READING AND WRITING AS SOCIAL ACTS

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As you have no doubt gathered from the announcements for this seminar and from what has been said here so far this evening, I am of the opinion that reading and writing are not the private acts we ordinarily consider them, but are, rather, social acts that we do privately only for the sake of convenience. I believe also that this seemingly slight difference in the way we think about reading and writing makes an enormous difference in the way we teach reading and writing. This evening and tomorrow morning I am going to try to demonstrate to you why I think of reading and writing in this way and the difference I believe it makes. Or, rather, I am going to try to help you demonstrate it to yourselves.

Obviously reading and writing are late and well-advanced stages of our use of language in practical affairs, requiring advanced, sophisticated, and complex skills. It seems clear, however, that we begin very early in life to use language as we use it later in reading and writing. Understanding this early phase, the origins of the relationship between language and abstract intelligence, sheds a good deal of light on the more advanced phase, the phase that concerns us here, the processes of reading and writing. I should say here also that although I may seem sometimes to be talking about writing to the exclusion of reading, that will in fact never be the case. Reading and writing, as I'm sure you will agree, are two sides of the same coin. They cannot be separated. All writers are their own very first readers.

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In a book called *Mind in Society,* the early twentieth-century psychologist L. S. Vygotsky explores a period of language development that I take to be the earliest stage in the long process which culminates in learning to write effectively. Based on his own research and that of others, the following conclusion is arrived at by Vygotsky:

> The most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge. . . . As soon as speech and the use of signs are incorporated into any action, the action becomes transformed and organized along entirely new lines. . . . [Before] mastering [their] own behavior, [children begin] to master [their] . . . surroundings with the help of speech. . . . Children not only *act* in attempting to achieve a goal but also *speak.* As a rule this speech arises spontaneously and continues almost without interruption throughout the [effort].

In brief, "speech not only accompanies practical activity but also plays a specific role in carrying it out. . . . Speech and action are part of one and the same complex psychological function, directed toward the solution of the problem at hand. . . . The more complex the action demanded by the situation and the less direct its solution, the greater the importance played by speech in the operation as a whole."

Now, Vygotsky's analysis of the way children use language is important to us as we teach writing to children, adolescents, and adults because his analysis can be generalized beyond that crucial moment very early in life when "speech and practical activity . . . converge." Vygotsky gives us an example of a five-year-old child trying to obtain a piece of candy placed out of reach on a shelf. The record of the experiment demonstrates how this child eventually figures out how to use a stool and a stick to get the candy by *talking* her way through the solution to the problem as she figures it out. What interests me about this experiment is that the child does not address her speech to the objects that concern her. Her talk is not fantasy play as a substitute for action. She talks about the objects and about what she is doing with them, and she talks to another person, either to

the other person present — the experimenter — or to herself as an internalized audience. Already, Vygotsky explains, this child's "socialized speech (which has previously been used to address an adult) is turned inward. Instead of appealing to the adult [she appeals] to [herself]."

What is evidently happening in this example is that the child is using social speech (as opposed to "egocentric" speech) *instrumentally,* that is, to help get something done. Instrumental speech is what makes an activity that appears to be a solitary task into a collaborative or social one in reality. Once we begin as children to use speech instrumentally in this way, we continue to do so. For the rest of our lives we work together, as Robert Frost puts it, whether we work together or apart. We do so because language is a social instrument that "shapes" action by affecting our relations with other people: our "ability to control another person's behavior" through language "becomes a necessary part of [our] practical activity." Here Vygotsky means nothing invidious by the word "control." He means that effective work comes to involve, first, engaging other people's attention, interest, and feelings with the task we have undertaken; second, tapping their expertise in order to fill gaps in our own and to augment and complement our own capacity to do the job; and third, drawing on the values, metaphors, and institutional commitments of our community of knowledgeable peers to make sense of our actions and give them meaning.

Furthermore, Vygotsky contends that as we mature we learn to internalize this instrumental use of speech until instrumental speech becomes what we later experience as "thought." When the child in Vygotsky's example is a year or two older, she will "say" much the same sorts of things as she works. In much the same way she will talk-through her solution to a problem, but she will not be likely, except under stress, to do so aloud. Thus, although our instrumental use of speech beginning in early childhood may not seem to continue as we mature, in fact it does. It merely, so to speak, goes underground.

