CONSTRUCTING EXPERIENCE

CHARLES BAZERMAN

Southern Illinois University Press
Carbondale and Edwardsville

12

Difficulties in Characterizing Social Phenomena in Writing

Most of us in the teaching of writing share a suspicion that social considerations can help us understand and gain control of writing. That suspicion, of course, is ancient. The stabilized and institutionalized precepts of classical rhetoric were founded on social goals and aimed at social effects. They contain an implicit analysis of social rhetorical relations within the structured institutions of Greek and Roman polity. A parallel tradition of dialectic arose out of the social activity of philosophizing, which developed its own institutions. Both traditions have produced macrorules about the available tools and advisable procedures of statement making.

These sets of rules have affected our conception and practice of statement making. Through confidence in these rules and the texts embodying these rules, we have been continually reproducing modified versions of classical situations—in philosophy classes, on nineteenth-century political podiums, in courts of law, in graduate oral examinations. By not looking afresh at our rhetorical situations, by not rethinking the classical social analysis, but rather by adopting the tools and practices of classical rhetoricians and dialecticians, we have tacitly tried to shape our world in consonance with their social vision. Sometimes other social forces have cooperated; sometimes they haven't. Entrenching legal systems, political crises of a bourgeois republican character, industrial mass production requiring mass distribution, and advertising all have provided social analogies that have reinvigorated classical rhetorical technologies, while the university seminar has provided a safe haven for dialectic. On the other hand, printing presses, television, changing public mores, population explosions, the rise of corporate and governmental bureaucracies, and disciplinary proliferation have put strains on our attempts to reproduce the *agora* and the philosopher's log.

Intermittently, those of us interested in writing have looked else-

where than society. Form—grammar, logic, genres as understood in the acontextual, formal sense—became at times a separate focus of attention, cut off from the social situations that give rise to the regularities of form. We have also looked within, for sublime emotions, authentic vision, and what we must say—as well as for the processes by which we come to say it. Depending on the reigning psychological theories, the individual mind has been seen more or less independent of a social-historical context and/or action situation. Both formal and psychological approaches have long and venerable histories, sometimes with alliances between the two, as in Chomskian linguistics where form is treated as the consequence of universal human mental characteristics. In composition we have been deeply engaged in an enlightening period of psychological concern, taking our unit of analysis to be the individual text producer and deriving the terms of our analysis from the flow of information and decisions within the isolated processing unit.

But the pendulum is now starting to swing: We are looking afresh at writing within the social world. In the past decade, a number of hortatory and theoretical articles have encouraged us to look at social phenomena within writing or at writing as a social phenomenon (Bazerman, "Scientific Writing as a Social Act"; Bizzell; Brandt; Bruffee; Cooper; Ede; Ede and Lunsford; Fahnestock; Faigley; Herrington; Laib; Miller, "Public Knowledge"; Myers, "Writing Research," "Reality, Consensus and Reform"; Nystrand, "Rhetoric's 'Audience' "; Odell, Goswami, and Herrington; Park, "Analyzing Audience," "Meanings of 'Audience' "; L. Perelman; Porter; Thomas; and Weaver).

Further, substantive research has begun to look at the social construction, activity, and character of writing (Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge*; Berkenkotter; Burleson and Rowan; Doheny-Farina; Dyson; Faigley and Hansen; Florio and Clark; Herrington, "Writing," "Classrooms"; Hudson; Jablin and Krone; Kantor; Kroll, "Audience Adaptation," "Social Cognitive Ability," and "Writing for Readers"; LaRouche and Pearson; Miller, "Genre as Social Action"; Myers, "Social Construction"; North; Odell and Goswami; Rafoth; Rubin; Rubin and Rafoth; Walzer).

This social concern has been supported within rhetoric and composition by the practical imperatives of writing across the curriculum, the intellectual enticements of contemporary literary theory, and the research consequences of adopting the investigative tool of ethnography. External support has been drawn from a revival of socially based linguistics, both neo-Firthian (for examples, Halliday; Swales, *Aspects*; and Swales and Najjar) and ethnomethodological (for example, Gumperz).

At this conference, the number of sessions and papers devoted to

such topics as discourse communities, writing in the disciplines, writing in the workplace, and audience as well as this discussion attest to the increasing animation of concern, attention, and hard looking into the social dynamics of writing. This fresh look has not necessarily been bound by the social analysis of classical rhetoric.

