DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 443 CS 214 516

AUTHOR Emmel, Barbara A.
TITLE Evidence as a Stage of Knowing in Composition.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Epistemology; Higher Education; *Methods; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory; *Evidence; *Prown (Jules)

ABSTRACT

The study of composition is in need of a methodology to teach students about the creation of evidence and the epistemological role that it plays in all writing. For many students "evidence" is an absolute, an assortment of facts found in encyclopedias, graphs, tables, census studies, surveys, almanacs, and so on. For most instructors, however, the term "evidence" connotes a process by which certain conclusions are reached. The theory of art historian Jules Prown offers one means of thinking about evidence as process. Prowns's methodolgy is divided into three consecutive inquiry stages centered around an object or painting: a descriptive stage in which observations are made; a deductive stage in which initial realizations, ideas, conclusions and insights are formed; and a speculative stage in which the former deductions are shaped into a whole and the question of "so what?" is entertained. By moving through levels of inquiry in these three stages, Prown has created a set of epistemological moves in which each stage of thought--each an end it itself--becomes evidence for the next stage. An examination of George Stubbs' "The Reapers" illustrates the importance of each of these stages Prown proposes. The point is not to import Prown theory into the classroom but to learn from its implications: surprisingly little attention has been paid, not only by composition scholars but by scholars from all disciplines, to the problem of what constitutes evidence in scholarship. (TB)

EVIDENCE AS A STAGE OF KNOWING IN COMPOSITION

by Barbara A. Emmel
University of Hartford

I. THE PROBLEM: EVIDENCE AND THE LACK THEREOF

When I ask students in my advanced composition course in argumentative writing what the word "evidence" means, I can predict their answers: evidence is something you find in the library. It takes a specific form, that of "facts, statistics, data." For my students, evidence is an absolute: it is information solely created for the purpose of serving as proof in some form. It can be found in encyclopedias, graphs, tables, census studies, surveys, almanacs, reference books, and so on.

The result of this misconception is that when we ask students "what is your evidence?" in order to get them to think more about the origins of their various claims and conclusions, the question comes across as one of methodology. Did you do enough research, we seem to be asking? Yet in using the word evidence, we are asking an epistemological question instead, I believe: how did you come to realize the conclusion you have arrived at? What information and what ideas led to these conclusions? We want, in short, for our students to see that evidence is a stage of their own thinking, a stage that earns the name "evidence" only when

the ideas it contains are transformed into that role by the creation of conclusions which depend on these earlier ideas for support.

The ideas that make up a stage of evidence in our own thinking may well contain information found in books. Or such information may be created information, such as derives from our own personal experience. The point is not where we get the information, but rather what we do with it to make it part of our own knowledge.

As yet, we lack in composition a theory about how we interact with information, either in its creation or in its discovery, to transform it into a stage of discovery in our epistemological journey towards knowledge and understanding. Evidence is present in every kind of writing, yet its image is mired in research rather than creativity. Many of us may even be teaching evidence as a stage of thinking essential to all writing--but we're just are not calling it evidence.

What we need is a theory of evidence that makes it possible for us to teach the word "evidence" as a positive word, one intimately connected with possibilities for idea exploration, creation, and generation. We need to teach "evidence" as a stage of discovery connected with the self, but one not limited to personal writing alone. If my the students in my class in argumentative writing are any gauge, they are desperate to feel knowledgeable, and to feel connected to their knowledge. Yet they are frustrated in

that connection because they are so little skilled in the methodologies of assimilating and/or generating information and transforming it into their own knowledge through their own processes of inquiry.

II. PROWN'S METHODOLOGY

As a paradigm for this kind of deeply connected inquiry into writing as a epistemological activity, I would like to turn to a method of inquiry developed by art historian Jules Prown. What is notable about this methodology is the personal engagement it requires in the creation of ideas and information that eventually will become evidence. Thus as a paradigm it has implications for composition (as Prown himself recognized, for it contains a central principle of knowledge construction: that evidence is always, first and foremost, a stage in creating knowledge and not just finding information in a book. Even if we are working with information found in a book, the act of composing requires that we transform it from found information to a stage in our thinking before it can take on any epistemological implications.

