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ABSTRACT

Like most composition courses at large state universities, basic writing classes at the University of Minnesota are primarily taught by graduate teaching students. Graduate students and basic writers share a similar position in the university, sitting on the boundaries of the scholarly communities in which they eventually hope to participate. As professionals entering the conversation in composition, graduate students can offer a unique perspective from their own positions as bridges for basic writers learning to negotiate discourse boundaries. Much of the theory influential to the current understanding of basic writing has focused on the role composition teachers play in helping students make this transition from outsider to insider status as readers, writers, and speakers. In a course for graduate students on the theory and practice of basic writing, all electronic discussions (400 pages worth) were saved and studied to find threads in the conversations which could help to give a better picture of how grad students perceive their roles in the university. The issue of identity was introduced by correspondents early on, as was a sense of the difficulties that basic writers and graduate students face as they try to enter the university. It seems that graduate students and basic writers are asking the same question: To be or not to be an academic writer? (Contains 21 references.) (CR)

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March 1996 CCCC Presentation

Beginning the Conversation (Electronically): Graduate Students Bridging Theory and Practice in Basic Writing

Introduction

I am a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, and my job is to teach basic writing in the General College program, a division of the university which prepares students for a successful transfer into other academic departments. The writers in my classrooms are probably labeled "developmental," "basic," or "remedial" by the rest of the university, by the wider educational community, and also by themselves. They are acutely aware of their marginal status in the General College and work hard to get into the "real" university as quickly as possible. They are, as Mike Rose (1989) aptly put it, working as writers "on the boundary" of the University of Minnesota. They want to become full-fledged members of the academy and join their academic majors to reap the perceived benefits of getting a college education.

Like most composition courses at a large state university, basic writing classes at the University of Minnesota are primarily taught by graduate teaching assistants, individuals who, like their own students, are learning to negotiate a successful entry into various academic discourse communities. Graduate students and basic writers share a similar position in the university; both groups, in a sense, sit on the boundaries of the scholarly communities in which they eventually hope to participate. As professionals entering the conversation in composition, graduate students can offer a unique perspective on basic writing from their own positions as bridges for basic writers learning to negotiate discourse boundaries.

Much of the theory influential to our current understanding of basic writing has focused on the role composition teachers play in helping students make this

transition from outsider to insider status as readers, writers, and speakers. I reflect on David Bartholomae's (1986) notion of writers "inventing the university" in their first-year composition classes. He notes how students, particularly those labeled as "basic writers" by their institutions, often are positioned on the outside of academe and are required to complete course work in programs like mine to gain successful entry. What they must learn, according to him, is to "invent" the expectations of the university through their writing styles by learning to approximate language patterns that will eventually construct them as members of a particular discipline or academic community.

While many people debate the implications of this insider/outsider dichotomy, I believe the distinction has merit. In my program, the fact is that my students cannot get inside the University of Minnesota until they do enough work in the General College to make a transfer. This essentially amounts to their successful completion of a series of requirements which places them, at least temporarily and programmatically, on the outside of the university. What I do for the students in my writing courses, then, is help them gain access, help them step to the inside.

I have experienced some interesting and difficult tensions in my teaching here specifically related to this notion of teaching students who are positioned in the margins of an institution. In fact, I occupy a unique "boundary" position myself in the university as a graduate student working to gain membership in the professional teaching community. Like my basic writing students, I often find myself "inventing the university" in my own graduate course papers and at professional conferences. I struggle to figure out which writing styles will please a teacher or dissertation committee so that I can continue making steps into this community. Although I certainly differ from my basic writers in some ways, I often feel quite aligned with my students as I see them trying to figure out what the

university wants from them so they can get the academic goodies they desire as well. In some ways it's pretty simple—we all just want to get in, and we worry about what that might mean as we submit our papers and learn to speak "like an academic" for others who will grade us and determine our membership status.

