

# Can Cross-Disciplinary Links Help Us Teach "Academic Discourse" in FYC?

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Recent research demonstrating how students learn to write in disciplinary ways (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988; Dias, et al, 1999; Freedman and Adam, 1996; Freedman, et al, 1994; Haas, 1994; Prior, 1994, 1998; Russell, 1991, 1995, 1997a, 1997b) has brought attention to the fact that the university is not monolithic, but made up of many activity systems (Cole and Engeström, 1993) or communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), each with very different ways of seeing and using the tools of writing and language. This research suggests that people know and understand the genres used to mediate activity in their own disciplinary systems, but logically know little about genres that mediate activity in other disciplines. At the same time, the discipline of Composition recently produced the first "official" set of FYC goals created at a disciplinary level, the WPA Outcomes Statement (OS), which a recent survey (Ericsson, 2003) suggested a large number of programs across the country are using. The OS primarily focuses on preparing students for the writing they will do within the academy. Despite the fact that much recent research demonstrates just how different writing is in different disciplines and just how differently writing is used across the university, FYC teachers primarily working in English departments are being asked to prepare students for the varied and complex ways the students will use writing over the next four years. Thus we have a situation in which our disciplinary research suggests that our first official disciplinary focus for FYC is difficult—if not impossible—to achieve.

While the OS clearly delegates much of the responsibility for teaching "specialized" academic discourse(s) to the disciplines themselves, many schools do not have WAC programs and FYC bears the brunt of the goal of teaching students to write in the academy. Even some schools with strong WAC programs officially state as a major FYC goal preparing students to write in the academy. FYC teachers, then, are faced with a very difficult task: preparing students for the varied genres used across the university and in its disciplines when the teachers themselves are usually involved in only one of those disciplines. FYC teachers faced with this goal for FYC are asked to be what Wenger (1998) calls "boundary brokers." Brokering is a connection made by a person with memberships in multiple activity systems; brokers "introduce elements of one practice into another" (p. 105). The immediately apparent problem with FYC teachers in English departments who are asked to be brokers is that they do not usually have the multiple memberships brokers need in order to translate, coordinate, and align between the perspectives (p. 109) (and genres) of the students, the English department, and the various disciplines with which students will become involved.<sup>[1]</sup>

Some current initiatives—freshman interest groups, clusters, and learning communities, among others—open one possible road to better brokering: collaborative, cross-disciplinary alliances. A major component of many of these initiatives is linking various required courses—including FYC—

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so that students in the learning communities take courses together and the teachers of the courses can collaborate in order to help students make links across disciplines. Ideally, FYC teachers are put into collaborative relationships with longtime members of the disciplinary systems in which their students would like to participate. While learning communities may not be available to FYC teachers nationwide, cross-disciplinary collaboration (official or unofficial) is often a possibility. Thus it is worth asking, especially at a time when many are calling for the abolition of FYC altogether or as a general requirement (Brannon, 1995; Crowley, 1998; Goggin, 1995; Petraglia, 1995c; Russell, 1995), whether cross-disciplinary FYC collaborations are one way of achieving current FYC goals. Are learning community FYC teachers better equipped to create classes that prepare students to write in the specialized activity systems of the academy? To answer this question, I relied on interviews with teachers and students, and samples of course materials collected from learning community linked FYC courses at one large Midwestern university. My analysis suggested that learning community teachers are faced with as many—if not more—challenges as traditional FYC teachers when asked to prepare their students for academic discourses. Often, learning community and traditional FYC teachers alike rejected outright the official goal because it did not align with their personal beliefs about what an education should do or because they felt first-year students were not capable of pursuing this goal. In many cases, the biggest stumbling block for all FYC teachers (whether traditional or learning community) in trying to teach academic discourses was their "misrecognition" of English studies genres as the genres of the university in general, demonstrating relatively latent definitions and conceptions of "writing." In sum, then, I found that learning community FYC teachers I interviewed did not know, or in many cases want to know, disciplinary conventions. Given this situation, they substituted "critical thinking" or "critical consciousness" or "preparation for citizenship in the US" or (unwittingly) "facility in the genres of English" for "writing for the disciplines." Given this situation, what became most interesting to me as a researcher were the ways that learning community and traditional FYC teachers alike grappled with what seemed an impossible request. Did they see themselves asked to do the impossible? If so, how did they respond? How did they work themselves out of what felt like a double bind? In this paper I use the lens of activity theory to present three systemic contradictions that kept this particular FYC program from moving toward the motive<sup>[2]</sup> of preparing students for academic discourse, and I discuss the responses to and roles of teachers in relation to these contradictions.

## Methods

Over the course of two years I collected data from 22 teachers and over 400 students in three types of FYC courses at a large, public, Midwestern university ("Midwest U"). One third of these students and teachers were involved in linked learning community FYC courses, ideally enrolling students in one or similar majors. One third were involved in "traditional" unlinked FYC courses enrolling students in a variety of majors. The other third were involved in a pilot program consisting of large lecture and small group work with potential test out at various points, also enrolling students in a variety of majors. I conducted teacher interviews, focus groups, and surveys, as well as student focus groups and surveys. I analyzed the data I collected using a variety of methods; the most useful analysis, and the one I will draw from in this paper, is cultural-historical activity analysis. In addition, I had access to administrative information such as course enrollment figures because I served as Associate Coordinator of the FYC portion of the learning community program for those two years.

Every teacher in my study—and nearly all teachers in the large composition program at Midwest U.—was a graduate student or part time instructor. Of the graduate students, most were M.A. students, since the Ph.D. students often taught advanced writing courses instead of FYC courses. While there was an M.A. program in composition at Midwest U., there were few students enrolled in

it. Thus, most of the M.A. students teaching FYC at Midwest were studying literature, creative writing, or linguistics. All learning community FYC teachers volunteered to be involved with the program and were able to choose the group of students they would work with out of the existing possibilities. The vast majority remained involved with the same learning community over the course of several semesters. Several of the part time instructors in my study (including Amanda and Sharon, who will figure prominently in my analysis here) had worked with the same learning community for three years or more.