And instrumental speech continues to be important even at the highest levels of knowledge and cognitive development. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* the historian and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn argues that central to change in scientific knowledge, whether it be the acquisition of scientific expertise by novice scientists or

a paradigmatic revolution of Copernican magnitude, is the process of acquiring "the ability to recognize a given situation as like some and unlike others that one has seen before." And one does this, Kuhn implies, by generating language that constitutes the world we see in a useful way. We learn in this way, that is, by appropriating "group-licensed ways of seeing." When someone else gives us language together with concrete examples of how it is used (when, for example, we learn as children the difference between a flower and a tree) we are initiated into a community and a "world" constituted by that language. We acquire the "tested and shared possessions of a successful group," an assenting community of knowledgeable peers. Conversely, the language we learn in this way survives as the community survives because it has "withstood the tests of group use . . . from generation to generation."

Kuhn's contention that we join a community of knowledgeable peers by acquiring that community's language is a corollary of Vygotsky's principle that at a crucial point in childhood practical activity and the social use of language converge to give birth to the distinctively "human forms of practical and abstract intelligence," through learning to use language — or any symbol system — instrumentally, to help us do something. Common to Kuhn and Vygotsky, then, is the view that knowledge, thought, and learning are intrinsically social or collaborative in at least two senses: they involve language used to help us do things, and they involve ways of seeing, inherent in that language, that have been tested and shared by a community of knowledgeable peers. The philosopher Richard Rorty confirms this view. In a book entitled *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* Rorty argues from Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein that knowledge in general is "socially justified belief," and that justification is "a matter . . . of conversation, of social practice." At every level of cognition beyond earliest infancy — beyond that "most significant moment in the course of intellectual development" when language becomes instrumental in work — the social artifact and practice we call language is identical with learning and active thought.

This being the case, then, the social nature of language must be involved in what is sometimes the most daunting of all human tasks, writing. Writing and conversation are closely related. For example, in order for me to write the essay I am delivering to you this evening, I had to talk

through what I might say with a friend or colleague. Or since I have become practiced in discussing my talk with friends and colleagues, I may sometimes be able to internalize that conversation and talk about my talk with myself. Either way, though, my writing is highly social, highly collaborative.

This necessity to talk-through the task of writing means that collaborative learning, which is the institutionalized counterpart of the social or collaborative nature of knowledge and thought, is not merely a helpful pedagogical technique incidental to writing, it is *essential* to writing. This is the difference between the conception of writing I am explaining here and the traditional conception of it. It is a basic difference. Conceived traditionally, writing involves an adversarial relationship, and hence an alienating one. According to the tradition, I am up here trying my darndest to convince you of my own point of view, thinking that you are down there trying your darndest not to be taken in. According to the tradition, the writer is a sort of hunter and the reader or audience, his prey. The writer's job is to aim his weapon carefully; the reader's job is not to be a sitting duck.

But writing viewed as a form of instrumental speech, as I have been suggesting that Vygotsky and Kuhn might view it, becomes something quite different. It ceases to be adversarial and alienating and becomes, instead, a highly social and interdependent activity: reader and writer become part of each other's sustaining environment. Like any other learning or problem-solving activity, writing becomes essentially and inextricably social or collaborative in nature.

This conclusion has some interesting practical implications for the way we teach writing. If we suppose that talking about writing is essential to writing and learning to write, this supposition raises for us, at least, the following questions. Is talking about writing something we do easily, without thinking much about it? Or do writers *learn how* to talk about writing? How does talk about talk or writing differ from talk about anything else? What distinguishes critical discourse about language from critical discourse about other things, such as baseball, finance, or the molecular structure of heavy water? If writers do need to learn how to talk about writing, what would teaching them to do that entail? And if talking about writing is, by definition, a social activity, what is the best sort of social structure or context in which it may occur? Is it enough to learn to talk about

writing with a person in authority — that is, with a teacher? Or do people beyond earliest childhood need to learn to talk-through the task of writing (or for that matter, any other task) with someone roughly of their own status — a peer? And if they do need to talk to a peer for this purpose, what is a peer?

I am not going to offer you any pat answers to these questions. But I hope that some of the work we do together this evening and tomorrow will suggest some answers to you, or at least make you feel that the questions I have raised here really are questions worth trying to answer. The truth, of course, is that what I'm doing now is copping out. I really don't have any answers, pat or otherwise, to these questions. But I do have some hunches. I trust that between now and tomorrow afternoon you will have some too, and that we'll have a chance to share our hunches.

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