Prown's methodology is divided into three consecutive of inquiry stages centered around an object or a painting: a descriptive stage, a deductive stage, and a speculative stage (Roman numerals I, II, and III on the handout). By moving through levels of inquiry in these three stages, Prown has

created a set of epistemological moves in which each stage of thought, each an end in itself, now becomes evidence for the next stage. In the end, the final stage of speculation subordinates, both cognitively and expressively, each of the first two stages to its own insights and conclusions.

Using a summary of this methodology provided on the handout, I would like to illustrate how Prown's methodology works as epistemological inquiry.

The descriptive stage is the starting point, the stage on which all else depends. One cannot start with either of the other two stages, for the information they work with or build on must be created in this first stage. In order for there to be information that will eventually become a stage of thought called "evidence," it must be generated through an exhaustive and encompassing descriptive inquiry.

Time does not allow a thorough or exhaustive analysis of the descriptive detail of "The Reapers," the painting that I will use to illustrate this process.[1] But we can get some of the broad outlines into place, enough to see how the detail generated in the descriptive stage ultimately is transformed into evidence by the ideas of the next stage. And within these broad outlines, I will concentrate on certain details that ultimately get carried through to the final conclusions of much that has been written about "The Reapers." Nonetheless, keep in mind that any conclusion drawn ultimately depends on the kind and range of

observations developed in the descriptive stage, and that one's conclusions may be very different or even indefensible if this first stage is cut short.

STAGE I: Description

Read paragraph on handout:

A. SUBSTANTIAL ANALYSIS

Physical Dimensions:

Approximately 44" by 55"

Picture: 30 1/4 x 40 1/2

Materials:

Wedgwood ceramic plaque (biscuit earthenware)

Enamels, no finish gloss

Unpolished wooden frame

Articulation:

Oval within oval-rectangular frame

Several levels of framing: raised wooden rim

also a raised outer wooden rim

B. CONTENT

1. **Overt Subject Matter:** laborers in a field during haying season, about mid-day, being observed by a superior of some sort, an overseer or member of the gentry, a owner of the field, perhaps.
2. **Symbolic Embellishments:** leafy pattern on frame

C. FORMAL ANALYSIS

1. **Two-Dimensional Organization:**

   a. **Lines:**

Horizontals: the many horizontal layers

the five layers:

the ground

the people

the low line of green

the thin background line of distant blue

the sky and taller trees

All horizontal lines are discontinuous. All are broken by some kind of line--but they do establish a series of interconnected planes in their distinction.

Verticals: the many verticals

the towering trees

the figure on horseback

the distant spire of the church in the background

the haystack

the standing man and woman

the horse and its parts: tail, legs, etc.

Diagonals and Triangles

trees to bottom left

the haystack

the diagonals of the workers' backs

the diagonal line of the dog

imagined diagonal: worker's gaze to overseer's gaze

Curves and Circles

the entire picture

the circles and curves of the clouds

the circles and curves of the trees

the circles of the faces (and within them, the circles of the eyes)

the curves of hats

the curves of the workers' backs

the curves of the sickles

the curve of the horse's neck

the circle of the cask lying on the ground

What the above process is doing is creating awareness. The investigator is engaging in both a cognitive and semantic activity, that of seeing, perceiving and naming what is seen and perceived. This inquiry leads to a great many observations, all of which are laying the ground for development of further ideas and insights.

b. Designs: repeated lines that form patterns

Here things begin to get more interesting:

1. The curve of the hats: a long curve from the left to the left to the right, in which the hat of the overseer creates a high point to the curve.

2. This line of the hats merely punctuates the pattern that the workers' bodies make, as they curve more downwards, toward the ground. So the line is both a punctuation and a staggered rhythm.

3. The white sleeves of the workers and the downwards curves they make, lines pointing to the ground.

4. The curve of the horse head also as curve that pushes downwards, pushing on the head of the worker curved to the ground.

