
OTHER FLOORS,
OTHER VOICES

A Textography of a Small University Building

JOHN M. SWALES
The University of Michigan



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Editor's Introduction

Charles Bazerman, Series Editor
University of California, Santa Barbara

John Swales identifies *Other Floors, Other Voices* as an example of a new genre: textography. Through analysis of text, of textual forms, and of systems of texts, we are shown the lives, life commitments, and life projects of people deeply embedded in the literate culture of the university. The people Swales examines all work today in a single building (a building materially evoked through description, history, and photographs), but their textual lives are maintained in different times and spaces, measured by the dimensions of text production and text circulation in their fields of work. These domains of text time and space are to some degree differentiated by the three specialties that mark the three floors of the North University Building (NUBS), the ethnographic site of this journey into textual lives: computing, taxonomic botany, and English as a Second Language. But within the general space of each floor and discipline, each individual establishes a distinctive kind of work, reaching out to different communities, mediated by different patterns of publication—so that each individual also lives in a distinctive time and space of a distinctive textual universe. Those individual and disciplinary networks are brought home in what happens each day on each floor and at each desk in NUBS, organizing that local space and time in highly articulated ways, so as textographer Swales walks through the building looking for pieces of paper he finds many cultures and ways of life. The material here and now and the evanescent distant intertexts merge to bring complex worlds together under one roof.

In pursuing the elusive concept of discourse community, Swales uncovers something far more concrete, novel, and revealing: the discursive

lives of individuals made within complexes of organized communications and social relations, mediated through writing. Imagine a movie of a life lived in a small town, where the main character's life is built in relation to family, school, church, local merchants and professionals, and a workplace. These relations, in turn, get played out in forums of family dinner, shop counter, and town meeting, through discursive forms like intimate whispers and school valedictory addresses. So a life is made. Swales finds in the North University Building lives are made through providing help online to students whose disks have crashed; through collecting and circulating botanical samples, writing taxonomies, and writing for amateur conservationist newsletters; and through preparing and administering international exams, publishing textbooks, and writing research articles on language acquisition. Through their work we come to know each of the selected inhabitants of NUBS and we come to feel the daily texture of their lives, so we move from ethnography to multiple biographies. We come to see people producing themselves, making unique lives, in literate worlds.

John Swales, as many of us have come to know him, is a distinctive member of both the applied linguistics and composition communities—an original, but an original stamped by the global village of language education he has lived his life in, revealed in his own textographic account embedded within this book. The innovations in his earlier books—from *Writing Scientific English* in 1971 through *Genre Analysis* in 1990 and *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (with Christine Feak) in 1994—have led the way for the field of English for Specific Purposes. In *Other Floors, Other Voices* he turns from applied concerns to an appreciation of the richness and variety of academic discourse for its own sake. Here he explores how the people are embedded in making their textual lives, within the discursive landscapes their communities afford. In so doing he shows not only his own love of language as a way of life, but his appreciation of how all his subjects find their labors of love in the language they create. He provides a fresh way of viewing universities and disciplines, revealing the complex intersections among research, institutional, community, and public discourses that each individual negotiates. And he provides an empirically grounded, fine-grained analysis of those communicative networks people identify as discourse communities. In all these ways John Swales again points to new directions all of us concerned with the written language would be wise to explore.