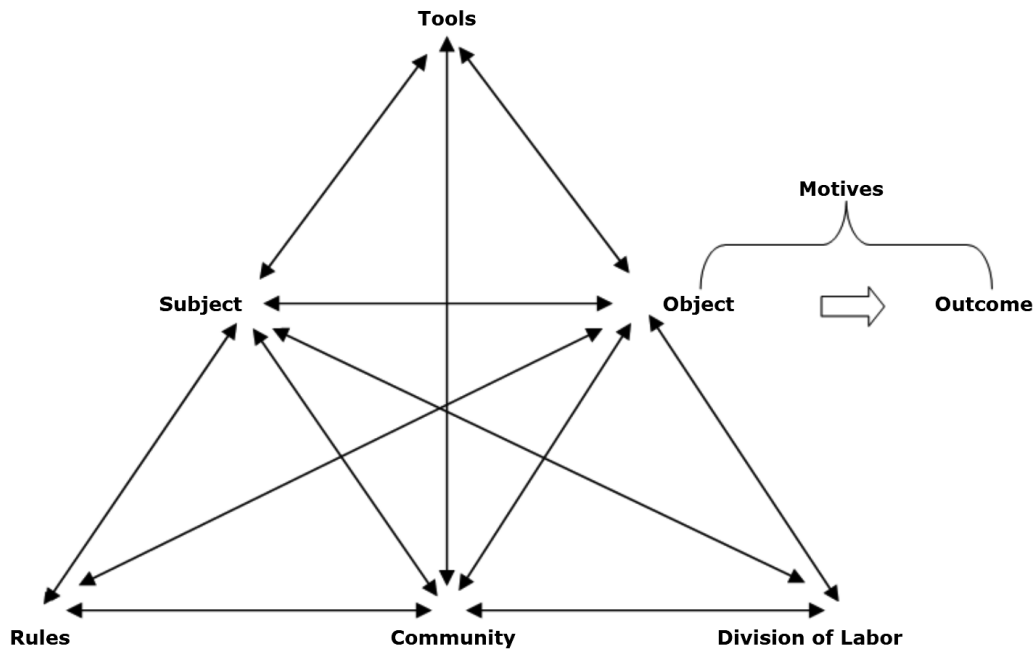
The learning community links were intended to be "tight" links, with FYC teachers and teachers of the other linked courses coordinating their syllabi and assignment sheets, and visiting one another's courses. Approximately one third demonstrated some version of a "tight" link. The others varied from "loose" links, consisting of several discussions per semester and exchanged syllabi, to no links at all. Ideally, the learning community FYC courses were intended to fill with students in one major or group of related majors, all of whom then took one or more other courses together. In reality, less than half managed to fill an FYC course in this way. The administration of the courses proved to be extremely complex; for budgetary reasons, a variety of students in unrelated majors were placed in the course if it did not fill by a set date.

### Cultural-Historical Activity Analysis

Cultural-historical activity theory (AT) provides a helpful lens for understanding how people interacted to carry out the activities of composition at Midwest U and used tools to achieve the varied motives of composition. While I might have used other frameworks for analysis (such as critical discourse analysis), activity theory is useful for examining issues related to goals of FYC because that aspect of activity is overtly included in the activity theory framework and directly linked to other aspects of the activity (such as division of labor and conventions for accomplishing the activity). Activity theory examines varied aspects of activity as shaped over time by people's social interactions with each other and the tools they use. According to Prior (1998), "Activity... is a holistic unit, fusing the often separated categories of culture, biology, and the physical world; of thinking, communication, individual development (learning), and social reproduction; of production, consumption, and exchange" (p. 31). The lens of activity theory helps to reveal the complex laminations of activity: "Activity may be conceptualized as the situated and distributed weaving (Cole, 1996) together of histories into functional systems that are open and perspectival, durable and fleeting" (Prior, 1998, p. 31).

The most basic activity theory unit of analysis is the **activity system**, defined as a group of people who share a common object and motive over time, as well as the wide range of tools they use together to act on that object and realize that motive (Kain & Wardle). Russell (1997) described an activity system as "any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction" (p. 510). Figure 1 shows the conventions activity theorists use to present the critical components of every activity system. Hovering or clicking your mouse over each hyperlink will provide more information about that "node" of the activity system.

Figure 1: Activity System



- **Community:** The community is the larger group of which the subject is a part and from which participants "take their cues." The community's interests shape the activity. Community members divide up the work necessary to accomplish their motives. The community members, according to Engeström, are those who form a community as a result of their involvement in the activities of the system.
- **Division of Labor:** The division of labor describes how tasks are distributed within the activity system
- **Motives:** The motives of the activity system are the guiding purposes of the activity, what might be more commonly understood as objectives or goals. Because motives refer to the driving force behind the activity, I will use the phrase "official motives" to describe the formal motives, as described in disciplinary and programmatic literature. Since formal, "official" motives are not, however, what drives some individuals within the activity system, I will use the phrase "unofficial motives" to refer to the motives of individuals when they do not reflect official motives. As motives vary, objects vary.
- **Object:** The object of the activity is often described as the object of attention or the problem space. People act on an object as they move toward their motive.
- **Outcome:** Outcomes are the actual results of the activity, whether intended or not.
- **Rules:** Rules are one way of attempting to manage or minimize conflicts within activity systems-including conflicts and problems related to tool use, division of labor, and motives. Rules are defined not only as formal and explicit dos and don'ts, but also as norms, conventions, and values. "Rules shape the interactions of subject and tools with the object" (Russell, 2002). Rules understandably change as other aspects of the system change-or as the rules are questioned or resisted-but the rules allow the system to be stabilized-for-now (Schryer) in the face of internal contradictions.
- **Subject:** The subjects of an activity system are the people who are directly participating in the activity being studied and whose activities are being focused on in the research; subjects provide a unit of analysis for studying the activity.

- **Tools:** Tools are physical objects and systems of symbols that people use to accomplish the activity. Commonly called "artifacts."

