

## REFLECTIONS 4

# LOOKING AT ACADEMIC LITERACIES FROM A COMPOSITION FRAME: FROM SPATIAL TO SPATIO-TEMPORAL FRAMING OF DIFFERENCE

### **Bruce Horner in conversation with Theresa Lillis**

Bruce Horner is a professor of rhetoric and composition at the University of Louisville. His work takes place within the context of US Composition. In this extract from a longer and ongoing conversation about connections between “Academic Literacies” and “Composition” and, in particular what is meant by transformation, Bruce explores what he sees as a key challenge—how to define and engage with the notion of “difference” in academic writing.

**Bruce:** A key challenge for us is how to engage with “difference.” Scholars of “academic literacies” commonly conceive of difference in three ways: as a characteristic of its subject of inquiry—“academic literac-ies”; as a defining characteristic of the “new” students enrolling in higher education through programmes of massification; and as a goal—transformation (see Theresa Lillis & Mary Scott, 2007).

**Theresa:** When you say scholars of Academic literacies are you talking about “Academic literacies” as a specific field of work, linked mainly to the United Kingdom, or are you including work on writing from a range of contexts—like “basic writing”?<sup>1</sup>

**Bruce:** I use “academic literacies” to refer to a “critical field of inquiry with specific theoretical and ideological historical roots and interests” (Lillis & Scott 2007, p. 7), and more specifically an approach grounded in Brian Street’s (1984) “ideological” model of literacy as social practice and as seeking to involve a “transformative” rather than “normative” stance towards existing academic literacy practices. But I would also include in “Academic Literacies,” US work—mine too—that arises out of disciplinary traditions of literary study and cultural theory and in the United States context often located in the institutional and pedagogical site of “Composition.”

In general, I think all of us working with academic writing—whatever the spe-

cific institutional or geopolitical location—need to be wary about slippages in how we think about difference. Such slippage may limit how we understand the goal of transformation and how that goal is to be achieved in the teaching of, or about, academic writing and literacy practices. In that slippage, differences among literacies, including academic literacies, come to be conflated with differences among students, and then these differences are identified with specific textual forms—often in terms of whether these are recognizably conventional or not.

**Theresa:** By “specific textual forms” would you for example mean specific uses of language? Specific languages? Specific levels of formality (or use of language often associated more with spoken language than written language)? Specific clusters of rhetorical conventions?

**Bruce:** The problem is complicated because any one of these levels of language—lexicon, syntax, register, organization—as well as notational practices more generally, can be claimed as nonconventional and that lack of conventionality identified with the (student) writer’s social identity. While this is preferable to identifying such ostensible breaks with convention as evidence of cognitive lack or pathology, it assumes and reinforces a stability to what constitutes conventional academic writing while ignoring the role of the reader in producing a sense of conventionality or its obverse when reading, and likewise assumes a stability to the social and linguistic identity of the student writer that also ignores the mediating role of writing (and reading—Joseph Williams’ 1981 essay on “The Phenomenology of Error is still one of the best accounts of this).

One recent version is where what are recognized, and known to be recognized, as instances of code-meshing—e.g., the insertion of representations of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in academic essays whose lexicon and register are conventionally formal—are fetishized as in themselves doing transformative work. This shifts attention away from what might be said to assigning special status to specific techniques of saying. For example, Geneva Smitherman’s (2000) insertion into her academic writing of features readers will identify as AAVE is hailed as in itself doing transformative work. This ignores the actual transformative import of what she is saying, and also overlooks the way in which her use of such features signals, primarily, her status as an established academic scholar—it is, after all, only those with low status who are expected to “watch their language.”

**Theresa:** I understand the potential dangers and I’d probably have used the word reification rather than fetishization but think fetishization brings a useful nuance here. But I must say I am sympathetic to the attempt to disrupt strongly regulated production—and reception practices—and I think Smitherman’s mixing or meshing actually adds power to the arguments she is making—in other words the

form is not just for form's sake but has an epistemological purpose too. I also think scholars who try to illustrate how mixing might work in their own writings can be caught in a double bind here: if they try to play (for pleasure and fun as well as for serious academic purposes) with resources, they can be accused of using their status to get away with this; but if the same scholars encouraged students to play, without doing so in their own work, they'd be accused of making those with lesser power take responsibility for transforming the academy. I also think that you're overstating the power that scholarly status confers. As we know from our work on writing for publication (Theresa Lillis & Mary Jane & Curry, 2010), scholarly status—and how the language/s used—varies considerably within global scholarly hierarchies.

