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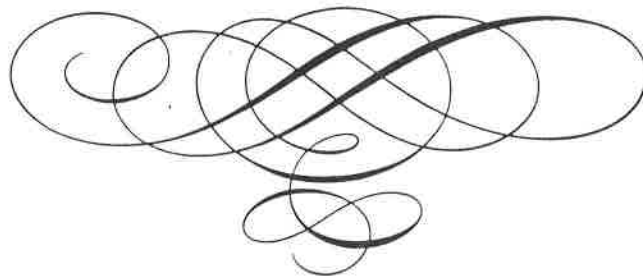
Essays on Written Discourse
in Honor of

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Theories That Help Us
Read and Write Better

Charles Bazerman

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The following contemplation on composition theory was provoked by my thinking about the large influence James Kinneavy's *Theory of Discourse* has had on me. Kinneavy's book was the beginning of my thinking about composition theory and the source of a number of ideas that have stayed with me, although transformed by other influences. By sorting out what I think he has done, what I have taken from him, and where I have come to differ, I hope to draw together a number of different impulses within composition theory that have emerged since Kinneavy set the current enterprise in motion. Although significant connections can be made between theories of written language and theories of spoken language, not to mention other forms of symbolic communication, this essay will consider only the use of written language, the primary domain of the composition classroom.

Theories at their best help us manage the manifold and inchoate realities we move among. They give a shape to our experience and desires; they allow us to project our actions into a universe to which we have attributed some order. They allow us to make our actions reflective rather than reliant only on the impulses of spontaneity, habit, and the unconscious. They also allow us to recognize and give proper influence to the processes of spontaneity, habit, and the unconscious, which we otherwise might wish to deny or obliterate with narrowly rational choices or hyperconscious mechanisms that make the simple difficult. We consider theories successful when we do better with their guidance than without, when we accomplish more of what we wish when following their accounts than when following any other or no account. When considered in this way, theories can be seen as heuristics for action.

This pragmatic theory of theorizing, which has long philosophical roots, has been most recently and most eloquently applied to composition by Louise Phelps. Her criterion for theories relies on their usefulness for the teaching of writing. But teaching is secondary to the primary practices of reading and writing. Theories that help teaching are necessarily founded on more fundamental theories about how people use written language. When the primary theory of literate activity is placed within the classroom, added to the theory are complications concerning

how people learn, what influence teachers and instruction have, and how the structured dynamics of the classroom affect literate practices. So the primary criterion of composition theory is what helps us, all human beings, read and write better.

Thus everything I have learned to tell my students I have also learned to tell myself. Every way I structure their developmentally aimed work is related to a way I conceive my own work as being structured. Every bio-psycho-sociological limitation and mechanism I note in my students and help them make best use of is a limitation or mechanism I recognize and attempt to cope with myself. Beyond the usual range of biological and biographical differences, I do not see them as any different from me, such that what I know about reading and writing would not be applicable to them or that what I learn from them or any other users of written language might not be applicable to myself. What I know about writing needs only to be localized to their experience, developmental biographies, and situation and then communicated to them in the way most appropriate to their tasks and current praxis. Similarly, what I learn from them and others needs only to be localized to my own developmental autobiography, situation, and tasks. As I myself come to richer and more productive accounts of what writing is (in large part by learning from others what their skill in writing consists of), I let students in on the tricks and strategies of the trade and guide them down the byways of this most intricately constructed of human practices. By coming to understand the many things we all have made of written language in many different circumstances, we all come to have more of the power of written communication within our reach.

Despite the great inventive complexity, variety and skill realized through written language, we nonetheless often grow up with the impression that writing is a natural, unreflective activity. If we are fortunate to have had a reasonably successful early education, we have learned many skills of literacy and internalized them as tacit knowledge while we were still children. Other skills we learn by ad hoc and inventive imitation of models of which we are only peripherally aware, while our focal attention is consumed by a communicative problem that taxes the limit of our skill. When we read and write, we must juggle so many balls that we are not likely to notice how much received knowledge and skill we rely on. We may not fully comprehend that writing is something we have had to learn how to do—as a human race, as separate cultures, as specialized communities, as individuals.

