Settings and the Institutional Organization of Language

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Professor of Rhetoric and Composition
Michigan Technological University

A lecture presented for the Composition, Literacy & Rhetorical Studies Minor and the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing

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Preface

In the spring of 1998, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing and the Minor in Composition, Literacy, and Rhetorical Studies sponsored a lecture by Professor Carol Berkenkotter from Michigan Technological University. A revised version of her lecture "Tools, Artifacts, Genres, and Settings in Literate Practices: Implications for the Teaching of Writing" is published here. In her lecture, Berkenkotter discussed the importance of physical spaces to conversational style and literacy learning.

Professor Berkenkotter is an expert in genre theory, the rhetoric of science, discourse in the professions, sociocultural contexts of writing, and qualitative research methodology. Her publications include *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communications: Cognition/Culture/Power* (with Thomas N. Huckin), "Genre as Tool in the Transmission of Practice Over Time and Across Disciplinary Boundaries" (with Doris Ravotas), and "Scientific Writing and Scientific Thinking: Writing the Scientific Habit of Mind."

The Center's primary mission is to improve the quality of undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. This speaker series, along with colloquia, faculty development workshops, conferences, publications, and other outreach activities are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all of the members of the University community. In addition, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- curricular reform through writing-intensive instruction
- characteristics of writing across the curriculum

- connections between writing and learning in all fields

- characteristics of writing beyond the academy

- effects of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing

- the status of writing ability during the college years.

We are pleased to present Professor Berkenkotter's lecture as part of the ongoing discussion about Writing Across the Curriculum. We invite you to participate in these conversations, either by contacting us directly or by attending any of our programs. Descriptions of our activities, online registration forms for workshops, and calls for proposals for grants and conferences are available at the Center's website: http://cisw.cla.umn.edu.

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Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Holly Littlefield, Editor
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Settings and the Institutional Organization of Language

Institutions are obligatory solutions to the most common problems of the social organization of life. [Thomas Luckmann, 1992, p 221]

Introduction: What's in a setting? Disciplines, departments, and disciplinarity

Every Monday and Thursday during spring quarter, 1998, I took the bus between the University of Minnesota's Minneapolis and St. Paul campuses. This travel arrangement resulted from the scheduling of my two graduate seminars, one at each of the two campuses of this large, urban university. Although I taught in the Rhetoric Department on the St. Paul side of the Mississippi River on Thursdays, on Mondays, my class met on the Minneapolis side in Vincent Hall, the mathematics building. Occasionally arriving a few minutes early at my classroom, Vincent 301, I would observe the undergraduate class that preceded mine. I couldn't help but notice that, as he was speaking, the professor literally covered the blackboard with equations and other sorts of mathematical notations. Although the students asked occasional questions, for the most part they quietly took notes, writing rapidly while looking at the blackboard where the professor was inscribing. These equations, formulas, and other notations were totally mysterious to me, although I think that I was looking at the symbol system of calculus. Around me, on the walls of the third floor hallway where I stood waiting, were bulletin boards with various sorts of clippings and drawings of mathematical problems and their solutions, as well insider jokes and other kinds of information of interest to math students, but which left me clueless.

I should also note that there was only one women's bathroom in this three-story building; it was located on the first floor. During the break in our three-hour seminar, my

students and I (all women) would troop down the three flights of stairs (there was no elevator in our corridor) collectively complaining about the inhospitableness of this setting and feeling very much like fish out of water in Vincent Hall.

Disciplines at the University of Minnesota, like those at Michigan Technological University where I teach, can be characterized in terms of their enclosures—the buildings, floors, labs, and classrooms that house the various academic departments.[1] Indeed, it is easy for students and faculty to perceive the academic disciplines in terms of their institutional settings in department offices and buildings. However, much recent literature on academic disciplines and knowledge production suggests that this perception is illusory.

