

1-1-1988

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### Recommended Citation

Lotto, Edward (1988) "The Texts and Contexts of Writing," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1, Article 4.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1164>

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## The Texts and Contexts of Writing

Edward Lotto

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Writing centers are exceptionally complex places, in part because they are the meeting ground of a number of different contexts. Students bring their own context with them, everything from their perception of the expectations of the teacher who made the assignment to what they have learned from their previous teachers. This knowledge itself exists within the context of all their previous experience of schooling. In addition, the actual context of the discipline in which the student is writing plays an important role in what goes on. And on top of all this, tutors bring their own context, which depends on their training and experience. In a sense, writing center tutors don't deal in a single truth but, instead, in the rhetorical business of balancing several versions of the truth.

Of course, this complexity is just the mirror, the *speculum* as they would have it in the middle ages, of the complexity every writer faces when writing. In some ways, the value of a writing center can be measured by the accuracy of the mirror it creates, for, as Stephen North has said, "Teachers, as teachers, do not need, and cannot use, a writing center: only writers need it, only writers can use it" ("Idea" 440). Unlike most writing teachers, who work primarily in the controlled environment of the classroom, the writing center tutor works in the relatively uncontrolled world of the writer writing. In this work the tutor needs to know as much as possible about the other contexts that inhabit the writing center.

To find out something about the contexts imposed by other disciplines, those outside the relatively familiar one of the English Department, I decided to take advantage of the research opportunities offered by the increasing number of students from disciplines outside of English who were

using the writing center at Lehigh University. These students are increasing in number because Lehigh, like many other universities throughout the country, has instituted an upper-level writing requirement which students must satisfy with a writing-intensive course in their major. I hoped to involve the writing center more fully in these writing-intensive courses.

The texts I used in my study came from three writing-intensive courses taught during the Spring 1987 semester. Before the semester started, I sent letters to all the faculty members teaching writing-intensive courses inviting them to participate in a project which would take up a limited amount of their time but which would result in increased attention for their students' writing from the writing center. Three faculty members agreed to participate, one each in history, government, and computer science. The "texts" I received from these particular classes consisted of interviews with the instructors about their sense of what makes writing good in their discipline as well as their perception of the typical kinds of problems their students face in writing, the students' papers and the instructors' comments on them, interviews with the instructors about the implications of their comments, interviews with the Writing Center tutors about their work with the students, and my own work tutoring the students.

From these texts I hoped to build a reading that would help explain the differences between the disciplinary contexts for writing and would help my writing tutors in their work. I did not, however, want to find the truth about these matters with a capital "T." In many ways, the strength of a reading like this is its ability, in North's terms, "to promote uncertainty" ("Writing" 259). It doesn't promote the illusion of progress in knowledge but leads, instead, to a realization of the difficult and tenuous nature of understanding. Its validity will lie not in some statistical test, but in the degree to which other readers see it as being true to their experience and useful in their work. Such is the nature of the humanistic disciplines.

In order to demonstrate my reading of this project, I would like to start with computer science. In this course, called Software Design, the students were divided into groups of five to seven, and each group worked on a software design project such as one to develop a system to keep track of all the keys at the university or one to allow English teachers to comment internally on students' papers on a computer disk. To explain its software design product, each group had to write a large number of documents, ranging from a discussion of the system's requirements to a user's manual, and each of these documents had to fit a particular form.

As in many writing courses in science, the form that the students had to follow was carefully defined. This concern for form is a sign of the belief in the sciences that knowledge lies outside language and that this knowledge is

probably logical and orderly. This same belief was apparent when the faculty at Lehigh developed the grading procedures for writing-intensive courses. The scientists insisted that the students in the courses get two grades, one for content and one for writing, even though the humanists were unhappy with that decision. In the humanities, scholars tend to believe that knowledge can't exist outside language or some symbol system and that in using sign systems human beings are creating knowledge, a belief argued strenuously in the recent book by Knoblauch and Brannon, *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*.

One reason the sciences hold their belief about language is that they do indeed work with events that are to some degree outside natural language, events about which there is no room for disagreement. Everyone can agree about whether or not the bacteria grow or die; about what the dial says, or whether the computer program works. Of course the sciences limit themselves to these kinds of projects by declaring that anything which is not like this—which is not, in their language, observable—doesn't exist or at least is not worthy of serious consideration. This method works marvelously well in the realm of the sciences, although it does not work so well in disciplines that have to do with the social interactions among human beings.

