

# Chapter 18. Becoming a Writing Researcher: The Classroom as Design Inquiry

Starting out as a teacher of writing, I thought I understood what writing was and how to do it. I looked into myself and the experience of other writers to become more explicit about what we knew. I also learned about my students to be able to motivate them and find out what they needed to learn. But some colleagues prodded me to realize that we didn't yet understand some fundamental things about writing. This was the next transformative moment in my development as a writer, turning me into an investigator, which I first pursued by experimenting with the design of classroom activities and then by more systematic research. This moment arrived shortly before my tenure, which then freed me from economic and evaluative insecurity to pursue what I thought was really worth doing. I never wrote on literary subjects again, except briefly to place literary writing within a more comprehensive theoretical picture about all writing (Bazerman, 2003d).

## Textbooks as Pedagogic Knowledge

Pairing reading and writing in the *English Skills Handbook* (1978b) made me question how we were using reading in our writing classes. As in many classrooms across the country, I had used anthologies to provide students material to comment on and examples to follow. I found, however, as had many other teachers, even when students read assignments for class, they often had difficulty understanding what the sequence of reasoning was, what points the authors were making, and how thoughts of people represented in the text fit into the author's perspective. In discussions, students could not remember ideas or details from the readings because they did not have a frame for making meaning from the separate details. I found that mapping out with students the argumentative structure of challenging readings could prompt more interesting discussions of their own ideas and experiences in relation to the articles. Yet they still had difficulties gaining such understanding on their own. I then asked them to paraphrase and summarize readings before the discussions in order to put the responsibility for gaining meaning from texts on them. These exercises helped them attend more carefully to what the texts said, helped them remember what they had read, and made their interpretations visible to me. As the readings became more complex and indirect, I found student difficulties in understanding to go far beyond the basic skills which Harvey and I dealt with in the handbooks. To help them connect with the readings I also asked them to write response journals and essays.

At Baruch, the second term mandatory writing class included a required research paper. While this requirement had been traditional, teachers wondered whether it was a meaningful task. It seemed ill-defined and artificial, not related to anything students would write in any of their courses or their careers afterward. Students, more often than not, did not produce very satisfactory work, often just incoherent cut and paste collections from sources only loosely related to their topic or to each other. I shared in these concerns, but I also saw academic writing required engaging with knowledge sources. I explored what activities and skills could make the research paper a more meaningful task, tied to student intellectual growth. While at that time textbook coverage of the research paper went little beyond citation form (Ken Macrorie's *Searching Writing* was not to appear until 1980), I began to explore how a better-defined library research task could engage students with inquiry topics that were meaningful for them, drawing on both their experience and what they found in sources. I found, as well, smaller interim assignments could help them find more meaning in the inquiry process.

## What was the Writing Requirement for?

Recognizing how writing was a means for intellectual growth increased my curiosity about what students had to write for their other subjects. When I started teaching writing in the early 1970s there were many views about the purposes of writing instruction, which ranged from fostering grammatical correctness, to developing literary style, to job preparation, to self-discovery through personal writing, to psychotherapy. All of them were valid concerns for writing, as writing was capacious, complex, and varied, but the immediate question was what we should teach in first year writing. For the non-traditional students I was working with in an open admissions environment, the most pressing task was for them to write sufficiently well to pass courses and complete their degrees, first in general education and then in their chosen majors. It seemed obvious to me that this was the reason writing courses were required, and I took this as my mandate. Accordingly, I discussed with students the writing assignments they were getting in other courses, and found the instructions were often ill-defined and vague, sometimes just asking for a "term paper" with no other specification.

