

Rereading Bartholomae and Fulkerson: Two Major Compositionists

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Abstract

This review brings to light key theoretical concerns that preoccupied the thoughts of two perceptive American compositionists: Bartholomae and Fulkerson. In their respective articles “Inventing the University” and “Four Philosophies of Composition”, the two argue strongly about the need for composition instructors to be specific in their writing tasks, and advocate that the writing process should place students at the core and not the periphery of engagements in order to maximize instructional contact between teacher and student. The articles are seminal and rich in content for theoretical, practical, and methodological applications in the modern ESL classroom.

Key words: audience awareness, discourse community, registers, rhetorical knowledge

Introduction

The selection of the conceptual articles authored by David Bartholomae, “Inventing the University”, and Richard Fulkerson, “Four Philosophies of Composition”, represents two seminal contributions in composition scholarship. For one thing, both works are univocal in their call for maximizing the teaching and learning productivity. That is, while Bartholomae raises awareness for the need among composition and writing scholars to be very specific in the demands they make of students, Fulkerson, in much the same way, brainstorms on how this angst could be addressed by providing a clear taxonomy that seems to provide the way forward in conceptualizing the central thesis of Bartholomae. In this paper I critique the key concerns raised by the individual authors, first by attempting a summary, and express some reservations I have in respect of how their discourses could lead the way for scholarship in writing studies.

Bartholomae's Main Concerns

Central to Bartholomae's exegesis, I believe, is that fresh college students are ill exposed to the norms and conventions available in the academic discourse communities. The exposure, he maintains, neglects the "distinctive registers" of specific discourse communities such as the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals, gestures, habits of mind and tricks of persuasion. This deficiency, Bartholomae further argues, in the context of the composition classroom, "makes learning...becomes more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention or discovery" (p. 408). Thus, the author enumerates two basic weaknesses associated with this problem. First, students learn to write within the specific discourse communities as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience. A number of scholars such as Fulkerson (1979), and Bartholomae (1986) himself have contended that audience awareness in composition is perhaps the most critical rhetorical knowledge basic writers will have to muster right from the onset of their college education. Second, a good number of college student writers' frantic efforts at attaining membership within their communities fail because they lack the capacity to find some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of the conventions available in their fields of study.

Many freshmen and women, thus, are bereft of the distinction between writer-based prose and reader-based prose, Bartholomae avers. According to him, although students are very much aware of the demands made of them in their university education, they lack the power to live up to expectation given their inexperience. A student's paper written from this standpoint, the author explains, shows "the record of a writer who has lost himself in the discourse of his

readers” (Bartholomae, 1986: 406). But Bartholomae puts this inefficiency squarely at the doorsteps of the teacher; for him, teachers have not taken bold initiatives at actively involving students into the “real stuff” and practices of the communities in which they belong. The net result, he argues, is that students are found at the fringes of the communities doing things that do not really equip them to enter the Burkean parlor where discourse is privileged.

Despite Bartholomae’s brilliant hermeneutics, I raise two fundamental criticisms in response to his observations. Although it is desirable to see our students become readily initiated in the ways of knowing and doing in their disciplinary communities, first, it must be borne that membership into these communities are not predetermined, static algorithms. In fact, I conceive of the discourse community as a continuum, an intellectual journey from a state of partial ignorance to apprenticeship to colleague—membership, then to a level of self-actualization, or expertise. Thus, it cannot be, as Bartholomae seems to portray, that teachers hardly engage students in the more productive arenas of the communities of practice in which these students find themselves. To be sure, the metaphor of the carpenter apprentice invokes in us a sense of learning around, for example, knowing the different types of planes, wood and liquor. It is when this knowing is perfected that the successful apprentice could then graduate into learning how to plane the wood, and do other things as fit in his vocation. The converse is usually inconceivable if not indefensible! Like this carpenter apprentice, our students have to be exposed, first, to the things they are most familiar with, thereby seeing the truth in “learning from the known to the unknown”. This is surely an entry point for them.