Part of this allegiance to knowledge outside language stems from the reliance in the sciences on formal logic. These rules, which are especially influential in computer science, divide things up and then allow us to reconnect them only within logic's own strict laws of cause and effect. In writing their documents, the students in the computer science course in essence had to translate from the structure imposed by their work with computers into the structure of English. The problems inherent in that translation became clear during my interview with the instructor. She said that inconsistency would be one of the major errors in her students' papers. And indeed, problems in switching verb tense were among the most common errors noted by the teacher on the papers. Another major problem was the question of pronoun agreement. Both of these concerns reflect the scientist's concern for logic as does the strict hierarchical structure of all the writing.

The situation is very different for government and history. The instructor in history talked to me about the importance of the students' showing a sense of history, by which he meant that they should be able to place themselves in a different place and time. Another important problem faced by the students of history is the difficulty of telling what is important from what is not. The important things are the particular parts of the historical period that help to define it, although this is a reciprocal arrangement since the definition of the historical period helps us find out what is important. The student has to find a way to enter into this circle of knowledge, just as in

hermeneutics readers have to find a way to enter circles of knowledge that are outside their historical horizon.

Many of the same issues surfaced in the government course, which was really a course on legal cases having to do with civil rights. The instructor here talked about the difficulties the students would have in tracing the important decisions and telling them from the unimportant ones. This question is really one of value, an issue which is a major focus of the humanities in general. In order to distinguish the important cases from the unimportant, the government instructor simply asked the students to plunge into the cases themselves. This strategy, that of immersion in the texts, is common in the humanities. Certainly in literature an obsession with the text itself is common. In this immersion, the material becomes part of the person who deals with it.

The major difference between law and history on the one hand and computer science on the other is that context is so important in the first. Or to put it a bit more precisely, in computer science context exists in an abstract set of rules and in observable actions whereas in the humanities context exists in a set of texts. This difference is much like the one drawn by Burke between positive and dialectical terms. Positive terms are the language of perception and dialectical terms are the language of "*Action and Idea*" (184). One is the language for getting things done in the physical world, and the other is for persuasion and understanding among human beings. It is this difference in their belief about the relationship between knowledge and language that leads to the difference between disciplines that are text-based and those that are not. And it is this difference that leads to the different problems faced by the students in the two kinds of courses.

Of the first set of papers turned in to the history instructor, only one or two were acceptable. The papers had the usual run of problems to be found in most undergraduate papers, but the one failing that made them unacceptable was their lack of a thesis. They had no controlling idea to hold together all the facts that the students had gleaned from their textbook about Imperial Germany, the topic of the course. They failed to provide a thesis in spite of a clear statement demanding one on the assignment sheet and in spite of the emphasis placed on unifying essays with a thesis in the two-semester freshman course that all Lehigh students have to take. This failure testifies to the difficulty of developing a thesis, especially when facing a mass of new and often contradictory material. A workable thesis is not something to be thought up in an idle hour and then applied to the material at hand. Its existence depends on a complex and interwoven context that is in many ways the defining characteristic of a discipline. It is this context that decides whether or not a thesis is trivial, interesting, or even defensible.

To understand better this relationship between thesis and context, I would like to turn to the government course. In this course, each student was assigned a Supreme Court case. The first assignment was simply to write a synopsis of the case. However, the instructor did ask the students to say something in the introduction about the importance of the case, a request close to asking for a thesis. The students who did well on this assignment wrote a clear synopsis and the ones who did poorly wrote a confusing one, but very few of the students had anything to say about the importance of the case. Even the student who wrote the best synopsis ignored the teacher's requirements for the introduction and simply plunged into a description of the case. The teacher's comments on this paper were, "Re-do introduction," "Is this [information] of sufficient import to be in your introductory paragraph? No!" and "What is case all about? Mitigating factors in imposition of death penalty under 8th and 14th [amendments]." Clearly the teacher wants the student to place the case within the legal and social context that makes it important. The fact that even the best student did not do so shows the difficulty in making sense of the context. The importance of the case, the sense of what it is all about, is like the thesis in the history course only in the law course the context that makes the thesis important is easier to see. It doesn't exist in a set of commentaries on texts and readings of these commentaries and texts by a carefully chosen group of practitioners of the discipline—readings which are developed and passed on in the graduate seminars held by that discipline—but instead in a relatively accessible set of commentaries on court cases that is ordered, cross-indexed, and computerized.

In fact, the best student in the law course did have many hints in her paper about the importance of the case, including a quote from the decision by the Supreme Court that the death penalty statute under consideration, that of Ohio, was "incompatible with the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments." The threads which would have led this student to her "thesis" were in her hands, at least in the sense that she copied them verbatim from her reading, but she still failed to realize they were so close.