I decided to survey faculty at my university to see if they could give me a more precise answer as to what they wanted. Although that kind of survey is common now, at that time I had not heard of many. The first survey in 1975-1976 established that teachers assigned writing and took it seriously. They had policies that showed more concern for organization and thought than correctness. Another survey the following year found that over two thirds of the writing was directly about reading in the form of reviews of literature, responses to reading, book reviews, or critical analyses—while almost all the rest of the assignments indirectly relied on reading for original theses, reports, or exam writing. I wrote up the findings of the surveys in internal reports and presented them in regional composition conferences. These

reports and presentations were my first experience arguing with quantitative evidence since I had written up cookbook labs in first-year college physics. I learned it took a lot of examining data to see where important trends lay and then to find the best tables and figures to highlight the findings. I had to overcome the first temptation to present the results narratively, where they would be hard to follow. While graphic display skills were then taught in undergraduate technical writing courses and social scientists early became familiar with them, to me with my humanities training, they were novel. Then I had the challenge of presenting these quantitative findings persuasively to humanities audiences.

These survey findings gave further impetus to my emerging writing about reading pedagogy. I experimented with assignments that would engage students in greater detail and depth with readings and develop their thinking in response. While composition journals had discussed readings as sources of content or springboards for thinking, the advocacy was general with few activities and procedures and little that would lead students to more careful reading. Similarly, textbooks offered little useful advice on creating a more dynamic and careful interaction with reading. Even anthologies of essays offered little beyond some content comprehension questions and general prompts for response. Only a few books like Ronald Primeau's *Writing in the Margin* (1976) started to address seriously how to build detailed response. For pedagogy to create more careful reading, I had to go back to Mortimer Adler's 1940 book, *How to Read a Book*, I. A. Richards' 1942 response, *How to Read a Page*, and Richard Altick's 1946 *Preface to Critical Reading*. Much earlier in the first decades of the century a number of books carried paraphrase and summary exercises, though without much in the way of instruction.

From the few hints in these books and several years of classroom experimentation, I developed a sequence of tasks combining the newly emergent process approach with these earlier methods of writing about reading. The sequence alternated response writing with writing tasks that attended closely to the meaning, structure, and argument of their readings. These led to essays of analysis, evaluation, and applying the ideas in readings to observations and experiences. From writing about a single text, assignments moved to synthesis of multiple sources and then developing arguments from that synthesis. This sequence gave focus and purpose to the research paper as a culmination of engagement with reading.

## Learning to Write Innovative Textbooks

At that time, and still to some extent today, one of the most effective ways to share pedagogical ideas in composition was through a textbook. Houghton Mifflin supported the concept of the pedagogy I had been working on and offered me a contract. The first edition of *The Informed Writer* appeared with a 1981 copyright (Bazerman, 1981a). I also wrote a rationale for the pedagogy appearing in *College English* in 1980: "A Relationship Between Reading and Writing: The Conversational Model" (Bazerman, 1980b). During the life of the book (the fifth and last

edition appeared in 1995), the book was by far the better vehicle for sharing the pedagogy than the article. Total sales across all the editions was around 300,000 (not including the used book market), but the article was only sporadically cited until after 2005. Parts of the pedagogy soon started working their way into other textbooks without citation (as is common in textbooks) including the general idea of writing from sources and the synthesis essay being a significant and challenging intellectual task. The essay of synthesis also was to become a substantial focus of research, beginning with the work of Nancy Nelson Spivey (Spivey, 1984). As I initially hoped, working with the assignments in classrooms gave teachers a more persuasive experience of the pedagogy than a theoretical presentation, as they saw what students were capable of accomplishing with some guidance. For the students, the practices of writing about reading have now been naturalized into taken-for-granted academic activities.

Coming up with the sequence of chapters and activities was a challenge addressed over years, through repeated iterations in my classrooms, with the last few iterations being field testing of the manuscript. In writing and revising the book I found it a challenge to break down more complex and unfamiliar skills into simple explanations and instructions. I learned to rely on extended illustrations of student processes and analyses of their products to form major components of the chapters. I also had to solve the problem of selecting accessible, yet engaging and challenging materials that would help students experience the serious intellectual world of the university at the same time as they would recognize the relevance to their lives. Students entering college, I had learned in my teaching, were often motivated by feeling they were entering something very different from high school, a world of more serious inquiry and thought. Yet many students also needed to see how these new ideas were meaningful and not just “academic abstractions” in the worst sense. The book needed to excite students to engage in the hard but rewarding work of reading and writing they would be facing in the university. While the sequence of activities set up the backbone of the book, this rhetorical motive drove the energy of the chapters.

