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The Researcher as Missionary: Problems with Rhetoric and Reform in the Disciplines

When writing researchers first ventured forth from the shores of academe to investigate the everyday writing practices of nonacademic life, they found a writing world vastly different from the one they had left behind, and they opened up a new disciplinary frontier. Now, less than two decades after those initial forays, there is brisk trade in pedagogical goods between composition studies and the workplace, with nonacademic writing research entering the classroom to influence instruction, and composition specialists going out to the workplace as trainers, teachers, and consultants.\(^1\) Of course, such border crossings present problems, as ideas from one setting are transformed or (perhaps worse) not transformed in transit to new locales. Herndl (“The Transformation”) points to one such problem: “To what extent does the movement into pedagogy domesticate the more radical position of ethnography and its possibilities for critique?” (19). He is concerned primarily with how, for example, a critical ethnography of the ideology enacted by an organization’s discourse practices becomes mere guidelines for audience analysis in the university classroom and textbook.\(^2\) We have a similar concern, but ours is with the role of traveling rhetoricians and the fate of the rhetorical theory and research they carry into the workplace and offer to practitioners.

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The four of us study professional writing from a variety of perspectives in a variety of disciplines. Judy Segal studies the discourse of physicians and other health care workers in multiple settings—academic, clinical, and public. Anthony Paré has spent over 10 years studying the writing of social workers, becoming increasingly interested in the ways in which the workers’ professional practice is produced and reproduced through their written genres. Douglas Vipond investigates this territory from the other side of the fence, as it were: as primarily a psychologist who has become interested in the ways in which psychology is rhetorically shaped. And Doug Brent, a writing center administrator attempting to popularize Writing Across the Disciplines at his institution, has studied professional writing practices as they are first introduced in the academic setting as prescriptive injunctions and disciplinary modes of inquiry.

In our many years of crossing paths in various settings we have been repeatedly struck by the ways in which our experiences, though varied, have commonalities that raise pedagogical, metarhetorical, ethical, and ideological questions about our projects. At the most obvious level, we have often shared frustrations over our difficulties in “getting through” to practitioners in the professions we study. Even when we believe we have important observations to make about the discourse practices of those we study, we are often ignored, misunderstood, or even treated with downright hostility.

But there are deeper and more troubling issues raised by our border crossing work. When we began formal collaboration on this paper, these were the issues we began to consider more closely: what is the rhetoric of our rhetorical work? to whom, and in what ways, are the fruits of our research useful? what can and should we do with what we learn when we study the discourse practices of professional communities? whose interests are challenged or supported by reports of our research?

In what seems the most straightforward case, teachers of academic, cross-curricular, and workplace writing are being informed by our discipline’s deepening understanding of how genres work in particular settings. This is no simple matter of reporting findings, however, or easily transforming analysis into pedagogy, and Herndl’s concern about critical perspectives becoming neutral descriptions has been echoed elsewhere (Freedman and Medway, “Locating Genre”; Herndl, “Teaching Discourse,” “Writing Ethnography”; Vitanza). Aware of this, and with feelings of deep uncertainty and ambivalence, we have been struggling with the less straightforward application of rhetorical interpretation that might involve us actively as critics and reformers of professional and disciplinary discourses. We feel bound—as speakers invited and uninvited—to let practitioners know what we “see” when we study their writing practices, and to explore with them the implications of those practices. Because we have
come to recognize the relationship between discourse and ideology in nonacademic settings, we can no longer sustain the role of “detached” observer, and we feel incapable of playing the neutral or non-critical participant. To participate is to become implicated and engaged, and it is the nature of that engagement that troubles us.

There is a significant difference between interacting with discourse communities in order to learn about them, and actively returning discourse knowledge, interpreted, to the communities we have studied. The latter implies presentations, workshops, and articles in publications geared to those professional communities, the purpose of which would be actively to inform those communities of our interpretations in ways that are somehow beneficial to them.

It is this concept of information that is “somehow beneficial” to professional communities themselves that is seldom questioned and which we have come to regard as problematic. Anthony has presented his research at social work conferences and conducted workshops with students, educators, and practitioners; Douglas has published two books that describe to psychologists some of their own rhetoric; and Judy has been invited to speak to nurses and physicians about the discourses in which they work. As we engage in such “informative” activities, we have all had the frustrating and humbling experience of not seeming to be heard or understood when we take our interpretations back to professional communities. We assume that the rhetorical knowledge we have created in our analyses is self-evidently beneficial, but those communities do not always regard it as such. Sometimes it is bluntly rejected.

