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BEAM: A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-Based Writing

This article argues that writing teachers can encourage students to adopt a rhetorical perspective toward research-based writing by characterizing products of research in terms of how writers use them in their texts. It maintains that the standard nomenclature for treating sources

"I-Search Paper"; Bruce Ballenger celebrates the research essay; Robert Davis and Mark Shadle advocate a hybrid form they call "multi-writing" (434).[2] All of this work endeavors to counter what David R. Russell has described as a "blindness to the rhetorical nature of academic writing" (10) that accompanied the rise of the German research model in American universities at the end of the nineteenth century and that finds preeminent expression in the conventional research paper.[3]

Yet influential as it has been, this work carries us only so far, because it leaves largely unexamined our manner of conceptualizing the myriad products of research that Larson characterizes as "data from outside the author's own self" and identifies as the "substance" of many forms of writing (813). Larson's choice of words is apt, for whenever writers incorporate such materials into their texts, they encounter a version of what Kenneth Burke calls the "Paradox of Substance" (21). As Burke explains, although the word *substance* is commonly "used to designate something *within* the thing, *intrinsic* to it, the word etymologically refers to something *outside* the thing, *extrinsic* to it" (23). To be successful, writers must regard their materials in both of these ways, as intrinsic elements of the texts they write and as extrinsic things that exist outside of those texts. But as teachers, we often struggle to cultivate this dual perspective in our students. Consequently, we should not be surprised that they sometimes treat research as a special chore they have to do for one particular assignment (Larson 814–15) or that they sometimes forget what they have learned about drafting and revision when they take their research and try to "write it up" (Fulkerson 26–27).

We struggle in no small measure because our standard way of classifying sources—the "substance" of most of the research-based writing students do in composition classes—is fundamentally antirhetorical. Rhetoric, Stephen Mailloux has recently observed, concerns the "effects of texts," construed broadly as "objects of interpretive attention, whether speech, writing, nonlinguistic practices, or human artifacts of any kind" (40). Yet when we classify sources as *primary*, *secondary*, and (in some versions of the scheme) *tertiary*, we attend not to their rhetorical functions or effects but to their relationship to some external point of reference: Primary sources emanate from or are coextensive with some researcher's topic or object of study; secondary sources discuss these primary sources; tertiary sources summarize or synthesize these secondary discussions. Like the conventional research paper, our standard terms for sources reflect what Russell calls the "ethic of scientific objectivity" characteristic of the late-nineteenth-century academy (11). When we use them unselfconsciously, we risk perpetuating a positivist legacy that composition as a discipline purports to disavow.

Moreover, there is a certain slipperiness to this nomenclature that can make it difficult for students to apprehend. Because the standard terms indicate only an abstract order or priority subordinates the core intellectual work of writing—the work of interpretation, argumentation, and communication—to the work of research.

common metaphor, argument sources are those with which writers enter into "conversation." In professional academic writing, there is a strong correlation between the genres in which writers work and the genres of their argument sources, but this correlation is weaker in student writing. In the ordinary practice of their professions, historians generally write articles and books that engage articles and books by other historians; neuroscientists generally write research reports that engage research reports by other neuroscientists. Students are not regularly asked to write papers that engage other student papers. This "genre gap" may be a significant reason students sometimes fail to apprehend the dialogic nature of academic argumentation.

I use the terms *method* and *method source* to refer to materials from which a writer derives a governing concept or a manner of working. A method source can offer a set of key terms, lay out a particular procedure, or furnish a general model or perspective. Like background sources, method sources can sometimes go things external to writers' texts, not as intrinsic parts of those texts. But the roughly parallel questions *What are your exhibits?* or *What are your argument sources?* can be construed in either sense depending on context. Third, because the categories named by BEAM shade into one another, they map a whole domain of ways writers might use their materials. For this reason BEAM allows students to make finer discriminations of function than are readily possible with the standard nomenclature.

