

# ON LEARNING TO WRITE AND WRITING TO LEARN

// An interview with Charles Bazerman

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Prof. Charles Bazerman from University of California, Santa Barbara is one of the leading experts on writing research and pedagogy, contributing significantly to the establishment of writing as a research field. His main emphasis is on genre theories, the concept of activity system, intertextuality, cognitive aspects of writing development, and the rhetoric of science. His approach to writing research can be labeled as socio-historical-institutional in that it focuses substantially on social, historical and institutional contexts within recognized genres, with form being a rhetorical response to a situation.

In general, Bazerman's publications on writing can be divided into two main categories – research/theory-oriented publications and textbooks/handbooks. The former include the following significant books, indicated below chronologically.

His award-winning book *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (1988), a landmark in studies on writing, is considered to be a seminal study by scholars across the world. It provides important insights into the social and rhetorical forces that influenced the development and character of the genre of experimental scientific articles.

*Constructing Experience* (1994), written over the period of 20 years, is a collection of influential articles on the teaching and learning of writing and on problematic issues in rhetoric and composition.

Another of his books, *The Languages of Edison's Light* (1999), is a study of how intersecting discourses foster and produce new knowledge. It won the best scholarly book of 1999 award given by the Association of American Publishers in the history of science and technology section.

Bazerman's numerous textbooks and handbooks, including *The Informed Writer: Using Sources in the Disciplines* (1995), *Involved: Writing for College, Writing for Your Self* (1997), or *Writing Skills Handbook* (1998), have helped both the academics in teaching writing and their students in learning to write. In addition, he has edited a number of books such as *Textual Dynamics of the Profession* (1991), *Writing Selves, Writing Societies. Research from Activity Perspectives* (2002), or *International Advances in Writing Research: Cultures, Places, Measures* (2012).

In May 2011, Bazerman delivered a series of lectures on the topics of textual analysis and academic writing at the Faculty of Social Studies and the Language Centre. His stay at Masaryk University in Brno was organized in cooperation with the Fulbright Commission.

In this interview, we focused on several areas of his research, including the continuous cultivation of writing abilities across the curriculum in colleges and universities

through to disciplinary and scientific writing. In relation to this, the issue of non-native speakers/writers of English is frequently raised. Another focal area in Bazerman's current research orientation concerns the notion of writing to learn, in which writing is believed to promote critical thinking and learning (i.e., cognitive consequence of writing). In addition, we also discussed his observations on Czech culture and the differences in the system of education between Europe and the US.

**This is your first time in Brno. What are your initial impressions?**

Well, I have many different impressions. Brno is a very lovely, comfortable, and easy-going city with a lot of resources. As a music lover, I'm very impressed for such a small city how much music there is, what high quality it is, how easy it is to go to performances and how appreciative the audiences are. The selections that are played indicate a lot of sophistication among the music listeners. Also for an American who's used to people having to use cars everywhere, the public transportation system here is something I wish American cities would have much more of.

**And how do you like Masaryk University and the students?**

Masaryk university strikes me as a very high-quality university judged from talks with the students, teachers, faculty members, and staff. It has all the attributes of very good university. I welcomed an opportunity to teach international students. One of my classes at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism has a very interesting international mix of students – they come from different regions and different backgrounds. Apart from Czech or Slovak students there are Spanish journalism students, linguists, and literature students from Italy, then students from Romania and Albania.

**What are your reflections on Czech culture?**

There is a very strong, rich culture here which is very enjoyable. I go to the theatre; I go to music halls and art galleries almost every night. But then it's a culture seeking homogeneity. Not only does it seek homogeneity, but it seems to exclude the non-homogeneous. To explain what I mean, I'll talk about my visit to the Museum of Romani Culture here in Brno. It was a very sad experience. The museum is really small and nobody was there. Somebody had to come to the museum to show me the two rooms and turn on the lights. It was also sad because of the story it told about gypsies. The main story it told was about the Holocaust. There were also some photographic exhibits which tended to be romantic about the poverty, about the beautiful but suffering people in the Balkans. But it was interesting that their story was also being told as a sad story and in sad surroundings. It was also being told about other people, about the Germans and about the Balkans. However, there was nothing about Roma in Czech and their struggles here – that part is really not dealt with.

**Well then, considering the US and the question of minorities analogous to our Romani minority, has it been dealt with effectively there?**

In the US we have a lot of people who feel that the outsiders threaten them, or the people who are not the part of the traditional culture are a threat to that culture. A century ago, we had a strategy trying to Americanize everybody, making them seem the same. And then it was only in the latter half of the twentieth century that diversity became really the overriding theme: How do you become American? By being diverse.