Had people not figured out how to do it, however, writing would not exist at all, let alone be the complex, varied kinds of practices it currently is. That process of figuring out depended on conceptions of problems, situations, and the symbolic tools that provided solutions. That figuring out continues today as our written culture expands and becomes more articulated to meet new social needs. If we lived within stable, orderly, and limited literate worlds, where traditional written language practices served all our needs and were transmitted by seamless cultural socialization, we might do just fine without self-conscious theorizing about language; we could simply live off the theoretical capital built into the traditional cultural practices. But our current world is linguistically and culturally complex, presenting each of us with novel and rapidly evolving situations and a tremendous variety of reading to make sense of. In the course of our educations and lives not

only do we meet and form close community with people of many different backgrounds; not only do we move through many different kinds of social, intellectual, and work arrangements; not only must we participate in many different institutions that organize different parts of our lives; but these social formations, arrangements, and institutions are constantly evolving within the complex dynamics of modern American society, economy, and technology. We need conscious theory to help us make our way through this interesting, ever-changing literate terrain.

Of course, theories of written language can do other work besides helping us use literacy. They can, for example, distance us from the work of language in the world by establishing esoteric bodies and practices of privileged language that become the property of only a philosophical or literary or theological or political class; the benefits and power of literacy are then to be shared only by those who attach themselves to the privileged class. Or theories of written language can disengage us from the practice of language by constantly reminding us of the limitations of any constructed system. After all, every building covers only a finite amount of space, is created of humble materials, and will eventually fall— facts that we usually pay attention to only during construction, renovation, and natural disaster; the rest of the time our attention is drawn to how to live within these buildings, which are taken for granted. An abiding theoretical attitude, by insisting on language's weakness, can make us disdainful of all who use language while we maintain our dignity as theoreticians who rise above the fallen state of the rest of humankind.

Such postures of the disengaged life put strain on people who enter into the study and teaching of writing despite the manifold punishments that attach to such commitments. Most of us are driven by engagement, engagement with the written language, engagement with our students, engagement with the work of the world. So what we need are theories that maintain that engagement, even while they give us the contemplative distance to pursue that engagement reflectively and intelligently.

James Kinneavy's *Theory of Discourse*, the first major theoretical work of the contemporary flowering of the teaching of writing, is thoroughly within this engaged, pragmatic tradition. In the opening chapter of the book Kinneavy casts his theory within the history of discourse education, education about how to use language. Moreover, he finds his sources in two major pedagogical movements: classical rhetoric and the New Criticism. Although classical rhetoric concerns itself with only one of the four aims of discourse he presents, it does provide a highly developed set of skills and concepts for the use of persuasive language. Moreover, classical rhetoric is the source of Kinneavy's triangle, which in turn generates his taxonomy of discourse aims and provides the analytical framework for considering the principles of construction of the text types associated with the aims.

In expanding beyond the persuasion (and implied persuasive contexts) of classical rhetoric, Kinneavy adopts the New Critical mode of primary attention to textual form as the key to meaning. Thus he moves from production to interpretation as his primary practical end. Yet he rightly casts the New Criticism as a pedagogical movement, concerned with improving students' comprehension and appreciation of texts, rather than as an abstract philosophic position about

the nature of meaning (in which terms the New Criticism has been regularly castigated by postmodern critical theorists). His basic pedagogical position seems to be that we cannot effectively teach (and students cannot effectively learn to use) discourse unless we recognize the various kinds of discourse, the various kinds of texts we are presented with. In fact, in the opening paragraphs of the book he sees the need for a theory of discourse because of the "anarchy" and "chaotic" variety of agendas in composition courses. Thus, to provide order and content for the curriculum, he generates and displays a taxonomy of aims and explores its consequences for a wide range of formal textual issues.

