The Economy of Explicit Instruction

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ABSTRACT: The risk posed by explicit instruction in composition is that the reduction of writing to stock moves and effective devices may diminish the writer's agency and guarantee reproduction of the teacher's. The advantage of explicit instruction is power: overt and recursive attention to selected strategies can help students imagine the public agency the instruction itself may temporarily suspend. This study argues that growth in student writing can follow from replacing problem-solving assignments (based on the problem-solving strategies found in Freakonomics*) with rhetorical-analysis assignments. In this latter kind of assignment, the four features of explicit instruction that this study found empowering are (1) paying attention to how published writers frame problems; (2) labeling the framing move as a rhetorical design on readers; (3) weighing the effects of such designs on readers; and, in a rhetorical analysis of* Freakonomics*, (4) rewriting an already-framed problem. Such instruction is necessarily preliminary to, but also part of, reflective inquiry into the ethics of the conventions, practices, and aims of teaching and learning academic writing.*

KEYWORDS: explicit instruction, economic metaphors, rhetorical analysis and framing, ritual.

I. The Practical and the Human

In the March 2007 issue of *The Council Chronicle*, the article "What Is College-Level Writing?" revisits an old question. To answer this question, the author, Amy Bauman, interviews several compositionists, one of whom, Patrick Sullivan, explains why the question remains important. The question of what college-level writing is still matters, Sullivan says, because how we answer that question "'determines so much of what we do'" (8). This claim seems exactly right. He goes on to say, however, that "'practical reasons'—'what we *do*' [emphasis added]—'are secondary to human reasons,'" which Bauman reasonably interprets to mean "the development of the individual" (8). Although this interpretation is reasonable, it does not explain how "'human reasons'" differ from the practical. The "'practical reasons'" of figuring out "'what we do,'" moreover, are not only different from "human reasons"; they are "'secondary.'" But why practical reasons are secondary is also unclear and, for teachers of writing, troubling. It is troubling to think, that is, that "the development of the individual" might

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not from the start inform, or be primarily related to, our inquiry into what we do for, to, and with our students.

If practical reasons are distinct from human reasons—and let us concede that deadlines are different from death—those practical reasons are not necessarily secondary. They may be essentially entangled with what we choose to call the "human"—the very means by which the human is inferred, embodied, voiced. In our everyday lives as teachers of writing, we compose the human with practical considerations: what texts (if any) do we assign and why? What writing assignment or sequence of assignments works best—and on what basis do we make that evaluation? Toward what revisionary ends do we pitch our comments on this particular paper by this particular student at this particular point in the term? If we do not spend as much time on style and voice as on invention and arrangement, why not? These practical considerations are not necessarily identical with all that is human, but they are in dialogue with mortal matters. Each of us has just so much time to help each student in each of our classes develop something—practical habits, skills, attitudes—of value.

One interesting question raised by the relation of the practical to the human is how explicitly to direct students' human capacities into practical forms. I see one version of this potentially problematic relationship adumbrated in Doug Hesse's candidate for what college-level writing should be: it should be, as Bauman quotes him, "'the ability to contribute to ongoing debates or discussions in ways that reflect both the writer's understanding of others' perspectives (what has been said before and what is being said now) and of current rhetorical situations. It's the ability to adapt to audiences and purposes'" (8). As I understand Hesse's answer, to be able to join a discussion, to understand what-others-have-said-and-are-saying *as a perspective*, and to make appropriate responses that keep the discussion going are constituent features of college-level writing. And insofar as these features can be found the world over, in places where college-level writing does not happen, in oral as well as in literate cultures, these features are *human*.

I see the *practical*—and the problem its relation to the *human* raises—in what Hesse goes on to say as he completes his answer: "the more important conversation focuses on . . . the types of real-world writing that college students and graduates need to be able to do. 'How do those kinds of writing relate to writing in vocational/professional, civic, and personal spheres?'" (8). The topic of relations among kinds of "real-world writing" may be "the more important conversation," I think, because this conversation aims to find out what our instruction can do for our students. It is a conversation

that will help us answer, in other words, the question of why we would care to define college-level writing in any particular way. But even more, because it is a conversation in which we hold a far-more privileged position than most of our students—we may have long and wide-ranging experience with workplace writing and civic action, we may have studied the relations of varieties of academic discourse to other discourses, and in any case we may feel it is our job to care about this conversation—we have to decide *how* to teach these future-oriented relations to our students.

Along with this practical question of how explicitly to teach these relations, there is the practical question of which of the many relations to real-world writing— "'vocational/professional, civic, and personal spheres'"—to feature. There is much to choose from. Which emphasis is practically best or humanly right? Although there may be sharp disagreements among us not only on what college-level writing is but also on how to help students achieve that level, we agree it is important to keep this conversation going. This agreement explains why most teachers of writing make their pedagogical choices a key part of the argument they conduct with their students—argument, I say, and not just conversation, because at least some students will passionately disagree with their teachers' decisions about what to do, the assumptions on which those decisions are based, assessments of what has been learned, interpretations about what next steps to take, and so on.

