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Rhetorical Research for Reflective Practice: A Multi-layered Narrative

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Sometimes it may seem that research into the rhetoric of disciplines and professions is an arcane endeavour, concerning philosophic issues, epistemological critique, or the structure of language. However, for some — myself included — such research is motivated by practical concerns, with results immediately applied to our classrooms and writing. Rhetorical knowledge provides means for practical reflection and reflective practice. This intimate and dynamic link between knowledge and practice has nourished my experiences as a writer, a teacher, a researcher, and a theorist.

I am about to engage in reflexive autobiography as a form of academic argument. Some see this genre as a postmodern American abomination. But if it is an abomination, its history is much deeper and its sources more international. Many of the postmodern advocates are European (vide Giddens; Ashmore; Woolgar). And not all recent advocates are postmodern theorists. The highly practical Donald Schon wrote about the reflective practitioner and founded a highly influential movement that has invaded such unpostmodern places as business, medicine, the law, and engineering. In the middle of the twentieth century Robert Merton argued that sociological concepts ought to be tested, extended, and used for personal wisdom through self-exemplification — seeing how general theories apply to yourself and your kindred. At the beginning of that twentieth century, the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky argued that language provided us the means of reflexive action and reflexive learning — which suggested that accounts of ourselves were the beginnings and ends of knowledge. Joseph Priestley in the eighteenth century argued that science ought to be presented as discovery accounts of how we addressed and overcame

our intellectual quandaries. And his contemporary Adam Smith struggled throughout his career with what it meant for him to be a practical philosopher.

As writers we are all reflective practitioners; as speakers we are often reflective when we are not just running off at the mouth. We think about what we write and speak; we think about our situations, goals, audiences, and available means of expression. Such thought is the foundation of rhetoric, which provides tools for examining communicative situations, for making choices about what we speak and write for making deeper sense of what others speak and write. The more we learn about what our words do to whom under what conditions, the more thoughtful and considered we become about our expression and the more understanding we become of the force of others' statements.

Writing is particularly open to reflection because it affords so much time to think, to compose, to revise, to examine. Studies of writers in professional workplaces consistently reveal that experienced writers spend far more time planning prior to beginning the first draft than they spend in the actual drafting. Further in writing we have the opportunity to read over what we have written, both before we send it off to our intended audience and after. Writing's externalization gives us much to reflect on and gives us more than the usual opportunity to see ourselves as others see us. Looking back on what we wrote yesterday we can wonder, what could we have been thinking? Time makes us strangers to our texts, but the texts hang around to haunt us with our former presences.

Similarly in our teaching we reflect as we plan day by day, revise curricula, develop materials, review the results of each term. And then we are haunted by the writing of our students. What could they have been thinking? What is it they didn't understand? What is it that we said that they so misconstrued or perhaps understood only too well? What should we be changing in our teaching to increase students' success and save us from seeing the shortcomings in student productions that haunt us?

We study language to provide us better tools to write more

effectively, to discover what choices skilled users make, to reveal what would help our students find their way in this wondrously teeming and endlessly creative world of language. Such knowledge is especially needed for the languages, registers, and practices that we and our students are not born and deeply socialized into. But writing is a second language to us all. Especially in our university years and after, as we confront more specialized forms of writing, we are caught in worlds where pre-reflexive habits of language are not enough. Who, after all, is born to write grammars or analytic philosophy or legal briefs?

I must admit I was late and resistant to more reflective attitudes toward writing. I was, as many who wind up teaching writing, a successful and fluent writer in school, trying many styles, thinking about what I wanted to say, sometimes worrying about it, but doing that thinking behind my own back. I wrote papers in a single draft at the last minute. I took my skills as a sign of genius rather than the result of fortunate early experience that led to increasingly frequent, successful, and confident experiences. So when asked in my own first-year university writing class to consider what my strengths and weaknesses as a writer were, I wrote a defensively resistant parable arguing that it was a waste of time to reflect — just let the genius grow and flower, keep doing what is in front of you.

Despite the defensiveness, I did keep thinking about what I was doing, and even regularly looked back on my papers from previous years, mostly to remember the glory of thinking those thoughts. Yet I rarely had the courage to face the writing as something that could be consciously worked and reworked; for many years I found revision an extremely painful process. However, when teaching college writing in the early seventies, I found myself passionately preaching the latest doctrines of the process movement — including revision. I also started to use my own experience as a writer, as current doctrine urged, to form a writing community with the students and help them face their own writing processes. My conscience eventually got to me and I decided that I needed either to practise what I preached or change my preaching to reflect my practice.