Kinneavy's taxonomy of text types is based on the dynamic sets of relations among writer, reader, subject, and text. By seating the taxonomy in the relations of his triangle, he recognizes that discourse is not a socially, epistemically, psychologically uniform phenomenon but adjusts to meet the dynamics and intentions within particular acts of communication. Moreover, by calling attention to these adjustments and their textual consequences, he suggests that we will read and write and teach better if we attend to these distinctions.

However, once he takes his four discourse aims (referential, persuasive, literary, and expressive) from the polar cases suggested by these dynamic interactions, he leaves context, intention, and interaction behind to consider the four discourse functions as idealized textual forms. He makes this New Critical move by suggesting that the end of discourse is text and that too exclusive an attention on arts (or process) mistakes means for ends (29). Moreover, although he recognizes that aims are in part shaped by cultural context and authorial intention, he points out that in reading a text we have only the text by which to judge aims. Although elsewhere (as in his essay on *kairos*) Kinneavy has considered language use as local and interactive, *A Theory of Discourse* presents discourse as universal and textual, with meaning always and stablely available in the text, independent of the reader or the reader's relationship to the author and text.

At this point, the theory can no longer provide guidelines for the acts of writing and reading, for recognizing one's local cultural and rhetorical situation, for shaping intent, and for pursuing interaction. Rather, Kinneavy provides guidance only for recognizing four idealized types of text to be produced or interpreted. The only cognitive, interactional, or epistemic actions that now come under his gaze are those immediately represented and completed within the text. Scientific thinking, for example, becomes indistinguishable from the textual reasoning displayed in reference discourse.

Certainly text is extremely important for composition theory to contemplate, for that is the medium through which interaction takes place; it is that which the writer produces, often with great struggle, and it is that which the reader receives and uses. The thinking and logic and organization and style displayed in a text become the momentary meeting point of writer and reader, although they may be variously perceived and understood by the different participants in the communicative act. In constructing a text, the writer attempts to grab hold of the reader's mind for a moment, constrain it in certain paths, and take it in certain directions. The reader has a separate will, set of purposes, and interpretive frameworks that lead to a negotiation of meeting that occurs in confrontation with the text. (Martin Nystrand and Louise Phelps have each in their own ways proposed theories that begin to contemplate the text's role in this interaction.)

Thus the text becomes alive and meaningful in how we deal with it: how and why we deploy form as writers and what we make of the forms as readers. These actions embody our skills as literate people and the skills we teach in our classes. Recognition of idealized forms is only the beginning of our ability to manipulate them. The thinking and activities by which we produce a text are related to, but not necessarily the same as, the reasoning displayed in the text, just as our interpretive activity is related to, but not necessarily the same as, the reasoning we attribute to the text. The reasoning by which we accomplish meaning is not the same as the accomplished meaning, nor is either the same as the series of words in a text.

When we contemplate a text in its context, we are not as likely to idealize the pure aims associated with idealized text types. Kinneavy recognizes that in fact aims are mixed, but he treats this as a simple overlapping that can be ignored for the sake of analytical clarity (60–64) rather than as a fundamental intertwining that cannot be radically pulled apart without violence to the phenomenon. Because Kinneavy is concerned with how texts appear, he takes the intentional ambitions overtly represented in the text as in fact the full representation of the aims instantiated in the text. Strategic subordination of aims, however, is not the same as making aims vanish. As I discuss in detail in *Shaping Written Knowledge*, for example, a basic persuasive and expository strategy of the modern experimental article in science is to organize social, philosophical, literary, and psychological dimensions of the text so that they all rely on empirical experience; thus, the representation of empirical experience in the form of experiment becomes the central element in the textual argument. This hardly means that scientific discourse lacks aims and interactions along these subordinated dimensions. Quite the contrary.[1] Nor does an expressive piece of writing do without concern for audience reaction, representation of experience, artful expression or an intertextual tradition. All these elements are always all there. The most expressive lyrics are precisely those that know how to draw readers into an emotive realm (to be attributed to the author's state of mind) through control of language, choice of psychologically powerful images, resonances from the literary tradition, and reorganization of readers' experiences of the world. Communication must be accomplished on all these dimensions.

