CEA College English Association

The CEA Forum

Summer/Fall 2009: 38.2

Next: Advising Undergraduates Considering Graduate Work in English

FILLING IN THE BLANKS:

THEY SAY, I SAY, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF FORMALISM

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Fluorescent lights, sandwiches and coffee, muffled chatter from the busy hall beyond the door: I was attending one of the informal weekly meetings our department holds for those teaching writing at the university, a gathering our program director calls “Comp Conversations.” Five of us sat around this time, two of us lunching from bags as we discussed our work in freshman composition.

Talk to turned to textbooks. My colleagues offered assessments of their recent choices—some old standbys, others brand new collections. Will (a pseudonym) leaned back in his chair and announced that he had found a jewel. He had adopted *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (NY: Norton & Company, 2006). He originally chose this text for a senior seminar course for English majors, but he planned to use it in first year composition [FYC] next semester.

After reading it, Will said, several of his senior students proclaimed, “I wish I'd read this when I was a freshman!” He encouraged them to use Graff and Birkenstein's templates in their writing and said he saw marked improvement in their prose afterwards. Will fully approved of these models and felt the approach allowed students better to adapt their own voices to academic expectations.

Wait—templates? I straightened my posture in both my chair and my thinking. Having just drafted a chapter in my dissertation railing against the over-standardization of both curricula in general and the school essay in particular, I wondered for a moment if the others could hear the bang of my mind slamming shut.

A few short weeks later, I attended a standing-room-only session at the 2007 Conference on College Composition and Communication [CCCC] featuring Graff and Birkenstein, during which many attendees testified to their love of their textbook. My colleague Will was not alone in his admiration. The authors reiterated the goal of their text as noted in its introduction: “To demystify academic writing by isolating its basic moves, explaining them clearly, and representing them in the form of templates” (ix). They further claim that, “In showing how to make such moves, templates do more than organize students' ideas; they help bring them into existence” (xiv). Graff and Birkenstein acknowledge that templates may be criticized as overly “prescriptive,” “passive” or “automatic” (xiv-xv). In fact, others present in the CCCC session argued those very points. The authors insist, however, that many students need such explicit instruction, and that templates can in fact “stimulate and shape” critical thought (xv).

Yet the testaments of my conference-going colleagues, the text and its subsequent editions (2008 brought a version with more readings) have left me more alarmed than impressed. I see the continued popularity of Graff and Birkenstein's text as a manifestation of a troublesome persistence of formalism, an approach to teaching that can certainly be useful, but which, if allowed to dominate composition teaching, can reduce the complex, intellectual process of academic writing to mechanical acts. Formalism can be generally understood as instruction grounded in fixed forms, set schema and particular “academic” turns of phrase. Formalist instruction emphasizes learning the conventions of select modes or genres. While it has long been debated in Composition Studies for its limited views of academic writing, correctness and style, formalism continues to be the focus of much composition instruction. My intent in this essay is to confront this trend on several fronts.

First, I argue that when formalism dominates instruction, complex ideas may suffer in favor of reproducing conventions. As a result, students may produce less intellectually rich or stylistically engaging prose. Second, I question what students actually learn in courses focused on formalism, proposing that they may take away limited notions of the choices available to writers when they would be better served by rhetorical flexibility. Third, I believe the latest rationalization for formalism—that composition teachers lack transparency—is not genuinely reflective of research and pedagogy in Composition Studies. Rather, it is perhaps more revealing of the gulf that still exists between those degreed in Composition and Rhetoric Studies and other academics teaching writing, and of the problematic staffing practices in composition. In the final section of this essay, I offer an example of a project I use in FYC. This assignment is grounded in a post-process approach, one framing writing as contextual and situated.

Conventions and Content

Formalism assumes that one can learn to write academic genres by adhering to a definite rule-set, particular sentence structures, organization schemas, and set phrases identified as “academic.” In the 1980s, David Bartholomae called these moves that matter “commonplaces,” (63) and expressed the need for students to identify “set phrases, examples, and conclusions” (67). The current-traditional modes are another manifestation of formalism, still reproduced in

textbooks today, which emphasize fixed rules for producing essays such as compare and contrast, classification, process description and causal analysis. Master particular models, they say, and you will be a good academic writer.