5. Other downward curves, all pointing to the ground: the cask, the dog's curved body, the clouds, the tree tops, the hats, and most importantly, the sickles.

2. Three-dimensional Organization: "forms in space, whether actual in a three-dimensional object or represented in a pictorial object."

a. Shapes

Most predominant are the figures, the workers who themselves are placed into various positions and relationships.

b. Relationships between shapes

1. All of the figures are on the same plane, all working in a fairly straight line. Why? Of these figures, the workers are all facing the same direction--they are all looking toward the overseer.

The overseer himself is facing from the opposite direction. Is this a deliberate oppositional?

At this point, it is worth noting that Prown is aware that the lines between description and deduction may begin to blur, as the mind jumps ahead to create conclusions. "Deductions," he notes, "almost invariably creep into the initial description." Prown warns against this, because deductions cut short the process of observing that will give a wealth of material to work with, but he also notes that the investigator can take advantage of the act of jumping to conclusions by asking why? Why am I so quick to want to see this?

2. There are two triangles that dominate the picture, the triangle of the overseer, his horse, and the worker curved under the head of the horse (with the overseer's hat at the apex of the triangle) and the one formed by the woman and the man on either side of the stack of sheaves. The two triangles weight each side of the picture.

The triangle on the left breaks the plane of the wheat by virtue of the hats of the man and woman, but their hats do not reach as high as the apex of the overseer's.

3. The male figures are all touching in some fashion. The woman is divided from the men by the intrusion of the haystack. But her hat is also, of the workers, the highest reaching.

3. Other Formal Elements: "the nature, extent, and pattern of distribution" of

a. Color

1. Lower and Upper

Lower half: warm, yellow, red browns--the environment of the workers

Upper half: cool blues, whites, greens (the environment of the overseer, the town beyond)

2. The Right Side and the Left Side: split the painting into quadrants or halves and see what happen.

The somberness of the right hand side

The lightness of the left side

3. The richness of color in the horse (why?)

Valued more than people?

The light colors of the workers' clothing?

The dark colors of the overseer's clothing?

The red of the woman's shawl, which matches the red of the horse.

b. Light

The darkness of the right side

The lightness of the left side

c. Textures

Cannot be discussed here, since we do not have the original painting in front of us.

You can hardly hold back from deduction at this point, because all of the foregoing details piles up and the mind

wants to start interpreting it. Thus the detail of the descriptive stage becomes, epistemologically, evidence for the formation of insights, realizations, ideas, conclusions, drawn in the deductive stage, which in turn functions as evidence from which the conclusions of the speculative stage can be drawn.

Before we examine the relationship of the foregoing stage to the deductive stage, I want to anticipate the power of that deductive stage to turning descriptive detail into evidence by setting up a contrast in advance between the findings of many of Prown's students and a recent review of a show at Yale that included "The Reapers." The show was titled "Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890." The reviewer, Michael Rush, writes that "British landscapes, peopled with well-dressed, serene and pious-looking peasants, are fakes. That is, they do not at all reflect the reality of peasant life as lived on the farmlands south of London.

He goes on to say that:

> "Peasants were a starved, overworked and rebellious lot whose plight anticipated the rise of socialism.
>
> The painters who created such serene landscapes were consciously distorting the truth of what they observed for the sake of perpetuating a myth about peasant life.... many of these artists were adhering to a prescribed

scenario, set forth by the Royal Academy of Art in London, about how farm life should be portrayed.

"The artists also were providing their patrons, the landed gentry, with the unthreatening and optimistic scenes the rich folk wanted to adorn the walls of their manors."

II. DEDUCTION

Even a brief discussion of the deductive stage reveals that Prown's students were led, through their personal engagement with the picture, to construct different interpretations of "The Reapers," interpretations that saw the painting as a more conscious work, perhaps even a subversive one with ominous overtones about the ongoing relationship between the gentry and their workers.