While this stepping outside of the social analysis of classical rhetoric has opened our eyes to new ideas, dynamics, and phenomena, it has put us on less-settled terrain. If writing is part of the social world, our understanding of writing goes hand in hand with our understanding of the social world. However, as we abandon certain beliefs about the construction of the social world embodied in the texts of classical rhetoric—and I emphasize that the actual social dynamics of the centuries of Greek and Roman vitality may not be fully represented in the classical rhetorical texts, although these texts may have helped shape and regularize the rhetorical situation and activity—we must gain new understanding of the social world. Thus, a number of us have begun to read in social theory, sociological research, and social psychology. The reference lists in composition journals now regularly cite such names as George Herbert Mead, Lev Vygotsky, Harry Stack Sullivan, Karl Marx, Robert Merton, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Michael Cole, Irving Goffman, Adolf Schutz, Harold Garfinkel, Bruno Latour, and Karin Knorr.

In trying to sort through and make use of this literature, however, we may inherit some of its problems. One problem particularly salient for our concerns is the tension between micro- and macrounderstandings of social phenomena. Although vexing, this problem is an immensely rich source of ideas, research, and insight. Worrying over this problem may lead us to significant understandings of what writing is, how it works, and how we do it.

Briefly, the problem is this: in thinking about the large-scale ordering and operations of society, social theorists have posited macrophenomena such as classes, communities, institutions, norms, reward systems, and all the other entities we heard about in Sociology 101. Much social research has accepted these entities as social facts—that is, things that are real because people believe they are real and therefore are real in their social consequences. As social facts, they are treated with a kind of unity and consistency across individuals and situations, and individuals are considered as behaving in patterned ways with respect to them. The law is the law is the law, and a norm is a norm is a norm. Much social research is carried out by questioning groups of people to determine the social facts operative for them or by finding statistical

indicators of the structured social facts within which large groups of people live their lives.

However, macrosocial facts are constituted by the aggregation of microactions of separate individuals. When the behavior, beliefs and reasoning of individuals are examined closely, as is done in ethnomethodological research, the macrosocial facts seem fluid and uncertain. From the microperspective, people seem to construct their actions on local grounds (called *situated* and *indexical*), with little rational concern for the supposed social facts they believe. That is, for example, how children and teachers interact in a classroom has far more to do with microhabits of the individuals in second-by-second ad hoc decisions about body motion and utterances than by the participants' conceptions of the education system; their roles, rights and responsibilities; social rewards and punishments; and values brought from the family. Insofar as social facts appear, they are more likely to be used as answers to certain kinds of questions (such as those asked by sociologists on questionnaires) or as resources when people are challenged or called to account. Social beliefs are good excuses because no one is likely to question their assertion.

Because microsociologists frequently see social facts as sociological fictions, at times they have launched vigorous (if not acrimonious) attacks on traditional functional sociologists for reinforcing ideological macrobeliefs about society, thereby limiting options for action and increasing societal constraint. On the other hand, macrosociologists maintain that these social facts establish a social context within which microactions take place. When a child and a teacher haggle over a reading lesson, it is in a classroom, within the social statuses of student and teacher, enacting identifiable roles and realizing institutionally supported and communally mandated socialization.

From the perspective of writing, the issue is whether we write within any stable social regularities with stable social tools to achieve stable social effects. Or are our social relations ad hoc, fluid, unpredictable, and thus to be constructed new every time? The macroview offers guidelines and predictability under the threat of repetitiveness, dullness, and the loss of individuality; the microview offers creativity and excitement under the threat of chaos and required constant heroic action. From the pedagogical perspective, the issue is whether we train our students into a stable network of roles, decorum, forms, styles, and actions, which they must reproduce, or we introduce students into the struggle and process of writing, letting them confront each rhetorical moment as an entirely new and unprepared for event.

indicators of the structured social facts within which large groups of people live their lives.

However, macrosocial facts are constituted by the aggregation of microactions of separate individuals. When the behavior, beliefs and reasoning of individuals are examined closely, as is done in ethnomethodological research, the macrosocial facts seem fluid and uncertain. From the microperspective, people seem to construct their actions on local grounds (called *situated* and *indexical*), with little rational concern for the supposed social facts they believe. That is, for example, how children and teachers interact in a classroom has far more to do with microhabits of the individuals in second-by-second ad hoc decisions about body motion and utterances than by the participants' conceptions of the education system; their roles, rights and responsibilities; social rewards and punishments; and values brought from the family. Insofar as social facts appear, they are more likely to be used as answers to certain kinds of questions (such as those asked by sociologists on questionnaires) or as resources when people are challenged or called to account. Social beliefs are good excuses because no one is likely to question their assertion.

