

# The beginnings of a phenomenology of writing-to-learn.

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The notion of 'Writing-to-learn' brings into conjunction an understanding of language and of learning. It is suggested that a particular view of language has unwittingly determined a view of the learner. By turning to a dialogical view of language a new view of the learner is presented.

## Framing the question

In its narrowest sense writing-to-learn names an American adaptation of the British writing across the curriculum movement of the sixties. It is a loose collection of classroom practices which involve students externalising their thinking, being reflective, and monitoring their learning through the act of writing. For the most part the practice has emerged independently of any particular epistemology or theory of learning. Though given the time of its emergence - the late 70's through the early 80's - and the American context of its origins, it is not surprising that the pragmatic tradition of Dewey (philosophically) and Bruner (educationally) give a constructivist rhythm to American reports of writing-to-learn practice. In the Australian context, from which the present work emerges, the last 10 years have seen the adoption of the writing to learn movement expanded with the accretion of theoretical assumptions from Vygotsky (psychological) and Halliday (social linguistics). These assumptions give a social constructivist flavour to Australian reports of writing-to-learn practice.

However writing-to-learn also signifies a far broader theoretical context, namely what is the relationship of language and thought? This theme is well understood in education through the work of Piaget and Vygotsky and their debate about the nature of inner speech. What is less well understood is how that debate is now problematised in modern philosophy. With the linguistic turn of the twentieth century and from the perspectives of analytic, critical, and phenomenological philosophy, the link between language and some inner world has been broken. To say what I mean isn't founded on some inner intention rather it is a manifestation of the resources for saying available within the culture. What becomes problematised when language is viewed this way is the subject itself, the 'who' in the question 'who's speaking?'. The "I" can no longer be taken as referring to a 'something', rather it is taken as a move in a language game which is manifest always in a particular speech act.

A unifying feature of all the literature on writing to learn is its concern with language in action. This concern distinguishes the project of understanding writing-to-learn from a straight linguistic project. That is writing to learn takes up the instances of saying (What Saussure called parole) rather than the structure of the said (langue in Saussure's terminology). As Ricoeur has noted language in its human guise is always a saying something to someone. To ask "who says what to whom" locates the task of understanding writing-to-learn as a task of interpretation (hermeneutics). That is to say the reading of the texts of the writing-to-learn-mathematics journals becomes the object of study rather than the writer's of the journals. This switch of focus is a shift from a scientific discourse to a discourse in the humanities. In respect of a text based study this shift has two important consequences: firstly, language can't be externalised as system; and, secondly, there is no

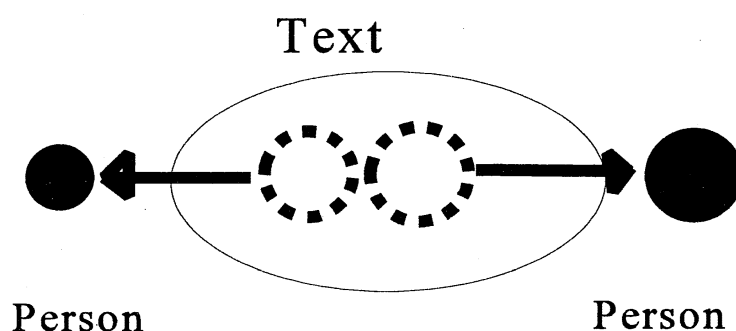
Archimedean point from which language can be talked about. In particular and in respect of the study of the journal texts what this means is that the notion of the competent reader, which is the device by which discourse analysis comes to trade as an objective or scientific discipline, must be abandoned. There can be no single right reading of a text and the object of the study of a text is the reading of it. A reading of the literature reveals a uniformity in appealing to the notion of language as action, it equal reveals a commitment to the prejudice that there is a transcendent source of action and that reason can somehow look through text to this source. What these prejudices do by creating an 'inner' world of language which is taken as informing the acts of expression in language is to cast learning as a predicate of some underlying 'thing'. It is exactly this essence ontology which underpins the 'inside/outside' split of Cartesian dualism. This split has been rethought from the outside by Wittgenstein's severing of the connection between words and things, and from the inside by Heidegger's reformulation of Being. This fundamental rethinking of language, thought, and being a learner are yet to be properly integrated into programs of educational theory and research.

The main point of discontinuity is apropos the construction of interiority and betweenness in respect of presence in the written text. When I read a text 'who' am I understanding and what is to be taken as being referred to by the text? These are fundamentally questions of the subject and of language, so, as preparation for stating a phenomenology of writing-to-learn, it will be useful to sketch the nature of the discontinuities between the extant corpus of writing-to-learn literature and the present study in respect of the key moments of language and presence and the nature of language as action.