For example, in her recent book, *Crossing Boundaries, Knowledge, and Interdisciplinarities* (1996), Julie Klein makes a strong case for the growth of disciplinary complexity and the crossing of permeable disciplinary boundaries, noting that the institutionalization of academic disciplines into departments dates back to the organization of the University of Paris in 1213. But there is, she reports, a tension between the existence of these departments as "elemental administrative units with the power to judge suitability of courses and programs, to recommend appointments, promotions, and salary increases and other awards," on the one hand, and, on the other, the proliferation of, during the second half of the twentieth century, "specialties, *new* hybrid fields, *new* structures of knowledge production and *new* educational formats, [all of which have] strained the premise of containment" (pp. 53-54, italics added). Thus, if the institutionalization of academic disciplines has exerted a centripetal force on the production and dissemination of knowledge through the higher educational system, a

countervailing force on numerous research fronts has produced new fields and new

specialties and subspecialties resulting in increasing differentiation and fragmentation.

Tony Becher, in his 1989 landmark study of academic disciplines, titled *Academic*

Tribes and Territories, similarly observes,

> While it is convenient in some contexts to represent disciplines as clearly
>
> distinguishable and reasonably stable entities, it has to be acknowledged that they
>
> are subject to both historical and geographical variation. The changing nature of
>
> knowledge domains over time has already been remarked upon, and such change
>
> has its impact on the identities and cultural characteristics of disciplines. [2]
>
> (pp. 20-21)

So if disciplines are not the stable land masses that college catalogues depict,

what are the implications for teachers in whose courses students produce college level

writing? One way of answering this question is to think about academic disciplines in a

more abstract way than we are used to doing because of our familiarity with day-to-day

departmental activities. By abstract, I mean thinking about our respective organizational

structures, noting how they are manifested in the basic organizational components of the

higher educational system (e.g. Becher and Kogan, 1980; Clark, 1983). Such a

perspective tends to highlight one particular set of issues: the variation in how academic

institutions elect to draw the map of knowledge; what operational distinctions need to be

made between traditional established disciplines (such as history or physics), and

interdisciplinary fields (urban studies, peace studies), and the like; the organizational

complexities of combining autonomous, self generating units within a single managerial

structure; the mechanisms for accommodating newly defined intellectual groupings, and phasing out those which are no longer regarded as viable. (Becher, 1989, p. 20-21)

Within the field of rhetoric and composition (an interdiscipline, if ever there was one!), Paul Prior (1997) and David Russell (1997a, 1997b) have each recently questioned our notion of academic disciplines as discrete and autonomous entities (cf. Dobrin, 1997). This conception underlies many of the studies of graduate and undergraduate students appearing in the 1980s and 1990s. Prior, who studied the socialization of Ph.D. students in the setting of the graduate seminars in different disciplinary and interdisciplinary departments, including Sociology and American Studies, has made the most critical appraisal of the view of academic disciplines as discrete and unitary entities. His argument is as follows:

> Disciplinary communities of practice are critical sites of sociocultural development and hence should be critical sites of sociocultural inquiry. Over the past century, disciplines, subdisciplines, and interdisciplines have proliferated, producing a dense jungle not only of texts, technical objects, and practices, but also of enculturated persons. These social formations have co-evolved with and exist within, thick institutional networks, linking everything from university departments and corporate laboratories to international associations and public or private grantors. . . Although linked to radical changes in our physical, mechanic, biological and social worlds, disciplines have been seen through purified public representations (Latour, 1993; Myers, 1990), . . . imagin[ed] as discourse

communities, as autonomous social territories to be mapped in detemporalized

spaces, as abstract systems of rules and knowledge to be diagrammed.[3]

(1997, pp. 275-76; cf. Swales, 1998)

The alternative view of disciplines, one that Prior would prefer, is of disciplines

as *heterogeneous networks of historically-constituted social practices.* Pointing to recent

research by Tony Becher (1989), Diana Crane (1972), Michel Foucault (1972), Sandra

Harding (1991), Julie Klein (1990), and Andrew Pickering (1995), he notes that this

research represents disciplines more as heterogeneous networks than as stable social

entities. "Thus," he argues, "it seems more important to move [away] from a discourse

community notion of disciplines as unified social and/or cognitive spaces to a notion of

disciplinarity as the ongoing, mediated constitution of a kind of sociomaterial network.

