ABSTRACT
                This paper describes one academic author's
consternation when he came across an annotation of one of his
scholarly articles from the "Journal of Basic Writing" in the ERIC
database. The paper recounts that the author was disconcerted to find
that the annotation was misleading, describing as his main point
something that his article warns against. Pointing out that this
misrepresentation raises some interesting questions concerning the
metaphors that are used to represent the discipline of teaching
writing, the paper considers some of the works of Peter Vandenberg,
Anne Ruggles Gere, Derek Owens, Richard Rorty, and Donald Davidson on
composition studies and related scholarship--particularly Gere's work
on metaphors and composition studies. The paper suggests that all of
the metaphors for a discipline of composition studies reflect
spatiality, including, of necessity, boundaries with varying degrees
of permeability and form. The paper concludes that abstracts and
annotations, therefore, should be seen as points of contact rather
than as ports of entry. (TB)

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"Driven to Abstraction: Abstracts and Annotations as Stiles

for the Boundaries of Composition Studies"

A couple of years ago I came across the ERIC abstract of an article of mine in *Journal of Basic Writing*. I was a little disconcerted to find that the abstract was misleading, describing as a main point in my article something that my article explicitly warns against. Added to this chagrin with the abstract is fact that the *JBW* requires all contributors to write an abstract to be included with the article. Why, I asked for the first time because this affected me, didn't ERIC simply use the abstract provided by the author?

I think it's fair to say we've become accustomed to believing that abstracts of articles in databases such as ERIC, the MLA Bibliography and others are tools that successfully chew an article or presentation down into manageable-sized chunks that we can rapidly test in order to make decisions about those articles and presentations. Certainly, many databases give us every impression to consider them as tools in such ways, even though the CD-ROM screens, or the peripheral print material, don't specifically advertise the databases in such a way. In fact, the handbook for contributors to the *CCCC Bibliography* explains that bibliographers are to resist evaluating the listed works, providing only descriptive annotations instead. And the bibliography, itself, claims that the annotations "describe the document's contents and are intended to help users determine the document's usefulness" (xiv). Now, let me interrupt myself here to say that I'm not arguing against the value of these databases; I'm arguing only that we carefully consider our metaphors for them. It seems, however, that this tool metaphor is often transformed into a gateway metaphor so that the abstracts and annotations become portals, stiles if you will, into the cordoned off

field of a discipline. I want to spend some time in this paper considering metaphors of the discipline of composition studies and then considering metaphors that have been used for the abstracts and annotations that represent the scholarship that, in turn, represents the discipline.

In an essay in the forthcoming book *Keywords in Composition Studies* , Peter Vandenberg illustrates notions of the term *discipline* in the printed record of composition studies. Most of the examples of *discipline*, a term which appears to be synonymous with *field, profession*, and *community*, indicate a spatial metaphor with boundaries that can be entered or exited. Further, Vandenberg shows that Janice Lauer and Robert Connors use research and journals as the entities which define the boundaries of a field; their claims seem to reflect perceptions prevalent throughout many disciplines especially as disciplinarity has generally been considered a concept borrowed from the sciences. More recently, however, there has been some rethinking about the possible fluidity of such boundaries, leading Vandenberg to suppose that "Perhaps whenever two or more scholars are gathered together in the act of someone's composing, the term *discipline* will not be far removed" (np).

One who has done some rethinking of the metaphor is Anne Ruggles Gere. In the preface to her book *Into the Field: Sites of Composition Studies,* she works with a version of the field metaphor. Gere suggests looking at the relationship between composition and other disciplines as a give-and-take, as interaction that results in composition's changing other fields, as well as its being changed by them. She offers Geoffrey Squires's notion of restructuring, noting, as he does, that the heretofore popular bridge metaphor (see Horner) evokes images of traversing boundaries while not changing the boundaries or the fields (1, 3). Gere's use of the restructuring metaphor, on the other hand, evokes images of dynamic areas that interact with one another; Gere calls these "charged sites" with "permeable boundaries" (4). James Zebroski appears to concur when he claims that the field is constructed by our

language--in other words, by our "professional conferences and journals and disciplinary deep talk." As does Gere, he argues that the field constructs us even as we construct it; thus, it's better when the boundaries of the field are blurred (257-58).

