

OVERVIEW OF READINGS

While the readings might, at first, seem different in their methodology, the issues addressed are actually quite similar.

Bartholomae, David. "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow."

Consider the conversation between Bartholomae & Elbow. At first it might seem that the two are simply discussing the *level* of written discourse in the first-year composition classroom – while Bartholomae argues that "academic" writing is a proper and desired level of discourse in the freshman composition classroom, Elbow thinks the distinction between creating *academics* and creating *writers* establishes a difference in a progressive pedagogy. The differences between the two approaches seem almost exclusively political.

Bizzell, Patricia. "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty."

Bizzell, on the other hand, provides an overview of two different cognitive approaches to the writing process: inner-directed and outer-directed. While Bizzell seems to approach the question of writing in the classroom from a very different perspective than Bartholomae/Elbow, they really are discussing similar practical situations in the composition classroom: the necessity of "transform[ing] students' whole world view." Composition process, then, becomes a matter of considering the process of cognition, or the manner in which the way we think corresponds with the way we write.

"Inner-directed" models establish fundamental processes formed prior to integration into communities, thus "prior to social influence" – the individual is born with "innate capacities" that may manifest themselves in discursive acts, and thus can be identified. Once identified, pedagogical techniques might attempt to recontextualize the student's thought process, establishing an earlier cognitive framework from which to elicit written responses. Bizzell identifies the work of Flower and Hayes, contributors to the Cross-Talk anthology, as major theorists of the inner-directed model.

"Outer-directed" models posit the social contexts that shape language use are present from an individual's earliest linguistic interactions; therefore, the linguistic capacities of the individual develop along with the social use of language. Fundamental structures, such as they are, cannot be separated and taught. Instead, students should become cognizant of the various "discourse communities" in which they travel, and concentrate on establishing themselves within different communities.

Which is "most" useful? Looking back at the Bartholomae/Elbow conversation, it seems clear that the two educators spoke to the idea of discourse communities in different ways.

Bartholomae saw no harm in making explicit the students' rhetorical position as situated within a specific, and demanding, discourse community – one that might be defined as “academic.” Elbow found the imposed identification limiting, arguing instead that instructors of composition need not constrain first-year writers by insisting on a sort of academic talk demanded by institutional presences.

Bizzell certainly seems to critique the inner-directed model, noting that many problems with student writing stem from a lack of awareness of discourse communities – particularly the “academic” discourse community.

Bartholomae, David. “Inventing the University.”

Do educators expect students to mimic the conventions and depth of academic discourse at points previous to their entry into the discourse? Bizzell's article prompts a somewhat surprising response from Bartholomae. Bartholomae suggests that students understand certain conventions of academic discourse, and tend to produce an idealized discursive vision of academic writing.

In the course of this essay, Bartholomae dismisses the inner-directed theorists (specifically Flower and Hayes) emphasizing instead the situated aspect of student writing. Responding to Bizzell, on the other hand, Bartholomae contends that students know that they are in a specific discourse community and tend to write towards that, “inventing” the idea of the university, and what sort of discourse happens there, for their performances on the page.

Ultimately, Bartholomae understands the most successful essays to be those that established a critical position as writers, papers that attempted to engage a fuller experience (a critical experience) than those that sought to reiterate some prior sense of subjectivity according to the writing prompt.

Fulkerson

Fulkerson first discusses weaknesses in logical approaches to argument, coming instead to emphasize less formally strict models for argumentation, Toulmin's model in particular. He discusses the inadequacy of philosophical logic, and key methodological terms such as “inductive” and “deductive,” as classroom strategies. Fulkerson then provides a full explanation of the Toulmin model.

Just what is “academic language” anyway?

When we discuss academic language, in the context of our graduate studies, we really resolve the discussion to the more specific consideration of academic English. Are students of English, however, the only affected parties? “Learning academic English,” writes Robin Scarcella, “is probably one of the surest, most reliable ways to attain socio-economic success in the United States today” (6). If this is true, one would imagine that the comprehensive writing plan is one that prepares young students for their professional lives by preparing them for the discursive conventions of higher ed. The discursive conventions of the university setting imply a semi-professional standard, and therefore stylistic protocols that yield clear distinctions between lay discourse and academic discourse. Yet when we think of academic English, a series of contradictions appears: a writing which is both clear and complex; essays that appeal to the generalist while employing the obscure jargon of the specialist; theoretical sophistication that begs for direct application. First-year students have enough trouble reading the professional essays that would serve as models – to what extent do we expect them to reproduce such writing?

And do we even know the ideal when we see it?

Remembering our discussion of “discourse communities,” it may seem that even the most well-defined discourse community is potentially a jumble of unrealistic expectations and unexamined assumptions. Instead of clearly articulating the nature of discourse in the academic discourse community, for instance, academic professionals often expect students to abide by conventions never previously encountered. Scarcella (whose essay draws upon the work of Swales, mentioned in Monday’s class) implies that the failure of students to deploy the language of the academic puts them at an immediate disadvantage professionally, even though professional considerations may be the furthest thing from a student’s mind.

The exercise for today’s class, then, requires you to consider sophistication as a marker of academic discourse. Conducting interviews at the Kim Emmons Language Association (EmmLA for short), or choosing students for long-term projects, you will consider how the use, underuse, or abuse of academic English shapes our understanding of the speaker’s place and capacity within the university setting. Hopefully the recital of more obscure and jargon-ridden academic prose will provide you with the perspective to judge student writing as a manifestation of students’ recognition of an unfamiliar discourse community.

Work cited:

Scarcella, Robin. Academic English: A Conceptual Framework. University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute Technical Report 2003-1.
<http://lmri.ucsb.edu/publications/03_scarcella.pdf> 5 Oct 2006.

Discourse Communities

The ideal of pure generalization is a discourse that embraces a wide audience. In fact, discursive gestures tend to function in smaller groups – “discourse communities.”

You'll remember our earlier discussion on audience, when we considered the differences between invoked audiences and addressed audiences. Imagine a group of people with similar interests, and a commitment to similar activities or goals. When invoking or addressing the audience, the writer must establish the commitments and goals of the audience. The writer is then free to establish a model (for the invoked audience) or display intellectual credentials (for the addressed audience).

Indeed, “goals” are an important attribute of discourse communities, according to John Swales, who has published some of the more important work on the subject (Borg 398). The assumption may be that individual written acts in a discourse community must somehow establish a work towards that goal, and may not be extraneous. The concept of genre was thus important for Swales, who stipulated that the written products of discourse communities could be identified as genre insofar as they established a consistent formal platform for achieving a goal.

Borg, Eric. “Discourse Community.” ELT Journal 57 (2003): 398-400.

McVittie, Joan. “Discourse Communities, Student Selves, and Learning.” Language and Education 18 (2004): 488-503.

Spellmayer, Kurt. “Foucault and the Freshman Writing: Considering the Self in Discourse.” College English 51 (1989): 715-729.

Swales, John. Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings. New York: Norton, 1984.

Wardle, Elizabeth A. “Can Cross-Disciplinary Links Help us Teach 'Academic Discourse' in FYC?” Across the Disciplines. 27 July 2004 < <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/wardle2004/>> 3 Oct 2006.