Given the similarities I see between my own graduate student position and the space my basic writers occupy, I have begun to wonder what graduate students might have to offer other basic writing teachers and professionals in the field given the reality that, in most large universities, undergraduate basic writing courses are staffed primarily by graduate students. I recently joked with a colleague that if my students can be called "developmental writers," does that make me a "developmental professional"? As a graduate student, I too, am in the process of developing, am working toward something else, and am attempting to become, as the definition implies. Like basic writers, graduate students work and teach in that somewhat temporal space of the university, writing our way into academia much the way our students must. Given these similarities, what can we learn about the relationships between us "developing professionals" and the "developing writers" we teach?

Research and Archives

I have recently begun a research project to study some of my questions about the unique role graduate students play in teaching basic writers. Last spring in the General College program where I teach, the graduate teaching assistants including myself, all participated in a course called "The Theory and Practice of Basic Writing." In this seminar, we used e-mail to communicate electronically outside of our class meetings to ask questions about the texts we read and explore issues related to our teaching practice. In the course, we read several historically and currently significant texts in the field of basic writing, and we launched our ideas into cyberspace for 10

weeks, creating a 400-page archive of our electronic discussions. I saved and printed out these responses and decided to study them to see what this archive might reveal about the role of graduate students in the field of basic writing.

Ultimately I hoped to find some easy answers, but what I really got, which is probably typical of most research, is a big stack of papers and a huge list of questions! Initially my project seemed rather overwhelming, but aside from the enormity of the task of reading through the archives, I really sense a richness to the discussion that needs to be pushed further. The voices of my colleagues are layered with sounds of the theoretical, the practical, the hopeful, the impossible, and the deeply personal. I began to sense that we, as graduate students, are somehow writing ourselves into the discipline of composition and "inventing the field" as we see fit in our work as teachers and students, foregrounding important questions and unlocking tensions we experience in those roles.

In the archives, the voices of these graduate students seem to parallel the voices of the students in our classrooms at times. While our basic writers are not typically found discussing the finer aspects of the latest debate sparked in an article by David Bartholomae, they do, like the voices in this archive, express doubt and concern about their positions as writers in an institution which seems to retain them in a marginal state of being. While the voices of the graduate students here are more confident and certainly more academic in many places than the basic writers we teach, there is a shift in our conversation toward a focus on some personal concerns and tensions which seems to bring us closer to understanding the positions of our students.

I began my reading of the archives hoping to find threads in our conversation which might help me get a better picture of how we perceive our roles as graduate students, teachers and writers in the university. I also wanted to focus on this bridge-like status of teachers and explore how graduate students, who staff the

majority of writing courses in large universities, are positioned uniquely by the academy to help their students negotiate this language. Mike Rose (1989) has emphasized the important role composition teachers play in easing the transition for students entering the university. Since graduate students also do much of their work on the boundaries of academe, I believe this positions them well to shed some theoretical and practical light on the nature of this transitional space.

Throughout the discussion, we grappled with current theoretical debates in the field and struggled to articulate how these merge into our daily practice. At this point I would like to turn to the voices in the archives to offer you a sample of these reflections and outline some of these themes.

Voices

The issue of identity was introduced early on by several graduate students as we expressed an ongoing sense of our own struggles as writers within the university, an awareness that seems to relate closely to the dilemmas our students experience as they learn about the expectations of this new academic culture and try to "invent themselves" on paper in a way that we, their teachers, will accept. One teacher wrote, *"As graduate students we are aware of the tension between writing in the academic voice and maintaining speaker-self integrity. In my experience, my voice has developed over a long period of time—after a long struggle to invent the university and primarily in resistance to the writing demands of graduate school. I don't believe that my voice emerged or developed until after I was able to approximate academic discourse and write with some confidence."* Another student echoed, *"Reading back on my earlier graduate work, I see now that I had an overly academic voice with too much jargon and conceptual material. This is common for graduate students as they are 'inventing the university.' They over appropriate."*

In these comments we reveal our own self-conscious attempts to write as academics, at times noting the guesswork and tentative, outsider status we feel in our writing as graduate students. However, one student revealed how this intimate connection to her own work in school translates positively into empathy for her students' experiences, bringing the ideas into her class discussions about academic writing. She said,"*I work with my students to blend their experiences and narratives/voices with the arguments and academic styles. Some are fairly successful. I'm also explicit about these styles in my course and sometimes about my views about writing and 'mastering' the styles in my graduate work. My students appreciate my honesty and can align themselves better with their task as 'university inventors.'* " In comments like this, I saw a sense of shared identity emerging between our work as teaching assistants and our students as writers, identifying a unique relationship where TAs and basic writers work together in the classroom to negotiate academic language.

