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ABSTRACT

The two current approaches to teaching academic discourse are conventional and collaborative; in practice, they overlap because both are based on a "conversational model" of learning to write in college. Taxonomists and collaborationists disagree on the relative emphasis that should be placed on the various pedagogical methods: collaborationists fear that taxonomists adhere too rigidly to conventions and taxonomists fear that collaborationists ignore the problem of how much--or little--students know about these conventions in the first place. The conversational model emphasizes the social context for writing which helps teachers to diagnose student writing problems as systemic conditions, involving the whole academic community, and not as local deficiencies in the students themselves. Students can be motivated to participate in academic discourse by pointing out that if they do not, they lose access to academic knowledge, and hence limit their future social, economic, and political options. Both taxonomists and collaborationists take the conversational model too literally; in order for a conversation-as-dialogue to foster initiation into a particular conversation-as-discourse, the participants in the dialogue must have some knowledge of the discursive practices of the larger conversation. In recognition of this inherent conflict, an in-depth, comparative, ethnological study of discursive practices in and out of school needs to be performed. (SRT)

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Academic Discourse: Taxonomy of Conventions or Collaborative Practice?

Currently academic discourse may be taught as a taxonomy of conventions or as a collaborative practice. Taxonomy-minded teachers may ask students to analyze the stylistic features of various academic genres; collaboration-minded teachers may urge students to imitate the constructive give-and-take of academic debate in classroom work on their own writing. These two approaches to teaching academic discourse are by no means mutually exclusive. Most teachers of academic discourse use techniques from both.

The overlap of the approaches is not surprising in view of the fact that they share to a considerable degree a theoretical basis in what has been called a "conversational model" of learning to write in college. Elaine Maimon speaks of "talking to strangers" (see also Bazerman, "Conversational Model"; Bruffee, "'Conversation'"). According to this model, it's as if the student attempting to master academic discourse were the new neighbor who steps up to a gossiping group at the church picnic, listens for a while to get the hang of the conversation, and then tentatively joins in.

Although the model is shared by taxonomists and collaborationists, however, they have been at odds over the relative emphasis that should be placed on the various pedagogical methods. Collaborationists fear that taxonomists exact too much conformity to academic discourse conventions; taxonomists fear that collaborationists ignore the problem of how much--or little--students know about these conventions in the first place.

But in spite of these quibbles, both the taxonomists and the collaborationists agree, obviously, that it is a good thing for students to master academic discourse. And both are inclined, ultimately, to give the same justification for the goal of mastery, namely, that it will foster a sort of constructive self-consciousness, or in the terms of Paulo Freire, a "critical consciousness," that will enable students not only to succeed in school but also to take a more active and powerful role in the life of the larger society.

In the past I have identified myself with the taxonomists, and I have been emphatic about the possibility of achieving critical consciousness through mastery of academic discourse (see "Initiation"). Now, however, something is troubling me about my own past positions. I am no longer convinced that we can deliver

on the promise of critical consciousness for all. In an attempt to get at what is troubling me, I would like in this paper to re-examine the conversational model, which is the basis for all this academic discourse work. I now suspect that we advocates of teaching academic discourse, whether taxonomy- or collaboration-minded, have been led into some errors by an overly literal interpretation of the conversational model. At the same time I think the model has a heretofor hidden strength, one that may enable me to put my finger on the sore place, in its implicit acknowledgement of the conflict inherent in any writing situation.

II

Let me begin by summarizing what I take to be the consensus on important features of the conversational model. Perhaps its most important feature is that it foregrounds the social context for writing. It reminds us that one is enabled to write anything only through participating in a way of writing elaborated by a social group, comprising shared knowledge, hierarchical relations among writers, conventional stylistic practices, and so on. In other words, all writing is writing within and for some discourse community. And as a writer participates in a discourse community, she may in turn influence its practices. This focus on the inevitable social context of writing leads to the conclusion that all writing is in some sense collaborative (Reither).

By implication, then, the conversational model of writing debunks both the notion that writing can embody pure self-expression, and the notion that writing can adhere slavishly to pre-set standards. No one can really join a conversation either by taking the floor and doing all the talking, or by simply murmuring, "Very true . . . ." Rather, learning to write--indeed, every writing process--must be seen as a process of negotiation between the socially established practices of a given discourse community, and whatever practices from other discourse communities the new participant brings with her.

