



# Rhetoric & Writing at BGSU

## Rhetoric & Writing Notes - Fall 2000

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#### A Dissertation Story: Rosalee Stilwell

Sometimes, I've heard, the dissertation can take on a life of its own. Or at least mine has. I thought, when I handed in the last revision of "The Thing That Wouldn't Die" in 1997, that I was actually finished. To prove that to myself, I packed every hard copy of the dissertation, every diskette version of it, and every scrap of paper even vaguely associated with it away. I put all of it in an unmarked cardboard box, taped it shut with long swathes of duct tape, and then put the box itself in the darkest corner of our Volkswagen van, which, very shortly after the dissertation was accepted, we drove out of Bowling Green.

It wasn't that I hated writing the dissertation. Not at all. I learned a lot about writing, and I enjoyed the feeling of making progress in my career. It's good to see your own dissertation taking shape and getting done after the years of preparatory work are completed. And, too, after at least a solid year of thinking--no obsessing--on a daily basis about its topic, its argument, its method, its length, its structure, its language, and a thousand other aspects of it, well, a person can get tired. When I taped that box shut, I was ready to be done with it, probably forever.

But that isn't what happened at all. For one thing, I had taken the advice of Donna Nelson-Beene and Sue Carter, who each advised me to pick a dissertation topic I really loved because that fact would help sustain me when I wanted to quit. For another, Rick Gebhardt had urged me to write with an eye toward publication from the start by aiming for a good, lively style that transcended the typical dissertationese editors can spot a mile away. What I didn't realize at the time was that such advice, while being helpful with the immediate task of finishing "The Thing," worked together to give the dissertation a future life.

When I finally settled on a topic, I knew it was one I could live with for awhile: a rhetorical analysis of the journal kept by the first lighthouse keeper of Sable Island--which is still considered Nova Scotia's "Graveyard of the Atlantic"--during the winter of 1801-1802. After all, I had already completed a transcription of James Morris's handwritten manuscript. If I could apply the Aristotelian notion of ethos, or projected authorial character, to the text, then maybe I could explain why it was so successful with the bureaucrats of the day back in Halifax. I think I was lucky in that I decided to use Strauss and Corbin's "grounded theory" technique of systematic, coded readings of texts that I learned about in Dan Madigan's course on research methods in rhetoric and composition: using such a credible methodology helped justify my particular reading of Morris's journal. This became important later on.

I read, coded, and wrote up my research over the academic year of 1996-97, turning over each of the seven chapters to Rick Gebhardt as soon as I finished it and then starting on the next while I waited for his comments. Something I haven't shared before is that I charted out each step in the writing process on a big and very ugly home-made calendar I taped to the living room wall. Each two-week period had its own self-imposed deadline of each step I had to take to finish by June. Every time I was able to make a deadline, my husband and our cats would applaud and do a little jig as I ceremoniously crossed off each step with big dramatic swipes of indelible black marker. (They are such good sports.) I'm glad I took the time and the wall space to chart my own progress like that because it was impossible to ignore that I really was getting somewhere in those "stuck" times. It was also a thrill to beat my own calendar by two weeks in the end!

During the first year after it was finished when the duct tape was still wrapped tightly around the box, I read two books that helped revive my interest in the dissertation: *Academic Advancement in Composition Studies: Scholarship, Publication, Promotion, and Tenure*, edited by Richard and Barbara Gebhardt, and *Publishing in Rhetoric and Composition*, edited by Gary Olson and Todd Taylor. The point I took from *Academic Advancement* was this: while definitions of scholarship are changing, a publishing record still matters--a lot. The dissertation was a big effort, and Janice Neuleib's words rang in my head: "Understand that nothing matters as much as an impeccable vita" (Gebhardt and Gebhardt 133). It just didn't seem efficient to not do more with something that had taken so much work. As well, James J. Murphy's advice to "work on a gap" (Olson and Taylor 190) resonated with me: I may have been reluctant to look at the dissertation itself again, but there had been "gaps" I had discovered about my topic, interesting gaps, and of course I certainly needed any kind of publications that might come of such work. Maybe I could stand to think about one of those "gaps" for awhile.