Part of the reason for this student's failure to discuss the importance of the case certainly had to do with the limitations of time and the difficulty of just getting all the facts of the case straight, but the fact that she did get so close to the thesis without knowing it indicates that her immersion in the texts is leading her in the right direction. Although the case with law is a bit artificial since the commentaries on the cases tend to state their importance, it is really not much different from other text-based disciplines like literature. In teaching literature, how often are we satisfied, even pleased, with papers that have as a thesis a minor modification of some other thesis the student has read about?

And even in the study of composition, how often do we read articles in the best journals that are simply applications of some idea from another field to writing? Such a process is both inevitable and enlightening since an idea transferred from one field to another often changes in important ways. What the students in the law course are doing may seem simple, but in fact it is the first step to the professional writing that creates a discipline, and this first step is a large and important one. Once the student can recognize the thesis in the writings of the Supreme Court, she will have come a long way towards being able to find one of her own. In this, as in many disciplines, learning to see is one of the most important skills.

The situation is somewhat different in computer science. Although learning to see is still important, I suspect, this seeing is not done through writing but in other ways. In the humanities, students demonstrate they can “see” by finding a thesis that orders a group of texts, or the parts of a single text, in a way that shows the relationships among the texts and their relative importance. In computer science, the students learn to see in different ways. The first is to immerse themselves in the technical problems of their field. Since computer science is so heavily dependent on mathematics and logic, this immersion helps to shape the criteria of consistency and conformity to the order of formal logic. The second is to deal with the pragmatic world of getting things done, of explaining what has gone on and what will. Many of the writing problems that the tutors dealt with arose from this sort of situation.

For example, a group that was working on a program to gather and store information from various departments at the university wanted to solve the problem of how to create a system that would ensure that one department couldn’t get into the files of another department. To explain their strategy for developing such a system, they wrote, “To ensure confidentiality, we will begin by writing a series of small programs among our team that will experiment with different password and user name systems. Once we have developed this on a small scale, we can move this idea to the larger scope of the project.” When I first read this, I had no idea of what the group was going to do. Only after a 15 minute discussion with the group did I realize that each team member would write a test program, and then the other team members would try to break its confidentiality. The program that was hardest to break would become the model for the project.

The problems in the writing of these computer science students have to do with ambiguities of reference and vague “code” words, as Linda Flower refers to them in *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*. In fact, the best tutoring strategies for students in the computer science course come from books like Flower’s text and Lanham’s *Revising Prose*. These practical works, and the theoretical work that attempts to justify their strategies, Hirsch’s

*Philosophy of Composition*, depend for their justification on a separation between knowledge and language. For them, knowledge consists of something that happens in the world and that is subject to independent verification. This is the very belief that underlies most of the sciences; it is no accident that writing strategies developed from this belief work for students in computer science.

It is important to remember, however, that the work of Lanham, Flower, and in particular, Hirsch, has not been received with universal acclaim by scholars in composition. The distinctions drawn by the critics of these works are the important ones to keep in mind for tutors who want to work across disciplines. These critics claim that Hirsch, Lanham, and Flower conceive of communication too narrowly, simply as a method for conveying pre-established information. It can be argued that even in the sciences, communication has far more to do with creating a community of discourse than it does with simply transferring information, but the creation of scientific communities is done in sign systems different from natural language, and in these disciplines natural language is subject to pressures from the other sign systems and is conceived of primarily as a transparent medium of communication. Thus, tutors who are not trained in the sciences are limited to working with language as if it were a transparent medium, certainly a debatable assumption, but one that makes pragmatic sense.

The situation is quite different in government and history. In these text-based disciplines, tutors would lose much of their value if they limited themselves to matters of clarity and style. Doing so would cast them into the role too often seen in other disciplines as the only one English teachers are capable of filling, the policemen of comma splices and the guardians of arcane and often frivolous rules about language that don't matter to anybody else. In a project like this, I certainly would not recommend using inexperienced tutors who are still developing both their own sense of text-based disciplines and their abilities as tutors, and I also fear that in tutoring in more advanced courses we might get in over our heads, but in these junior, humanities courses at Lehigh University and for the experienced tutors I worked with, our knowledge of the workings of texts and our general sense of thesis and purpose in writing enabled us to deal with substantive issues in the students' papers. We could do so because we shared with the disciplines of government and history an understanding of the way in which text-based disciplines work and a belief that knowledge exists in that intertextual network.

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