Episode 13: Chuck Bazerman
Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I have the good fortune talking with Charles "Chuck" Bazerman. Chuck has taught for 50 years in a range of different educational settings and has made significant contributions to writing studies, most notably through his work in genre studies or rhetorical genre studies and writing across the curriculum.

Chuck Bazerman is a Distinguished Professor at the UC Santa Barbara Gevirtz Graduate School of Education. His research interests are in the practice and teaching of writing, understood in a socio-historic context. Using socially based theories of genre, activity system, interaction, intertextuality, and cognitive development, he investigates the history of scientific writing, other forms of writing used in advancing technological projects, and the relation of writing to the development of disciplines of knowledge. His *Handbook of Research on Writing: Society, School, Individual, Text* won the 2009 Conference on College Composition and Communication Outstanding Book Award. His other work includes *Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition: Writing Across the Curriculum* and *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*.

In this episode, we talk about what surprises him the most about teaching writing, he reflects on rhetorical genre studies and the impact genre has on teaching writing, and his interest in writing across the curriculum.

Chuck, thanks for joining us.

SW: You've taught for 50 years: what has surprised you or continues to surprise you the most about teaching and what stands out to you about the development of teaching writing, the evolution of theories and practices over the past 50 years?

CB: Yeah, I've taught for over 50 years in higher ed, just about 50 years. What surprised me, continues to surprise me and I learned more about is the students: what they know, how they perceive things, how they develop and how individual they are and how much you have to speak to them to really be of any value to them. You need to somehow intervene in their own exploration and their own development, so that means you have to get to know them.

From the earliest, my early teaching experience was in first grade and third grade. The students were a revelation and that's what motivated me and that's what continues to motivate me, and everyone is different. Even if you're teaching the same course for the 90th time, they're different students, so that's been the big surprise. All the research and theory has been simply to understand what is writing so I can help them explore it and use it better as part of their own development.

I suppose you could also say it's very surprising, when I started, there were only a few general folk beliefs about writing: all writing was the same, good writing was good writing, some people

had talent, others didn't. Now, this is like partly true, it's in most expression, you find it in yourself that there are certain favorite forms of writing and they define real writing. Other things are shopping lists. Shopping lists turned out to be really interesting the more I thought about them. Certain literary styles were favored and thought to be worth attention. Everything else was boring, nonfiction, non-creative, right?

As I've come to know writing a lot more and with many colleagues such as Amy and Carolyn and many others, and we've explored writing in different ways, we've come to understand that a lot more, both as the great variety of texts in the world, their role in the world, but also how people produce them, how people develop as readers. That's the thing that's most changed. Students are still students, right, and they each come with their own histories and their own motives, but we have a lot more understanding we can use to help them grow as writers.

I've looked into that myself and it's moved from an individual facing the challenges of a particular task. Although, that's important. That's how we experience writing. That's how our students experience writing. You start to see how writing done by many people over many millennia has really worked its way into the heart of society and, in fact, made possible the large forms of cooperation and identity and activity that formed the modern world.

I keep calling it the hidden infrastructure of modernity. It's invisible to most people, the enormous importance it is. Though, people's development as writers and their processes are embedded in that great complexity. The example I always use, if you were the child of a farmer in Mesopotamia you could learn to count the cows and get your counting stones by the side of your parent. Yeah, in the course of daily life with no big deal. Today, every role of power involves massive amounts of reading and writing. Writing, different from reading, is more receptive. Writing is having a voice. You don't write, you don't have a voice. So to engage and participate in these massive complex social endeavors that are mediated by writing, meaning almost everything, you have to develop very high skills.

SW: Chuck, you're talking about these social systems, these complex structures, which reminds me of your work in genre studies. Rhetorical genre studies really changes the way we think about genre and teaching writing because it challenges us to study and understand how genres are rhetorical and connected to social purposes and actions. In 1994 you introduced the term "genre systems." You write, "Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genre shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible, communicative action with each other and the guidepost we use to explore the unfamiliar." I was hoping maybe you could talk more about what this means or the thinking behind genres as forms of life, ways of being and frames for social action.