This essay represents our attempt to consider collaboratively the purposes and the problems of returning to the social workers, physicians, psychologists, nurses, and others we have studied and saying “This is what we see when we look at your discourse.” The territory feels dangerous to us all: it feels colonial, intrusive; it makes us think of what our response might be if a group of sociologists, for example, approached us to inform us of our social practices as rhetoricians. We might, at least, find them presumptuous in thinking they could comment on our practices when they don’t really know what we do. We worry about those rhetorical researchers (have we been among them?) who study fragments of a “community’s” conversation over a period of time and conjure up a publication that purports to explain authoritatively that community’s discourse or to teach the community how to improve their rhetorical practices. In short, we explore here the general question of why we might want to turn the people we study into audiences for our work, and then the more particular questions of how we might do so usefully and without adopting the colonial, self-righteous attitude evoked by our title.
Why Bother?

Why would we want to tell professional communities what we think we know about their discourse? To answer this question—a question that we find is seldom articulated—we must back up a step to ask what it is we are studying in the first place. Just what is it about professional discourse that makes it worth studying?

As noted above, rhetoricians and composition researchers have over recent years turned their attention from the study of “writing” in general to the study of particular sites where writing takes place. One powerful lens through which to view professional and workplace writing is offered by contemporary reconceptions of “genre” (Freedman, “Reconceiving”; Devitt). Groundbreaking theoretical and research work in this area (Bakhtin; Bazerman; Berkenkotter and Huckin; Miller; Swales; Winsor; see also collections from Freedman and Medway; Reid) has suggested the extent to which disciplines are not only characterized, but, in an important sense, constituted as disciplines, by written genres. Communities, as Carolyn Miller argues, collectively see certain configurations of events as repeated exigencies: “Exigence is a form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but also makes them what they are: an objectified social need” (157). A repeated exigence, in turn, gives rise to a genre, which Graham Smart, following Miller, defines not just as a set of formal features but rather as “a broad rhetorical strategy enacted, collectively, by members of a community in order to create knowledge essential to their aims” (124).

Genres, then, shape thought and action, and suggest to community members what may be thought, said, and done. Community beliefs and values are inscribed in patterns of discourse which, in turn, elicit/evoke/require those beliefs and values when enacted. As Anthony Giddens points out, a social system does not exist outside of the people who make it up. It is a pattern of conventionalized actions, which, in their repetition, simultaneously constitute the social system and constitute the locus of change as the social system changes. They establish the conventions that others must learn in order to enter that system. Discursive actions are by far the most powerful of these patterns of behavior; they make up the symbol systems that create our reality for us. And discourse habits are by no means universal: the tropes, the topoi, the stylistic forms, and the rules of evidence of one discipline are not the same as those of another. The notion of form is thus made radiant: learning to become a social worker, doctor, psychologist means, in part, learning to think with the discourse forms that continually produce and reproduce the knowledge of those disciplines.

This, at least, is the common ground of much current theory in rhetoric and composition. The proliferation of studies of genre is explained by the
currency of the view that in genre lies a collection of social secrets and rules of disciplinary games. But rhetoric is not only an art of description and explanation. Like a social science, it seeks to explain systems of knowledge in order to increase understanding of how those systems, and systems of knowledge in general, work. However, rhetoric is also rooted in an art of performance, social action, and pedagogy. From Aristotle’s first proto-scientific inquiry into the causes of certain speakers’ success, to modern attempts to apply rhetorical principles to processes of composition, rhetoric seeks to know how discursive systems work in order to improve the ways in which people learn those systems, and even, though it seems like hubris, to improve the systems themselves—as though, by understanding discourse, one could direct it to better projects, or direct it to existing projects better.

But—to return to the overarching concern of this section—just what do we mean by “better”? Do we mean better in the sense of operating more effectively in the practical or communicative sense? Or do we mean better in some more rarefied, ideological sense? We believe that rhetoricians too often make the unexamined assumption that their work is concerned with the former but not the latter, as if “more effective” were a measure that could exist outside of a particular discourse and the ideological struggles played out there. Our pooled experience of attempting to help practitioners become “more effective” rhetorically has taught us that it is impossible in fact to separate “better” in its communicative sense—clearer, more correct and concise—from “better” in its ideological sense—more equitable, democratic, and just. We have become equally aware, however, that though these senses of “better” seem to us ideally inseparable, they are routinely severed in practice, mostly by omission; that is, the ideological dimension is usually unstated or unexplored in textbooks, classrooms, and boardrooms. This awareness has increased both our determination to influence the discourse of the communities we have studied and our difficulties in achieving that goal: we are more determined because we see the value of our work and feel the righteousness of a just cause, but we find it more difficult because we have now gone far deeper into discourse concerns, too deep, perhaps.

