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ABSTRACT

Composition studies is a plausible choice for a "potentially liberating influence" for psychology, because it offers a useful place from which to think about and critique the writing practices of the psychology discipline. One area in which psychology can learn from composition is audience. Writing guides for psychologists tend to speak of mental constructs rather than real audiences. A second area in which psychology can learn from composition is genre. The empirical report seems to be the official genre of psychology but, in fact, the range of genres in psychology is much greater, and includes monographs; books of all kinds; book reviews; biographies; case studies; unpublished genres such as conference papers; and "feminized" genres such as letters, essays, and narratives. What psychologists can learn is that writers tend to use, mix, adapt, and invent genres according to their particular rhetorical situations. Another aspect of writing to consider is style. According to the American Psychological Association (APA) Manual, clarity is a very important feature, and this suggests that ideas and language are two completely different things. Actually, people in composition studies would say that thought and language are, at the very least, interdependent. These critiques of the writing practices of psychology have strong implications for the teaching of psychology, which include having students write to and for real readers, having them write in a wide range of genres, and teaching style as a set of rhetorical practices rather than rules. (PRA)

The Write Stuff: On the Relation between Composition Studies and Psychology

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Towards the end of *Constructing the Subject*, Kurt Danziger (1990) says that mainstream psychology created problems for itself when it became isolated from "potentially liberating influences" (p. 194). Mainstream psychology ignored other ways of knowing that were available in the social and human sciences, and in philosophy. If I understand him correctly, Danziger is saying that as psychologists we should be confronting our knowledge, and our ways of knowing, with other kinds--ones that "have become identified with other disciplines" (p. 197)--and here he mentions specifically linguistics, sociology, and anthropology.

My purpose in this paper is to propose <u>another</u> discipline to add to Danziger's list of "potentially liberating influences"--the discipline known as composition studies.

What is composition studies? I understand it as the discipline that specializes in the study and teaching of <u>writing.</u> Its roots go back a long way--to <u>rhetoric,</u> which of course has been an important area of inquiry since the ancient Greeks. Rhetoric is still an important area of inquiry; in fact there's a lot of overlap between rhetoric and composition.

But it's possible now to speak of "composition studies" as a modern and somewhat separate field. In the United States, composition has enjoyed its own formal organization since 1949, the year the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) was established. Now, CCCC has about 8,000 members (nearly half of whom, incidentally, attend its annual meetings).

In Canada the history is different. The tradition here is that composition is not taught as a separate course but instead is considered a minor--and rather marginalized--component of "English," where literature is the major component. But, writing courses and writing programs at places like McGill and the University of Winnipeg indicate this may be slowly changing. Certainly, there are many Canadian scholars deeply involved in the study of writing. The Canadian equivalent of CCCC is "CASWAR"--the Canadian Association for the Study of Writing and Reading, which publishes a newsletter called "Inkshed."

So much for background. The claim I'd like to advance here is that composition studies is a <u>plausible</u> choice for a "potentially liberating influence" for psychology. For now, I'll just say that it would certainly be a <u>logical</u> choice, because composition studies is the study of writing, and writing is central for psychology. How central? Psychologists <u>make meaning</u> through writing. We advance and negotiate knowledge claims by means of empirical articles and other forms of written discourse. Our disciplinary knowledge is largely dependent on writing. Without writing

there would be no books, no journals, no dissertations, no term papers. Although that may be a pleasant thought at times, unfortunately there would also be no psychology--so most of us would be looking for work.

I want to make it clear that I'm turning to composition studies not to learn how psychologists can become "more effective writers," although no doubt they can. Instead, I want to turn to composition because, as the discipline that specializes in the study and teaching of writing, it offers a useful place from which to think about and critique the writing practices of our discipline. Because of the close connection between writing and knowing, any limitations in our writing practices can produce limitations on what we can know. To repeat, then: Composition studies provides a space from which the writing practices of psychology can be critically examined.