CB: Let me go backwards a little bit to the group of people who were earliest interested in genre and what I learned from them and how I positioned myself within them. As I started to look into academic writing and writing in different disciplines and I did the study of what written knowledge does, I identified that three different texts from different disciplines were fundamentally different on a number of parameters, but I didn't have a good way of mapping it. I

really didn't know how to talk about the differences. I was also starting to work with the history of the scientific paper by then too.

I heard Carolyn I think was in '79 where she was giving her presentation, an early version of what was to become her '84 paper. It clicked in my mind that was the concept I needed and what I saw Carolyn doing in that paper, and eventually came out, and I really encouraged her to write it. It took her five years of arm twisting to get her to publish it because she just sort of thought that was her dissertation chapter.

What she did is she linked the rhetorical tradition to the sociological tradition. At that time, I was studying, I was sitting in on a seminar on the sociology of science. I know Carolyn made that link, but she was very close, remained very closely tied to the rhetorical tradition. Amy was working on genre from a historical linguistic perspective, and then she studied the accountant's letters. I was editing, so I had a lot of discussions with her. I do a lot of, when I edit, I often do a lot of developmental stuff because it's a way for me to learn and engage.

For my sociology studies, I suggested to her that the concepts that would be useful for her would be "genre sets." It's not just a collection of genres, but these were all different ways of enacting genre. They're not just linguistically different, but there were different forms of participation.

Okay. Another thing I thought was brilliant in Amy's essay, in the tax accountant essay, was the way she started to, the different ways the tax code was referenced in the different genres. There were different forms of intertextuality. Amy had this crystal clear example of even within a single profession, how different genres engaged you in the literature because the literature is also kind of a social world. It's not the talking social world. It's the texting social world, right?

Again, that's easy for us to conceive of now that we have all these devices and social media, but back then it was harder to figure that out. I'm just thinking through that and that was part of my thinking through for further into a sociological way of thinking why is this important? It's phenomenological. It's a way of being. It's an activity. It's a way of imagining ourselves and a way of imagining others. Therefore, it's ideological, not in a shallow sense, but the ideology is the world we see around us and the way we think about the world.

Genres essentially induced us into his-, they became historically received. This is another thing I got from the history of scientific writing, that these were historically emerged and they had the kind of wisdom and orientation of the field built into them. When you learned it, you learn to participate in the ways that were sanctified, built over the years of the field. Okay, so that's sort of the kind of thinking behind that.

SW: How does this thinking or how does rhetorical genre studies inform the way we see and teach writing? I really like, for example, how you say genres are the guidepost we use to explore the unfamiliar, because I think knowing and seeing genres as guideposts can really help us be better teachers of writing.

CB: Yeah, the word "guidepost," people often take teach genres as rules and conventions that you need to follow, but they're there for a reason because they're part of the reasoning that field

engages in. All right, so you need to help them see the wisdom or maybe the lack of wisdom, the obsolescence of these various things they are expected to do. You can always violate as long as you got a good explanation, right? If you can bring your audience along with you, you can do anything, but if you're violating and you're not, they're going to say, "Huh? What? Why are you doing this to me?" Unless you've got a good way to bring them along, then you've lost, so they're the guideposts. Think about it, understand why you're using them and when you're violating them.

As guideposts, they can also help you see farther. That, if it's an expectation that, this is a like really simple, like my earliest teaching, that after you have a quotation, you should talk about it for a while rather than just let it sit there. Actually when I first started teaching, nobody told me that and I had to make that up and use that and I put it in a textbook. That's really useful because it forces you to say what it is you want the reader to get from the quotation. It makes you think more and become more precise.

There's a lot of those genre expectations that really force you to dig deeper or to look more. The students need to be really engaged, not just in the material that they're writing about, but in the tasks and social groupings they are engaged in. You have to find ways to help them connect with it, which is taking their project seriously, but their projects bring with it a social world and helping them connect up with relevant social worlds that would motivate them or social worlds they're already engaged with but figuring out how do you engage them more deeply in a more serious way, in a more demanding way that'll draw more from their writing that they'll see the challenges in their writing.