In dynamic, changing activity systems, **contradictions** (Engeström, 1999) and disturbances are the norm. Contradictions are seen in activity systems when various aspects of the activity system (various "nodes" on the activity triangle in Figure 1) are incompatible in some way. Researchers can pinpoint contradictions by examining the relationship of one node to other nodes. For example, the researcher might ask whether the subjects have the knowledge to use the available tools, or whether those tools are sufficient to achieve the motives. As activity systems interact to get work done, contradictions can also be seen between the various systems. Because change is constant and activity systems are always experiencing and working through contradictions, "...equilibrium is an exception and tensions, disturbances, and local innovations are the rule and the engine of change" (Cole & Engeström, 1993, p. 8). **Constraints** grow out of contradictions. People experiencing constraints find themselves in what Engeström (1987) called a psychological **double bind**: "In double bind situations, the individual, involved in an intense relationship, receives two messages or commands which deny each other - and the individual is unable to comment on the messages, i.e., he [sic] cannot make a metacommunicative statement" (online). For example, FYC teachers may be constrained from preparing students for academic writing as a result of the contradiction between the genre tools they use in their activity system and the genre tools people in other disciplines use in their activity systems. When they become aware of the contradiction and resultant constraint, the teachers experience a psychological double bind, perhaps asking, "How can I teach all those genres I am not familiar with?"

Although people must (and do) find ways to resolve their own psychological double binds, in doing so they can only create their own individual solutions. What activity theory calls **re-mediation** (resolving systemic contradictions) requires more than individual innovation. Individuals cannot re-mediate the contradictions in the activity system by themselves because contradictions are in social/material relations among groups of people and the tools they use. Thus, contradictions must be resolved by groups of people. Until such group re-mediation occurs, individuals must find individual ways to cope with their psychological double binds:

[The subject]...might rise above the constraints of the context and break it, or put it into a wider context where it becomes relative and changeable...To be inventive in a dilemma situation is to invent a new instrument for the resolution of the dilemma. This demands experimentation, borrowing or 'conquering' already existing artifacts. (Engeström, 1987, online).

Of course, one individual's inventive resolution may push the activity system toward systemic, group re-mediation.

An activity analysis of the FYC program at Midwest U. revealed a number of contradictions and resultant constraints on teachers as they worked within a system that asked them to pursue an official motive of preparing students for academic discourse. I found the contradictions produced constraints for all teachers, even those involved in learning communities. I will focus on three contradictions here: the contradiction between official program motive and teachers' own unofficial motives, the contradiction between official objects (disciplinary *genres*) and unofficial objects (disciplinary *topics*), and the contradiction that arose as a result of the use of different genres (tools) in English Studies and other disciplinary activity systems. In the following sections I describe these three contradictions, the constraints placed on teachers as a result, and the psychological double binds teachers worked to overcome.

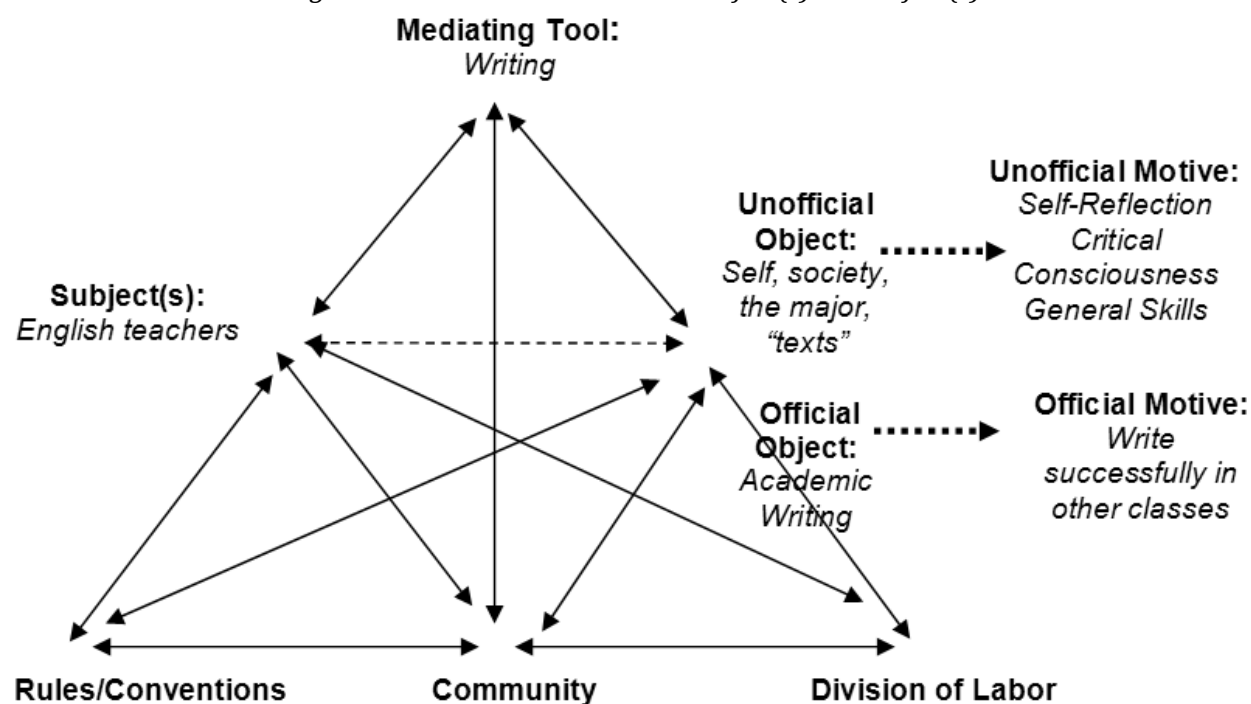
## Contradiction One: Between Official Program Motive and Teachers' Unofficial Motives

One contradiction that became immediately apparent during focus group discussions with teachers was the contradiction between subjects and object/official motive in the FYC activity system at Midwest U: many teachers rejected the official object and motive as they interpreted them and replaced them with their own motives and objects for three reasons: either the official motive was not in keeping with their beliefs about what education should do, or they felt students were not yet ready to read and write academic discourse, or they found the official motive impossible to achieve. Thus, one impediment to achieving the motive of preparing students for academic discourses was that many teachers—learning community and traditional alike—rejected the motive and, thus, rejected the role of boundary broker.

During the focus groups I conducted with the three teachers, I asked repeatedly about their motives for FYC and the activities and assignments intended to help students pursue those motives. In general, the teachers tended to enlarge the official motive of "helping students write in their other courses" to "helping students succeed in college and as citizens through critical thinking and self-reflection." This motive seems to mirror, in some ways, older official motives of FYC: to make students better citizens for a democracy and to help students use writing for self-expression (see Berlin, 1987). However, many teachers appeared to be pursuing what has been termed "critical consciousness."

