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The Rites of Writing: A Review

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The Rites of Writing, edited by Daniel J. Dietrich (Stevens Point, Wisconsin: Office of Academic Support Programs University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, 1982), 112 pages.

No doubt the title of this volume, *The Rites of Writing*, is intended to evoke memories of the “rites of spring.” Actually, “The Rites of Writing” is the name given to a two-day symposium at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, the first of which was held in 1976 (there have been six conferences since then). The symposia had, according to Mary Croft, the founder and director of the “Rites,” the distinctive goal “to proclaim the universality of writing, to remind [the] campus that writing was something all disciplines had in common” (p. 1). The book is a collection of pieces on writing by former speakers/participants in the symposia.

Images of the “rites of spring” were, for me at least, even more strongly evoked by the fact that these symposia were held in the spring months of the year. One can imagine a mid-Western campus in the midst of a spring awakening—new mint green grass, bursting trees, yellow daffodils and purple hyacinths scenting a warm, enveloping breeze—with over 2500 enthusiastic people from many different places coming together to celebrate the teaching and learning of writing. Spring makes me giddy, mostly because I can finally shed my winter layers, physical and otherwise, and I’m sure those who attended “The Rites of Writing” felt much the same as I. It’s no wonder the symposia are so successful: everyone’s ripe for rebirth.

Unfortunately the book, *The Rites of Writing*, comes up somewhat short in being able to duplicate for this reader the enthusiasm of the symposia themselves. The ambiance cannot be fully reproduced. (I can't say for sure that the readers of this book who were in attendance at the real thing might not feel differently. They, at least, have the memory of the event which they can bring to their reading. It would certainly make a difference.) Also, like other books of this sort—collected proceedings or speeches reprinted from a conference—this one has lost whatever cohesive themes may have been present during the actual events. Having a live audience at the symposia, one which can respond, provoke, and question, helps keep the speakers/writers on track. Such an audience no longer exists. For readers, however, the most important problems stem from the fact that many of the pieces, as far as I can tell, were not necessarily written directly for this book (that is, they served other purposes originally—either for another book or some other forum); and, for the majority of them, the audience to whom they are being written is unclear or unidentifiable.

The last problem, that of audience, is a severe one. Since I am writing this review for *The Writing Center Journal*, I have assumed my audience to be mostly teachers and tutors who work in writing centers. I have further taken for granted that *The Rites of Writing* was submitted for review in this journal because its editor, Daniel J. Dieterich, considered it appropriate for this audience as well. Although there are some pieces which might translate into helpful pedagogy—specifically, those written by Jacqueline Jackson, Lester Fisher, Richard Lloyd-Jones, Donald Murray, Stephen Judy, Myra Cohn Livingston, and Thomas Pearsall—there are others which either never make the connection between a point of view on writing and the teaching of writing (like those of George Hartung, Lindsay Doran, James Posewitz, Bill Dwyre, and Joel Vance); or espouse a writing pedagogy which is in direct contrast to the most recent research findings about the writing process and the teaching of writing (Ruth Hine, Frances Hamerstrom, and Dolores Landreman); and then there is one piece which does not seem to belong here at all.

This, a poem by Denise Levertov which opens the book, represents what I think might have been a conflict for the people who put the “Rites” book together: do we publish a book which reflects the symposia themselves, or do we publish a book containing writing by participants in the symposia whether it reflects the symposia or not? Although this poem, entitled “A Speech: For Antidraft Rally, D.C., March 22,

1980," may have fitted well into a spring renewal (and, I might add, is a poem I liked very much), it doesn't meet the intentions of the editor. According to Dieterich's original letter, those who were asked to submit pieces for this book were requested to author "a few pages describing [their] views on writing or the teaching of writing" (p. 1). Had Levertov written about how she wrote this piece in the first place or how she turned a speech into a poem it might have conformed more successfully with both the original intentions and the tone of the rest of the book. Most of the articles, though, do meet the editor's intentions as noted above. However, some of those pieces that did explore the writers' views on writing did not fulfill my expectations as a reader.

As an experienced writing teacher and consultant for writing teaching and learning, I have grown to view, accept, and teach writing as a process. I like to say to teachers that when we teach writing, we are growing better writers, not necessarily always helping writers to produce better texts. I have come to value process over product; to believe that invention or prewriting or discovery are as important, or more important to creating better writers, than a neatly written finished piece; and to see that re-writing, or re-vision, or re-discovery, not only are essential to a writer's process, but are vital to a writer's growth in thinking and learning skills. It is with these expectations that I come to review this book. As readers of this review, you should be aware of these because they, no doubt, have influenced my opinions. It is my contention, however, that those of you who work in writing centers have, if not the same views, at least come in contact with them to the extent that they influence your teaching and tutoring. Those pieces I had difficulty with in this book seem to me to be in direct conflict with the principles that guide my own teaching of writing.

In order to illustrate this dichotomy, I would like to focus this review on three pieces: Thomas Pearsall's "The State of Technical Writing," Ruth L. Hine's "Scientific Writing," and Dolores Landerman's "Effective Outline Preparation and Use." To review every selection would take an article much longer than my space allows. The diversity of the pieces in this book make a wholistic review impractical. The three articles I will discuss have a common subject area, that of technical writing, and propose contrasting points of view.