Because microsociologists frequently see social facts as sociological fictions, at times they have launched vigorous (if not acrimonious) attacks on traditional functional sociologists for reinforcing ideological macrobeliefs about society, thereby limiting options for action and increasing societal constraint. On the other hand, macrosociologists maintain that these social facts establish a social context within which microactions take place. When a child and a teacher haggle over a reading lesson, it is in a classroom, within the social statuses of student and teacher, enacting identifiable roles and realizing institutionally supported and communally mandated socialization.

From the perspective of writing, the issue is whether we write within any stable social regularities with stable social tools to achieve stable social effects. Or are our social relations ad hoc, fluid, unpredictable, and thus to be constructed new every time? The macroview offers guidelines and predictability under the threat of repetitiveness, dullness, and the loss of individuality; the microview offers creativity and excitement under the threat of chaos and required constant heroic action. From the pedagogical perspective, the issue is whether we train our students into a stable network of roles, decorum, forms, styles, and actions, which they must reproduce, or we introduce students into the struggle and process of writing, letting them confront each rhetorical moment as an entirely new and unprepared for event.

Our experience of writing reinforces this macro-micro split. Our daily experience of writing is as micro as one can get. You sit alone at your desk or collaborating in a small group, making small decisions about what to put on the page, second by second. You think about the specifics of your situation, audience, and exigency. Writing happens one text, one page, one sentence, one word, one keystroke at a time. One's construction of one's reader and one's interactions with that reader is made new with each act of writing. In our conferences with students, in our responses to their papers, in the process and collaborative structuring of our classrooms, in our discussions of anthology selections, and in the ambient literary climate of love of the particular text of the individual author, we build up enormous stores of microexperiences for ourselves and to share with our students. Indeed, each teacher has special knowledge of writing, not shared by any colleague, built by the accumulation of microexperiences constructed in each of our classrooms. Our research tools of ethnography, protocol analysis, and textual studies further this microview of individualized decision making.

On the other hand, when we write we also seem to be guided by generalized beliefs about the social world. We write for a specialized disciplinary audience or we write for our friends. We rely on shared social beliefs—such as the commitment of composition teachers to improving our understanding of writing. We consider certain forms, vocabularies, stylistic devices appropriate for condolence occasions and others appropriate for formulating contracts. When we as researchers survey the wide world, we also observe large social facts as gross distinctions. Groups of people, socially labelled as patent lawyers, in acting as patent lawyers, regularly communicate with particular kinds of correspondents (such as patent examiners) to do typified actions (such as make applications or appeal decisions) in institutionalized forums and on regularized occasions (such as in instituting an action before a bureaucratic review board), using identifiable special varieties of language (sometimes institutionally reinforced, as by government legislation and regulations, legal dictionaries, printed forms, etc.). We do not have difficulty distinguishing the matrix of activity and language that establish patent rights from what happens on the pages of horticulture magazines.

As students of language, we have also long traditions of macrotheorizing. Classical rhetoric is a macrosystem. Philosophical discussion of the epistemology of rhetoric is macro. Positing correlates between paragraph types and general human cognition is macro. Drawing flowcharts of a generalized writing process is macro. Finally our classroom

activities, although generating extensive microexperience, demand we think macroscopically—in designing course sequences for thousands of students at a time, in defining the skills and information that qualify a student as competent or educated in writing, in finding things to say to our entire classes to help them in their individual struggles with writing, in designing evaluative tools that measure student productions against some generalized standards, in writing and using textbooks that define a particular technology of writing.

We can see the tension more concretely if we consider two of the concepts that seemed important to a number of us attempting to look at social phenomena: discourse community and genre. I pick these two because I know several people in this room have struggled with each of them. Both discourse community and genre have great intuitive force as concepts and seem to speak to the written world we find around us. But when we look closely at these terms, they seem unstable. The concept of discourse community reflects our sense that texts—in some general, statistically loose way—do seem to travel among particular groupings of people, who seem to write back and forth to each other. Our familiarity with texts is largely constrained by those groupings with which we have regular contact. In my daily reading, I rarely run across patent examiners' communications with inventors, unless I deliberately search out such texts, motivated by the peculiar attitude and intentions alive in the community of discourse analysts. However, as we look more closely at the flow of individual pieces of paper and at the aggregation of paper read by any particular individual, we find that most definitions of discourse community get ragged around the edges rapidly. Papers flow (both by accident and design) to peculiar places. Unpredictable and irregular groupings of people may have motivated interest in any particular document. Not only do we belong to and speak to many such groupings, but these groupings reshape around each different text so that we can define no stable thing such as a crisp discourse community, even though we may maintain a general statistical impression that such things exist.

