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ABSTRACT

A language-centered social interactionist approach toward writing and written communication involve writing and reading as acts of negotiation. Effective writing, which enables writers and readers to construct and share understanding, is a process of interpersonal contextualization. An analysis of the working drafts and revision of the introductory section of one student writer's text demonstrates how key textual features function reflexively to establish and sustain the rational grounds of writing and reading as sense-making social practices. An important pedagogical implication of this framework for understanding writing is that writer-reader classroom interactions need to be intensively text-centered, a concern too often neglected in current process-oriented instructional design. Developing writers need to witness the on-line effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of their texts as rational accounts of the working contexts that enable readers to make sense of their efforts. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

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Text, Context, and Shared Understandings: Refocusing on "Accountability" in Student Writing

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Abstract:

In this paper I outline a *language-centered social interactionist* approach toward writing and written communication. Writing and reading, in this view, are acts of *negotiation*. Consequently, texts are said to communicate successfully when they effectively index or *account for* the mutually oriented work that enables writers and readers to construct and share understandings. Effective writing, in other words, is described as a *process of interpersonal contextualization*. A brief analysis of the working drafts and revisions of the introductory section of one student writer's text is offered to demonstrate how key textual features function *reflexively* to establish and sustain the rational grounds (i.e., interpersonal contexts) of writing and reading as sense-making social practices. One important pedagogical implication of this framework for understanding writing is that writer-reader classroom interactions need to be intensively *text-centered*, a concern too often neglected in current process-oriented instructional design. Developing writers need to witness the on-line effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of their texts as rational accounts of the working contexts that enable readers to make sense of their efforts.

Biographical information:

I am a doctoral candidate in Composition Studies at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, and expect to complete my degree by Spring 1994. I have taught beginning and advanced courses in writing, reading, and U.S. culture to both native and ESL students at the university, and currently serve as Editorial Assistant to *Written Communication*. My principle research interests involve systemic-functional, social semiotic, and ethnomethodological descriptions of the interpersonal contexts of academic writing. The working title of my dissertaion is "Negotiating role relationships in academic writing: Linguistic processes of contextualization." Publications include "When is a text explicit? Formalist and dialogical conceptions" (with Martin Nystrand, 1991) and "Where did composition studies come from? An intellectual history" (with Martin Nystrand & Stuart Greene, in press).

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My current work examines some of the ways in which college writers use language to negotiate the complex private and public contexts that bear upon their writing. More specifically, I try to describe the kinds of verbal and written language choices these student writers make as they try to construct, represent, sustain, and ultimately share an ongoing sense of the key contextual circumstances that ground their efforts after meaning. As such, I mean to demonstrate how language functions to mediate context and cognition for these student writers and their readers.

Today I want to share one strand of my thinking about a dynamic interpretive relationship between text, context, and shared understandings. I want to argue that the meanings communicated in writing can be conceptualized usefully as *negotiated* constructs, or the concerted accomplishments of writers and their readers. Written texts communicate successfully not when they "represent" meaning unambiguously for all to see, but rather when they effectively index or *account for* the particular functional conditions--or what I call the *generative contexts*--that enable writers and readers to work out and share understandings. I will argue, then, that effective writing (and reading, for that matter) is essentially a *process of contextualization*.

This view of context and shared understandings as the ongoing, textually mediated and concerted accomplishment of writers and their readers is closely related to a family of approaches toward writing and discourse that Marty Nystrand (1989; 1992) and others have characterized collectively as *social interactionist theory*. The central premise of a social interactionist theory of writing is that meaning is never constructed wholly by individual writers or readers, one working in isolation from the other, but rather is always in some very fundamental respects the mutual accomplishment of their joint venture. Texts, therefore, are described as sites of negotiation: writers construct texts in consideration of the perceived needs, purposes, and abilities of their readers, and readers attempt to understand those same texts with an eye fixed to the presumed purposes of their authors. This is to say that writing and reading are largely acts of *interpersonal contextualization*.