So, while the dissertation rested in its box, I worked on these tangential subjects, turning one into a paper I read at The Rhetoric Society of America's 1998 conference, which then became an article in a journal in 1999. I also applied for and was awarded a grant to study another "gap" I had found while doing these intensive coded readings I remarked on earlier. Using a well-defined

By this time, I had read Maureen Hourigan's "From Dissertation To Monograph: Meeting Professional Expectations" in Olson and Taylor. Along with excellent suggestions on revision, she stresses how important the question of audience is when marketing the dissertation. For some reason, I hadn't considered audience to this degree and wasn't looking for publishers outside the United States (an odd blind spot, I now think). Suddenly, it was clear to me that I needed to seek out publishers with an audience to whom they could market my particular work. At this point, I started doing internet searches with terms like "Rhetoric" and "Canada" and "publishers." When I found the Mellen Press, I could see that it had an audience which would appreciate my work since it markets scholarly monographs to research libraries in Canada, Great Britain, and the States, and, in fact, it features books dealing with Canadian Studies and Rhetoric. After checking the company out further, I thought it might be worth a try. I had saved everything from Rick Gebhardt's course on scholarly publishing (thank goodness--it helped) and so had models to follow as I went along with this unfamiliar process.

I sent in the finished proposal and waited. During this time, I tried to follow Hourigan's advice about streamlining things and found some areas to work on, but I also found that the revisions I did were not too extensive, because of revision advice I'd had while drafting the dissertation. When the letter of acceptance came, I thought it would be a matter of shipping the manuscript off to New York and that would be the end of it. Instead, I was surprised to see that I had yet more to do, like making an index and getting permissions. (No one, by the way, told me how difficult an index is to do. It's very tedious work.) I have gotten a new appreciation for the effort that goes into making a book happen, and it's been an education.

Now I'm waiting for the real thing to appear. I'm so glad I chose a "durable" topic and that I had to revise so much originally. I'm glad, too, that good books are available when the seminar classes are history. All these things helped to get the dissertation out of the box and resuscitate it, and they will, I hope, put it on the shelves of some interested scholars.

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#### **Gebhardt Receives CCCC Award**

Richard Gebhardt, a member of BGSU's Rhetoric & Writing faculty, received the John Gerber 20th Century Leadership Award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication this spring. The one-time award, named for the founding Chair of CCCC, was established to re-cognize members who made major contributions to the furtherance of CCCC and its objectives in the first fifty years of the organization.

The Gerber 20th Century Leadership Award was presented to Professor Gerber, Rick Gebhardt, and four others who, in the words of CCCC Chair Keith Gilyard, "have mentored teachers, theorists, researchers, and administrators in composition studies" and "been active in promoting and celebrating writing."

In presenting the award, Richard Fulkerson, the Chair of the selection committee, mentioned Rick's long service on the CCCC Executive Committee (including five years as Secretary) and his editorship of *College Composition and Communication* from 1987 until 1994 .

#### **Christine Sauer Wins Graduate Student Teaching Award**

Christine Sauer, a fourth-year student in the Rhetoric & Writing PhD Program, won BGSU's Graduate Assistant Teaching Award for 1999-2000.

This highly competitive Graduate College award emphasizes creative course planning, good personal interactions with students, and strong in-class teaching performance.

Christine is one in a line of Rhetoric & Writing doctoral students to win the award. Other recent winners include Brett Holden, Dawn Gordon, and Rosalee Stilwell.

#### **Recent Dissertations from the Rhetoric & Writing Program**

Edward Karshner, *Representation, Interpretation, Writing* (2000)

John Mauk, *A Story of Geography and Composition Pedagogy* (May 2000)

Paul Tanner, *Embedded Assessment and Writing* (2000)

Scott Calhoun, *The Classical Trivium in Contemporary Contexts* (1999)

Keith Duffy, *The Role of Spirituality in Re-Envisioning Writing Pedagogy* (1999)

Jai Hee Cho, *Comparative Rhetoric and Student Writing* (1999)