

An Interview with Prof. Bazerman: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Writing

Prof. Charles Bazerman of U.C. Santa Barbara (Education and English Departments) was a Sonoma State University featured guest speaker Feb. 12-13 (his visit sponsored by the RCSA). Prof. Bazerman has published extensively in English, technical and business journals; has co-written textbooks such as *The Informed Writer* (now in its 5th edition); edits the *Rhetoric, Knowledge, and Society* book series; runs the interdisciplinary research focus group on *Science Technology and Culture Transcription* project on the culture of information at UCSB; and has written books such as *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (University of Wisconsin, 1988) which has won several awards including the McGovern Medal of the American Medical Writers' Association and the National Council Teachers of English Awards for Excellence in Technical and Scientific Writing, and also a book soon to be published discussed in the following interview with Rebecca Small.

RS: For readers who missed the opportunity to attend your speaking engagements in February at Sonoma State U., could you say a bit about your current research on "Edison and the Public Theater of the News" and your forthcoming book on this topic?

CB: Just a few minutes ago I finished reading the proofs of *The Languages of Edison's Light*, so it should be appearing in about four months from MIT press.

The book looks at Thomas Edison and his colleagues as rhetorical actors during the period they were developing and bringing to market incandescent lighting. They had to act in numerous discursive fields to bring into material being a technology that was at first just an intention and an idea. Many people have to cooperate with bringing a new technology into the world—they have to grant the possibility of presence for something new and then find the new presence meaningful and valuable.

Edison and his co-workers had to convince financiers to invest and patent examiners to grant them patents, thereby creating an ownable intellectual property. They had to create impressions before the public through interviews in the newspapers, to achieve legitimacy in the technical press, and to gain the cooperation of urban politicians. They had to communicate with each other through lab notebooks.

Each kind of communication had a history of practices, genres, and social relations, and Edison had to learn to find his way in each. He was remarkably clever and energetic in each of these and other arenas. In the first large section of the book, I consider the historical emergence of each of these discursive forums and the corresponding genres, Edison's previous experience and knowledge of each, the particular rhetorical problems Edison faced, and the rhetorical actions he and his colleagues took.

There is, however, a continuing tension between the words, impressions, and promises Edison used to gain cooperation and the difficulties in actually producing the material technology. The middle part of the book looks at how Edison struggled to maintain trust and cooperation over several years when he could not deliver on his first bold claims, and had to convert those claims into promises that were only gradually delivered on. The final third of the book looks on the new discourses of legal argument, investment, corporate organization, and domestic

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might have something with that word-counting device of hers, at least in relation to this book, because the repeated words and echoed phrases are so obvious, it looks like Calvino's sending up the technique with his form. Apocrypha, mirrors, ghosts. Ludmilla's frequent pronouncements on her preferences in fiction, "I prefer novels..."

Beyond all theory, Calvino seems to be saying, there is just the writer and the reader, just Flannery and his reader on the terrace of a chalet. Beyond all the fussy stylizing, only the arduous work of putting words on paper, and the maddening ease with which the reader consumes them.

In the end, who can say what the writer intended? Perhaps at the end of the semester I'll have a better understanding of this novel, but for now it looks to me like a satire on all criticism, postmodern theory included (and perhaps foremost, with the Reader doggedly pursuing the stories the postmodern trickster keeps stealing away), an explication of all the ways in which it is futile to attempt to pin meaning on anything. What the Reader wants, he says repeatedly, is the whole story, the whole complex plot that Aristotle idealized. In the end, Calvino does give the desperate reader an ending, a rather perfunctory one, but a conventional ending, nonetheless.

-by Abba Anderson

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aesthetics that emerge as the technology and corporations stabilize into durable entities.

I try to present most of the book as an historical narrative about rhetorical systems, rhetorical situations, and rhetorical actions, keeping the theory in the background--just to frame the story and focus the details. In the last chapter, however, I tie together the several lines of theory I work with throughout the book--rhetorical theory, social theory, speech act theory, science studies, structuralist theory. What I am really trying to do in the book is examine how people to accomplish things in the world have to act in a number of different kinds of discourse arenas, each with their histories and dynamics, and they have to coordinate these multiple actions, because the meanings and values developed in one arena often have bearing on the meanings and values in others.

Mixed in with all the historical detail and theory, are some nifty anecdotes and minor scandals, for Edison understood the importance of

creating the right impression in each arena, even if it meant dealing with corrupt politicians, hungry journalists, and robber baron financiers. Edison knew how to get around in the free wheeling world of the late nineteenth century.

RS: *Your work has been published in scientific and technical journals as well as English journals such as College English and Basic English. Does it seem that your work is received and considered differently by scientific and technical writing communities than it is by scholars and students of Rhetoric and Composition Studies? Also, are there overriding similarities between how these different communities regard your work?*

CB: My interests bring me into contact with a number of different fields, and that is part of the fun of doing the projects I do. It is a bit hard to judge exactly how my work is taken or even whether it is noticed by people in each of these areas. The feedback one gets is only fragmentary, and I suffer the same paranoid uncertainties (and grandiose self-justifying narratives) that all writers do about whether anybody reads them and if they do, what they think. But let me try to say a few things.

