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Rhetorical U-Turn: The Attack of the Textoids

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[Text for delivery]

When I agreed to do this talk, I thought that it would be a pretty simple matter to address the theme of the conference: "People and Places: The Social and Physical Contexts for Writing." That phrase encapsulates something that is at the center of what I've spent a pretty long career thinking about. I sort of envisioned my role here as rather like my role in the English Department at St. Thomas. I was mandatorily retired a few years ago, and since then I've had to apply for limited term contracts to continue teaching. When the department is asked whether they support the application, what they typically say is, "Oh, we need Russ; Russ is history." What that means -- I hope this is what it means -- is that I remember what we tried in 1978, and how it worked, or didn't, and that I remember why we decided to do some of the things we now do out of sheer habit.

So I thought, for the study of discourse and writing in Canada, I'm history. This, I figured, would be a piece of cake. But deciding what to say here has turned out to be far less than simple. This is partly because I don't want to be in the position of recounting history everybody knows, or, on the other hand, presuming everybody knows things that I remember clearly but that have faded into the mists of time for others.

It's also important to bear in mind that I'm coming to this from a different planet. My interests have not been in the teaching of writing, or really in rhetorical or genre theory: I've been focused on how, across the undergraduate curriculum, literacy - writing and reading-- is used, or could be used, to support learning. My priority, though, is not so much helping people become better writers, as helping them learn to use writing and reading more effectively as tools for learning. That has as a sort of side effect helping them get better, for example, at learning to participate in new genres, and being more flexible and resourceful in adapting their writing to new texts, new audiences, and new purposes - but writing improvement remains, for me, a side effect.

So my angle of vision, and my context of reference, the paradigm I'm hailing from,

are a bit skewed. In some sense I see myself as talking across a sort of disciplinary gap. I should also admit that in some sense what I've written here is a sort of a rant. And because I've had to go back and recast it, fairly deeply, in light of some of the important and transformative presentations I've heard so far at this conference, I'm going to stick fairly close to my text.

One of the consistent preoccupations of my thinking about language, and about teaching, has been an issue I can only call authenticity. That is, I've been worrying the idea of the subtle but crucial difference between, on the one hand, language which actually functions in social relationships between people and, on the other, language which serves what we might call display functions (the way a term paper does, for example).

One of the best ways of formulating the difference is a phrase I got from a language teacher and scholar in Australia, Anne Freedman, who remarked that in French class, every piece of discourse is "an example of French." In other words, as a reader you don't take what the piece of language says or does seriously and directly, you assess it as an example, contemplate it. You approve it, or help with it.

Around that same time, back in the late eighties, I began using the word "textoid" to describe the kind of language which seems at first sort of like authentic discourse but which has something fundamentally synthetic, artificial, about it. I thought about it first in looking at the pieces of discourse that writers about language often use as examples of linguistic behavior. Texts used on comprehension tests are this sort of thing. It's the kind of language we produce or find when we want to illustrate something about language, when we want an example of a construction - or, in fact, any time we unhook language from its immediate, real social context. Textoids. The word, of course, was created on the analogy of "android" -- which, in the science fiction of my youth, referred to a robot which was designed to look human, but which, of course, really wasn't. Although you couldn't always tell exactly why, you knew immediately it wasn't quite right, not natural.

The reason this has been an important, and persistent, idea (perhaps even an obsession) for me for three or four decades is in part that it has given me a category with which to think about why some language learning situations are powerful and rich and others are much less so. When people are engaged in real social transactions with each other, it seems to me, there are rich opportunities for developing and extending and elaborating the ability to use language. When they

are engaged in exchanging textoids, much less learning occurs. An important problem in thinking about this is that you can't always tell which is going on by looking at the actual discourse, the string of signifiers which makes up the text.