BEAM as a Framework for Reading

Many composition scholars have argued that strong writing depends on strong critical reading.[8] BEAM can support critical reading not only by providing clear labels for the different postures writers might adopt toward their materials but also by enabling students to track shifts in these postures over the course of a text. I will illustrate BEAM's utility in this regard by applying it to three very different texts: an autobiographical piece by essayist Richard Rodriguez, an article by historian Eric Foner, and a one-page research report by entomologists John E. Losey, Linda S. Rayor, and Maureen E. Carter. Rodriguez's essay, "The Achievement of Desire," appeared in his 1981 book *Hunger of Memory* and is a staple text in composition classes. Foner's article, "American Freedom in a Global Age," was originally delivered as his presidential address to the American Historical Association in January 2001. Losey, Rayor, and Carter's report, "Transgenic Pollen Harms Monarch Larvae," appeared in the journal *Nature* in 1999.

I come to my first text through David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's popular composition reader *Ways of Reading*. In an assignment on Rodriguez's essay, Bartholomae and Petrosky ask students to examine Rodriguez's treatment of his only external source, a chapter on the "scholarship boy" from Richard Hoggart's book *The Uses of Literacy*. They ask students to "[l]ook closely at Rodriguez's references to Hoggart's book" and to draw connections between the seemingly "technical matter" of how Rodriguez deploys these references and his claims to interpretive "authority" (581–82). BEAM is well suited to helping students execute this sort of assignment. In the first two of his essay's four numbered sections, Rodriguez uses a concept provided by Hoggart to make sense of his own early school experiences: "I found, in his description of the scholarship boy, myself" (qtd. in Hoggart 564). Rodriguez positions Hoggart's chapter as a method source and takes his own experiences as exhibits.[9]

on his own pulses," Rodriguez condemns this characterization as "more accurate

> Although plants transformed with genetic material from the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt)* are generally thought to have negligible impact on non-target organisms[1], *Bt* corn plants might represent a risk because most hybrids express the *Bt* toxin in pollen[2], and corn pollen is dispersed over at least 60 metres by wind.[3] (214)

Because it documents a proposition the report goes on to contest—that *Bt* plants "have negligible impact on non-target organisms"—note 1 cannot be a background reference. It must therefore be doing some other kind of rhetorical work. Two possibilities suggest themselves. We could take the note as offering an illustrative exhibit in support of the assertion that the disputed proposition is "generally thought" to be true. Alternatively, we could take the note as identifying a specific argument source the authors mean to challenge. Which of these possibilities we embrace depends on how seriously we take the authors' representation of the disputed proposition as a commonplace. If we accept this representation at face value, we must opt for the first. If we discount this representation as a rhetorical gesture demanded by the genre of the scientific report, we can opt for the second, with interesting results. It turns out that the note refers not to another piece of primary scientific communication, as one might expect, but to a sixteen-page guide touting the benefits of *Bt* corn and advocating its use. The guide follows a question-and-answer format foreign to primary work in the sciences but appropriate for its intended audience of students to consult as many sources, and as many kinds of sources, as possible.[11] Such exhortations are not necessarily unsound, but we lead students astray if we lead them to believe that the mere number or variety of their sources is more important than how well they use them in their texts.[12] In my own writing assignments, therefore, I rarely require students to cite a minimum number of sources. Instead, I require them to deploy their materials in one or more of the four ways delineated by BEAM. (Which and how many depend on the aims of the assignment.) The conventional requirement treats the number of sources as a challenges. Those who start from exhibits risk producing papers driven by what investigators associated with the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing call the “complexity thesis.” As one of these investigators, Faye Halpern, explains, this kind of thesis merely “announces that something . . . is not as simple as it may first appear” (136). In my terms the danger is that students will perform intricate and perhaps brilliant analyses of particular exhibits but fail to bring these analyses to bear on any larger questions or problems. Students can avoid this danger, as many commentators have pointed out, by positioning their analyses as contributions to specific, ongoing intellectual conversations. In my terms this means finding and engaging argument sources relevant to their exhibits. Conversely, students who start from argument sources risk producing papers that merely rehash what others have already said. It is of course possible to further a conversation by ordering and commenting on the arguments of others (in other words, by writing a review essay), but when used to excess, this strategy leads to writing that has a distinctly second-hand feel. A better strategy is to bring something “new” to the table by introducing into a debate an analysis of some yet-to-be-considered exhibit. This reciprocity gives rise to a powerful rule of thumb: *If you start with an exhibit, look for argument sources to engage; if you start with argument sources, look for exhibits to interpret.*