**For almost 20 years now you have been teaching at University of California, a state of great cultural diversity. What are the major differences in the system of education in the US and Europe?**

Many of the things that get done in the upper secondary level in Europe get done in the first two years of the university in the US. So we have a kind of open general education space which then allows for skills courses (such as the writing skills), and university-wide courses. Students don't enter their faculty, they enter the university. And then after two years, they select their major, their faculty and their department. Such a different structure then makes writing possible. The first two years will prepare them for a more advanced work as opposed to students having to come in fully prepared in Europe.

**In addition to teaching, you have served as a referee and a member of the editorial boards of numerous professional journals and conferences on writing research and pedagogy. I'm certain you have come across a great number of articles written by non-native speakers of English. What problems, in terms of language, are characteristic of such articles?**

First of all, these articles do not get immediately rejected, contrary to the common belief. I try to look into them and see if there's something important being said there. If there is, I try to figure out how to work with it. I ask myself questions like "Is there an interesting idea?", "How can we make that work?", and also "Is that person capable of writing or transforming that article with guidance and mentoring?" It's not easy but it's very important to be as open and supportive as one can be.

As for problems with language, the articles I get as a referee or an editor are often not well composed, not well organized, or the direction of the argument is not very clear. As you can see, it's not just the surface language. In addition to composition, organization and argumentation, there are also problems in taking a position intertextually. So it's a lot of things which are not just a matter of correct linguistic form.

**Where do you think these problems stem from?**

Writing is not just language. However, in many parts of the world it is often taught by applied linguists who approach it as an issue of language only. In some countries there's not much learning to write and practically no focus on the composition even in the first language. Moreover, only certain kinds of writing are taught in the native language. Students have almost no experience with scientific writing or certain kinds of scholarly writing in their first language. Quite frequently, they have to learn English at the same time they learn how to write in English. So as editors or referees we have to work on two levels – we deal with the details of language as well as providing instructions on how to write.

**English is regarded as lingua franca of science. Non-native speakers of English tend to be disadvantaged when it comes to publishing in international journals. What are your views on this 'English language imperialism' as it has been labeled?**

There are many aspects to this issue. How it came about, whether it's right, what is the dilemma of non-native English speaking scientists...

**The main problem is that excellent Czech scientists can be disadvantaged due to their insufficient knowledge of English, resulting in the absence of international recognition.**

It's also actually hard to be a good scientist unless you're in communication with the leading-edge colleagues, which means not only that you'll be able to read in English, but that

you go to conferences, develop the informal channels of communication. So the whole 'game' is played in English. And only very small pockets of subgame are played even in language like Spanish, a widely spoken language. There is a fairly substantial Spanish language physics establishment but still they have to publish in English to get published internationally. All the top journals are in English.

I've been very lucky because my work has been published in Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, French, and Italian. I've been also lucky in the sense that my native language is English. It allows me to travel and to work internationally and work with different national traditions. On the other hand, English speakers are unlucky in that they are not forced to learn another language. We don't bother, we don't need to. Who knows what the future will be. In the past, it was important to know German or French. In high school, I learnt German because I thought I was going to be a scientist. In the mid 1950's German was still a little bit a language of science, for instance chemistry was still German.

At present, English turned out to be the major language of commerce, and entertainment as well, as scholarship and science. I am also embarrassed because part of the English dominance has to do with all kinds of nasty political/imperial kinds of history. It also carries with it some ethnocentrism, linguocentrism, or cultural centrism. On the other hand, science in international projects needs the collective wisdom of all peoples and you need some kind of mechanism for that – a common language. Maybe in some point in the future machine translation will be so accurate and transparent that English won't be needed. Although I suspect when you're working in a specialty, your phrasing needs to be specific. Precise phrasing of a concept in a specialty is one of the hardest things for people to do.

Another aspect of this is that part of the advance of US science has to do with government funding, which lot of it is defense related. On the other hand American universities and research grew very much in the 20th century. That is something to be proud of. Again, some people are lucky in terms of native speaking. Academic writing is of course not native to anybody but still if you're writing in your native language, that base also helps.

### **Is there anything that can be done to compensate for disparities in the knowledge of English?**

One way to relieve the guilt of just being lucky, the guilt of history of the English language, is to be able to support people in providing ways for them to and into the English discourse, to go out of one's way and learn a bit of another language. I do a lot of editorial work and especially when you're working with people from certain languages, it's a lot of editorial work. I feel I have responsibility I'm paying back for my good luck. It's especially important to bring the richness of their ideas and their perspectives into the discussions. There are several projects, which I'm engaged in, that are trying to help this too.

However, it's tied to economic disparities as well, as in Latin America or Africa. Language difference has to do with economic disadvantages as well. English speakers need to be aware of these disparities and try to do their best to help other people overcome this without being too patronizing about it. They need to be supportive and open.

