Rewriting myself
Gary Rolfe

‘It should not be forgotten that science is not the summa of life, that it is actually only one of the psychological attitudes, only one of the forms of human thought’. Carl Jung

Introduction

I would like to respond to the commentary by Closs and Draper (1998) on my paper ‘Writing ourselves: creating knowledge in a postmodern world’ (Rolfe 1997). However, formulating a response raises some interesting issues, given the post-structuralist stance which I advocated in that paper. I claimed, for example, that once a text is published it is no longer ‘owned’ by the writer, but becomes public property and that the reader imposes his/her own meaning on it. I cannot claim, therefore, that Closs and Draper (1998) misunderstood some of what I wrote, but only that they chose to read it in a particular way. Nor can I respond by ‘putting them right’, by enlightening them as to the ‘true’ meaning; as I wrote in that paper ‘It makes no sense ... to attempt to elicit the meaning that the author ascribed to the text, because there is no single “objective” meaning’. All I am able to do, then, is to provide my own reading both of my original paper and of Closs and Draper’s reading of that paper. My voice is no more privileged in this than is that of Closs and Draper; it is but another reading of something I wrote sometime ago which has since fallen away from me, as Barthes (1997) would say, ‘like a meteorite disappearing’. To paraphrase the Virginia Woolfe quotation in my original paper, the Rolfe who writes is different from the Rolfe who later reads what is written. For this reason, I will refer to the Rolfe who wrote the original paper in the third person. The ‘I’ who is writing this response is therefore the Rolfe who later reads what is written.

Closs and Draper raise three particular issues (apart from their admission that they had difficulty in understanding parts of Rolfe’s paper), and for the sake of clarity, I will discuss each of these under Closs and Draper’s own headings and in the order in which they present them.

Key terms

As Closs and Draper rightly point out: ‘The words in the title of this paper are crucial, since they signal its main contention’. It is interesting, then, that they single out the word ‘knowledge’ from the title, whilst completely ignoring what for me was the key word: ‘postmodern’. They then appear genuinely surprised when Rolfe presents what is essentially a postmodern treatise on knowledge and research, and claim that ‘This title raised expectations that were not completely fulfilled by the subsequent text’. One wonders quite what they were expecting from a title which included the phrase ‘creating knowledge in a postmodern world’, if not a postmodernist perspective on knowledge and knowledge generation.

Their unfulfilled expectations appear to centre around their own ambivalent view of knowledge, since they were disappointed by the fact that Rolfe’s title ‘implies that writing creates knowledge’. However, they are never quite sure in their own minds whether it does or not. At one point they seem to reject the notion that writing creates knowledge, claiming that ‘after reading the paper, it seemed more likely that the act of writing helps us to organize our thoughts and ... may create new ideas through the novel juxtaposition of these thoughts’. Writing, claim Closs and Draper, creates not knowledge but new ideas. Elsewhere, though, writing ‘could produce [Carper’s] personal and aesthetic types of
knowledge’. What is it then, that writing produces: new ideas through the juxtaposition of thoughts, or aesthetic and personal knowledge? Or are they, perhaps, the same thing? But no: the differences between ideas, theories and knowledge are fundamentally important, but these terms appear to be used interchangeably in many parts of [Rolfe’s] paper. One could, perhaps, level the same criticism at Closs and Draper. My suspicion that this self-confessed ‘pair of pedantic old researchers’ only really value hard scientific knowledge is strengthened by their final verdict on Rolfe, that: ‘we do not believe that private writing can produce knowledge of the publicly scrutinizable variety, but that it can improve self-knowledge and create new ideas’. Their disappointment, it seems, is not that writing cannot produce knowledge, but that it cannot produce hard, publicly verifiable scientific knowledge.