This ideological reasoning proceeds from the ways we see language. Practitioners in other disciplines are more likely to see language as transparent: something to look through. In disciplinary work, focal knowledge generally pertains to that part of the universe one is investigating at a particular time: a patient’s symptoms, an incident of child abuse, the slope of a hill on which one is building a house. Knowledge-making practices, including rhetoric, usually lie in the realm of “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi) or “practical consciousness” (Giddens) or “habitus” (Bourdieu). We believe that rhetorical knowledge can remain tacit, without impeding one’s ability to operate effectively. Many language educators have believed this
for years about grammar, finally admitting that most of the grammarian's models of how language works have little or no utility for the person actively engaged in discourse. In other words, ability to participate linguistically and rhetorically in a community's discourse practices does not depend on one's ability to express or explain the rules of practice. This belief is strongly supported by Freedman's argument ("Show and Tell?"), and the argument of situated learning theory in general (see, for instance, Lave and Wenger), that practitioners typically acquire genre knowledge unconsciously, through participation in a group’s activities.

Yet part of our ideology as rhetoricians—and part of the rhetoric of our rhetoric—is the assumption that language ought to be treated as opaque: something to look at. We pay attention to language qua language in order to amass information on how it works in context. Our stance proceeds from the assumption that discourse practices are more easily influenced and changed when one understands them, and that the rhetorically aware practitioner is less locked in to modes of thought and action than one whose rhetorical knowledge remains tacit. While it may be possible to ignore one’s ways of knowing—including one’s ways of reading, writing, speaking, and listening—we believe it is important to think metarhetorically, for reasons other than the baldly practical one of getting things done. Knowing about knowing is prerequisite not only to change but also, simply, to choice. As Richard Coe points out, "genres embody attitudes." He writes, “Since those attitudes are built into generic structures, they are sometimes danced without conscious awareness or intent on the part of the individual using the genre” (183). Certainly, using those genres, dancing these attitudes (to invoke Coe invoking Burke), unconsciously or uncritically can lead to the notion that the discourse structures of one's own discipline are essential or necessary, or just “the way things are,” and thus they disappear, become transparent.

If practices both arise out of and contribute to the constant reproduction of larger structures of behaviors, as Giddens (for example) argues, then how do these structures ever change? The same problem is raised by Thomas Kuhn’s view of paradigms, by Stanley Fish’s view of interpretive communities, by any theory that posits that individual and social actions are constrained by discourse structures that limit what people can think and talk about: how can one think consciously about the patterns of discourse that tell us what to think about and even how to think?

Giddens points out, however, that structures of behavior, of which discourse practices are undoubtedly among the most powerful, are not totally determinate. He rejects the idea that “constraints operate like forces in nature, as if ‘to have no choice’ were equivalent to being driven irresistibly and uncomprehendingly by mechanical pressures” (15). Social institutions
are patterns of social knowledge held within individuals’ “practical consciousness,” and they are reproduced on a day-to-day basis by knowledgeable agents, not simply by institutions. It is this factor of knowledgeability that we want to stress here, though we want to shift the ground a bit from practical knowledgeability to rhetorical knowledgeability. To know how one’s behavior reproduces the social matrix of one’s community is to avoid being totally constrained by that social matrix. To understand, for instance, the way a scientific article reproduces the values of science is to approach that reproduction cautiously, not slavishly. To accept it knowledgeably, to work within discourse conventions that one has understood, is also to have the power to change or subvert the conventions.6

The point is for practitioners to know enough about their own discourse practices to know when to revise them—and when to protect them. Rhetorical knowledgeability may be a danger to immediate efficiency, as self-consciousness may disrupt “normal” operations; yet it is also, in the long term, not only advantageous, but also necessary. So, when Judy wrote about patient noncompliance, she was trying to illustrate, using a rhetorical model, the problematics of a fully conventionalized asymmetry in the doctor-patient relationship. She observes, for example, that the present tense of a horizontal relationship between physician and patient can further entrenched a vertical relationship. This might be an observation helpful to those practitioners who are a willing audience for such analysis. In workshops with social work practitioners, Anthony has initiated debate by posing what we in composition and rhetoric might consider fairly basic questions: Who reads your documents, and why? Can clients easily get access to their own files and, if not, why not? Whose interests do your documents serve? Why are documents organized in their present form? Can writers refer to themselves by name or with first-person pronouns and, if not, why not? How might your documents be improved? Discussion of such questions invariably exposes professional assumptions and beliefs, as well as inequalities and conflict. In a recent workshop that included these questions, discussion led to the formation of a working group to review documentary practices.

