Composition Students and the Academic Subculture

by
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One of my freshman composition students once asked, after I had told him he should elaborate on his ideas more thoroughly, "Why should I tell you all this? You're smarter than I am. I don't want you to think that I think you're dumb, or something." His words revealed a certain sensitivity to his audience and to the rhetorical situation, but an ignorance of an important convention of academic discourse—the convention of explicitness, extended discussion of ideas. Because, like most students, he was unfamiliar with academic discourse and the academic culture that provides us with the standards that govern such discourse, he could not begin to make the assumptions that are nearly second-nature to us. Examining the attitudes and assumptions that we have inherited from the academic culture can help us understand the bases of much of our teaching and can allow us to make explicit for students a framework of standards and conventions which we have long ago internalized and of which we are thus not always consciously aware, but which does affect the way we view students and the work they do. For if this framework remains unarticulated, it may confuse our students or create other barriers to their learning.

We all know that the primary purpose of much academic writing, though it is seldom articulated in writing courses or other kinds of courses, is to display the student's knowledge and his mastery of certain materials or tasks; it may communicate to its audience (almost always the teacher) information about the subject with which it deals, but primarily it communicates information about the student's performance and abilities. Academic writing is written to be evaluated, sometimes for no other purpose. We cannot avoid assigning writing with such a purpose, nor is doing so necessarily bad, but it does create a rather artificial writing situation. For example, a student in a speech course might be assigned to write a paper discussing several techniques that Adolf Hitler used to manipulate the media for an instructor who knows more about the subject than the student can hope to tell him in, say, ten pages or so. But the student's failure to inform him about this subject will not affect her grade negatively; if she has presented the information coherently and clearly and demonstrated her grasp of the subject, aided by responsible research, her writing will probably earn a high grade. To be sure, I learn a great deal about various subjects by reading the essays that my students write, but if a student following the guidelines of an assignment happens to write on a topic I know a good deal about, I do not give her a low grade just because she has failed to comunicate to me anything new about that subject.

The reason for such standards of evalution is that in academic writing, as David Olson tells us, the focus is less on interpersonal relations between the

writer and her audience than on logic and ideas (278); in other words, the focus is on the text itself. Certainly, it is important that the student's mastery of the subject and the assignment be displayed, but the text does that primarily through the interrelationships within it, its coherence, its form, and so on. This emphasis on text is, of course, problematic if we attempt to teach students to analyze their audiences and writing contexts and to use those analyses to guide their writing. For if the text itself is primary, it eclipses the rhetorical situation. Talking about this peculiarity of academic writing with our students might prevent some confusion.

Emphasis on the text is related to a number of our expectations about academic writing and what makes it successful. Olson explains that our notions of literacy and text derive from the British essayist tradition and its conventions (268), a tradition exemplified in the essays collected in the readers that we may use in teaching our composition courses. Its conventions, then, are the conventions that characterize academic writing and give it a literate, as opposed to an oral, orientation. And they are familiar to all of us. An essayist text is as explicit as possible, stating and exploring the presuppositions and implications of every statement within it. Hence, extended discussions of its assertions are necessary (Olson 267-268). That is why rhetorics, handbooks, and most of us constantly tell students to be specific, use evidence, discuss their points thoroughly. Furthermore, inferences in essayist prose must be correctly drawn; reason and consistency are important (Olson 277). In addition, the logical relations between ideas must be explicitly marked (Scollon and Scollon 9). Many of our rhetorics and handbooks, therefore, include sections on logical reasoning and provide lists of transitions for our students to use. Certainly, we expect our students' prose to avoid blatantly illogical reasoning, to exclude confusing irrelevancies, and to provide clear transitions, and we evaluate it according to these criteria.

