Chapter 24. Elaborating the Theory: Finding a Point to Stand On

Writing the theoretical introduction in *Constructing Experience* was only a first gesture towards a more coherent and elaborated theory. As I was seeing it to press, I continued writing essays and making presentations, working out various theoretical problems. A first question for me was why even write theory. Within that volume I had included a couple of earlier essays that started to formulate an answer. In a 1990 essay for a volume on responding to student writing, I used my emerging theories to understand some practical problems of teaching, such as what happened interactionally when I responded to student writing (Bazerman, 1990d). The following year in a festschrift for James Kinneavy, I discussed how he wanted to develop a framework to guide teaching and improve student writing (Bazerman, 1991d). Elsewhere, I considered how classroom interactions were socially constructed by teachers' and students' moment-by-moment responses within institutional arrangements and interests (Bazerman, 1992f). This reframing of student-teacher interactions was part of my emerging understanding that genres were only one aspect of the typifications that comprised the social arrangements within which activities and texts emerged, not only in the classroom, but throughout society. If we were to teach writing and improve students' choices as writers, we need to develop a deeper understanding of what writing was and did, and how it has emerged, changed, and differentiated within the different spheres of life.

The protean and emergent nature of the typifications at play in writing led me to consider what even constituted a moment and how this was negotiated by participants ("Whose Moment?" delivered as a conference paper around 1991, and published a chapter in *Constructing Experience* in 1994). Structurationist ideas of social organization helped me formulate how texts contributed to emergently quasi-stabilized social arrangements, roles, and available actions, leading to my chapter on Genre Systems (Bazerman, 1994d), and then to explain how genre and genre systems created "Habitats for Social Action" (delivered in 1994, but not published until Bazerman, 2004f). In working on Edison, I considered patents and intellectual ownership as emerging objects (Bazerman, 1993h & 1997h). At about this time I also saw how other regulated and institutionalized documentary systems provided structured places for action; the example of the U.S. income tax system became paradigmatic for me of an emergent and changing documentary system that, nonetheless, at each moment seemed tightly strung through institutionalized structures and regulations (Bazerman, 1999d). A number of other articles elaborated and applied these ideas to writing in disciplines and professions. Over the next few years, I drew on David Russell's formulations of activity systems (Russell, 1994), and I collaborated with him on a couple of collections

that encouraged work in a similar vein (Russell & Bazerman, 1997i; Bazerman & Russell, 2003g).

Another confirmation of this socio-historic view of genre and activity systems came when I was asked to contribute to a collection on letters. I had first written about scientific letters as the basis for the scientific article in *Shaping Written Knowledge*, but I kept coming across other instances where letters had a formative role in the emergence of other genres. As I put the cases together and examined them more closely, I saw a repeated pattern. The explicit sociality of letters—identifying author, recipients, date, location of sending, affiliation and cordiality gestures, and specificity of purpose or request—mediated specific interactions. With repetition and time, the sociality became more implicit or stylized within emergent genre conventions. As the genres signaled recognizable social inter-actions, the texts shed socially-identifying features of letters to foreground the specific information needed within the now typified transaction. Institutional arrangements came to rely on the specialized genres, and the genres became fur-ther stylized as their meaning became sedimented within the transactions of the organizations. Decrees of kings became stylized into orders, laws, and commu-niques. Commercial letters gave rise to memos, reports, and order forms. Finan-cial instructions to banks became checks and paper money, and now digitized electronic transfers. And so on, through many spheres. Of course, some written genres had different origins, such as transcriptions of public speeches, but the stylization of letters has been one of the robust means by which forms of writ-ing became meaningful social documents. This process revealed how genres had recognizable social bases and became infrastructural for institutions that stretch across distances and times (Bazerman, 2000b).

Seeing literate action within mutable but quasi-stable genres and social struc-tures also led me to rethink rhetoric, which had become a standard theoretical frame for much of writing studies in the US I did see writers acting rhetorically as they attempted to carry out their interests and communicative needs strategically within specific situations, but rhetorical theorists had tended to present rhetoric through a limited number of concepts which they applied universally—while my theory was all about changing genres, changing social arrangements, and hu-man invention. Since the 1970s I had resisted seeing everything as an argument, and saw that writers often engaged in strategic, planful text production with no intent to argue. Over time, I saw more clearly how the terms and situations of traditional rhetorical thinking had derived from the field's origins in oratori-cal performance in the classical agora and then later in the Christian pulpit. I, therefore, had distanced myself from the term rhetoric, seeing rhetoric as only a special set of historically and institutionally limited cases (see the critique in Ba-zerman & Russell, 1994e). I tried then to formulate an alternative view of rhetoric (Bazerman, 1993c), but got no purchase from rhetorical theorists and scholars, not even a counter-argument or a passing riposte or rejection. While still whis-tling in the wind, I called for a new theory of rhetoric based on writing and the

social situations made possible by writing (Bazerman, 1997e, 1999d, 2000c). I still hoped, optimistically, that more fully articulated theory of rhetoric, grounded in the problematics of writing, might be useful and of interest to some in writing studies and the teaching of writing.