### Language and presence.

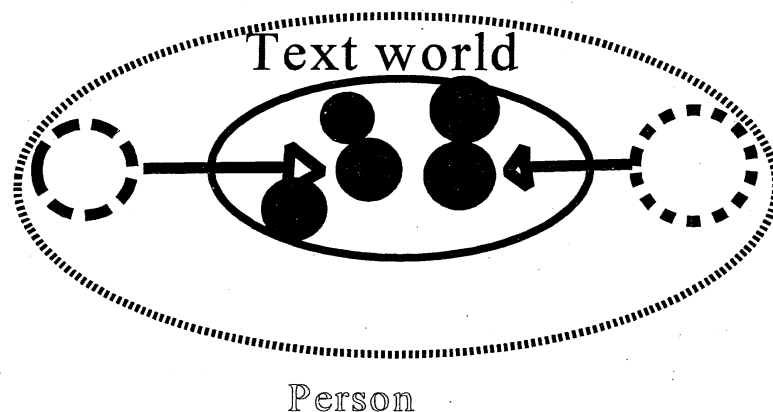
Modern Anglo-American and Continental philosophy has formulated language, as the choice to say or not to say, the distinctive ground of human presence. The strategy of this linguistic turn is to rethink the Being of being human. The following two figures summarize opposed views of the relationship of language to presence. Figure 1 typifies what might be called the natural attitude to language: Language is a medium through which two people meet. What is represented in language refers directly back to the intentions and

Figure 1



self presence of one to the other. The assumption is that what is being expressed is a true reflection of some prior synthesis of experience that is taken to be the subject making the utterance. Figure 2 on the other hand portrays a far more complex picture. The expressions in language are taken as the site of the subject, and indeed of multiple subjectivities. Where in the first model speaker and spoken are taken as continuous in the second model speaker and spoken are at a distance from each other. For the most part we are blind to this distance in the face to face of spoken language but it begins to reveal itself in written language. In

Figure 2



written language author and reader are not present to each other except by an intervening act of interpretation. Further once something has been said in writing its meaning is removed from the intention of the author - it is free to be read and reread with ever differing meanings. Writing merely highlights what is in fact true for all language: the saying and the said can never be identical. To really appreciate the force of this view is to realise that "speaker" and "hearer" are language structures and are not necessarily mapped onto biological organisms. It is possible to speak to yourself, to hear what I just said, for marks in the sand to tell us something, to speak to and be understood by animals, etc. Though the biological organism is not structurally part of language what is, is an other to that biological organism. Put most boldly: without the other that constitutes the being of language there isn't consciousness.

As I mentioned above language inevitable marks a distance in the presence of one to another. What is important about recognising or not recognising the distancing played on self presence by language, as in the differences between model 2 and model 1, is that it determines the validity or otherwise of the questions: who is the subject? and, how is it constructed as an object of scientific inquiry? In model 1 the text is a window onto the mind of the speaking subject. In model 2 language makes the subject opaque and in principle inexpressible. While language is seen as a window onto a self this self can be made an object of study by analogy with other things in the world. This is indeed the path followed by psychology, even to the level of the depth psychology of Freud and Jung where what is mediated by language is taken as an empirical reality. Once language is seen as in fact

hiding the self then it can no longer be studied as a thing in the world but must be approached as a phenomenon of human meaning or, in Heidegger's term, being-in-the-world. These two options have a great deal to do with method and what, how, and why objects become objects of study. In particular they demarcate a scientific project from a project in the humanities.

### **The analytic dimensions of language.**

There are many dimensions along which language might be analysed. Four key dimensions that seem to underlie much of the work I have examined are: function, aboutness, experience of self and other, and role or voice.

Figure 3 sketches, in four dimensions, what might be called the universe of language discourse. Each dimension represents themes that have emerged as significant in reading of the writing-to-learn literature. This schematisation is a caricature of the analytic complexity of language, but is useful in that it acts as a mnemonic for the range of ideas that have to be kept together when looking at a text. Of the four descriptive dimensions it is the fourth, Agency/agent, that is the most important for reformulating the view of the learner. In fact it is the addition of this axis that enables the move from a naive description to a phenomenological one.

**DESCRIPTION - EXPLANATION:** This axis is an icon for the social functions of language. It is intended to resonate with themes developed by Halliday, and work on genre. Or it can be interpreted in a more homely way as the distinction between showing and telling.

