ED 418 406   CS 216 172

AUTHOR   Parfitt, Matthew
TITLE   What Kind of Discourse? Thinking It through.
PUB DATE   1997-03-00
NOTE   14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
                Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th,
                Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE   Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Critical Thinking; *Discourse Modes; Higher Education;
                *Hypermedia; Instructional Improvement; Instructional
                Innovation; Literary Criticism; Student Motivation; Teacher
                Role; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS   Computer Assisted Writing; Ricoeur (Paul); *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT
        Composition instructors are particularly interested in the
fact that hypertext, as the mode of discourse that computers promote and
prefer, introduces a new problematic for those concerned with teaching
critical thinking. What kind of discourse is hypertext, and to what extent
does it encourage, enable and demand critical thinking? The issue is not
strictly about a computer technology, but a way of writing and a way of
reading. To think about hypertext's nature as discourse, for example,
consider Paul Ricoeur's interpretation theory as a guide in his
"Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning." Ricoeur bases
discourse analysis on the distinction between semantics and semiotics. His
approach to interpretation theory makes it possible to see how critical
thinking remains possible and necessary, but in important respects, changed
in the hypertext environment. Considered as discourse, hypertext is closer to
writing than to speech and so presents the tasks of literary interpretation
and criticism. If hypertext remains in a sense "text," then the reading
skills that are required still bear a relation to those that print requires.
It is the larger structures that hypertext radically transforms. It is the
"link," a particular kind of transition, that seems to characterize hypertext
as a genre; the invitation is to explore a world that exists not simply in
front and behind but offers paths in many directions. Hypertext encourages
exploratory, multilinear writing rather than polemical writing. (CR)

Matthew Parfitt

["HyperDiscourse: Just What Are We Thinking?"]

What Kind of Discourse?: Thinking It Through

ED 418 406

My word processor, like those used by my students, wants

me to believe that I'm typing onto a page of typewriter

paper. Through the window of my computer screen, I can see

about half of that piece of paper, and by scrolling up or

down I can see text that appears to be "above" or "below" it.

The software wants to preserve the illusion of typewriter

paper and printed text. But this of course is a slightly

perverse way to use a computer: if I had writing software

that insisted that a computer is a computer and not a

typewriter, I would be linking together word-structures and

probably images the size of my computer screen or smaller. I

would still be constructing sentences, and probably

paragraphs. But all units larger than the paragraph would be

radically transformed. I could still create works, of course

-- essays and narratives -- and I could still control the

order in which my chunks of text and images were read. But I

could also throw the work open: I could incorporate a

plurality of argument-threads or narrative-threads such that

the reader's experience depends on her own choices as she

makes her way through the links. I could invite others to

interpolate their own chunks into my work. And I could

update my work as often as I liked, in response to readers or

my own whims.

This concept is of course familiar to anyone who's ever

encountered hypertext on the Web or anywhere else -- which is

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

pretty much everyone. But I'm starting from the obvious and
familiar in order to make it easier to define what we mean by
hypertext, and to conceptualize this mode of discourse. If
computers preserve the notion that written works have
unilinear arguments or narratives only by clumsily indulging
the writer's nostalgia for the typewriter, then perhaps what
the prognosticators are saying is true: we may be already
well on our way towards abandoning this notion.

As composition instructors, we're particularly
interested in the fact that hypertext, as the mode of
discourse that computers promote and prefer, introduces a new
problematic for those of us concerned with teaching critical
thinking. When we ask students to revise a paper in order to
look more carefully at its reasoning, analysis, or terms, we
are usually working from our familiarity with "linear texts"
-- the uninterrupted, continuous arguments that the printed
page requires. When it comes to *hypertext*, we are on less
comfortable ground. We seem to have no hypertext literary
tradition, few hypertext genres to use as models. This
situation urges us to ask: what kind of discourse *is*
hypertext, and to what extent does it encourage, enable and
demand critical thinking? Alternatively, might the need for
students to learn the skills that fall under the critical
thinking rubric require new ways of using hypertext? Must
the notion of critical thinking be *completely* reformulated,
-- or merely adapted to suit this new environment? What
exactly do we mean by "critical thinking," anyway?

Although I can't fully address all these questions in
the time available, my task is to lay some groundwork for the
two papers that follow by exploring the nature of hypertext
as discourse. It may be helpful to begin by suggesting that
what we're really talking about here is not strictly a
computer technology, but a way of writing and a way of
reading. Just as computers do a passable imitation of a
typewriter, and are able to display conventional unilinear
structures, so printed pages can display hypertext, can
contain hypertextual elements like footnotes and indexes, or
visuals that stand in a hypertext-like relationship to the
text. The printed page encourages unilinear discourse, while
computers encourage hypertextuality, but each can pantomime
the other.