In the late 1970s, as I was writing the first edition of *The Informed Writer*, the WAC movement began growing. In subsequent editions I began to address disciplinary differences. I also started to think about different disciplines in terms of written language communities, as a metaphoric extension of the linguistic concept of spoken language communities, used to identify geographically localized dialect differences in pronunciation, lexical items, and grammatical features. I presented a paper with the title “Written Language Communities,” at the 4C’s in the spring of 1979, trying to make the concept of community apply, but I was already uneasy with it as not subtle or differentiated enough to characterize the multiple social positions and interpretive stances of the various individuals participating in disciplinary discussions. I drew on contrast cases to indicate the complexity and subtlety in traditions and the different roles different participants, readers and writers, might take. Drawing on the pedagogy I was developing, I tried to formulate how readers’

interpretations, responses, and actions identified the consequences and thus the practical meaning of texts. Further, because writers design their texts anticipating audience response, their social orientation of writers went beyond a naturalized use of the dialect that they grew up in and accommodated toward.

In thinking through the complexity of the social interactions mediated by writing, I was soon to reject the term “communities” as not specific enough about the social relations and activities realized and organized through texts. I was trying to find a vocabulary to describe social interaction of writing and how texts form context for each other, reaching towards ideas of intertextuality, genre, and activity systems—but I wasn’t yet there. At the same conference, however, I met Carolyn Miller and heard her first presentation on genre from her dissertation in progress. I found her characterization of genre and its mechanisms for formulation, emergence, and replication to be powerfully clear and precise. Further, she showed specific linkages between rhetorical and sociological theory, with some implications for cognition. This conjunction between sociology and rhetoric allowed me to bring together several tracks of my thinking at that time. Later I would fold this into a larger theory of activity.

The writing problem I was working with was finding the right conceptual term. An inexact term could lead to a lack of clarity and impede analysis, obscuring phenomena. It also required more words to talk around a phenomenon that was not yet grasped firmly<sup>5</sup>. But the right terms could bring the phenomena and repeated processes into focus, leading to further inquiries, evidence, and discoveries. This growing awareness of the value of correct terms drove my desire to develop formulations I could stand behind with precision. Although I started avoiding the term *community* except when I found it narrowly appropriate, I saw many other people using the term to recognize the sociality of writing. I did not, however, enter into a terminological argument at that time, because I was glad at least they were starting to take a social view of writing processes. Nonetheless, in my own work, I sought a more sociologically precise and complex set of terms to elaborate the social positioning of writing.

As I gained some clarity on the different roles and activities people took within disciplinary work, I saw that students in most undergraduate courses were not expected to write in the genres of professional publication, although they were often expected to read professional disciplinary texts that they would then write about in student genres. They would need to understand disciplinary texts, though not write them<sup>6</sup>. Further, I was finding that although most disciplines had

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5. I found Yehuda Elkhana (1974) particularly clarifying on this problem as he recounts the conceptual difficulties incurred in 19<sup>th</sup> century physics by different terms used before energy and how this impeded discovery of the concept of conservation of energy.