Disciplinarity invokes the dynamic integration of the historical and the situated, the

production of both knowledge and society, the mature practice and the novice, the social

representation of unity and the networked, dialogic hybridity of concrete activity" (1997,

p. 277; but cf. Swales, 1998).

Both Prior and David Russell (1997) have made cogent arguments in favor of the

view that disciplines are not so clearly bounded and boundaried as we might have

believed them to be. However, bear in mind that in the institutional settings in which

disciplines are housed, "the flow of communication . . . is channeled according to the

functional requirements of the institution," as sociologist of knowledge, Thomas

Luckmann, suggests (1992, p. 222). A perspective of historically-constituted, social

practices in the context of their institutional settings from pre-school to graduate

programs makes it easier to understand, for example, that classroom or instructional

genres and course textbooks are often different and distant from professional genres. By professional genres, I mean the communicative genres that faculty in different knowledge communities use in their papers, conference presentations, and books in communicating with academic peers. These texts are often different than the papers that professors assign to introduce students to the ways that disciplinary practitioners think about their objects of study, whether they are quarks or subatomic particles, or classifications of mental disorders, or representations of the female body in Renaissance art.

The classroom is, after all, an *institutional setting* with its contextual cues, language, and bodily orientation, gestures, physical configuration of desks, lab tables, overhead projectors, slide projectors, glass beakers, microscopes, blackboards, computers, and so forth. These are the tools, artifacts, genres, and settings that constitute of the institutionalized practices that university students are learning. As sociologist Luckmann suggests,

> Institutionalized social interaction is more rigidly controlled with respect to means and has more clearly defined ends than other kinds of social interaction. This area of social life, therefore, tends to exhibit a low degree of tolerance for deviations from established procedure. Institutions organize the central functions of social life, such as production and distribution of the means of life, reproduction, the exercise of power and the construction of "meaning," that is, of legitimacy for the social order and of cognitive coherence for individual life in society. Institutions have a specific location in social space and time and they may, of course, also be seen as a specific aggregation of personnel. But essentially they are a "code" of action. (1992, p. 221)

Luckmann's comments foreground a notion that current writing instruction in the US does not take into account: namely, that institutions have discursively organizing functions, functions that are instantiated in what appear to be the most common sense, context-sensitive linguistic practices and behaviors.

One example of the "institutionalized social interaction," to which Luckmann refers can be seen in children's engagement in literate activities in a preschool setting. In the setting I describe below, children learn how to construct meaning in the context of tools and artifacts, genres, and contextual cues. It is in preschool settings that we can see most vividly how language and meaning are shaped by the physical positioning of children's bodies around tools and artifacts.[4] In this respect, we can see how literate practices are quite literally embodied by young children as part of their enculturation into the practices of "doing school" (Dyson, 1984). I am suggesting here that school literacy and school discourses are first constituted through embodied practices in young children, in the course of their language socialization. The photographs below depict a preschool literacy event in which children acquire knowledge of scientific concepts through embodied activity and collective orientation to tools (including language) and artifacts.

Literacy as embodied practices: Bear walks around the sun four times in a Boulder Montessori school classroom

First, a bit of context needs to be provided. The setting—a Montessori school classroom in Boulder, Colorado—is one of eight or nine Montessori nursery schools in Boulder. The children who attend are primarily Caucasian and middle-class; however, there are also a small number of Asian- American, African-American, and Hispanic children in this and other classrooms in the Montessori system. As is the case at many

other institutions for preschool children, the school day is divided into units, beginning with outdoor play in the school's backyard, a transition period for children between home and school. The children in the photographs below have recently been dropped off by their parents.

Photograph 1. Children on the Playground

The varieties of children's talk (i.e., their speech genres) are imbricated in physical activities and mediated by the artifacts that are in the setting.