In writing, however, interpersonal contexts are always somewhat problematic. Writing differs from speech precisely because writers and readers typically do not share an immediate communicative context. Yet this does not mean that effective texts must function autonomously, but rather that writing and reading must lean heavily--perhaps more heavily than speech--on *linguistic* processes of contextualization (see Brandt, 1986; 1990). Moreover, the interpersonal contexts of school settings are particularly problematic. Typically student authors have little choice but to play the role of novice in their writing. They write *about* experts (primarily the "great thinkers" that constitute our academic disciplines) and they write *for* experts (mainly their teachers), and this represents a uniquely skewed relation, one which seems to leave little room for any real "negotiation" of their respective interests (see Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1976; Langer & Applebee, 1987). Alternatively, in our more "progressive" classrooms, students write for their peers. They share and

critque each other's work, helping each other as only "truly interested" readers can. At least that is what a "good" writing teacher directs them to do. And then, of course, at the end of the required course--or worse yet, at least in the case of Freshman Writing at my university, the pre-required course--they are graded anyway. Again, the ways in which student writers and readers might negotiate the complex interpersonal role relations of these writing classrooms are by no means clear.

One productive line of social interactionist thought about how students work to negotiate such problematic interpersonal contexts for their writing derives from an *ethnomethodological* approach toward discourse outlined by sociologists of language (for example: Garfinkel [1967], Kjolseth [1972], Cicourel [1973], Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson [1984], Heap [1991]). Applying this framework to the study of writing, I examine how the language student writers use functions to *account for* the on-line processes by which they make ongoing sense of the key generative contexts that make their writing both privately and publicly sensible. In other words, my work looks to demonstrate how student texts function *reflexively* to constitute and sustain the rational grounds--or for my purposes, the interpersonal contexts--of writing and reading as sense-making social practices.

My handout today offers a brief analysis of the working drafts and revisions of the introductory paragraph of one student writer's text to demonstrate how key textual features function to account for the complex interpersonal role relations (writer-reader, writer-teacher, and writer-source) that bear upon the writing task.

I examine these contextualizing language features on two levels of text structure. At the level of *message structure* (Rommetveit, 1974) I examine the sequencing of propositions as indices of what might be thought of as an underlying or implicit writer-reader dialogue, where one proposition both "responds," as it were, to a presumed reader's anticipated reaction to prior propositions, as well as sets the stage for the sequencing of subsequent propositional material. This carefully ordered sequencing of textual content is said to constitute--or account for--a condition of intersubjectivity or reciprocity between writer and reader. It is in this condition of mutual attunement--a linguistically mediated "attunement to the attunement of the other" (Rommetveit, 1992)--that writers and readers can be said to share a productive sense of *what's happening* and *between whom* at any given point in a text.

A second level of the analysis examines textual organization from the point of view of *linguistic structure* proper. I draw from Michael Halliday's theory of language as social semiotic (1978) and its correlate systemic-functional linguistics (1985) to show how the writer works to accomplish a potential for meaning by fashioning a direct functional correspondence between his text and the public contexts in which his work finds significance. In Halliday's framework this functional organization of texts serves to mediate context and cognition; it is a consequence of this principled, linguistically mediated relation that meaning can be constructed and shared. Halliday's framework is useful for my own purposes particularly in its analysis of the interpersonal functions of textual features (for example: pronomialization, lexicalization, mood and modality, thematization) and the situational tenor those functions work to account for.

[DISCUSS HANDOUT]

My analysis has some rather obvious limitations. The approach assumes, of course, that the *processes* of interpersonal contextualization are deeply implicated in the written *products* writers produce. Yet the claim that process can be simply "read" from product faces considerable resistance in the field, and rightly so. Of course, no one "*simply* reads" written texts for the processes they implicate; texts carry no more than a *potential* for meaning. Therefore analyses such as this one that purport to examine texts as indices of the processes of their own creation and use require confirming

evidence gained from more conventional process-oriented methodologies (for example: classroom observation, protocol analysis, prospective and retrospective accounts).