I tried to use drafts more deeply, to inspect not only sentence

style, but the underlying logic and presentational strategies. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that this helped me understand what I was doing and do it better. This experience of becoming more reflective about our own writing is, I believe, a common experience of writing teachers and researchers. The Bay Area and the National Writing Projects, born about this time, encouraged teachers to think of themselves as writers and to reflect on their processes, so as to be able to lead students to think of themselves as writers. I was soon set on a conscious trajectory of investigating what can be done through writing, what competences and skills and practices are part of making writing do these things, and then how to use that knowledge to refine my own practice.

Throughout my career, every study in some way has extended my understanding of my positioning or practice as a writer, or the available forms of writing, or the systems within which writing flowed. I expanded my repertoire and strategic thinking as a writer by recognizing and managing the process; by understanding traditional tools of rhetorical analysis such as, situation, *kairos* and *enthymeme*; by drawing on recent work in linguistic pragmatics and anthropology, such as *deixis* and footing; by considering writing as interaction and as a means of self-development in interaction through the lenses of interpersonal psychiatry, sociocultural psychology, phenomenological micro-sociology, and structural sociology. Out of these and others I have developed an ever more integrated synthesis of the act and consequence of writing, which I am currently trying to bring together in a multi-volumed theoretical work.

One core trajectory as a writer, scholar, and teacher that has given me tools to engage in multidimensional synthesis involves what has become known as intertextuality. However, the issues now clustered under the widely circulated term intertextuality have sources and implications broader than those that arise in the literary discussion that shaped the term's familiar meanings. A reflection on my history of grappling with these issues may suggest broader sources and implications of the term within writing studies, as well as the significance of using the concept in writing and teaching practice. My

developing understanding of intertextuality suggests the way in which writing, as many other human activities, is a reflective boot-strap operation, allowing us to go further and do more, the more we do and understand what we do. We make it up as we go along, in the very best sense of that phrase.

The term intertextuality was first coined in literary theory by Julia Kristeva in *Desire in Language*, published in 1980. She drew on Bakhtin and Vološinov to suggest that any text is a mosaic of quotations. She argues against the radical originality of any text and locates common experience in the sharing of text rather than any more fundamental shared intersubjective state. Orientation to common utterances, she argues, creates the ongoing culture and evokes common objects of desire. Intertextuality, for Kristeva, is a mechanism whereby we write ourselves into the social text, and thereby the social text writes us.

The origins of the concept in Bakhtin and Vološinov — and I would distinguish between the two — have different motives and forces than used by Kristeva. In Vološinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* the relation among texts is used to argue against Saussure's langue/parole dichotomy and to suggest an utterance-based approach to language, always located in immediate moments and relation. Further, the relations among utterances are used to argue against Saussure's diachronic/synchronic dichotomy by pointing out that every utterance draws on the history of language use and carries forward that history. In the interplay with past utterances, each new utterance takes on a stance toward previous utterances. Vološinov, furthermore, begins a technical analysis of how texts position themselves to each other through linguistic systems of direct and indirect quotations. Vološinov's work raises fundamental issues about the nature of all language and does not prejudge which set of relations are more valuable. He points out that the relations exist and different linguistic forms and practices facilitate different sets of relations. Bakhtin, on the other hand, uses the relations of utterances to pursue narrower questions of literary value in the way that novels represent the utterances of the characters and narrators. In *Problems of Doestoevsky's Poetics*

(1984) and *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) he praises the form of novel (which he associates with a form of consciousness) that recognizes the variety of utterances incorporated and thus adopts a stance of multivocality, dialogism, or heteroglossia rather than authoritative univocality, monologism, or monoglossia, which obscures the complexity of human language, consciousness and relation. In these and other works, such as *Rabelais and his World* (1984), Bakhtin is also interested in the stance or attitude or evaluation one utterance makes toward others, such as through double-voicing or carnivalesque.

