Reviews


Reviewed by Fred Reynolds, Old Dominion University

For those who teach upper-division technical and professional writing courses for English majors, or graduate seminars in technical and professional writing pedagogy, Carolyn Matalene's *Worlds of Writing* is a godsend. An affordable anthology of twenty-three substantive, readable essays, it offers a viable alternative to the collections of photocopied articles and endless handouts on which we have grown dependent. And its mere existence sends the hopeful message that such outstanding books have finally begun to find publishers willing to offer something different from their seemingly unlimited supply of embarrassingly identical technical writing textbooks based on a rhetorical theory no beefier than "here's a letter, now you do one; here's an abstract, now you do one; and always remember to analyze your audience."

Matalene's contributors call for "writing instruction genuinely grounded in rhetorical theory." They ask us to develop approaches based on a fuller awareness of "the complexities of the rhetorical situation, the political realities of exigencies and purposes, the tensions created by multiple audiences, the textual needs of readers, and the constraints imposed by cultural contexts." Her twenty-three collaborators—teachers, writers, consultants, and program directors—have examined the problems our students (especially English majors) experience upon entering various worlds of work, and have concluded that "pragmatic writing courses are largely waiting to be designed, just as the textbooks to teach them are largely waiting to be written." *Worlds of Writing* insists that we "radically redefine what we mean by writing," that we rethink corporate communication as "a collective, social activity by which texts are produced and transformed, knowledge is constructed and disseminated, communities are created and maintained, audiences are identified and persuaded."

Part One compares academic and nonacademic worlds. Kristin Woolever describes their different standards of excellence. Stephen Doheny-Farina and William Rivers offer interesting case studies and surveys documenting
the serious transition problems our majors face when they encounter those different standards. Mary Ann Eiler explains why we need to allow for a more dynamic interaction of process and product ("genre") in our teaching. (Her subtext about the inadequacy of current verbal/visual paradigms is especially good.)

Part Two, which focuses on problems of academic instruction for nonacademic work, contains the two most powerful essays in the collection: Janette Lewis' "Adaptation: Business Writing as Catalyst in a Liberal Arts Curriculum" and Theresa Enos' "Rhetoric and the Discourse of Technology." Both blast current textbooks, which to my thinking richly deserve it. As Lewis points out, "narrow," "pedestrian," "endless," and "interchangeable" technical writing textbooks "pour" from publishers, and "in their attempts to be exhaustive become merely exhausting." Enos explains that although "technical communication is the fastest growing area in English departments, if not the fastest growing area in the entire university curriculum," most teachers of the subject—especially the new, inexperienced ones—feel bound to textbooks "written out of the current-traditional rhetoric of the nineteenth century." Enos offers alternatives: classical theory, directed readings, dialectical writers' notebooks, collaborative projects, and head-on attacks on "moral grayness" and "corporate anonymity." She offers the useful definition of technical writing as "writing which involves the adaptation of messages for audiences unfamiliar, or relatively unfamiliar, with the material being presented," and calls for "a rhetorically based, ethical technical communications course... instead of the usual forms approach." Here, here.

The essays which follow in Parts Three through Eight repeat Worlds of Writing's basic themes while extending their analyses to specific discourse communities. Jean Ann Lutz and J.C. Mathes provide introductions to organizational psychology and the special problems of writers in organizations. Elisabeth Alford documents the importance of minutes (typically ignored) and epideictic rhetoric (a fresh idea) in trade associations. Lee Clark Johns, Janis Forman, and Aletha Hendrickson write about the writing done in accounting, banking, and business; Nancy Wilds, in the military; Teresa Phelps and John Warnock, in law; and Matalene and Donald Murray, in journalism. Dan Dieterich and George Jensen offer excellent introductions to using the increasingly popular Myers-Briggs (Personality) Type Indicator in technical writing, reading, teaching, and consulting. Rousing overviews come from James Raymond (his rhetoric of bricolage, "the practice of simultaneously exploiting and resisting generalizations," is wonderful) and Edward Gold (his account of "the travels of an English major in the land of the techies" is delightful).

The twenty-three contributors to Worlds of Writing come from and work in different worlds of writing, and their essays show it. Styles, tones, and conventions vary dramatically in the book. This struck me as advantageous and appropriate, but others may see it as inconsistent and bothersome. I
wasn't satisfied with Matalene's arrangement of the essays; thus, when using the book this semester as the primary text for a graduate seminar, I juggled the order of readings to suit my needs. Students in my seminar reported that they found the contributors' Works Cited pages to be extremely helpful. And overall, like me, they liked this book a lot.


Reviewed by Stephen M. North, State University of New York, Albany

I floundered around a long time seeking just the right way to introduce this review of Louise Wetherbee Phelps' *Composition as a Human Science*. The truth is, I really like this book, with emphasis on that present tense; I find myself rereading it, pondering it, defending it, attacking it, recommending it to my students. But maybe for that reason—because, that is, I still have a "live" relationship with it—I am reluctant or unable to write the kind of review, make the kind of pronouncement, the genre seems to call for. You know: "This is one of the most important books . . ." or "If I were stranded on a desert island . . ." I'm just not ready for that yet. I like the book a lot, and I've boiled my liking down to three reasons. Here they are.

The first—and I won't try to defend its rationality—is that it is a whole book written by one person. I've contributed to my share of essay collections, and I'll probably continue to do so; they seem to be the staple book-length genre in composition. But I really do prefer reading a single voice for longer periods of time. *Composition as a Human Science* isn't entirely satisfying in this respect. The "Contributions" in the subtitle indicates that this text consists of a series of essays written over a ten-year period, numbered as chapters, and arranged in three sections: "Constructing an Ecology of Composition" (defining composition as a system within larger systems); "The Process of Reconstruction" (that is, of rebuilding rhetoric/composition in a postmodern or post-critical world); and "Application" (which explores the relationship between theory and practice in the "reconstructed" composition of the previous section). But while there is a logic to this arrangement, a logic in the framework, the individual essays are not so fully integrated. And although Phelps does a good job of accounting for her approach in her Preface, it doesn't make synthesizing significantly easier.

Still, given the option, I would almost always choose to work at making sense of a range of utterances by a single voice than to read even a slick package of a dozen different voices on a given topic. And in this instance, my preference is made even stronger—and this is my second reason for liking the