

In Memoriam: Carol Berkenkotter (1940–2016)

J. Thomas Wright

On September 26, 2016, Carol Berkenkotter signed the papers needed for me to receive my PhD. It was her last act in a full career. A week later, her lengthy battle with cancer came to an end. Neither the expectation to retire nor an exhausting illness had kept her from helping her students for as long as she possibly could.

She defined her students in a remarkably broad sense, sharing her impressive knowledge and careful feedback with anyone who could benefit. In my case, I joined this group two months after I began my doctoral studies at the University of Minnesota, well before I enrolled in a class with her. I had given a presentation in San Antonio, and she was in the audience. After my talk, she made a point of seeking me out and sharing some ideas. Much to my surprise, she was clear that she knew the kind of work I did. I had been familiar with her work, of course, and I had enrolled in that program with the hopes of learning more about it. But it had never occurred to me that she might have looked into what I was doing. If I had been speaking with others who knew her, I would not have been surprised. She was unfailingly generous with her time—not only to students throughout our program but also to scholars throughout the discipline.

Later I became her student in a more conventional sense, taking a class from her in the rhetoric of science. When I finished that, she asked me for help in wrapping up a book she was working on called *Patient Tales: Case Histories and the Uses of Narrative in Psychiatry*. The book had been written; all she needed was a copy editor. But we spent many hours and many lunches going over the content, talking about what to leave in and what to take out. These talks were far more for my benefit than hers. She already knew what she wanted to say. She also knew I needed training in that kind of thinking. She was paying me to give me private lessons on how to write an academic book.

I continued working with her for a year as her research assistant, and I still have boxes of notes and documents that came out of that. When Hurricane Matthew approached my house on the coast of Florida, the first thing I did to prepare was cover the window above those boxes.

Everything she shared with me came from the decades of research and writing that had created a global reputation for her work in genre theory. With Thomas Huckin, she wrote *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power* (1995). This book immediately became known to genre theorists everywhere. Although genre theory isn't my specialty, even I knew of it before I read any of her other work. It was highly relevant to my own studies in the rhetoric of science and several other areas. The scope of her influence is suggested in *Written Communication's* "Special Issue on Narrative in Writing Research in Memory of Carol Berkenkotter." From the discourses of psychiatry to the historical contexts of writing to the value of personal narrative studies, it's clear that the way we do research now is different because of Carol's efforts. The articles published in that special issue reflect just a small part of that.

It is not only professional scholars who do research differently because of Carol. Hundreds of undergraduates do, as well. For many of them, an early essay of Carol's is their introduction to how research in writing studies is done—and, indeed, even that such a thing can be done at all. In 1983, Carol worked with Donald Murray on a pair of essays called "Decisions and Revisions: The Planning Strategies of a Publishing Writer" and "Response of a Laboratory Rat: Or, Being Protocoled." These essays are now included in a successful first-year composition textbook called *Writing about Writing*, by Elizabeth Wardle—one of Carol's former students—and Doug Downs. My colleagues and I have been using this book for the last six years. We consistently find that students who have never considered writing as something to be researched can easily follow Carol's methods and see the value of them. When I first told Carol that we were using her work in our first-year composition program, she volunteered to answer questions my students had about it. Through her efforts, they began seeing their textbook as something written by real people who can be questioned and challenged, not as a collection of facts to be accepted uncritically and forgotten as soon as grades are posted.

Some of these students are now teachers themselves. Many of Carol's students through the years are as well. Through us and through her writings, her influence is carried forward. I'm proud to be a part of that effort.

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