One of the important considerations here is that any instance of language is always, and only, what we treat it as. What I point to as a textoid might, in other circumstances, function as an efficient utterance in a social situation. As Bakhtin (or Vološinov, or the folks we associate with their circle) pointed out long ago, the exact same string of signifiers is never the same utterance, from one social situation to the next. In its new situation, the string changes, becomes the vehicle for a different transaction, and thus actually becomes a new, different utterance. Obviously, some strings are more likely to afford being taken as textoids than others - the classic "Jack is eager to please," for instance, which Chomsky contrasted with "Jack is easy to please"; or examples of triple embedding like "it was the man the boy the nurse knew hit" are extremely unlikely ever to serve as vehicles for an authentic social transaction. On the other hand, "Hey, how's it goin'" is unlikely to be a textoid except in the case I've just used it in -- where it functions as an example of something.

What has made this particularly important for me is my belief that this distinction has important implications for language learning - and, in my view, that's what all my teaching and writing have been centrally about. Part of the reason I think this is my experiences with student writing and reading in my classes, and where I've watched learning occur (and where I've seen it fail to occur). But it's also because of what I've learned about how human infants develop language.

Among the people who have attempted to understand how human infants come to be active, competent members of a discourse community it became increasingly clear through the twentieth century that it was by using language to relate to others and get things done that babies achieve the amazing feat of developing what Roger Brown famously called "a first language." (I'm leaving aside the researchers who see it as a miraculous bit of pre-existing hardwiring rather than a process. Noam Chomsky, call your office.) What runs through the work on this question, from Vygotsky and M. A. K. Halliday through Kenneth Kaye and Robin Dunbar and beyond, is the observation that the most remarkable achievements of language learning occur when the language is being employed, not when it is being observed -- when we use it, rather than when we contemplate it, when it's a tool rather than an example.

I am, in other words, convinced that language is radically social and can not be deeply understood or lived in, or learned, outside of an authentic, immediate

context of use (no more than a frog can be understood out of the context of a swamp). This conviction has helped me understand an ever wider range of my professional and personal activities for most of my adult life. I've never been sure how clearly I've been able to explain what exactly I mean by that, or why it's so important, and thus it probably won't be a surprise to hear that I'm going to give it another try this morning.

One way to characterize my continuing interest over that time has been to say that I've been trying to deepen my understanding of how people read and engage with rich, authentic, socially functioning texts. By rich and authentic I don't mean only "literature" in the traditional sense, although I do include it -- along with literary journalism, and business memos and quarterly reports, and emails. Maybe even tweets.

One of the things that ran through the work that Doug Vipond and I did during the eighties on what we called "literary reading," in fact, was our observation that while texts we usually think of as "literary" more readily *afforded* the kind of engaged, dialogic reading we were looking for, they didn't determine it, nor were they sufficient. Our readers could, and did, read a John Updike story for the information contained in it; on the other hand, pretty much any text, from a grocery list up, under the right conditions, was *open* to the kind of reading which treated it as a move in a social relationship. In other words, a pretty unpromising text in an appropriate context would allow us to ask questions like, "what is the writer of this text doing?" or, "what social relationship is being conducted by means of, or enacted by, this piece of text?"

The problem, of course, is that as soon as you actually *ask* questions like that you convert the text from an authentic social exchange to an *example* of an authentic social exchange. There are still, of course, traces of the exchange left, and we can make guesses about it, but the phenomenon itself has a tendency to vanish on inspection. (That's why in one of our reports on this work, Doug and I quoted Walter Kintsch's recipe for rabbit stew: "First, catch the rabbit." We found the rabbit pretty difficult to apprehend.

This difficulty accounts, I think, for a good deal of the tendency among linguists, reading researchers, and literary critics to proceed as though texts are pretty much fixed, permanent objects whose properties can be identified, and to marginalize the nature of the real, immediate social situation they are actually encountered in. And for much of what we do, that assumption is good enough. But ever since I encountered the Bakhtin circle's challenge to the idea that an

utterance is the same from one instance to another, it's become harder for me to be comfortable thinking I actually know in any dependable way what a given string of signifiers is doing.

I should make clear that I'm not asserting that we can't know how language works. I am arguing, however, that in order to understand it, and use it effectively, we need to recognize - as Dewey and Bentley asserted about all transactions back in 1949 - that every linguistic transaction is in a radical way uniquely shaped by the situation in which it occurs. That two transactions are mediated by the same string doesn't make them the same transaction. Location, location, location.