**Your last project involved planning and organization of the conference Writing Research Across Borders. What was it like to organize such an international conference with researchers from different parts of the world, different writing traditions, and different perspectives on writing?**

People in many parts of the world have become more and more interested in writing. They begin to understand that writing is an essential skill of the modern world. Sometimes they tend to associate the skill merely with the problem of scholars trying to write for international publication. However, writing is a hidden dimension of every aspect of the modern world. I've argued this in many of my publications. Writing provides an intellectual communicative knowledge infrastructure of most of the institutions of modernity.

In sociology, there is the problem of how we come to be able to relate to society at a distance. Years ago, people related to the people in their family and their tribe, people right in front of them. Today, we see ourselves as members of nations, members of economy, interest groups, intellectual groups, or even ethnic groups spread over large regions. We live our lives in many ways at a distance: we work all day for money and money flows widely; we participate in the international economy or our national economies; we read newspapers. In short, we live our lives not just thinking about people in front of us. How does that happen? I think writing is the technology that allowed communication at a distance. It is from the activity system point of view and genre perspective that you start to see how much writing then becomes the infrastructure, the glue that holds us together with the organizations at a distance, and holds even these organizations and institutions together.

### **Could you explain some of the issues or problems associated with researching writing?**

Our instruction and consciousness about writing is very limited. Most people are phobic about their writing because they fear it and are unable to reflect on themselves as writers except for negative self-feelings. This is something that really needs development even though we have more communications technology at a distance which also involves writing. For instance, the internet is a wonderful example. People write more now than they ever did on Facebook, Twitter, weblogs, etc. They fill in online forms. We live surrounded by world of texts and multimedia. As a result, societies around the world are starting to become more aware of writing as something that extends beyond the world of literature. As the idea of writing has often been attached to creative writing people tend to feel negatively about themselves as writers. They would say: "I'm not Shakespeare; I'm not a real writer". Writing is just beginning to be born as a research field, as a field that's trying to understand writing and writing development apart from the ideology of literature. So the conference was very important in this respect but also very exciting to watch happen internationally.

The US again has been lucky because of the system of college and composition that we've had unlike in Europe. On the other hand, we learn a great deal from the many different perspectives that the rest of world is adopting. All cultures are struggling how to make writing research empirical, how to make it more based on fact, whatever fact is. It's important to have a deeper contact with the actual experience of what happens inside of our heads. It's very tricky trying to turn this into empirical studies because, as I said, so much of this is actually in the head, deeply psychological but at a level that is very different from what experimental psychology gets at.

This is the very beginning of empirical studies in the US – we are starting to see a real expansion and blossoming of this important field, bringing in many disciplinary resources. In the long run it's important to move the project to global research and communications between regions. I feel very lucky to be part of it. On the other hand, there are certain

obstacles that have to be overcome. For instance, there are tremendous logistics problems making this happen and there've been tremendous political problems. Luckily, the International Society for the Advancement of the Writing Research is just being born and hopefully some of the most pressing problems could thus be resolved.

**The US is known to be a writing culture, or more precisely, a culture cultivating writing at all levels of education. Most Czech professors, scientists or even teachers would argue that students should acquire the skill of writing in high school and that they should already be fully prepared to write academically at university. How would you respond to this view?**

I will answer the question in two ways. First of all, students may learn to be wonderful writers in high school and still not know what they need to write at university. This is because the writing at university has new demands. In the US, concepts like analytical or critical writing only start to be taught at universities. Students are supposed to think at a different level. In high school, students learn about narration, a little about argument, but not necessarily about scholarly argument. The writing they do in high school is often about making a point and supporting it, commenting on literature, discussing a poem, or how they feel about a story. At university, students have to read scholarly books from different disciplines, they have to be able to understand the underlying ideas of the books, they have to be able to criticize theories, and they have to take fresh data and analyze them. So there is a good deal of new tasks that are expected at university, even at the first level, which is an enormous break in the curricular expectations. So that's one perspective...

**And the other perspective?**

Every time you move from one situation to another, there is learning specific to that situation. In most cultures it is recognized that there is an intellectual difference between high school and college. This intellectual difference really means the difference in what one is supposed to write. That's how it's reflected. The skills that are taught as a matter of writing are tied to thinking required in college. However, it's not like you suddenly learn to think differently and then you write differently. It's as you learn to write differently, you learn to think differently.

**How is writing different in different scientific disciplines? Can you give us an example?**

Scientists write in a certain way. They have extensive literature and the writing is in the context of that literature and the theories and the findings. In the US, in sociology there is a very strong emphasis on theory, so for everything you read you need to understand what's the theoretical orientation that it comes from, how then it leads to different research methodologies and different kinds of commentary. Whereas in physics, you also have a concern for the literature but it's what are the findings in the literature. So there are so many differences that students need to learn to write in those fields. Not only do they have to learn to write at different intellectual levels, they need to learn to write in different intellectual spheres.