We also expect, in accordance with our knowledge of good essayist prose, that the writing should be understood in contexts besides that in which it was written and that, within certain limits, it contain all the information necessary to communicate its meaning (Olson 272, 277; Scollon and Scollon 8)—that it be, in other words, like George Orwell's or E. B. White's essays, quite comprehensible to anyone who reads them in any anthology. The text should be a unified whole. This expectation helps to explain the handbooks' ubiquitous discussions of thesis statements or governing ideas, but it also explains the "rule" that introductions should introduce the topic and indicate what will come next or should lead the reader into the paper, as McCrimmon, for instance, suggests (217). In some contexts, this is a strange rule. For if the student is writing about a subject discussed in class or one he has discussed with the teacher (who he knows is his audience), why should he spend time introducing the topic? The teacher/audience already knows about it, knows what it is. To omit a thorough introduction in such cases would be to rely almost intutively on an awareness of the context and of the audience's knowledge, the very things we often urge students to develop an awareness of. But it would also violate the essayist tradition's requirement that as little as possible outside the text be necessary to interpret it. Our resultant insistence on a complete introduction in all cases calls a student's commonsense employment of rhetorical elements into question, and in doing so, it may confuse him. It would thus be useful to examine with students this clash and the academic conventions that shape our expectations and that sometimes take precedence over the student's knowledge of the audience and the context.

Because meaning in academic prose seems to reside in the text, Scollon and Scollon argue that essayist prose fictionalizes both the audience and the author; the reader is an idealized rational mind that is formed by the rational body of knowledge the essay discusses, and the author tries to efface himself and write "a clear communication from rational mind to rational mind" (9-10). Indeed, textbooks such as *The McGraw-Hill College Handbook* give students advice to avoid "calling attention to themselves and getting in the way of the subject they should be writing about" (Marius and Wiener 215). Though this process of fictionalization may not characterize the personal writing we assign in our composition courses, such writing is usually meant to lead toward more conventional academic writing. The conventions of fictionalization that govern academic writing seem, of course, to be rather at odds with the advice we give our students to begin with subjects they have some personal investment in, to determine what they wish to communicate about these subjects, and to visualize the audience and their characteristics before they write. Writing from mind to mind is not quite the same thing as writing from person to person.

Because of these conventions of essayist prose, academic discourse is often described as decontextualized, but while that term can be useful, it is not completely accurate. For such writing certainly has a context—that of the academic culture and the traditions of essayist literacy, as I have been attempting to point out. In addition, as Mike Rose notes, the terminology, conventions, and knowledge associated with particular disciplines provide a context for specific pieces of academic writing. And many university courses assume that a student is familiar with central ideas in the western intellectual tradition, ideas that provide a context for much of academic writing (25). Then, too, a good deal of academic writing is built on other texts: lectures, readings, and the theoretical framework and conventions established by other works within a discipline (Rose 12). Many of our students, however, come to us unaware of these conventions and traditions, and unless we make them explicit and discuss them, the students may have to learn them through a frustrating process of trial and error.

For if, as Frank D'Angelo says, our students come from a culture that is primarily oral (104), many academic conventions will be foreign to them; they will rely not on literate strategies, but on oral strategies. Oral strategies may reflect not only a lack of skill with literate strategies but also a different set of values about what features of discourse are important, values that can lead

students to resist our instruction. Elaboration, for example, may not be valued, as the students' question I began with illustrates; elaboration may be seen as an insult (see Olson 263 and Stubbs 47). In an oral context, detailed explanation might seem to imply that the speaker thinks the listener is not very bright. At the very least, it may be viewed as a long-winded, boring enumeration of details. And I imagine that most students would rather not be boring. Thus, they may not understand our injunctions to be specific, being used to relying on the context to provide support and illustration for what they say, and they may resist using details and elaboration.

Resistance to our instruction might be related to students' perceptions of the academic culture, as well. We are all aware of the stereotype of the academic, full of book-learning but out of touch with reality, a bumbler residing in an ivory tower who thinks great thoughts but who, when she emerges, cannot operate a parking meter. Unfortunately—or not—our students probably half believe this stereotype; certainly, they seem actively to want to avoid becoming academics. The "brainy" kid in class is often ostracized, and even those students who do what the teacher expects of them usually cultivate a certain level of indifference to the teacher and to learning if—they want to be accepted by their peers (Eggleston 114), Thus, students—even at the college level—may resist instruction; if they learn too well, they will become like us and lose their own identities.

