

CONSTRUCTING EXPERIENCE

CHARLES BAZERMAN

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Introduction I: Occasional Improvisations and Integrating Continuities

The texts presented here were improvised for various occasions. In each instance they were constructed out of the resources at hand—a repertoire of shards and habits gained by encounters through language, a history of experiences of making meaning. Because reading and writing have been recurrent concerns of mine, I found myself making many different statements on the subject as I spoke with different people on different occasions. As I made these statements, I sensed the continuities among them and the way each made the next possible. But these continuities, though they were both transparent and important to me, were not obvious to others, even my best of friends. Now, by placing some of the variety side by side in a single volume, perhaps I can make that coherence more evident.

This volume contains some of my written statements and scripted talks of the last decade (with one slightly older exception). But my puzzling over literate activity has a longer history. The earliest conversation I can remember about constructing texts was in December 1950. Mrs. Curb had told us kindergarteners that we would be making holiday calendars for our parents. We were first to draw an appropriate winter scene, and then she would help us turn it into a calendar. After making a hurried drawing, I ran up to Mrs. Curb's desk, asked for a new sheet of paper, and inquired how many days were in January. By my fourth trip to the desk, asking about more paper and the days of April, the teacher finally realized what I was doing, and she told me to wait until she gave preprinted calendar pads to the whole class to be glued to our pictures.

Ever since then I have been trying to understand the writing tasks I have had and the reading texts people have handed me. I have generally been too dense or obstinate to see the shortcut—the shortcut that would bypass revealing questions. But since no more than the shortcut has usually been expected, I have often had to work with

inadequate information, trying the patience of the hapless mentors whom I have tried to interrogate into revelations. So I frequently had to make my own way out of the fleeting glimpses and clues others yielded up to me. In schools I tried interrogating teachers, but I found often enough that they had little novel to say and little patience—although with notable exceptions to whom I remain indebted in ways that are constantly renewed. Then I started to interrogate the texts I was reading to see how they were done. I remember wondering at about age twelve how is it that anybody could ever have enough to say to write a book.

As well, I started to interrogate my own tasks to see what tricks I could do. Endless strategy sessions with my high school debate partner (a would-be journalist) helped us reconstruct a kind of third-hand rhetoric. From high school through graduate school, literary studies placed a number of intriguing texts in front of me and provided me analytic tools to see how they were constructed. I took these lessons as immediately applicable to my own writing; I would regularly turn in critical papers in the style of the canonical text being examined. The most bizarre of these papers was an analysis of Faulkner's long sentences, all accomplished in a single sentence of two thousand words, embedding a quotation of the longest Faulkner sentence I could find. I also remember, from undergraduate years, late-night discussions with a close friend, studying to be composer, about how contemporary, serious music could speak to its audience.

When the Vietnam draft encouraged a detour from graduate literary studies into inner-city elementary school teaching, issues of literacy took on a new urgency. Literacy became more than an egocentric matter. The children before me were the revelation. As they took hold of literacy, I could see how they became cognitively and socially transformed. I remember a distracted and spindly first-grader gaining focus and poise almost immediately upon having mastered the first-level reading book. The morning before he made his major breakthrough, this boy named Milton spent playtime calling himself Superman and jumping off a chair into the unknown. I remember Daniel who, the year after he was in my third grade, came visiting my class every week to borrow books.

And I could see in those who did not find literacy an interesting accomplishment, how the lack of literacy clearly cut them off from the institutions and means of life in contemporary American society. There was Karen, frequently absent, and always too hungry to care. One day

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at lunch on a school trip, I saw her pacing, cradling her sandwich within hunched shoulders and folded arms, as though to keep the other children from stealing her stale peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And there was very bright Willie who resisted any communication from adults and any compulsion to schoolwork.

Being part of these children's daily struggles with literacy, I had to do more than wonder privately about how I could write. I had to set up classroom assignments, read books with the children, support them through painful encounters with primers. I had to talk with children about their motives and difficulties and habits. I had to work with them. And then I puzzled with other teachers about the lives and minds of the students. I also learned that the conditions of inner-city education victimized the teachers as well as the students, making those situations increasingly difficult to maintain as positive experiences. I had only so much ability to stand at the classroom door fending off inappropriate school policies with one hand and trying to provide what students needed with the other. I only had so much energy to get up at 5 A.M., create a fresh story for the day's reading, typed directly on a Rexograph master, and then get to the school early enough to break into the duplicating room, because I was not granted permission to make the copies I needed.