**What are the main arguments for the importance of learning to write even at the PhD level and beyond? In other words, what are the reasons for an ongoing cultivation of the writing skill?**



At the PhD level and beyond, researchers are required to collect a great number of original data, to read lots of books, and to be able to tell how the many books they have read fit together and how it sets up the intellectual problem for their research. Most importantly, they have to make a coherent argument of all these parts, which is a whole new level of challenge. It's a well established fact that in many countries students who are highly successful as students get suddenly stuck when it comes to their dissertations or their theses. In the worst scenario, they never finish. Non-completion based on thesis can be fifty percent. For example, in Argentina it's a real problem because it can be as high as eighty percent. Therefore, you need writing support even at the post-graduate level.

**What about the postdoctoral level?**

When people finish their doctorates, they go out to work or they teach. It still turns out that only a very small percentage of those who have been trained to be researchers actually publish research. There are new challenges and one of them is that up through the doctorate you're following the guidance of somebody who helps you to define what theories you should be using and what your research problems are. As a postdoctoral researcher you are on your own and you have to trust your own judgment. To publish original research, you have to identify questions that are important. This requires a whole new range of skills that people often do not get during their graduate education. I think this is one of the main reasons why so many postdoctoral students fail to turn into researchers.

**And what about learning to write after leaving the university to be able to work in the different professions?**

When people leave the university to go to work, for instance, for corporations, they need to learn all the genres of that corporation. So there's always a transition. There's been some interesting ethnographic research on the kinds of way that in positive corporate situations people are given mentorship and they learn the genres. They're given simple tasks at first, and then more extended tasks. Even if they come out of the top universities, they still need to be introduced to the world of writing and to the responsibilities associated with all the writing in the company.

**Is cultivation of writing abilities beneficial for such a seasoned researcher as you are?**

As a writer myself I believe that people need cultivation at every level. Even though I'm not a beginner, I find my big projects always challenging. In addition, the more projects you do the more skilled you get, and you become more ambitious in your writing. I wish I had somebody to guide me or become readers on some of my work because you're out there alone. So at every stage, support is useful. Professional musicians have coaches even if they're superstars. Football players have coaches who are watching them whether they're making mistakes or when something goes wrong. Tiger Woods goes to coaches when he has problems and they analyze them. Why should writing be any simpler?

**The last two decades have seen an increased interest in investigating the link between writing and thinking. Could you elaborate on this?**

Writing seems to have something to do with intellectual mental growth. Writing affects one's mind. We all can feel it as writers. There's an area called writing to learn which the research has been pretty shallow on although we feel writing to learn has some of the deepest

kinds of meaning. It's what philosophers do. They write, they come up with new ideas and they teach these new ideas through their writing.

The writing to learn research has been investigating issues such as, for example: If students take more notes, will they get higher scores on exams? The problem is how we can get from that shallow level to the very deep phenomenon of writing to learn. I'm currently working on two clusters of empirical research related to this phenomenon, which can be generally summed up under the themes of 'knowledge and meaning' and 'thought and personal development'.

**You are a prolific author who has written or edited many books on writing, writing research, rhetoric and genre studies. I believe many readers would be interested in the process of your writing from the initial idea to the final product. Can you give us some insights or suggestions?**

There is not one process, which is something I often tell my students. It depends on your material, situation, how the ideas come to you, different kinds of constraints, personality differences and the nature of the project. One reason I'm emphasizing this is because we had the process movement in the US, which wrongly taught a single process. So the only way I can answer that question is to talk about specific projects.

When I write large books, for instance, they tend to come from some kind of overall design. In terms of personality or individual characteristics, I'm more strategic than tactical which means that having the big idea or strategy often comes first. I deal with the details later on in my writing.

Another aspect of the process is that once you get comfortable with the process, you should start to trust it. You shouldn't try to solve everything at once. You should work on one level at a time. For example, I try to separate out the cognitive load by focusing separately on different aspects of my writing - the structure, the text, or the meaning. Of course you always solve things at every level, but you put your main focus on one level and you trust that you will be able to get there at the end.

**Do you use any specific techniques that contribute to better writing?**

I've used relaxation and focusing techniques from yoga, meditation, and tai-chi. They help me reconstruct the state of mind you can remember feeling when writing intensively. I often have outlines but I don't use them at the beginning. I make outlines when I'm halfway through. Sometimes I use a lot of subheadings as outlines. It's also important to think about the direction of the writing. Since writing is hard work, it's useful to literally chain yourself to the desk and spend for example an hour writing each day. What seems also beneficial to me is to go to coffee houses, sit down with a notebook and write - the presence of other people around helps me to focus. Alternatively, going to a place associated with the project, such as the library, will also help focus the mind. Frequently, mere discussing and talking about the project might help with brainstorming new ideas.



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