

Local Knowledge, Local Practices: Writing Communities and the Case for Writing in the Disciplines

Two Excerpts

- A. The first excerpt is drawn from David Russell's authoritative critical history of writing in instruction in higher education in North America. Russell asserts there is a contradiction between disciplinary specialization and the traditional view of writing as a "transparent" and mechanical skill. He makes the case that effective instruction in writing and thinking in the disciplines requires taking a socio-rhetorical approach to understanding the local conventions and practices of each distinct discourse "sub-community."

From *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*, by David Russell (Southern Illinois Press, 2002) 12-14.

The transparency of rhetoric in academic disciplines is in many ways a function of specialization. As the disciplines became separated from one another and from the wider culture, persuasion became so limited, so bound up with the genres (and activities) of a specific community's discourse, that it could be taken for granted by members of the community. Scholars saw little need to enter other symbolic worlds, little benefit in making their own discourse accessible to outsiders, little reason to translate their knowledge into the genres of other communities and thus reconcile their activities and conventions of discourse with those of other disciplines.

Yet the naive, mechanical conception of writing which specialization fostered contradicted the actual practice of academics, for whom writing was a very human thing, a complex social activity involving a whole range of rhetorical choices, intellectual, professional, and political, as recent research into the social basis of writing has shown.² As a social activity, writing is inevitably embedded in and conditioned by a community. By its very nature it is local, context specific, dependent on a community for its existence and its meaning. Literacy is thus a function of the specific community in which certain kinds of reading and writing activities take place. Standards of acceptable discourse vary among social and disciplinary groups, a fact that we implicitly recognize in our daily affairs. As Brazilian sociolinguist Terezinha Carraher notes, a professor may, without irony, express pleasure that her maid is "literate" because she can barely decode recipes and take down phone messages, but complain that her students are "illiterate" because they do not yet understand the conventions of written discourse in her discipline.³

This social perspective on writing embeds each text in a context of human behaviors. Genre becomes, in Carolyn Miller's formulation, "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations."⁴ Those recurrent situations, the habits of a community, give rise to repeated formal elements in texts: conventions of argument, evidence, diction, style, organization, and documentation which allow those familiar with the conventions to recognize and understand the writing of a particular community. Cooperative human activities (to borrow Lev Vygotski's phrase) organize themselves through language. In the activities of modern mass education and disciplinary inquiry, the language that counts most is written—but written in ways characteristic of the various cooperative activities, the various

communities and subcommunities that make up the system. As Arthur N. Applebee says of the symbolic universes of the disciplines (paradigms as he calls them, following Thomas Kuhn), "These paradigms provide tacit guidelines about proper lines of evidence and modes of argument. Though rarely made explicit, their influence is pervasive; they determine what will be seen as interesting, what as obvious, and what as needing elaboration."⁵

One can understand the writing of a community, as Charles Bazerman has pointed out, only in terms of the community's activities: the issues it addresses, the purposes it serves, the concrete objects it manipulates, the questions it has excluded or already answered to the satisfaction of the community, the things that can be left unsaid because of the community's history and activity, or the things that might be said to accomplish its objectives. To read and write meaningfully, one must, in other words, understand how the community interprets its texts, those shared understandings (Bazerman's term) which connect text to context. Using the conventions of a genre without understanding (tacitly or explicitly) how those conventions operate within the community is as meaningless as learning how pieces move in a chess game without knowing the conditions under which one piece may capture another or knowing that the object is to checkmate the opposing king.⁶

Over the past two decades, scholars have just begun to study the rhetoric of academic disciplines and other professional communities on a case-by-case basis, to analyze the interactional rules, tacit and explicit, which govern the knowledge-making and communicating activities of various discourse communities and subcommunities. These scholars do not attempt, as did earlier critics of academic specialization, to banish specialized vocabularies, arcane "rhetoric," in order to restore some universal clarity to the academic Babel. Rather than seek to overcome modern complexity, they study the ways modern complexity is reflected in and created by writing. Their goal is to advance the activities of specialized communities, not to transcend specialization. Studies by Donald McCloskey (economics), Greg Myers (biology), Charles Bazerman (the experimental article in various disciplines), Glenn Broadhead and Richard C. Freed (business consulting), Hayden White (history), James Boyd White (law), JoAnn Yates (industrial management), along with many studies of knowledge making in science, explore the institutional as well as the intellectual and material settings in which writing takes place.⁷

Such analysis is a complex undertaking within any one community or subcommunity, for each is made up of members who play many and often-shifting roles; the rules of the game constantly change in response to a wide range of intellectual, material, and political forces within and outside the community.. Moreover, these studies have often met with considerable resistance from mainline scholars. But only such socio-rhetorical analysis, discipline by discipline, will provide a foundation on which to construct meaningful generalizations about how writing works— and how students learn to make it work.

- B. The second excerpt is taken from an account of research carried out by two rhetoric and composition specialists within a biology course. It issues a caution against WAC assumptions about “universal” methods of enhancing learning through writing, and concludes by suggesting that fostering writing within content areas will be advanced best by those who play the anthropologist versus those who play the missionary.

From “Writing in the Content Areas: Theory and Practice,” by David Kaufer and Richard Young, in *Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing: Rethinking the Disciplines*, ed. Lee Odell (U of Southern Illinois Press, 1993) 73, 80-82.

Writing and Content

Inquiry into the relationship between writing and content can quickly provoke a wide array of questions: for example, questions about the relationship between learning to write and learning a subject or, more fundamentally, about the relationship between language and meaning, assuming we interpret “writing” to include language practices generally. Since first-language learners learn language and meanings concurrently, we might ask what role learning the language practices of a specialized discipline plays in learning the discipline’s specialized meanings. There are other related questions, less basic, perhaps, but of more immediate interest to designers of writing programs in the content areas: What is content knowledge? What is writing knowledge? Are they the same or different? If different, how? If interactive, how?

