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Textual Dynamics of the Professions: Historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities, edited Charles Bazerman and James Paradis

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A few years ago, at the height of perestroika and before the break-up of the U.S.S.R, the following witticism was reportedly making the rounds in the Soviet Union: “It is difficult to have a revolution without changing anything at all.”

*Textual Dynamics*, according to its editors, “explor[es] the textual side of social construction” (4) in the professions and does so thematically, with the editors grouping articles “into three closely related themes identified as (1) textual construction of the professions, (2) the dynamics of discourse communities, and (3) the operational force of texts” (5). As such, *Textual Dynamics* promises to be revolutionary insofar as it participates in the rhetorical turn to overthrow modernist doctrine: textuality constitutes professions rather than reflects them, independent discourse communities constitute a diverse confederation of epistemologies, and discourse itself constitutes a powerful force that defines the practice of the professions as well as the praxis of the world at large.

But how dynamic is *Textual Dynamics*! What dynamus, what capability, is actualized? Is this a book that tries to have its revolution and eat it too? Does it embody the difficulty of a revolution that sets out to change nothing?

To read the book in a positive light, we can say that the revolution has already occurred. In Kuhn’s terms, the paradigm has already shifted—the rhetorical turn has turned irrevocably—and *Textual Dynamics* becomes a model work of normal science. With the research agenda set and focused and the basic hypotheses articulated in the thematic headings of the book, the individual contributions engage in a variety of particulars, both methodologically and substantively.

Under the first heading, “The Textual Construction of the Professions,” are six chapters, where we move across fields as diverse as literary criticism (Fahnestock and Secor), molecular biology (Myers), and management theory (Stewart); and where we move through history with the letter writing of medieval institutions—class, church, school—(Perelman), with Priestley’s eighteenth-century investigation of the *History and Present State of Electricity* (Bazerman), and with “Scientific Rhetoric in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” (Zappen). Four chapters constitute part two: “Toward a Sociocognitive Model of Literacy: Constructing Mental Models in a Philosophical Conversation” (Geisler), “Social Context and Socially Constructed Texts: The Initiation of a Graduate Student into a Writing Research Community” (Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman), “Meaning Attribution in Ambiguous Texts in Sociology” (Schwegler and Shamoon), and “Texts in Oral Context: The ‘Transmission’ of Jury Instructions in an Indiana
Trial" (Stygall). This part of Textual Dynamics emphasizes the role discourse plays in shaping members of professional discourse communities: learning to talk the talk is absolutely essential for learning to walk the walk.

In the third part of Textual Dynamics, “The Operational Force of Texts,” discourse becomes a powerful agent itself, operating upon us through the agency of professions. There are five chapters in this part: “Text and Action: The Operator’s Manual in Context and in Court” (Paradis), “Understanding Failures in Organizational Discourse: The Accident at Three Mile Island and the Shuttle Challenger Disaster” (Herndl, Fennell, and Miller), “Creating a Text/Creating a Company: The Role of a Text in the Rise and Decline of a New Organization (Doheny-Farina), “Intertextuality in Tax Accounting: Generic, Referential, and Functional” (Devitt), and “A Psychiatrist Using DSM-III: The Influence of a Charter Document in Psychiatry” (McCarthy). The many, often unnoticed, ways discourse “operates” upon almost every aspect of our workaday lives and workaday reality are emphatically brought to light with synecdochal efficacy in a few astute chapters. This third section leaves us with the book’s final metaphor, the “web of this discourse system” (376) and, literally, its final word, which takes on a thematic resonance: “pervasive” (376).

What are the implications of pervasiveness of discourse and of web, a metaphor of entrapment as well as connectivity? On the evidence of Textual Dynamics, the implication would seem to be that the rhetorical turn is also a turn from rhetoric as a form of action in the larger community, political discourse, to rhetoric as a vehicle for socialization within the profession. Rhetoric is by this turn less a force that can do something for you than a force that does something to you. This turn is signaled by the word “social” and its action-packed derivatives “socializing” and “socialization” that certainly pervade the text. “Social construction” is a thematic tag from the outset; Zappen speaks of “social community,” Stewart of “socialization,” Stygall of “socializing,” Paradis of “socialization of technology.” The notion of the social governs Bazerman’s “cooperation,” Perelman’s “transformation,” Fahnestock and Secor’s affirmation of “shared values,” Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman’s “initiation,” McCarthy’s “web”, just as it governs discourse and terms of textuality: Myers’ “story,” Stewart’s “narrative,” Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman’s “genre” and Devitt’s too—all terms of agency, instruments that socialize. But how are we to characterize and respond to that agency, that discourse, that socialization? Water metaphors help: Myers speaks of “melting into streams of knowledge” (64ff), and Stewart speaks of narratives where stories “catch, hold, and focus our attention.... [and where] the neophyte finds himself or herself immersed” (124). Discourse, it seems, is elemental, and the discourses described in Textual Dynamics are all indeed elementally powerful.