So I returned to the more privileged conversations of graduate school but with transformed interests and questions and experiences. My return to literary studies helped integrate my understandings of the literary and the literate—as skills, as practices, as history, and as cultural systems interactive with social, political, and economic systems. Literature clearly appeared as only one subcategory of literate behavior—one of the many things people did with the written word. I began to see that literary culture and practices were in part similar to other literate cultures and practices and in some ways differentiated in the particular character of the literary system. These differences could be precisely articulated in mundane terms, although we have historically constructed these differences as cultural sacralizations.

One difference that sacralizes literature is its guise of timelessness and placelessness. In a move I now recognize as transgressing that sacred boundary, driven by the simple-minded question of why people write, I took up the issue of occasion in Renaissance poetry, thereby reintegrating poetry into social occasions and social structure. I now also take that graduate school work to be a precursor of my current concerns with genre, rhetorical moment, and specialized languages.

(In Elizabethan society poetic motives and motifs, genres and styles were clearly differentiated along class lines.) Although my work then found few listeners and no publishers, I now see it as related to issues of literary location and action now at the fore in literary studies.

My return to literary research and criticism as topics of professional conversation, however, did not draw me away from literacy. After my degree I found myself teaching writing at City University of New York within the educational ferment of the early years of open admissions. Serious talk among part of the faculty (unfortunately only part) about how to teach writing, many educational experiments, and new kinds of students to talk with, all led to new things to say about writing and new forums locally and nationally in which to say them. Our local ferment became absorbed in a national ferment about writing, which we at CUNY liked to think we helped set in motion.

Since then many different occasions in classrooms and halls and offices, in faculty lounges and conference rooms, in textbooks and professional journals have given me opportunities to say different things about writing and the teaching of it. Some of these varieties of utterances are represented in this volume, while others are beyond the scope of the book. But they all draw on and increase the stock of common resources I use to consider any issue of reading and writing.

The heterogeneity of the kinds of texts collected in this volume reflect the potential multiplicity and integrity of knowledge available to teachers of writing. The continuity and integrity of our various knowledges and discourses develop insofar as they become mutual resources for each other. What we tell ourselves about our own writing, what we tell our students, what we tell each other, and what we tell other research disciplines benefit by being held mutually accountable to each other. Unfortunately, major divisions often fracture our discourses. By imposing literary standards to student writing, we distance ourselves from the discourses students are confronting in the rest of the academy and the professional world. Research and teacher talk define themselves against each other instead of in mutual support. Our own experience as writers only occasionally enters into communication with the experiences of our students as writers or our research discourses. Textbooks remain a dirty secret, mentioned only to be vilified in both research and teacher talk. Notable exceptions cross each of these divides, but the exceptions are not the pattern.

As the teaching of writing rightfully seeks full citizenship among academic studies, it seeks to develop and display a disciplinary knowledge that warrants our status as a research discipline and a disciplined

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profession. I take part in this move and I applaud it. At the same time, we need also recognize the multiple sources and forms of that knowledge. This is a matter of professional equity for the people who do the many sorts of professional work, but even more it is a matter of professional vitality, so that our multiple discourses can mutually inform each other.

The last three essays in this volume (forming part 4, "Experiencing our Constructions") represent the most privileged kind of academic work in English departments—historical scholarship, interpretation, theorizing. But these pieces are intellectually continuous with the issues puzzled through on the different fronts represented by pieces earlier in the volume. Part 3, "Conceptual Puzzles in Constructing Rhetorical Accounts," is comprised of professional discussion papers from conferences, symposia, and festschrifts—all representing a process of working through ideas with colleagues in professional forums. Part 2, "Constructing Empirical Practices and Disciplinary Landscapes," comprised of methodological contemplations and reviews of the literature, contains attempts to articulate what it is we are trying to find out and how we might best create those experiences that will help answer our questions. Part 1, "Constructing the Classroom Experience," addresses classroom issues most directly, the classroom being the beginning and ending of our attempts to understand literacy.

At this point it is customary to give thanks to the many people who helped me in these endeavors and influenced my thought. How could I not recognize an unending list of debts, given all I believe and have said about the construction of the self at the intersection of our experience of others on the social playing fields of discursive occasions? Even more, how could I not give endless credit, given the richness of experience others have afforded me? But rather than recognize here the many readers, friends, influences, and supportive family members in the foreground of my life, I would like to reserve this space for giving thanks to an almost entirely hidden figure of enormous influence, a man of great originality and humanity. Twenty-five years ago, when I was teaching elementary school, Tony Gabriele was waiting for me to wander into his psychologist's consulting room in New York. As a mentor first and then as a friend, he has given focus to my struggles with language, has helped me to sort out the social world and how language helps me make a place in it, has helped me understand the continuity of myself with others, has helped me see the great power of

the social sciences to move us beyond the most narrowly self-interested understandings of ourselves. More than anyone else, he has helped make me who I am, because he has opened the door to others. I am not alone in my love and admiration for this great man. He will live on and on in the many lives he has entered.