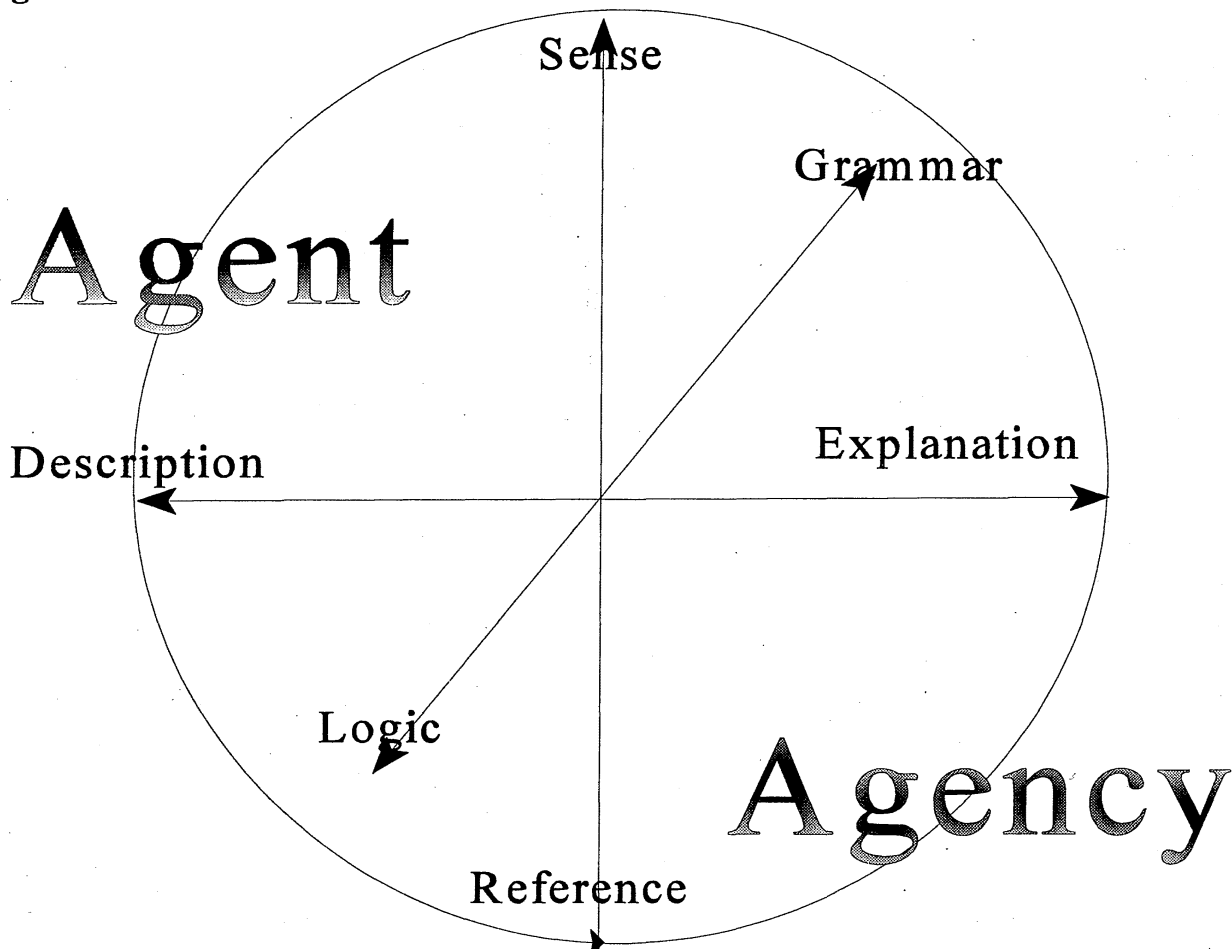
**REFERENCE - SENSE:** This axis symbolises the question of representation in discourse, as dealt with in discourse analysis and philosophy. A homely analogy for this distinction would be the distinction between touchable things and thinkable things. It is as Ricoeur typifies it the relation of 'what is said' to the 'about what'.

**LOGIC - GRAMMAR:** This axis introduces a philosophical dimension. In an earlier time 'logic' was used to refer to the relation between things, and 'grammar' to the relation between symbols. It is in this sense that I want to use the terms now. This is a very useful axis to have for our discussion of the universe of discourse, because this axis more than the others is related to that all pervading experience of the world, of cause/effect, and time passing. It is in this sense that Wittgenstein talks about 'forms of life' as grammar. Our experience is often taken as the basic logic from which we move towards constructing grammars.

**AGENT - AGENCY:** what would be the fourth axis in a four dimensional figure is represented here by the enclosing circle. This axis is to be understood as orthogonal to the other three, and it is represented as the fourth dimension because it is typically not a consideration in any naive descriptions of language but is prominent in any phenomenological description. It is by making this dimension of language analytically central to the study of the writing-to-learn journals that the present thesis begins to diverge from previous attempts to understand writing-to-learn. I will develop this distinction more carefully in the next section.