In order to think through the question of hypertext's
nature as discourse, I propose to use Paul Ricoeur's
interpretation theory as a guide, in particular his book,
Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning,
which expands on some lectures he gave at Texas Christian
University in 1973. Why Ricoeur? My motive lies in the fact
that he bases discourse analysis on the distinction between
semantics and semiotics. Language considered as discourse is
language considered not as a synchronic system of signs, but
language considered as predicative, the vehicle of meaning by
which someone says something to someone about something.
Discourse, he says on page 1, reaching all the way back to
Plato and Aristotle, "requires two basic signs -- a noun and

a verb -- which are connected in a synthesis which goes
beyond the words." (1)   The sentence (I'll briefly quote):

> is not a larger or more complex word, it is a new
> entity.   It may be decomposed into words, but the
> words are something other than short sentences.   A
> sentence is a whole irreducible to the sum of its
> parts.   It is made up of words, but it is not a
> derivative function of its words.   A sentence is made
> up of signs, but it is not itself a sign. (7)

This distinct entity, the sentence, requires a different
description, a different science, as it were, from the sign:
it requires semantics rather than semiotics.

The point of this, as concerns hypertext, is to remind
us that hypertext still relies on sentences in order to
convey meaning.   I don't mean merely that in practice
sentences occur in most hypertext documents.   I mean that to
the extent that hypertext documents are the bearers of
meaning, and hence to the extent that it makes sense to say
one "reads" hypertext or "writes" hypertext, then it is due
to the fact that signs -- words, images, ideograms, and so on
-- can be combined into sentences or predicative, sentence-
like structures.   So it makes sense, I think, to speak of
"hyperdiscourse" and to try to describe its characteristics.
Already, this observation puts our inquiry on a different
footing from some recent theoretical approaches.   By
suggesting that hypertext presents the reader with sentences
and larger literary or quasi-literary structures, and not

just a network of signs, we're taking a hermeneutic approach
to hypertext rather than a deconstructive one. As I'll argue
a little later, critical thinking is a component or aspect of
interpretation, and Ricoeur's approach to interpretation
theory, I think, makes it possible to see how critical
thinking remains possible and necessary, but still, in
important respects, *changed* in the hypertext environment.

Moreover, considered as discourse, it is clear that
hypertext is closer to *writing* than to speech, and so it
presents the tasks of literary interpretation and criticism.
True, as Walter Ong and others have pointed out, hypertext
does introduce elements of orality -- for example, it more
readily accommodates collaborative dialogue rather than
imposing fixed roles on reader and writer. But even
collaboration and dialogue are directed to the creation of an
artifact that is inscribed, in the sense that hypertext
expressions outlast the event of meaning in a moment's
utterance. The message becomes fixed, exteriorized in
material marks that are no longer tied to the immediate voice
and gesture of a human speaker. My point is that when
hypertext is the medium rather than the printed page, the act
of communication and the hermeneutic situation is transformed
somewhat -- but not as radically transformed as it is when we
turn from speaking to writing. We are still dealing with
essentially the same hermeneutic situation, the same familiar
problematic. By becoming fixed in writing, the message takes
on what Ricoeur calls "semantic autonomy": the meaning of the

message is no longer what the speaker meant, it is what the
statement means, the words and sentences that have been
inscribed as text. As Ricoeur puts it, the "author's
intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide."
(29) So interpretation is still required and it does not
simply mean the divining of the author's intention as a
psychological object: the detachment from the utterer, the
release of the text from simply "what the speaker intended"
is what makes critical reading necessary. If hypertext
remains in this sense "text," then the reading skills that
are required still bear a relation to those that print
requires.

These are important reference points to help us position
hypertext as discourse. But if the word and the sentence
remain in hypertext essentially what they were on the printed
page, it is the larger structures that hypertext radically
transforms. Just as the sentence represents a new entity
irreducible to its component words, so written texts bring
into being "organic wholes irreducible to a mere addition of
sentences," (32) namely genres, literary texts generated
according to recognizable rules and conventions. Hypertext
differs from print chiefly by introducing new genres, but
these genres remain "works." Like other forms of literature,
they are not just uttered but at least to some extent
crafted, constructed. In this way too, then, hypertext
documents resemble printed documents and require related
interpretive skills on the part of the reader. At this point

in the evolution of hypertext as a medium, it may be
impossible to predict exactly what new genres it will
eventually produce. But although we can't speculate on what
will become of hypertext as the technology evolves, it is
possible to consider what differences ensue from the
multilinear nature of the hypertext document.

