

Lester Faigley Interview Transcript

➔What is your research right now?

I've been doing a lot of thinking over the years about visual rhetoric. I've done some historical work on that, but I'm guess I'm trying to decide what to do on that. I'm interested in effects of digital literacy. That's what I teach this semester. The course I teach this semester is Multi-Media Writing, but the subject matter is basically Web 2.0. We're looking for example is concerning Facebook. This past week *The New York Times* wrote that "Once you're on Facebook, you can never get off it." People responded very quickly that you can get your Facebook profile down. But you still get emails. Those kinds of issues are interesting.

➔Do you work primarily with graduates?

No, I don't. I teach a graduate course every other year. I primarily teach undergraduates in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing (DRW). I teach with the English department too. We have two departments: the DRW and the Department of English. I have half-time appointments with each. I teach primarily travel literature for the English department looking at non-fiction travel books basically. I do have (students) visit a small town—I have them do that much. They look at issues with books and write about issues within them.

➔What are your favorite courses to teach?

It's kind of this connection with the Rhetoric and writing courses on digital media—anything with visual components and new media. Pretty much everything involves that with digital components. On the literature side, there is a lot of demand for travel writing. I taught a class in the fall about "Adventure Travel." Sometimes we read older accounts. This semester I'm teaching a senior seminar. We started with *Motorcycle Diaries* about Che Guevara. Now we're reading *Full Tilt*, an account of an Irish woman who road a bicycle to India. The third book we're reading is O'Hanlon's *In Trouble Again*, a discussion of the Venezuelan border and the Yanomami tribe. Napoleon Chagnon wrote the *Yanomami: The Fierce People*, a standard book in anthropology up until about 2000, when a journalist, Patrick Tierney, wrote a book called *Darkness in El Dorado* that accused Chagnon of encouraging the violence he recounted by giving some people machetes and not giving other people machetes. There was a whole, long list of accusations. It was a big deal. The University of Michigan gathered a fact-finding committee that rejected most of Tierney's charges. It raised a lot of questions about anthropological and participant-observer work. There was so much (questioning) that there was something there that constituted ethical violations. O'Hanlon has a background in natural history, so it's interesting that he visited these Yanomami before the book scandal. The fourth book we're reading is by Sarah Macdonald, called *Holy Cow*, about her year in India. She talks about all the major religions there. She goes into spiritual retreats with all of them. She does it in a participant way. She's not there to critique them, but to learn. The fifth book we'll read is Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*—the account of Mt. Everest. The

last book is by another Australian woman, Robyn Davidson, entitled *Tracks*. She does a trip by camel across the Western desert. The first half of the book is about her learning how to do it. It takes her a long time to find someone to teach her. It's an incredible book. I like some of the older stuff, but it's always hard.

I'm sure I do see connections between literature and rhetoric. There're certainly rhetorical elements to it. There are issues of representation and of what people choose to say. I find the writing issues interesting. How much the traveler or writer foregrounds himself in the narrative. How they represent other people and other places. How they choose to write about it. I find these books interesting because they're generally not considered great literature. Even though I think they are, they kind of fall through the cracks as far as being considered good literature. It's kind of like reading student writing as far as students have to, even if it's someone you don't like or someone discredited—say Hemingway—you still have to deal with him as a literary figure. With the travel writers you're dealing with them straight up. Some of them are more likeable than others. Some of the people I admire as writers are not particularly nice people. They ethically challenge things at times. It's also that I don't do fictional accounts (in my class). Some of the people do write fiction. That's an interesting question. Is the fiction more truthful than the non-fiction?

➔ How did you get into the field?

I came in through linguistics. To my knowledge the first rhetoric and composition concentration was the University of Southern California sometime around 1978. That program no longer exists. Ours (Texas) started in the fall of 1979. I think it's the longest running rhetoric-concentration program. I got into it by writing about stylistics in student writing. My background is in medievalist linguistics, but everyone taught composition. All the faculty taught composition courses, and I found I didn't know much about (composition). I wanted to look at it from a stylistics perspective. I began to publish on style. I realized I needed to know a lot more than I did, so I began to study with James Kinneavy when he was at Texas. I didn't think I was going to stay there, but there was another professor there named Stephen Witte who had a similar background to mine that came through the same way I did. That's how I got to Texas, and I didn't end up leaving.

➔ How have your life experiences shaped your thinking and scholarship?

Certainly it's visual interests (that influenced me). I started as an undergraduate in architecture. That interest stayed with me and came back with an interest in digital media. We can so easily put images on a page. That circling back that happened. Early on in my career I thought if you could latch onto a topic—some people write a dissertation that stays with them like Chagnon—but I've always had too many interests. I get interested in one thing and it's sort of like solving a puzzle for yourself. One thing led to another and that's kind of been the pattern. I've been all over the place. It's been good—certainly at times I've doubted that. I think it would have been better to find one thing and work it to death.

