Kenneth Bruffee's recent work on composition and the social construction of knowledge encourages us to move in several simultaneous directions. That theory, with its roots in philosophy (Richard Rorty), literary theory (Roland Barthes and Stanley Fish), and theories of literacy (Walter Ong, Eric Havelock, and Paulo Freire), encourages us most directly, however, in our work in devising cross-disciplinary writing programs and pedagogies which present writing as ways of knowing and communicating. As we move across disciplines, we come to see our discourses as always and inevitably incomplete, as attempts by members of one interpretive community to share its specialized knowledge with members of a larger, universal community.

Perhaps the most significant insight accompanying this move across specific fields is our understanding that discourse can never be defined, or confined, by any one-dimensional or single-track theory of communication. The solitary scientist speaking of his or her field's methods of selecting, organizing, and interpreting phenomena is never simply reporting, is never applying a methodology in its pure or precise form. Rather, all efforts to write involve the specialist's tools and perspectives in a complex interdependency with that same specialist's membership in a larger, human community. Confronting this insight in the late twentieth century, we as writers have reached a point of extreme nervous anxiety. We know that the discourses of our particular fields, as rigorously and as systematically as they are usually applied, will never do the whole job—that as convincing or persuasive as they may be in their own epistemological and formal terms, they will never hold up as complete or final in what Michael Oakeshott and Kenneth Bruffee call the "conversation of mankind."

I wish to apply this theoretical context for composing to Oliver Sacks, a writer representative of an entire class of professional writers whose works are, I believe, set squarely in the middle of this field-specific/field-universal tension in contemporary academic discourse (and, to a lesser degree, in all forms of written discourse, popular or "serious"). As writing teachers, we can look to their works to figure out what we need to do to make writing-across-the-curriculum classrooms more effective.

Sacks's fascinating essay collections contribute to a new genre, which Sacks calls "clinical tales" (The Man xiv). Each tale grows out of Sacks's
own professional experience as a neurologist and clinical psychiatrist, and each is based on his experience, over an extended period of time, of a particular patient’s struggles with a neurological illness. In their acuity and comprehensiveness, the tales give us a glimpse of the professional scientist struggling to synthesize two essential discourse allegiances: one to fellow professionals who share rigorous, scientific ways of seeing and interpreting these stunningly memorable patients, the other to a universal audience, those committed readers who care that science be rigorous and human but that the writing of the best scientists show how scientific methods might work to give us an understanding of how and why the world (in Sacks's case, a very human world) works.

I am not arguing as it may seem so far, that Sacks’s "case histories" represent the kind of writing all scientists should do or the only kind of prose educated people should read. Rather, I am suggesting that we might use his essays on professional subjects for what they are: excellent examples of the tension that always exists between field-specific and universal rhetorics in the writings of professionals who are methodologically and formally adept in their own fields but cognizant of a need to transcend these special methods and forms in order to participate in the ongoing conversation of humankind.

To understand how Sacks’s essays work, we cannot limit our analyses to his texts alone. Rather, we must first examine them from a broader perspective, drawing on rhetorical and literary theory. And we must also imagine what Sacks might have done as he composed these essays, drawing on his remarks in the prefaces, headnotes, and introductions to his books. I shall limit my attention to The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat.

**Discourse Communities and Textual Meaning**

Current literary theory offers a framework for understanding Sacks’s underlying intentions. Recently, many theorists have provided writing teachers with concepts that help define the contexts in which most academic and professional texts function. Stanley Fish suggests that interpretive communities control the functions of texts, and, thus, that texts are governed by the perspectives and backgrounds of different communities. To this idea of varying community discourses and their control over textual meaning, Mikhail Bakhtin adds the notion of dialogic interaction—the idea that self-aware and self-conscious communities purposely keep texts open by placing gaps in them. These gaps elicit predictable or imaginative responses from readers who belong to particular communities, but also always function to keep the text open to other interpretive possibilities.