What I'd like to do now is illustrate this by touching very briefly on three aspects of writing. I think rhetoric and composition specialists can help us get some perspective on the concepts of audience, genre, and style. Then I'll draw some implications of this critique for the teaching of writing in psychology.

Audience

"Audience" is a very common term in rhetoric and composition studies, and it's also a very controversial one. But in psychology "audience" is a relatively rare term. For example, there is hardly any mention of audience or readers in one of the most authoritative documents on writing in psychology, the APA Manual. Audience is mentioned more frequently in writing guides intended mainly for students. There, the advice is to "consider your audience" or "keep the reader in mind." Writers of psychology are advised to figure out what their audience is like, and then adapt their content accordingly.

Of course, this is pretty good advice. But it's worth pointing out that the writing guides are not talking about real audiences or real readers--the audiences they're talking about are fictions, mental constructs of the writer. ("Keep the reader in mind.") Work in composition studies points out some limitations with this approach.

First, Anthony Paré (1992) reminds us that when "audience" is applied to writing, it's a metaphor. And the audience metaphor carries baggage with it: we start thinking that readers are like audiences-in-the-theater--in other words, that they're passive, "in the dark," and that they merely respond to the writer's actions. The audience metaphor tends to make writing into a performance and it tends to make writers into actors. And notice that writers and their "audiences" come together only momentarily, while the text is being read.

Paré reminds us that writing takes place in social contexts; that it's real people, not "audiences," who read. Therefore he'd replace the writing-as-performance metaphor with a different metaphor: writing as conversation. With this new metaphor, we can see some things we didn't see before.

What we see is the intensely interactional nature of writing. Paré studied writing in a nonacademic setting--a social work agency in Montreal. Here, social workers routinely wrote "predisposition reports"--advisory reports written to a judge concerning the sentencing of a juvenile found guilty of a criminal offense. These reports illustrate the conversational or interactional nature of writing. For example: The reports were not read by a single, mass "audience" but by multiple readers, each with different interests and different relationships with the writer; they're read not only by the judge, but by the juvenile, his or her family, at least two lawyers, and so on. And, these relationships are ongoing: they are not limited to the act of reading, but they extend both before and after reading.

Work in other nonacademic settings supports the point that readers, not "audiences," read texts. Business and professional organizations often practice something called "document cycling." Document cycling is when a report is drafted by a person low in the organization's hierarchy; next the report is read and commented on by a supervisor, then sent back to the writer for revisions; this cycle may be repeated several times, but eventually the text is sent "up" to the next level in the hierarchy (e.g., mid-management) for yet another round of comments. And so on. Now this isn't exactly the same as a one-shot performance in front of a mass, anonymous audience.

We don't need to confine this discussion to nonacademic settings, however. "Document cycling" is similar to what academics do when they publish a paper. Scientists and other academic writers routinely get feedback and advice from colleagues and other "trusted assessors," make revisions, and only then send a manuscript "up" to a journal, where disciplinary representatives (gatekeepers) make their comments and suggestions--and demands.

The point is, none of this is very accurately portrayed when we say, "be sure to consider your audience." Work from rhetoric and composition reminds us that audience is not merely a mental construct. Readers are much more various, and much more important, than the writing handbooks would have us believe.

Genre

A second area in which psychology could learn from composition studies is genre.

The APA Manual takes what I think is a fairly a common view towards genre: In the Manual, the empirical report is the official genre of psychology. The Manual mentions others--theoretical papers, review papers--but they are secondary. And when psychologists "teach writing," what we usually mean is teaching students how to write empirical reports.

But in fact the range of genres in psychology is much greater. In addition to empirical reports, there are: monographs, books of all kinds (especially

edited books), book reviews, biographies, case studies. Not to mention all the unpublished genres that psychologists use: conference papers, technical reports, lecture notes, lab notes, letters of reference, and so on. So, in trying to understand the genres of psychology, the central question seems to be, Why, given this great diversity, is the empirical report the most valued, privileged form?