I recognize the value of teaching the formal characteristics of a genre and in practicing organization through modes. Yet, complex ideas may have trouble flourishing when set conventions and modes become the primary content of a course. Formalism as the driving theory behind one's pedagogy can be reductive. My own experience using *They Say / I Say* in FYC demonstrates this hazard.

Made curious by my colleagues' uses of *They Say / I Say*, I adopted the text in one course section. The students wrote first drafts using the templates, and the resulting writing suffered from the same early troubles as those produced without templates: undeveloped thoughts, clunky phrasing, and confusion. Another complication was added to their writing, however. The select pieces of their drafts based on the templates were often, to be blunt, incomprehensible to me, as if the students had been playing an academic form of *Madlibs*. Indeed, the *Madlibs* comparison seems to come quickly to teachers of a certain generation. Two of my colleagues made this same joke to me before I read Jason Arthur and Anne Case-Halferty's 2008 review of *They Say / I Say* in which they observe: “Blanks can easily be filled with flawed syntax and illogic that a student would not otherwise have produced without the authoritative guidance of the template. With this academic version of *Madlibs*, certain dead ends are so stifling that they might produce a species of cluelessness rendering the question ‘What do I mean?' unanswerable.” My students frequently complained that the templates were inhibiting, limiting both what they could say and how they could say it. Often, their phrasing had become mangled as they shoehorned ideas into the blanks. I felt limited, too, helping students to produce texts with a very short list of rhetorical tools—there were no templates for including personal narrative, for instance, or for experimenting with mixed genres (or for including anecdotal evidence, as I do here).

The reduction of composition to a list of “moves that matter” is an old phenomenon. Rule-sets and models have been recounted and revised by Plato in *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* and by Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style.* Over the past sixty years, the pressure to teach writing quickly and neatly in the span of a single semester has generated a long catalogue of composition textbooks grounded in the pedagogical theory that one can write by mastering generic models. When this pedagogy stands as the sole framework for a course, students may not be prompted to consider how the content, audience, or purpose might influence the development and organization of their thoughts—the schema limits choice. For example, in his composition textbook *Writing with a Purpose*, first published in 1950 with reissues through the 1990s, James McCrimmon goes so far as to provide formulae: an illustrative essay is “T + E1 + E2, etc., where T stands for *thesis* and E for *example* ” (61) (original emphasis). McCrimmon presents equations like this for each of the current-traditional modes. Similarly, a few years ago I taught from a mandated text providing two options for organizing a compare and contrast essay; students were not encouraged to stray from the prescribed patterns. This formalist pedagogical focus treats prescriptive rules as if they preceded thinking; moreover, a *few* accepted academic models are portrayed as facilitating the processes and purposes of every student writer.

This may seem an overstatement. Will students actually feel compelled to reproduce the conventions of templates or modes even when the integrity of their developing ideas is at stake? My experiences in un-teaching the five-paragraph essay seem to suggest that this is the case. I have frequently worked hard in my own composition classes to convince freshmen that they do not always need a “blueprint statement” after a thesis, and that a paragraph is not bound to being three to five sentences in length.

Similarly, many freshmen enter my courses having learned the conventions of “the research paper,” believing that it is a single genre with the sole purpose of gathering and presenting information. As many professors and disciplines demand more from research writing than reporting, I must introduce them to the relationship of research to interpretation, analysis and discussion, asking students, “So what?” and “Who cares?” To be fair, Graff and Birkenstein cover the need to contextualize information, using these same long-familiar questions, in chapter seven of *They Say / I Say*; however, their templates may undermine that goal. Arthur and Case-Halferty worry that the reductive nature of templates can result in misrepresentation of both ideas and scholars: “By teaching students to vulgarize an argument, to reduce it down to a single clash, the authors encourage oversimplification and deliberate ignorance of the complexity of a given conversation.” Already, I struggle to move students beyond reducing every debate to a for-or-against binary, a formalist approach common (and understandable) in early writing instruction. I bet many of us can remember, as I do, literally having to choose an uncomplicated “pro” or “con” stance for a middle school essay. While Graff and Birkenstein's intent certainly is not to limit thinking in this way, this simplification can be easily wrought out of their templates—and any simplification may be too tempting to both the anxious student and the overworked teacher. Some conventional rules are so familiar to most of them that many students have difficulty writing in any other way. I wonder, then, if the moves and forms suggested in Graff and Birkenstein's templates might likewise become habits that they will one day struggle to unlearn.