But is it a benign power? Post-critical discourse may be as two edged as pre-critical logos; communities and traditions can pummel as well support; rivers can drown us as well as carry us and nourish us. If the impulse of rhetoric—of giving, warranting, and believing reasons—is anything, it is judgment—kritikos—the ability to discern and decide. Conceived critically, the rhetorical stance counters the all-consuming, pre-critical fire of logos; the critical rhetorical stance disrupts the flow of discourse rather than succumbs to it. That, after all, is the Socratic and Aristotelian dynamus: from within the logos, within the communities, within the traditions, rhetoric challenges all reason-giving critically, so that people may engage logos, community, and traditions to discern and decide rather than merely...
succeed. Rhetoric is the alternative to immersion. With the emergence of the
new sophistic and all its praiseworthy celebrations of figuration and community,
discourse and web, narration and socialization, we must be wary of losing the
dialectical counterpoint of critical rhetoric. We must resist the translation from
political to social, from *zoon politikon* to *animale sociale*. As Habermas has
suggested, the failure to resist such translation has led in the west to the
domination of technocratic reasoning, which, in the name of rationality, has
rendered the reasonable irrational. When we do not resist such translations, when
we allow the political to be translated into the social, we confuse politicization
with socialization; we allow action to be identified with behavior, rhetorical praxis
to be identified with discourse behavior.

What is pervasive in *Textual Dynamics* is the absence of accountability and
deliberation and, in its place, the dominance of socialization, the readiness to
immerse oneself and melt into streams of narratives and genre systems without any
recourse to interrogate the discourse, asking questions of its dominant assumptions.
Rhetoric has been translated into discourse, and authoritative discourse pervades in
the absence of critical rhetorical engagement—there is only socializing behavior in
the absence of political action; there is immersion instead of discernment. For
example, Fahnestock and Secor argue—often wittily, always convincingly—that
“literary scholars have... their own special topoi... Like the Aristotelian special
topoi that appeal to shared values and shared perceptions, these special literary
topoi invoke the shared assumptions of the community of literary scholars, and at
the same time create that community” (84). By interweaving observations about
the profession’s shared values in their discussion of the special topoi, Fahnestock
and Secor prepare their audience well for their final insight—that the professional
discourse of literary criticism is carried out in the epideictic mode: “Ceremonial
rhetoric affirms the shared values of a community and harmonizes new insights
with what is already believed... and as ceremonial rhetoric literary argument has
much in common with religious discourse... Literary criticism also keeps alive a
traditional set of texts by subjecting them to continual exegesis, and literary
scholars constitute a body of believers who welcome new members into their sect.
There are however, many doctrinal controversies among believers, many disputes
about the canon, even to the point of reform movements and recusancy” (94). It is
telling that Fahnestock and Secor translate, without skipping a beat, the Classical
into the Christian, identifying the epideictic with the religious. By doing so,
Fahnestock and Secor show the dynamic domination of shared values and tradition
without actualizing the critical potential of epideictic rhetoric to raise questions
about the values of the community: identity, Burke tells us, can include a
“fulcrum” for change as well as the ingratiation of “flattery” (55-56). What are the
implications for critique in the religious tenor of the lit crit profession? For the
most part, questions like this are not raised in *Textual Dynamics*. Professional
discourse, like the Rum Tum Tugger, will do as it do, and logos like, neophyte
professionals can do little more than access it and make themselves accessible to it.

Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman, in discussing the socialization of a
Carnegie-Mellon graduate student do raise some questions, but only in their
conclusion: “How... do the sociopolitical constraints that govern the ‘manufacture
of knowledge’... in this emerging field affect a graduate student’s choice of research
program? To what extent are the issues that concern composition teachers
subsumed by the agendas of mentors as they join powerful research or scholarly
enterprises, such as the one that we studied?” (212). The questions are raised only
to disappear in a strange qualification: "We raise these questions because composition studies is a young field bound to be affected by the above factors" (212). Why are these questions raisable only in a new discipline? Are there not political implications for all disciplines through their entire lifetimes? Does not the introduction of rhetoric into disciplinarity and professional discourse break the narrative spell of overwhelmingly powerful discourse and methodological tyranny that socializes non-deliberatively everything in its path? Does not rhetoric move the professional into the public domain, raising questions that require public deliberation rather than professional expertise? To presume the discourse of a professional discourse community as a given, and to strike ironically or unwittingly the scientistic stance of disinterested observer merely reporting the sociology of discourse seems a presumption that places *Textual Dynamics* at odds with the name of the series in which it is published: "The Rhetoric of Human Sciences."