Again turning to composition studies, David Bleich (1989) has an answer: he draws an association between genre and gender. In Bleich's feminist argument, there is a hierarchy of genres just as there is a hierarchy of genders. And for the same reason: It serves the interests of those in power.

Bleich is talking about a hierarchy of genres throughout academia. He is talking about a privileged way of speaking and writing that can be called academic discourse--the discourse academics use when we write for one another.

Bleich and others have identified some characteristics of academic discourse--it tends to be "objective," "universal," "timeless. " But probably the chief characteristic of academic discourse is its tendency to be competitive. In academic discourse, individual knowers do battle against one other. We talk about "competing notions" of some idea. Knowledge is a zero-sum game: In order for you to be right, others must be wrong.

As I said, Bleich's perspective on academic discourse is a feminist one, and, of course, in the feminist critique of science, all these characteristics of academic discourse--objectivity, universality, the ethic of competition--are also characteristics of culturally "masculine" ways of knowing. The feminist critique of science makes the point that our very ways of doing science are biased towards masculinist values and assumptions. What scholarship in rhetoric and composition adds to the critique is this: These masculinist practices extend to ways and kinds of writing--that is, to genres.

So the critique raises some questions for the genres of psychology. First, the critique would question the hierarchy of genres that places empirical reports above all others. Second, it would question the restricted range of genres that are officially recognized. It would seek recognition for so-called "feminized" genres of writing--letters, journals, essays, and narratives of all kinds, including biographies and autobiographies. It sees the value of personal or "reflexive" writing in which researchers locate themselves in their research instead of pretending to be nonexistent. And third, the critique would question why genres have to be "pure." It recognizes mixed and blurred genres. What we learn from rhetoric and composition is that writers--unless they are straitjacketed by inflexible genres--tend to use, mix, adapt, and "invent" genres according to the particular rhetorical situations they find themselves in.

Style

That brings me to the third aspect of writing I want to consider, which is style. Of course when we talk about style in connection with psychology, most of us think of "APA style." I want to talk about APA style, too, but I have in mind not so much editorial style or a particular citation format, but rather some of its values. Again, work from composition studies can be read as a critique of these values.

I suppose the main thing to say about APA style is that it's not just a style but an epistemology. Or rather, it's an epistemology that presents itself as a style. Here I'd like to acknowledge the pioneering work of yet another composition specialist, Charles Bazerman. Bazerman (1988) tracks down the origins of the APA Manual. He argues that the codification of a style for experimental psychology occurred between 1929 and 1952--in other words, during the glory days of behaviorism. Later editions of the Manual have become longer and more prescriptive, but they have not changed in essence. For Bazerman, what the APA Manual still embodies, then, are positivist and behaviorist values. (However, these values can also be traced as far back as the 17th century, when the Royal Society advocated "plain style" for scientific writing.) In any event, I have time today to consider just one of these values, clarity.

Clarity seems to be the main term in the Manual. It's certainly one of the most frequent: In the first 28 pages of the Manual I counted 22 uses of clear or clarity. Example: "Thoughtful concern for the language can yield clear and orderly writing" (p. 31).

Now I don't mean to suggest that I advocate obscurity over clarity. However, I do want to point out that the Manual makes it sound like clarity is a text property. But rhetoricians would say, clarity is at least an interaction of writer, reader, and text. Obviously, what's clear to you might not be clear to me, and what's clear at one time might not be so clear at another. "Clarity," then, is really just shorthand for what happens when everything is in sync--writer's intentions, the text, and the reader's constructions. "Clear" is what we say when things seem to be working well, but it doesn't help us understand how or why they're working. So when the Manual tells us to "be clear!", it's like saying, "be successful!" or "be effective!" or "write like a psychologist!" This isn't very helpful.