This fear is perhaps especially relevant to language instruction, for a person's language is very much bound up with her identity. In their discussion of Athabaskan-English communication, Scollon and Scollon point out that members of a group see discourse patterns as "distinctive factors in their own identity both as members of a social group and as persons" (19-20). It seems reasonable to assert that learning the conventions of academic prose and the literate strategies that produce such prose amounts to becoming a member of a new discourse community. When we ask students to express themselves in academic discourse, we are asking them to exchange the discourse that is a badge of loyalty to their group and that gives them their identity within their oral culture for a discourse alien to them. We are asking them to take on a new identity. If they resist doing so, we should probably not be surprised, especially if an identity as an academic is not something that their group values.

Another assumption central to academic writing that may be confusing to students or that they may resist adopting for other reasons is that of ownership of text. To us, both the words and the ideas in a text are clearly the property of an author, and using either the words or ideas without giving the author credit is unethical. Writing textbooks reflect these attiutudes. Crews equates failure to acknowledge a source with bank robbery (223); Gere (252) and McCrimmon (499) both say that plagiarism is stealing. Therefore, appropriating someone else's words is not merely a practical problem, but an ethical one. These ethical dimensions of writing might be intimidating to students from an oral culture—textbooks certainly present them in an intimidating and legalistic

manner—and students might resist learning them for that reason; this way of viewing a text might be confusing, as well, to someone from an oral culture. How can one own words when they are so fleeting, disappearing as soon as they are spoken? How can one even tell who wrote the words that Dan Rather speaks on the evening news? Credits run after the broadcast is over, and are usually not very specific. Much of what the student has encountered in his oral culture has not prepared him to understand the idea that a text can be owned, violated, or stolen from. Thus, we ought to be patient with students who do not immediately grasp the conventions of documentation or the reasons behind those conventions. Recently, a student argued with me over what I presented as the necessity to cite the source for a summary she had written. She said, "But if I read a *whole book*, and then I summarize it in a couple sentences, that's my work—that reducing it down like that is *my* work." She was right, of course, and her objection showed that she knew that a good summary requires its author to synthesize the information in a source. But it also showed that she did not understand the ethical issues surrounding academic writing that we all take for granted.

Indeed, ethics, morality, and propriety have long been associated with writing instruction, and it might be worthwhile to become conscious again of that association. Shirley Brice Heath points out that in the nineteenth century, when floods of immigrants began arriving from Europe, knowledge of standard English became associated with civic responsibility, good character, and patriotism; writing skills began to be seen as "tests of character, intellect, morality, and good taste." Heath wonders whether these attitudes are not still present in the academy, particularly in English classes (35, 38). Perhaps they are. I used to hear a former colleague complain frequently that a number of the students in his writing courses could not write coherent essays; he almost always conjoined this complaint with the assertion that such students were not fit material for college. His assertion suggests to me that he associates writing skills with intellect and, probably, with personal merit. I am equally guilty of such attitudes, I know, and I suspect that my colleague and I are not alone. After all, those of us who teach writing value it. We are probably good writers ourselves and, like our students, we may believe that our personal worth is bound up with certain discourse skills. If so, then it is hardly strange that we associate our students' writing skills with their personal worth. But this is unfair, of course; their inabilities to write "good" essays may well be a result of their unfamiliarity with the essayist literacy that the academy values and with other academic traditions and conventions.

It is important, I think, to try not to let the value we place on literate discourse lead us to view the students' oral discourse as inferior or worthless. Such a viewpoint is sometimes difficult to escape; it is implicit in the developmental framework often imposed on the oral/literate dichotomy, in which

individuals or communities are said to develop from using oral strategies to using literate strategies (as in Olson 262). The implication, of course, is that oral strategies are of a lower order. If we can avoid such a value judgment, perhaps we can use the oral skills our students have to teach them what they do not yet know. Making such a value judgment can only erect yet another barrier to our students' learning what we try to teach. Clearly, we need no more barriers. Because our enterprise involves so much more than teaching a facility with language—because it involves introducing our students to a new culture and asking them to begin adopting a new identity—there are already barriers enough. Becoming aware of those conventions that we accept almost unconsciously and making them explicit to students is, I think, one way to begin to break down those barriers to learning and help our students succeed in the academy.

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