

## THE WRITER ON THE SPOT AND ON THE LINE

Forty years ago when I began to inquire into what kind of writing students needed to be able to produce to succeed in their academic endeavors, I was drawn into a vortex of individual and disciplinary differences. I was led from texts to disciplinary endeavors, to intertextual relations, to histories and transformations of genres, to theories of society, action, consciousness, and cognitive development. In this volume I have tried to lay out how these various theories can fit together into a picture of individuals situated in specific historical and social circumstances acting through writing and participating in the social life unfolding around them. Much of my empirical work has been about historical emergence of literate forms, the knowledge expressed within them, and individuals acting within specific circumstances. In many of these studies theory has been developed in pieces, and in relation to the issues raised by each case. To complete the picture, this volume draws those various pieces of theory together in what I hope is a coherent and persuasive account.

This volume provides an account of the local production of purposeful meaning within textual interaction, and an account of genres that facilitates the alignment of people in their communicative interactions, particularly over texts. But in so doing, this volume has also proposed processes by which meanings and the conditions of complex meaning-making spread over larger groups engaged in activity, and how these groupings and their opportunities for meaning-making evolve. That is, literacy facilitates communicative interaction among expanding groups of people, and document-mediated relations facilitate wide-spread meanings and knowledge, forms of extended social organization, and the rise of institutions. This account does not rely on abstract, out of time conceptions of language, society, knowledge, mind, or thought, but rather proposes concrete processes of communicative action among individuals building the larger structures of modern distantiated society on an expanding collection of small inventions of language, technologies, textual representation, social and material relations, and literate practices. The ideas here position the writing self within historical circumstances to unpack the psychological complexity of someone attempting to produce effective texts for his or her circumstances and developing into a competent writer adequate to the opportunities and demands of the time.

With the aid of this theory, I return, on the other side of the vortex, to the complex history and social arrangements that situate each person learning to become a writer today and which have formed the contemporary literate world. Much of this chapter will rest on summary reviews of prior historical and social inquiries. Rather than attempting to present that work and the related arguments in full, I refer you to other sources, much of which is gathered in the first two sections of the *Handbook of Research on Writing* (Bazerman, 2008), specifically devoted to “Writing and History” and “Writing and Society.” I close with some comments on the challenges a developing writer must face, based on the view of writing presented in this and the accompanying volume, *A Rhetoric of Literate Action*.

## THE PROBLEMS OF SPREAD OF SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS AND ACTION

Unless we are to posit invisible and abstract cognitive structures that act above the level of the human or deep within each organism through a preprogrammed human genome (and not indicated in any of creatures we evolved from), it is hard to account for the large structures of human language and activity that we participate in, extending over the globe and indeed now reaching out into the universe. While other animals communicate knowledge of food sources, threats, and even modes of play through chemistry, sounds, and visible behavior (and perhaps even limited symbols), they do not make that knowledge available to those of their species not in their immediate group nor do they develop large bureaucracies of record keepers and scholars whose work it is to produce, collect, and synthesize what the species or even the local cluster knows. Further, while other animals may pass limited information from generation to generation or group to group, they do not develop large structured organizations dependent on conscious regulation, information, and long cultural educations. Even humans prior to writing lived overwhelmingly local lives, orienting to the immediate physical surroundings and the social groups they saw daily—extended in space by the limited oral reports they would get about the past through the traditional lore and wisdom of their local group, distant realms that others claimed to have visited, and the material circulation of goods and artifacts through trade, plunder, and inheritance. Language facilitated the creation of local cultures and societies, but literacy made possible the large structures of modernity that distribute knowledge, orientation, and activities across greater distances than one can imagine, fostering both greater complexity of behavior and greater coordination that supports that complexity.