6. Cheryl Geisler’s work on students’ authorial stances and purposes in a philosophy course was particularly provocative in helping me see this. She found that students approached texts in a course on ethics in practical ways to help them deal with issues in

distinctive names attached to departments, professional organizations, conferences and journals, yet multiple kinds of writing appeared within each, and that some writing in one discipline resembled writing in quite different disciplines. So while I was coming to appreciate the value of genre to understand readers' expectations, I was also seeing genre as not stable enough to dictate formal templates, nor did I see genres mapping crisply onto the boundaries of disciplines. Academic writing was a complicated landscape about which we did not know enough to make simple generalizations that would not be misleading to undergraduates. Even the traditional distinctions of humanities, social sciences, and hard sciences obscured the variety within and across the fields. So rather than following a simple taxonomy of disciplines or assuming that each discipline had a clear uniformity, I looked to the kind of evidence collected, displayed, and argued from in each text. A textual logic followed from whether fields used historical evidence, contemporary evidence from actual events, or evidence from designed/experimental events. If, alternatively, texts talked mostly about ideas theoretically, in relation to the ideas of other authors, they followed another logic. I presented this approach to evidentiary differences in disciplinary texts in the third edition of the *Informed Writer* appearing in 1989. Since I thought students would be more expected to read such disciplinary texts and perhaps write about them, but not to produce them, I focused on making sense of and discussing disciplinary texts. I added a subtitle to the book to indicate the engagement with disciplinary writing: *Using Sources in the Disciplines*. This question of production and use of evidence in different disciplines for me turned into an enduring and as yet not fully resolved research question, being implicit in many of my studies to follow, and more explicit in some recent ones (see Chapter 28).

In visiting campuses that were using *The Informed Writer*, I was shocked to see how the teachers' manual was used in TA training and standardized course syllabi. What I had written at my desk at home as some preliminary ideas to seed local creativity had turned into a set of requirements to be enacted by contingent employees. This drove home to me that consequences of writing existed in the uptake, over which I had little control. After the text left my desk, it belonged to the readers to understand and use as they would. As a writer, this increased my sense of responsibility for being as careful as I could in what I offered. This recognition ultimately would lead me to activity theory<sup>7</sup>, which in turn led me to view classrooms as communicative activity systems within particular constraints and arrangements and using various tools, such as textbooks.

I followed up on these realizations in a 1989 anthology, *The Informed Reader*, which helped guide students into more in depth reading in the disciplines. The

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their lives instead of in the abstract puzzle solving way of the professional philosophers (Geisler, 1994).

7. I was greatly influenced by Yrjö Engeström whose work I first became familiar with at a conference in 1992.

readings were organized around major issues from each disciplinary area that might be of potential interest to students—the literary canon (literary study), upward mobility (sociology and history), memory (psychology), productivity (business), greenhouse effect and climate change (earth sciences), nuclear power safety (physics and engineering), and artificial intelligence (interdisciplinary). From a perspective of more than three decades later, I am surprised how several topics remain of current importance.

This anthology also presented some issues of writing design. First, was the challenge of leading students from their non-expert positions into engaging with specialized disciplinary texts. The article clusters were organized to start with more general public statements, such as newspaper and magazine articles, setting up the importance of the issues and providing some basic terms and explanations. The selections then moved to more information heavy presentations such as from textbooks, then finally to core disciplinary articles. By the time students worked through the earlier readings they were prepared to understand the importance and content of more specialized texts.

A second challenge was to use the textbook apparatus to scaffold deeper engagement—in understanding, in critical engagement and application, and in a technical understanding of how the text was put together. I built on the strategies I had used in the more basic *Reading Skills Handbooks*, but went further in guiding students to deeper readings. Initial support came through headnotes and glosses, but deeper engagement was guided by the exercise activities. The exercises for each selection also introduced a specific rhetorical or stylistic issue which the students had to analyze through annotating the text, and then answering analytic questions using the evidence from the annotations. This analysis aimed to reveal in detail what writing choices were made and why. Finally, more general essay questions for each article and each section would allow students to consider the meaning and importance of the readings in relation to their own perceptions and interests. These sequenced classroom activities were designed to have students recognize the value of well-researched information, to be able to incorporate research grounded articles into their writing, and to give them the confidence to be able to read and respond to the disciplinary texts they would encounter in their other courses.