The above schematisation of the space of language gives us a useful shorthand for distinguishing domains of language use. I want to suggest that the vast majority of discourse happens in the space delimited by DESCRIPTION, REFERENCE, and LOGIC. Because the vast majority of discourse is defined within this space, I will call it Natural Language Discourse. It is the space of the market place, where people talk about themselves and the world around them in the informality of a shared culture. We give each other directions on how to do and how to find. All the sophistication of language operates, and we write expressively and transactionally. It is here that language serves to locate us within

Figure 3



the hurly-burly of life as lived, and it is undoubtedly from fulfilling this function that language has the marked forms that it does. (In linguistics the term 'marked' refers to the common or unmodified syntactic forms.) Natural language is unproblematic because it is language which is ready-to-hand.

In addition to serving the pragmatic demands of life, language also serves the demands of imagination and reason. From the domain of natural language discourse, language is stretched in one direction to become an art form, and in another direction to express and communicate scientific theories. As art, language is located in the space to the left of the plane marked by REFERENCE, LOGIC, and SENSE not occupied by Natural language discourse. Another differentiation of language happens as it serves the needs of scientific inquiry. It is the demand of explaining that moderates modes of reference, and the demand of theorising that makes language oscillate between the demands of logic and grammar, and, sense and reference.

As I have emphasised the three dimensions sense/reference, grammar/logic, and

description/explanation, come alive in a phenomenological sense when the agent/agency axis is added. The speaker and the spoken, the writer and the written are separable, the product no longer defines the process. The reason for this is that the product, for instance the text as a completed act, can be understood as a text only because of the existence of writing in the lifeworld. That is to say the agency resides in the culture. For an act to be considered to be an act and not a random movement it must make sense. It is the requirement of making sense that ties an act, not to individual minds but to the agency of the lifeworld in which the act is embedded. If we take the term 'event' to be the composite of agent and agency then the event of the spoken or written word is partitioned into a speaker and hearer, or a writer and reader, in accord with the sense they make in a particular culture, ie to the degree that the culture has a voice available for them to occupy. That an author is taken to be saying something (the act of speaking) is due to the agency of language held in common. Agent and agency define the space of speaker and audience. Both the self and the other can now be seen as structurally part of the discourse, a role within it.

### **A Phenomenology of writing to learn.**

I take learning to be about meanings and meaning making and in this sense it is about language understood in its broadest sense. The paradigm for this process is wrongly taken to be natural language. All the literature on writing to learn stays within the confines of the twin western prejudices: there is a transcendent source; and, reason can 'see' below the surface. These prejudices give rise to the view that learning is a predicate: a developmental property of some underlying 'thing'. Such a view is implicit in the grammar of natural language. To breakout of these prejudices requires that we see language dialogically, ie as existing only in the space between biological entities. Where this notion of dialogue (intertextuality) is most fully developed is in the work of Bakhtin. Bakhtin develops his argument as follows:

Knowledge of the thing and knowledge of the person. They must be depicted as boundaries: the thing, pure and dead, is nothing but externality; it exists only for the other (the knowing subject) who can reveal it entirely, down into its deepest recesses.....The second boundary is the thought of the person in presence of the person itself, dialogue, interrogation, prayer. Two boundaries of thought and praxis or two types of relations (the thing, the person). The deeper the person, that is the closer we edge to the personal boundary, the less applicable any generalising method; generalisation and formalisation efface the boundaries between genius and mediocrity ... Our *thought* and our *praxis* (not the technical one, but the *moral*, i.e. the set of our responsible acts) take place between two boundaries: the relation to the thing, and the relation to the person. *Thingification* and *personification*. (Todorov, p.18)

The knowledge which is *personification* is reduced to *thingification* by either of two false reductions of the Text: the text is reduced to its materiality (the structuralist enterprise); or, it can be reduced to a sequence of psychic states that exist in speaker and hearer ('I mean what I say' and 'I know what you mean'). For Bakhtin both these reductions share essentially the same defect, "they try to find the whole in the part". Text is the visible person and Text is an 'I and other' and not an 'I' and 'other'. For Bakhtin "this personalism is semantic and not psychological"(Todorov, p. 19).

There are events that, in principle, cannot unfold on the plane of a single

and unified consciousness, but presuppose two consciousnesses that do not fuse; they are events whose essential and constitutive element is the relation of a consciousness to another consciousness, precisely because it is other. *Such are all events that are creatively productive, innovative, unique, and irreversible.* (Bakhtin quoted by Todorov, p. 100, emphasis added.)