Let me start with Thomas Pearsall's piece, since it fits most comfortably into my own writing philosophy. Pearsall is Professor and Head of the Department of Rhetoric at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul, and as the introductory note says, "a nationally recognized authority on the teaching of technical writing" (p. 97). Although Pear-

sall spends most of his time in this article summarizing the state of the art of technical writing, he does manage to include what I think are some important theoretical and pedagogical issues relating to writing teaching in general. For example, in answer to his own question about why technical writing has gained so much enthusiastic support from teachers who have been, for the most part, drafted to teach these courses, he says, “technical writing makes things happen. Certainly there is a sense of both practicality and power in technical writing. Technical writing is practical because it is situational. It always addresses itself to a particular purpose and audience. Technical writing is powerful because it makes things happen. Students and teachers alike enjoy the power and breathe a sigh of relief at technical writing’s rational practicality” (p. 98).

In reviewing the chapter titles of technical writing texts Pearsall notes that between texts written in the 1950’s and those in the 1980’s the “change is obvious. The older book is product oriented. The newer book still has a healthy amount of product but process now plays an important role. The [newer] texts both lead and reflect what is going on in the classroom” (p. 103). The reason for this change, Pearsall notes, is that technical writing courses appeal to “such a diverse audience [that] we have found it impossible to find products to suit them all. We have turned to process in self defense” (p. 103).

Finally, Pearsall suggests that technical writing may be becoming an inappropriate name for what is really being taught. He suggests that Britton’s category of transactional writing be employed instead, because as he says, “transactional writing is that writing with which we carry on the transactions of the world’s work, whether that work be technical, scientific, or whatever” (p. 104). And, further, he notes that “we have begun to realize that teachers of writing can’t do the whole job alone. We have to bring in our colleagues from other disciplines. I’m talking, of course, about writing across the curriculum” (p. 104). And this means both encouraging them to assign more writing in their classes and, most important, to come to understand how writing can function as a tool for learning the content they are trying to teach.

By way of summary, then, Thomas Pearsall highlights in his piece five of the most important and current views about the teaching and learning of writing: process over product; the need for a real audience for student’s writing; the necessity for real purposes for student’s writing; the idea that what is actually being taught is transactional rather than technical writing (which implicitly suggests that Britton’s function categories are beginning to take hold in this country in impor-

tant and practical ways), and lastly, that writing time and practice in the future requires writing across the curriculum, if real writing (and learning) improvement is to take place.

In contrast to this piece are those of Hine and Landreman. I might even say they represent more closely the technical writing books of the 1950's that Pearsall says are quickly fading from the scene. Ruth Hine is a technical editor who works primarily on editing and publishing technical research reports on wildlife, forestry, and resource management. Dolores Landreman is Senior Proposal Specialist for Batelle Memorial Institute-Columbus Laboratories. Both articles give practical advice on how to go about writing a research report: Hine has her "principles" and Landreman has her "outline." Underlying both pieces is the assumption that writers know what they are going to say before they actually write it down, an assumption in direct conflict with current theories that suggest that writing is an act of discovering what you know and what you don't know, and thus what you need to find out. This assumption also points to the difference between a process versus a product orientation toward writing, which Pearsall suggests should be moving toward process, but such a view is not represented here. Hine says that "there must be logic before language, organization before writing" (p. 33); Landreman says it more directly, "the writer must know where he's going before he starts out" (p. 64). This notion of writing as transcription clearly denies any possibility for writing as a means of exploring a subject, exploration which is often essential before one knows what to say about it.

In describing Step 10 ("Construct a Topic Outline") of her principles Hine says, "This step, particularly, shows the relationship between good, orderly, precise research (thinking that is), and good writing (which is based on good organization)" (p. 37). In a similar discussion on outline use, Landreman says that "skill in organizing thought - translated [is] skill in making effective outlines" (p. 58). Both these statements reflect the position that thinking is a clean and orderly process and that a good outline reflects both clear thinking and good writing. Again, neither of these statements could be defended in light of current research on how writers get their ideas and on how human beings think. They also fly in the face of Pearsall's notion that technical writing is really transactional writing, which, according to Britton, grows out of a more personal, exploratory type of writing *before* it takes on any information transmission characteristics. While an outline may be useful as a revision tool, it rarely works as part of invention.

Neither Hine's nor Landreman's piece mentions audience or purpose as it relates to a writer's stance toward her subject. Once again as in earlier times writing is seen as a solitary process where the writer struggles alone to "excite interest and arouse the desire to read" (Hine, p. 38). And some of the most archaic advice is given in Hine's article under the heading "Style." Here she says writers must "polish their style" by being "simple and concise," by being "precise," by "using verbs instead of abstract nouns," and by "breaking up noun clusters and stacked modifiers" (pp. 40-41).

I would, if I were to continue in this vein, be unfair to *The Rites of Writing*, since it is generally a pleasant book with more good than bad in it. My greatest concern is how to reconcile articles like Hine's and Landreman's and Hamerstrom's (which I did not discuss, but which begins with the sentence, "Revision - if possible - is to be avoided," and continues in the same paragraph with this caveat: "revision is an admission of failure: 'there is no excuse. . . in not being properly prepared before you *start* writing'" (p. 53)), with the other pieces in this book and current theory and practice, both of which are in direct opposition to the advice given in these three pieces. I supposed mixed messages are inevitable in a book of this sort—diverse authors with varying points of view—but readers should be aware that these pieces, in particular, do not reflect the current state of the art of writing. Which leads me to my final comment which is actually a comment about reading. Whether you are formally reviewing a book or not, being a critical reader—bringing all the knowledge, insight, and information you have on a subject to your reading—is the essential and quintessential ingredient for accepting or rejecting what you read. And that's how readers should read *The Rites of Writing*.