What differs among text types are the configurations, subordinations, coordinations, emphases, and mechanisms for harnessing all the aims into a coherent text that appears to have a dominant impulse. There are potentially many such configurations that could create any one apparent dominant aim, so it is not a priori obvious that texts apparently displaying the same aim must be of a single, uniform type. If our concern were only to recognize the appearances of dominant impulse, and if dominant impulses consistently overwhelmed other aims, then Kinneavy's account would be adequate. But if we wish to produce texts that effectively coordinate all aims to the apparent dominant aim and if we wish to be able to understand fully as readers how texts operate on us, we need richer accounts of embedded relations, and not just apparent ones.[2] Just such problems of coordinating the multidimensional aims of texts provide the impetus for the most striking textual inventions, such as the argument from experiment or the evocation of mood through personal contemplation. Our discourse world would indeed be impoverished if we did not constantly contend with the multidimension-

ality of all discourse. Moreover, we either would have achieved epistemological magic or would be philosophically naive if we acted as though our discourse could achieve unmediated access to our spirits, the spirits of our audience, the world outside us, or a disembodied creation of Saussurean *langue*.

Considering texts as ideal types out of context also obscures the connection between a text and prior statements, both those that establish the immediate conversation or rhetorical situation and those that establish the underlying rhetorical/symbolic universe within which the local conversation is taking place. This intertextual dimension is equally part of the context that each new text must coordinate. Representation of the intertext can indeed be a dominant mode of writing, as in the codification of laws, reviews of literature, or poems and stories that evoke the familiar themes and raise the old songs (for example, James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" can, in part, be seen as self-consciously operating in this mode). Yet like the other aims, the other concerns to which texts can attend, the intertext is never attended to totally innocent of the other aims, which it must harness to its apparent dominance. And it is never not there, even when other aims are more obviously served.

The underlying strategic problem of writing is indeed orienting yourself with respect to all these dimensions, defining your aims with respect to them, and realizing in the text a set of relations among these elements to achieve your complex aims with respect to them all. Assessment, evaluation, and decision are all intentional matters, shaped by the writer's conceptions, perceptions, motives, personal histories, and development. The need for intentional choice is relieved only in those instances when we are totally and habitually socialized into a stable set of rhetorical relations, so that cultural regularities and conventional language make the choices for us. A text-based taxonomy does not allow us to move beyond conventionalized regularities; it even makes the world appear much more conventional and regularized than it is. In a text-based taxonomy, intentional thinking becomes invisible and unknowable. Nonetheless, this complex area is precisely where we need clear theories to help us make order of where we stand and how we should act once we recognize we live in a confusing rhetorical universe.

But even here we do not leave Kinneavy's taxonomy totally behind. If we take his aims not in the direction of idealized, discrete text types but as concerns and connections that are all addressed in every act of discourse, every symbolic interaction, and if we add to his four concerns (of audience, self, reality, and text) the fifth concern of intertextuality (or the symbolic field, or prior statements), we have a heuristic for considering the sets of relations we as writers need to orient ourselves toward and address. We may even, for memory's sake, call this heuristic a neo-Kinneavian pyramid, supplementing the three vertices of Kinneavy's triangle (writer, reader, reality) with the fourth vertex of the literature or intertext; the word or signal remains in the center.