That's the main lesson that it's engaging in the world students are writing for and helping them engage and, therefore, grow and then you support that in whatever ways you can, you help direct and support that, but you know they're learning to write. You're not learning to write. You may learn a lot of stuff which will help write, but they're the ones that are struggling with the writing and solving the problems so you got to get them engaged in the problems and see higher level problems and care about those higher level problems. If they don't care they just do what's necessary to solve the problem of how to get a grade, which is not a very interesting problem.

You need to understand where they live to help them grow from where they're living. Although, genre activity theory is seen as socio-cultural, which it rightly is. It's also psychological. The formations and activities of minds in situations which is how our brains, they are discovering work, that they're very flexible organs that are responsive to where they are taking in information and trying to solve problems about where do you take the next step.

SW: Thank you, Chuck. This is my last question. I'd love to give you some space to talk about writing across the curriculum and WAC/WID programs. I'm thinking back to our earlier conversation on social systems and action and how knowledge moves from one place to the next and how writing is an incredibly important part in that process, not only the transfer of knowledge but how writing gives us a voice. With that being said, at least for me, WAC/WID programs have these opportunities to serve institutions, programs, students in really unique ways. I'd love to hear how you became interested in writing across the curriculum and your thoughts on the importance of that work.

CB: I have been very much drawn to WAC/WID, but I have never been a director of a WAC/WID program. In fact, none of the campuses I've been at has there been a successful WAC/WID program. I'm not the practice guy, not the administrator, so it's kind of odd that I have become so engaged in it and, in some ways, I'm considered an expert in that area in the published reference guide to it and considered a spokesman. It was because I saw early on, when I said why do we have college writing, it's to, why do we have the luxury of all these students which provides us the jobs and interesting work is because students need to write for their university courses. It's pretty much that simple, so let's figure out what it actually is they're writing for their university courses.

I think this is a fundamental. It seemed to me that from the beginning that WAC needed to approach each of their disciplines with a great deal of respect and understanding their variety. I think it took the field, as a whole, awhile to get there because at first they were very much taken with the practices they developed. Writing programs have been by and large the pedagogical innovators for the universities since the 1950s or '60s, and things like writing centers, collaborative pedagogies, learning centers, importance of communication with students, even the question of writing of inquiry-based education.

Another thing I want to mention about writing across the curriculum, to come back to why I've stuck with it even though I've never really engaged with the programs is the formation of knowledge and how do people get knowledge. How does that enter into how they think and how they communicate and the bonds and commitments they make through the writing? Where does that knowledge come from? If you think about the analogy between human beings, we're not computers on desks. We're not brains in a bottle because we have eyes and ears and we walk around and we touch things and we get to know the world and we try to make sense of it and bring it in.

Research methods, one of the main ways that knowledge of the world gets into texts and therefore enters into the activity systems. There are related ways, like so, intertextuality is knowledge from one system gets into another, but if texts are the place we communicate and we think through things, we analyze them and we make proposals out of them and we make plans and situations, it's important we get knowledge into them and that the ways of getting our data about the word gets formulated into useful knowledge.

That's, to me, a paramount importance. If you just look at things like climate change and climate change denial and the way, I've looked at the Congress, and the way congressional hearings are used or not used to admit knowledge of climate change and the various devices of going, "Nah nah nah nah…I'm not going to listen. I'm not going to listen. We're not going to have a hearing on this or the hearing is going to be about this other thing. It's going to be about NASA wasting money," Right? Right? That's how knowledge does or does not get into a system and therefore not get into action and to action, into action or not.

I think this is of paramount importance in the academic disciplines and related kind of research communities have been one of the tremendous changes that have allowed us to think differently and gather knowledge and deal with our world in a more intelligent, sensitive, aware way. That's why Writing Across the Curriculum is really important.

SW: Thank you again, Chuck, for taking time to join us today, and thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.