Because of the variance in motives and the substitution of official motive with unofficial motives, there appeared to be widespread (though not unified) disagreement with the official *object*. The teachers had to construct their own understandings of academic writing. Many assumed that academic writing meant "professional" writing or "general skills" and "correctness." Given their own definitions of academic writing, the teachers then had to determine whether or not they wanted to teach academic writing as they understood it; not surprisingly, many rejected it because they did not want to provide what they saw as "professional training." Rather than acting on academic writing, many of the teachers acted on a variety of (not necessarily academic) texts in a general skills sort of way and/or in order to provoke students to think more critically about the world around them. Others appeared to be asking students to act on "self" or "society" to promote self-reflection and critical consciousness. Still others ask students to act on the object of "the major." The contradiction between official and unofficial motives and objects is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Contradiction Between Subject(s) and Object(s)



The fact that teachers grappled with what "academic writing" meant and then often rejected it as they understood it was illustrated in comments teachers made in focus groups. Amanda, a part time instructor who had been with the same learning community for at least five years, said, "I think people come to college far too often for career training and I'm opposed to that. I'm in favor of education. Broad based education. Learn how to think, learn how to find the information you need, develop those skills. The career training you can get on the job." When asked if she saw a difference between connecting writing to the students' chosen field and getting professional training in writing, she responded again that she wanted to give her students a more "broad based" view of writing:

I think so...Because professional training in writing would be just very specific for one particular field. I mean, it would be all the jargon, and the format, you know, you must have charts every three feet, or whatever it is. I think that's too specific for what I want. My writing is more broad based....

Amanda appeared to view specific forms of disciplinary writing as static and formulaic ("jargon" and "format") and rejected the notion that she should teach those forms to students. Amanda was not alone in her rejection of specific genres of academic discourse as appropriate for FYC. Sharon, another part time instructor and learning community teacher, suggested that she, too, rejected "academic writing" as the object and instead acted on what she called a "socialist type or a multi-culturalist type of approach." She emphasized that, while she certainly wanted students to "come out knowing basic punctuation skills[,]...realize they need to read in order to have something to say...[and] arrange paragraphs so they proceed in a logical order," she also wanted students

to think about themselves as they are in the world at large and I want them to think about the privileges of being born a white American. I want them to realize that truth is something that can be created to suit the need of the person who is doing the writing and

speaking. I want them to think about the emphasis in this society on consumerism, capitalism, which, as business students, I mean, they're just gung-ho, let's make more products, sell more things, so I can make my money. And I'm standing there saying, "Wait just a minute, what about our environment, look at what we're doing with everything we're throwing away, and look at our status markers, and what do they really mean..."

Sharon, even more than Amanda, rejected the values she perceived to be held by her linked discipline, and thus rejected their genres. Many of the learning community FYC teachers rejected the object of academic writing—and the motive of teaching students to write for other academic courses—in favor of a motive that appeared to be critical thinking/consciousness. The implied object was not the officially-sanctioned "academic writing" but rather "self" or "society." This rejection suggests some FYC teachers felt the values inherent to the genres of other disciplines might be suspect. Thus, they did not choose to help students learn to write those genres, but rather to critically examine the values of the discipline or issues suggested by the discipline.

Another reason teachers rejected academic writing as the motive for FYC was because they felt students were "not ready" to be exposed to academic writing in their first semester at the university. Teachers suggested that "highly technical" academic writing would "overwhelm [students] this semester" and that students "aren't ready yet" and "are terrified." The agricultural engineering FYC teacher (an advanced doctoral student in rhetoric) suggested that her students were not prepared for academic writing because of their own personal backgrounds: "...focusing on styles of writing at this point, at the 104 point, isn't relevant because they're farmers, their communication is oral still. They even have to figure out how to code switch from being small town farm kids to college kids, much less discipline specific writing."

Some teachers recognized the official motive and demonstrated a willingness to pursue it but claimed they lacked the tools to do so. Matt, an adjunct who had recently completed his M.A. in rhetoric and composition and was teaching a traditional FYC class, explained the double bind he experienced by saying that while he *wanted* the students to write "for their major," (i.e., practice academic writing of some sort) this really wasn't possible beyond assigning them to write a paper "exploring their major" because of the mix of students in his class.

"One of the biggest problems was people who didn't have a major. So it's kind of hard...Half my students are completely undecided...So that part as far as writing for your major, it's difficult...."

On the whole, then, many of the FYC teachers in my study appeared to reject academic writing as the object and in doing so replaced the official program motive of helping students write well within the academy with their own unofficial motive. Again and again, the notion of "critical thinking" (which appeared to mean *critical consciousness*, not informal logic-related critical thinking) emerged as an unofficial motive for many FYC teachers, along with objects that would work toward this motive. Thus, one impediment to preparing students for academic discourses within FYC—whether linked learning community or traditional—is the FYC teachers' own beliefs about what is appropriate, what is ethical, and what students are prepared to tackle. Even if we find ways to make it possible for English teachers to prepare students for the genres of very different activity systems, they may not be willing to do so. Bishop's (1990) study of teacher training demonstrated the importance of personal beliefs and goals in creating classroom motives. Even when teachers read research supporting the process-related motives they were being asked to appropriate, they did not all initially embrace these new motives. The teachers in Bishop's study eventually came to support the motives



their program supported, but some did not do so for long periods of time after the training was over. In the case of the FYC program I studied (and many others, I suspect), part time instructors received no training at all; most of the graduate students who did receive training (Ph.D. students were generally not required to take a training course) were M.A. students who would teach no longer than two years—not long enough for some of the teachers in Bishop's study to accept official motives. The impediment of personal beliefs to working toward the motive of preparing students for academic writing is, then, an important one to consider.

Although most teachers rejected the object of academic writing for English 104, they were generally aware that the FYC course was intended to prepare students for other courses. To resolve this discrepancy, they often attempted to achieve their unofficial motives while simultaneously taking into account the officially sanctioned object and motive.

## Contradiction Two: Replacing Official Objects (Disciplinary Genres) with Unofficial Objects (Disciplinary Topics)

Teachers of learning community courses were aware that they were expected to act on academic/professional writing as the object of the course and were theoretically in a somewhat better position than teachers of unlinked courses to respond to this motive because their courses were intended to be limited to students in similar majors. However, as I have pointed out, many of the learning community teachers were opposed to acting on academic writing and wanted to focus more on general critical thinking/consciousness.