In a vein similar to the field metaphor, Derek Owens offers a geographical metaphor of disciplines that manages to remain fairly faithful to conventional perceptions of geography but that is dependent on discourses. Owens describes disciplines, or what he calls discourse focuses, as chains of islands. One such island, which Owens calls Composition Island, is "home to people interested in the business of teaching writing" (4) and is part of the chain known as Academic Discourse. On each island, however, are various groups who speak different argots; for example, on Composition Island there are the formalists and current-traditionalists who converse about "product." There are also others who are "process-oriented" or who promote "expressive discourse." Although the island is defined by interest in teaching writing, the various cliques on the island are defined by research interests and methodologies and represented by varieties of academic discourse. Owens notes that there is a significant amount of written and oral discourse produced on this and the other islands, but very little of it is for inhabitants of other islands (4). In fact, the most prominent glue holding the islands of Academic Discourse together is the armada of administrators which visits each one periodically with pronouncements and memos and the like (5). Owens observes that beyond the string of Academic Islands are many more strings, and that inhabitants of one island tend to travel with relative ease to other strings, but the problem is that the islands themselves stay, well, insulated so that we tend to view the world as if only our own discourse matters (6). Even though Owens promotes a refreshing global outlook, his solution is to provide bridges between islands, thus leaving the islands almost unaffected by each other (7), and this is where his insular metaphor diverges from the more dynamic one of Gere and Zebroski.

One essay in Gere's collection that exemplifies this rethinking of boundaries is Barbara Deen Schildgen's "Reconnecting Rhetoric and Philosophy in the Composition Classroom." Schildgen looks at Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics as based on an individual's need to understand others, through language, in order to maintain communal needs. She traces Gadamer's understanding of an "'insurmountable barrier' in the linguistic exchange between people" (32). And she reviews three ideas about construction of understanding that Gadamer describes: foreconception, dialogue, and fusion of horizons.

> Foreconceptions is Gadamer's term for the entire range of cultural and historical attitudes, whether tacit or conscious, that we bring to bear on an object as we scrutinize it. Dialogue is the ideal conversation that occurs when a subject (an inquiring reader...) communes with an object of inquiry (e.g., a literary text...). (32)

When readers of texts have recognized their biases and conducted dialogue with those texts, then the fusion of horizons can take place. Such a fusion precludes the idea that a truth can be frozen within the text; rather, it encourages the subjectivity of that text and the possibility of biases on the part of the writer and of the reader. "When a mutual exchange occurs in the interpretive transaction, however, both sides cede authority to the intended object, which they now acknowledge as a subject for whom scientific knowledge is not possible" (Schildgen 40).

To use a recent example, I wrote the 25-word annotation, plus key phrases, for a 1994 *Journal of Advanced Composition* article by Elizabeth Ervin and Dana L. Fox. The annotation and key phrases are for the upcoming CCCC *Bibliography*, and I asked Ervin her opinion of the annotation, as well as of the key phrases designed to guide researchers to her article. Without spending too much time describing the annotation or Ervin's suggestions, I'll point out that she seemed satisfied with the key phrases and all but one clause of the annotation. She would have used verbs such as

recognizes and *encourages* whereas I had used *promotes* and *valorizes*. Her concern lay primarily with the possibility that the tone of the stronger terms might be misconstrued as advancing an agenda that is not scholarly. Using the gateway metaphor, we might decide that the annotation could inhibit, or at least not invite, some readers who would benefit from the article, perhaps some of the very readers that Ervin and Fox had in mind as part of their audience. However, a rethinking of boundaries--with journal articles still defining the "field"--as Gere and Schildgen, through Gadamer, promote would construct the annotation and key phrases as spaces for dialogue--spaces for the writer of the article, the writer of the annotation, and the readers of either, to recognize the foreconceptions they bring, the subjectivity of the texts, and possible reactions to such interactions. Gadamer's fusion of horizons does not imply agreement among various ideologies that affect interpretation; it only points them out as agents for comprehension, conversion, or consensus (Schildgen 41).