Practitioners of the fields I have studied have a range of reactions when I talk with them or when they read my work. Some are just pleased that people in other fields are interested in what they do, and others have a deep reflexive interest in understanding their practices. This latter group is always looking for ways that will help them understand their work and field and they can be very responsive to rhetorical analyses of their fields. Sometimes these are people who have been uncomfortable with the standard rhetorical practices of their field, and want to say things at odds with the going way of speaking in their fields. Others are just good, thoughtful writers. In either case I find them responsive to my work in a solid, practical way.

On the other hand, there are some who see any kind of rhetorical analysis as calling the validity of their field or work into question, or they find writing totally secondary to what they think the real work of their field is. Those people have little interest, and the great majority of people in the fields I study are just so busy and preoccupied with their work, thought about in the ways typical of their field, that they just don't have time or attention to turn to rhetorical issues.

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I also communicate with people in fields whose theory and findings overlap with what I do--science studies, sociology, psychology, history, linguistics, anthropology. I learn a lot from people in these fields, even if some of them are not very interested in approaches that are outside of their fields. Responses vary, based on how tightly people stay within the standard approaches of their fields. While I may learn a lot from historians, for example, many are very committed to archival detail as the main technique to advance historical understanding; only some of them are ready to see the value of a rhetorical approach for the questions that interest them and only some are willing to entertain social or rhetorical theory. Similarly, sociologists often have a hard time reaching over into cognition and psychologists have a hard time seeing the value in historically situated accounts, and so on. However, in each field there are a certain number of people who are careful, disciplined scholars in the terms of their field and yet open to serious interdisciplinary inquiry. These are really the great people to communicate with.

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In composition there is the same problem of disciplinary boundaries. Quite a number of people in composition are so tied to theories and methods standard to English departments that they do not have much interest in work that draws so heavily on social sciences and history, nor are they particularly keen on looking at "non-expressive," "non-creative," "non-imaginative" writing. Further, their vision of the field of composition is very tightly tied to the first year writing course, conceived in some limited ways. So while I think it is very useful to think of writing in interdisciplinary terms and to think of freshman writing in relation to all the other discursive activities in the university and society, this is just off the radar screens of quite a number of people in composition. Work on writing in the disciplines and professions can easily be seen as a narrow specialty, maybe of interest to people in technical

writing, but not having much to do with standard approaches in the field. I think this is a pity, but that's the way it is.

RS: *For Rhetoric and Composition Studies students who are interested in studying discourse analysis of scientific and technical writings in historical contexts, are there any recommendations you could offer on how to become familiar with and learn to do research in these fields?*

CB: Start to get in there and do a couple of projects. Pick a field you are interested in and just start describing some texts, interviewing writers in the field, putting together some historical context on a major rhetorical conflict or action that occurred in the field. As you start to get a feel for the discourse you are interested in, keep on reading the work that has appeared in rhetoric of the disciplines and professions. But also read some relevant sociology and history of the profession you are studying. And talk to other people doing this kind of work. Everyone who is now doing this kind of work had to some degree to make it up on their own through just this kind of process, and most will be happy to hear about what you are doing and share their responses.

RS: *You preface the essay "The Interpretation of Disciplinary Writing" (published in Writing the Social Text: Poetics and Politics in Social Science Discourse, and Constructing Experience) with several "puzzling questions" pervasive in language studies, such as "How can words and symbols, the shadows of transient mental concepts, embody any substantive knowledge of the physical world?" and "How can language reach beyond the social beliefs and assumptions on which it is based?" You then go on to state in regards to these questions that "...in addressing these questions I have gradually moved toward an interpretive stance where these questions no longer seem so troubling or important (Constructing 83)."*

Could you describe this "interpretive stance" (as you do in this essay) and how you developed this perspective which has helped you to move through these potentially daunting questions?

CB: People are constantly trying to make sense of their social and material worlds as part of their

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living. This sense-making process is both individual and group. The sense they make is purely human, cast in human terms, to serve human needs, from human perspectives. Further the socially-developed sense-making, through language and attention to each other's orientation toward situations, gets developed within the media of human exchange. Yet we make symbols and share representations and act rhetorically with each other as part of our embodied lives, so the language practice is simultaneous with other more material practices of living in the world.

Making discursive sense, constructing human meanings, is something the human animal does in making its way through the world. Our language is responsive to the sensory experience of being in the world and is constantly driven by those needs and motives that activate our attention. We quickly discover many limits and constraints and opportunities in our ambient world, and our language is responsive to that as well. In fact, historically, people frequently find it useful to work to make their language as responsive to that sensory experience as possible--extended by devices, probes, measures, reports of others in distant places, etc. Particular communal practices, often associated with knowledge production, attempt to create useful accounts embodying a range of experiences of many people, reflexively gathered and held accountable to emergent communal standards for the production of experiences and accounts.