The resolution for many of the learning community teachers to the contradiction between being *expected* to act on academic writing and *wanting* to teach critical consciousness was to have students critique and consider disciplinary and professional *issues* rather than examine and write the sorts of texts they would later be asked to read and write. Teachers asked students to read *about* cultural, social, political issues related to biology, for example, and then write about their understanding of those issues. Don, the animal science FYC teacher, told me in an interview that he brought in "more about science, animal science...the goals toward the animal science were more narrowly focused on science and animal science to make sure they are writing *about* that" (emphasis mine). Students in classes like Don's were not examining or practicing the types of *writing* (genres) that would be required of them in their major; rather, they were discussing and writing about important *issues* in their major--and they wrote about these issues in humanities genres.<sup>[3]</sup> Many of the learning community teachers found and used literary texts that dealt with issues in other disciplines. They thus were able to talk about literary genres whose conventions they knew, while focusing on issues of importance in other disciplines. Several of the learning community FYC teachers taught in their classes novels that related in direct ways to the subject matter being taught in the linked disciplinary course. For example, the FYC teachers linked with the biology learning community all taught the novel *Ishmael*, and had their students spend a good portion of the semester writing and talking about this novel and comparing the points made in the novel with what the students were learning in their biology course. The writing the students did about *Ishmael* was humanities writing—journals, reflections, essays—writing not generally seen in biology.

This strategy enabled FYC teachers to connect their course to the biology course and collaborate with their colleague in biology, while at the same time drawing on the tools they already had in order to help students understand and write about a complex novel. Further, though, this assignment helped the teachers achieve their unofficial motives of teaching students critical thinking/consciousness. India, one of the biology learning community FYC teachers and a second year doctoral student in

rhetoric, was quite explicit about bringing together her desire to help the students think critically with the officially sanctioned object of academic writing:

My goal, of course, is to teach writing, but also good critical thinking and consciousness, and I always try and...hopefully teach them something about civic life and society that they haven't learned elsewhere and with the biology learning team it's really easy to talk about the environment and the kind of rhetoric that is being espoused about the environment.

India's remarks suggest that the motives for her FYC course are a mixture of historical motives (such as prepare students for civic life) as well as current official program motives (prepare students to write in other courses) as well as her unofficial motive (teach students critical thinking).

Amanda, the agricultural business FYC teacher, used a strategy similar to India's. Because her course was linked with economics, Amanda and the economics teacher decided it would be useful for the students to read *Animal Farm* in their FYC class. The students were encouraged to see the book as an economic text, and to draw on what they were learning in the economics class to help them understand and think critically about *Animal Farm*—and vice versa. Amanda, who told me repeatedly that she wanted to give her students a broad-based education, drew on a novel related to their major to help students think about important issues in their major. Thus, her motives appeared to be a mixture of official program motive (prepare students for writing in other courses) and unofficial motive (teach students critical thinking).

Student responses suggested students saw a difference between being prepared to write in their majors and learning about issues in their majors. Learning community FYC students recognized that they were reading and being asked to consider issues related to their major but repeatedly commented that they did not know what they would be writing in their other courses or in their careers. For example, agricultural engineering students read *Broken Heartland*, a novel about farming and small town life, and watched PBS documentaries about farming life in order to reflect critically on their experiences as small town farming students entering the university. Yet in focus groups these students said they rarely discussed the particular types of writing they would do in their major courses. Students knew that they would be doing more writing beyond their learning community English classes; while they only had a vague sense of what these written assignments would entail, many seemed certain that they would write genres other than the essays they were writing in FYC: "I don't think I'll be writing the kind of essays we wrote in English." One student suggested, "I expect to do a lot more report writing in general, but we didn't talk about it all that much in English." Thus, the reading that students did from novels related to their major may have achieved the teachers' unofficial motive of teaching critical consciousness, but students did not believe they were being prepared for the sorts of writing they would do in their majors.

Teachers' attempts to attend to the official motive of the course (preparing students to write in their other academic courses) while also working toward their unofficial motives by asking students to read and discuss novels that dealt with important issues in their majors, then, beg an important question: does having students write about disciplinary topics accomplish the motive of preparing students to write in their disciplinary classes? To put this question in activity terms, are disciplinary topics and disciplinary texts the same object? Is acting on one tantamount to acting on the other? Does acting on either of these function for the same motive, the motive of helping students write in their other classes? I argue that the answer to all of these questions is no. Shifting the object in this subtle way actually functions to change the motive from helping prepare students to write in other

