

Chapter 23. Becoming a Writing Theorist: Keeping Abstractions Tied to the Ground

Disillusionment With Big Ideas

In my education I was often tempted by big ideas, but over time I became disillusioned with theory and broad generalizations, as I saw many clever people coming to strange conclusions guided by entrancing ideas. In high school I enjoyed the confident assertiveness of physics, but I came to understand how one theory inevitably replaced another, how pervasive errors were, how different ideas spoke to different human concerns, and how knowledge enterprises were funded by political agendas. My resistance to the absoluteness of knowledge was heightened by my being surrounded in my college years by bright people who seemed so arrogantly sure of their ideas that they believed they knew what would be best for others. Many of them wound up being in the neo-con brain trust, making choices that could be considered war crimes and crimes against humanity. Happily, my own uncertainties and respect for the viewpoints of others led me to resist their certainties. I learned to appreciate particulars and differences, even while nostalgically desiring certainty and absoluteness.

After my college senior year experiment in suspended disbelief as I explored Jewish orthodoxy, I returned to distrusting big ideas and learned to dwell on facts, living the life in front of me, forming personal relationships, and professionally committing myself to helping individuals in their lives as they saw them. As discussed in Chapter 14, these motives came together when I lucked into teaching literacy. My therapy helped me focus on the life as it emerged and not any imagined or idealized world. Finding my satisfactions and meaning in working with the students in my classroom, I initially had little interest in pursuing research after finishing my Ph.D. In seeking tenure publications, I stayed close to detailed evidence, attending to the text structures and details. In my book reviews I was impatient with what I viewed as ideological arrogance while I appreciated sharp tongued social critics. When I gained tenure, I dropped all attempts to publish in literary studies or more general cultural venues.

Further, as I became familiar with the uses of theory in the humanities, I found conceptual looseness and vague approximation. Theories could spark interesting, powerful, and even admirable ideas in readers' minds, the kind of mental explosions associated with poetry since the Romantic era, but loose associativeness also made theoretical ideas slippery as they grew by accretion and displacement within each reader. Even more this slipperiness made ideas hard to prove or disprove as each reader would bring to bear their own experiences and examples—either through explicit memory or implicit feelings and perceptions. Even more troubling, the conceptual slipperiness of theories made it impossible

to articulate them precisely with other ideas equally exciting, as each would build their own symbolic pantheons, potentially rife with internal contradictions, incomplete connections, or outright gaps. Even if one person could come to an understanding of terms they were satisfied with, it would hardly translate with any precision to the system of ideas of another. No useful common knowledge and understanding would emerge to support coordinated action in the world. Only internal individualistic worlds of continuing mental excitement were fostered.

Dragged Back into the Swamp of Ideas

My wholehearted commitment, however, grew in the teaching of writing and the impact it had on the lives of students. A few early pieces (published and unpublished) tried to articulate my student-centered orientation, but I needed research in order to understand students' writing needs and situations. This research eventually led to theorizing, even though I resisted it. I felt uneasy as I fell into a theorizing mood. I initially would only theorize when the ideas were necessary to understand the data I found, but I gradually ventured into ideas that grew out of the evidence. Over time, the wider applicability of these ideas to society became more evident, pushing me to frame them more broadly so others might find them useful in opening up their own views of writing. I, nonetheless, constantly felt the need to base the theories on evidence, to avoid unfounded generalities and judgments, and to be as precise as I could to support coherent syntheses with other work.

I could only overcome my unease by ensuring that my ideas were grounded in publicly shareable evidence—available in shared archives or made transparently accessible through carefully articulated methodology. Tying concepts to observable and documentable things could increase clarity in the meaning of the concept, and firmer distinctions could be made among differing concepts. As well, starting with a small number of well-articulated and evidenced concepts could provide a more solid grounding for a larger universe of related concepts that might count as a theory. Additionally, evidentiary transparency could connect with what other people had found through other perceptions and reasonings. That is, the experiences of others would be respected—they had seen what they had seen, even if a new theory might propose different terms to understand what had previously been seen. Nothing legitimately seen was unseen, just renamed and reexplained. Millennia of subtle observations about texts and personal and social processes associated with writing have given us a wealth of experience to build on. New ideas might understand those observations differently but that richness of experience and observation can only serve to make our new accounts more comprehensive and more closely tied to material realities, as I had learned from Joseph Priestley's broad attention to all observed phenomena associated with evolving concepts of electricity.