Central to both the community and dialogic perspectives on composing is the simple understanding that no writer or reader is ever a member of one community, that numerous interpretive agreements inform every interpretive act, and that the intersection of these converging lines of
communal response results in what Roland Barthes or Bakhtin would call a "plural text." Plural texts put pressure on readers to participate in the construction of meaning. Readers reading a plural text must, first, expect to see several subtexts in the text; they must, second, find the seams in the text and explore them to define subtexts; and, third, they must define the tension among subtextual meanings to come to some complex understanding of the experience of reading the text as a whole.

Discourse theorists Kenneth Burke and Chaim Perelman have contributed ideas to the New Rhetoric that further help define the contexts in which makers of plural texts function. Burke's description of the terminological fields that permeate the discourses of interpretive communities provides teachers with pedagogical strategies. His notions of *positive, dialectic,* and *ultimate* terms help us perceive that a community's discourse determines its knowledge, that its knowledge does not determine its discourse. Epistemology becomes ontology; rhetoric becomes wisdom and truth; the way a community agrees to speak becomes its way of knowing the world.

While Burke's description of terminology explains how words operate in and on communities, Perelman's concept of *universal audience* helps us understand how community discourses interact and overlap (31-35). While every defined community constructs its own language for describing the world, it also provides examples of how that language must be adapted to address a particular writer's sense of the universal audience that stands behind the immediate one. According to Walter Ong, this second audience is also always to some degree a fiction; but whatever its fictional qualities, this second audience must in some way involve the writer in ethical appeal—in active engagement in the moral, political, and social implications of the writer's text and his or her community's language. It is this tension between field-specific and universal audiences, as they are perceived by the writer writing and the reader reading, that influences the production and interpretation of complex texts.

**Sacks's Field-Specific/Field-Universal Rhetoric**

Given this theoretical context, what motivated Sacks's choice of rhetoric, his synthesis of scientific method and narrative? In his preface to *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat,* Sacks tells why he wrote case "stories" rather than case "histories." Case "histories," he says, are confined by the methods scientists (in this case, neuropsychologists) use to gather and construct data about their subjects. They are written in the community's jargon—in Sacks's case, in terms such as *agnosia, aphasia, deficit, aphonla, alexia, apraxia, amnesia, ataxia,* words used to describe behaviors that scientists relate to pathological brain dysfunctions. Rigorous and systematic, these "histories" are useful to specialists in building out of the stuff of clinical experience hypotheses about the origins and characteristics of neurological diseases.

Yet, Sacks tells us, these histories never seem to go far enough, to
capture what Ivy McKenzie, in an epigraph to Sacks's title essay in this collection, has called the patient's struggle "to preserve identity in adverse circumstances" (4). For example, they do not adequately capture what Sacks is able to in his title essay about Dr. P., who mistook his wife for a hat because a lesion in his right brain caused him to apply abstract recognition schemes in an absolute way to common objects:

By a sort of comic and awful analogy, our current cognitive neurology and psychology resembles nothing so much as poor Dr. P. We need the concrete and real, as he did; and we fail to see this, as he failed to see it. Our cognitive sciences are themselves suffering from an agnosia essentially similar to Dr. P's. Dr. P. may serve as a warning and parable—of what happens to a science which eschews the judgmental, the particular, the personal, and becomes entirely abstract and computational. (19)

What I believe should be most interesting to writing teachers in this statement and the context that generated it is best captured by the answer to this question: where did Sacks go, as a scientist-writer, to solve this problem? He went to narrative, in this case, to the most basic and simple of narrative forms: the parable, tale, and fable. In the process of producing one kind of professional text (the case history), Sacks was driven by the lack of fit between a professional text's forms and conventions and a basic human impulse—to tell a story, and to make a complex point evocatively by telling that story. Sacks subtitled his collection "And Other Clinical Tales." In his preface, he says that this is a conscious reference to the Arabian Nights:

Classical fables have archetypal figures—heroes, victims, martyrs, warriors. Neurological patients are all of these—and in the strange tales told here they are also something more. . . . We may say that they are travellers to unimaginable lands—lands of which otherwise we should have no idea or conception. This is why their lives and journeys seem to me to have the quality of the fabulous, why I have used Osler's Arabian Nights image as an epigraph, and why I feel compelled to speak of tales and fables as well as cases. The scientific and the romantic in such realms cry out to come together—Luria liked to speak here of "romantic science." (xv)