It's the "link," a particular kind of transition, that
seems to characterize hypertext as a genre or group of
genres. But it seems to me that "links" in hypertext are
quite different from the links that connect ideas on the
printed page or express transitions in a linear argument.
The latter are logical links, expressed by such familiar
transitional words and phrases as "therefore," "however,"
"but" and so on. But in hypertext, the link itself is
frequently mute, and rarely more than a single word, for
example "next" or "index." So the hypertext link offers the
reader a mere juxtaposition, or to borrow a nicely precise
phrase from F. N. Robinson's book on *Beowulf,* a "paratactic
apposition." This term refers to the method by which meaning
is built up by juxtaposing passages that at first appear to
be merely "digressions." Such juxtapositions are, I think,
essentially hypertextual. But hypertext, instead of offering
only one paratactic apposition at a time, often offers a
plurality, a variety of "threads." It is sometimes said that
hypertext is *non-linear,* but this seems to be precisely true
only in the most anarchic boundary cases. Most hypertext is
multilinear. But it may be the case that making meaning out

of the paratactic appositions of hypertext requires more
sophistication and experience on the part of the reader than
does conventional linear argument or narrative.

A genre is a generative device, but it also makes a
certain promise to the reader by raising certain
expectations. What qualities distinguish a hypertext
document as fulfilling the genre's potential? "Good"
hypertext satisfies by being rich and suggestive rather than
being compellingly persuasive. Perhaps ideally in hypertext
everything is linked somehow to everything else. And since
there can be so many paths for the reader to explore,
hypertext design is perhaps analogous to landscaping or park
design, with more emphasis on pleasant surprises than on a
single, irresistable narrative or argument. Moreover, text
becomes spatialized, as it tends to in lyric poems. We
become more aware of the visual appearance of each hypertext
element. The reader of hypertext is invited to *explore* a
circumambient world that exists not simply in front and
behind but offers paths in many directions.

For these reasons, hypertext perhaps lends itself less
to familar fiction and non-fiction genres that have been so
shaped by the requirements of the printed page, than to a
genre that Northrop Frye called the Menippean Satire or
anatomy -- not a satire in the ordinary sense, but a work
that, as he defines it, "presents us with a vision of the
world in terms of a single intellectual pattern" (Examples:
Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; Burton's

9

Anatomy of Melancholy; Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy;* Walton's *The Compleat Angler*) In their long form, they tend toward the encyclopedic; in the short form, toward the dialogue or colloquy. In these works, the sequence of ideas is not important. It's the world that's created, in which you can move about more or less at will. So perhaps we should look to works in this genre to teach us about the literary potential of hypertext.

But even if hypertext tends to construct a virtual world for the reader, it remains true that, as Ricoeur contends, "discourse cannot fail to be about something" -- and this remains true of hyperdiscourse. As a result the problematic of reference -- of what the text (including the metaphorical, symbolic, poetical text) claims to be true -- persists. Ricoeur contends that it is this reference that represents the real goal of interpretation: not to figure out simply what the author meant, but to figure out what the text means for me, what possibilities it projects. What role does critical thinking play in the full work of interpretation?

At this point we need a working definition -- or at least description -- of what we mean by "critical thinking." All reading begins with an intuitive grasping at the surface-level meaning, but what needs to happen beyond that in order to produce a critical interpretation? Ricoeur's interpretation theory is useful for describing the process in a way that does justice to a wide range of approaches to criticism and interpretation. Interpretation as described by

Paul Ricoeur involves three moments: firstly, this naive
reading, which we arrive at through a mere "intuitive
grasping" of what the writer intends; secondly, a critique,
which we arrive at by bringing our assumptions and the text's
assumptions into question, frequently guided by a critical
frame, a formalist or structuralist or post-structuralist
approach. This may simply involve an attentiveness to the
rhetorical structures in a text, or it may involve an
elaborate hermeneutics of suspicion, such as deconstruction
or a Marxist or psychoanalytic critique would prescribe. But
it is at this stage that we introduce method and no longer
rely on intuition alone. However, and I think this is
particularly true in the composition classroom,
interpretation does not really rest there. There is a third
moment, one that moves beyond structuralist or post-
structuralist critique toward a higher comprehension.
Ricoeur calls this a "second naïveté," but he means this in a
positive sense, because this is an existential moment, in
which we "appropriate" meaning by making decisions about what
the text "means" for us, what it suggests for me in my own
world, apart from merely what the author meant in her or his
world. Ricoeur writes:

> What has to be appropriated is the meaning of the
> text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the
> direction of thought opened up by the text. In other
> words, what has to be appropriated is nothing other

than the power of disclosing a world that constitutes

the reference of the text.   (92)

The text is understood to disclose "a possible way of looking

at things" but we are no longer looking behind the text for

something like the writer's intention (92). So this higher

level comprehension is the final moment along a hermeneutical

arc that begins in intuitive grasping, proceeds by way of

structural analysis and issues in critical interpretation.