Replication of research through shared methods is never as simple as it sounds;

local conditions and craft always are part of the process—as science studies had taught me. The problem is even greater when the issues involve human meaning, choices, and actions, which depend on histories of individuals, local conditions under which individuals act (including social groupings relevant to the data collecting event), and people’s complexity of orientations, perceptions, and motives in the moment. Further, when the object of study is creative, intentional action of individuals and collectives—as through writing—no two events are the same. In fact, treating two different writing events as the same destroys the very phenomenon you are looking for, because writing involves creating situationally meaningful and often unique communication. Add to these the particularity, position, and purposes of the observing analyst. These issues troubled me throughout my research career, especially as I tried to build theory on the basis of that research. It drove me to think about what robustly might reappear across individuals and circumstances. If there was repetition of texts or actions, that itself was the result of intentional or creative work, which then might mean different things to the different participants. If there was something replicable it would be in underlying processes. Methods became a way of uncovering those underlying processes, which would be confirmed only if many investigators found those same processes in many instances in different circumstances using different methods.

The concept would then be made stronger every time a methodologically careful researcher could locate the phenomenon operative in their data. Additionally, whenever writing and teaching practitioners found a concept useful in leading to greater success in their practice, it would further strengthen the reliability and replicability of the phenomenon. The continuing uptake in practice would suggest that the phenomenon (or something close enough to the phenomenon to be identifiable by the terms proposed) was describing something, and that thing turned out to be a useable idea. Practice has a wisdom, but that wisdom can grow with research-based theory and that research-based theory can be tested in practice. So as I went on my journey of theorizing I kept close attention to both empirical and practical work, as well as to their interplay.

In *Shaping Written Knowledge*, some concepts became important to make sense of the detailed evidence—including that of genre and how it evolved in relation to changing disciplines. Issues of disciplinary regulation embodying ideology became important for the study of the *American Psychological Association Style Manual*. Issues of role and role conflict (as informed by sociological research and theory) held the key to understanding the social structures, norms, and values that arose around scientific publication. Theoretical issues concerning the nature of facticity also haunted me because the search for facts motivated the creation and circulation of knowledge. I struggled to explain how texts were written human productions but yet could accountably report empirical experiences with the world beyond the text. While this epistemological question of knowledge production and its matched question of ontological trust in the world represented may seem philosophically abstract, to me they became very much practical and

empirical issues of how to write so as to reliably represent the world. This turned the issue from a philosophic question to an empirical research question of just what was going on in disciplinary and scientific writing.

How can Ideas Travel Across People and Fields?

As I became aware of how different the epistemologies, ontologies, and ideologies of fields were, I realized these hard-won perspectives and practices were the consequence of extensive discussions, practical work, evidence gathering, theory-building, and contention among dedicated scholars in their respective fields. I could hardly expect them to adopt my theoretical perspective wholesale. The best I could do was to make phenomena found through my research robustly visible and practically useful to people of various perspectives. They then could make sense of writing phenomena in their own ways, within their own disciplinary perspectives. Over time, if I could show to people of different ideological and disciplinary orientations things they could recognize and identify in the world around them in their own terms, then readers might accede to these things existing, even if shown through the odd theoretical lenses I offered them. In turn, readers might come to accommodate their ideas about the world to accept the newly recognized phenomena, perhaps causing them to reorganize their understanding to include what they have now seen and could not see, without having to directly buy into whatever theoretical frame I was offering. Of course, the recognition of a new phenomenon would bring along some theoretical and methodological baggage. Let me provide an analogy: accepting the reality of something seen through a microscope would entail accepting that a microscope works and that there was a world too small to see with our unaided eyes. It would also challenge the viewer to give accounts of the workings of microscopes and the nature of the microscopically seen objects.

In adopting this rhetorical strategy of showing things that once seen cannot be unseen in *Shaping Written Knowledge*, I was foremost interested in showing that experimental reports evolved, and there was significant variation within and across disciplines and over time. Secondarily, I wanted to show that these changes resulted from active rhetorical choices by writers speaking to the discussions of their times to advance their best views of doing science. Only tertiarily did I have hopes for the more theoretical argument that scientists were concerned with developing credible representations of the world. The penultimate theoretical chapter of *Shaping Written Knowledge* put together a plausible account of how all these might fit together, and the final chapter presented some practical consequences of that account. But it wasn't necessary for readers to accept these two chapters to accept the studies in the more empirical chapters. Presenting theory as a kind of explanatory afterthought was a kind of rhetorical modesty in recognition of the great variation in readers' beliefs. Even though a particular set of evolving and growing understandings helped me see the things I then would be able to show

the readers, I would not make accepting those ideas a required entry-ticket to seeing what I found. Rather showing what I found might open the doors for readers to come to new ideas, when they might find my theoretical offerings useful.