Genres, then, can be seen as more than passive reactions to exigencies; they can also be viewed as textual strategies for changing the nature of exigencies. The consciousness of language that our rhetorical investigations offer can provide practitioners with a new or unfamiliar critical perspective on their discourse and create opportunities for professional communities or individuals within those communities to change or modify language practices deliberately and thus bring about change.

We are aware, however, that this kind of generic engineering—Fairclough calls it the “technologization of discourse” (87)—can shift relations
of power within institutions and disciplines. As rhetoricians we have already been accused, by Carl Herndl (“Teaching Discourse”), of being complicitous in reproducing the social structures, ideologies, and subjectivities of the various communities we study. Herndl speaks in the context of teaching professional writing in the academy, warning that as we introduce our students to the various professional and organizational discourses we explore in our research, we may be reifying the social relations of which those discourses are a part (353). But the same warning applies to our attempts to inform practitioners of the implications of their (normally transparent) discourse practices. To simply “teach them how to do it better” in a purely practical sense would be not only to participate in the uncritical replication of social structures that Herndl warns against. Possibly worse, it could be to increase the power of those social structures by increasing the professional communities’ means without consideration of ends. Every accomplishment of the analyst raises another issue. To perform an analysis with the effect of improving the rate of patient compliance, as in the example above, is implicitly to endorse the notion that doctors’ orders are, in general, worth following.

Still, we wish to argue that, done with sufficient rigor, rhetorical inquiry into professional language practices can be a form of critical pedagogy, not just rhetorical trouble-shooting. If medical practitioners truly recognize some of the rhetorical problems that lie behind the “problem of compliance,” for example, they are, with this recognition, invited to consider not only their language practices but the ideological relationships that are constituted and replicated by those practices. And when Anthony worked with practitioners in the social service department in a hospital, critical attention to the redesign of standard forms exposed resentment among practitioners, since the forms were being shaped to meet the needs of medical staff, and led to changes that served the social workers’ own needs. In short, we are not arguing that rhetorical awareness can improve the technical efficiency of professional communities. We are arguing nothing less than the power of rhetorical awareness to facilitate deep changes in professional ideology. Simply changing textual forms will not facilitate such changes, but we believe that, at least some of the time, such changes can be fostered by a thorough awareness of the relation between textual forms and underlying ideology.

We are also aware that this ideological view of rhetorical study leaves us in a double bind—a worse one than if we were merely presuming to tell professional communities practical tips about their language practices. To adopt this stance is to risk stepping over the line from rhetorical anthropologist to missionary. It is, after all, possible that professional practitioners have little interest in critical pedagogy. They may feel that their social practices and the
discourse practices that constitute them generally work quite well, and when they do not, practitioners are likely to want practical solutions to immediate practical problems that they perceive as problems. They are unlikely to be searching for the disorienting self-knowledge that is the supposed outcome of critical, or its more extreme cousin, radical, pedagogy.

However, our research has shown us that professional discourse is always a site of struggle among competing interests: if there are practitioners who feel that their discourse practices generally work quite well, there are sure to be others who disagree. Physicians may feel comfortable with the genres that create the knowledge they need, but nurses, patients, and allied professionals who are caught up in or influenced by those genres may relish the opportunity for dissent that rhetorical critique provides. And if you recommend to a room full of social workers and their clients that both be required to sign the documents that go into clients’ files, you can watch the workers squirm and the clients demand “why not”? By providing a discursive awareness that may potentially be disruptive, we are not simply doing what we think is best for some practitioners, but what we think is best for the entire community, especially those with little or no power.

How Well Are We Doing?

First, let us assume for the moment that we are right that the commentary we rhetoricians can provide to practitioners can be beneficial beyond the level of document style and organization and that we do have a right and even a responsibility to offer it. Is our offer being taken up?

In practice, and for many reasons, some of which have to do with the getting of tenure, we rhetoricians have not always sought to publish our work in the journals of those we really wish would read it. So, disciplinary journals (in medicine, social work, psychology, and so on) typically contain little or no work on the rhetoric of the discipline—while we continue to talk to ourselves in journals like this one (and Written Communication, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, The Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, and a few others), where we can ride the feedback loop and ponder what disciplinary rhetorics tell us about rhetoric in general. Yet other rhetoricians are often less than a proper audience, for they are not poised to act in the cases at hand. For example, Martha Solomon’s “The Rhetoric of Dehumanization: An Analysis of Medical Reports of the Tuskegee Syphilis Project,” published in the Western Journal of Speech Communication, points to some disastrous consequences of the disinterested stance of medical/scientific writing. Solomon’s analysis is brilliant, but it is directed to a relatively ineffectual audience, an audience not of medical researchers and publishers, but of other rhetoricians, whose interest in Tuskegee is, effectively, theoretical.
The four of us have, to some extent, stuck our necks out into the disciplines we have studied and tried to return some of what we have learned. We have, each of us, experienced some resistance to our messages. Anthony reports on the two parts of a 2½ day workshop with a social work unit that deals with adoptions and foster children. He had prepared, for the first day, a carefully staged activity that asked social workers in small groups to analyze all aspects of their primary record—readers, format, purpose, style, and so on. The day seemed to go swimmingly, marked by lively discussion and apparent insight. But, in fact, no changes were ever made as a result, and the next day and a half—on editing techniques—was far more popular and consequential according to feedback on evaluation forms. He has since attempted to link the sentence level—the profession’s virtual ban on use of the first-person pronoun, for example—to the social level in which the workers’ records operate.