All of the metaphors for a discipline of composition studies reflect spatiality, including, of necessity, boundaries with varying degrees of permeability and form. Thus, scholarship, and abbreviated representations of that scholarship, will generally be viewed in light of their power to access the space of the discipline. For that reason, gateway metaphors abound. However, the more fluid, active, and reactive we perceive those boundaries, the more we note the need for modified metaphors of accessibility. Richard Rorty provides a useful metaphor in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, a book he says "tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private" (xv). Rorty spends much of the first chapter dispelling the notion that there is any knowable intrinsic value in reality or in self expression. He ponders the results of treating language, as well as consciousness and community, as "a product of time and chance," as "a sheer contingency" (22). In other words, the external world does not speak or provide us with a language. But the world can give reason to subscribe to a variety of beliefs once we have adopted a

language for ourselves. Therefore, there is no intrinsic nature in the external world and no intrinsic nature in ourselves that guides our decision making.

> But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that *languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is the property of linguistic entities, of sentences. (Rorty 7)

It is just this interest in examining truth as a property of language rather than of either external pressures or internal expressions that leads Rorty to work with some of the ideas of language philosopher Donald Davidson in order to discover different metaphors for language. Davidson, Rorty says, dismisses the idea of language as a medium--a mode to, adequately or not, represent external realities or express internal thoughts. Language as medium is similar to the bridge metaphor between disciplines that Gere attempts to avoid but that Owens appears to embrace. The bridges allow access but also provide distance, thus keeping, one would suppose, the boundaries of the fields relatively unaffected by the entering or exiting of data. The fields illustrated here have some identifiable intrinsic nature that can be expressed by language and described to other fields.

Davidson proposes a metaphor of alternative tools to circumvent questions such as "What is the relation of language to thought?" In addition, he proposes that we question the effectiveness of our tools, asking "Does our use of these words get in the way of our use of those other words?" To compare vocabularies may mean merely allowing some tools to complement other tools with the end product of some larger picture or reality--a jigsaw puzzle metaphor. Davidson values replacing the former tool with a new one. Thus, the image isn't one of adding tools and slouching toward

reality or self expression. Rather, the image is of making something new that did not exist previously (Rorty 12-13). In a manner similar to Darwin's ideas of evolution, older metaphors, older tools, die off and are replaced by other tools so that there is a causal relationship between the older tools and the newer. Or, to express it otherwise, there is contingency in language. Important to note here, however, is the absence of any teleological motive. The evolution does not lead to some grand picture, does not build to some end result that can be identified; instead, it allows for formerly useful metaphors to be replaced as needed. An example from Rorty is the shift from Copernican language to Newtonian.

Further, Davidson does not see metaphor as having meaning. Like a facial expression or some other physical gesture, metaphors produce effects on the speaker/writer and on the audience "but not ways of conveying a message" (Rorty 18). Unlike the Platonist and the positivist, Davidson does not see language reproducing some external reality. Unlike the Romanticist, he does not see language expressing a deeply hidden truth. Language is an evolutionary series with no higher purpose or end result.

Application of Davidson's, and Rorty's, views of language to the uses of abstracts and annotations of scholarly writing, then, requires dealing with metaphor at two levels: the discipline defined by that writing and the access to that discipline. First of all, their ideas of alternate, evolved tools work well with the metaphor of the discipline offered by Gere and Zebroski. If the discipline can better be characterized as a set of charged sites with permeable borders and with changes reciprocated between those sites and those who "read" them, then the former metaphors of bridges or gateways become sadly inadequate. Bridges and gateways provide access but do not address the dynamics occurring within the sites and within the scholars when the two interact with one another.

Also, if language is contingent and not a conduit for existing meaning, the annotations and abstracts designed to give glimpses into a discipline must be reconsidered. There is no intrinsic truth in the annotation that we all can agree on; there is no intrinsic truth in the article that's reproduced in the annotation. There is only the meaning that is made through the reaction with the annotation and with the article. The annotation or abstract becomes, not an object of inquiry but a subject as Schildgen describes. We who use abstracts and annotations to access the discipline as defined by scholarly works will see those abstracts and annotations as points of contact rather than ports of entry. These points of contact are not fixed but are found at varying areas in the discipline; further, they react to us just as surely as we react to them. And they react with contact to other disciplines, as well. With such a metaphor of access to the discipline, it does us little good to complain, as I did, about how our work is represented in databases. It does us quite a bit of good, however, to use those databases with the understanding that the abstracts therein hold a complex configuration of other work--that which we've internalized and that which we haven't yet encountered.

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