Let us imagine here what happened to Sacks as he composed. He sits down to capture the history of Dr. P. in one textual paradigm. Frustration sets in, grows from a quiet discontent into a repressed rage. The terms Sacks must use to represent clinical reality are far too technical and abstract to get at the truth, the fantastic qualities, of Dr. P. Yet Sacks, professional neuropsychologist that he is, does not want to do away entirely with his professional community's vocabulary and style. In all his case "stories," the careful clinical eye—the attention to definitions of key clinical and neuropsychological terms—remains. But Sacks's frustration with his scientific subtext leads him from concern with his immediate community as audience (neuropsychologists writing case histories) to a need to consider a larger, generally educated, universal audience. It is at
this point that Sacks realizes that he must choose a genre that will allow him to address both audiences at once. It is this composite sense of language and audience that drives Sacks to traditional narrative, to the idea of neurological adventure stories in which his clinical subjects are protagonists in an age-old battle between pathology and self, in which they struggle to maintain identity and individuality in the face of diseases which threaten to diffuse, shatter, or transport them.

What teachers of writing and reading need remember at this point is that Sacks's originality develops from his composite use of two traditional textual paradigms: the case history and the tale. He never entirely sacrifices the virtues of the rigorous scientist to those of the good storyteller, nor is the story ever marred by the expository intrusions of the neuro-psychologist's voice, even when that voice is marked by technical terminology and scientific description. Consider these two excerpts from "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat":

And yet there was something a bit odd. He [Dr. P.] faced me as he spoke, was oriented toward me, and yet there was something the matter—it was difficult to formulate. He faced me with his ears, I came to think, but not with his eyes. (8)

How should one interpret Dr. P.'s peculiar inability to interpret, to judge, a glove as a glove? Manifestly, here, he could not make a cognitive judgment, though he was prolific in the production of cognitive hypotheses. A judgment is intuitive, personal, comprehensive, and concrete—we "see" how things stand, in relation to one another and oneself. It was precisely this seeing, this relating, that Dr. P. lacked. (27)

Both excerpts show Sacks at his narrative best—the first, a descriptive passage demonstrating his objective, clinical-professional methods of observation and delayed inference-making; the second, an interpretive passage controlled by carefully sequenced questions through which the shared clinical perspective of the first excerpt is transformed into a judgmental and evaluative statement. The positive, dialectical, and ultimate terms of the scientists (aphasia, and the like)—all subsumed under the ultimate term science—are transformed through synthesis with basic story forms: the subject as hero or protagonist, the direct address to readers on a universal plane, the use of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony as literary devices (indeed, even the phrase "the man who mistook his wife for a hat" serves as a synecdoche describing a type of clinical aphasia). This marriage of the language, methods, and rhetorical forms of two very different discourse communities brings together under one textual roof the immediate audience of neuropsychologists and the universal audience of generally educated readers who wish to find the human significance behind neuropsychology.

Pedagogical Applications

Freire's liberatory pedagogy puts into practice much of what this theory and analysis suggest for teaching students. In constructing a
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pedagogy for adult literacy, Freire argues in *The Politics of Education* that even the most basic of adult readers must read with an appreciation of contextual and textual realities:

- The reader must serve as the subject of the act [of reading]. (2)
- The act of study . . . is an attitude toward the world. (3)
- The act of study assumes a dialectical relationship between reader and author, whose reflections are found within the themes he [or she] treats. (4)
- To study is not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them. (4)

How do we, as teachers, help students become agents creating rather than objects exposed to Sacks's essays? We can begin by having them conduct amateur clinical studies of their own, in both objective case-history and the more subjective clinical-tale forms. Writing these kinds of preliminary informal studies helps students understand what Sacks experienced as he composed and helps them comprehend the textual paradigms of science and narrative that inform Sacks's tales. How do we help students see that reading and writing embody "an attitude toward the world"? We can do this, simply enough, by exposing students to Burkean analyses of Sacks's language, demonstrating how Sacks synthesizes two language communities in his essays—one scientific, the other literary. We can present this synthesis by listing phrases from the essays on the board and asking the class to explore connotations and denotations and to relate them to their sources in one or another of the communities. And how do we encourage students to "create" rather than "consume" the texts they read? The answer lies in collaboration, in students' realization that Sacks's texts are meant to be renegotiated by interpreters who understand the paradigms behind the scientific and narrative subtexts, and in their understanding that Sacks is creating a stage upon which they, as readers, can carry out an essential dialogue.