Doug Brent had a similar experience with a Writing Across the Curriculum workshop at his campus. After what seemed an eventful day of discussing discourse practices within various professional disciplines, Doug asked participants to complete an evaluation form which asked, among other things, “What could have been done to improve the workshop?” One respondent answered, “Talk about writing.” Clearly, discussion of the social consequences of discourse practices did not interest this respondent. What she wanted was talk of what she perceived as “writing”: in this case, tips on teaching editing and APA format.

Judy’s analysis of medical rhetoric has been directed to both rhetoricians and to health practitioners. She has published in journals like Social Sciences and Medicine and The Journal of Medical Humanities; she has given talks to physicians and nursing students and to health policy analysts. Recently, with two other rhetoricians, she gave a workshop on rhetorical methodology at a meeting of bioethicists. But to do this work, she has had to learn over time to overcome an impulse to “doctor-bash”; she has, with a growing appreciation of the complexity of the discourse that is her subject, learned to edit some of the attitude and zeal out of her writing.

Douglas is the one of us best positioned to inform the informants because, unlike the rest of us with respect to disciplines studied, he is not an outsider. He is himself a psychologist. Yet he too has met some resistance from the professionals he has addressed. For example, in the manuscript for his book, Writing and Psychology: Understanding Writing and its Teaching from the Perspective of Composition Studies, Douglas had suggested, citing Charles Bazerman, that the behavioristic rhetoric of APA style, as embodied in the APA Manual, has a considerable grip on writing in the field of psychology. A psychologist reviewing the draft manuscript responded thus:
I remain entirely unconvinced that current writing practices in psychology exact any costs from the field. I just don’t see what concrete evidence Vipond has for this claim. To provide some, I presume that he will have to try to find something like circumstances in which important ideas have been suppressed because of nit-picking APA Style.

One scientist at a Science and Society discussion group one of us attends responded to claims of a social/rhetorical quality in scientific knowledge production by throwing a hat in the air (and watching it come down) to demonstrate the “reality” of the force of gravity—as though to admonish those of us who, believing in the social nature of science, must not believe in the most basic principles of physics.

His view is not unusual. Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt write, in the same vein, of critics they subsume within the “academic left”:

Within the academic left...hostility extends to the social structures through which science is institutionalized, to the system of education by which professional scientists are produced, and to a mentality that is taken, rightly or wrongly, as characteristic of scientists. Most surprisingly, there is open hostility toward the actual content of scientific knowledge and toward the assumption, which one might have supposed universal among educated people, that scientific knowledge is reasonably reliable and rests on a sound methodology. (2)

Gross and Levitt use the term “academic left” to “designate those people whose doctrinal idiosyncrasies sustain the misreadings of science, its methods, and its conceptual foundations that have generated what nowadays passes for a politically progressive critique of it” (9). They include, in particular, the social constructivists, postmodernists, feminist science critics, radical environmentalists (13)—in other words, many of us. This backlash critique certainly confirms the fear that we articulated in the previous section. Like many scientists, some practitioners find it difficult to hear the more critical aspects of our rhetorical analyses, others are simply not interested, and still others are actively resistant to anything perceived as ideological.

It is possible that resistance to what we have to teach is simple avoidance of uncomfortable truth, like the refusal of some of Galileo’s contemporaries to look through his telescope. However, our own rhetorical insights paint a more sympathetic picture. As we mention above, the work of Charles Bazerman and others has suggested that the carefully maintained illusion that knowledge is solid, positive, and arhetorical may be a
necessary fiction, vital to knowledge-making in the disciplines. The discourse practices we study help maintain this epistemological stance.

