

8

On-Going Concerns: The Place of Students in Disciplinary Discourses

What students attend to, work on, and learn in all educational settings very much depends on student attitudes, engagement, socialization, and sense of agency within the learning situations. This is particularly crucial in considering students' involvement within disciplinary material that may be at some distance from their everyday sense of the world and their lives. WAC particularly highlights these issues of student stance as writing puts students on the spot to communicate within situations where disciplinary knowledge is by definition a central resource and component. Thus, it is not surprising that questions of student position, stance, voice, and agency with academic and disciplinary discourses has generated controversy and discussion.

Student Orientation toward Disciplinary Assignments

Case studies have illuminated how students perceive and prepare for school-related tasks and activities, by allowing researchers to examine students' real-life struggles and successes. Prior (1998) presents one such account in *Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy*, in which he traces the instructor's and students' responses to the major assignments and activities involved in a graduate seminar. He found that each of the students and the instructor viewed the tasks of the assignments differently, resulting in a range of different work pursued and different products handed in.

Studies of classroom writing indicate the teacher's pedagogical style, ideology, and objectives can strongly influence the students' writing (Casanave, 1995; Herrington, 1985, 1988; Prior, 1998). Since the instructor usually designs the course, selects course readings, sets assignments, and organizes class activities, this impact is not surprising. In Prior's example of the language research course, the instructor identified three major course and assignment objectives relating to curricular (occurring within a specific institutional context), professional (as part of a disciplinary discourse community), and developmental areas (as part of an intellectual process into which students are being assimilated). In order to contextualize the assignment of a literature review, the instructor told how in a previous class he had had to renegotiate the assignment based on one student's desire to include every study ever published on the topic rather than compile a more tailored, selective list. The instructor's request to submit "just a draft" of their research proposal took on a variety of meanings; however, most interpreted it to mean "rough draft" or an "easy assignment." Although their instructor's directives certainly influenced several of their decisions in the course, many students commented that personal interests, life experiences, and political or ethical issues were inextricably linked to the topics chosen for their research proposals. Some were more practical with their research topics allowing availability of research materials to direct their selections. "In short," Prior remarks, "students' research proposals and critiques were embedded in and infused with motives, contexts, and resources that extended well beyond the seminar" (Prior, 1998, p. 49).

Flower, et al. (1990) observed that variation among student texts was often not simply a reflection of their quality of work but rather of their understanding of the task at hand. Equally paramount was their finding that both teachers and students assumed task representations were the same when in fact each may have had different expectations for assignment objectives. Spivey (1988) also found that students' interpretations of assignments differed significantly from instructor's intentions, with perceptions strongly shaped by what they were actually rewarded for. Kirsch (1988) documents the substantial amount of work and dialogue that went into creating alignment between the instructor's intentions and the student's understanding of the task; interestingly through this dialog the student came to understand that the instructor was not being as directive in expectations as he had

imagined, and that he as writer needed to take ownership of the assignment more confidently.

In *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication*, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) note the reluctance of American language arts and composition teachers to spend class time teaching the genre conventions of the disciplines. In the U.K. and Australia, however, the explicit instruction of genres in the classroom has been the source of intense disagreement, culminating with *The Place of Genre in Learning: A Current Debate* (Reid, 1987), a collection representing various positions on the subject. One contributor, Gunther Kress, remarked that the real issue regarding allowing students creativity with the conventions of genre was whether children's experimentation would actually be deemed successful or whether it would, perhaps as Flower et al. observed, be perceived as a submission of sub-par work (Kress, 1987). In *Language, Schooling, and Society* (1985), Christie argued "that a major cause of many primary and elementary school children's inability to learn written genres other than narrative is that teachers do not make explicit their tacit and seemingly unreflexive knowledge of classroom genres. Such knowledge constitutes the *hidden curriculum* of the language arts classroom" (p. 21). The existence of these overseas debates confirms the significance of the issue and raises the question whether students are being adequately prepared for the kinds of work expected of them in the disciplines.

Domination, Participation, and Agency

While WAC as both a theory and a practice has espoused the ideals of student empowerment through language and student entry into disciplinary discourses that were once mysterious if not closed to them, it is not without its critics. Within the broader field of composition, the battles rage over whether writing instruction as commonly carried out in the university is equipping students with linguistic tools or coercing them into accepting the dominant discourse. In WAC, difference is usually considered at the disciplinary level, with each discipline's linguistic and rhetorical practices respected and students encouraged to develop adaptability in writing in response to these disciplinary differences.

The field of composition has been forced, however, through rigorous public discussion and debate, to come to terms with issues of

race, class, and gender as they relate to the writing process and to the discourse communities which house writing. WAC will continue to be challenged along these lines as well. Delpit (1993), in "The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse," notes the dilemma instructors feel when teaching non-mainstream students to conform to mainstream standards. She wonders, "Does it not smack of racism or classism to demand that these students put aside the language of their homes and communities and adopt a discourse that is not only alien, but that has been instrumental in furthering their oppression?" (Delpit, 1993, p. 207). Delpit ultimately argues that dominant discourses such as academic discourse need not be oppressive to students of color, but the extent to which she respectfully addresses these concerns is evidence of the weight of these concerns. Villanueva (2001) also argues that disciplinary discourses are assimilationist, and that WAC instructors should become aware of the voices students bring with them from their cultures and the ways these voices are expressed within early drafts of their academic papers. Such an awareness will enable these voices to be translated into the academic world rather than suppressed and excluded. McCrary (2001) similarly comments that developmental writers—typically students from less privileged backgrounds—are less able to tap relevant reservoirs of knowledge when they are assigned academic texts. Further, he finds academic writing is valorized without justification. To counter this situation which further marginalizes non-mainstream students, he advocates use of texts reflecting womanist theology as a way to provide students with "an accessible discourse and hermeneutic that challenges and critiques oppressive rhetoric both inside and outside the academy" (McCrary, 2001, p. 549).