A Plan for Coherence

By the mid 1990s I started taking notes and drawing up outlines towards a theory book, tentatively titled *Becoming*, to indicate the historical sweep of emergent literate social systems, genre options, and communicative resources available to a writer, as well as the way the literate world provides a field for the development of the individual, across the lifespan. I wanted to combine this broad theoretical picture with practical guidance to writers who wanted to understand more deeply what they were doing, so they could act more creatively and effectively. I was trying to juggle a coherent and readable account that would make intuitive sense to writers and teachers with the multi-disciplinary theories and research that would elaborate the reasoning and evidence. That was a lot of different sized and shaped items to juggle, some with sharp edges. At the end of 1997, as I was revising the Edison book, I realized a strategy of separating the theory project into two volumes might resolve the tension between the practical and theoretical goals. The first volume would be a shorter (perhaps 100 pages), practical rhetoric for writers and teachers that would offer direct, though sophisticated, advice with only enough discussion of the work of others to make the concepts intelligible. The second volume would at greater length (perhaps three times the length of the first) elaborate all the concepts in the theory and would discuss the full interdisciplinary resources I would draw on; it would have fuller documentation. A decade and a half later I completed two books following that basic plan, with the first volume being about 165 pages, though the second volume was mercifully much shorter than I had imagined, only about thirty percent longer than the first. The works cited list of the second, however, was about eight times the length of the first volume (Bazerman, 2013c, 2013d).

    In 1997, I outlined both volumes and opened up separate computer files for each of the proposed chapters, placing notes in each to identify what topics might be covered and how. I also started to draft a few of the earlier chapters. File names and chapter organization changed as the books evolved, but most of the topics in the original outline found their place in the final books. I had hoped that the tables of contents of the two volumes would be parallel, with each chapter of the rhetoric being explained in a shadow theoretical chapter. I initially started to work on the two books in tandem, working on the matching practical and theoretical chapters at the same time. The logic of explaining and elaborating the theories from different disciplines and perspectives, however, pulled me in different directions in the two books. Consequently, the outlines of the two started to diverge, as did the writing of the chapters. Nonetheless, in

the final version the concepts in each are mirrored in the other, though across different chapters. I provide a map of the correspondences in the introduction of the second volume.

The volumes took so long to write in part because I was working on other things, including the *Handbook of Research on Writing*, appearing in 2008, which helped me think through the scope of the field I was drawing on (see chapter 25). I wanted to let the ideas for the theory books cook slowly, examining the relevant literatures carefully, and being precise in my formulations. I was aware that this would be the synthesis and culmination of much of my inquiry over the years, as I was entering my sixties in 2005. The theory volumes appeared just as I was turning 68. I did not expect to have such a long life, as my father died at age 48 in 1965, my mother at age 58 in 1974, and my brother, my only sib, at age 63 in 2004. I had long been self-conscious about mortality and the necessity of getting things done while I could. But I also wanted to get things done right.

I had the formulations, examples, and sequences of reasoning for a number of the early chapters in both volumes well worked out as I had been writing and talking about the ideas in them for years. I also had been discussing in classes and publications a number of the authors and texts that had influenced the development of the ideas. Still, I had to reread the relevant texts and commentaries carefully to identify the aspects of those works important for my presentation. As these resources were interdisciplinary and often not explicitly related to writing, I needed to select how much to tell about them in the most relevant way and to explain exactly how I was using those ideas and why. Meeting these challenges was well within the kinds of writing I had been doing about those materials. I was, nonetheless, surprised by insights that came when I started articulating those ideas and sequencing them to unfold their relationship. Carefulness and constant revision kept the process slow.

Later chapters in the first, practical book, however, required greater problem solving and new ways of formulating topics that had long been part of writing studies. Topics such as motivation, strategics, invention, meaning and representation, organization, style, and processes were obviously of continuing importance to writing, but I had a different perspective and way of talking about them. Traditionally these were seen primarily in relation to the individual writer and the production of individual texts, with some attention to the audience. I needed to place these within larger social systems and more dynamically unfolding sequences of texts and histories of cultural practices. Even psychological elements of writing needed to be reframed within this larger socio-historical perspective.

The second, theory book required me to revisit interdisciplinary domains at greater length and greater detail. The early chapters required a rearticulation of my major influences from cultural psychology, phenomenological sociology, and interdisciplinary pragmatic social sciences. The major prior discussions of these authors had been framed within the projects of other disciplines, but I needed to reframe them from the perspective of writing. In further chapters I needed

to discuss other disciplinary traditions which I saw as relevant to writing, but through the framework of the three traditions which lay behind my approach. This meant I needed a double reinterpretation of those traditions—seeing them as sociocultural and then applied to writing.

