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Introduction

The scene of writing is often conceived in terms of the ideologically loaded image of the individual writer sitting at a desk in a garret, searching her own soul for inspiration in order to write for some individual reader, equally isolated in her curtained window-seat (cf. Brodkey 1987, 396). But as writing teachers and researchers, we have found that the actual scene of writing is much more open: the classroom crowded with other writers, the computer lab, the writing center, or perhaps the archetype of all of these, the newspaper editorial office in which individuals embodying the different parts of the writing process compose, edit, revise, and proofread in a noisy and exuberant enactment of literacy. Neither image, of course, is meant to describe all writing in all times and places. The image is where we begin thinking about writing, an encapsulation of what we think is important to consider.

As we remember our school experience, the dominant form of writing was not anything our teachers assigned (though in those days, of course, much writing was assigned), but rather the notes passed hand to hand, hidden in desks to avoid the teacher's eyes. Much of this writing was dyadic in mode, the "come to my place after school" variety. But some of this writing involved larger social groups, and sometimes the entire class participated. One of us remembers a fourth grade class in particular in which a good part of several weeks was spent writing serial stories: each student wrote a sentence before passing the story on to the next. An especially good contribution was one that left the next writer with an impossible situation to resolve or explain. By the time the story returned to you, the characters and plot line had usually changed radically. Students expressed themselves—and more particularly their relation to the rest of the class—in what they wrote. Some attempted to restore unity in the story while others delighted in creating the wildest imaginable scenes; some defended rules of decorum while others strove

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to go beyond the consensus of what should be written in the stories; some frequently initiated new stories while others frequently skipped their turn or repeated what others had written. We knew each other by our writing; we created a particular kind of social group in our stories. They ended when the teacher found one, not because she was upset by it (she wasn't really), but because just her knowing about the stories changed the way we wrote them.

The argument of the following pages is that writing is a social activity. In the composition classroom, in the writing research laboratory, in the basic education or adult literacy class, teacher and learner, researcher and subject bring with them entire communities whenever they are engaged with writing. When, either in our research or in our teaching, we ignore these communities, we ignore the complexities of social structure and dynamic that characterize writing. Researchers might argue that simplification is essential in some kinds of experimental inquiry, but, with writing, results derived from individuals in a laboratory setting must always be measured against what happens in the real—and not so simple—world. Likewise, a familiar way of thinking about teaching writing is in terms of the interactions between the individual teacher and learner, but there are few actual situations in which this occurs: usually learners are plural and they often interact with each other more than they do with the teacher, circumstances that can be made contributory to learning if they are not ignored.

Increasingly, writing researchers have found that “elegant” methods of studying writing are reductive, producing results that have no bearing on what writers—either beginning or expert—do. The common view of the natural science paradigm of research—the bracketing of variables so that a single one can be studied in isolation—is fundamentally inapplicable in the human sciences. No variables in human behavior are isolable. Thus, the mode of our research in this book is more interpretive than experimental: we offer analyses, stories, arguments, meditations, but no quantifiable data.

It is difficult to sufficiently appreciate the density of everyday life. Whether we are considering the question of why a particular student in a particular class cannot seem to organize his argument on a particular subject or the question of the effect of the mode of writing on what is written and by whom, there is no single determining factor. There is peer pressure and there is writing anxiety and there is ideology and there is institutionalized alienation; there is Gutenberg and there is Petrarch and there is the proletariat and there is the microchip. Culture, as we were taught by Althusser, who learned it from Freud (who may have learned it from Marx), is overdetermined. Politics and sexuality, economics and technology, MTV and advertising interpenetrate as a great nexus of causality so that all interpretation is a constant call for yet more

mediations as we strive to avoid, on the one hand, reductionism, and, on the other hand, the perpetual play of interpretation that is finally a defense of the status quo.