The idea of negotiation in turn implies the mediation of a conflict. The writer experiences stress in attempting to realize her intentions through participation in a given discourse community; and the community also experiences stress in changing to accommodate the contribution of a new participant. Similarly, there is a sort of social "inertial barrier" between a group of people who are already talking and a newcomer. The newcomer wants company, but is shy of intruding . . . the group doesn't want to be interrupted, but does want new blood. Depending on who is entering what group, bearing what new ideas, this inertial barrier varies in penetrability.

The conversational model of writing thus helps us to diagnose student writing problems as systemic conditions, involving the whole academic discourse community, and not as local deficiencies in the students themselves. We have a "problem" when the process of negotiation and collaboration,

normal to writing, breaks down. Perhaps students can't collaborate because they are too unfamiliar with the discursive practices of the academic community; or professors won't negotiate because they have forgotten that the community needs to accommodate newcomers if it is to remain viably responsive to change in the world.

Not too surprisingly, the conversational model is often used to justify a writing-across-the-curriculum pedagogy. For in writing-across-the-curriculum work, students are encouraged to find out what the academic community's discursive practices are, and faculty are urged to recognize the part such practices play in their own work. Students and faculty alike are led to examine their discursive practices, with the avowed purpose of initiating the beginners into the academic discourse community.

Also not surprisingly, the conversational model is often linked with a theoretical argument that moves from the conversational model's social account of what people do when they write to an epistemological account of how people know through their writing. If all writing, all conversation, all language is socially constructed in discourse communities, then there is no way we can get "outside" language to measure the accuracy of these constructions over against external reality. All knowledge, that is, is socially constructed; or, in the "harder" form of this argument, reality itself is socially constructed (Scott; but see Cherwitz). Either way, disputes over the "truth" of knowledge become like disputes over any other language-using practice: subject not to testing against external reality, but to negotiation and collaborative investigation by the participants in the discourse community that shares the knowledge. Disputes are concluded in the achievement of community consensus--what we might call rhetorical closure--rather than in the presentation of self-evident test results (Kuhn).

It follows, then, that if one wants access to knowledge and to debates over the value of knowledge, or the "truth" of some "facts," one must first gain access to the discourse community in which this knowledge is generated, disseminated, and changed. This provides the strongest possible inducement for students and professors alike to overcome the conflict inherent in the writing situation. If students are not willing to enter the academic discourse community, they lose access to academic knowledge, and hence limit their future social, economic and political options. If professors are not willing to help students enter, they lose the coming generation of co-workers; without these students, the knowledge the professors have generated and maintained would die with them. Conversely, if all collaborate to initiate the beginners, not only is the cultural heritage of academic knowledge preserved and extended, but also--or so the argument has run--students gain the power to escape or at least to modify limiting social circumstances, to achieve personal aspirations, and ultimately to become powerful advocates for their home folks within the larger society.

How is the conversational model interpreted too literally by academic discourse teachers? Let me get at this problem by summarizing the preferred pedagogies of taxonomists and collaborationists and analyzing their disputes over pedagogy.

In teaching academic discourse, taxonomists tend to emphasize the extent to which beginners are indeed "talking to *strangers*." Hence they advocate college-wide writing-across-the-curriculum programs that take faculty development as their main goal, helping faculty to seem less forbiddingly foreign to incoming students. Often the hidden agenda of such faculty development is to loosen up professors' overly rigid adherence to academic discourse conventions, to persuade them to admit more variation within the category of "acceptable" academic discourse, which would both aid beginners and change the discourse permanently in the direction of more flexibility. To bolster the college-wide program, taxonomists in the writing-across-the-curriculum composition class teach beginners about academic discourse conventions, so that they will offend less frequently against the professors' discursive sensibilities (Maimon et al.; Bazerman, *Informed*).