We find it easier to accept this sort of argument when we're talking about oral language, of course; in oral communication the utterance doesn't actually survive the situation, or at least it doesn't normally. We *can* record and transcribe conversation, as the work of conversation analysts like William Labov and Livia Polanyi demonstrates, but the difficulty of understanding such recorded language outside its context of use is obvious. It's obvious when you look at the page how radically language changes in the process of being recorded, transcribed, and moved to the pages of a scholarly article.

To see that the same is true of written language, think for a moment about this sentence:

"I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food."

That, I think no one will deny, is a radically different utterance when read by a sophisticated twenty-first century reader, a first-year student in a literature class, and a member of the English gentry in 1727. And, of course, it's different again in the context in which I just used it.

Swift's sentence is, of course, an extreme example, but I would argue that the principle applies to some degree to every instance of written text, and that acknowledging this has important consequences for the way we understand language and for the way we help students to understand and manipulate it.

Not so many years ago it seemed to me that we (those of us in academia, concerned with the teaching and use of language) were moving, across the board, to an increased awareness of this radically social, instrumental, rhetorical nature of

texts. We even had a name for it: "the rhetorical turn." The phrase was popularized, if not created, by Richard Rorty in 1984 and it came, over the next couple of decades, to be applied to a seachange occurring in literally scores of disparate disciplines, from philosophy and psychology to the hard sciences. In the fields I was most interested in, reading research, literary theory and pedagogy, this increasing acknowledgment of the rhetorical nature of all language - what was regularly termed "the rhetorical turn" in those disciplines - had powerful consequences.

Here are a couple of relevant examples. The rhetorical turn shaped and enabled the inquiries of folks like Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami into the way language works, who uncovered the rhetorical sophistication of business communications which, before their work, had been regarded as too simple to be worth study. It also cleared the way for work like that of Charles Bazerman on the rhetoric of scientific articles. Perhaps most important for my thinking was the team of researchers at Carleton and McGill (Dias, Freedman, Paré, Medway, and others) who explored school and workplace writing and reading (notably in the book *Worlds Apart*). This work too was, it seemed to me, a direct outgrowth of the widespread acceptance of the idea that we needed to understand texts as social actions. Similarly, the increasing interest in the study of genre as social action was part of the same paradigmatic drift. The rhetorical turn of the tide, it seemed, was lifting and redirecting all boats.

But as always seems to be the case, theory doesn't often have much effect on what happens at the chalk face, as Larry Cuban pointed out years ago, looking at the consequences of the "curriculum wars" for the actual day to day practice in the classrooms he found photographed in archives. As it happened, the wars passed overhead and the teachers continued to do pretty much what they'd always done.

All this, in other words, *should* have put us in a position to begin changing the way texts are treated in educational contexts, to find ways to structure classroom situations such that texts were actually fulfilling social functions, rather than being what John Dixon used to call "dummy runs," simulations of social relationships. Textoids. Term papers.

But it hasn't happened. Yes, it's true that people regularly acknowledge that the radically rhetorical nature of texts should have consequences for how we teach. There's an example I like a lot in Doug Brent's *Reading as Rhetorical Invention* (which, incidentally, is another example of valuable work that could only happen as we acknowledged the "rhetorical turn"). Brent suggests we should turn "an entire

classroom into an active research community." We would, he suggests, thus create a situation in which the writing and reading of students would create an instance of what Bazerman and others had helped us to see as the rhetorical life of the scholarly community. In such a community, an article is not a compendium of information - my students almost invariably see an article this way - but a move in a social relationship, which may have as an ancillary function the creation and sharing of knowledge. We could replicate this in classrooms, Brent suggested.