Photograph 2. Children on the swing

Thus, an observer is likely to hear snatches of conversations on the swing or the utterances surrounding a child's dangling from monkey bars, laughter, and shouting (or crying) that accompanies a game that has been made up spontaneously. What's important to keep in mind is that language is embedded in activity, and in activity taking place in different settings, each of which is a semiotic context rich with cues for bodily and language behavior.

Moving from the playground into each of two preschool classrooms, one sees a setting designed for children's educational enrichment, filled with tools and artifacts to engage a child's curiosity; these include books, word games, puzzles, materials for painting and drawing, easels, paints, chalk, colored pencils, flat geometric shapes to draw with, other geometric shapes which are three dimensional, scissors, string, cutting paper, a cage with a guinea pig, and so on. But what is most salient to a casual observer are two concentric rings, each about two inches wide, made of bright blue tape and affixed to each of the classroom rugs. What one also notices in these two classrooms are the tools and artifacts of everyday living: hammers and nails, brooms, dish soap and towels, child-size kitchen sinks, and other domestic accouterments.

Children make the transition between outdoor and classroom activities by coming together in the circle to participate jointly in a beginning-of-school-day activity. Often (but not always), it's some form of the activity that typically begins the school such as Morning News or Sharing Time.[5] Up to this point in the morning, most (although not all) of the children have been playing outside (weather permitting) running, swinging on bars, working at outside projects with sand, trucks, scoops, and shovels, or making up games

that frequently involve the cooking of food (sand) in the latticed gazebo that sits in one

corner of the play yard.

The joint activity that signals the ending of outdoor playtime and the beginning of

class time does not occur until each child is seated in the outer blue ring. This is the

physical configuration around which certain language and physical behaviors are

organized. Children new to this setting are quickly oriented by the teacher and the

assistant teachers to the kinds of talk and activity considered appropriate to sitting and

participating in the circle. There are, in other words, conversational practices that the

children learn to associate with sitting in the circle. Sitting in the circle at the beginning

of the day helps "transition" them from the spontaneous utterances of the playground to

the more consciously organized and orchestrated (institutional) speech genres of the

Montessori classroom.

Photograph 3. Child Changing the Date

Photographs 4 through 7 depict an institutional activity sequence, "Bear's"

4th birthday celebration. This particular morning Bear is the child who goes to the

box containing the numbered squares and takes the one with the number 28 on it

and sets it into the calendar. The clock on the wall shows school has begun: It's

9:10 a.m. in this Boulder Montessori classroom.

Photograph 4. Teacher Putting a Candle in the Circle

In photograph 4, Bear's teacher, Joyce, is placing a candle in the shape of the sun in the

center of the two rings, and she places rectangular cards with the names of months around

the "sun." This is a ritual with which most of the children (except newcomers) are

familiar, so they are pretty quiet as they look on.

Photograph 5. Bear Circling the Sun

Bear now begins his walk around the sun. He circles the lighted wax globe four times, once for each year of his life.[6] This is a nice example of the kind of embodied, literate activity that children in this Montessori school witness. Bear's activity here suggests a hybrid genre; Bear is celebrating his birthday with a set of rituals, but the birthday ritual is a science lesson as well because he is demonstrating the revolution of the earth around the sun.

There are two points that I wish to make with these snapshots of a child's birthday celebration in this classroom. First, classrooms, like other institutional settings, are activity settings in which tools, artifacts, speech genres, and the setting are co-constitutive. Secondly, the literate practices in which we see the children engaged are embedded in the "work" and participation structures of the classroom.

Photograph 6. Empty Lunch Room with the Tables Set

In the lunchroom seen in photograph 6, the tables are set for the birthday. The children's talk is more spontaneous in this setting, in contrast to the conversational circle; nevertheless, here, as well, the children are being socialized to perform a series of actions around which talk is organized.

Photograph 7. Children at the Table, Eating, Talking

Even in this less structured setting, the Montessori children are being socialized into the participation structures, or speech genres that are co-constitutive with artifacts, tools, and the setting. We might call this genre "table talk."