In contrast, collaborationists fear that if some conformity to academic discourse conventions is admitted even as a limited goal for writing instruction, students will be at a serious disadvantage in preserving anything of their non-academic discursive practices. The weight of authority attached to academic community practices, an authority enforced by the sanction of grades, will be just too great. Hence, collaborationists work hard to disestablish the authority of academic discourse in all classrooms in which writing takes place; and to replace this traditional authority with a classroom consensus on what constitutes "good" discursive practice, or good writing. This consensus is to be achieved through collaboration among students and teacher-as-older-friend; the assumption is that such collaboration will be essentially egalitarian.

For the collaborationists, like the taxonomists, college-wide writing-across-the-curriculum programs also focus on faculty development, and also seek to educate faculty about how to teach writing in a way that does not enforce rigid standards. But the collaborationists have an even more leveling motive. For example, whereas taxonomists might teach professors how to use prewriting techniques to help students develop the kinds of essays appropriate to their academic disciplines, collaborationists might encourage professors and students to share personal journals about their experiences in a course (Fulwiler). As I noted earlier, there is overlap of techniques; taxonomists are not averse to using journals. But they are likely to place journals in a much less prominent position in the curriculum.

In the composition class, collaborationsists take as their main task not inculcating academic discourse conventions but

practicing academic collaborative work. The class is set up like a writers' workshop, in which the main focus of discussion is self-assigned student writing. Such a classroom format, of course, reduces the teacher's authority, but its more important purpose is to provide ample opportunities for student talk. Face-to-face conversation becomes the principal means of initiation into the discursive conversation (Bruffee, *Short Course*; Knoblauch and Brannon). The same kind of actual conversation is emphasized in work with peer tutors, which takes place in a workshop that operates independently of course requirements (Bruffee, "Brooklyn Plan"). Collaborationists often advocate such tutorial workshops as an essential part of writing-across-the-curriculum programs.

Yet, both the taxonomists and the collaborationists fail adequately to recognize the severity of the conflict involved in the academic writing situation, for some, if not for all, beginners. All writing-across-the-curriculum work relies too heavily on the good will of the participants--the faculty's willingness to be more tolerant and more vulnerable to criticism and self-criticism, the students' willingness to be more trusting of faculty's good intentions for their futures and hence more conforming to faculty expectations that may initially seem arbitrary or even threatening.

We fall into this error because we have a tendency to literalize the conversational model of discourse. I agree with the argument that oral, face-to-face conversation--what I might call conversation-as-dialogue--fosters initiation into a larger conversation-as-discourse (which is carried on in print, etc., as well as aloud). But for a conversation-as-dialogue to foster initiation into a particular conversation-as-discourse, the participants in the dialogue must have some knowledge of the discursive practices of the larger conversation. For example, no dialogue between students is going to initiate anyone into the larger conversation of the academic discourse community if the participants know little or nothing about the discursive practices of this community (Myers).

Typically, collaborationist pedagogy does not address the problem of what the students know: it concerns itself much more with what they do, for example helping them learn how to manage small-group discussion politely and productively. But such methods cannot of themselves ensure that what is produced is understanding of the academic discourse community. Collaborationist advocates of writing across the curriculum describe the collaborative writing class as initiating students into academic discourse. But there is theoretically no way for the collaborative class to find out if its notion of good writing matches that of the academy, unless a class member happens to be familiar with it.

There is also no way for collaborationists to know whether all their students actually assent to the classroom consensus, or whether some have just given up. A student who wishes to defend

the discursive practices of a community at a great remove from the academic, but who finds herself alone in this desire and aided only by her own discursive resources, may be reluctant to speak. Similarly, a student who happens to be familiar with academic discourse conventions may feel that to advocate them in the collaborative class would be to defy its anti-authoritarian spirit, and so may prefer to keep silent.

The taxonomists also fail to realize that conversation-as-dialogue alone is not sufficient to initiate anyone into a conversation-as-discourse. Of course, taxonomists want students to write as well as to talk. But taxonomists tend to assume that the success of the whole initiation process is linked to the compatibility of personalities in dialogues. Male faculty members more friendly, more willing to explain what they do when they write and what they expect students to do, and success will follow. I do not wish to dispute that more friendly, or mentorly, behavior would make the university a better place. But there often may be extra-personal reasons for the failure of dialogues. For instance, faculty members may be experientially unqualified to imagine what social relations some students will have to give up if they allow themselves to be assimilated into the academic discourse community (Holzman). In other words, writing problems really are profoundly systemic--involving social, cultural and political systems beyond the university. The individual professor and student, even if they wish to do so, cannot make a separate peace.