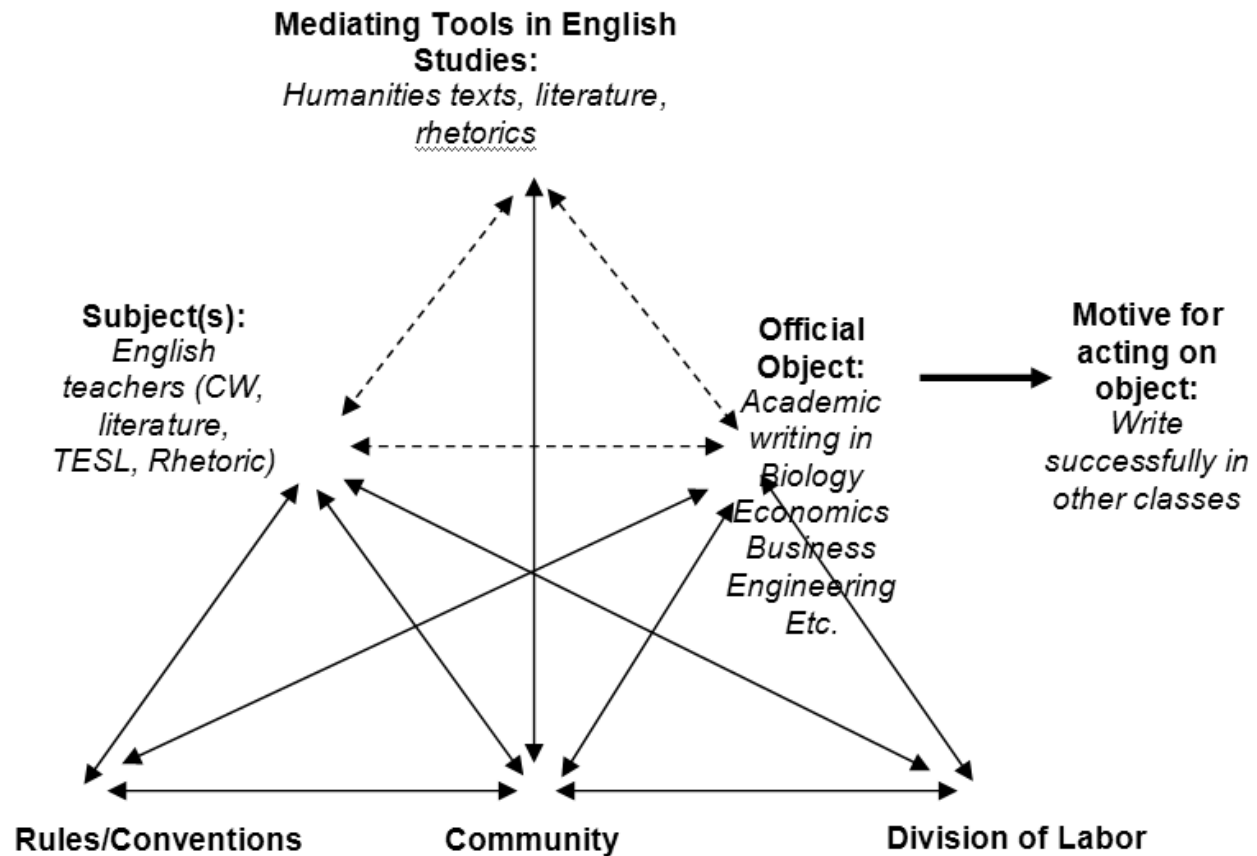
courses to helping students think about important issues in their major and/or helping students choose and understand a major.

The motive of helping students write for other courses—of broadening access to academic discourse(s)—is then displaced by the motive of helping students think critically about important disciplinary issues. Historical motives and values such as the importance of helping students be active and critical citizens are foregrounded, while, as students' comments suggested, writing *qua* writing (and the students as writers of disciplinary texts) are moved into the background. The attempt to balance unofficial motive with official program motive resulted in the dominance of unofficial motives. Students and teachers alike appeared to enjoy pursuing the unofficial motive—reading interesting major-related texts, thinking about and discussing them, and writing about them in the form of English essays. Yet the official program motive of preparing students to write (preparing them for the writing they will do in other academic courses) was pushed to the side.

### Contradiction Three: English Studies Genres Seen as "Genres-in-General" to Those in English Activity System

Perhaps the most intriguing twist I observed as teachers grappled with the official motive of academic writing was that they rejected academic discourses as an official motive, while still often teaching toward them. Teachers often talked about their desire to avoid academic writing and "professional training" yet also assigned students to write and read the academic genres of English Studies and, at times, assigned students to read the academic writing of other disciplines. Teachers often appeared to "mis-recognize"<sup>[4]</sup> (to use Bourdieu's, 1999, term) the genres of English Studies as "genres-in-general." Further, they did not appear to "recognize" that they were teaching some forms of academic writing (in English Studies genres) or that, at times, they *were* teaching (about) academic genres of other disciplinary systems. I found that teachers were constrained from achieving the official motive of FYC by their lack of involvement in other disciplinary academic writing systems and, thus, by their lack of experience with the types of academic writing (genre tools) that mediate the work of those other disciplinary activity systems. The contradiction between subject(s), object(s), and tools is illustrated in Figure 3. Teachers in English Studies use the texts of the humanities to mediate their work; however, they are asked by the official FYC motives to teach students (about) texts that mediate work in disciplinary systems as diverse as biology, economics, business, and engineering. In other words, they are asked to broker between their own activity system and another system in which they are not involved.

Figure 3: Contradiction between Subject, Tools, and Object



FYC teachers often did not appear to "recognize" the writing assignments they gave in FYC as requiring the genres of English Studies. For example, two learning community teachers, Amanda and Sharon, often assigned genres of academic writing that were typical of the English Studies (and, even more specifically, the FYC) activity system (such as personal essays about what it means to be educated), but which they did not recognize or describe as English Studies genres. These teachers said they were not really concerned with what they termed "writing style" (which I interpreted to mean the genre conventions of various kinds of academic writing) but were more concerned with the *issues* they asked the students to write about. Yet, despite their assertions, these teachers repeatedly asked students to write in the "writing style" appropriate to the English Studies activity system. In other words, these teachers were "mis-recognizing" their English Studies genres as "genres-in-general" rather than as a specific forms of writing used within one disciplinary activity system. Many of the FYC teachers "mis-recognized" their English Studies genres as "writing-in-general": none of the FYC teachers described the writing they were assigning as *academic* writing (despite the fact that it was writing assigned in the academy). Rather, they appeared to view what they were assigning as simply "writing," a neutral (what Bourdieu would call invisible) vehicle.

Bourdieu has argued that "mis-recognition" is the source of symbolic power, "invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it" (p. 164). If we follow Bourdieu, we might surmise that FYC teachers (many of whom are the least paid, least powerful people in the English Studies system, teaching a course that is often seen as being "in service" to other disciplines) were able to exercise

some symbolic power by assigning the genres of English Studies and talking about them as genres- (or writing-) in-general. "Mis-recognizing" the English Studies genres they assigned as forms of writing-in-general served a practical function: it allowed teachers to focus on the issues in which they were interested. But further, it also allowed people who were not in positions of power (within their disciplinary activity system *or* within the university activity system) to exercise the symbolic power of English Studies genres as *the* genres that matter.

I do not suggest that "mis-recognition" of English Studies genres as writing-in-general or the exercise of symbolic power were conscious choices—or even *choices* at all. Rather, from an activity perspective, mis-recognition and the exercise of symbolic power are inherent parts of activity systems. Over time, tool use becomes routinized. As people in an activity system use tools (in this case, certain genres) repeatedly, and their use becomes routinized, those tools become transparent. As long as the tools function to mediate work in the activity system, there is no need for subjects to consciously consider those tools. In the case of FYC teachers who assigned English Studies genres and talked about them as though they were genres-in-general, I would argue that those genres had become routinized for those teachers and, thus, transparent to them—and this is a common result of long-term tool use in any activity system. Because FYC teachers (the subjects using genre tools in this analysis) were *teachers*, they happened to be in a position where they could transfer their routinized understanding of English genres to their teaching—and thus require their students (many of whom would not use English genres routinely, if ever, in the future) to use English genres as genres-in-general. In doing so, teachers functionally exercised symbolic power.