But it is the created detail of the first stage, description, that makes deductive insights possible, especially in the area of what Prown calls "intellectual deduction."[2]

One possible idea that emerges in the deductive stage is that of the subjugation of the worker. The worker closest to the overseer is visually being pressed into the ground by the powerful line of the diagonal connecting the overseer's head to the horse's head and continuing through the worker to the ground. Both this worker and the worker next to him are bent low, their backs pushed into the ground by the horizontal

line of the far-reaching field of wheat. Their gazes also connect them to the earth as do their sickles.

The powerful theme of subjugation belies the more prettified theme of workers at leisure as suggested Rush. The workers clothes may not look dirty, ragged, or even mussed, but the positions and postures, especially in relationship to the vertical power of the overseer, a power heightened by his position on the horse and by the heavy mass of the trees behind him, tie them to the earth.

Yet within this tone of oppression there is also challenge: the workers are all aligned against the overseer. Two of them confront him directly with their gazes; standing fartherest from the overseer, they are free to stand upright, and even break the unyielding horizontal line of the wheat field with their hats. Their hats symbolize an impending equality in another way, too: the overseer wears the same black hat as the workers. Although his hat is in the higher position now, possibly he too will have to join them some day, for he too is linked by the broad u-shaped curve of hats that pulls him to the ground as well.

Furthermore, although the workers and the overseer appear to be lined up on a single plane, and thus all connected in a way, their different groupings begin to create pictures within pictures. Reading either from right or left, as one adds or takes away a figure, the meaning of the picture changes. [Show this].

If we leave the woman out of the picture, the worker on the left and the overseer hold each other in their gazes, as in a challenge. If we focus only the overseer and the two men immediately before him, their subservient positions become a major theme. If we exclude all three of those from the picture, then the man and woman working with the sheaves of wheat seem more free, more upright, more equal.

All, however, seem frozen into a single moment of time, on a single plane. Their positions are fixed, not fluid. They seem static, not active. Perhaps it is a position that reflects a moment in British history that is about to pass--as it did.

III. SPECULATION

By the time we get to the speculative stage, most of the generative work has been done and speculation takes up the task of shaping the foregoing into a whole. Speculation is that stage that moves into the level of the "so what?" question. Here the writer begins to explore and develop "theories that might explain the various effects observed and felt." In doing so, the writer draws heavily on the details of the first two stages to support these final conclusions. In this way, Prown's methodology is similar to the enthymeme, whose final claim or conclusion doesn't create new information, but rather gives logical shape to a body of underlying information. The information generated in the

descriptive and deductive stages becomes evidence in support of the conclusions of the speculative stage--but evidence is itself, as we have seen, a created phenomenon.

Thus in a piece of writing, the epistemological shape of knowledge is inverted. Speculation is the argument that controls the movement of a piece of writing from beginning to end (as the enthymeme also shows us), and the descriptive and deductive details that support that argument are subordinated to it throughout as evidence--even though it is the creation and realization of these details that first sets the whole argumentative process in motion. The process of creating, developing, and constructing arguments is an epistemological journey made up of many stages--as Prown's methodology has shown.

Speculation thus shapes a piece of writing, although the details of description and deduction are visible throughout, as the following commentary on agricultural paintings of the 1700s and 1800s in England illustrates:

> "Even a cursory glance at images of the nineteenth-century English agricultural landscape shows them to be at odds with the evidence of the social, political and economic circumstances of the agricultural laborer. To read contemporary accounts, or the many twentieth-century histories based on them, one would think that agricultural labourers were not a promising subject for art. All too often they were half-starved, prematurely aged, exploited

and despised by their superiors, whom they in turn hated and feared: they lived in squalid cottages, with little opportunity for a happy family life; their inclinations to poaching or arson revealed little respect for the law of the land and the social hierarchy. And yet paintings of the agricultural landscape are attractive, and the figures contribute to their mood; they are almost invariably soothing and optimistic, not threatening or depressing. Such paintings exaggerate the pleasures of agricultural work, the health and contentment of the male agricultural worker, and the happiness of his wife and children. It is evident that, in most cases, they are vehicles for myth rather than accurate reflections of reality." (Payne 23)