Later literary critics such as Kristeva, Barthes and Riffaterre narrow the literary and ideological questions even further to issues of the status of the author and originality. Among the literary critics only most recently has Genette begun to start mapping out in an orderly the possible sets of relations among texts, what he calls transtextuality: intertextuality (explicit quotation or allusion), paratextuality (the relation to directly surrounding texts, such as prefaces, interviews, publicity, reviews); metatextuality (a commentary relation); hypertextuality (the play of one text off of familiarity with another); and architextuality (the generic expectations in relation to other similar texts). (1992, 1997a, 1997b.)

My work in academic writing, begun in the early 1970s before much of this literature was available in the US, raised the issues of what I called then writing about reading and took me down a different pathway, showing different things. The problem first appeared to me in the form of the ill-defined assignment of the research or term paper, endemic to American composition courses of the time, and in its variants still endemic to many courses in many disciplines. In such assignments students are expected to investigate and discuss some issue relevant to the course subject matter. Nobody quite knew what this assignment entailed, and the only teaching materials available were little more than lists of references and resources along with footnote-style prescriptions. Teachers regularly complained, long before word processing and Internet research, of cut-and-paste jobs that simply strung together quotations, paraphrases, or verbatim plagiarism.

As a successful student, however, I knew that there was a lot

more to writing good research papers than locating some sources and following correct bibliographic form. There was a journey of learning, of problem formation and reformulation, of careful and thoughtful reading, of being able to interpret and restate what sources had to say, of evaluation and comment, of synthesis, of fresh argument. I had begun to learn this myself through the assignments in middle and high school, and then amplified through undergraduate assignments in literary studies where I did much experimenting on positioning my commentary with respect to the text discussed and the prior commentaries on texts, and in papers in other disciplines where I was forced to take an evaluative, argumentative, synthetic, or analytical stance towards the materials. These were not lessons necessarily learned by all my classmates — so these skills were what marked me as one of the better students. Why I was first able to get on this train when many of my classmates weren't, I am not quite sure — perhaps it had something to do with my early development of language and ability to speak with adults and then a series of fortunate experiences that flowed from that. I do know that by high school I was writing far more ambitious research assignments than my classmates. My university experience of switching majors every six months, from physics to political science, to literary studies, taught me that intellectual inquiry and use of prior disciplinary utterances was not a uniform generalized skill but involved understanding different disciplinary styles of investigation, thought, projects, values, data. When I started teaching, I did not articulate these things very well, but little was well articulated about these issues then. Some textbooks of previous decades and centuries taught summary or precis writing, some used annotating texts, some provided advice on how to read a book or a page. Mina Shaughnessy in her 1977 book *Errors and Expectations* had a few lines on the importance of reading in writing (p. 223), mostly in relation to literary texts.

I took encouragement from those words of my colleague at the City University of New York, but I had already for several years been redesigning the research paper course around how to write about non-literary, knowledge-focused reading. I eventually rebuilt the entire 15–week course around a sequence of assignments that took apart and

practised separately different clusters of skills and activities that went into successful library research projects — including response realized in journals and informal essays, close restatement of details and gist of source texts through paraphrase and summary, understanding the rhetorical characters of text in their aims and techniques, linking a text's meanings and implications to one's own experiences and observations, evaluation of texts through book reviews and critical essays, comparison and synthesis of texts, framing research problems and plans in proposals and moving through sequences of discovery and reconceptualizations, culminating in a final paper. As I started to analyse these skills, I developed more focused smaller assignments and teaching sequences, so that the research paper ultimately became an optional component of the course. The course became about how you write about things you read. Although there had been for a while a tradition of books about how to write about literature, there existed no book that took up such issues for non-literary texts. *The Informed Writer*, which I worked on throughout the mid-seventies, appeared at the end of 1980. I also co-authored an integrated reading and writing skills handbook at this time, first appearing in 1977.

The Writing Across the Curriculum movement was being born at this time, and my work on academic reading and writing suggested to me that we needed a much better understanding of what was entailed in academic course work and writing in disciplines than the then dominant expressivist and writing-to-learn theories. I did some surveys of the relation between reading and writing in the assignments students were doing in other courses throughout the university. This led me then to begin investigating differences in disciplinary discourses, and I soon moved to a sociological understanding of how texts were situated within fields. As I already had a rhetorical view of the way texts mediated social interaction, I began to look at how texts served various functions within different fields, engaged in different kinds of arguments, and developed appropriate forms. I also began to see how texts structured role relationships. I had the good fortune to be introduced to the sociology of science and the eminent sociologist Robert Merton.