**Bruce:** I take your point about published scholarly writing. The danger for me, which you suggest, is in the tendency to argue for pedagogies that advocate “mixing” of forms as a goal in and of itself, which redirects our energies, and those of our students, in less useful directions: formal experimentation for formal experimentation's sake, outside and ignoring issues of context, including power relations, and purpose. More generally, I'm concerned about the slippage between people and forms. This slippage manifests in the use of a spatial framework whereby students, writing, and specific literacy practices are located in terms of relations of proximity, overlap, and hierarchy. Transformation is then understood in terms of resistance, challenges, or opposition to those relations: “importing” literacy practices belonging to one domain to another; challenging hierarchies among these practices by, say, granting legitimacy to those deemed subordinate or “vernacular”; multiplying writers' repertoire of practices, and identities; or deviating from the conventions and practices deemed “appropriate” to a given domain.

**Theresa:** I agree that there's always a danger of talking as if domains are hermetically sealed from each other—as if the “academic” domain were separate completely from the “home” domain (and I'd guess we'd need to carefully consider how we construct “home”). But I'm assuming that you aren't saying that we shouldn't question the dominant/conventionalized practices that have come to be defaults in specific domains, such as academia? I would be surprised if this were the case given what I know of your work—you challenge the institutional deficit positioning of students who are labeled as “basic writers” (Bruce Horner & Min Zhan Lu, 1999) and in your work on a translingual approach (Horner et al., 2011) seem to be calling for us (teachers, readers, writers,) to rethink the ways in which we approach texts that look “different” in some way.

**Bruce:** That's right, though I'd put it somewhat differently now than I may have previously. What I think we most need to challenge, especially at the pedagogical level, is the stability itself of those dominant/conventionalized practices. We can and should teach these practices as historical rather than fixed. So whatever prac-

tices student writers (and everyone else) opt to participate in on a given occasion should be questioned, whether those practices are identified with the dominant or conventional or not. Many of us (especially those involved in basic writing) have been focused on rethinking practices identified as different from such dominant/conventionalized ways, and often to defend the logic of these different practices, we've tended to engage in a peculiar textualism locating practices spatially but not temporally, hence as fixed rather than contingent in significance.

Min-Zhan Lu's chapter, "Professing Multiculturalism," in our book *Representing the "Other"* (1999) best exemplifies our position. The example discussed there of a student who first wrote "can able to" to express having both the ability and permission to do something, then revised this to "may be able to" shows a writer exhibiting agency in both instances. As Min argues, "can able to" should be probed for its logic rather than being dismissed as a simple grammatical error (though error is always a possibility). Writers can then consider whether to maintain that more idiosyncratic usage or a more conventional usage, aware that either decision carries risks and rewards.

For me there are two difficulties arising from adopting a spatial framework for understanding difference in academic (and other) literacies, students, and their literacy practices: first, such a framework appears to grant greater stability, internal uniformity, and a discrete character to the various kinds of literacies, literacy practices, and student identities than is warranted; and second, active writerly *agency* comes to be identified strictly with writers' recognizable deviations from these (thereby) stabilized practices. This poses a dilemma to teachers pursuing transformation of seeming to have to choose between either "inducting" students into dominant literacy practices—to allow for students' individual academic and economic survival—or encouraging students to resist the restrictions of these conventions, thereby putting their academic and economic futures at risk. The fact that requiring production of dominant writing conventions appears to align pedagogy with the (for many, discredited) ideology of the autonomous model of literacy (Brian Street, 1984), and the fact that the students concerned are likely to be from historically subordinated populations, and thus in most need of improvement to their economic situations, make this dilemma particularly acute.