Consequently, I am concerned that a focus on formalism may result in student prose that is technically sufficient but not intellectually engaging or stylistically interesting. How often do we challenge undergraduate student-writers to produce academic writing that they and others would actually *want* to read? In this vein, Derek Owens compares student papers to “prefab forms” and wonders, “How complicit have we [teachers] been in contributing to this terrain, we who have been conscripted, conditioned, and determined in part by obligatory prose forms assumed within our institutions and professions?” (365). We should not be surprised, suggests Owens, that student papers are “functional. Forgettable” (366). Templates may sometimes make for cleaner, quicker essays; the quality of the content is assumed to follow later. Learn these forms first, they say, and the matter will take care of itself. In “Is Teaching Still Possible? Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning,” Ann Berthoff critiques similar “positivist conception[s] of language,” objecting that they act “as a set of muffin tins into which the batter of thought is poured,” and may lead “to question-begging representations and models of the composing process” (330). To extend Berthoff's metaphor: initially, anyway, the taste of the muffins is not as important as their uniform look.

At the same time, I am certain that many of my colleagues see nothing wrong with forms and formalism, blueprint statements and all. I have often heard people say that students must learn “the rules” before they may break them. But what are students truly learning about academic writing as they absorb these rules?

Ritual and Rhetoric

Both new formalist texts like *They Say / I Say* and older formalist texts like McCrimmon's *Writing with a Purpose* do discuss the roles of purpose, audience, and context, yet these considerations sometimes take a backseat to the conventions of the templates or modes the texts' authors choose to represent academic writing. In other words, if assignments do not have a “well-grounded intellectual and communicative task” (14), as Anne Beaufort asserts they should in *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*, then “writing becomes for the sake of a writing class, rather than writing for the sake of intellectual pursuits. And the skills taught are without grounding in, or acknowledgement of, the effects of subjects and their social contexts on writing activity” (12). Similarly,

John Clifford insists that if a writing teacher's primary focus is a set of discourse features, then “writing subjects learn that the panoply of discourse conventions are, in fact, the *sine qua non*, that adherence to ritual is the real ideological drama being enacted” (387). As a result, students may pay attention to reproducing a classroom's subset of “moves that matter” without considering if or why they differ with context; they may focus on producing technically acceptable prose and not intellectually engaging prose. This dissociation of thinking and writing seems counter not only to the value the university lays on critical thinking but to the writing truly respected both in and out of academia. Moreover, Beaufort's study of undergraduate writers demonstrates that students can have difficulty transferring what they learn in a composition class into other courses (11); if students have learned more about ritual than rhetoric, they may not be able to adjust to the new genres teachers will ask them to compose as they advance.

Of course, students will be asked to write in discipline-specific fixed forms during their college careers, such as the lab report or the case study. I do not pretend that modes do not matter. I do not, as Graff insists many educators do, see “*standardized* and *standardization* as dirty words” (134). Rather, I argue that a course *dominated* by formalism, by the mastery of a particular set of conventions or a few modes chosen by a text or composition teacher, will not necessarily serve students as they encounter new expectations and genres beyond the comp class.

