

placed, copy added. This issue of *fforum* would consist of a collection of articles by theorists and another collection by teachers — each a complement to the other on the complex relationships of talking and writing.

The revised plan suggested at least one essay that would fuse theoretical and practical concerns in one scholar-teacher's experience: Professor Penelope Eckert, a linguist in the Anthropology Department at The University of


Michigan, has been conducting research on spoken language in schools in Southeastern Michigan. And she agreed, in spite of an imminent deadline for publication, to share her findings with *fforum's* readers (*Hedging the Standard English Bet*, p. 7)

Now, as I read the final copy of this issue, I remember the faces of students to whom I have said: "This is a fine paper. It was worth all those revisions. Wasn't it?"

## Talk to Text

Patricia L. Stock

For some time, I have self-consciously avoided the language currently used by many theorists and teachers of writing to describe the processes of composition to themselves and their students. I have avoided their language because it is made of metaphors inappropriate to my notion of the act of writing. I believe that to write is to engage in a particularly human — potentially humane — enterprise. Therefore, it is uncomfortable for me to conceive of writing in martial language — with such labels as *tactics*, *strategies*, and *attack skills*; or in the lexicon of computer technology — *reader-based*, *writer-based*, *input*, or *feedback*, and *bottom lines*; or even with the contractual and product-labelling terms of business and industry.

I am particularly unsettled by these metaphors of our time because as a student and teacher of language and literacy, I respect the power of the symbol system which language is. The words we use to describe writing to our students suggest to them the kind of activity we believe writing to be. Our words are not merely audible or visible signs. They are not substitutes for concrete objects or events or procedures — such as the smoke which represents fire; or the marker , which indicates the contour of the road; or the name "Patches," which is herself to my cat. That is to say, words are not terms associated in one-to-one correspondence to what they concretely signify. Rather, the words we use are what Suzanne Langer calls "symbols," or "proxies for their objects" or "*vehicles for the conception of objects*" (Langer, p. 45). The language of our descriptions of the acts of writing is rich in latent meanings. If we suggest to our students that they "develop writing strategies" or "attack writing problems," we lead them to regard the acts of writing as, if not militaristic and combatant, at least competitive, adversarial. The writing itself is the enemy to be defeated. If we suggest that their prose be "reader-based" or "writer-based," we suggest that they should strive for products much like computer print-outs, the result of orderly programmed, step-by-step procedures. If we refer to

their products we imply that their work is the end result of a series of assembly-line procedure calling for fulfillment of the *specs*.

Consequently, I find it more comfortable to conceive of writing in self-consciously human metaphors — in terms of voice and vision. I understand that I describe metaphorically when I suggest: To write is to commit one of the many voices each of us possesses to the page and thereby to see one's words graphically. My metaphors shape my practices even as my epistemology shapes my metaphors. For example, I ask my inexperienced students to talk about their assignments for my class with each other, with me, and with other students outside of our class to whom I introduce each of them at the beginning of the semester. I also ask my students to write a letter about each assignment to their out-of-class peers and to meet with those students to discuss each assignment before they write their first drafts of the assignment for classmates. Having talked with classmates about their writing, my students revise their drafts for a conference with me. They prepare their final text only after this weekly multi-staged process of talking-writing-writing-writing-talking. While students are writing and talking to one another about assignments, they are also writing in their journals about a variety of tasks associated with the assignments. I ask them to contemplate the audience and purpose for the piece (Who will read the piece? What does the reader need or want to learn from the writing? And so on.) I ask them to reflect upon primary and secondary research they have done for the assignment (Record an experience; react to readings, and so on). The tasks I ask my students to perform as they prepare a text are a rhetorical statement on my part: All uses of natural language — speaking, listening, and reading — can serve writers as they shape texts. Metaphorically and practically I ask my students to shape their voices upon the page as they talk, read, listen, and write their way to effective texts.