Mis-recognizing English Studies genres as genres-in-general enabled teachers to avoid experiencing a double bind as a result of the contradiction between subjects, tools, and objects. If teachers had recognized the English Studies genres they were assigning as only one of many possible genres mediating work within the academy, they would have become aware of their lack of involvement with those other genres. Recognizing this fact, and the further fact that they could not easily *become* involved in other disciplinary systems and learn to use the genres that mediate work in them, would have caused FYC teachers to experience a psychological double bind.

On the whole, however, teachers did not appear to consciously consider their lack of involvement with the genres mediating work in other disciplines, and thus, their lack of information about those genres. Rather, many teachers seemed to define the academic writing of other disciplines by the most complex standards of academic writing in the English activity system, and this led them to not recognize a number of kinds of texts as illustrative of academic writing. Teachers, for example, did not recognize texts such as unpublished engineering reports as examples of academic writing and instead defined academic writing as published academic journal articles. Even learning community teachers in tight links with teachers in other disciplines seemed not to recognize many texts that constitute academic writing (texts that mediate academic work) in other fields. For example, when explaining why she avoided assignments dealing with academic/disciplinary writing/reading, Loraine, the FYC teacher in the agricultural engineering learning community, said:

I guess I kind of backed away from that [having students look at academic writing] in 104.... I don't want to overwhelm them this semester and I think that if I brought them a highly technical article of that sort, I don't think they are really ready for it at this point. I think it would frustrate them.... [W]e took a look at the engineering report that they're going have to do for College of Engineering, or we took a look at some publications that were done out of the Extension office, telling people how to do things and a little bit more simple.

This response suggests that Loraine was defining "academic writing" in terms of the kinds of writing that graduate students and professors in English studies would find academic. Because she defined academic/disciplinary writing as "a highly technical article" (when I had explicitly said she should define it in whatever way she saw fit), Loraine felt that she was not having students examine academic writing when they looked at "the engineering reports they're going to have to do for the College of Engineering." However, engineers write and read engineering reports commonly; engineering students are frequently asked to produce engineering reports in their engineering courses. In other words, engineering reports (both published and unpublished) *are* an important academic genre (an important form of academic writing) for engineering students. Asking students to examine engineering reports was one potentially useful way of helping prepare engineering students for writing in their other courses. However, in this case, Loraine did not recognize what she was doing as preparing students for *academic writing*. While she clearly thought reports were important (because she had students look at them), she did not appear to recognize them as an important *academic* genre for engineers and their students. Thus, Loraine was brokering, but unknowingly or accidentally because she was not involved in the other activity system of engineering.

Other teachers also suggested that they were not asking students to read or write academic genres despite the fact that their activities and assignments suggested otherwise. Sharon and Amanda asked their students to read non-English academic and professional genres regularly: Sharon, the business FYC teacher, asked her students to read and analyze mission statements and annual reports, while Amanda, the agricultural business FYC teacher, asked her students to subscribe to and read the weekly professional magazine *The Economist*. However, these teachers (like Loraine) did not appear to recognize the texts they assigned as academic/professional writing. Instead, all three of these learning community teachers seemed to recognize only highly technical academic journal articles as academic writing.

The implication, then, is that while some teachers (learning community teachers, in particular) gave assignments that appeared to pursue the official motive of helping prepare students to write in other academic courses, they did not always perceive this to be the case and instead talked about their motive as teaching students to think critically about important issues encountered in their non-academic reading. I suggest then, that FYC teachers were *not* always constrained from teaching academic writing (or at least from helping students read and analyze academic writing, which may or may not be a different matter) but were, instead, constrained from "recognizing" their actions as such because of their lack of involvement with academic writing in other disciplinary systems. Thus, though the contradiction between subject, object, and tool existed within FYC, many teachers did not feel constrained by it, nor did they experience a double bind as a result of it, because they substituted their own motives, motives the system did not constrain them from achieving. Thus, mis-recognition and all that goes along with it is a useful resolution of sorts for many FYC teachers asked to do what appears to be impossible given the nature of the FYC activity system. Mis-recognizing English Studies genres as invisible, neutral vehicles for examining issues helped teachers avoid experiencing the contradiction between the genres that mediate work in English Studies and the genres that mediate work in other disciplines. Mis-recognizing academic texts that mediate work in other disciplines helped FYC teachers avoid experiencing a double bind.

## Discussion

Can cross-disciplinary links help FYC teachers prepare students for specialized academic discourse? In the cases I studied the answer was no. Despite teachers' best efforts, there were contradictions that kept even learning community courses from appearing to prepare students for the varied

discourses of the academy. The first problem with the motive of preparing students for academic writing is that even if FYC teachers recognize English genres for what they are—some of many, perhaps never to be used again by some students—they may be unwilling to teach about the genres of other disciplines, seeing them, at best, as representing too narrow a view of what education should give students and, at worst, as unethical or suspect. The learning community teachers in my study were no less likely to take these views of the genres of other disciplines than the teachers of traditional FYC courses.

Even when they were willing to teach toward non-English genres, the teachers in my study did not have a clear picture of what academic writing might be, so they saw their own genres as the norm. From an activity perspective, since people do not generally use—or at least, write—the genres routinely used by those in other activity systems, this view on the part of the FYC teachers is to be expected. It is difficult for participants in one activity system to see their own genres for what they are: a few of the many tools used by people to get work done. The people currently charged with teaching FYC (in this study, graduate students and adjuncts) cannot be expected to participate in and understand the genres of all disciplinary activity systems in which their students will participate. Thus, asking them to prepare students for writing in those genres seems to place those teachers in a double bind. Their lack of familiarity with the genres of other disciplines was evidenced by the fact that teachers in my study—learning community and traditional alike—did not recognize non-English academic genres as examples of academic discourse.