In 1997 I published another textbook, *Involved*, on similar principles, but incorporating my continuing research and theorizing. This book empowered students to analyze the activity systems within the classrooms they would encounter, so that their writing would successfully meet the learning intentions and expectations of the course. The book asked students to consider the logic of their classes and how the readings, activities, and lectures fit together, so they could analyze what their assignments needed to accomplish, what constraints and expectations would frame the evaluation of their assignments, what resources they had available, and ultimately how these tasks could satisfy their own interests and curiosities. The advice and activities asked students to develop their own

perspectives, evaluations, and thoughts in response to course materials and their assigned tasks. The course ended with investigation in archives and field. The book also added guidance and activities to foster complexity of reasoning and problem solving, which would allow them to do higher quality work, revealing the value and rewards of serious inquiry into difficult problems.

## Learning From Textbook Writing and Working with Textbook Publishers

The writing of textbooks had many consequences for my own development as a writer. I developed an authoritative and direct expository style. I sorted out what was important to discuss and what was digressive. I considered how to lead readers from a simple explanation of concepts and practices to more nuanced complex understanding. I learned how to realize concepts in examples and practical activities that would make concepts alive. I learned how to present related concepts systematically and progressively over chapters. I became more adept at using subheadings (a standard textbook practice) to guide the readers' understanding of the sequence of thoughts. Perhaps most, I advanced my sense of how to use my writing dialogically to prompt students' own productions and thoughts, by setting up situations, materials, and questions to pose puzzles for students to work through in their writing.

Working on textbooks also gave me a fuller sense of published, distributed writing as complexly collaborative. Textbooks are corporate, marketable, sellable products. A successful product, however, has to be something that teachers could use and would integrate with their own approaches and methods, supporting them in their classroom work. And then it would have to be successful with students in leading them to the kind of learning teachers valued. These ends were different than the typical academic work that sought to contribute to the knowledge of a field and possibly be intellectually or emotionally intriguing. Textbook editors (and their sales and reviewer networks) could identify projects that would meet classroom needs and could provide support to the textbook's development, but they could also be obstacles, especially if editors were switched part way through a project. Disagreements with editors who understood and believed in the book's concept could be quite productive. Disagreements with editors who did not believe in or understand the project could be harmful, leading to a tension, even incoherence, in the final book. Sometimes, however, even these tensions could lead to some creative invention to speak to editors' concerns, while maintaining the book's vision. A sales force that understood the book could locate places where the book would prosper, but the book could wither if the sales force could not see what the book could accomplish and could not present it appropriately to textbook committees and teachers.

Extensive reviewing could be helpful directly—even when it seemed misguided or based on misreading. Reviews forced me to ask how the text could have



avoided the misunderstanding, or how I could have better supported the book's classroom usefulness. If one reader had these problems, others would also likely have them. Reviews also could identify who the book would appeal to: the book was not for everyone.

While my pedagogy emerged out of my specific teaching experiences and the discussions among colleagues within City University of New York, the opportunity to elaborate these ideas in textbooks and the interaction with other writing programs that supported further development was dependent on a nationally organized publishing industry, its economics and corporate structures, the structure of the textbook markets, and the strategies of the industry to address the markets. In some ways authors are like the front person in a band; you need a lot of people on stage, backstage, and in the business office all aligned to deliver something in the name of the lead singer. So learning to write textbooks also meant learning to produce content that fit within the larger structures, expectations, and needs of the industry, including marketing and sales.

When Harvey Wiener invited me to join him on the *English Skills Handbook* series, the books were already contracted with Houghton Mifflin, where the books stayed through most of their editions and versions. Because of the positive relationship formed with Houghton Mifflin, I stayed with them for my ensuing projects. At that time, it was a moderately-sized, privately-held, independent company, with a reputation for educational quality. The reputation of its educational division built upon the publisher's history of eminent books on literary and social issues, going back to the middle of the nineteenth century. It was one of a group of independent publishers that were known to share literary and academic values and were a recognized part of an educated national culture.