Moreover, one might easily object that, after all, we have not learned much about this student's text that is not already perfectly obvious without all the rigor of this kind of close language analysis. My point is, however, that as teachers we ought to seek some principled account of the basis of such implicit understandings about our students' writing. We need to seek ways to understand our "common sense intuitions" about *what's going on* in a text, for once understood, we then have the capacity to raise our students' consciousness as writers as well.

To sum up, the approach toward accountability in student texts I have outlined here provides a framework for investigating sets of questions like the following:

1. How do student writers use the text they produce to construct, represent, and sustain (or account for) the interpersonal contexts that endow their work with a potential for private and public significance?

2. How do these language constructions change across a range of writing tasks? How do they vary with respect to the task type and subject matter of a discourse? What is the role of linguistic mode (for example: speaking vs. writing; informal, impromptu writing vs. formal revised writing) in this variability?

3. How can we conceptualize these interpersonal contexts as negotiated constructs? That is, how do a student writer's representations of role relations evolve across the writing process? And what is the impact of teachers and peers in this ongoing process of negotiation?

In conclusion, I want to suggest that refocusing on accountability in student writing promises significant consequences both for theory about writing as well as for writing instruction. First, the approach contributes to the field's current aim of building a general sociocognitive theory (see Freedman, Dyson, Flower, & Chafe, 1987; Flower, 1989; Flower, Stein, Ackerman, Kantz, McCormick, & Peck, 1990; Greene, 1990; Berkenkotter, 1991; Brandt, 1992; Witte, 1992). The central problem motivating such a theory is how to reconcile a constructivist focus on individual processes of mind with social orientations toward both the general contextual constraints that operate on individuals and the real-time communicative interactions of writers and their readers. An analysis of the accountability of student texts demonstrates some of the ways in which language functions to mediate these sociocognitive relations. More specifically, the approach challenges our traditional notions of a rhetorical context as something *out there*, first to be recognized, then responded to. Rather, even the short analysis I have offered here illustrates that beyond this static notion context is also, or perhaps more importantly, a construction that is negotiated and continuously renegotiated across the writing process. My analysis suggests, in fact, that the context that *counts* is the one the writer takes pains to *account for*.

A second important consequence of this work then is its support of the argument for reintegrating a focus on language processes in the study of student writing. The framework demonstrates some of the ways in which texts, or the *products* of writing, can be read as accounts of the *processes* of interpersonal contextualization. As such, the approach shows how texts function to construct and sustain both the cognitive processes of writing as well as the social processes of written communication.

The framework offers at least two important contributions for writing instruction. First, the analysis of accountability in student writing offers much needed evidence regarding the effectiveness

of process-oriented workshop formats for writing classrooms. By tracking the ongoing processes by which students and teachers negotiate and account for the complex interpersonal contexts for writing through the talk and texts they use to engage each other, strong empirical support can be gained for classroom workshop formats that foreground and facilitate these contingent processes.

Finally, the approach demonstrates the importance of refocusing the work of writing classrooms on the language and texts students and teachers produce to make sense of the complex interpersonal relations that constitute academic writing. Too often, as well intentioned instructors have rightly turned their attention to the importance of fostering good writing and communicative *processes* to facilitate student learning, their classrooms have come to neglect the abiding importance of the verbal and written *products* these processes depend upon. By demonstrating how texts function to account for the ongoing processes by which writers and readers negotiate their private and shared sense of the interpersonal contexts that make writing meaningful, this approach points out a need to correct to this unfortunate neglect.

FIRST DRAFT.

(1) The literary crisis in the United States should not be taken lightly. (2) As Hirsh points out, there has been a serious decline of literate knowledge over the past fifty years. (3) Everyone views differently on what the crisis is and how to go about resolving the crisis. (4) Rose's theory of the power of invitation is definitely a solution that would make a substantial difference.

MESSAGE STRUCTURE.

1. Makes personal claim about seriousness of presumed literacy crisis.

< Why not? What literacy crisis? Who says so? >

2. Offers historical evidence of crisis, claiming consensus with Hirsch as support.

< OK, fine. Can't we just fix the problem? >

3. Makes personal claim problematizing nature of crisis and its solution.

< What's the answer then? >

4. Offers personal evaluation of Rose's approach as solution.

LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE.