In writing the conceptually driven chapters of this book, I was constantly challenged to make the prose as transparent and simple as the subject allowed, without misleading oversimplification. I took as my slogan a version of Occam's razor I had read as a teenager attributed to Einstein: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler."¹²

As mentioned earlier, some readers stumbled over preliminary drafts of my early studies, and this sent me on a quest throughout the rest of my career to identify the essence of what I wanted to say and build my sentences around that. I kept constantly revising at the sentence and paragraph level with this in mind.

Learning to simplify sentence style and argument structure never ends, and readers may still find my prose wanting. The search for clarity and simplicity of expression led beyond greater readability to greater precision in my thought, particularly in formulating concepts and eliminating distractions, excessive words, or other wastes of readers' cognitive resources that would leave meaning fuzzy, imprecise, or hard to decode. My goal was to have the edges of concepts and the connections among them to be as tightly constructed and hard edged as a system of plumbing so that the exact size and shape of each component would be specified, as well as how and where it connected to each other part to fit within an entire working system. If I was uncertain about how any piece might or might not fit with others, I sought to be candid and to identify the uncertainty or fuzziness as much as I could.

Although my attitude toward prose revision could be considered quixotic in a field so protean and historically unfolding as writing studies, I felt only in this way could we try to understand the principles behind creativity, invention, and change in writing and other symbolic communications. This stance put me at odds with much of my training in the humanities, which encouraged a kind of brilliance that excited the reader's individual associations and sparks of imagination. While I continue to value creative excitement and abductive leaps, we need to be as clear as possible with each other to create a shared system of ideas grounded in evidence and observed phenomena.

Historical Inspirations

After I finished *Shaping Written Knowledge*, my study of Joseph Priestley led me to appreciate his understanding of the communal practice of science. I incorporated into my own values and practices some of his insights into the communal

12. Though Einstein apparently said it in a more technical way <https://www.championingscience.com/2019/03/15/everything-should-be-made-as-simple-as-possible-but-no-simpler/>

practices still at play within the modern scientific world. His advocacy for transparency of methods, evidence, and reasoning resonated with me—but he also argued for a transparency of theories in relation to other extant theories, so one would not only advocate for one's own ideas but would try to place them fairly in relation to the ideas of others.

Priestley was not the only writer I studied who fundamentally influenced my ideas. From almost all I learned directly what they did as writers, by observing their texts, the genres they wrote in, and the processes by which genres evolved and were deployed in organized situations. From a subset of these writers, I learned practices which informed my teaching and my own writing. From others, I learned strategies and tricks they used in their texts which I could borrow, transform, or steal. Others had insights into writing and their rhetorical situations which helped me think my way into my situations. Some, moreover, were also wise about writing and expanded my vision of what writing could be, how to go about doing it, how it worked in the world, and how it could be a way to engage in the world. I consider these mentors.

A special few of these historical mentors had inspiring visions that engaged and extended my values. They taught me ways of being. These included Joseph Priestley and Adam Smith, both of whom pursued capacious transdisciplinary enlightenment quests to understand the world and how through writing they could contribute to the human experiment. They forged new practices as part of their growing analysis of what it meant to be a writer within a communal conversation. Others, whom I wrote about as scholars rather than subjects, had a similar impact on me—Lev Vygotsky, George Herbert Mead, Harry Stack Sullivan, Alfred Schutz, Robert Merton. Seeing the world through their eyes expanded my own sense of being a writer, and the sense of writing I could share with my students. Many writers I studied were smart and clever people, some even brilliant, but only some illuminated my world. They showed me deeper things about writing and being. They were the ones that held my hand as this mood of theorizing came over on me.

Trying to Explain: Coherence as a Kind of Integrity

As I started to develop a more robust, empirically-grounded view of writing, I found myself endlessly explaining to my colleagues in writing studies and other fields how things appeared to me. This theoretical explanation started with co-das to some articles, closing chapters in books, articles devoted to syntheses of literatures and findings, then more elaborate theoretical presentations, culminating in the two volumes of *Literate Action* appearing in 2013. How I learned and developed as a writer as I moved beyond the institutional strictures of schooling became increasingly directed by what I was coming to understand writing to be. This understanding of writing kept opening up planes of considerations that could be attended to and made accountable to conscious choices.