Closs and Draper also attack Rolfe’s use of the word ‘research’, which they claim is employed in ‘an unusual way’. Thus, ‘Rolfe concludes that writing can be seen as a form of elementary research in its own right, an interrogation of the self which aims to uncover / create new knowledge and theory’. This stands in stark contrast to their own definition, in which ‘Research is essentially a well organized, systematic analytic activity, in no real way similar to the processes of introspection’. It is not clear where this definition comes from (is it personal knowledge gained from ‘the process of introspection’?), but it is certainly at odds with much current thinking, even in nursing. Thus, the Dictionary of Nursing Theory and Research informs us that:

Empirical research methods have traditionally been recognised as the only legitimate (and the only ‘scientific’) method for generating knowledge. However, this view has been challenged by theorists and researchers who insist that methods for developing all areas of knowledge are essential to human science disciplines such as nursing and, therefore, must be equal in terms of legitimation. When methods for developing all patterns of knowing are equally recognised, the view of what constitutes ‘scientific research’ is changed and expanded significantly. (Powers & Knapp 1990, my italics)

Thus, Powers and Knapp continue, ‘we strongly believe that the advancement of nursing science and practice depends upon the successful integration of all [Carper’s] patterns of knowing through a pluralistic approach to theorizing and research’ (Powers & Knapp 1990).

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which organizes the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) through which research funding is distributed to universities, takes a similarly eclectic view of research. For the purposes of the RAE, research includes not only ‘original investigation’ and the ‘gaining of new knowledge’, but also the ‘generation of new ideas, images, performances and artefacts’ (source: HEFCE seminar presentation, my italics). It would seem, therefore, that Closs and Draper’s concern about the product of writing is largely irrelevant: whether writing really does produce new knowledge or merely new ideas, it still counts as research. The point, however, is that whilst Rolfe (and others) is attempting to open up the definition and conception of what counts as research, Closs and Draper are attempting to close it down.

**Thought and writing**

Closs and Draper’s second concern is that ‘Rolfe almost entirely neglects the notion of thought’. This remarkable statement is supported with a quotation taken entirely out of context: thus, they accuse Rolfe of advocating that ‘We create something new not by thinking about it, but by doing it’, whereas he was merely summarizing the behaviourist view advocated by Watson. Rather than neglecting the notion of thought, Rolfe was actually asserting the primacy of language over thinking. Closs and Draper take the ‘common sense’ view that language (speech and writing) is the expression of thought, that ‘both speech and writing are extensions of our thoughts’ and ‘If we could not think, surely we could neither write nor speak’. However, many writers, including most modern philosophers, suggest that the opposite is true: that language precedes thought and is an essential prerequisite of thought; in other words, without language (speech and writing), there could be no thought. Nowhere does Rolfe neglect the notion of thought; rather, he is proposing the view that thought (and
knowledge) arises out of language, and in particular, out of writing. Closs and Draper’s common-sense view is that thought is the prerequisite of language, whereas Rolfe is advocating the contrary position that thought is dependant on language.

Some false dichotomies

It is at this point that Closs and Draper’s reading of Rolfe’s paper radically parts company from my own, in as much as they ‘read in’ dichotomies that Rolfe never proposed. Firstly, they claim that he is ‘separating speech and writing into two mutually exclusive categories’. Nowhere does Rolfe make this claim: what he does say is that speech and writing are ‘fundamentally different’ (not at all the same thing; Rolfe acknowledges that they are clearly not mutually exclusive). Furthermore, Rolfe is not creating this distinction but reporting it; indeed, Derrida traces it back at least as far as Plato, via Rousseau and Saussure.

Secondly, Closs and Draper claim that Rolfe is setting up a dichotomy between ‘public and private writing’, and point out that the two overlap, that ‘Private writing often leads to well thought out, well organized public writing’ and vice versa. Of course it does, but then Rolfe never actually used the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ to distinguish between his two types of writing. His distinction between writing and writing was far more subtle: the former is concerned with description and/or understanding, the latter is an act of creation in its own right. In fact, Rolfe acknowledges the overlap between public and private writing when he notes that ‘I might submit my writing for publication, but that is not the reason why I write. I write in order to learn and I write in order to teach’.

