

Threshold Concept: DH Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity and Words Get Their Meanings from Other Words

From Bruno Latour, “Scientific Humanities” MOOC <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/532>

In this exercise, Latour asks students to follow an utterance—a statement on climate change in the local newspaper, a claim about economic upturn or downturn, etc.—over time and report on the journey that that utterance undergoes. Here is his explanation for this assignment:

How to locate a floating utterance

I ask to students to practice a set of exercises: this time, they seize on the fly any utterance whatever—an utterance floating randomly in conversations, on television, over the airwaves, on blogs—and make an effort to relate it to its conditions of production. Since I’m a great admirer of comic strips, that’s what I call “enclosing a floating utterance in a bubble”. You know, those comic strip bubbles, those fumata, with a little hook coming out of the mouth of the cartoon character. Most of the utterances we exchange in the course of a day do not come out of anyone’s mouth in particular: Who said them? To whom? Under what circumstances? With what type of proof? Against whom? To what end? From what point of view? According to the principles of what profession? With what financing? And so on.

At the beginning of the exercise, the utterance is floating. By the end, it must be discovered to be solidly implanted in a precise landscape, where you must make the acquaintance of individuals, whose identities must be specified, who are addressing others on a matter whose issues must be made explicit, who have in their hands visible and tangible proofs of what they are discussing more or less heatedly.

I ask students to begin to take note of the difference between an utterance, which, isolated would appear to be self-evident, and other utterances that come to modify the truth value of the first, which, for its part, does not change.