Even more fundamentally, in the United States, unlike in some other countries, there was no national curriculum, textbook policy, or governmental production. Primary and secondary purchases were typically made at the school or district level, though within state policy and parameters. Higher education was even less regulated with textbook decisions made largely by the individual instructor, or for large multi-section courses, by a department or departmental committee. Some disciplines such as chemistry are highly standardized in the expectations for their basic courses through professional organizations, following developments in the field. Writing courses are less regulated, but are often guided by traditional expectations. Departmental decisions were common for required writing courses, especially when there were large numbers of contingent or new instructors, or where there were campus pressures for common expectations and standards, as first year required courses were often seen as a service to the campus as a whole. Further, since these courses were often administered through English Literature departments, literary values influenced what was seen as good writing to be encouraged. Accordingly, publishers were motivated to contract and produce books that appealed to broadly shared, traditional expectations, attractive for larger adoptions at bigger schools. As a result, the composition market tended

to be conservative, although a book gained by having noticeable distinctiveness to make it more attractive than similar alternatives.

The three standard kinds of books used within writing courses had been stabilized as handbooks, rhetorics, and anthologies. Handbooks were basic references presenting standards and expectations for correctness, with minimal instruction or exercises. Rhetorics provided overt teaching material aimed at developing skills, through introducing writing concepts, providing examples, and offering activities. Anthologies provided readings for discussion, analysis, and models, whether organized around themes, text types or other principles. Some anthologies were literary, others expository, others focusing on civic, social, or personal issues. Because of the book resale market and students' practices of selling books when they were done with courses, publishers were motivated to produce new editions of successful books every few years in order to drive the older editions off the market. This then created the need for a certain amount of ostensible novelty, and perhaps some real innovation in response to what was learned from the use of the earlier editions, though not enough to turn off users of previous editions.

Books were produced for the most common patterns of courses. Required writing courses tended to be for one or two terms within the first year, with sometimes remedial courses for students identified as needing preliminary work. When there was a required two-term sequence, the second often included a required library research paper. This matched the curricular sequence at Baruch, so my teaching matched well with the structure of the market.

*The English Skills Handbook* fit a clear niche in this market, adopting the standard form of handbooks which set basic expectations, but addressed to the growing part of the market for developmental courses, through simpler, less technical explanations. Further it placed within that format reading instruction, often needed by developmental students, who were now being admitted under open admissions and similar programs. As developmental reading courses were most often distinct from writing courses, even taught in different departments, the books prospered better once split into separate writing and reading books.

On the other hand, some writing courses were taught by people with long experience and some degree of autonomy as semi-permanent lecturers or tenured faculty members. This then created within the market the potential for more original products, appealing to more sophisticated or evolving ideas of writing instruction. Anthologies, though fairly stable in formats, could express novelty in selections and organization. Rhetorics, however, had the most flexibility to offer new modes and topics of teaching. These niche opportunities increased as the field became professionalized and research and graduate degrees emerged, which happened during the life-cycle of my textbooks. Sometimes more trained and confident instructors also gained control of the committee decision making processes, creating possibilities of more novel books to gain larger adoptions.

The more novel pedagogies of *The Informed Writer* and *Involved* found this more creative space for innovation within rhetorics. Over five editions *The*

*Informed Writer* evolved and created a new kind of approach to composition about writing with sources and writing for disciplines, with books by other authors consequently taking up its general approach. As well, aspects of the approach were integrated into books with more comprehensive approaches and some anthologies. The innovations of *Involved*, however, were not taken up and so it did not have a wide impact on teaching. By the time *Involved* appeared, as well, the publishing industry had changed. Textbook publishers were merging and being bought up, to be part of large corporate enterprises, publicly held and driven more by corporate culture with the need for strong quarterly earnings rather than being part of educational, academic culture. This created greater pressures for standardized products with larger markets and adoptions. More boutique innovative products were not marketed as vigorously.