➔ Are you a critic, a theorist, a practitioner?

I've done different things at different points. First of all (North's) taxonomy is pretty old now. I'm sure it would be different if he did it again. He was trying to make sense of the field at the time. We were trying to figure out different assumptions. The early work in my career was empirical that became more theoretical as I learned more and realized some of the limitations of empirical research and what I was doing.

➔ What theorists have you found to be particularly influential?

I met James Berlin early on. He had two sons, and I had two sons that were about the same age. We corresponded about a number of things. He came to Texas for a year as a visiting professor, and I got to know him very well there. He did some of his most influential work there. He did his first monograph and pretty much all of his second monograph there. It was an important year for him. He talked about what was going on in the field. (The monographs) were extraordinary at the time. Some people say they are a lot of generalizations, but you have to remember there wasn't anything. We were trying to get a sense of what our role was. It was important work at the time, and I think it still is.

➔ In reference to visuals and multimedia, how do you see that steering the direction of the field?

To me it's just something that students are doing. The humanities seem to have the problem with the visual; the sciences don't have a problem with them. It's where things are going. I have a piece where I make an historical argument about this. It has to do with the separation of the visual had to do with printing technologies. The early printers were still using woodcuts, which made it pretty easy to put illustrations in books. But the move towards steel engraving made it more difficult and more expensive to include images. Books with pictures were diverged from books with words. It's interesting how that still upholds. I looked for a book on Ancient Rome that was illustrated. It was a real book, but it was shelved in the children's section. Someone had thumbed through it, saw the drawings and had placed it as a children's book. That's an example of how serious books can have pictures, but have to be seriously constrained. Usually put in a series of images in the middle of a scholarly book or a humanities book. That's what the history is and we're coming out of that. They're not going to have heavily illustrated books as central to the humanities. That's what the history is. We're coming out of that. It's almost unnatural to illustrate something when we have the capabilities. So why not when we have the capabilities of the medium. It's even in the work place where people expect things to be presented in different formats. Sometimes the report might start first and then the people that wrote the report have to make a presentation. Or vice versa where people make a presentation and then write the report—that's very easy to do when you have tables and charts and they drop it into a power point presentation. The technologies incorporate this.

How far can we take these relationships? I find them very suggestive with working with visuals and having very little vocabulary for talking about them.

There's a lot of good, practical scholarship in technical communication. Where I'm coming at is looking at curriculum design and the more theoretical level. There are more practical payoffs, but that's how I'm coming at it.

➔ In what direction do you see the field going?

It's certainly true at the production level that Rhetoric and Communication are similar. It has the potential to cause friction when schools are hurting for students. At big schools this isn't a problem—there are plenty of people who want to go into Radio, TV, and Film. In many places they have more students that want to do that than they can accommodate. They're not worried about us having our students go out and make videos. If you're at a small school—say a branch campus—some of these things can cause friction. As far as the scholarship, what has happened, is that Speech Departments have changed their names to Communication Studies and are much more interested in corporate communications and social sciences. There are certainly exceptions. In many places rhetoric is coming to English. By and large that's not where the thrust of those departments have gone. In many ways rhetoric is still in the humanities, but the disciplinary turf is available.

➔ What is most important for rhet/comp students to consider or think about?

What's most important is what is interesting to you. What do you want to follow? Once you've exhausted a topic, it's no longer a good topic for you. But if you're still finding things to talk about and you still have an entry point that you're really interested in, then that's the key. Have something you're passionate about and that will sustain you.

➔ What is a part of rhetoric/composition that you see is under-researched or under-theorized?

I think a lot of the digital media is so new that there is lots and lots to be done there. I did this study in the early '80s of what college graduates wrote. It was published in *College English* in 1981. What we found was what a lot of other people found—people have to write a lot on the job. We took a stratified sampling, which was the first time someone did that—we actually sat down and figured out where college graduates were in the work force. We looked at occupation and type of employer and plotted a grid to find out how many people fit in each cell. We went out and found these people and then we found someone who we interview them. Out of 200 people, 187 were in occupations that required a college degree. All 187 were writing on the job, but there was very little writing off the job. A few wrote personal letters, and one or two people wrote for church newsletters. Now everyone's doing personal writing all the time. Everyone's emailing and blogging. There's an explosion of self-sponsored writing that just was not there two decades ago. It's phenomenal. I think we see this in our students in sheer fluency. When I first started teaching in technology

classrooms I had a student who could not really get the mouse to work. She lacked the coordination. She understood conceptually, but she dropped the course. We don't mention the keyboard anymore. There's so much dexterity dealing with computers now and the ability to produce words is a big change. Nearly all students can produce words of some kind—even though they may be poorly suited to the task. They can produce text in a way they didn't used to produce text. That's a whole different set of issues there. It has to do with how their whole lives are organized. We had a discussion about how students function without Facebook or cellphones.