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Part 1

Constructing the Classroom Experience

More than any other motivation, literacy education sets in motion research into how people read and write, the kinds of reading and writing people do beyond the walls of the classroom, and how reading and writing affect the well-being, prosperity, intellect, and culture of individuals and society. Understanding such things helps teachers plan lessons, assignments, wise sayings, and environments to support students' learning.

My own formal inquiries into reading and writing began with the fundamental classroom problem of what I should teach and how I should teach it. In the early years of my career, the problem of college writing was posed to me most forcefully by the second semester freshman writing course at Baruch College. This course had a research paper requirement that seemed only an unrelated appendage. To understand why the research paper should be taught and how to teach it, I used the classroom as a laboratory and discovered that intertextuality permeates college work. When taught as a means of discovery, the research paper helped students negotiate the collegiate world of intertextuality. When taught as a matter of footnotes, the research paper was only a burdensome artifice. What I learned at that time is most comprehensively presented in my textbook *The Informed Writer* (first edition, 1979; fifth edition, 1995). The first essay following, "A Relationship Between Reading and Writing: The Conversational Model," appearing in *College English* in 1980, describes and gives a rationale for the pedagogy of the book as I understood it at that time.

Knowing what to teach does not guarantee motivated learning. To enlist students actively into the educational process requires that students perceive how that education meets their needs and interests, even if these are only local interpersonal needs of managing to get through the school day without humiliation. From my earliest years of teaching, I have wondered how best to evoke the motivated, focused hard work that will lead to rapid growth in language—how best to make advanced literacy something students feel they want

and need—and then to reward that motivation by teaching those things that will satisfy student wants and needs. The need for motivation is most evident at the developmental level, for developmental students have usually not had many rewarding experiences with literacy. Nonetheless, as students successful at one level confront the daunting challenges of more advanced literacy, motivation and interest still remain crucial. Few people relish the hard work, mental reorganization, and headaches that accompany writing tasks at the limits of their skills. The search for motivating and rewarding materials has been what I consider the most distinctive feature of the Skills Handbook series I have written with Harvey Wiener (initiated with the *English Skills Handbook*, 1977, and now represented by *Reading Skills Handbook*, sixth edition, 1994; *Basic Reading Skills Handbook*, third edition, 1994; *All of Us: A Multicultural Reading Skills Handbook*, second edition, 1995; and *Writing Skills Handbook*, third edition, 1993.) The second essay in this section, "What's Interesting" (appearing in *English Basics* in 1990), explores how we can identify those areas of interest that will motivate students.

The next essay, "Where Is the Classroom?" (appearing in *English Basics* in 1992), explores further the complex dynamics of the classroom and the relation of the classroom to surrounding social arrangements. The more aware we are of the forces that shape the classroom and drive students' participation in that classroom, the more intelligently we can figure out how to make that classroom work successfully. The fourth essay, "Reading Student Papers: Proteus Grabbing Proteus" (from *Encountering Student Texts*, 1990), examines how the core activity of the writing classroom, the communication between student and teacher through the student's written work, is at the heart of the motivational system of the classroom but is deeply influenced by the many contexts that shape the activities of reading and response.

The final selection, "From Cultural Criticism to Disciplinary Participation" (from *Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the Disciplines*, 1992), raises the question of the literacy classroom's relationship to the many worldly discourses that surround it. Even though the protected world of the classroom provides the leisure and independent standpoint to examine these other discourses critically, critical knowledge ought not be defined against the world, as humanities have often done, but as an interactive part, giving students the stance and tools to cope with the world and transform it to one more of their liking.

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The connector then writes se and theory about as a truism, making or consequences lack of attention the many disciplines century: *Speech* has staked a claim to to spoken language factory lodgings literacy; and *English* purely with the incarnations as to advanced expository. All these speaking writing to conceiving connections: our writer alone with contexts in which opponents in coming the form of a composition writing, and the

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Part 2

Constructing Empirical Practices and Disciplinary Landscapes

Every profession has a research discipline that informs and extends its practice. Professions rely on disciplines continually to produce new specialized knowledge. Without that new specialized knowledge to keep informing and transforming professional practice, the practice will be reduced to a set of stable, simplified, commodified procedures that can be transmitted with minimal training. Then there is no profession, only a service. This indeed happened with the teaching of writing when for almost a century the teaching of writing was thought to consist of little more than grammar, the five-paragraph essay, and the modes. Over that period, composition teaching was relegated to subprofessional instructors or preprofessional graduate assistants.

