate social practices. The formation of social trust and bonds; the division of interests and the creation of distrust; the processes of task definition and social enlistment; the locating of mutually recognized points at issue at socially defined times; the formation of roles, responsibilities, personalities, and tasks within complex social organizations; the creation of reasonably common understanding through processes of social typification; the use of symbols to create group cohesion or mutually perceived concerns; the means of socializing into new literate practices and the consequences of different socialization paths; the needs of individuals to have their representations accepted as worthy by reference groups; and the complications of shame (with attendant skewing of representational behavior) when one feels one's words are not appreciated—such processes of social symbolic behavior will provide a framework of understanding that will help us move from one complex communicative site to another without being overwhelmed by the infinite variety of social circumstances. Certain terms from rhetoric, literary theory, sociology, and psychology provide guideposts for our investigation of these processes: genre, *kairos*, stasis, social bond, anomie, intertextuality, socialization, typification, hermeneutics, schema, and representation. These (and many others unmentioned) suggest processes that we need to investigate further as they apply to literate behavior.

Yet no matter how many fundamental human processes we are able to identify with some specificity and regularity, these processes will never fully define what it is to write or give a comprehensive account of what one needs to do in any writing circumstance. They reveal only the social processes out of which we create the complexities and particularities of our social life. It is in these particularities that we live and to these particularities that we write.