As the foregoing passage reveals, the epistemological journey of creating and using knowledge need not depend solely on cognitive inquiry, although I believe that any theory of evidence ought to include cognitive inquiry as part of its heuristic. Prown also takes into account the possibility of outside sources of information becoming part of the overall epistemology in the "Further Research" subsection. Investigators who turn to social history would learn, for example, of the tremendous economic and social unrest going on in England in the 1700s and 1800s, unrest that would eventually lead to the kind of face-offs between classes depicted in "The Reapers': the Swing riots with

their destruction of threshing machines and property, arson of the harvest haystacks and wheat shocks, the creation of the Corn Laws, the Poor Laws, the Game Laws, and the Enclosure Acts. Each of these laws gave greater power to the gentry and worsened working conditions for the labourer. Thus, by the time that Stubbs painted "The Reapers," conditions were getting worse, not better in the agricultural world.

SECTION IV: CONCLUSION

Although I myself have successfully used Prown's methodology in writing courses, the point of the above exercise isn't to give us a new methodology to import into our comp classes, but rather to examine its implications for composition. Part of those implications, I believe, are that as yet we have no methodology worked out for teaching our students about the creation of evidence (and the transformation of information into evidence) and the epistemological role that evidence plays in all writing. That is, we lack a theory of evidence about how we create and use information to understand the processes of our own minds.

We are not alone in this. Apart from Departments of Philosophy, which teach evidence as part of symbolic logic, few departments if teach the concept of evidence as part of their discipline's epistemology, and as a heuristic. A

recent book from the University of Chicago Press, Questions of Evidence, notes that "surprisingly little attention has been directed toward the central concern of what constitutes evidence in research and scholarship" in the disciplines. And Larry Laudan of the University of Hawaii notes that other than in departments of Philosophy, evidence is typically taught only in law schools, where, paradoxically, it appears in courses on what constitutes inadmissible evidence.

If this charges are true, then they are serious ones, just as is the charge I am making against composition that it lacks a theory of evidence, a theory that should be essential to our discipline. I do think that there are approaches to composition, and activities within those approaches, that do teach students how to write and create evidence--but that they are not so named. Evidence, evoking the worst of the old current traditional paradigm, is an out-of-favor word, one that smacks of prescriptive formalism, the old reason 1, reason 2, and reason 3. What we teach may in fact have potential to contribute to our student's understanding of evidence as epistemology, but if we don't give it that name, they cannot make the connection.

In the end, however, I would argue that it is not just a matter of terminology, but the very way in which we understand writing as an epistemological act, an understanding or approach which sees the entirety of the writing process as a mental journey in which the writers

learns to recognize the individual landscapes of their own minds: a landscape which they both create and explore, and whose creation is intimately tied to further exploration, further ideas, further insights. It's "the further" that seems of such essence here: if they cannot understand the importance of the initial epistemological stages of this journey of knowing and writing, how can they progress to the final stages of knowing what they think and why--and know the entire process as one of their own creation.

OUTLINE OF METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURE FOR ART AND ARTIFACT ANALYSIS

STAGE I: DESCRIPTION

The descriptive stage is a synchronic one in which "description is restricted to what can be observed in the object itself, that is, to internal evidence [which is] read at a particular moment in time. In practice, it is desirable to begin with the largest, most comprehensive observations and progress systematically to more particular details." At this stage, "the analyst must continually guard against the intrusion of either subjective assumptions or conclusions derived from other experience."

The descriptive stage consists of three sub-stages.

A. SUBSTANTIAL ANALYSIS: "a descriptive physical inventory of the object,...an account of the physical dimensions, material, and articulation of the object."

1. **Physical Dimensions**: measurements, weight, etc.

2. **Materials**: type, use, pattern of distribution

3. **Articulation**: "the ways in which the materials are put together in the fabrication of the object"

B. CONTENT: "The next step in description is analysis of content...[its] subject matter....The procedure is iconography in its simplest sense, a reading of overt representations."

1. **Overt Subject Matter**: what the picture or object shows

2. **Symbolic Embellishments**: "decorative designs or motifs, inscriptions, coats of arms or diagrams, engraved or embossed on metal, carved or painted on wood or stone, woven in textiles, molded or etched in glass."