And thirdly, Closs and Draper suggest that Rolfe makes the false dichotomy between metanarratives and epistemological anarchy. Once again, the term ‘epistemological anarchy’ is not his but theirs, and betrays what might be loosely termed as a very creative reading of his text. Thus, they continue, ‘Rolfe appears hostile to the notion of truth, committing himself to a position of relativism that we find both untenable and unnecessary’ (I will ignore for the moment the fact that an accusation of relativism is probably the greatest insult that a positivist scientist or empirical researcher could possibly endow on a colleague). They go on to assert that ‘The relativism of Rolfe’s work is seen in his citation of Borges’ suggestion that ‘the promise of truth and certainty is ultimately an illusion and the quest for it results in insanity’. Now, I would largely accept Borges’ remark as a statement of Rolfe’s own position on truth, and it certainly accounts for the mental state of many of my more positivist colleagues. However, let us examine carefully just what Borges (and Rolfe) is claiming. He is not saying that truth and certainty is an illusion, which would certainly be grounds for the accusation of relativism. Rather, he is claiming that the promise of truth and certainty is an illusion. He is not taking a stance of epistemological anarchy in which all truth claims are equally (in)valid. He is making the far more interesting point that we can, perhaps, never recognize the truth, even when it is staring us in the face. Somewhere in Borges’ infinite library is the ‘faithful catalogue of the Library’, the ultimate truth. But how are we to distinguish it from the ‘thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue’? I may have the true catalogue in my hands, but I have no way of knowing that it is, indeed, the truth.

Karl Popper, the philosopher of science and ‘inventor’ of hypothetico-deductivism, made a similar point with his notion of falsifiability. No matter how many times our hypotheses are shown to be supported, we can never be sure that they are true, since it takes only one future disconfirmation for them to be rejected. That is not to say that there is no truth, but only that we can never be absolutely sure that we have uncovered it. All we can do is guess, but ‘That we cannot give a justification – or sufficient reason – for our guesses does not mean that we may not have guessed the truth; some of our hypotheses may well be true’ (Popper 1979). Popper is essentially making the same point as Borges; that it is the promise of truth which is an illusion, not truth itself. And if we can be certain of anything (which we can’t!) it is that Popper would not take kindly to being accused of epistemological anarchy, and few writers would seriously attribute such a position to him. Closs and Draper, then, have given a new meaning to the term ‘false dichotomy’: in all three of the above cases, they are falsely attributing dichotomies to Rolfe which he never actually made; in all three cases, the dichotomies were set up by Closs and Draper rather than by Rolfe.
Conclusion

It is only in their conclusion that Closs and Draper get to the nub of their objection to Rolfe’s paper: they write that ‘There is a need within nursing for us to speak clearly to one another’, but unfortunately ‘The writers cited in Rolfe’s paper come from a wide range of disciplines beyond … nursing’. The problem for Closs and Draper is that words are used differently in these different disciplines (what the postmodernists call discourses), such that ‘The scope for confusion is obvious’.

Ironically, Closs and Draper have highlighted here the central tenet of the postmodernist argument. Different disciplines use the same words in different ways and different words to refer to the same concepts; they effectively speak different languages. And as Closs and Draper recognize, this causes confusion and problems of communication between disciplines, what Kuhn (1962) referred to as the problem of incommensurability. Thus, from within the discourse of nursing, it is not possible to sustain a critique of (say) philosophy, and vice versa; there is always scope for disagreement and misunderstanding across disciplines because of the language barrier. This is precisely what Derrida meant when he wrote of a ‘decentred universe’ in which no single discourse has a privileged position from which to critique all the others.

The question, however, is how to survive in this decentred universe in which, as Closs and Draper rightly point out, ‘meaning may differ between disciplines’. Closs and Draper’s solution is disappointing, if rather predictable. We must, they insist, tighten up the language of nursing so that ‘the meaning of words should be as clear as possible’. However, what is gained in terms of clarity within the discourse of nursing is lost in terms of the ability to communicate across discourses. The tighter the definition of a word within the language of nursing, the more difficult it will be to talk to colleagues from other disciplines who use the same word in different ways.

Furthermore, language of disciplines, like the languages of nations, must evolve or else die. As Closs & Draper point out, English is the richest language in the world with the most extensive vocabulary, and it attained this not by shutting out new words and new interpretations, but by assimilating them. Our aim should not be, as Closs and Draper suggest, to close down meanings of words such as ‘research’ so that everyone uses them in the same narrow way, but to open them up, to make them more diverse. If, as I argued earlier, our thoughts are shaped by the language we use, then by narrowing and restricting our language, we also narrow and restrict our thought. A dead language results in dead thought, which ultimately results in a dead discipline. The fact that ‘the word ‘research’ is used in an unusual way in [Rolfe’s] paper’ ought to be welcomed, not censured; it suggests that the discipline of nursing continues to grow and evolve.

References