Furthermore, like the notion of "audience," "clarity" is a metaphor. The notion of clear, transparent language suggests a "windowpane" philosophy of language that says you can look right through language to the ideas on the other side. So it implies that ideas and language are two completely different things: You have a thought, and then you find words in which to express it. Now, composition studies people (along with many others) would challenge that view. Instead, they say, thought and language are, at the very least, interdependent. It's a question of whether ideas are constituted by language or conveyed by language.

Teaching

I've been critiquing the writing practices of psychology from the standpoint of composition studies. But what are the implications of all this? What difference does it make?

I think this kind of critique has especially strong implications for the teaching of psychology, because long-term change in the discipline might well begin with our teaching practices--or, to paraphrase George Butterworth, although not all students become psychologists, all psychologists were once students.

As you might expect, I think teachers of psychology should be doing much more with writing--having their students write more, and doing different kinds of writing. Of course there is the problem of class size. We like to complain of our huge classes--200, 500, 1000 students--especially in intro psyc. At the same time, aren't we secretly proud of those large classes? At least they show how popular we are. How much writing can you expect students to do when you have a class of 100 or 200? But it's interesting that composition classes (even first-year classes) are limited to 25 or 30 students. Why aren't psychology classes limited to 30 students?

It's true--we don't have students write much because classes are too big. But it's also true that classes are big because we don't believe students need to do a lot of writing. If we really believed writing was important, I think we'd find ways to reduce class size. At least we'd be a little bit ashamed of those huge intro classes.

Fortunately, many psychology classes are small enough that serious writing can happen. So to return to the "so what" question: If we accept even some of what I said about audience, genre, and style, what kinds of writing could or should take place in the psychology classroom?

(a) Audience: I said that in the usual view, audience is a mental construct--you imagine what it would be like to write for parents, experts, classmates, and so on. The new understanding of audience that comes from composition studies suggests that we replace "audience" with readers, and as much as possible have students write to and for real readers--who (even better) really respond to what they say.

I guess we all know what usually happens. Students usually are writing for an audience of one--the teacher; and students are writing in order to demonstrate to the teacher that they know the material--so they're writing to someone who already knows what they're going to say. Rhetorically, this is a very odd situation. Instead, I would suggest that teachers try to find ways to have students in a class write to and for one another; have them write to younger students; or even have them write to the teacher--provided that the teacher genuinely wants and needs to know what they have to say.

(b) Genre: I'm not saying that academic discourse has no place in the academy, but I think it's unfortunate that we neglect nonacademic discourse and blurred or mixed genres. I don't think we should leave them to the

English Department, either (they're too important for that). Maybe we should be more concerned with whether students can make sense of their reading and their experience, and less concerned with whether they can tell what belongs in the Results section and what belongs in the Discussion. After all, most undergraduates do not become academics or psychologists; or, as Peter Elbow (1991) says, "life is long and college is short." So I would suggest expanding the range of genres that students use. As well as empirical reports and term papers, have them write biography, autobiography, short stories, poems, narratives, dialogues, letters, and so on--because these are all valid ways of making sense in psychology.

(c) Style: As for style, I would likewise say it's not that we should abandon APA style, but we could teach it differently. We could teach it as a set of rhetorical practices rather than a set of rules. There's a tendency to treat deviations from prescribed style as "errors" and marking them in red. Instead, can we help students reflect on the origins, advantages, and limitations of some of the so-called "rules"? How about a comparative approach?--have students write papers in APA style but also have them write papers in MLA style and the footnoting style used by historians. They might then better appreciate how each style constrains and enables knowing.

Here I've been able to give you only a few hints, really, about composition studies (these topics are treated more fully in Vipond, 1991)--but I hope I've said enough that you can at least begin to see that this relatively unknown discipline is indeed relevant to psychology. Because writing is at the center of our discipline, and because rhetoric and composition can help us critically examine our writing practices, I conclude that composition studies is indeed a "potentially liberating influence," and I commend it to your attention.

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