Photograph 8. Children Washing, Busing Dishes

In the last of this sequence of photographs of Bear's birthday celebration, the children are in the midst of carrying their plates to the sink, rinsing them off, and stacking them in plastic tubs to be carried to the kitchen. Through this joint activity, they are socialized into situationally appropriate behaviors and talk for school and home. The children's talk and the activities around which the talk is organized are driven by 1) the

direction or objective of the activity; 2) the tools and bodily movements indigenous to the activity.

What we have seen in the last five photographs is an institutional activity sequence (see Engeström, 1987, 1993; Cole and Engeström, 1993; Russell, 1997a) in which children are being socialized into literate practices, both those of formal schooling and those of family and home life. Children who enter kindergarten not knowing how to "do school," as Heath (1983) and Dyson (1984) have shown in their research, begin their elementary school career in arrears. Learning the social languages of school is more than a matter of learning the surface conventions; this learning is very much embedded in the setting (outdoors, indoors), the activity occurring in the setting (e.g. catching balls, swinging on swings, sitting in the circle for a group activity such as morning news or show and tell), and the objectives or ends of that activity, i.e., science lesson cum birthday celebration. What is salient in these photographs is the extent to which the practices of school-based literacy are assimilated by three- and four-year-olds at the level of bodily orientation, or positioning in relation to artifacts and tools. Along these lines it might also be useful to think of Bear's walk around the sun as a form of embodied learning, in the sense that this ritual demonstrates a formal scientific concept for Bear and his peers.

The children in these pictures are many years from the disciplinary tasks and activities they will have to master as college students, but even at this early age they are beginning to acquire the concepts that they will need for literate practices in a science curriculum. Their activities are semiotically heterogeneous, yet we can see (even if we

can't hear) the way in which talk is organized by and embedded in the various kinds of "work" in which the children are engaged.

Genre as the discursively salient component of human activity systems

I'd like to elaborate on this notion of talk being embedded in work, placing it in a theoretical framework. Researchers who study intertextually linked writing and speaking practices tend to focus either on what the actors are doing ("follow the actors"), such as the dyadic interactions of conversational analysis, or they focus on the features and conventions of texts ("follow the texts"), as has been the case with much recent research on writing in the disciplines.

With these analytical foci, however, it is easy to background the many different kinds of contexts in which the situated activity we are studying is occurring, contexts such as the physical setting, material practices and socioeconomic structures of the profession or organization, the history of its practices, the kinds of background knowledge of the participants, the interpersonal relations between the participants (e.g., doctor/patient, therapist/client, nurse/doctor etc.), the co-texts, and so on. Indeed, the very concept of "context" is itself problematic, as numerous commentators have observed (see Lave, 1993; Duranti and Goodwin, 1992; Engeström, 1993; Linell, in press; Russell, 1997a). How do we study, analyze, describe, and theorize context? Understanding context as being multidimensionally historically-sedimented, cultural, dialogical, discontinuous, contradictory, social, and ideological requires a particular kind of theoretical lens.

To circumvent the problem of treating context either as "containers for actions or as situationally-created experiential spaces" (Engeström, 1993, p. 67), scholars and

researchers in a number of disciplines have begun using the multidimensional concept of

activity system in place of context. (See, for example, Chaiklin and Lave, 1993;

Engeström, Y., 1987, 1993; Engeström, R., 1985. For examples of North American

writing researchers drawing on activity theory, see Bazerman, 1997; Berkenkotter and

Ravotas, 1997; Dias, et. al. in press; Freedman and Smart, 1997; Prior, 1997; Russell,

1997a, 1997b). In particular, Yrjo Engeström's *Learning by Expanding: An Activity*

Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research (1987) and his chapter in the

collection*, Understanding Practice* (1993), have been instrumental in introducing the

concept of activity system both to researchers in the North American tradition of genre

studies[7] and to educational researchers (see Cole and Engeström, 1993). Building on neo-

Vygotskyan activity theory, Engeström observes:

> If we take a closer and prolonged look at any institution, we get a picture of a
>
> continuously constructed, collective activity system that is not reducible to series
>
> of sums of individual discrete actions, although human agency is necessarily
>
> realized in the form of actions [Leont'ev, 1978]. . . .(1993, p.66)

 "For activity theory," Engeström continues, "contexts are neither containers nor

situationally-created experiential spaces. Contexts are activity systems. An activity

system integrates the subject, the object, and the instruments (material tools as well as

signs and symbols), into a unified whole. An activity system incorporates both the object-

oriented productive aspect and the person-oriented communicative aspect of human

conduct. Production and communication are inseparable" (1993, p. 67).

Underlying Engeström's conception of human activity is the view that

communicative acts (and their genres) are part and parcel of the subsystems of

production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, a point also made by Fairclough (1992). In this respect, activity theory is a materialist theory. But it is not a deterministic theory in the sense that the life of an activity system is also discontinuous. As Engeström observes,

> Besides accumulation and incremental change, there are crises, upheavals, and qualitative transformations. . . an activity system is not a homogeneous entity. To the contrary it is composed of a multitude of often disparate elements, voices, and viewpoints. This multiplicity can be understood in terms of historical layers. An activity system always contains sediments of earlier historical modes.
>
> (Engeström, 1993, p. 68)

One way to observe the disparate elements, or dissonances, within an activity setting, such as a university or preschool classroom, is to examine its genre systems and the intertextual and interdiscursive linkages within those systems. By this I mean that the researcher, using some combination of case study or participant-observation techniques, in conjunction with fine grained linguistic/ rhetorical analyses of oral and written texts, seeks to identify the sorts of multivoicedness and inner contradictions existing within the institutional setting.

Disciplines as "activity systems"

 In what ways might we consider the academic disciplines and interdisciplines as "activity systems?" An activity theory perspective has considerable heuristic payoff for studies of academic and professional writing and for the teaching of writing in two major respects:

1) *It enables us to take a diachronic view of academic disciplines as constantly evolving and changing as they become altered by new specialties and sub-specialties, by increasing differentiation and fragmentation, and in some cases, by interpenetration occurring at disciplinary boundaries.* (See Fuller, 1993; Klein, 1990, 1995; Berkenkotter, 1995; Journet, 1995; Sullivan, 1995). This means, as I suggested earlier, that we need to get away from conceptions of disciplines as stable land masses with clearly demarcated boundaries. Unfortunately, this representation is most often present in the writing-across-the-curriculum textbooks that tend to portray academic disciplines as monolithic entities.

2) *It makes us aware of the need to make the unit of analysis reflect the systematicity of situated local practices.* The unit of analysis is a critical concept in writing research because it determines not only our research questions, but also the design of the study, the conceptualization of the research site, and the kinds of data we collect and analyze. In a course I recently taught at the University of Minnesota on qualitative methods in rhetoric and technical communication, I showed my students how to make the unit of analysis more inclusive by thinking about research sites as "activity settings," that is, as culturally-historically constituted semiotic systems with participants, tools, artifacts (including texts), speech genres, and so forth. To help facilitate their learning this approach to research, I asked students to begin their observations, not in the semiotically complex settings of the biology lab or English department seminar room, but rather in the more accessible sites of everyday life such as supermarkets, restaurants, or bars.

One of the students in this course, Beth Sokolowski, observed the patrons and kinds of talk at two very different types of coffee bar—the Blue Moon and the Jump Start—and produced several graphics (see Miles and Huberman, 1996) of the spatial organization of talk and activity in these two settings.