IV

If we refine the conversational model so that we are clearer on the difference between conversation-as-dialogue and conversation-as-discourse, then we will be better able to understand the nature of the conflict inherent in the writing situation. As I noted earlier, our current version of the conversational model does implicitly acknowledge the presence of conflict. But because of our tendency to literalize the notion of coonversation, to conflate conversation-as-dialogue and conversation-as-discourse, we tend to see this conflict primarily in personal terms. That is, we expect that the stresses experienced by writer and discourse community can be eased by increased faculty willingness to explain standards and to be flexible about them, increased student understanding of how to conduct a discussion without excluding anyone, and so on. It seems to me that the conflict goes deeper than this.

Not enough work has been done on what I might call the social-systemic sources of conflict in the writing situation, particularly as it pertains to adults entering college. Mike Rose has shown how prior schooling can leave a writer with dysfunctionally rigid rules and inflexible plans for composing. David Bartholomae has analyzed the competing influences on academic beginners of other discourse communities, on which they draw as they try to enter the academic. But no one, as far as I know, has performed for college writers an in-depth, comparative,

ethnological study of discursive practices in and out of school, such as we find in the work of Shirley Brice Heath, David Olson, and other researchers into the development of literacy in young children.

Given the paucity of such descriptive research, it is difficult to proceed to what is, I think, the next essential step, namely an analysis of the politics of the writing classroom. Such analysis would have to recognize that every process of entry into a discourse community involves both gains and losses for the initiate. I am not speaking now only of gains and losses in terms of language resources--mastering Standard English, for example, and hence losing one's creative touch with the street speech of one s home neighborhood. Much excellent work on basic writing pedagogy has focussed on the issues involved in such language changes. But the focus on, for example, whether or not all students should have to learn Standard English has tended to obscure what I take to be more serious changes, the cultural gains and losses that go along with such language changes, whether or not we see them as logically entailed--mastering the scientific method, for example, and hence coming to see one's pious father's way of thinking as hopelessly unreasonable.

I do not mean to suggest with these examples that I see every process of entry into a discourse community as enacting a bipolar choice between deracination and exclusion. We all know people who are comfortably bilingual, bicultural, bi-discursive as it were. But I am increasingly uncomfortable with the reluctance of composition studies as a discipline to acknowledge the social costs of initiation into the academic discourse community. For some students, at least, no meliorist pedagogy can abrogate the conflict they face between allegiance to home culture and aspiration to academic culture. Perhaps we never can mediate such choices for our students. But we should at least acknowledge that some of our "successes" *are* deracinated, some of our "failures" already possessed of critical consciousness and hence unwilling to submit to any of our discursive constraints.

We need, therefore, in addition to ethnographic research, a lot more reading in critical-Marxist educational theory (Anyon; Apple; Giroux). This will help us to understand the ideological content of what we take to be liberatory methods. I'm not sure that we will learn to abandon our methods, to discard any or all of our taxonomic or collaborative ways of teaching academic discourse. But I'm pretty sure that we will discover that no method is ideologically neutral. If we really do want to foster critical consciousness--especially in the Freirean sense, which is explicitly tied to an anti-capitalist, pro-Christian-Marxist political agenda--we are going to have to examine the political content of our classroom materials, our attitudes toward our students, all our professional activities.1 We are going to have to reconceive ourselves as political beings.

Notes

1. In a recent paper, Patrick Hartwell describes a set of classroom methods that he characterizes as conducive to literacy. It occurs to me that these methods might also foster the kind of political consciousness for which I am calling, although obviously more work is needed on this. It's worth pointing out that Hartwell sees his methods as appropriate to students from widely varied social origins--that is, they are not intended to be only "remedial." I would like to seize on this implication for my own work. That is, although it should be apparent from the tenor of my argument above that I am primarily concerned about the problems of students from cultural minorities, I think the issues I raise pertain to all students.

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