1. Definite determiner the: Presumes writer-reader consensus on existence of crisis.

   Modal should: Construes claim as directive (reader-oriented).

2. Thematizes Hirsch: Writer-source consensus fortifies personal claim. But source's claim (minor clause) remains subordinate to personal claim (main clause).

   Serious: Adds emphatic modality to historical evidence supporting claim.

3. Thematizes pronomial everyone: Adds emphatic modality to problematizing claim.

   Mood: Embedded (but transformed) questions what the crisis is and how to go about resolving the crisis promote (attenuated) writer-reader engagement.

4. Thematizes Rose's theory: Resumes writer-source consensus.

   Definitely...would...substantial: Adds emphatic modality to evaluative personal claim.

SUMMARY: WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE, AND BETWEEN WHOM?

In this passage we find a writer making strong personal claims regarding a literacy crisis. The message structure of the passage accounts for a familiar problem-solution context, and the fairly clear subordination of the sources to the writer's own claims in this structure is perhaps an attempt to account for the more specific context emphasized by the instructor in the assignment. The linguistic structure of the passage functions to presume a situation of consensus between the writer and both his sources and his readers, and a fairly consistent emphatic modality throughout suggests it is a situation of some seriousness. The writer constructs a context of engagement with his readers through his manipulation of mood (embedded questions), but transforms those questions to attenuate that

engagement in each case, as is typical in formal academic writing situations. The interpersonal context of the passage can be characterized by at least three evident role relations:

writer-reader: consensus; writer as informed advisor

writer-sources: consensus; writer as reviewer/evaluator

writer-teacher: compliance; writer completes task of making personal claims about a significant issue while integrating the support of sources (without yielding his own personal voice)

SECOND DRAFT.

(1) The United States definitely has a literary crisis as the authors Mike Rose, David Bartholomae, and E. D. Hirsch, Jr. point out in their books. (2) However these three authors have different opinions on what exactly the crisis is and how to go about dealing with it. (3) The ideas of these authors on how to deal w/ the crisis will resolve the crisis.

MESSAGE STRUCTURE.	*LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE.*
1. Personal claim establishing factuality of literacy crisis, supported immediately by observed consensus with three sources.	1. Definitely: Adds emphatic modality to personal claim establishing factuality of crisis.
	Thematizes personal claim of factuality (vs. support of sources).
< Well, what do they think it's all about, and what do they say we should do about it? >	
2. Contrasts sources' opinions on the nature of the crisis and its solution.	2. Thematizes logical marker however: Foregrounds personal logic to problematize implication of consensus between sources (from previous sentence).
< So will their ideas work? >	Mood: Embedded (but transformed) questions what exactly the crisis is and how to go about dealing with it promote (attenuated) writer-reader engagement.
3. Offers evaluative claim about sources' solutions.	3. Thematizes the ideas of the authors: Foregrounds sources' claim (vs. writer's).
	Mood: Embedded, but transformed question how to deal w/ the crisis sustains (attenuated) writer-reader engagement.
	Will: Adds mid-range modality to evaluative claim about sources.

SUMMARY.

Here again we find the writer beginning with a fairly strong personal claim, but in this case it is a claim asserting the factuality (vs. presumption) of a literacy crisis. The message structure changes from the previous draft, however, as the writer moves more quickly (same sentence) to assert a consensus with (not one, but three) sources, a move that is perhaps necessitated given the new lack of presumptive factuality accounted for in this revision. Still, the original problem-solution situation is sustained, and some (minimal) degree of balance between the sources and the writer's own claims remains. The linguistic structure of the revision is essentially like the original, with the exceptions of a less emphatic modality and the deletion of the initial (reader oriented) directive. The interpersonal context accounted for in the passage might now be reconfigured slightly as:

writer-reader: writer as informer (no presumed consensus; writer yields advisor role)

writer-sources: consensus; writer as reviewer/evaluative arbiter

writer-teacher: compliance, with writer moving even more deliberately toward task of critical synthesis of source readings, despite early signs (weaker modality) of lost voice

THIRD DRAFT.