Students who begin with background or method sources face both sorts of challenges. In both cases the sheer openness of the rhetorical situations such students create for themselves can be debilitating. Students who develop writing projects from background sources run the risk of writing mere vanilla reports. If they cannot move beyond these sources, they can do little else. Students who begin from method sources begin with procedures or perspectives in search of applications. They begin with nothing in particular to write about and no one in particular to write for, to, or against. They therefore risk producing papers that display little sense of exigency or that seem contrived or forced. Students who find themselves in one of these situations may have to do significant preliminary or exploratory work just to get to the point where they can develop projects around exhibits or arguments.

Finally, BEAM can aid students in revision. Much of what I might say on this point is already implicit in the foregoing discussion, and so I will restrict myself to a few brief observations. BEAM can serve as a critical vocabulary in written comments, workshops, and student conferences, but it can also work as a checklist for assessing drafts. Since students’ papers will generally be stronger if they address specific exhibits and engage specific arguments, simply asking students to verify that they are not missing either of these elements can be all the stimulation they need to make thoughtful and substantial changes to their work.

BEAM's Contribution

In closing, I would like to reflect again on the body of scholarship with which I began. In his touchstone 1982 article "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing," Larson argues persuasively that because research practices vary so dramatically across fields and because research can inform almost any sort of writing, "English" teachers should stop teaching the "research paper" as if it were a universal genre. While I agree with Larson on this point, the wider lesson I take from his article is that writing

In this article I use the term *research-based writing* to refer broadly to writing that draws on outside materials of any sort, whether or not these materials are the direct products of the writer's own research. For example, I regard papers on assigned texts as a form of research-based writing, even though such papers may require no research from the student writers themselves.

[2]I follow Davis and Shadle in naming Booth, Colomb, and Williams; Macrorie; and Ballenger as representative figures. Davis and Shadle perceive an explicit historical and logical progression in this succession of forms, which they view as enacting "a movement away from the templated discourse of the research paper and into an increasingly complex world of rhetorical choices" (427).

[3]Russell states emphatically, "One genre has defined extended student writing in mass secondary and higher education: the documented essay (or research paper or term paper)" (78). For his account of the genre's development, see 78–92. See also Davis and Shadle 423–27.

[4]This asymmetry reflects the fact that primary sources vary far more widely across disciplines than do secondary sources. Secondary sources are usually prose arguments of some kind, but any artifact or representation can potentially be a primary source. I make a similar observation with respect to my terminology below.

[5]In making this statement, I am not ignoring the rich recursive relationship between writing and research, nor am I denying that research itself can be a kind of "intellectual work," a phrase I take from James F. Slevin. I am noting that the priorities informing the standard nomenclature are not those of most writing teachers.

[6]My goal in this article is thus similar to Joseph Harris's in his recent book *Rewriting: How to Do Things With Texts*. Like Harris, I want students to regard writing as a process of (to borrow Harris's borrowing of J. L. Austin) "doing things" with their materials. But despite this affinity, our specific focuses differ. Harris identifies and explains four interpretive "moves" academic writers often make with sources: *coming to terms*, *forwarding*, *countering*, and *taking an approach* (4). I offer a vocabulary for describing writers' materials in terms of their functions in texts.

[7]In literary criticism, passages offered for inte0.2689 sors inie(anhib.8(,.5(d)9J18.406 0 TD0.0002 TD3552689 T

kind of source" (Maimon, Peritz, and Yancey 215). In a short article for students, Fulkerson puts this standard advice more pithily: "How many sources do you need? All of them" (23).

[12]Brent, for example, tells the story of a student in an undergraduate history class who cited over twenty sources in a paper but received a comment from her professor suggesting that she needed a "more extensive bibliography." The professor had misdiagnosed her inability to deploy her sources effectively as a lack of reading (110–12).

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