The events that Bakhtin is talking about are all those events that are rightly spoken of as mine, eg my birth, my death, my becoming an adult in so far as it is valorised by a particular chronological age in a particular society, or simply my being a speaker when I speak creatively, but are not experienceable from within. For Bakhtin these events constitute being a person and there is more to being a person than there is to being conscious. 'Only the other is in possession of the values of the being of a given person' (Todorov, p. 98). The excess of being a person over being conscious is the structural excess of language itself - that is language as I am born into it. On this understanding of language it neither swallows me up nor condemns me to solitary alienation but rather in the structural excess of any dialogue gives the freedom to 'be spoken' or to 'speak out'. The 'structural excess' that Bakhtin refers to arises from the nature of words as communication. For a word to be a word it must simultaneously be said and be understood, without understanding a word is only a sound. The way Bakhtin expresses this is to say that the word is essentially dialogical. The dialogue is not between individuals but is structurally part of language. It is in this sense that the model represented in figure 2 locates the substantial interaction between people is in the world of text rather than in the 'real world' of things. So the 'I', 'we', or 'you', as words uttered by the speaker, are structurally part of language and don't refer back to the author-creator.

To be or not be a person is an ethical issue and from this it follows that language is essentially ethical because any saying is a proclamation of the world for the other. Personhood relies on being able to be a topic in discourse. Schooling is a discourse and within this discourse language offers students ways of being a person. 'Self' and 'other' is a false dichotomy where as 'self and other' is precisely person. Saying something to someone, apart from the content of what is said, is a confirmation and continuance of my dasein, it is what Heidegger calls being-with. For this to be the case it makes no difference whether in this discourse event I am speaker, hearer, or spoken about. Being a person is a matter of having become through a history of being with one another. In respect of this being and becoming a person there is a continuing lived tension which Heidegger notes as follows:

Everyday Being-with-one-another maintains itself between the two extremes of positive solicitude - that which leaps in and dominates, and that which leaps forth and liberates [vorspringend-befreienden]. It brings numerous mixed forms of maturity; to describe these and classify them would take us beyond the limits of this investigation. (BT p. 159)

There is no doubt that the classroom is for the students an everyday-being-with-one-another. In this learning is a 'form of maturity'. What 'leaps in' or 'leaps forth' is the word. Advertising is a good example of a word event that 'leaps in' as language is used to grasp the person and reduce their saying to slogans. Such domination is overcome by the possibility of dialogue.

In the classroom there are two senses of dialogue to be considered. There is the dialogue of the classroom, and there is the dialogue of the individual with themselves - inner speech. In each case the speaking subject is other than the uniqueness of the being-

there (dasein) of the person, yet it is these dialogues that constitute the becoming of dasein. What ever text makes this dialogue concrete in history is fundamental to a 'Hermeneutics of the "I am"'. This is true whether the concern of the dialogue is identity or thought.

Each 'I' recognised above is embodied by the way it enters language through the use of the tokens of language. To understand the 'I am' is to understand both its domination by language and its struggle to be liberated. To simplify the discussion of the forms of maturity that arise from the tension between being formed by language and forming within language I will introduce the names: intending-becoming and attending-becoming. The goal of intending-becoming is the uniqueness of the individual, it is signified when the 'I am' is projected into language so that the articulations have the force of insights and new possibilities. Attending-becoming has no goal of its own. For attending-becoming the articulations of language come from the commonness with the other (In Nietzsche's terms it is the language of the herd), whether from memory, tradition, culture. In attending-becoming the person is being defined, while in intending becoming the person is defining. In attending becoming we are mere points of intersection of the social roles and functions we share with others. As Guignon (1993) puts it:

As placeholders in the public world, we become caught up in the turbulence of mindless busy-ness, yet we are at the same time tranquillized, complacently assured that everything has already been worked out and that nothing really calls for a decision. (p. 30)

On the other hand 'being called to decide' opens onto intending becoming as authentic being. To intend is a mature form of becoming. Phenomenologically writing to learn mathematics can be a 'leaping in' of the word of schooling or a 'leaping forth' as a word of learning, it is the dialogue of these words that is meant by attending or intending becoming. While the dominant metaphor of schooling is to attend it is difficult for students to become learners.

The communication that a writing-to-learn text is, is a communication about becoming a learner. The hermeneutical task is to recover this conversation given that:

...if we rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an original text, we shall see that the idea of complete expression is nonsensical, and that all language is indirect or allusive - that is, if you wish, silence. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964)

The person is never expressed but is the silent frame in which each dasein becomes in the human world.

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