With each of these dimensions we have long histories and stabilized relationships, all of which come into play as we contemplate any new symbolic action of discourse. We have since birth interacted with and established social place with respect to many individuals and social groupings; these interactions provide us with social models through which we perceive how we stand with respect to the current audience, no matter how distant, impersonal, and novel it might

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appear nor how inappropriate such models may ultimately turn out to be for this situation with this audience. We have also established our sense of self, our personal experiences and commitments and goals, and our adopted personae before various publics, which bear on how we will represent ourselves and further our personal ends before this particular audience. Similarly, we have become familiar with and moved within various symbolic fields and engaged in conversations that have led to this moment; we have come to know, each in our own ways, aspects of the ambient physical world that bear on the current moment; and we have had a certain amount of experience with reading and writing text and creating formulations that provide the material of our current utterances. These elements all frame the current rhetorical moment for us.

Moreover, each of these histories that frame the current moment interacts fundamentally with all the others. The statements we have uttered have been part of our relationships with the people around us and have helped form both our public persona and personal commitments; moreover, in our statements we have reacted to the conversations we were part of and have deployed symbolic elements we have discovered within the intertextual field. Even our sense of reality has been shaped by the symbols with which we surround our experience and knowledge of the world.

More concretely and practically, rather than to create an abstract model of all discourse situations, we can use these five concerns to begin to map our rhetorical situation against the several worlds we interact with as we communicate. As we draw out this map, we can recognize our constraints and opportunities, our resources and problems, our goals and choices, our models of analogous situations, and our possible mechanisms for influencing others.

As readers, we can also place ourselves, our motives, our interests, and our aims in interpretation by means of this heuristic, thereby deepening our reading. We can come to understand how this text interacts with us, the intertextual world, our perception of reality, and even our perception of the author. We can construct a vision of where the writer placed herself and attempted to place us, and we can evaluate whether we accept that placement in all its dimensions. As reading theorists have argued, reading can be seen as a constructive act by which we invoke schematic knowledge to make sense of a text within the frameworks of our understanding. I have elsewhere (*Shaping Written Knowledge*, chap. 8) found that physicists employ complex, multidimensional schema as they read, reflecting all the concerns expressed in this heuristic pyramid. In this view, schema are not the passive modules of culture-determined names (as presented by E. D. Hirsch, Jr.) but the active construction of each individual as that individual comes to terms with the social, natural, psychological, and textual worlds she moves among. Moreover, the schema are aimed at producing action, for each individual organizes perceptions in order to evaluate the next move. The heuristic derived from Kinneavy can serve as a device for explicitly recognizing and organizing the multidimensionality of our schema.

This concept of schematic knowledge by which we interpret and make decisions can in turn be applied to the act of writing once we accept that writing is a reflective action, based on organized perceptions and considered decisions. The generalizations of theory, then, have place as principles by which we organize our schema, by which we order our view of the worlds in which we act. And

again I suggest that the neo-Kinneavian pyramid offers us a rich and useful set of categories by which we can come to terms with what we are doing in writing, by which we can become more articulate and reasoned in our writing processes.

This role for theory highlights theory's constructive, heuristic function. Rather than describing a natural state of affairs, a theory of written language posits a framework for constructing an understanding of prior events and creating new ones. If we hold one theory over another and use that theory as the basis for interpretation and action, we will experience and act differently than if we had held the other theory. Theories of written language, because they are heuristic for our literate practices, are self-fulfilling prophecies. The criterion for choosing among such theories cannot be reference to any natural state of affairs, for the theory itself helps us construct a state of affairs consonant with its precepts and helps establish a perception/action framework through which we perceive those states of affairs that we consider natural. The criterion must be our satisfaction with the world created by our theory and with our sense of how well the world we have created coordinates with our experiences of the worlds we move among (that is, whether our theory allows us to participate successfully with others, all living lives according to their own conceptions). People can hold theories about language based entirely on concepts of propriety, and in a proper world, where all problems have been put in a proper place, and everyone knows where they properly belong, one could get by quite properly. By contrast, where nature is kind and no economic pressures or cultural complexities require greater ordering of human actions, unreflective spontaneity would be a perfectly adequate theory of discourse to which almost everyone would come independently, spontaneously.