**Theresa:** I agree that it would be irresponsible for teachers to tell students to resist conventions when using such conventions is central to success—to passing exams, to being recognized seriously as a student. But does anyone actually do this, particularly within disciplinary based spaces? Although I've argued—both implicitly and explicitly—that a wide range of textual forms (at the level of sentence level grammars, vocabulary, modes, languages) should be encouraged and debated in the academy, as a teacher, working with undergraduates and postgraduates in my field

(applied and social linguistics), I make students aware of the rules of the game and the consequences of not using these. In some instances, there are opportunities for me to open up default conventions—for example when I’m setting and assessing assignments—but as often—and for writing teachers working at the edges of disciplinary spaces—this is often not possible.

**Bruce:** I think you’re right that few teachers encourage students to avoid conventional academic conventions in their writing. But the terms for using these—often couched as “following conventions”—are often paltry and bleak: “do it to get by,” to survive. That approach leaves the actual contingent nature of deploying specific forms unquestioned: curiously, again conventional language gets a pass, its significance treated as a given rather than subjected to genuine questioning. And our textualist bias leads to a conflation of notational difference with social or conceptual difference. Clearly there are times when breaks with conventional language are demanded insofar as that language stands in the way of conceptualization—neologisms like *translingualism* are a case in point. But I suspect that rejection of work on grounds of its breaks with conventional language is often a cover to reject that work because of the conceptual challenges it poses (as I think some of the cases in your 2010 book with Mary Jane Curry illustrate).

I guess what I’m saying is that we need to shift our metaphors or frameworks so that we don’t get caught up in only ever recognizing transformation as something that is marked as different in the academy—or only ever recognizing value in *forms* our training leads us to recognize as “different.” That would seem merely to flip, while reinforcing, binary oppositions of the conventional/unconventional while retaining an attribution of stable significance to form alone, treated in reified fashion. A US example of a scholar’s efforts to grapple with the confines of the spatial framework in pursuing the goal of transformation is an essay by David Bartholomae, “The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum” (1993), frequently cited as calling for the abolition of a separate curricular space to teach students deemed “basic writers,” i.e., those deemed unprepared to produce post-secondary-level writing. (see Horner, 1999a, pp. 192-193.) Bartholomae invokes Mary Louise Pratt’s now well-known concept of the “contact zone” to counter what he sees as the tendency of basic writing programmes to “bridge AND preserve cultural difference, to enable students to enter the ‘normal’ curriculum but to insure, at the same time, that there are basic writers” (1993, p. 8). The problem, he sees, is that “the profession has not been able to think beyond an either/or formulation—either academic discourse or the discourse of the community; either argument or narrative; either imitation or expression” (Bartholomae, 1993, p. 324). To counter this, he calls for making “the contact between conventional and unconventional discourses the most interesting and productive moment for a writer or for a writing

course” (Bartholomae, 1993, p. 19).

The focus on points of contact promises to allow for the possibility of interaction among conflicting beliefs and practices. However, the spatial framework invoked (the “space” of the contact zone where, in Pratt’s words, “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with one another” (Pratt, 1991) risks reinforcing, by assuming, the stability of the distinctions that Bartholomae aims to challenge: (basic/normal; conventional/unconventional; different/normal). Thus whereas his critique begins by complaining of difference as a product of the basic/normal framework, he ends up advocating a curriculum that retains the notion of students as different, but that adopts a strategy of their integration, rather than segregation. As critics have since complained, the interaction to be advanced is difficult to imagine.