In helping students become agents actively engaged in recomposing what they read—once they have become aware of the effects that traditional genres have on writers—we are teaching them to use Burke's pentad. But we must at the same time remember that genres do not affect writers in narrowly formal or mechanistic ways. According to Burke's psychology of form, a writer does not consciously or arbitrarily select forms that suit preconceived notions of purpose and message. Rather, writers such as Sacks engage readers in dialectic, superimposing upon subjects and readers first one form with its embedded expectations, and then another with its own expectations. Composing, thus, becomes a dramatic event.

Teachers of cross-disciplinary writing can put this dramatistic perspective to practical use in several ways:

1) Sacks's essays might be examined from the pluralistic perspectives I describe in analyzing "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat." On a freshman or sophomore level, the cross-disciplinary...
teacher might locate only a few rather basic textual paradigms—perhaps those of science and the humanities, as I have explored them in Sacks's text. On an upper-division level, teachers might superimpose on these more basic textual paradigms the conventional forms of particular technical and humanistic fields—the format, for example, of a professional article reporting on a scientific experiment or the serious and comic parodies of technical language often found in literature.

2) Once a teacher has examined a text and located at least several of its textual paradigms, he or she might build a sequence of class activities around these paradigms, concentrating in the early stages of the learning sequence on helping students perceive subtexts (for example, Sacks's or Gould's use of story to provide "thick" or full examples of otherwise scientifically rendered phenomena). These early stages could make use of workshops and other forms of collaboration which emphasize the intertextuality of all reading processes. This collaborative approach increases students' awareness of relationships among subtexts, a writer's overall intentions, and the processes of dialogic literacy that are involved in any interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary endeavor.

3) Later activities in this sequence might turn students toward intertextual responses of their own. Some students might tell stories to help make a complex technical concept clearer for other readers. Others might transform stories into more technical formats—lists of figures, graphs, drawings, or statistical tables.

4) The final stages of this cross-disciplinary learning sequence might turn students back to considerations of subtexts and intertextuality in essays by writers such as Sacks, Gould, Selzer, and Thomas while they consider, and play with, combinations of textual forms and overall intentions in their own writing. In other words, meta-level discussions of literacy's dialogic processes would go on as students try out their own textual experiments on others.

Theorists such as Walter Ong (*Presence*) and Eric Havelock claim that we have lost the sound of the word in our technological and print-oriented lives. In the exercises that I describe above, oral and written textual forms are, first, separated out of the plural texts that students read; these oral and written paradigms then become the teacher's means of encouraging students to generate oral and written subtexts of their own and to work these texts together as they compose in interdisciplinary contexts.

Perhaps Oliver Sacks, Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Selzer, Lewis
Thomas, and others like them are reminding us in their narrative impulses that even the most specialized and isolated scientist speaks aloud to other human beings. And telling and hearing stories, perhaps more than any other language experiences, help us feel the presence of the word, and of others. As we move the teaching of writing across the curriculum, we need to emphasize that the best writing is both scientifically and literarily informed. For every writer has a story to tell, no matter how technical its source.

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Notes

1 Positive terms are the terms members of a community use to refer to physical elements in their perceived environments; dialectic terms those that members use to refer to abstractions that can be argued (Christianity, capitalism, Marxism, and the like); and ultimate the terms they use to refer to abstractions that represent the highest-order principles governing a system of ideas, and which are often left unquestioned and result in mass mystification (Rhetoric 183-88).

2 For Burke's most concise description of the pentad, see A Grammar of Motives 3-20.

3 For a synopsis of Burke's theory of form, see Counter-Statement 123-83.

Works Cited


Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.