A series of presentations in the late 1980s and early 1990s forced me to start working out my ideas more explicitly and articulating them more clearly—as well as connecting them with other work going on in science studies and writing. Writing book reviews as well led me to grapple more fully with other people's work and to elaborate my own positions in response. Equally, the opportunity to write introductions or prefaces to collections challenged me to find coherent themes within the diverse chapters in each collection and to articulate my emerging ideas in relation to what each volume had to offer.

The attempt to synthesize my emerging ideas coalesced in the project of putting together a volume of my selected essays in 1994 called *Constructing Experience* (Bazerman, 1994b). I wanted the book to be more than a random collection, even though the essays responded to different local exigencies. To me, they seemed to come out of an emerging coherence, which I wanted to make evident in the collection. In eighth grade I was attracted to and quoted Whitman's now-clichéd “containing multitudes” excuse for contradictions but I no longer found that satisfactory. A push for integrity/integralness kept driving me to find ways to articulate how parts fit together and what my vision was. Collecting my articles challenged me to explain how each part of my development and work was heuristic for each other. In *Shaping Written Knowledge*, coherence came out of the view of genre, how a genre arose and changed, how it served to meet the needs of a time, how writers came to make choices, and how genres came to organize the work and social relations of scientific communities. Now in *Constructing Experience*, the task was to show how my work in apparently disparate domains of the profession of writing and its teaching fit together into a coherent project. The essays I had published in writing studies included four different kinds with different seeming motives—1) sharing classroom perspectives and practices; 2) describing and synthesizing areas of inquiry that helped me understand writing; 3) puzzling through problems in understanding writing; and 4) offering empirical and theoretical studies. To explain how they fit together, I first wrote a brief autobiographical introduction (6 pages), along with briefer introductions to each of the four sections (1-2 pages each). These explained how each chapter grew from earlier practices and connected across sections.

But it was one thing to assert continuity and another to give a coherent vision that would connect the various pieces more conceptually. I felt the pressure to articulate that theoretical vision. I remember spending many hours sketching out different fragments of ideas, which seemed to be falling into different perspectives and time scales. Some seemed intimate, concerning my own practices and processes, while others were global, thinking about large social systems. My mind kept evoking an image from a passage I read as an undergraduate in Milton's *Paradise Lost* of the world suspended in space, encased within different spheres yet hanging from a common pendant. This imagery led me to characterize the theory as moving outward from the most located internal personal perspective of the writer (a phenomenology), through the outside view of the intimate observer (a

social psychology), to the middle-range observer of literate social systems (a sociology), to the most distant overview (a sociocultural history of rhetoric). Across these differently-scaled perspectives, however, topics recur, viewed at different scales: location, situation, action, resources, typification, genre, produced text, histories of experiences, identity, roles, audiences, interactants, expectations. I also considered the kinds of situations and roles which we are likely to take when we adopt each of these perspectives. I suppose you could also call this a kind of inverse mandala, with the concrete experience at the center and ideas emerging in the outer circles.

This retelling a story from multiple perspectives I came across a number of times in reading literature; *Rashomon* is a classic example, one that I first came across as a teenager. I also was fascinated by informational displays that had transparent overlays of complex systems to display the different layers, as in anatomical graphics. Later in my dissertation I drew on this technique as I described in layers a complex ceremonial event which included a procession through streets of London, decorations, plays, music, and recitation of poems.

The “Introduction II: Sketches towards a Rhetorical Theory of Literacy” in *Constructing Experience* offered a vision from four different points of view. It was dense and long—almost 40 pages, but it had no footnotes or even organized evidence. It had some examples to make the vision concrete, but it hardly offered a warrant or an argument. Nor did it even recognize all the thought of others that I drew on. This sketch left me with a sense of obligation and desire to lay out the full story, with evidence, citations, and reasoning that might persuade. This obligation set off two more decades of finding out how to tell that story. Along the way I gave a promissory note in the form of a 1997 conference presentation and published paper (Bazerman, 2000c), saying that in order to elaborate our knowledge of writing we needed a history of the emerging social purposes and forms of writing and a comprehensive new theory of rhetoric based on the problematics of writing instead of high stakes, platform-spoken performance. During the ensuing fifteen years I engaged in a number of projects that served to build the knowledge necessary to do this—including editing research and reference series, and a handbook which attempted to pull together the knowledge of the field, grounded in historical and social developments. I will discuss these in the next two chapters. I also continued to noodle around with many smaller essays elaborating theory and bringing parts together.