Just how distant from each other discourse and rhetoric are reverberates through these sentences by Herndl, Fennell, and Miller as they conclude their discussion of the "Challenger" disaster: "Our analysis suggests that the common view that managers at Morton Thiokol were just acquiescing to pressure from NASA is too simple. Rather, it may be that engineers and managers were unable, more than unwilling, to recognize data which deviated from that characteristic of their organizational roles. Different experiences and commitments provided the engineers and managers with different understandings of the problem and with different argumentative resources. These differences manifest themselves in the different warrants and evidence offered by members of each group" (303). There is something either completely deterministic or hopelessly cynical about this analysis, particularly in the word "unable." Is the logos of professional discourse so pervasive that it obliterates public discourse? Are our technocrats so thoroughly disabled by their professional discourses of "different argumentative resources... warrants and evidence" that there is no common rhetorical ground among them? What kind of analysis subordinates the political dimensions of discourse as "simple" to the complacent observation that "different experiences and commitments provided the engineers and managers with different understandings of the problem"? This analysis gets dangerously anti-rhetorical, for it apparently fails to recognize the need in a society with often contradictory aims of technocracy and democracy to move beyond the alienated warrants of this or that discrete discourse community of expertise into the common places of public discourse. The failed discourse at Morton Thiokol was not caused so much by engineers and managers offering mutually incomprehensible warrants as by both groups failing to move from the discourse of specialization into the discourse of the public good, of failing to move from technical knowledge to rhetorical engagement. The failures of organizational discourse, or disciplinary discourse, can easily stem from the failure of the organization or discipline to see that its discourse does not exist in a vacuum, that its daily rhetorical exigencies are politically and ethically deep. The engineers' and managers' failure was the failure of rhetorical imagination, a failure that I am reluctant to explain away with what strikes me as the oversimple observation that different groups have different warrants. Ending the analysis there ends the possibility of rhetoric, rendering us all in our own ways "unable": our pluralities become a trap, giving us no choice but to succumb to the dominance of the logos at hand: we have no choice but to make ourselves accessible.
So, is *Textual Dynamics* revolutionary? No, it is not insofar as it avoids the rhetorical implications of discourse. If anything it works to sustain the status quo. Managers will continue to argue as managers, engineers as engineers, sociologists as sociologists, professional philosophers as professional philosophers, psychiatrists as psychiatrists and on and on. Methodologies become identified with epistemologies and multiplying epistemologies become an excuse for a critically sanctioned, technocratic Babbittry—we only know what we know, and that’s good enough for us. *Textual Dynamics* implies that our only choice is to join these discourses or not, never to challenge them. We can be socialized by them, but we can not politicize them. I find such acceptance of discourse paradoxical but not surprising. After all, Donald McCloskey, one of the series editors, once remarked the following about the rhetoric of economics: “One thing is clear, the absorption of rhetorical thinking in economics will not precipitate any revolution in the substance of economics” (174). Perhaps it is not so difficult to have a revolution without changing anything at all—academics do it all the time.

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Charles Bazerman’s Response

Reflective Rhetorical Action, not Revolution

Critique, challenge, and change in professional discourse we all agree are important, vitally important. Insularity, stultification, coercion, and exclusivity of professional discourse we all agree are dangers. Professional responsibility, professional accountability, public access, and public participation we all agree are desirable ends. Such concerns provide great challenges for contemporary rhetoricians and contemporary society, embedded as we are in a culture of professionalism and facing the first consequences of the information age. It is not difficult to understand and sympathize with Professor Sebberson’s anxiety.

But what is the best way to address these concerns? Is it to deny the social forces around us as well as the structures of cooperation and knowledge, however unsatisfactory, that maintain billions of people on this planet, although many live under the most distressing conditions? Or is it to confront directly the social world we have made together to see how it works and how it doesn’t? Is the way to relieve the pain of poverty and crime in our cities to deny economics, sociology, psychology, medicine, and politics in the name of the critical voice? Or is it to understand how we can bring those professional knowledges together with public desire to provide a new configuration for wise public action? To see the social as irremediably tainted, as only fit to be the object of critique, leaves us little choice but to leave the polis and rail from outside the walls, as either god or beast, as Aristotle reminds us. I think it wiser to accept our deeply social nature and recognize that what individuality we have emerges from our participation with those around us, that we construct individuality and individual action upon complex
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