It is also instructive to note that the writing process is not an arcane, calculable scientific inquiry. For the most part, it is the idea of conceiving it as a meticulous art that makes it all the

more exciting. This means that the pedagogical approach being proposed by Bartholomae seems antithetic to the aspirations of composition scholars, especially pro-exclusivists or Neo-Platonists such as Fulkerson (1979) and Berlin (1982). The idea is expressed by Bartholomae that the samples of essays he analyzed were below standards, although he fails to recognize that those were only single essay prompts from individual student-writers, and so may not be entirely representative of their capabilities.

Besides, the argument he advances is far-fetched judging from the point of view of practicality. To say that the scripts displayed a high sense of immaturity because of the shift in voice is amateurish is to suggest that even experienced authors and scholars do not do same. I have known, seen and continually read papers that shift focus in formality, style, tone, voice and even grammar, and yet few of us even suggest that they are messy in their argumentations. Meanwhile, we need to remember that, as in many organic cultures, member acculturation and enculturation could either be conscious or even unconscious (Grusec & Hastings, 2007). But in anyway, does this methodology proposed by Bartholomae invigorate the writing process from being arid? I think it is these concerns that Fulkerson's (1979) "Four Philosophies" previously sought to address.

Fulkerson's Prior Observations

Like Bartholomae, Fulkerson expresses some reservations about the pedagogical effectiveness deployed by teachers of composition. As he rightly evinces, "My research has convinced me that in many cases composition teachers either fail to have a consistent value theory or fail to let that philosophy shape pedagogy" (p. 347). The point of departure between the two, however, is that

the latter conceptualizes his arguments in a form of heuristics and a problem-solving approach, an approach that could be applied in the classroom.

Following the work of Abrams (1953), *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Fulkerson classifies composition scholars into four: (a) formalists, (b) expressionists or expressivists, (c) mimetists, and (d) rhetoricists. This classification, Fulkerson adduces, provides a description of the composition process and a method of evaluating the composed product. According to him, formalists hold as good writing essays that inhere internal forms as constitutive of specific texts and discourses. Good writing, this group believes, requires directness. Emphasis is usually placed on spelling, punctuation, length and grammar. Expressionists, on the other hand, see writing as a self-discovery activity, and so deemphasize the rigidity of evaluation so they could make room for creativity and self-expression. These scholars or teachers hold in high esteem an interesting, credible, honest, and personal voice of a student as indicative of her ingenuity in the writing process. The third school of thought, mimetism, is of the view that there exists a clear connection between good writing and good thinking, and that the only way of representing the real world is to sound logical in writing. Logical syllogism is typical of mimetists. Finally, unlike the first three camps, rhetoricists do submit that good writing is writing adapted to *sui generis* rhetorical contexts and kairoses for the purposes of achieving specific effects on specific audiences. In fact this group's philosophy is premised on the assumption that writing is a dialectical process, and, therefore, it values free writing, collaborative criticism and audience adaptation or audience-awareness.

Nevertheless, although this typology best represents the argument in vogue in Fulkerson's epoch, we need to acknowledge that so much water has passed down the bridge of

time. Today, the thinking of composition scholarship in such a manner is less creditable no less than desirable. I, however, am not too fast to discount the idea that there are few persons who still hold allegiances to certain modes of delivery. Far from that! But I still do believe that a plethora of composition teachers will consider themselves, in Fulkerson's terms, rhetoricists. They switch to available philosophies that best reflect the type of pedagogical agenda they would like to execute, and essay type they envisage. They believe this is the way of making round, and well-developed students in the tradition of rhetoric and writing (*See Kinneavy, 1971; Berlin, 1982*).

Conclusion

Despite the seeming difficulties one can identify in Bartholomae and Fulkerson's works, I am certain that their scholarly engagements will forever remain axiomatic insofar as they are still regarded seminal pieces in the scholarship of composition. And yet I also think their articles call for increased participation in empirical research to ascertain the verity or otherwise of their hermeneutics. We all need to get involved to make this happen in the ESL classroom.

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