Beth divided the Blue Moon into three distinct regions, or zones of activity. Working from the front to the back of the coffee house, she noted that in the first of these zones there was a primarily "text-based" organization of work and talk among customers. Some of the activities taking place in this section included a professor and student chatting about a paper or thesis, a customer working on a paper, and two other individuals whose talk appeared to be organized around a business document. In contrast, the central zone of the Blue Moon was the area frequented by "regulars," customers who knew and were friendly with the staff. Regulars sat at the bar and chatted with the people who made and served the orders. In this central activity area where regulars congregated, the talk was social and informal; i.e., "insider chat." Beyond the counter in the central zone and to the rear of the coffee house was the rear seating area, an area with comfortable living room furniture and roomy enough for children to play without bothering the patrons in the other two sections. In this third zone of activity, customers came to socialize and drink coffee, especially those bringing children who played while the adults caught a few moments of relaxation, or chatted with a friend.

As was the case with the conversational circle and the lunchroom at the Boulder Montessori school, the setting at the Blue Moon (i.e., the spatial arrangements of furniture and other artifacts in the three areas), functioned to delineate three different

zones of activity. These different zones differentiated between kinds of social interaction, or "work" to be accomplished; thus, each section functioned to help individuals carry out social, or business/professional, or familial and leisure objectives.

In contrast to the Blue Moon, the Kick Start was a "biker bar," with a primarily male clientele. During warm weather, Kick Start regulars sat chatting at picnic tables placed on the sidewalk in front of the bar. It was not unusual for a motorcyclist to hoist his bike up on the curb in front of the picnic table where the regulars were sitting, at which time the conversation turned to the bike and its owner. After seeing Sokolowski's field notes and her drawings, the other members of the class inferred that the Kick-Start is a "male social space" where particular display rituals were enacted.

Coffee houses like the Blue Moon and the Kick Start can be seen to provide interactional spaces for different social groups (as well as a semi-private setting where individuals can usually work without interruption). These differences are reflected semiotically both by the regulars' clothing styles and "looks." In this respect the two coffee houses serve different social, structural, and ecological functions.

From an Activity Theory perspective, each of the two coffee bars has a socio-cultural history the understanding of which would require further research on the history of coffee houses, on the demographic changes in neighborhood, and on the evolution of non-mainstream cultures and alternative lifestyles in Minneapolis as a Midwestern city. Of course in a single quarter, it was not possible to carry out this research; however, my point is that an analysis of talk-in-context in these two different settings would need to be placed in some kind of cultural-historical context. Just as in classrooms, the linguistic interactions in the Blue Moon and Kick Start coffee bars require being conceptualized as

historically-sedimented, context-sensitive, heterogeneous, discursive activities. And that is what I mean by making the unit of analysis the entire activity system, rather than the constitutive speech genres.

Implications

Settings have importance for our understanding of the interrelationship between language and institutional contexts. This paper has been an exploration of settings, first in the context of disciplinary territories—in this instance, a building on the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota (Vincent Hall) that seemed curiously foreign to a rhetoric professor. After briefly discussing the literature that points to the problematic difference between departments and academic disciplines, I added the caveat that, in any institutional setting (disciplinary and/or departmental), the flow of communication will be shaped by the functional requirements of that institution. This view is one of the many valuable contributions that Thomas Luckmann has made to the literature on genre analysis, and, more broadly, to the sociology of knowledge. Luckmann's perspective has relevance, I believe, for understanding the subtle interrelation between the use of space, tools, and artifacts and child (or adult) language socialization in an institutional setting. To make this observation more concrete, I described a few of the activities of a morning in a Boulder, Colorado, Montessori classroom. Finally, to illustrate what a research program based on an activity theory approach might look like, I described Beth Sokolowski's diagrams of two Minneapolis's neighborhood coffee bars as activity settings.

My goal in this essay has been to use each of these settings to demonstrate how recent research in such fields as ethnography of communication, sociology of knowledge,

and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) might affect the way that we think about

the institutional and disciplinary contexts of written communication. In this respect, this

paper's primary purpose has been heuristic.

     With my description of the physical setting on Vincent Hall's third floor, I've

attempted to make the point that we often mistakenly assume that disciplines are

somehow static and unified entities because of their institutional presence within

departments. To the contrary, much recent research suggests that disciplines have

permeable boundaries, which means that practitioners need to develop trade languages,

pigeons, and other linguistic and rhetorical forms in order to communicate (Fuller, 1993;

Berkenkotter, 1995). So we need to examine our assumptions about the disciplinary

mapping on which much of our thinking about teaching writing-in-the-disciplines is

based.