It may be well to keep in mind the following cautionary words from Evelyn Fox Keller. Although she is writing specifically about science, she reminds us not only to show respect for the people we study but also to go some way to finding common ground:

Until we can articulate an adequate response to the question of how “nature” interacts with “culture” in the production of scientific knowledge, until we find an adequate way of integrating the impact of multiple social and political forces, psychological predispositions, experimental constraints, and cognitive demands on the growth of science, working scientists will continue to find their more traditional mind-sets not only more comfortable, but far more adequate. And they will continue to view a mind-set that sometimes seems to grant force to beliefs and interests but not to “nature” as fundamentally incompatible, unintegrable, and laughable. (36)

We must learn how to talk with the scientists and practitioners in other disciplines who are threatened by or contemptuous of the analysis we offer. Otherwise, when we say “rhetoric,” they will hear “your writing is all manipulation.” When we say “social construction,” they will hear, “you’re all a bunch of frauds.” When we say “ideology,” they will think “political correctness.” So, how do we go about challenging traditional mind-sets while still showing respect for the people we study?

Problems with the Missionary Position

As we have suggested, we are in a double bind. We write, knowingly, “Rhetorical knowledgability may be a danger to immediate efficiency, as self-consciousness may disrupt ‘normal’ operations; yet it is also, in the long term, not only advantageous, but necessary.” Thus we adopt and defend a pedagogical position that suggests we know other people’s rhetoric better than they know their own and that, moreover, they should want to know what we know. And yet even if we have decided, on ethical and ideological grounds, to maintain this position, the experiences listed above suggest that critical analyses of others’ ways of knowing, even when justified, are often rejected, for a variety of reasons.

Possibly a good deal of the problem is that we have not yet learned how to tread lightly on other people’s paradigms. Consider, for instance, a College Composition and Communication essay, “Evolving Paradigms: WAC and the Rhetoric of Inquiry.” (It is always so much easier to see others’ lack of humility than it is to see one’s own.) Judy Kirscht, Rhonda Levine, and
John Reff write about designing an assignment that would allow students to engage in a discipline-specific rhetoric of inquiry, the mode of inquiry being the empirical study. The authors say,

The project was first developed by Judy Kirscht in consultation with an empirical psychologist, and such consultation is, of course, essential in the initial stages of course development. Once Kirscht was familiar with the psychologist’s assumptions about knowledge, however, the inquiry process itself proved to be a variation on a familiar theme. (375)

The essay has some very useful things to say about the evolution of WAC paradigms, and it may be that the depth of the investigation was elided in the report by the natural propensity of people writing up research results to make the path look smooth. But we can’t help suspecting the same arrogance in this description that we fear is present in our own work. In the course of the “initial stages” of her project (and in the course of a subordinate clause), the researcher is able to become “familiar with the psychologist’s assumptions about knowledge.” We feel uncomfortable with a practice of rhetorical inquiry that looks in for a brief time on the tacit knowledge that others have acquired over a lifetime and then tells them what it is.

Herndl (“Teaching Discourse”) has argued that a classroom pedagogy shaped by such missionary zeal is as oppressive as the dominant discourse it seeks to criticize. “Ironically,” he argues, “students will become once again the objects of what Freire calls the banking model of education, the objects this time of the teacher’s ideological enlightenment” (359). We agree, and argue further that when such missionary zeal is applied not in the classroom but to professionals (whether in professional practice or in professional realms of the academy) who have already fully absorbed the discourse of their profession, the reaction will probably be incomprehension and rejection. If we intend to make a difference, we must find a position between the descriptive stance of the traditional anthropologist and the evangelical zeal of the missionary. We hope that the proper label for that position is “teacher”—not just any teacher, but a thoroughly informed, ideologically critical, and most important, respectful teacher, a teacher who wishes to connect with, but not necessarily to convert, her “students” in the professional communities.

How Can Rhetoricians Make a Difference?

Without presuming to offer solutions to every problem we have raised, we would like to conclude by pulling together some specific suggestions about
how rhetoricians might approach disciplinary work while avoiding the missionary position.

*Gain knowledge slowly and respectfully, ideally with the collaboration or cooperation of the members of the community being studied.*

Learning about another discipline, like learning about another culture, is a lot of work. It cannot be done overnight, as Kirsch and her co-authors, perhaps inadvertently, seem to suggest. Our projects will fare better if we acknowledge disciplinary complexity and collaborate with members of the disciplines we study. As much as possible, we need to work delicately, from the inside out, with discipline members not only as “informants” but also as full partners in an investigation they care about and see value in. This collaborative stance will help us avoid the trap of cataloguing discourse practices and the social practices they constitute without paying attention to the deeper work they perform in the discipline.