How did I get to such a view? In part by trying to avoid fruitless dichotomized arguments, by trying not to get too caught up in enticing but ultimately absurd positions. One of the most useful books for me when I was getting caught up in epistemological debates was Ludwick Fleck's Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact. In more recent years I found the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz and the work that followed on the social construction of everyday life to be fruitful for thinking about sense-making.

RS: To conclude this interview, could you say a little about how your background in Elizabethan literature and history has aided you in your current research and your teaching? Are there other aspects of your academic and/or personal experiences that you'd like to mention which you have found particularly helpful in your role as professor of English and Education at UC Santa Barbara?

"Because I also thought of myself as a poet back then (something that, remarkably, strangely, is not always encouraged in literary studies--imagine a music department where people did not learn to play instruments or sing) my attention to texts was driven by questions of how they were put together and what they did to readers."

CB: For many years I have been ambivalent about my background in literary studies. Since I was trained during the closing years of new critical dominance I did get a sense of what close attention to a text entailed. Because I also thought of myself as a poet back then (something that, remarkably, strangely, is not always encouraged in literary studies--imagine a music department where people did not learn to play instruments or sing) my attention to texts was driven by questions of how they were put together and what they did to readers. From my fascination with drama, I started to get some sense of how utterances served purposes and created meanings within action contexts. Finally, because I did work with some serious historical scholars, despite the new critical times, I did start to build some historical research techniques and did start to get a feel for how different texts are from different times, places, and social systems. So these are the good things I got from literary studies. I won't talk about the bad things I had to get beyond.

But I will say in getting beyond them, I found sociology, social psychology, linguistics, and other social sciences tremendously useful. These fields helped me start to understand that writing was just an ordinary human activity, that people have figured out how to do over the last 5000 or so years, to carry out ordinary human purposes. Writing is an integrated part of our social, cultural, interactional systems, and is pervasive in the modern world to carry out many functions. To understand what writing is and does and how humans do it, we would do well to borrow all the available tools from all the disciplines that study what it is to be human. I won't mention the particular authors and approaches I have found useful, because they are all pretty much there in my writings and works cited. But, of course, every person needs to pursue those authors and approaches that are most personally persuasive and useful.

Writing is remarkably fascinating as an

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historically invented, ever changing set of remarkably clever ways of extending our social relations and social projects. Included within those, but only as a small subset, are those entertainments, displays, ritual enhancements, explorations, and so on that we characterize as literature. Although institutional history of no more than two centuries has given literary studies cultural authority over all matters concerning literacy, allowing literature to pervade standard beliefs about literacy with literary values, we would do well to open our eyes a bit wider than that. At least I found it useful.

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About The RCSA

The Rhetoric and Composition Studies Association was formed in the Spring of 1997 and meets biweekly at the homes of a few of its members. Last April, members of the group presented at and participated in the first annual Humboldt State University English Graduate Student Conference and this past February presented at the Writing Center Conference at Shasta College (The weekend trips were paid for by club funds provided by SSU). This semester we are working on developing the RCSA newsletter, hosting visits from guest speakers, and finding other means to share the education and fun that can be reaped from rhetoric and composition studies.

While many members are graduate students in the rhetoric program, we welcome anyone (including undergraduates, faculty, and staff) with an interest in learning about rhetoric, talking about communication more generally, and discussing other issues school-related or otherwise.

Dean Klotz, founder and graduate chairperson of RCSA, is the assistant director of the SSU Writing Center. He can be contacted for more information (email: dean.klotz@sonoma.edu or phone: 664-4402). Rebecca Small, president of RCSA, can be contacted via e-mail at smallr@sonoma.edu. Our faculty advisors, Professor Julie Allen (Faculty, English department) and Professor Scott Miller (Director, SSU Writing Center) teach courses in rhetorical theory and the history of rhetoric for the English department.

We invite all interested parties to submit articles, letters, responses, or opinions for the RCSA newsletter, *Kairos*. For more information about publication, please contact Dean Klotz or Rebecca Small.

Announcements

Upcoming Conferences

"Bridging the GapII: A Living Profile of the Disciplines"

sponsor: HCSU's Student Chapters of NCTE/CCCC

dates: May 1 and 2

contact: Erik Drobey, 666 Hidden Creek Rd.,

Arcata, CA 95521; drobey@humboldt1.com;

(707) 822-8626

"Unmasking Writing: A Collaborative Process: (The 16th Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing)"

sponsor: Pennsylvania State University

conference dates: Oct. 29-31, 1999

deadline for proposals: April 14

on-line information: <http://www.chss.iup.edu/wc/ncptw>

contact: Julie Story, Conference Director

Center for Excellence in Writing

206 Bouke Building

University Park, PA 16802-5900

ph: (814) 865-0259

Impending arrival:

Still no sign of Austin Dean/Opal Elizabeth Klotz. Dean and Amy will be parents any second now ... and the entire Writing Center staff and Rhetoric and Composition Studies Dept. are holding our collective breath for the first sign of the little pooper.

Kairos Staff

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Professor Julie Allen and Professor Scott Miller

*Special thanks to ESA for all their support and to Suzette for the assistance, but not the abuse.