If Bartholomae’s work simply illustrates the continuing limitations a spatial framework imposes on thinking about differences and pedagogies of transformation, another example, Roz Ivanič and colleagues’ UK study *Improving Learning in College: Rethinking Literacies Across the Curriculum* (2009) directly addresses such limitations. Ivanič et al.’s study initially focused on the ways in which students’ “everyday” literacy practices might interact with and support their learning of the literacies required in their college courses, and therefore explored the possible “interface” between and among these different literacies associated with different “domains’ of students” lives (2009, pp. 1-2), the “‘border literacy practices’ and ‘border crossing’ of literacy practices from the everyday to college” (pp. 22-23). However, Ivanič et al. ended up calling into question the “ways in which ‘context,’ ‘domain,’ ‘site,’ and ‘setting’ are conceptualized” (2009, p. 23) and, as well, the associated metaphors of “boundaries and borders, and of boundary zones, boundary objects and border-crossing” (pp. 23, 24). Ultimately, they concluded that such metaphors, “inscribed in the method we had used to collect the data” about literacy practices, led to a “static two-dimensionality about the Venn-diagram representations and mapped spaces which follow from talk of ‘borders’ and ‘border-crossings,’” rendering “the concept of ‘border literacies’” “untenable” (Ivanič et al., 2009, p. 172): “we had assumed a border space, but as we moved to bordering as a practice rather than identifying border literacy practices as entities, we saw that the relationship between domains and practices was more complex and messy: they co-emerge” (p. 172). As Ivanič (2009) has observed elsewhere, “‘whole’ literacy practices ... cannot be recontextualized wholesale into educational settings because the social domain changes the practice” (p. 114).

**Theresa:** I can see the problems with setting boundaried framings around language, writing, and semiotic practices, but isn’t it also the case that the assessment of student writing in the various disciplines that make up the academy tends to be driven by quite rigid notions and ideologies about what counts as acceptable

discourse which is monolithic and monologic in nature? In other words, quite rigid boundaries exist which student-writers (and teachers) constantly bump up against rather than being given opportunities to interact with. Isn't the writing space of "Composition" very different?

**Bruce:** Yes, you're right. One of the privileges of working in composition in the United States, at least for many of us, is that the composition course, even the required first-year composition course, for all its problems, remains a "special writing space," with instructors given significant say in assessment, as opposed to writing in other sites—one reason I oppose moves to abolish that course. I sense you're pointing to the need to direct our energies more to our colleagues outside writing studies (broadly conceived) and to the public. You've argued elsewhere (Lillis, 2013) that while we might rightly reject commonplace ways of valuing writing in terms of its ostensible "correctness," that does not absolve us of the responsibility for (and the inevitability of) arguing for some kind of valuation of writing. So we might direct our energies towards discussing these other ways of valuing writing: for example, its level of engagement, conceptual heft, accuracy, and so on. These are values that our academic colleagues, as well as the public, might well already share. Here I think I'm simply echoing your argument (Lillis, 2013) that we advocate for our own values in language use, as against prescriptivist grammar values invoked as ideologically neutral "standards."

Rethinking our metaphorical framings here, I think a temporal-spatial framework—rather than just a spatial one—might allow a conceptualization of difference and transformation that is both more readily within the reach of ourselves and our students, and at least potentially of greater consequence. It might help resolve the dilemma those pursuing transformation of academic literacies face of seeming to have to ask students to choose between submitting to dominant conventions in their writing or deviating from these at the risk of academic failure; and it radically challenges key features of the ideology of the autonomous model of literacy against which those taking an academic literacies approach are set. I attribute the fact that we typically do not recognize differences in temporality *as* differences, or as making a difference and accomplishing transformation, to the continuing operation of that ideology in our *dispositions* to language. I'm thinking of Pierre Bourdieu's caution that language ideology has "nothing in common with an explicitly professed, deliberate and revocable belief, or with an intentional act of accepting a 'norm.' It is inscribed, in a practical state, in dispositions which are impalpably inculcated, through a long and slow process of acquisition, by the sanctions of the linguistic market" (Bourdieu, 1991[1982], p. 51)

**Theresa:** I think the dichotomy may be overstated—I wouldn't see it as choosing

between submitting to dominant conventions in writing or deviating from these at the risk of academic failure—I think it's more about focusing on the cracks between practices, allowing some of the forms to come through IF they enable writers to work at the kinds of knowledges that they want to work and towards what they want to mean. For me it's about increasing the range of discourses and semiotic resources that it's permissible to use in the academy. Obvious examples come to mind are the use of vernacular forms that you mentioned already—or I guess more precisely, the use of what have come to be defined as “vernacular” forms. But what does a focus on temporality get us? Or help us to avoid?