The remainder of this essay will take up some problems posed by explicit instruction: first, a general sense of the ethical uncertainty explicit instruction poses—the problem of whether to name for students what is important and what they must do (Section II); next, the particular problem of which kind of real-world writing to relate explicitly to academic discourse (economics, in this case, as represented in *Freakonomics*—Sections III and IV); then, the explicit rhetorical intervention designed to improve the pedagogical shortcomings discussed in Section III (Section IV); and last a reflection on what the limited success of the explicit rhetorical intervention might have to say to us (Section V).

II. The Economy of the Explicit

How explicitly to conduct our arguments with our students is at least as salient a question as at what level to set college-level writing. How explicitly directive to be has recently been at issue because of the specter of passive learning, that is, explicit instruction linked "with kinds of rote instruction that have indeed encouraged passivity and drained writing of its creativity

and dynamic relation to the social world" (Graff and Birkenstein xv). In a critique of such instruction, Barbara Couture points out how device-laden it is, whether the devices be the specific templates found in Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say* or, more generally, "the rhetorical modes; the five-paragraph theme; the processes of prewriting, writing, and drafting; and perhaps even the techniques of tagmemic analysis, problem solving, brainstorming, or cooking and growing" (41). The price we pay for such practical devices, Couture suggests, is our humanity: "Devices make things available to us without requiring any investment from us; they reduce human activity to the mere process of acquiring a commodity" (41). In the economy of learning that is explicit instruction, students are reproduced as consumers, not apprenticed to invention and negotiation.

This educational reproduction must be risked, Graff and Birkenstein argue, because "many students will never learn on their own to make the key intellectual moves that our templates represent" (xv). Graff and Birkenstein's templates encompass generic moves like "the rhetoric of problem-formulation," a move that, research tells us, does improve with explicit instruction (Williams and Colomb 258). The improvement associated with explicit instruction, Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb argue, is one good indicator that explicit instruction is worthy of our investment. Elaborating the economic metaphor that informs the pro and con sides of explicit instruction, they frame the risk as follows:

> Nothing challenges our professional worth more than the charge that we are failing our students, perhaps even doing them harm. Aviva Freedman offers the sobering hypothesis that at best we do students no good when we try to teach them to write by teaching them explicit features, rules, or principles of specific genres. At stake in her claim, however, is more than our self-worth. Were such a claim true, it would challenge how we structure curricula, write textbooks, train teachers, do research—indeed, whether we do some research at all. It would encourage financially-strapped provosts to ask what makes generic courses like first year or advanced composition worth their cost. If on the other hand we act on Freedman's hypotheses and they are wrong, the cost will be borne by our students. (Williams and Colomb 252)

The economic metaphor is deliberate, as Williams and Colomb make clear. Taking "the liberty of reframing [Freedman's] question," they revise "'Is ex-

plicit teaching of particular features possible at all?'" into "'Is the benefit of explicit teaching of salient features worth the cost?'" In an extended modification of this latter question, they break down its economic implications:

> Assuming normal conditions of effective teaching (knowledgeable teachers, developmentally-ready students, authentic and meaningful tasks),
>
> > When we explicitly teach specific feature [F] in situation [S], how many students [N] reap benefit [B] (learning, retention, adaptability, confidence, etc.) at what cost [C] (time, demands on students, knowledge and training required of us, etc.)?
>
> Though this formulation may appear crudely economic, it preserves the question for serious investigation. Freedman predicts that research will show that explicit teaching produces negligible benefits at best and may even do harm. We believe the evidence, both theoretical and empirical, already indicates otherwise, that the harm is illusory and that the benefits are many and exceed their costs. (Williams and Colomb 253)

I admire how frankly the authors admit the economic, the ways in which it must deeply inform how we think about teaching—the persons as well as the things we teach. Consider how this deep information is surfaced by their "formulation": quantity ("how many"), value/worth ("worth the costs," "reap benefit," "negligible benefits," and "benefit"), and risk ("even do harm" and "exceed their cost"), none of which appears to me "*crudely* economic." Even in its cruder versions, the economic seems to me quite human. Which books to use and what kinds, what kinds of writing to assign and how much—these are ethical questions because every text we assign is a choice imposed on students, a choice made by teachers committing students to something rather than something else. Time and space are severely limited (ten short weeks for a basic writing curriculum that serves all majors at the polytechnic university where I work—and where, year after year, on the basis of the California State University's English Placement Test, over 50 percent of incoming first-year students are placed into non-credit-bearing, remedial writing courses). What *would be* crudely idealistic would be to write about pedagogy as though these economic considerations were administrative only, as if they were not essentially implicated in teaching and learning.

Because I do believe these considerations are essentially implicated

in teaching and learning, I thought it would make sense (and still think it makes sense) to bring the economic more explicitly into my teaching and into my students' learning. That this explicit focus added value is a point the rest of this essay will demonstrate.