(1) The authors, Mike Rose, David Bartholomae, and E. D. Hirsch, Jr. point out in their books that there is definitely a literacy crisis in the United States. (2) However these three authors have different opinions about what exactly the crisis is and how to go about dealing with it. (3) Together the ideas of these authors will resolve the crisis.

MESSAGE STRUCTURE.

1. Summarizes sources' claims about the factuality of a literacy crisis.

<Same as second draft.>

2. Same as second draft.

<All these ideas--will they work?>

3. Offers evaluative claim about sources' combined (vs. individual) solutions.

LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE.

1. Thematizes the authors: Signals review/summary (vs. original claims).

   Definitely: Adds emphatic modality to sources' claim.

2. Same as second draft.

3. Same as second draft, but here thematizes combination (together) of sources: Emphasizes synthesis (vs. writer-source consensus).

   Embedded question of second draft is deleted.

SUMMARY.

Here we see a significant shift from the strong personal claims about a literacy crisis that began the first two drafts to what is essentially a simple review/summary of the sources. The message structure

of this revision sustains the account of a basic problem-solution context evident in the earlier versions, but here it is a context defined mainly by the sources, with no move to assert writer-source consensus. Clearly the balance has shifted here to foreground the sources' (vs. writer's) claims. The linguistic structure of this version is again similar to the earlier drafts, with the important exception of the writer's new move to thematize the sources to initiate the paragraph. The consequence of this move is to account for a new situation entirely, one that is now organized essentially by the sources, or perhaps the writer's claims about the sources, but certainly no longer by the writer's own claims about a literacy crisis.

writer-reader: writer as informer

writer-sources: writer as reviewer/evaluative arbiter

writer-teacher: partial compliance, but now with considerable loss of personal voice; legacy of schooling emerges to redefine context (after all, good "students" [vs. writers] don't make original claims, they review and react)

FINAL DRAFT.

(1) The authors, Mike Rose, David Bartholomae, and E. D. Hirsch, Jr. point out different flaws dealing with the literacy of the United States. (2) Hirsch believes our nation needs to become culturally literate, Bartholomae feels the student needs to invent the University when he writes, and Rose points out the power of the invitation. (3) I feel if Bartholomae and Hirsch would take in consideration Rose's idea of the power of the invitation, it would make a substantial difference in the literacy of the U.S.

MESSAGE STRUCTURE.

1. Summarizes sources' claims about flaws in dealing with [U.S. literacy] (vs. presumption or established factuality of a literacy crisis).

< What flaws they mean? >

2. Elaborates sources' independent solutions.

< What do you think we should do? Who's right? >

3. Offers evaluative synthesis of sources' solutions.

LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE.

1. Crisis (third draft) is relexicalized to flaws.

   Emphatic modality of sources' claims is deleted.

2. Thematizes sources independently in conjoined major clauses.

3. Thematizes I feel: Attenuates subsequent evaluative claim about sources.

   Conditional modality (if...would...[then] it would): Asserts logic of writer's evaluative claim about sources.

   Substantial: Adds emphatic modality to writer's evaluative claim about sources.

SUMMARY.

In this final draft we observe the review/summary context of the previous draft sustained, but here with the writer's role of evaluative arbiter (since second draft) more fully articulated. The message structure of this fourth version sustains the original problem-solution situation, also offering a new elaboration of the sources' positions (suggested by the instructor in his review of the third draft). Some effort to restore the earlier sense of a writer-based context in the final sentence is also evident. The linguistic structure of this final version seems also to account for a restored sense of the writer's role in this situation (rethematization; conditional modality foregrounding writer's logic), although a more cautious stance toward the issue (relexicalization; attenuated modality generally) is also evident. The interpersonal context accounted for in this final version of the introductory paragraph might be represented as:

writer-reader: writer as informer

writer-sources: writer as reviewer/evaluative arbiter

writer-teacher: partial compliance, with evidence of efforts to synthesize more deliberately and to recover the personal voice yielded in the previous version; review/react situatation is essentially sustained

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