Yet so focused have many of us become on helping students “invent the university,” as David Bartholomae famously described the acquisition of academic discourses, that we might too often dismiss ideas wrapped in unconventional prose forms. Or, we may insist students be strictly conventional out of fear that other professors will dismiss them. In our own scholarship, many of us may feel likewise limited, censoring our styles in order to be taken seriously by those journals and publishing houses whose editorial policies seem steeped in formalism.(See, for example, Patricia Bizzell's “The Intellectual Work of ‘Mixed' Forms of Academic Discourses” in which she recounts the controversy surrounding the publication of a mixed-genre piece in the *Journal of American History*.)

Transparency and Invisibility

Despite the potential pitfalls of a dominating formalism, some of its supporters attest that academics have themselves made the precepts of formalism necessary. In *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, Mitch Nakaue and Michelle Sizemore defend *They Say / I Say* on this point, arguing that the culture of academia is one of “opacity,” evidenced by veteran scholars who keep their research a secret from colleagues, and teachers who are reluctant to “disclose the procedures of scholarship” to students. Indeed, in the 2007 edition of *Profession*, Graff frames his textbook as a response to “a serious lack of transparency in the academic intellectual world” (128) and a “college curriculum” which “does more to conceal the secrets of academic success than to make those secrets explicit” (129).

From the perspective of some 21st century formalists, composition teachers are largely sinister gatekeepers, forcing newcomers to stumble about, making guesses, as they click their tongues in disappointment. Nakaue and Sizemore claim, “When students aren't told by their teachers what they need to know and how to acquire that knowledge, teachers assume inhospitable roles in which they obstruct students' entry into the very community where they serve as guides or hosts.” In contrast, they insist, Graff and Birkenstein not only lay the tools of academic writing bare, but also acknowledge “the reality that our students cannot imagine a world that is not dominated by tools, technologies, and mechanisms that have been set in place to make life easier—or at least more fun.”

Obviously, the assumptions Nakaue and Sizemore make can be challenged. First, while some teachers no doubt unfortunately see themselves as gatekeepers, I must believe that most compositionists have long seen their role as exploring and explaining academic writing. I reject the black hat they want me to wear. Indeed, compositionists have developed numerous pedagogies with the aim of discussing and practicing scholarly writing; formalism is not the only means of exposing the intellectual work of academic composing. Nor are all of these methods the “natural” and “organic” means (here I can't help but read “hippie” between their lines) that Nakaue and Sizemore claim “undervalue” the study of specific “strategies and tools.” For example, pedagogies informed by rhetorical theory, genre theory or post-process theory are concerned with examining contexts and choosing tools with care. While I cannot claim any knowledge of Nakaue's and Sizemore's expertise, they do identify themselves in their article as literature teachers. I can't help but wonder how much their argument is influenced by this position.

In April and May of 2008, members of the Writing Program Administrators Listserv [WPA] debated the value of *They Say / I Say*, and the resulting conversation did indeed highlight a disconnect between the perspectives brought to writing pedagogy by compositionists and other English professionals. Many established composition theorists contributed to this conversation, as well as Graff and Birkenstein themselves. The discussion was often passionate and at times heated. At one point, William Thelin writes, “B&G [sic] couldn't do any better than making vague allusions to those silly compositionists who think the 5-paragraph essay is a formula. It's as if B&G want to pretend the field of composition doesn't exist—or at least that it doesn't matter.” Charles Bazerman adds, “This discussion indicates the depth and range of the intellectual resources of our profession—a depth and range not recognized by the authors [Graff and Birkenstein], whether or not their book is useful.” Graff calls for transparency in composition teaching while ignoring the historical abundance of composition theorists and pedagogues who strive for it. It seems compositionists are not merely transparent—to some, we are invisible. Graff and Birkenstein are, notably, not compositionists. Some compositionists on the WPA listserv objected to the text for what they saw as a co-opting of academic territory. The more thoughtful critiques, though, pointed out that Composition Studies has long favored more complex and painstaking approaches to teaching writing, approaches which demand from students more thought and trial and error. They object to Graff and Birkenstein's repackaging of formalism as innovative, when in fact it may be a means of making teaching and grading easier—a way of generating drafts more quickly and cleanly, with less time and effort spent on developing the ideas of the writer and exploring various means of presenting them. Composition via templates denies student writers the rhetorical flexibility to choose form and style based on context and audience Again, there are many ways of making the moves of academic writing, in all its flavors, less opaque, but most are more unruly than filling in blanks.

