Challenging Students to Interact with Their Discourse Communities
by
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In the past decade we have examined the writer's sense of audience, voice, and purpose and how these influence the features of a text (Rubin & Piche, 1979; Crowhurst & Piche, 1979), and we have examined the composing process (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Matsuhashi, 1981). According to Odell (1981; 1985) we have also begun to realize that an awareness of rhetorical context influences our evaluation of texts, or we have begun to look beyond the written text to the larger contexts in which writing is done (Bartholomae, 1985; Bazerman, 1983; Clark & Florio, 1983; Herrington, 1985). Looking at these broader writing contexts requires one to look at the discourse communities which influence writers' attempts to formulate and express their ideas. We need to consider the relationships between the composing process and the knowledge, values, and experiences that writers share with others in their discourse communities.

According to Faigley (1985), approaching the writing process from a social perspective forces one to understand the writing process in much larger terms than from starting with "prewriting" and stopping with "revising." When viewed from a social perspective, texts are not detached objects possessing meaning on their own, but are links in communicative chains, their meanings "emerging from their relationships to previous texts and the present context" (p. 235). Members within a discourse community, or members who are literate in the language of their discipline, know what is worth communicating, how it can be communicated, what other members of the community are likely to believe or not believe, and how other members can be persuaded. And in the case of the social sciences, journal articles serve the discourse community as both a means of communication and as a means of earning rewards (Merton, 1957).

Advanced writing courses can serve as a way to teach students the intellectual and social conventions of their discourse communities (Bazerman, 1981; Kinneavy, 1983; Maimon, 1983). These conventions include the issues which a discipline considers important to resolve, the lines of reasoning used to resolve the issues, and shared assumptions about the audience's role, the writer's role, and the social purposes for communicating (Toulmin, Ricke, & Janik, 1979). Advanced writing courses can serve as a way of teaching these intellectual and social conventions because they "can give students the occasion to use the lines of reasoning of a disciplinary forum to resolve issues important to that forum and to assume the role of a participant in that forum" (Herrington, 1985, p. 405).

As teachers we can therefore ask ourselves, how can students learn the conventions of their discourse communities or their disciplines when as students they are, in fact, writing in an advanced composition course? Or, more specifically, what assignments

Students then begin to form statements about their interests. I ask students to look at their background knowledge in an area and then generate lists of interests. Students draw links from these lists to articles they've seen, heard about, or perhaps read for other courses. I then ask students to choose one article and to read critically and react to that article, writing up their critique in any format they wish. We discuss ways to summarize, paraphrase, and quote the work of others, and how, amid such summarizing, to integrate one's agreement or disagreement, to describe the links between this research with past research, to critique the procedures followed or the results given, and to pose alternative results or conclusions. I ask students to challenge the choices which other researchers have made, and I ask them to note the overall structure which the authors have followed in designing, implementing, and documenting their research.

Faigley (1985) proposes the following suggestion for teaching: "Instead of teaching students a generalized analytic procedure, we need to help them understand the specific questions that can help them explore the topics [studies] they must write about" (p. 277). Based on this suggestion, I have developed the following set of questions:

QUESTIONS CONCERNING REVIEWS OF LITERATURE

1. Does the author convince the reader of the importance of the research?
2. Has the author drawn a clear ring around the problem so that it is clear as to what is included and what is left out?
3. Can you easily find a succinct statement of the purpose of the research? What is it? Is it convincing?
4. Is it clear how the author's study relates to previous and on-going research? Does it show a cumulative and systematic approach?
5. Is it clear how this study extends the body of knowledge about the topic?
6. If there is a theoretical base for the study, is it stated?
7. Has the author summarized the studies so that a reader who does not know the particular area of research will still sense its significance?
8. Has the author critically reviewed past research as well as given hints as to how future studies might avoid their flaws?
9. If there is little or no literature which relates to the problem, has the author researched studies "closest" to the problem and indicated why they fell short?
10. In short, has the author made a scholarly attempt to find precursors in this field?

QUESTIONS CONCERNING METHODS OR PROCEDURES

1. Is there mention of how the sample was obtained?
2. Has the investigator tried to control for sampling differences?
3. How are the instruments described? Clearly?
4. Does the method or do the procedures seem reasonable? If not, what is the investigator hiding?
5. Are the analysis procedures consistent with the objectives, design, and method?

QUESTIONS CONCERNING RESULTS

1. Is the data summarized in tables, graphs, or figures? Are these easy to understand? Are they referred to in the text?
2. Are the statistics interpreted according to what is currently accepted in your field?
3. Have all possible interpretations of the data been presented? Has the investigator examined the data from many angles and tried to extract all possible meanings?

QUESTIONS CONCERNING DISCUSSIONS

1. Have clear conclusions been reached?
2. If the results are negative, have these conclusions been "faced?"
3. Does the author bring in any new "unrelated" elements not previously mentioned?
4. Does the author extrapolate the findings to situations / populations not represented in the study?
5. Is the significance of the study clearly described?

A second suggestion which Faigley (1985) makes is that: "We need to give students frequent opportunities to practice the interpersonal skills that will enable them to function effectively in a dialogue or in a group discussion" (p. 278). Based on this suggestion and because the diverse majors mentioned above often require collaborative writing, I next ask students to work together, through conference groups, on a survey project. This is a small research study in which students gain quick experience in collaboratively developing a research question, making a survey, and collecting and analyzing data. Because this research is done in groups, students can easily share their questions and frustrations about conducting their first actual research. When documenting their group's survey, I ask each student to accept the constraints implied in the context of survey studies recorded in his/her discipline. By this I mean that each student writes up the same results in a format which is appropriate to his/her field of work. Therefore, the psychology student may document the results in APA style; the journalism student may write a newspaper article, and the business student may write an extended memo.