Other chapters took even longer to work out my perspective. I particularly had a problem with the linguistics chapter, even though (or perhaps because) linguistics seemed so close to writing studies. Writers of course use language and rely on psycholinguistic processes. Even more proximate to writing studies, applied linguistics included the teaching of second language writing in its portfolio, and is in many countries outside the US the main disciplinary home of writing education. Over the years I had become familiar with a number of varieties of linguistics and applied linguistics, and found a number of different approaches useful practically and theoretically. But I had found none of them fully satisfactory or consistent with the views I had been developing about writing. It took me years to puzzle through exactly where the points of connection and difference were, and what points I wanted to make that would clarify my theoretical position without becoming unnecessarily quarrelsome.

One difficulty was that linguistics over the last century has tended to see spoken language as more "natural" and fundamental, with written language as epiphenomenal and filtered through normative systems of schooling, publication, and politically dominant dialects. I understood how the interest in spoken language made sense given that humans spoke long before they began to write, that recording technologies in the twentieth century increased convenient access to spoken data, and that linguistics coordinately moved to description from prescription. Nonetheless writing studies needed an understanding of language applicable to writing. Another core challenge was to distinguish between applied linguistics approaches to writing which placed language forms at the center of writing instruction and writing-centered approaches that saw writing as the socially situated production of meaningful, effective texts to mediate shared social understandings.

A further difficulty was that utterance-based linguistic and semiotic approaches which were most theoretically compatible with my work—associated with Bakhtin and Volosinov, but also implied in the work of their contemporary Vygotsky—had not yet been and might never be brought into the canonical form of a quasi-stable description of language, which still remained a central motivating task for most linguistics systems. To this day, utterance-based linguistics serves mostly to critique the limits of more traditional language systems. Even functional linguistics was more a program than a system, and the most systematized version of functional linguistics—Hallidayan Systemic Functional linguistics I found to be caught between its theoretical recognition of the social fluidity of language and its linguistic motive to produce a language system. I have great respect for SFL and find many of its concepts and concrete linguistic findings of great value for writing, but I still cannot adopt it as a fully adequate system.

Despite my lack of fundamental commitment to any linguistic system, I understand how writing practices and institutions have created the impulse, need, and use for language systems, and I see systematization of language as part of the process, growth, and instruction of writing. Language systems are necessary tools for writers to negotiate alignment between writers and readers, particularly as texts travel across space and time. But I see no grammar or linguistics system as absolute or foundational—though some would want to ground language in psychology and the brain, the nature of the sign, or physiology. While each of these dimensions may contribute to and constrain the languages we use, I do not see any of them as foundationally determinative. Insofar as I see anything as constant, it is the social processes by which people negotiate meaning well enough to carry out their practical purposes.

My problem in writing this chapter was to adopt an appropriate stance that would recognize and respect the value of various branches of linguistics and discuss their important role in writing without requiring me to advocate for any one system. Ultimately, I adopted the stance of examining why writing throughout its history relied on and motivated the systematization of language. This then allowed me to consider how different linguistic systems were of various use to writing. Of all the unorthodox views that I presented in those two volumes, my view of language may be least persuasive, not because I am any less persuaded myself or less committed to it, but because the many committed adherents of different systems will not be happy with my lack of adherence to any of them. My views might have few natural allies within any branch of linguistics.

A Note on Technology and Process

I want to end this chapter with a note on my drafting practices which had developed over the years since I had begun writing on a Kaypro II computer around 1983, but actually grew out of earlier practices from the days of typewriters. Prior to personal computers, but after I started to pay attention to writing processes, I sketched out ideas on notepads to get my thoughts down, but then wrote my first full drafts (either by hand or typed) rarely referring to the notes. Then I would revise from those drafts, typing a final clean copy. When I first began writing on desktop computers with the early cumbersome programs, requiring many formatting codes, such as Wordstar, I continued to free-write and sketch ideas on notepads. But when I switched to Apple computers and I first encountered what was then called WYSIWYG (What you see is what you get) formatting, I started writing my initial notes directly onto the computer. When I was ready to write a full draft, I would start typing at the top of the file, pushing my earlier notes and sketches down to the bottom as my text lengthened. Sometimes when I felt that I had covered topics I erased the related material at the bottom of the file. When I felt I was losing the direction in my draft I would outline what I had done to that point and/or introduce subheadings to structure the argument. Even when doing

my interim outlines, I still usually would not refer to my notes now at the end of the file, as they had served just to bring all the thoughts and material I wanted to discuss to mind and helped me order them. At most I would skim those notes and sketches to see whether I had dropped any topic, information, or strong formulations, but I almost always found I had indeed covered everything I had intended and said it better the second time around. Then I would copy the text in a clean file and delete all the excess at the bottom. I would use this new file to revise, rework, and clean up.

The extensive synthesis and thinking through of the implications of the material for these theory books, however, put even more pressure on the idea sketching process. For this pair of books, I in fact often used chapter drafts themselves as discovery documents, getting everything down in them and then abandoning the drafts when I started afresh to put the material together in what I thought a more effective way. It is only when I felt I had close to a satisfactory draft that I would begin intensive revision of existing text.

Figure 24.1. Generations of my writing technologies