But, in general, our classrooms haven't done anything like that. In fact, it seems to me there's evidence that every year fewer teachers, across the academy and the educational system, are providing anything like authentic rhetorical situations for student writing and reading. It's difficult to sustain a conclusion like that without lots of evidence, of course, and I actually don't have very much - but in spite of that, I suspect few here will disagree with my conclusion that, in general, the use of writing in university classrooms continues to be overwhelmingly arhetorical. I think I might even get agreement that writing in classrooms focused on composition are not likely to create situations in which writing serves social functions beyond assessment and certification.

I think particularly important evidence of this is the work I've heard at conferences like this, and which I heard again yesterday morning from Roger Graves and his colleagues, about the way writing is actually used in what are often called "content courses."

This is true both of reading and writing. Classroom reading, of course, is primarily what Doug Vipond and I used to call "information-driven." That is, regardless of the text's apparent affordances, readings are assigned, and students accordingly read, with the overriding aim of extracting "the information" from the text. This is clear when students read traditional textbooks, of course, which virtually never exhibit explicitly any indication that the information in them is offered by a particular person or group with a particular social motive. Even when the texts are collections of articles ("course packs") which actually would, under other circumstances, readily afford a more engaged reading, the dynamics of the social situation push the student to absorb the information, and to pay no attention to the rhetorical stuff that lets you see what the author's attempting to achieve socially, but doesn't actually deliver the info.

Classroom writing is even more clearly unhooked from actual rhetorical or pragmatic situations. Or, more accurately, it's normally done in a context which requires that the writer ignore the actual situation (writing for the teacher as examiner),

and pretend to be in a different one. This issue is often addressed as though it were a matter of "audience awareness," and we often (in writing classes, but much more rarely in what we identify as "content" classes) address the issue by discussing it and exhorting students to write as though they were writing for, for example, "a general audience," or "your peers."

There are lots of reasons this doesn't work very well, most of which were outlined a generation ago by Anthony Paré, in a wonderful article in which he invited us to usher "Audience" out, describing the usual posited or imagined rhetorical audience as "those folks out there in chairs." In situations where writing is not a focal concern (content classes), the rhetorical and social dimension of the writing is paid even less attention. Classroom writing, in general, is written for "folks out there in chairs" who assess it, approve it, or help with it - but never, ever to someone who actually needs to know what it says, who is open to being persuaded or amused or engaged or infuriated by it. It's an example of writing. All the attention we've given to the ineluctably social nature of discourse has been sealed off in theoretical approaches, and has had virtually no consequences for classroom practice.

Aside from the reports of writing across the curriculum programs and writing centers over the years, what makes me especially sure this isn't an exaggeration is the rise of the plagiarism industry and the hysteria about replicated texts and what Turnitin.com called "unoriginal material" in classroom writing assignments. I won't go into that issue at length here; I've belabored the subject elsewhere.

But I will make the assertion that if you are writing something which actually has an immediate social, rhetorical purpose and is going to be read by someone who genuinely wants to know what you have to say (and is not going to be evaluated and added up by the "teacher as examiner"), the cheating sort of plagiarism is unlikely to be a problem. Moreover, the accidental, patch-writing sort can be easily discussed and straightened out, especially as students get into the habit of citing each others' work, and knowing how it feels - why it might feel good - to import someone else's language into your own, as an explicit acknowledgment of their participation. The fact that Turnitin.com and their ilk are able to make lots of money by peddling panaceas for a plague of plagiarism, it seems to me, is inadvertent evidence that classroom writing, on the whole, is, by and large, radically arhetorical.

We usually spend some time at the end of this sort of talk for discussion. I want to do something different here. I'm putting my money where my mouth is.

Some people here this morning will find this familiar, and others won't; but what I'm going to ask you do is a few minutes of writing and reading. It's called Inkshedding. Here's how it works.

[Explanation]

[Everybody writes for five minutes]

[More explanation]

[Everybody reads, looking for something that you'd like to bring to the attention of the rest of us by reading it aloud, for five or ten minutes. When you've found something, mark it. Hang on to it, or get it back when we've finished reading]

[Everybody has an opportunity to read something aloud.]

[Discussion ensues. Russ hands out [his list](#) of possible ways to make classroom writing authentically and actually social. Time runs out.]