Following this survey assignment, I again ask students to explore their own research interests, and to begin forming possible research questions. Students are introduced to online computer search services and social science indexes which can aid them in their search for information. I model my own research strategies and how researchers in my field begin forming research questions. I ask them to then write me a memo in which they detail the research interest(s), specifically telling me why and how they are genuinely interested in this question. Based on their chosen research questions, they search for past work related to their topics and begin prewriting and talking with other students about their research interests. According to Faigley (1985), "We need to help students make the process of inquiry a social process, one that begins well before

students have written a draft" (p. 278). In order to guide students' comments and to help make the process of inquiry more social by including personal reactions to research questions, I give students the following set of questions to use when writing comments concerning their conference members' prewriting for a review of literature paper:

1. What is the research question?
2. Does it seem or look researchable? Is it specific enough? Narrow enough?
3. Where has the author looked for information? Reliable sources? Journals? General-audience literature? Primary sources? What other places could this person look for information on this topic / research question.?
4. What possible organizations could this review take? Chronological? Specific bodies/camps/schools of thought? Pitting theory against theory? Tree some possibilities.
5. What would YOU really want to know about this topic? What would YOU really want researched? Why?
6. What is the most important part of the prewriting? Why? Star it.
7. Where are potential problems / weaknesses? Why? Where are potential strengths? Why?
8. What do you think the investigator is REALLY searching for? . . .Really wants to find out?
9. What might be this investigator's Purpose / Audience / Effect?

Following more research and much discussion, students write a review of past studies which have focused on their research question, critiquing these studies and listing directions for future studies. I ask students to use the following questions when reading and reacting to their own and their conference members' rough drafts:

1. FOCUS

   Write a summary in a sentence or two.

   What is this paper's "center of gravity?"

   Is there more than one focus? Why? How?

2. AUDIENCE

   Who is the intended audience(s) for this paper?

   What have you done to meet these readers' needs?

   What level of background information have you assumed?

   What background information have you provided?

3. THESIS = PURPOSE = GOAL

   What is the purpose of this paper (study)?

   Where is this purpose explicitly stated?

   Is it in the best place(s)?

   Does it need to be repeated elsewhere? If so, why?

When others read your paper, did they get your point? Did they reach the same conclusions? Or did they think of other conclusions / links / future studies?

4. SUPPORT

   What specific studies do you discuss? List them.

   In what order do you present them? Why?

   Have you described too many studies? Not enough?

   Are some studies irrelevant?

5. TRANSITION DEVICES

   List the kinds of transition devices you have used (first, second,... on the other hand, consequently, in contrast to, similarly, in addition to, ...).

   Have you provided enough transitions?

   Have you used too many?

   Will the reader be able to follow your thoughts, that is, will the reader be able to understand why you are describing a particular study first (second, or third...) to support your research question?

6. EFFECTIVENESS OF STYLE

   Have you tried to use action verbs whenever possible? Have you stated who's doing what in the subject of your sentence, and then stated what "who" is doing in your verb?

   Have you tried to avoid using the passive voice?

   Have you used inclusive language?

   Have you used the first person? Why or why not?

   Have you avoided nominalizations?

   Are things in a logical order?

   Have you eliminated all wordiness? Have you broken up sentences that are too long and combined sentences that are too short?

After reviewing past studies in their fields, students then propose their own research studies, prewrite, discuss options in conference groups, decide on research designs, conduct their research, and document their findings. Throughout this research process, students pause numerous times, questioning the contents and formats of both the studies they review and their own work. It is through this constant critical reading, exploring, questioning, writing, revising, designing, reformulating, etc., that students begin to understand the conventions of their discourse communities and their own entrance into these communities.

The last assignment in this course is not a written assignment but rather an oral presentation. Students give an oral presentation of their research as if they are giving a presentation to a national conference or meeting in their discipline. Because I limit the length of the presentation to 10 minutes, students must choose what part or parts of their research to present as they have written much more than they could possibly present. From this assignment, students gain experience not only in presenting research

before a group, but also in determining what is most important to present, what visuals or graphics to use to better emphasize key points, etc.

Conclusions

When developing an advanced composition course, we need to consider the disciplinary conventions we want our students to learn, and how we can create classroom situations that will enable students to learn those conventions and explore their own ideas. According to Herrington (1985), we should consider the intellectual conventions we want students to learn, asking questions such as:

What characteristic issues do members of this discipline try to resolve? That is, what do they consider to be important problems or questions?

What lines of reasoning are used to explore these issues and develop arguments to resolve them? Most important, what count as good reasons? (p. 411).

If the aim of your class is for students also to learn the social conventions of their discourse communities, the following questions might serve as a guide in identifying these social conventions:

In what social forum are particular issues addressed and lines of reasoning used? . . .(e.g., an academic journal, popular magazine, newspaper) or a place (e.g., Congress, a research laboratory in a company, a social service agency).

In a given forum, what is the social purpose for trying to resolve a given issue? Is it, for instance, to advance the community's knowledge of some phenomenon?. . .

What roles are assumed for both writers and readers? Most important, what are the characteristic expectations of readers and what ethos is valued in writers? (Herrington, 1985, p.412).

We need to ask ourselves the questions, "Do we as teachers create situations in which students must find issues for themselves?" And, "Do our assignments encourage students to become active participants in the social forum by which their disciplines thrive?" By creating courses which are forums for students' exploring and researching processes, by creating courses in which students can deliberate about issues of concern to their discourse communities, we can teach students to go beyond just reading the writing in their disciplines; we can teach students how to become active members!

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