Yet a focus on formalism may undeniably be attractive to the frustrated or overworked writing teacher. Sydney Dobrin admits that composition teachers, too, desire simple answers: “We want to be able to go to our classrooms, teach writing, see our students engage in discourse; and we want to be able to identify that when we are finished our students are not only better writers—that is, closer to mastering discourse—but also better people, and if they are not, we want clear signs as to why” (89). The set schema and limited features to which formalism can be reduced are certainly less daunting to tackle in a semester than the complex interplay of skills that comprise advanced literacy. Indeed, I would never claim that I could teach students “how to write” in a mere fifteen weeks. And, as Dobrin implies, we naturally long for a sense of accomplishment, one I believe is less easily achieved when we give as much attention to the messier and subjective sides of writing in our composition classes.

Complicating the matter even further is the reality of how composition courses are staffed at most institutions. I must concede that writing instruction is not populated exclusively by degreed compositionists. In 2001, the Conference on

College Composition and Communication Committee on Part-time / Adjunct Issues reported that seventy-five percent of composition teachers nationwide were graduate students, adjuncts, and temporary employees (340). While some universities foster dynamic composition programs, the current culture is one in which English teachers often work outside of their specialties and interests. Formalism suits this system very well, providing an unambiguous means of teaching and grading writing, a boon to anyone who is unsure how to proceed in unfamiliar territory.

While the compositionists writing on the WPA Listserv were justifiably offended by what seemed to be Graff and Birkenstein's willful ignorance of the history of Composition Studies and its many alternative pedagogies, I believe they must admit that the authors of *They Say / I Say* may simply know their audience well. They are not writing for the compositionist minority, but for the majority of those teaching writing, hungry to find ways to do right by their students while working, as is often the case, outside of their academic comfort zones and inside the pressure cooker of graduate, adjunct, or untenured work. It would be unfair to ignore how the context of these academic working conditions affect the choices teachers make—when indeed they are allowed choices, and not given a mandated textbook.

Composition in Context

My discussion thus far has been begging the question: what do I see as the purpose of a composition course? I see my role as encouraging students to examine academic writing critically, in terms of its social and rhetorical contexts. I help students to practice analyzing the purpose, audience and genre of assignments in order to determine which conventions are appropriate to the situation. I also encourage students to consider whether they should conform or resist those expectations.

I endeavor to strike a balance between the study of academic conventions and the study of the larger intellectual concerns behind why and what we write. In this way, I have applied to my course designs Gary Olsen's larger observation that the field of Composition "is perfectly situated to participate in the exciting cross-disciplinary investigations of the interrelations between epistemology and discourse" (24). I want students to learn to question conventions and educational writing in ways they had not before considered.

Again, I see formalism as a useful component of composition teaching; my trepidation is with its dominance. In this final section, I move from my critique of formalism to a practical discussion of one way in which form and intellectual work intersect in my classroom.

I write from a teaching philosophy grounded in post-process theory, one sensitive to contextual considerations. I prefer student-writers to begin with critical thought, and then to shape the composition as rhetorical context demands—even when those demands are limited to an audience of one (the professor) and a singular purpose (to pass the assignment).

My position certainly does not constitute a new pedagogical approach; the methods and assignments I use are the combined result of the experience I have accumulated, the lore teachers have shared with me and the theories I have studied. For instance, I was inspired by reading *Relations, Locations, and Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers*, edited by Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon to create an assignment I call "Locating Writing." I ask students to reflect on and analyze their writing processes, their personal definitions of "good writing," or their perceptions of themselves as writers. The intent is a less ambitious version of Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon's post-process text: To "remind us that as writers we are never alone…and that all forms of symbolic action reflect a way of knowing the world conditioned by how we are positioned in it" (16). My aim, ultimately, is to stimulate thinking about and critique of the ways in which we are taught to read and write. I do not encourage blanket rejection of standards; rather, I assume that students can best make informed decisions about their writing and about their educations when they have considered from where and from whom standards emerge. I return to the tenets of Paulo Freire: "To alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects" (85). I want students to be subjects, not objects, in their educations.