Halasek (1999) questions whether academic discourse offers students the rhetorical position they need to speak with authority to a reader/teacher. Halasek is interested in changing the academy to fit the students' language uses, not changing their language use to fit the academy. Halasek does not, however, call for an abolition of academic discourse from writing instruction; rather she wants to counter pedagogical approaches that emphasize conventions and form over that which is generative and critical.

LeCourt (1996) also seeks appropriate writing stances for students who do not find their voice within disciplinary discourses. The danger, to LeCourt and others who favor a critical pedagogy, is that the students' voices will be silenced as they are forced to submit to the

prevailing discourse conventions and to reproduce the “dominant ideologies” which the discourse supports. This silencing is particularly troubling, as LeCourt details, when it involves “cultural, socio-economic, and gender differences as well as alternative literacies and other ways of knowing” (p. 396). LeCourt suggests a two-pronged approach to the problem of addressing these issues in a WAC program. First, “disciplinary writing can—and perhaps should—be examined by both disciplinary practitioners as well as students in order to reveal exclusions and enclosures of discourse to see how and why they developed and to question their necessity in any particular case” (LeCourt, 1996, p. 396). This sort of critical thinking about disciplinary discourse can, according to LeCourt, allow students to “(1) recognize the continual conflicts currently being played out within the discourse, (2) examine the influence of wider social discourses on their construction, and (3) interrogate how a discourse’s constitution is both productive and silencing” (LeCourt, 1996, p. 397). Second, LeCourt suggests a renewed emphasis on expressivist writing, especially in writing to learn, as “a way for the personal and disciplinary to interact in a dialectical fashion rather than one in which one voice must be silenced for the other to speak” (LeCourt, 1996, p. 400). For an earlier, similar critique, see Mahala (1991).

Elbow (1998) argues the way to develop students’ intellectual stance necessary for producing academic discourse is through doing non-academic writing. This frees students to develop their thoughts without the burden of following conventional surface features of academic writing. He believes that the deep structure of academic discourse is no different from the deep structure of good nonacademic discourse. Only the surface features or mannerisms of academic discourse differ, and students can best learn the intellectual stance without having to worry about surface mannerisms. In fact, he believes that students can be seduced by the surface dimensions, adherence to which may hide the failure of students to “engage fully in the intellectual task” (Elbow, 1998, p. 162).

Zamel (1998) also believes that direct instruction in academic writing too often is “reduced to identifying the language, conventions, and generic forms that supposedly represent the various disciplines” (Zamel, 1998, p. 187) rather than the serious underlying intellectual work. Moreover, the valorization of objectifying conventions of other disciplines may come at the expense of the humanistic traditions of

personal engagement and accepts a hierarchical subordination to the standards and interests of other disciplines.

Bazerman (1992, 2002) argues that the social power of various disciplinary languages is the very reason that students should become conversant with these languages. Students gain from the ability to carry out their own perceptions and interests within those powerful worlds held together by specialized languages or learn to contend effectively against their effects. Even more, learning to participate in disciplinary discourses goes beyond learning conventional forms to learning to use the disciplinary tools effectively to think, investigate, and formulate arguments. Although disciplinary languages may follow conventions, those conventions arose out of histories of contention and argument, and often carry serious intellectual weight. The particular modes of investigation and argument are the products of serious attempts to understand and find meaning in the world, and then to act for human purposes in relation to the world. Attempting to remove ourselves from particular forms of entanglement in the world (i.e., creating various forms of “objectivity”) has been found to be useful in some of those inquiries just as, in other kinds of inquiry, finding various ways to explore, expand, and reformulate our subjectivities has been useful. Humanistic inquiries stand side by side with social scientific, scientific, and other professional inquiries, but we should not be in a position of prejudging for our students which will be most useful and valuable for them.

While challenging students’ previous perceptions, experiences, and commitments, disciplinary modes of thought and action provide opportunities for expansion of identities and strengthening new voices that are effective in powerful communities. To suggest that students not pursue and engage new worlds because of previous commitments suggests that some groups of people should not have access to or influence to shape influential knowledge communities that will impact their lives. Professions and disciplines exert great force in contemporary society, and that force has dangerous and oppressive potentials. These disciplines and professions, nonetheless, are the construction of people’s commitments to do good work in the world, expand knowledge, and carry out significant tasks to the best of our human abilities. Intelligent choice making, participation, and attempts to transform contemporary practice need critical acumen, but careful criticism and tools to redirect disciplines only come through detailed engagement

with them. Only by engaging with, learning to use, and effectively exercising those powers can we make them part of a world we want to live in. Only by making these worlds accessible to our students can we provide them means to live within them and exercise the powerful forms of inquiry that shape our contemporary forms of life.