**Bruce:** My sense is that we should shift our emphasis from what is permitted or allowed in language (and media) to a focus on what we and our students might and should be attempting to work at in their compositional work (broadly construed). This focus on temporality gives us the ability to recognize students' agency as writers, and its deployment both when they iterate what seem to be conventional, “permitted” forms and when they deploy forms that are identified as breaking with convention. Pedagogically, that's a crucial advantage. This focus would certainly expand the range of discourses and semiotic resources under consideration, but I worry that framing the issue in terms of those resources in themselves, and which ones will be allowed, gets us sidetracked into 1) thinking about these as stable entities with inherent values, rather than focusing on what we might want to accomplish and why, and 2) mistaking dominant definitions of conventional resources and their meanings for all that has been, is, and might be accomplished in their guise. Of course, the material social conditions limiting access to and uses of particular resources would also come up for investigation. To bring it closer to home, in terms of languages, a translingual approach that my colleagues and I have argued for works against both conventional multilingualism and monolingualism: neither “English” as conventionally defined nor the usual proffered alternatives adequately represent what we have to work with. We are always instead writing “in translation,” in Alastair Pennycook's terms (2010), even when appearing to write “in English.”

To reiterate, a focus on temporality helps us to recognize the exercise of writerly agency even in iterations of what we are ideologically disposed to misrecognize as simply more of “the same,” rather than identifying such agency only with what we are disposed to recognize as deviations from an ostensibly “same” practice. Musical iteration perhaps best illustrates this: a “repeat” of the same phrase in a melody (e.g., standard blues tunes) is both the same as what is repeated and, by virtue of following the first iteration of that phrase, different in temporal location and significance, which is why it is not typically heard as an unwitting mistake. From this perspective, difference is an inevitable characteristic of iteration rather than exceptional



or alternative. Applied to writing, the question of difference and transformation is thus no longer whether to allow previously excluded difference to “enter” the academic sphere in order to achieve its transformation. Instead, it is a question of what kinds of difference and transformation to pursue, given their inevitability. From this perspective, such phenomena as hybridity and translation would be seen not as exceptions but part of the unacknowledged norm, as would the changes to practices arising from their re-location to “different” domains about which Ivanič remarked. With difference recognized as the norm, any apparent “sameness” would need to be accounted for as emerging products of practices. Iterations would be understood not as reproducing the “same” but, rather, as contributing to the ongoing sedimentation, or building up, over time, of language practices and the “context” of their iteration (Pennycook, 2010, p. 125). Context here would be understood as in co-constitutive relation to utterances and speaker identity, and, as in exchanges between colonizer and colonized, as creating new meanings and new relationships between meanings, with the potential to undermine the status and distinction of the dominant and transform the identities of all the participants (Homi Bhabha, 1985; Pennycook, 2010, p. 44; Pratt 1991).

**Theresa:** So, in pedagogical terms—what does it mean to adopt a spatio-temporal framework rather than just a spatial one? How would a shift in framework shape the work of a teacher of writing (in a separate writing space) or of a discipline in which students are doing writing?

**Bruce:** I think it would mean calling into genuine question (with one possible answer being to confirm) the aims and effects of any iteration. For example, what might iteration of an ostensible deviation from or reproduction of conventional discourse seem to accomplish for a writer and particular readers, how, and why, and so on. If we assume difference as an inevitability rather than an option, we change our question from one asking whether to allow difference in writing to asking what kind of difference to attempt to make in our writing, how and why. In posing such questions, teachers would in effect be assuming not their preference for a “contact zone” pedagogy or the need to introduce difference into the classroom but, rather, recognizing the classroom as always already a site of differences, “contact” or, better, relocalizing of practices: differences would be identifiable not as characteristics students (or their teachers) have brought to the classroom, or introduced there, but rather as always emerging products of specific reading and writing practices. Like the “errors” commonly, if mistakenly, seen as simply introduced by students “into” writing, differences are in fact “social achievements” resulting from interactions between readers and writers (see Horner 1999b, pp. 140-144). So, if students select to iterate conventional discursive forms, those can and should be put to question,

just as iterations of ostensible breaks with these should be. And of course, given the contingent and interdependent relationship between context and discourse, these would be genuine questions for the students and the teacher.

## NOTE

1. Basic writing<sup>7</sup> is a term used in the United States to identify the writing and courses in writing for adult students identified as unprepared to do college-level writing.

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