C. FORMAL ANALYSIS: "Finally, and very important, is analysis of the object's form or configuration, its visual character."

1. **Two-dimensional Organization**:

   a. Lines: horizontals, verticals, diagonals, curves, etc.

   b. Designs: repeated lines that form patterns

   c. Areas: size relationships

2. **Three-dimensional Organization**: "forms in space, whether actual in a three-dimensional object or represented in a pictorial object."

   a. Shapes
   b. Relationships between shapes

3. **Other Formal Elements:**

a. Color
b. Light
c. Textures

STAGE II. DEDUCTION

"The second stage of analysis moves from the object itself to the relationship between the object and the perceiver. It involves the empathetic linking of the material (actual) or represented world of the object with the perceiver's world of existence and experience."

A. Sensory Engagement: What the investigator sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels when looking at, touching, or otherwise interacting with the object.

B. Intellectual Engagement: What the foregoing descriptive elements lead you to think about the object. "It is desirable to test one's external knowledge to see if it can be deduced from the object itself and, if it cannot, to set that knowledge aside until the next stage."

"In the case of a pictorial object, there are a number of questions that may be addressed to and answered by the object itself, especially if it is representational. What is the time of day? What is the season of the year? What is the effect on what is depicted of natural forces such as heat and cold or the pull of gravity? In the relation between the depicted world and our world, where are we positioned, what might we be doing, and what role, if any, might we play? How would we enter pictorial space? What transpired prior to the depicted moment? What may happen next?"

C. Emotional Response: How you respond to the object, what feelings it arouses.

STAGE III. SPECULATION

A. Theories and Hypotheses

"The first step in speculation is to review the information developed in the descriptive and deductive stages and to formulate hypotheses. This is the time of summing up what has been learned from the internal evidence of the object itself, turning those data over in one's mind, developing theories that might explain the various effects observed and felt."

B. Program of Research

"The second step in the speculative stage is developing a program for validation, that is, a plan for scholarly investigation of questions posed by the material evidence. This shifts the inquiry from analysis of internal evidence to the search for and investigation of external evidence. Now the methodologies and techniques of various disciplines can be brought into play according to the nature of the questions raised and the skills and inclinations of the scholar."

Finally, Prown notes overall that:

> "The object is not abandoned after the preliminary analysis--description, deduction, speculation--is complete and the investigation has moved to external evidence. There should be continual shunting back and forth between the outside evidence and the artifact as research suggests to the investigator the need for more descriptive information or indicates other hypotheses that need to be tested affectively."

From: Prown, Jules D. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," Winterthur Portfolio 17 (Spring 1982) 1-19.

WORKS CITED

Chandler, James, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry D. Haroofunian, eds. Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; 1994.

Payne, Christiana. Toil and Planty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890. New Have: Yale University Press; 1993.

Prown, Jules D. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," Winterthur Portfolio, 17 (Spring 1982) 1-19.

Rush, Michael. "The Earth Won't Move When You See Yale's 'Toil'." New Haven Register: Sunday, January 30, 1994, Arts Section, E1 and E7

Stubbs, George. "The Reapers." New Haven, CT: Yale Center for British Art.

Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. Time Machines: Artifacts and Culture. New Haven: Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute; 1985.

ENDNOTES

1. Because of difficulty of reproducing a clear and definitive copy of "Reapers" here, I instead recommend that readers locate a museum-quality reproduction of "Reapers" (1795 version, the last to be painted in the "Reapers" series) to look at when reading this paper (if they wish). In general, "Reapers" is one of the most anthologized paintings of its time, and copies of it can easily be found in most works discussing Stubbs individually or British art of the 1700s (especially in those works focusing on themes of the pastoral, nature, and/or the laboring class). Christiana Payne's volume titled Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890 contains an excellent reproduction (see Works Cited).

2. Prown's use of the term "Deduction" to label a stage in the thinking process may or may not involve deduction in its entirely. While it is true that many of the ideas created in this stage do require a deductive move from descriptive detail, sometimes that move might well be inductive instead.