placed, copy added. This issue of forum would consist of a
collection of articles by theorists and another collection by
teachers — each a complement to the other on the complex
relationships of talking and writing.

The revised plan suggested at least one essay that would
fuse theoretical and practical concerns in one scholar-
teacher’s experience: Professor Penelope Eckert, a linguist
in the Anthropology Department at The University of
Michigan, has been conducting research on spoken lan-
guage in schools in Southeastern Michigan. And she agreed,
in spite of an imminent deadline for publication, to share her
findings with forum’s readers (Hedging the Standard En-
ish Bet, p. 7)

Now, as I read the final copy of this issue, I remember the
faces of students to whom I have said: “This is a fine paper.
It was worth all those revisions. Wasn’t it?”

Talk to Text

Patricia L. Stock

For some time, I have self-consciously avoided the language
currently used by many theorists and teachers of writing to
describe the processes of composition to themselves and
their students. I have avoided their language because it is
made of metaphors inappropriate to my notion of the act of
writing. I believe that to write is to engage in a particularly
human — potentially humane — enterprise. Therefore, it is
uncomfortable for me to conceive of writing in martial lan-
guage — with such labels as tactics, strategies, and attack
skills; or in the lexicon of computer technology — reader-
based, writer-based, input, or feedback, and bottom lines;
or even with the contractual and product-labelling terms of
business and industry.

I am particularly unsettled by these metaphors of our time
because as a student and teacher of language and literacy, I
respect the power of the symbol system which language is.
The words we use to describe writing to our students
suggest to them the kind of activity we believe writing to be.
Our words are not merely audible or visible signs. They are
not substitutes for concrete objects or events or procedures
— such as the smoke which represents fire; or the
marker[2], which indicates the contour of the road; or the
name “Patches,” which is herself to my cat. That is to say,
words are not terms associated in one-to-one correspon-
dence to what they concretely signify. Rather, the words we
use are what Suzanne Langer calls “symbols,” or “proxies
for their objects” or “vehicles for the conception of ob-
jects” (Langer, p. 45). The language of our descriptions of
the acts of writing is rich in latent meanings. If we suggest to
our students that they “develop writing strategies” or “at-
tack writing problems,” we lead them to regard the acts of
writing as, if not militaristic and combative, at least com-
petitive, adversarial. The writing itself is the enemy to be
defeated. If we suggest that their prose be “reader-based”
or “writer-based,” we suggest that they should strive for
products much like computer print-outs, the result of or-
derly programmed, step-by-step procedures. If we refer to
their products we imply that their work is the end result of a
series of assembly-line procedure calling for fulfillment of
the specs.

Consequently, I find it more comfortable to conceive of
writing in self-consciously human metaphors — in terms of
voice and vision. I understand that I describe metaphor-
ically when I suggest: To write is to commit one of the many
voices each of us possesses to the page and thereby to see
one’s words graphically. My metaphors shape my practices
even as my epistemology shapes my metaphors. For example,
I ask my inexperienced students to talk about their as-
signments for my class with each other, with me, and with
other students outside of our class to whom I introduce each
of them at the beginning of the semester. I also ask my stu-
dents to write a letter about each assignment to their out-
of-class peers and to meet with those students to discuss
each assignment before they write their first drafts of the as-
signment for classmates. Having talked with classmates
about their writing, my students revise their drafts for a
conference with me. They prepare their final text only after
this weekly multi-staged process of talking-writing-
writing-talking. While students are writing and talking to
one another about assignments, they are also writing in their
journals about a variety of tasks associated with the assign-
ments. I ask them to reflect upon primary and secondary research they
have done for the assignment (Record an experience; react
to readings, and so on). The tasks I ask my students to per-
form as they prepare a text are a rhetorical statement on my
part: All uses of natural language — speaking, listening, and
reading — can serve writers as they shape texts. Metaphori-
cally and practically I ask my students to shape their voices
upon the page as they talk, read, listen, and write their way
to effective texts.