The results of my analysis suggest that before learning community FYC teachers can fully utilize the resources available to them in cross-disciplinary links, they must first come to a meta-awareness of the nature of genres, an awareness of the varied genres of the university, and an acceptance of the legitimacy of non-English genres as academic discourse. These things are difficult to foster in the diverse and varied group of part-time instructors, graduate students, and tenure-track PhDs currently teaching the course around the country. People cannot be forced to meta-awareness, nor can they be forced to accept a motive they believe to be suspect.

### Where Do We Go From Here?

If learning community courses come no closer to achieving the motive of preparing students for academic discourses than other FYC courses, where can FYC go from here? Among other solutions, rethinking the official motive or reconfiguring the division of labor stand out as two possible ways to re-mediate FYC in order to eliminate current contradictions.

The teachers in my study found a way to resolve their own psychological double binds that could, if implemented at a disciplinary level, resolve many of the current contradictions; that is, the teachers replaced the current official motive with the motive of having students write and think critically about the issues of various disciplines, but in English Studies genres. Given this motive, students could reflect on issues they were studying in other classes, reflect on why they were in the university and where they wanted to go, and begin to imagine themselves as members of the academic community. FYC teachers had the necessary knowledge and skills to help students use writing to do these things and were not constrained from pursuing this motive. In fact, the FYC activity system actually affords an excellent environment in which to teach students self-reflection and critical consciousness. The teachers in my study were only constrained from working toward their unofficial motive within the FYC course by the fact that it was *not* the official program motive they were expected to achieve. Because they were aware of this fact, teachers often tried to work toward a combination of both official and unofficial motives, and this *did* produce contradictions resulting in constraints for teachers and students, since the unofficial motive is not simply different from but



actually in opposition to official program motives: the official program motive focuses on *writing for others*, to do work in the academy, while the unofficial motive focuses on *writing for self*, to increase self-awareness and one's own critical consciousness. Thus, the replacement of current official motive with a different motive would, apparently, need to be complete.<sup>[5]</sup> This solution, while resolving the contradiction I outlined here, brings up an important question to which I have alluded here but not explored: does such a course teach students "to write" in some way, which is ostensibly the larger goal of an FYC course? And if not, is that problematic or have our notions of what an FYC course should do subtly shifted over the past decade or so?

Another possible motive, one that has been discussed for at least ten years and is currently being explored on a limited basis (see Downs, 2004), is to make the motive of the FYC course teaching *about* writing, helping students understand the nature of writing by drawing on the research from the past thirty years. A course with this motive would ask students to explore a research question of their own about writing, and to reflect on how writing research applies to and helps them. It could focus on the same concepts as many FYC courses currently do (researching, reading, and writing arguments in the university), but rather than purporting to prepare students for writing in the university, it would teach students *about* writing: how does it work? How do people use it? What are problems related to writing and how can they be solved? Rather than purporting to teach students "academic writing" and claiming to prepare them for writing in the academy, the course would teach students some of what we as a field have learned about writing—in particular, those things that might be of interest and use to incoming college students. This solution provides the course with an attainable goal while continuing to help students understand how writing works in the academy so that they can succeed there.

Another potential solution to this systemic problem is to leave the motive as is but change staffing so that FYC teachers are people involved in disciplinary activity systems where students plan to be involved—and this solution has been implemented at some schools (for example, at the [University of California, Santa Barbara](#) and [Cornell](#)). This solution would almost certainly overcome the contradictions I have outlined here. These teachers come from and work in the disciplines where students will need to write. The instructors, then, may be more willing to accept the motive of preparing students for academic discourses than the English instructors in my study, and are familiar with the genres that mediate their own, non-English, disciplinary systems.

Solutions, then, are possible. Each of these certainly presents its own complication; given the difficulty of pursuing the current motive of FYC, however, further discussion and consideration of alternatives such as these appears to be warranted.

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## Notes

[1] There are many other ways Wenger's concept of brokering can be applied to FYC instructors. Of particular interest, given the lack of prestige felt by many in Composition, is Wenger's sense that brokers are constantly uprooted, belonging in several places and to none, making it difficult for themselves and others to recognize or assess the value of the brokers' work.

[2] Commonly, motivations for or desired end results of activities are termed "objectives," "goals," and/or "outcomes." Within Composition, "outcomes" is most commonly used within assessment circles, where "objectives" is also used. "Goals" is often used at the program level, within syllabi, or to describe personal motivations. Activity theory complicates terms related to desired outcomes and motivations; activity theory does not use the terms "objectives" or "goals," and uses "outcomes" differently than the term is commonly understood. In activity theory, the term "motives" is used to describe what we might understand as "objectives"—motivations for or desired end results of activities. "Object" is used to refer to the problem space upon which subjects act while undertaking their activities. The "outcome" refers to the actual result of the activity, whether intended or not. In this paper I will use the activity term "*motive*" to refer to objectives and goals. However, because motives refer to the driving force behind the activity, I will use the phrase "official motives" to describe the formal objectives, as described in disciplinary and programmatic literature. Since formal, "official" motives are not, however, what drives some individuals within the activity system, I will use the phrase "unofficial motives" to refer to the objectives of individuals, the motivations of individuals, when they do not reflect official motives.

[3] The types of writing asked for in the assignments I analyzed can be grouped into the following genres:

Autobiography/personal narrative	Interview
Profile of a person	Travel narrative
Argument/position paper	Evaluation/review
Observation	Reflection
Rhetorical analysis	

While the general descriptions of these assignment genres resemble some genres found outside of humanities activity systems, their specific characteristics (their rhetorical situations) were quite different. For more on this problem, see Wardle 2003.

[4] In this section I use the term "recognize" in a specific way, following from but expanding on Bourdieu, in order to simultaneously suggest two possible definitions: "to perceive as something previously known" and/or "to acknowledge." Thus, when I say that teachers "mis-recognize," I am not claiming to know their internal psychological functions. Rather, I am suggesting it appeared they either did not *perceive* certain texts to be academic writing as they understood academic writing within their disciplinary activity system *or* that they *did* perceive a particular kind of text as a form of academic writing but did not *acknowledge* it as such. I do not—and cannot—know which of these was the case for the teachers in my study. My claim is that regardless of the type of "recognition" or "mis-recognition," the result was that mis-recognition allowed them to avoid experiencing a double bind as a result of the contradiction between subject, tool, and object in the FYC activity system.

[5] For more on the problem of writing for self vs writing for others see Wardle, 2003.

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