We offer, with some reservations, an example of a partly successful collaboration. As part of a large-scale project on disciplinary writing practices, Anthony and his co-researchers are required by their funding agency to share their research interpretations and conclusions with the communities they are studying (in his case, social work). But for all the reasons detailed here, Anthony has learned not to “tell” social workers about their discourse. On the contrary, he is learning to listen, and has transformed his work into a form of action or participatory research, with social workers as full participants. He does not import the “problems” of professional social work discourse into the field from rhetorical theory but, instead, works with practitioners towards an understanding of and solutions to their problems. To do that, he has established long-term relationships with practitioners in a variety of social work settings. He occasionally trades editing workshops for interviews, focus groups, and other forums for discussion of rhetorical practice, and has co-presented and co-authored with practitioners.

Our reservations here concern the very complexity we are suggesting that rhetoricians must respect: in the course of “helping” social workers define and solve their own rhetorical problems, Anthony has found himself caught in ideological struggles between workers and clients and between workers and management. Over-identification with the aims of any single discourse community within complex institutional cultures—a workplace version of the anthropologist’s “going native”—means the traveling rhetorician can be compromised or coopted. Again, acknowledging the complexity of culture may make those of us working far from our disciplinary homes alert to this possibility, but only inclusion of multiple
perspectives can reduce the danger. As a result, Anthony now seeks client representation at workshops and in workplace research and, whenever possible, encourages or engineers dialogue between and among interest groups.

Concentrate on problems that the practitioners recognize as significant within their own frame of reference.

This principle proceeds from the preceding example, and takes into account a general feeling within disciplinary communities that “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” But while the point of breakage, or disrepair, or anomaly, or dissonance is a good point of entry for rhetoricians, it may also be the case that rhetoricians-as-critics have an obligation to point out problems apparent to them through their analytic approach, and possibly not apparent to practitioners themselves. Of course, approaching members of a community with news of a problem they have not identified for themselves is very tricky.

It is also sometimes possible to work sideways from problems that practitioners identify to a reframing of those problems in terms that are permitted by a rhetorical focus. Judy’s analysis of “non-compliance,” for example, begins with a practice that medical practitioners would readily acknowledge is broke and does need fixing. But by reframing the problem as one of rhetorical and ideological asymmetry, she opened an opportunity for a wider discussion of the rhetorical paradigm that dominates the medical profession.

Join their conversations.

As mentioned above, we have published in disciplinary forums, presented at disciplinary meetings, and conducted workshops in workplaces. But we have also read in the fields we study, attended sessions at their meetings, and listened to practitioners. As we have grown in our understanding of the practices and people we study, so has the positive reception to what we have to say. Initially, our presence as outsiders hampered our ability to speak and to be heard, but we have grown into a middle space between our own discipline and the disciplines of those we study. From this space we speak to practitioners in and about the language that shapes their professional lives. And, as outsiders still, we can be critical without having a vested interest (unless, of course, we are training unwilling practitioners to participate in management discourse strategies, or failing to recognize the multiple interests at play). Increasingly, within the disciplines, we have
found willing audiences—and, more importantly, willing co-investigators—for our critical studies of professional discourse.

*Use the opportunities provided by education.*

Our role as teachers also provides many opportunities for us to speak about rhetoric within professional communities. Practitioners may be content with their own discursive practices and their own genres, but acknowledge difficulty in passing particular modes of writing on to students. The induction of new members, then, is the most common "teaching point" for rhetoricians. We are frequently asked to "teach writing" to incipient social workers, physicians, psychologists (and, occasionally, to practitioners already in the field). While the request may at first be a request to teach sentence structure and skills of outlining, we are provided in the course of events with opportunities to get students and practitioners to examine their own rhetorical structures while their epistemological paradigms are still somewhat permeable.

This brings us to the territory of Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines programs, which we have hitherto largely excluded from our discussion because we wished to frame the problem as "How do we talk to professionals," not "How do we talk to students." But talking to students may in the long run be our best means of getting a hearing from professionals. Douglas Vipond, as we have mentioned, has had limited success in sharing with other psychologists his insights into psychological writing practices. He has had a better reception, however, from psychology students, who seem to find it helpful, for example, to learn that in the introduction to research articles writers "create a research space" for their own projects. Students seem to appreciate the idea that they are not working in a vacuum but instead are learning to participate in conversations already in progress. While it is possible that students are simply more polite than their more experienced counterparts, it is also the case that the knowledge of their professions has not become tacit or "natural." Moreover, they are not yet in a position where not acting in accordance with institutional practices could lead to dismissal or demotion. And then, in a "good" WAC or WID program, the lines between student and professor/professional are open and the lines between rhetorician and professional are open as well.