Our world of cultural complexity, individual mobility, and complex coordinated endeavors requires complex understandings of where we are and how we stand with respect to each other. We need fairly complicated schema to get around in the complex of discourse by which we interact with many different kinds of people in many different ways. Within this complex we find many pockets of regularized relations and discourse that we identify as structured communities with stabilized genres and conventions. Nonetheless, our complex biographies created in the fluid and eclectic relations of contemporary society require that our entries into these pockets of stability must be a self-conscious transformation of our identities. We must learn their mores as strangers being socialized into foreign cultures. We need a theory of language rich enough to help us make sense of these experiences, avoid the mistakes that would violate the communal understandings at the base of the system, and transform these communities to accept all the complexities that we as individuals bring to them. Otherwise, we have to leave our entire histories and commitments at the door whenever we enter a new discourse situation. We would then submit to the tyranny of overpowering parochial social control.

This danger of suppression of the fullness of our complexity should not prevent us from entering into regularized situations with whole heart or even from adopting local theories for organizing our experiences within those situations. When reading the poetry of Blake, the more one enters into the set of imaginative conceptions that encompass that work, the richer and more complete the experience is likely to be, just as the more one enters into a bureaucracy, the more one must construct some theory of highly ordered and relatively inflexible communica-

tions to guide one's utterances. Nonetheless, it may add to our freedom and intelligent action if we have some ability to measure the cost and gains of the various discourse formations we have access to, so that we can select intelligently, modify when we feel discomfort, and avoid creating discourse universes we would prefer not to inhabit. If we believe in the constructive role of language and the power of the theories that are heuristic to that construction, then our evaluation of theories becomes a serious matter. Diminished theories are not just diminished accounts; they result in diminished practices, diminished experiences, and diminished lives.

All of us who have committed ourselves to advancing the cause of literacy in the world have also committed ourselves to the shaping and reshaping of the world. By engaging with our students' use for written language in their lives, we in part engage with their needs to write their reports, sell their products, and manage their corporations. But we also engage with their ability to make reflective choices about what discourses they engage in and how they engage in them. The more deeply they understand the worlds they interact with through written language, the better able they are to interact more fully and to understand who they become through the interactions. They learn to move from being the minor functionary, unreflectively carrying out narrowly defined tasks, to being able to understand and control the symbolic actions that shape the endeavor they are part of.

James Kinneavy has long been deeply committed to the fundamental cultural project of advancing literacy, and he has provided important distinctions that many in the teaching of writing have found useful in constructing our evolving discourse universes. He started with a vision well founded in the practical discourse theories of classical rhetoric, which were part of a world where local community, state, and virtues were givens, where travels were accompanied by the hardships of Odysseus and Aeneas, and where social inequalities severely limited life choices. But he then asked how those theories should be modified to fit current practical educational difficulties and modern theories of language and texts. In making the connection between classical rhetoric and New Criticism, he sharpened our sensitivity toward the text and helped move our models of texts beyond the traditional rhetorical situations of *agora*, assembly, and court. His theoretical terms helped shape our thinking about writing, and we must attend to them, even as we attempt to create new theories of writing to help guide us through postmodern times.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. Consider, for example, the amount of work Isaac Newton had to accomplish in order to establish the inductive proof that harnessed the variety of philosophical positions, empirical experiences, experimental competences, interpretive frameworks, intertextual

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commitments, and rhetorical styles of the various participants in the optical debates to a single unified system in which his own empirical demonstrations could become compelling. (Bazerman chap. 4)

2. Walter Beale, in his *Pragmatic Theory of Rhetoric*, treats textual forms as varying realizations of an underlying typology of aims or motives, which themselves are conceived as part of a spectrum or mixed array. But he also seems to treat aim as something that can be monotonically chosen, so that one can attempt to persuade an audience without concern for the representation of reality or the poetic weight of the words or the expression and actualization of the writer through the act of writing. He as much as Kinneavy relies on idealizations of aims rather than seeing them as all always there as part of a complex, interactive set of relations crystallized in the discursive moment.

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