From theorists such as Vygotsky and his American students, we have recently learned to think that language and learning themselves are in the first instance social activities, that what we had thought—in Piagetian terms—to be natural stages of maturation are actually culturally conditioned *activities* by means of which small groups of individuals in each generation reconstruct the social world. That the social nature of thought and its representation has been overlooked is not surprising; our culture places a great emphasis on individualism, on a Cartesian idea of the self. But even ideas that have ideological motivations as strong as those of individualism can eventually be modified by lack of success in application. Many teachers in schools and colleges, as well as adult education practitioners, have found that the Romantic paradigm of the isolated writer thinking individualized thoughts simply does not work as the basis for writing instruction. In addition to being an artificial and inefficient way to write—when, other than in school, are writers forbidden to enlist help from anyone handy?—the content of the writing that is produced under these circumstances is likely to be inauthentic. Asking students to write something based on their own ideas results in students writing what they have been told—by their parents, their peers, the media. Asking them to look into their souls results in their remembering conversations they have heard. As Bruffee has said, “reflective thought is public or social conversation internalized” (Bruffee 1984, 639). To pretend otherwise, as we all too often do, is at best hypocrisy, at worst a form of indoctrination.

These social aspects of writing have increasingly received attention within our profession, particularly in the last several years. But the meaning of “social” in all of this work is not always the same. Thus, we wish to be very clear about what we mean when we say that writing is a *social activity*—and we wish to emphasize both parts of this term:

First, perhaps, what we don't mean by social. We don't mean that writing is social in the sense that Saussure said that language is social. Saussure used the term in order to emphasize that language is a communal product, not the original creation of individuals as they strive to express themselves. Those who study language, he argued, should focus not on the individual act of speaking but rather on “the social fact” of the system of language, “the instrument created by a collectivity” (Saussure 1966, 13, 11). This might at first seem close to a theory rooted in the world of talk and labor, but, on the contrary, it is only a short step from Saussure's concept of language as “a grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals” (13–14) to Chomsky's socially agnostic specifica-

tion of language as a cognitive ability to produce and understand correct syntactic structures. For us, writing is not merely a common system through which individual minds can communicate—an abstract telephone network in the brains of a group of individuals—but rather a real interaction among social groups and individuals.

Similarly, in saying that writing is social, we don't simply wish to emphasize that writing necessarily involves an audience—readers. The work on social cognition, the ways writers do and/or should think about their readers when writing, converts a social reality into a cognitive category. The writer is still isolated in this view; the absent reader—an ideal, always a fiction—must be reconstructed by the writer. In contrast, if we think of writing as a social activity, readers are always present to writers—real people we know and talk with and do other things with. Writing is not fundamentally a cognitive process, though of course thinking is involved. Writing is a way of interacting with others—a social activity.

What we do mean by social is that writing is located in the social world and, thus, is fundamentally structured by the shape of that environment. Our sense of the term is closer to that employed by Humboldt, who defined language as an activity and argued that “language develops only in social intercourse” (Humboldt 1971, 27, 36). And to Halliday, who says,

Language is as it is because of the functions it has evolved to serve in people's lives; it is to be expected that linguistic structures could be understood in functional terms. But in order to understand them in this way we have to proceed from the outside inwards, interpreting language by reference to its place in the social process. This is not the same thing as taking an isolated sentence and planting it out in some hothouse that we call a social context. It involves the difficult task of focusing attention simultaneously on the actual and the potential, interpreting both discourse and the linguistic system that lies behind it in terms of the infinitely complex network of meaning potential that is what we call the culture. (Halliday 1978, 4–5)

Like Halliday, we think that we cannot begin with the isolated writer and then add on social factors. To understand what writing is we must first and primarily understand its place in the social process.