My introduction to sociology resulted in a review of the literature of science studies applying to scientific writing — "Scientific Writing as a Social Act" (1983) and the essay "What Written Knowledge Does" (1981). In this latter article, in comparing texts from literary studies, sociology, and biology, I foregrounded the use of prior texts of the field, the character of the prior texts, and the position of the new text with respect to those prior texts. My analytic heuristic expanded the traditional Aristotelean communication triangle of author-audience-subject matter by adding a fourth vertex — the literature — to create a communication pyramid. Thus intertextuality became built into my fundamental model of communication. I went on to examine the historical emergence of features of scientific writing as writers constantly built on and exceeded prior texts. This was coincident with my settling on genre as a key concept. Although I had not read Bakhtin, Kristeva, or any of the others at this time, I was influenced by Vygotsky's account of the social origins of language and the way the interpersonal became the grounds for the intrapersonal. I was also influenced by similar notions from the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan about how the self is formed through histories of social relations. I found in these much more fundamental accounts of utterance relations than I was later to gain from Bakhtin and even Vološinov.

How did these research and theory interests affect my own practice as a writer and a teacher? The changes in my teaching practice can be traced through the various editions of *The Informed Writer*, through which I reflectively developed my teaching not only for the second-term course but other courses before and after in our sequence. In the second edition (1985), I added an introductory chapter on writing as situated problem-solving, purposeful within rhetorical contexts. I also added a new section of five chapters on writing in the disciplines, considering how the organization of investigative work leads to different forms of writing, argument, and knowledge. The most important addition of the third edition (1989), by which time I had read Bakhtin, was a chapter on analyzing the many voices within the text. I remember distinctly thinking that this chapter brought out the underlying logic of the book, making explicit the core concepts upon which the book was already built. The writing in the disciplines section

also put more emphasis on how to read materials in the disciplines — for you had to read before you wrote knowledgeably. Since students were more in a position to make sense of and use disciplinary texts for their own purposes than to create novel contributions to knowledge, I started to put more emphasis in the following editions of students as consumers of disciplinary texts rather than producers. My pedagogy took distinct shape as I understood the intertextual landscape of professions and the ways individuals took up positions in those landscapes as producers, learners, neophytes, citizen consumers. I saw my students as part of the same complex world as I was investigating.

Similarly, as my understanding of intertextual disciplinary knowledge worlds deepened through teaching as well as research, I better understood what I was doing as a writer. My commitment to practising what I preached and preaching what I practised was reinforced by Vygotsky's account of reflectivity as a way of monitoring, guiding, and regulating action. Spilling the beans about how to do academic writing started as a kind of introspective consideration of what I did that allowed me to succeed, but as I articulated this more to my students and then saw related patterns emerge in my research, I sharpened and refined my own practice. I became more adept at encapsulating the meaning of new texts, synthesizing literatures, developing my own evaluative position and stance, and using the literature in my own arguments. Thus my own writing kept gaining intertextual richness, drawing very close to a number of literatures while sharpening my distinctive uses and differences. I used reviews of literatures to master fields and reorganize them for my own purposes, as when I wrote "Scientific Writing as a Social Act."

This interdisciplinarity became a self-conscious ability to move across disciplines as well as to analyse the shape of different disciplinary discourses in my research. I was able to draw on numerous fields in my work from history to sociology by sorting through what they had to offer, what stances they took on what theoretical underpinnings, and how they fit together or contradicted in more than superficial ways. Yet I still was able to maintain a sense of my own project of the study of writing for practical purposes. Because I had become so self-

conscious about the techniques of handling literatures in various fields, I could quickly identify what the fields had to say on issues of interest to me, to figure out where in their literatures to go to, and to recognize given the dynamics of discussion in the fields what kinds of findings were and were not likely to be available. I also learned to assess quickly the kinds of theories, perspectives, and assumptions underlying the research and the ways those theories might or might intersect with my own theoretical assumptions and concerns. I became practised and self-consciously planful of how to synthesize diverse empirical and theoretical materials in relation to my own projects, which carried their own baggage. Paradoxically, the more I found points of contact with other forms of inquiry the more unusual the positions and methods and forms of argument are that I took. The oddity of my work is not the result of individual characteristics or personal virtue — though I might have believed that in my earlier days — but precisely because I have become broadly conversant with the standard writing tools and the historical particulars of work within a range of academic disciplines. As I developed a pedagogy and textbooks, I became the student in my own classes on academic writing — allowing me to push my research and theoretical essays farther, in turn providing deeper insights to be applied to my own writing and teaching.