Each face-to-face social encounter is local, gaining the attention of only those present. Each spoken utterance is local and enables coordination only among the interlocutors. Only enduring artifacts can create regularities and organization over time. A chance physical environment such as a cliff with caves, light, proximity to food sources, and a stable climate can create some continuity among life in an ecosystem over years, but if the physical system were to change, so would the life of all the creatures. Humans (even before literacy), more than other creatures, have organized their environments to create comfortable and continuing ways of life. In preliterate and prehistoric times, humans even created physical environments to embody knowledge of the heavens and the seasons on earth that would make agriculture and other living conditions more predictable. But you have to be there, living in the village at the Stonehenge or in the aural community surrounding it, to benefit from its organizing knowledge.

## LITERACY AND THE ORGANIZATION OF SOCIETY

The development of modern society needed some further mechanism to create an organization that brought the local into larger regimes of organization and also brought the benefits of knowledge gained from many locales, coordinated, evaluated, and selected from. The marking of signs on stones, clay, paper, and now digital memories—each more portable and rapidly travelling than the previous—provided means for increasingly coordinated and extended action as well as memory across larger groups of people over time and space. As Goody (1986) discusses in *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, writing changes the possibilities of the basic institutions of society: economy, religion/belief, law and government. None of these transformations are compulsory or automatic, and they play out differently in different societies and cultures, under differing geographic conditions and dynamics of culture and invention. Nonetheless, literate inventions facilitated greater wealth, business, and governmental power over greater distances; greater uniformity and predictability of laws over extended domains embodying concepts of equality of treatment; communities of belief defined by commitment to sacred texts as well as open to schisms over the meaning of texts; emergence of literate elites who controlled the knowledge gathered through literacy or scribal castes who worked in the service of other elites; and many other potential consequences which we can recognize in modern institutional life. Tiersma (1999, 2008, 2010) has examined the technical legal consequences of textualization of the law. Smart (1993, 2003, 2006, 2008) has considered the role of texts in the

activity of financial institutions as well as the development of the economy as a system of textual transactions and records, and the very concept of an economy. Dorothy Smith has studied sociologically the formation and consequences of a documentary society with bureaucratic practices to regulate, monitor, and serve the life of its citizens (1990, 2002; Smith & Schryer, 2008). Other social and cultural systems that have developed on the infrastructure of writing include journalism and news (Conboy, 2008), medicine and health (Schryer, 1994, 2002; Schryer et al., 2002), systems of professional work (Beaufort, 2008), commerce and corporations, and literary arts and entertainments (Hogan, 2008). Even our understanding of personal relations, romance, mental health, and spirituality have been deeply influenced and reorganized by forms of written communication, the literate circulation of beliefs and self-help practices, written reflective accounts of the self, and published scientific studies.

Literacy has also facilitated and become the medium for the production, distribution, and application of knowledge along with the associated institutions of libraries, education, academic disciplines, and research. Most of what we consider knowledge has been produced and is accessible in the form of written documents. As discussed in chapter ten, knowledge can be considered as the produced contents of texts, circulating within particular social networks through appropriate genres. The work of the institutions of knowledge is largely mediated through the production and circulation of texts, whether within the classroom or among colleagues. For a detailed history of the interrelation of the institutions of knowledge production and transmission, the associated genres, and the forms of knowledge valued and produced in various societies, see Bazerman & Rogers (2008a, 2008b) and Anderson (2008). The medieval invention of the university, the early modern development of the genres and institutions of science (Atkinson, 1999; Bazerman, 1988, 1991; Gross et al., 2002) and the development and democratic spread of schooling (Olson, 2008) are particularly important for the formation of modern knowledge and information society.