     With the description of the Boulder Montessori classroom, I attempted to show

how the activity sequence that my photographs depicted was both birthday celebration

and science lesson. In this kind of rich, educational environment, the learning of scientific

concepts can be seen as a form of embodied literacy for children as young as three and

four. In the photos of Boulder Montessori classroom and lunchroom, we can also see the

role that tools, artifacts, speech genres and settings play in children's development of

literate practices. The physical layout of this Montessori classroom, with its

conversational circles, tools, and artifacts, helps us to more clearly understand the ways

in which children learn how to construct meanings.

     What I've most sought to do in this essay has been to make Activity Theory more

accessible by suggesting that the discursive activity in *any* setting (classrooms, coffee

bars, laboratories, greenhouses, or the virtual settings of the Internet), occurs within a semiotic system, and it is useful to think of settings in this way. And, because I've been recently integrating an Activity Theory perspective into my teaching of qualitative research methods, I wanted to describe the socially-situated organization of talk-in-context in Minneapolis's neighborhood coffee houses. I'm very pleased that Beth Sokolowski's drawings capture the typified activities indigenous to the settings and demonstrate what an important role the setting plays.

There remain a number of questions that this essay hasn't addressed—questions having to do with the interrelationship of settings, tools, artifacts, and literate practices—that are particularly relevant to composition scholars and teachers designing course materials as the millennium approaches. For example, how might one extend the notion of "setting" to virtual locations on the Internet? How might computer design be altered to make it possible for collaborative work on the same machine? That is, why do the affordances of the computer as a tool preclude more than one person working on the keyboard at the same time? In what sense, or senses, are the settings of MOOs and MUDs artifactual? How are these settings altering users' discursive practices? Finally, how are these Internet-based discursive practices altering institutional conceptions of knowledge production, if, in fact, they are? These are just a few of the questions that an Activity Theory orientation to language learning—in the context of settings, tools, and artifacts—raises.

We don't have very long to answer them as we slouch toward the twenty-first century.

Notes

[1] See Swales (1998) for an ethnographic study of three such settings in one university building, the North University Building (NUB) at the University of Michigan. Using interviews with the knowledge workers on the tasks that occupied their work life and organized the time within that life, as well as fine-grained linguistic analyses of their texts—Swales provides a unique study, a "textography," of the cultures of three university specialties: computing, Systematic Botany, and English as a Second Language.

[2] For an interesting discussion of the impact that shifting knowledge domains and geographic variation have on the identity of English departments, see Dobrin's (1997) essay review, "English Departments and the Question of Disciplinarity."

[3] Prior's perspective, as well as the terminology in which it is cast, reflects his reading of neo-Vygotskian Activity Theory and Actor-Network Theory, two theoretical frameworks that force the researcher to distinguish between individual action and collective activity in institutional settings. Those interested in knowing more should refer to Russell (1997a, 1997b); Bazerman (1997); Berkenkotter and Ravotas (1997); Prior (1997, in press); Freedman and Smart (1997).

[4] This view of children's talk (and bodily orientation) organized around school-based activities as the early constitution of school literacy is based in no small part on informal observations (about two to three times a year since 1996) of my two granddaughters, Kyle and Zoe, at Boulder Montessori Preschool in Boulder, Colorado. My thanks to Karen Olson, Boulder Montessori's Administrator and the school's Board of Directors for granting permission to publish snapshots of the children in this setting taken on February 28, 1998.

[5] Following Bakhtin (1986), I would call Morning News and Sharing Time (i.e., "show and tell") exemplars of primary speech genres.

[6] To Bear's left and back is his mother and father, who have come to participate in his celebration.

[7] See Russell (1997b); for overviews of North American genre scholarship see Freedman and Medway (1994); Hyon (1996).

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