Similarly with genre, although we are aware of generic differences, when we get down to brass tacks of defining essential generic features, genres rapidly blur. I am not just concerned with self-conscious hybrids of the Geertzian kind but with unexceptional ordinary texts. Exactly how much is determined by a genre? What are its mandatory features? How far can one add or modify and still maintain generic identification? More significantly, how is the genre re-created in each new situation? How does generic form serve the particular interests of the parties in

each particular situation? Does a text unrecognized as generic (by author and/or reader) still have the force of the genre? How do individuals understand the generic assertion and individually interpret the generic force? How does individuality of statement emerge within generic forms? Even in the most typified kinds of cases, such as tax forms or sonnets, there are innovations, differential interpretations, and similarities to other texts not identifiably of that genre. Yet, despite the fluidity and instability of genre, it remains an important concept in our ordering of the world and an important resource in text making and text interpretation. We use genre to write and read.

As we begin looking closely at such macroconcepts as intertextuality, social structure, disciplinary styles, roles, and repertoires, similar problems emerge. Rather than crisp concrete regularities, we get fluid, ad hoc arrangements around individual circumstances, created by individuals' idiosyncratic understanding and deployment of what the individuals believe to be social facts. Social facts are individually realized and interpreted by each person in each circumstance. Even extensive definitions, criminal penalties, and expanding bureaucratic regulations do not guarantee that we all understand and fill out a government tax form in the same way nor that all tax examiners will read and react uniformly to our fiscal confessions.

To get on with our research, we may be tempted to ignore the macro-micro tension and focus solely on macrostructure or microaction. In our research we may constitute large stable objects, such as fixed genres and crisply bounded communities, with limited, determined, and invariant sets of relations. Or we may identify unbounded individuals pursuing their own interests and self-actualizations through a free play of rhetorical possibilities. That is, we can reify social structure and hide the individual life or we can reify the individual and pretend that each moment is a *de novo, ex nihilo* creation, constrained only by biological imperatives, calling for guerilla warfare against institutional coercion and oppression.

Either definition of our research would be handy, but either would be a mistake that would soon be hounded by its own exclusions. Rather we need to find ways to identify the fluid dynamics of social understandings and individual actions. We need to look at such questions as what are the social facts that bear, in various circumstances, on individual acts of reading and writing. How are these social facts constituted, transmitted, transformed, and operative in different circumstances? How do individual interests and rhetorical goals arise within structured communal activity, and how does the individual mobilize

social fact and realize social action? That is, we need to look not only at both macroscopic and microscopic phenomena at the same time but at the mechanisms that tie the two together and make each possible.

The attempt to find mechanisms linking macro and micro has been a recurrent concern among sociologists (for example Merton, *Social Theory*; Handel; Randall Collins; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel; and Giddens, *Constitution of Society*), who have proposed interesting, plausible, and potentially rich ideas. These should be explored, at least for the analogy.

In the study of language, the most obvious correlate of the macro-micro problem has been Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*—the disembodied language system and the contexted, motivated, individual utterance. In composition we have lived unreflectingly with this split, which Saussure adopted only as an expedient, to make some headway against the dizzying complexity of language. We have done little to see whether we could make a different kind of headway without relying on the simplifying assumptions and reifications of the *langue-parole* distinction.

As we in rhetoric and composition begin to search for those regularities of written form and social interaction that help shape rhetorical situations and provide opportunities for responses, we need to avoid the error of looking for too firm a ground under our feet, trying to justify our work by claiming we have found pure and concrete objects, just as we need to avoid the error of not taking social regularity and structure seriously. Discourse communities, genres, texts, and textual interactions are only as people make them, but many people over the long duration make conditions influencing how people remake the moment. We must first find ways of identifying and discussing literate conditions, events, and systems in ways that begin to reveal how ephemeral and idiosyncratic, yet how substantial, regular, constraining and opportunity creating our social placement is. Life is somewhere—some structured social where; but without life, there is no social somewhere.