Historically early scribal schooling taught the basic skills of reading and writing in tandem, as the scribes were the recorders, record keepers, record readers, and record users. However, as the archive of inscribed knowledge expanded, and certain productions became privileged (to the point of sacred texts being treated as having divine attribution), the maintenance and reading of texts became more widely spread and authorship more highly valued and restricted. Particularly in religious schooling, reading and interpreting of received texts took precedence over writing, placing the students subordinate to a received tradition rather than as co-creators of an ongoing culture of knowledge. The first priority in learning was to be aware of the texts that

ruled life, and only with experience and selection would some be brought into interactive roles in producing the tradition. Most modern education is based on the principle that students need to know and attend to the knowledge gathered in the books, usually textbooks. Specialized school textbooks are designed for the transmission, explanation, manipulation, and application of knowledge valued by a society. In contemporary primary, secondary, and even higher education much student writing is reproductive reporting of material in textbooks and other assigned reading. Students are enculturated within a large sea of received knowledge, which they become accountable for to succeed in schooling and presumably in life afterwards.

Yet it takes positive acts of assertion to mobilize that knowledge for our benefit and interests and concerns. This is much of the dilemma of contemporary schooling—there is too much to transmit and become accountable for, so much that the time and opportunity for learning the positive skills of assertion may be pushed to the side. Without those skills of articulating and asserting our concerns and acting on them, however, we are buried under the weight of received learning, becoming the epigone that Nietzsche warned us of in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/2008).

## THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING TO WRITE

Young people learning to write in contemporary society are, therefore, faced with many daunting tasks that extend far beyond the issues of transcribing letters, spelling words, and forming sentences that follow the prescriptive grammars. They must become familiar with the world of knowledge arrayed in existing texts and they must find how to represent that knowledge, respect it, use it for their own purposes, and perhaps have something to say about it. This means students have to spend many years becoming familiar with the received knowledge in textbooks, reference works, and other assigned readings. Much of their writing serves the learning function of familiarization with received knowledge and demonstrating that familiarity. It is then a further challenge to learn to think with and about that information, to have something to say about it that is not just repetition—whether that added value is in rephrasing, synthesis, reflective comment, personal association, critique, or new assertion or claim. While in the early years of schooling, students have some authority or authorship rights over their own experiences, feelings, or imaginations, and are able to engage in tasks local to their life-world, it is only at the more advanced levels of education and academic life that they gain gradual degrees of authority to substantively comment on, contest, or add to the body of received knowledge

in most areas. For those students that endure that long in the academic world, moving from the role of knowledge receiver to knowledge maker requires many fundamental changes of stance and role.

A second level of challenge has to do with becoming familiar with and adept in the large number of genres and linguistic inventions that are available to write in—selecting among them and performing them competently (or potentially highly effectively) in relation to their purposes, form, organization, contents, appropriate lexis and register, stance, tone, and politeness conventions. Furthermore, many of these genres are lengthy and complex, requiring gathering and organizing of extensive material and thoughts into coherent statements with an internal logic appropriate to the genre. In the early days of writing, when scribes mostly wrote lists—tax rolls, inventories of property, chronicle lists of events, genealogies—the options for text organization were limited and highly determined by the tasks. The contents were similarly determined, though some care might be needed in collecting the information to be transcribed. Learning the techniques of transcription, the limited relevant vocabularies and their symbols, and the format of lists were fairly contained tasks; once one had mastered them one could write competently for that world. But as writing came to include such tasks as creating poetic narratives of the works of great kings or drafting wise laws that would be understood unambiguously across wide domains, then issues of extended composition and logic, alternative forms of expression, logical and associative sequencing of events and thoughts, internal consistency of heterogeneous statements, audience awareness, rhetorical effectiveness, and many other issues of text composition became significant. Only a few writers would have sufficient skill to do these tasks competently, and these highly skilled writers began to specialize in particular domains, with increasingly few polymaths able to handle a broad spectrum of genres within different discursive domains. Today the genres of finance are far from those of poetry and both are far from the genres of sociology or medicine. Even our widely read, publicly distributed genres, like those of journalism or television scripts, are produced by a small subset of specialized writers. Although a few individuals gain some skill at multiple genres, it is near impossible to gain competence in more than a handful.