The assignment sheet for this work that students receive outlines my intentions:

> In this project, I ask you to consider the factors that affect your identity as a writer. What influences your perceptions of writing, your idea of yourself as a writer, and the development of your work? Our readings, homework assignments and class discussions will ask you to reflect on diverse influences including: race, class, gender, ideology, experience, classes, books, persons, and physical locations. Looking back on these reflections, you will compose a work of "creative nonfiction," the characteristics of which we will discuss and determine in class discussions. As it is an academic piece, your creative nonfiction should be more than entertaining storytelling: it should have an analytical or critical purpose.

Before writing, we read Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," Leslie Yoder's "Resisting the Assignment," Peter Elbow's "Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard," and Richard Rodriguez's "Achievement of Desire," among other texts. I choose readings in which the authors not only explore how their concepts of writing and language use were formed, but also exemplify mixed genres and designs not typical in students' own academic coursework. In class discussion, we analyze the authors' rhetorical choices, which include mixing narrative and analysis, citing both poems and scholarly sources, eschewing chronological organization, and of course, employing formal elements of various genres. As they draft their own compositions, I encourage students to experiment with alternative forms, to find an approach that suits their voices and purposes.

Preparation for composing also includes in-class freewriting and discussions intended to promote reflection on students' beliefs about writing. For instance, writing prompts ask, "Why do schools teach and use the five-paragraph essay?" "How do you define 'good' writing?" "How should writing be taught?" and "What makes a work 'literary'?" In our discussions, I urge students to consider and express what experiences and values underlie their responses.

We also discuss the status of unconventional writing in the academy, reading Patricia Bizzell's "The Intellectual Work of 'Mixed' Forms of Academic Discourses." In this piece, Bizzell notes that "slowly but surely, previously nonacademic discourses are blending with traditional academic discourses to form the new 'mixed' forms" (2). Yet she cautions readers that "It would be a mistake to imply that the 'mixing' in alternative academic discourses can go on easily, naturally, or without political opposition from the powers that be" (4). We discuss this opposition in contexts students may encounter, considering how and why "mixed forms" of writing might be received by professors across the disciplines. We also generate ideas for negotiating the use of mixed forms with their teachers.

In the end, not every student chooses to write an unconventional essay in response to my assignment, nor is that my intention. Rather, I intend to give students rhetorical control over their projects, choosing the form for themselves (with

guidance and feedback from fellow students and me). Students have often told me that this assignment is the first instance in which they have been given the freedom to select the form as well as content of their academic writing. Moreover, some of my students have never considered how their educational experiences, reading habits, and cultural affiliations have shaped their conceptions of writers and writing. Reflection on these influences is the beginning; further, I want students "to resist the systematic and to recognize that no conception of 'good writing' emerges outside of an implied or interpreted context" (Vandenberg, Hum and Clary-Lemon 16).

By critically examining the forces that shape their own ideas about writing, as well as those of particular academic communities, I certainly have goals for students grounded in traditional rhetorical studies: I hope that they will come to see writing not as a set of conventions to be memorized, but as an event shaped by the rhetorical situation, including the perceptions of author and audience. More than that, however, I hope students will systematically reflect on the ways and means in which writing is presented to them in academia, understanding that standards, instruction and assignments are culturally and ideologically grounded.

This assignment certainly does not represent an answer to the challenges of a busy schedule or the complications of the academic labor system. Nor do I have a simple alternative to formalism; I do not think I must have one. Instead, I would like to see the transparency of the "academic game" taken up by every teacher in every discipline. I would like us all to acknowledge that the moves that matter are varied—and always in flux. I would like students and teachers alike to challenge conventions when they do not suit their purposes. I would like to nurture the critical writing of freshman composition students without assuming the impossible task of teaching a universal academic discourse in a single semester. At least, that's what I say.

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