These are difficult questions. They become more difficult still when we begin confronting the second category of questions about the conditions under which content expertise and writing expertise are best acquired. Can and should both kinds of knowledge be taught by the content teacher? By the writing teacher? Is there a principled division of labor? And, finally, what is the nature of rhetorical expertise and how does it relate to subject matter expertise?

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A Content-specific Case: Writing in Biology

[This excerpt recounts the shift in perspective of a pair of WAC researchers, Velez and Young, as they observe students in a first-year Biology lab and provide feedback on the role of writing process to the professor, Dr. Kauffman.]

Faced with the subtle assumptions of Kauffman’s Biology students [regarding the merely mechanical nature of writing], Velez and Young became convinced that they needed to make some interventions in Kauffman’s class that would show students the generative and inventive capacities of language. Young wanted to introduce into the course one of the characteristic techniques of WAC pedagogy, the journal, and he asked Kauffman whether students already were required to keep some sort of journal or

notebook in the course. In true missionary fashion, he was trying to introduce new practices by grafting them on similar but already well-established ones. When she said that her students were required to keep a record of their lab work in a notebook, Young suggested that the functions of the notebook be expanded to include what the WAC literature associates with the epistemic uses of language (e.g., Fuiwiler; Kaimbach; Selfe and Arbabi). These include using the journal as a place to identify and explicate problems as they arise in the student's thinking and as a way for students to keep a written record of their transactions with teachers.

Kauffman's reply was dismaying. She said that while the suggestion was not unreasonable, the lab notebooks of professional researchers are often used in patent applications and in product litigation and hence are controlled by strict conventions. Her students' notebooks had to be string bound; the pages had to be numbered before they were written on; ink had to be used, not pencil; and lines had to be drawn through any blank space at the end of pages—all this so that no undetectable alterations could be made after the original entries. Since Kauffman was trying to teach her students how to behave like professional biologists, Young's suggestion, no matter how useful it seemed to him, was simply inappropriate. The problem was not that keeping journals in Kauffman's class was necessarily a bad idea; even if the students had to keep two separate journals for different pedagogical purposes, it might well be a profitable activity. The problem for Young and Vélez was that they began to think that they did not know enough about practices in the biology class to make useful suggestions.

Method/Content Dichotomies

Two quite different approaches are discernible in the educational movement that goes by the name writing across the curriculum. The first approach (e.g., Flynn and Jones) is based on the notion that writing is an epistemic activity and seeks to introduce generic languaging activities (e.g., the journal and collaborative learning) into educational environments of any kind. The second approach (e.g., Williams and Colomb) seeks to identify, systematize, and teach the rhetorical practices of particular disciplinary communities. In the first approach, the same teaching methods are assumed to be equally appropriate and equally effective in any disciplinary community. It implies a dichotomy between pedagogical method and content somewhat analogous to the dichotomy between language and content noted earlier. As Slevin et al. note,

“With regard to the teaching of writing, then, we distinguish between the concept of writing across the curriculum and the concept of writing within disciplines. In the former, writing across the curriculum, we look for general practices, common procedures for teaching writing that will work in all sorts of courses; so our attention here will be on generalizations about the writing process, learning, and cognitive growth.”

In the second approach, writing within disciplines, the separation of method and content is never an issue because writing assignments are dictated by the specific rhetorical practices of the community. For example, in a journal Kauffman kept on her teaching, she wrote,

“During lecture today I made a small writing assignment that students should turn in a week later at the next lecture. The assignment was, for those students in the Monday class that would, on Friday,

complete Experiment III, to plot the turbidity of the culture, as requested in the report section of Experiment III and then to describe the resulting curve. This was to be completed in five or six sentences, since as I said in Appendix I, more words did not convey more meaning. . . . Since the material that they were writing would be an integral part of their final report, this exercise was not a “ghost” or “dry” effort. (Sept. 7, 1988)”

At the inception of the pilot project, Velez and Young had been taking the first approach to WAC and not paying much attention to the second. This was apparent in their efforts to introduce journal-keeping into the biology class and in their lack of any effort to learn about education in biology. When Kauffman rejected the proposal to expand the functions of the lab notebooks, Velez and Young realized that they were outsiders, strangers in a strange land, so to speak, and that they needed to find a more appropriate strategy to guide their activities in the project; as it turned out, this required moving from the generalist-epistemic approach to a more discipline-oriented approach. They realized that they needed to learn a great deal more about language practices in biology before they could be useful to Kauffman and before they could hope to introduce useful changes that would persist in her class. As Velez now recalls, both she and Young had been talking too much. But this was understandable, she says, because neither she nor Young had known what to listen for. She further recalls this moment as the point at which she started to immerse herself in biology materials, thinking that if she was going to help redesign a course, she had better first know something about the course. Metaphorically speaking, Velez and Young abandoned their role of WAC missionaries and became something like anthropologists investigating the culture of academic biology.

Clifford Geertz defines the culture of a people as an “ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (129). Velez and Young began reading “over the shoulders” of those to whom the texts properly belong, both literally and figuratively. They began to collect information about practices in Kauffman’s course, using surveys, tape-recorded interviews with Kauffman and students, taking notes on what went on in lectures and labs, and assembling sets of syllabi, assignments, and student reports. Their immediate goal was a deeper knowledge of language practices in the lab course as a reflection of broader disciplinary practices and the rhetoric underlying those practices.