Specifically, with respect to intertextuality, my own sense of the agency of the individual to move through complex literatures and create new positions and practices through developing new forms of argument went hand in hand with specific scholarly projects. My interest in the historical emergence of modern explicit citation practices, for example, led to my study of Joseph Priestley, who was one of the key figures in that development. I took up the consequences of modern citation practice for the way the publication game is played now by examining a modern virtuosic *tour de force* of citation, Gould and Lewontin's "Spanderels of San Marcos." During this period several other people were working on parallel studies to understand the workings of reviews of literature to position new contributions (Swales) and to advance research agendas (Myers), the way graduate students learn to navigate the literatures of their field to establish professional identities (Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman), the way intertextuality

structures the work of a profession (Devitt), and the way particular charter documents organized all the discourse of a field (McCarthy).

These various studies helped me see my own writing and the writing of my students as strategic, purposeful action within emergent structures of texts that conditioned the situation for future actions. Each text we write is a speech act, and the success of that text is in the consequences for what follows after, how the text creates a landmark of something done that needs to be taken into account in future utterances. One may even start taking a felicity condition approach to writing — what conditions must be met for each text to have the desired effect. This moves the evaluation of texts — and thus the trajectory of conscious production — away from formal standards or general rhetorical or aesthetic principles, or even presupposed persuasive or expressive ends, to a detailed analysis of situations and how they evolve with various textual interventions and accomplishments. My framing of these ideas was influenced by contact with linguistic anthropology, pragmatics, and conversational analysis. These concerns in turn helped evolve the pedagogic practice revealed in my recent textbook *Involved* (1997). Much of this pedagogy is to enable the student to size up the situation and the stakes, and then to identify what the writing must accomplish to meet the student's need. Only through commitment to action and continuing successful action is to be found strong motivation to write, a sense of self-fulfilling reward, and increasingly meaningful feedback. These in turn lead one to solve ever more difficult problems of writing, to continuing hard work, and to focused attention through which one grows as a writer. This perspective has increasingly informed my mentoring practice with a wide range of writers, from underprepared first year students through graduate students and mature professionals. Even my professional service as editor, creator of professional forums, and departmental administrator are informed by these perspectives.

The theme of agency through creating presence in intertextual landscapes directed my major scholarly project of the 90's, a book on the *Languages of Edison's Light*. The book examines how Edison took up positions in major discourses of his time — patent law, finance,

porations, technology and science, politics, journalism, consumer ure — as part of making incandescent light and power a reality. had to complete many speech acts and create many social facts in ltiple discursive worlds to give his emergent technologies presence, aning, and value.

Where this concern for agency within intertextual worlds leaves now is wondering about what it means to live in an information e, and what intellectual and rhetorical skills students will need to gotiate the informational world. I see this as urgent not only because formation technologies are now reshaping all educational, social, d economic institutions but additionally because the ideology and presentation of information misleadingly represents information as sembodied from human purposes and meaning-shaping contexts. I ve several recent and current projects looking at the emergence of r modern understandings of information, how agency is being shaped in Internet environments, and how students can learn to use rge data sets in meaningful ways for their own purposes and for rposes of social improvement.

The odd public performances of a seventeenth century West ussian engineer, the different drafts of Newton's work on optics, e social ideology behind early reviews of literature, or the political rategies of a citizen's information movement in 1950s St. Louis give impses into the rhetorical world we have made and how people anage to act in the world through words. I have tried to apply the ssons of these cases to provide students the tools they need to make eir own lives and the lives of us all a little better.

I warned you at the beginning that this reflective narrative might e seen as purely a creature of American ambition and self- ggrandisement. If that is the case, there is even more reason to consider he reflective dynamics of other forms of communicative research, heory, pedagogy and practice — for we each make our communicative worlds out of what we know, believe, and desire. The diversity of anguage pedagogy and practice reflects the diversity of the worlds we elieve we live in or desire to live in. Further, language pedagogy creates he meanings and uses of language within which our students will make their lives. And that is something worth reflecting on.

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