I find encouragement for this way of looking at critical

thinking in Bartholomae and Petrosky's introduction to *Ways*

of Reading. Their account of the work of critical reading

seems to be consistent with widely accepted ideas.

Bartholomae and Petrosky describe two complementary modes of

reading: reading with the grain and reading against the

grain. A certain principle of charity applies to the work of

reading: we always begin by reading with the grain. But in

order to get beneath the surface, we need to read against the

grain. If we complete our work as readers, however, we

return from this adventure in order to try reading with the

grain once more, sympathetic to the text's purpose but not

beguiled by it. So I think such a double-approach to reading

guides students in basically the same direction that Ricoeur

has in view. Students who are able to read both with the

grain of the argument and against it, and then able in their

writing to hazard a third step in which they construct the

text as a complex but semantically rich web of intersecting

forces, have succeeded in becoming critical thinkers.

Does this help us to close in on the consequences for critical thinking that hypertext entails? In the classroom, it seems to me, the conventional *printed* texts that "work" best to promote critical thinking have many of the qualities of hypertext and may even tend in the direction of hypertext. They tend not to give a strong sense of closure; they tend to be less explanatory than exploratory. Many do make compelling arguments but they don't pretend to have all the answers: they make arguments that seem to have challenged the writer's own resources no less than the reader's; we sense that the writer has been reaching to extend his or her grasp, discovering what can be said in the very process of making an argument. They seem to engage in their own genuine struggle to understand their subject, to work something out in such a way that the reader can join in the struggle and share in the excitement. An exploratory essay or fiction of this kind keeps drawing us back into itself, and from each reading we learn more, as we begin to see more deeply into its internal coherence and its external ramifications. Its difficulty seems to be a necessary difficulty, a difficulty that would be there for any reader, however sophisticated, by virtue of the nature of the inquiry itself.

Such readings bear the marks of multilinearity even while they have been shaped for the printed page. This suggests to me that hypertext and critical thinking can go hand in hand when conceived in the right way. The hypertext author, instead of seeking a linear argument, would have to

persistently resist closure, to keep the exploration open and flowing.

Thinking, as we know, does not start out as unilinear. At what point in the process does a writer's thinking become cast into the unilinear form that the printed page requires or at least prefers? Frequently, perhaps, not until quite late in the process, when the writer settles on just one of several possible lines of argument. The writer chooses a single line of argument and organizes its elements into a single arrangement in order to make it meet the requirements of the printed page. If the writer were to gather and generate ideas in the usual way but never reduce them to a single line of argument and a single arrangement, and then if the writer were to give expression to all these interconnected ideas at once in hypertext, preserving all the connections and lack of connections, would an essential lesson be lost? The hypertext version would be inconclusive, exploratory, venturesome, perhaps more like a meditation than an argument. If the polemical element were there at all, it would probably be less assertive. Hypertext, it seems, encourages exploratory, multilinear writing rather than polemical writing. But as writing, such explorations still present readers with meaningful statements about the world and not just a closed system of linked signs, and so, I would suggest, potentially present students with the full range of interpretive and critical thinking tasks.

CS 276 792

Would you like to put your paper in ERIC? Please send us a clean, dark copy!

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

ERIC®

REPRODUCTION RELEASE
(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Paper presented at the 1997 4C's Convention (Phoenix)

"What Kind of Discourse: Thinking It Through"

Author(s): Matthew Parfitt

Corporate Source:	Publication Date: March 12-15, 1997

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic/optical media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following two options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all **Level 1** documents

[xx]

Check here
For Level 1 Release:
Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical) *and* paper copy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 1

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all **Level 2** documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 2

[ ]

Check here
For Level 2 Release:
Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical), but *not* in paper copy.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but neither box is checked, documents will be processed at **Level 1**.

"I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic/optical media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries."

Sign here→ please	Signature: [signature]	Printed Name/Position/Title: Matthew Parfitt Assistant Professor, Rhetoric
	Organization/Address: College of General Studies Boston University 871 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston 02215	Telephone: (617) 353-4860 / FAX: (617) 353-5868
		E-Mail Address: parfitt@bu.edu / Date: 2/24/98

(over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:

Address:

Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:

Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

Requisitions

ERIC/REC
2805 E. Tenth Street
Smith Research Center, 150
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47408

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
1100 West Street, 2d Floor
Laurel, Maryland 20707-3598

Telephone: 301-497-4080
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-953-0263
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: http://ericfac.piccard.csc.com

6/96)