In turning from product to process, composition theory and research nevertheless remained safely within an idealist framework. Just as we once analyzed and taught an ideal essay form even though it never existed purely in any real essay, we discovered an ideal writing process, even while recognizing that it would never actually be realized in the writing

of any individual or on any particular occasion. In both cases the object of inquiry and imitation is the uniform ideal, from which all realities are divergent, defective, troublesome in the way that Shakespeare was to Dr. Johnson. Though this sometimes seems an apt way to look at student writing, we have learned from Shaughnessy and others that “defective” writing and “divergent” writers have a logic of their own that cannot be understood simply by noting their distance from the ideal. Nor can the writing of such students be “improved” simply by changing the way they think while writing (as if that were even possible). As Bakhtin said about another social activity, “we are most inclined to imagine ideological creation as some inner process of understanding, comprehension, and perception, and do not notice that it in fact unfolds externally, for the eye, the ear, the hand. It is not within us, but between us” (Medvedev/Bakhtin 1978, 8). Writing happens where we can see and hear and touch it: a fourth-grade student composes an intricate plot turn to confound her classmate, whose turn it is to write next; in Parma, Petrarch notes the death of Laura in his copy of Virgil. If we wish to change writing activities within our society, we must look not at what we think happens within our students' heads but rather at what happens between our students and us, between our students and other social groups with which they interact.

Still another way to distinguish our approach is that we assert the primacy of the social over that of the technological. One of us was asked, recently, to observe a Level One adult basic education class to monitor the teacher's effectiveness. This can be an intensely distasteful activity, with its associations of Matthew Arnold, Yeats, and the police, but there seemed at the time little choice but to do it. The class was taking place in a room where each of the students had their own computer, each seemingly quite comfortable using the machines as writing instruments. One of the students, a gentleman in his mid-twenties, spent most of the class session writing a sentence. He would key in the letters of a word, turn to the teacher, ask the spelling of the next word, key those in, and so forth. The interest of this is that he was doing precisely what Shaughnessy describes in *Errors and Expectations* as hypercorrection, although Shaughnessy's description involves a pencil and much erasing, not an Apple IIe and the Bank Street Writer. Everything had changed, but everything was much the same. The quantitative transformation of the technology had no effect at all on the activity, which had its roots not in the archaic nature of pencils, as we once thought, but in the enduring character of the organization of our system of education—its highly successful function in limiting learning opportunities for perhaps half our people, and nearly eliminating them for millions. Computers will not end illiteracy. Literacy is not a technology that can be freely transferred from one culture to another, or acquired like an appliance. Writing is not a technique.

Writing is a form of social action. It is part of the way in which some people live in the world. Thus, when thinking about writing, we must also think about the way that people live in the world. Over the last few years we have been thinking in these terms about our teaching, about research in composition, and about literacy programs in the schools and in other institutions. The essays in this volume represent some of that thinking.

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The Ecology of Writing

I wrote this essay in response to the chain of events narrated in the final essay in this collection. Though I was not directly involved in the literacy project that was developed for the California Conservation Corps in 1982, I did spend a lot of time talking about the pedagogical and theoretical implications of what was going on with my colleagues who were working in the project. In these discussions—in seminar rooms, in offices, in restaurants, on front and back stoops—I began to see how to ground the ideas I had been developing about writing as social action (drawing, for the most part, on sociolinguistic and speech act theories of language) in the actuality of social structures. Aspects of language use that function as discrete abstractions in these theories—Grice's background knowledge, Brown and Gilman's power and solidarity, for example—appeared in these discussions as operational facts, completely enmeshed not just in the immediate conversational context but in a whole web of social systems that had been built up over time. When one of my middle-class students in a linguistics class responded with disdain to an approach from one of the uniformed corps members in the halls of our building, I began to see the inadequacy of describing such encounters as infelicitous because of an imbalance in power and the lack of sufficient solidarity. For both Michael and myself, the literacy project served as a catalyst to bring together theory and practice. But as he increasingly turned his attention to the problem of teaching writing in workplace settings, I took up the problem of seeing college writing classrooms as also part of the social world.

Since its publication in *College English* in 1986 this essay has been much commented on. I respond to one interpretation of it in the essay on discourse communities later in this collection. Here I wish only to say that what seems most important to me in the way of thinking about writing I propose in this essay is the idea of dynamic, interacting systems.