Every research discipline produces a literature that proposes, evaluates, and codifies its knowledge. With the rebirth of rhetoric and composition as both profession and discipline in recent decades has come a rapidly expanding scholarly and research literature of a heterogeneous sort. Because writing is such a complex, multifaceted, and widely spread practice, many forms of knowledge are relevant to its understanding.

The following essays present some of my thoughts on those literatures that might inform a new basis for the understanding of literate practices and on the methods I have used to produce empirically grounded research. "The Interpretation of Disciplinary Writing" was originally prepared for a conference on the rhetoric of the social sciences in 1989. "Inclusions, Exclusions, and Conclusions" was presented as part of the second meeting of the Research Network in 1989. "Linguistic and Rhetorical Studies of Disciplinary Language" was written for the *Encyclopedia of Higher Education*, appearing in 1992. Finally, "Discourse Analysis and Social Construction" was written for the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 1990. In other reviews

of the literature and book reviews not collected here, I carried out similar work.

Even more than in reviews of the literature, book reviews, or methodological reflections, discipline building occurs in the creation and maintenance of disciplinary forums. Although strengthening the organizational networks of a discipline is not as visible through publicly prominent artifacts as is publication of one's own work, it is perhaps more important for the overall growth of knowledge. Strong networks for communication foster the development of important communications, which in turn strengthen the networks. Therefore I count my role in the development of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors, the Research Network, and the Coalition of Graduate Programs in Support of Scholarship and Research as among my most important professional work.

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Part 3

Conceptual Puzzles in Constructing Rhetorical Accounts

Over time, a range of theories and findings began to form, for me, a related set of accounts of how people wrote in varying circumstances, how those rhetorical circumstances arose, and what the collective consequences of individual rhetorical actions were. As these ideas started to come together, they posed certain conceptual puzzles to me, particularly concerning how various phenomena might be characterized without creating oversimplifications and other forms of patterned intellectual blindness. Acutely aware of the multiplicity and complexity of writing as individual and social action, and acutely aware of the reifying and limiting effect of terminological choices, I approached all conceptual characterizations with a skeptical caution. This skepticism was further heightened by my awareness of writing as a creative, created, and reflective act. Thus, writing might be many different things, depending on what people made of it. Thus, whatever theoretical language we used to conceptualize writing would in turn influence the practices of writing to be congruent with the theory. That is, not only would what we say tell us what to see, what we said and saw would be enacted in future practice.

In a series of conference talks and essays, I puzzled through conceptual difficulties, trying to see my way through some of the traps of terms and theories being invoked in rhetorical studies. "Difficulties in Characterizing Social Phenomena in Writing," the first of this series (from the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1987) raises the issue in the most general way, while the following four talks—"The Nature of Expertise in Writing" (American Educational Research Association 1990), "Temporary Boundaries over Unstable Land Masses" (Conference on College Composition and Communication 1990), "Why Representations Are Interesting" (Conference on College Composition and Communication 1992) and

"Conceptual Change from a Sociocultural Perspective" (American Educational Research Association 1992)—take on several related terms at the juncture of cognitive and social studies of writing. The final selection in this section, "Theories That Help Us Read and Write Better" (from *A Rhetoric of Doing*, 1992) begins with a critical examination of the theory of James Kinneavy and ends with more general thoughts about what rhetorical theory might be.

Part 4

Experiencing Our Constructions

Because writing to me is a dynamic creative construction, research into writing is looking at what people do and have done, what influences what they do, and what texts do to people who write and read them. Research into writing is a means of extending our own experience to incorporate the experience of others.

The three essays collected here take different approaches to extending our knowledge of writing. The first, "Whose Moment? The *Kairotics* of Intersubjectivity," attempts to reinterpret the classic concept of *kairos*, or rhetorical timeliness, in light of contemporary social thinking. As such, the article ranges widely and synthetically across findings and theories developed in many disciplines, drawing upon the experiences gathered within those disciplines.

The second, "Intertextual Self-Fashioning" (from *Understanding Scientific Prose*, 1993), looks at one text and its sources carefully to see how the scientist Stephen J. Gould reconstructs and mobilizes the surrounding literary context to uproot an entrenched disciplinary view and replace it with another. Gould's rhetorical strategy brings to the surface issues of scientific discourse that are only rarely visible.

The last, "Money Talks: Adam Smith's Rhetorical Project" (from *Economics and Language*, 1993) reconstructs Smith's rhetorical understanding of the social world and analyzes how Smith's most influential text acts rhetorically, mobilizing that understanding. Because this text has been so influential in shaping modern consciousness and social organization, this study goes beyond the formation of an individual's rhetorical conceptions and practices to expose the grounds of modern life that we continually re-create through our adoption of the communicative practices Smith proposed.