They also identified a sense of the difficulties that basic writers and graduate students face as they try to enter the university, again highlighting their own feelings of being on an academic margin in their work here. One graduate student noted that,"*Our own sense of marginality in terms of certain conventions of writing can help us in working with our basic writing students who too have a sense of marginality, although perhaps to a greater degree.*" Again, this sense of self-awareness and need to share our own graduate student stories with our students—to help us connect with them—was strong in this related comment. *"There seems to be a lot inherent in the structure of academic writing itself that creates barriers and boundaries... our awareness of these issues in our personal writing experiences can only help us better understand our students."*

Related to this sense of connection to the students' own writing processes, the students in this archive emphasized a driving need to stay in touch with the voices

of the basic writers and not let academic theory subsume those needs, constantly placing the student in the foreground of their reflections about teaching. Someone noted how, as a graduate student, she strained to find a comfortable position relative to the academic conversations in the archive. She said, *"It's easy to let all this theory seriously overwhelm me, which in a sense, probably isn't all that bad. But then I find myself in a negative academic trap, one where the actual practice is glossed over somewhat by research and theoretical accounts. While I think it's all very important to me as a teacher, I first need to keep in mind who really counts in all this... my students and their writing."* On a similar note, someone also shared this: *"There's just not enough written about how basic writers see themselves. We claim a lot of anecdotal knowledge as teacher-researchers about our students' accommodation, resistance and ambivalence, but what do beginning writers have to say about themselves?"*

There seemed to be an attempt by several of the teaching assistants here to push these questions into the forefront of the whole conversation about basic writing theory and practice. One person emphasized the need to research student stories in this field and wrote:*"I guess I'm thinking about the importance of considering our own individual histories as teachers and academic writers (and how this relates to what our students experience). It's important to locate myself in this process and understand the mechanisms so I can understand my students."* Overall, there seemed to be a strong sense in this discussion that both their own stories and those of their students are badly needed to ground the theoretical work in the field.

Conclusion

Overall I feel the voices in this archive express tensions vital to current debates about the theory and practice of basic writing, and as they occupy a unique position on the edges of the discipline, they are positioned well to help developing

writers negotiate the language of the academy. In reading these archives it is clear to me that this group of graduate students, if this is typical in any way of graduate student teachers in general, is wholeheartedly committed to helping our students through learning what is best from both theory and practice.

It seems that graduate students are a great resource and offer a bridge-like position between their students and the greater theoretical conversation. As developing professionals, we can be allies for our students as we work together with them to negotiate the forms of academic writing. We can learn a lot from our basic writers as they make decisions about who they will be on paper, and we can support them from a position of immediate experience and empathy. To the wider field of basic writing theorists, we can also offer another look at what it is like to write and work from a marginal position in the university as scholars and teachers and remind them of the nature of this spot and bring to voice the needs of those who occupy it.

Overall, through listening to the voices in the archives, I can hear that graduate students are a lot like basic writers, just entering the conversation, equally concerned with trying to figure out just who we are in this place. Are we theorists and scholars, excited about arguing over the finer aspects of the current linguistic code-switching debates and worrying about the politics and cultural implications of certain discourse conventions? Or—are we more like the students who stare at us from behind their desks, wondering about the whys and ifs of academic writing and its relationship, if any, to their own lives and real interests?

It seems that graduate students and basic writers are asking the same question: To be or not be an academic writer? Let's listen.

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