Doug Brent, and his collaborator, JoAnne Andre, relied on these lines of communication in a project on the writing of nurses. Interested in what nursing students knew about the discourse practices of their discipline, Doug and JoAnne knew they would have to begin with intensive interviews of nursing students. Instead of conducting the interviews them-
selves, however, they worked closely with a nursing graduate student, whom they instructed, as much as possible, in theories of rhetoric and writing in the disciplines. With information gleaned from nursing students, this graduate assistant prepared a manual of advice for future nursing students. In creating the manual and explaining it to the faculty at a workshop on writing, she has foregrounded and made focal knowledge that was tacit.

With this advice, we offer a caution: there is a continual danger of means/ends confusion. The problems identified by the community may easily be used as rhetorical Trojan horses to smuggle in our own “right-thinking” ideas of what the problems should be. Using students and other interested professionals within the community could degenerate into attempts to create “moles” who will convert from within. The position of teacher is precariously perched between the positions of anthropologist and missionary, and like the practice of rhetoric itself, might slip into arrogant and unreflective manipulation. This caution leads us to our final suggestion:

*Don’t expect to use what you know to save anyone.*

In taking an ideological approach to rhetorical study and teaching, we are attempting to enact our belief that things can be changed for the better, that people are not trapped in their ways of seeing, saying, and doing. Increasingly, we have experienced success at initiating discussions among practitioners about the implications of professional discourse. But the complexity of workplace and disciplinary politics has made us realize that our work is necessarily a slow and delicate process. The cultures we study are intricate, dynamic, subtle. The tacit conventions of professional rhetoric are deeply rooted and powerful, and workplace genres are sites of struggle within discourse communities. We suggest that rhetoricians enter other disciplinary and professional cultures with patience and caution. The resistance we meet when we share our rhetorical interpretations in the workplace occasionally comes from incomprehension, but often occurs because we have challenged someone in power, sometimes inadvertently. Those who suffer as a result of unfair, unequal, or oppressive discourse practices may have no difficulty understanding and appreciating our critical analyses, but those who benefit from those practices are often quite resistant. We have learned, too, that even the apparently powerful may be constrained by institutional or disciplinary forces we cannot at first perceive or appreciate. And those who are placed at some disadvantage by professional discourse practices may reject or resist our criticisms or suggestions for change, since such changes might expose them to further and worse controls and jeopardize their positions. As a result, we suggest that
rhetoricians proceed with respect for cultural complexity and the beliefs of others, and thereby avoid the missionary’s righteous zeal.

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Notes

1. We are thinking here of the pioneering work done by, among others, Knoblauch, Selzer ("The Composing Process"), and the researchers included in Anderson, Brockman, and Miller, and Odell and Goswami.  
2. Herndl is concerned here and elsewhere ("Teaching Discourse," "Writing Ethnography") with ethnographic research. He and others (Brodkey, Cintron) have warned against the uncritical application and exploitation of ethnographic methodology in composition research and pedagogy, especially given the current debates in anthropology over what James Clifford calls "the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures" (2). For the most part, our own work falls more comfortably under the broader term "qualitative research": however, in this article, we explore a problem akin to the ideological and epistemological difficulties faced by cultural anthropologists. Indeed, we are concerned with something beyond the representation or invention of cultures, and that is our own interference in cultures. In this essay, we consider the implications of adding the task of "medi-dler" to the already problematic role of participant-observer.  
3. This essay began life as a long-distance collaboration for the annual conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Learning (Inkshed), May 12–13, 1995, Kanannaskas, Alberta. We are at four different universities and our collaboration, which involved countless drafts and sets of comments—SOME IN CAPS, [some between brackets]—is testimony to the enabling effect of email.  
4. Of course, there are exceptions to this. It has been gratifying, for example, to watch multidisciplinary interest in Jack Selzer’s well-conceived Understanding Scientific Prose. Our concern, however, is with the degree to which such studies tend to be the exception rather than the rule.  
5. Fairclough makes a similar point, although he chooses a different optical metaphor, in his discussion of the "naturalization of ideology": "Naturalization gives to particular ideological representations the status of common sense, and thereby makes them opaque, i.e. no longer visible as ideologies" (42).  
6. For a discussion of shaping knowledge through discourse regulations/genres in a social work setting, see Paré.  
7. Again, there are exceptions. A proliferation of interest in metaphors of practice, for example, characterizes recent writing in bio-medicine, especially writing by nurses. See, for example, MacPherson, Condon, Smith. A recent critical ethnography of social work by de Montigny offers an insightful analysis of rhetorical practices in front line social work, without ever using the word "rhetorical."  
8. The workshop in question was done with Charles M. Anderson and Barbara Heiff-eron for a joint meeting of the American Association of Bioethics, the Society for Bioethics Consultation, and the Society for Health and Human Values in Baltimore, November 1997.

Works Cited


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