This brings us to our third level of challenge, as students move beyond the academy to participate in social roles in the workplace, community, politics, or other domains. Outside school, the purposes, tasks, the social roles and relations, genres, relevant knowledges and intertexts, the uses made of information, registers, and stances are widely varied and distinct from the world of schooling. In schooling, learning and display of learning are at the center of most transactions, and evaluation standards and procedures are largely explicit.

The student's work is scaffolded by the setting; the world the text travels in is defined, local, and known in the classroom—with the addition of highly structured anonymous assessments. Beyond schooling, there is little guarantee that people will notice what you write, and little definition of the criteria by which people will evaluate your work, dismiss it, or pay attention. Writing in school usually has few consequences for the student beyond progression through the system (as long as the writing does not raise health and safety issues), while writing outside school has the potential of travelling far and having major consequences, whether for good or ill.

Even within the contained and relatively safe world of the classroom, students may need to learn to cope productively with anxieties raised by how their writing will be perceived and evaluated by their teachers, assessors, and peers. Teachers, however, can also work to create positive atmospheres for writing, increase trust, and diminish anxiety. As people begin to write in the larger world with substantial stakes and less supportive readers, the potential for anxiety is greater. Anxiety, when unmanaged, can interfere with the clarity of thought necessary for difficult writing, and can even steer a writer away from taking on a needed writing task. The writer needs to learn to see clearly through anxiety to gather confidence and courage to write what needs to be written. Part of the anxiety comes from the way people make judgments about ethnicity, class, education, creativity, and intelligence on the basis of one's writing. But also a large part of the anxiety is whether others will attend to, take seriously, and understand what it is one has written, and then further whether others will approve.

Writing, as well, puts the writer, so to speak, on the line with some permanence and consequence. Even when filling out a familiar form, the writer may be anxious whether one has filled in the correct dates and information on a non-refundable ticket, or has filed accurate information with a government agency. As a writer matures and understands how information flows and its consequences, he or she may become anxious about expressing private beliefs or unorthodox experiences in a document that might circulate. Even personal writing can be used as a witness against oneself, carrying social stigma or political danger. So management of anxiety and the wisdom to make wisely courageous choices also presents another level of challenge.

Finally, as the writer's resources, options, knowledge, and experience grow, the writer needs to become more explicitly aware of exactly what he or she wants to accomplish and how to go about it. It is one thing to fill out a few factual items in response to a questionnaire and quite another to put together extensive legal findings and facts into a coherent and effective legal brief structured by one's advocacy role for the client. It is even another, on the basis of an investigation,

to come to conclusions about the policies that would be best for a community and then argue effectively for them. The writer must come to know his or her increasingly complex mind, and how to pull together all the external resources, make sense of them, and then from internal depths, externalize thoughts into a public document. Understanding and management of writing processes must continue to develop as the writer's repertoire and complexity of tasks expands, but in a way that maintains places for spontaneity, invention, and the force of complex unconscious and intuitions to direct the core of the message. If management of writing processes turns into mechanical algorithms, the text can lose immediacy, message, and interest. The process must be driven by the writer's fundamental communicative impulses to be saying something that he or she wants to say to a specific audience.

Learning to write is learning to navigate and act effectively within the complex social world we humans have historically created with literacy—or at least the small contemporary quarter of it relevant to the writer's life. After five millennia of writing—where literacy has become intertwined with almost every human activity from the medical monitoring of involuntary heartbeat to global agreements for the coordination of economies—the resources and tasks of writing are daunting. We must seek our understanding of writing in barely charted and swelling universes, where each new act creates new territory and expands the universe, where each writer must find new bearings and weave fresh nets to engage minds that transiently pass within reach of their inscribed words. Even the simplest act of writing is not predetermined and involves choices. We cannot then say there is any one answer about how to write. All we can do is to try to be wise about social, psychological, and historical processes, about our resources and responsibilities, about our opportunities and interests, to make our best choices in the protean and evanescent world of communication. The tasks are never ending and never the same. The results are rarely certain. Yet each successful act of writing increases our presence, our reach, our place in the world. And each act of writing makes the world a more habitable and inhabited place.