III. Teaching *Freakonomics* Rhetorically

In the fall term of 2005, my students and I spent some time with Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner's *Freakonomics*, the best-selling account of a rogue economist who freakishly solves big problems. As a book representative of contemporary and/or ideal practice in the work of economics, *Freakonomics* arguably does not quite qualify. Many economists "complain that Levitt and his ilk are so far removed from using meat-and-potatoes economic theory they may as well be practicing journalism" (or at least the "nerds" among them make this complaint, according to Noam Scheiber [31]). Obsessed with the methodological snazziness of *Freakonomics*, new Ph.D.s in economics, according to Berkeley professor Raj Chetty, are no longer thinking, "'What important question should I answer?'" (Scheiber 28). What it means to answer an important question is itself an important point, so in Section V below, I will return to it.

Freakonomics may or may not be methodologically flip, but it is exemplary rhetorically. In Donald Schön's well-known terms, *Freakonomics* acknowledges the fact that problems are not out there in the world waiting to be solved; we, rather, must "*name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them" (Schön 40). The problems that *Freakonomics* provocatively names and frames, it answers with data and logic, using the power of numbers to separate *what is* from *what is believed*, allowing the evaluation of the quality of the reasons for our belief. Its answers tend to keep the problems alive and open—as questions deserving further inquiry—rather than closing them shut. Its answers, furthermore, complicate rather than reaffirm the conventional wisdom (e.g., "But if an adopted child is prone to lower test scores, a spanked child is not. This may seem surprising—not because spanking itself is necessarily detrimental but because, conventionally speaking, spanking is considered an unenlightened practice" [Levitt and Dubner 171]). And *Freakonomics* is dialogic, giving voice to the reader's questions (e.g., "How, then, can we tell if the abortion-crime link is a case of causality rather than simply correlation?" [140]), while also anticipating objections ("Sure enough, the states with the highest abortion rates in the 1970s experienced the greatest crime drops in the 1990s, while

states with low abortion rates experienced smaller crime drops. (This correlation exists even when controlling for a variety of factors that influence crime: a state's level of incarceration, number of police, and its economic situation.)" [140-41]).

Freakonomics, then, seemed an efficient solution to the problem of connecting, for students of Basic Writing, the human and the practical, approaching human desires from pragmatic and profitable angles. As Julie Nelson puts it in *Economics for Humans*, "Understanding that economies are vital, living, human-made, and shaped by our ethical choices can help to improve our decisions—both individually and as a society" (Nelson 3-4; see also McCloskey 41, 55, 71, 420). That my students would see the rhetorical contingencies that ground our ideals, would therefore grasp the civic salience of the economic, would put the practical and human into dialectical exchange—this hope was initially thwarted. And it was thwarted not by the students' resistance, as one might expect, but by their enthusiasm. They thought they were being unusually well served by our focus on the economic because, as they put it, it made perfect sense to analyze any human interaction for its underlying incentive structure—to ask always, "What's the deal?"

Once I questioned, peevishly and imprecisely, their capitulation to incentive structures: "Must everything be economic?" A young woman responded, "Of course it's economic; everyone needs a carrot!" To which I, the rather plaintive straight-man, put the question, "But what if you don't need a carrot?" "Then," another student said, "you're a vegetable!"

Although I find that story memorable, it is mainly representative: only *I* needed persuading that carrots were always necessary. Was it unnecessary, then, to focus on the economic, when students already grasped its necessity? Here's another story, one meant to illustrate how we stumbled past the vaudeville of my either-or question and into the pathos of the economic question. Recently in a grad seminar the question arose whether it was ethical to require first-year college students to read *Lolita*. Some of us claimed that eighteen-year-olds, ready or not, have entered the adult world—and what better place than a college classroom to engage a literate pedophile's eloquent perversions; others claimed that the artfulness of *Lolita* was secondary to the pain it could cause anyone who'd been abused. The discussion proceeded sincerely but, at best, lukewarmly, until one student declared it "silly." "If eighteen-year-olds can be sent to Iraq," he asserted, his patience about gone, "they can read *Lolita*."

What had been lukewarm heated up. Was the student saying that

sending young soldiers to Iraq was ethical or unethical? If unethical, was he then saying that if the greater of two unethical acts is common practice, then it was silly at best to worry about the occurrence of the lesser of the two unethical acts? But if assigning *Lolita* was ethical because it confronted students with the reality of a perspective they needed to understand because the better they understood it, the better they could recognize it to intervene, then by the same logic would assigning hard-core or child pornography also be ethical? If any assigned reading has the potential to upset students, then what compels us to take some risks but guard against others?

What I find interesting is how much this turn animated the students. In quantifying quality, we did not so much reduce quality as relate the question of the ethical to the quantitative question of how much unethical risk is too much, a turn that by exposing values also endowed them with a little more urgency. The question was not whether to assign possibly offensive texts (texts probably ought to violate commonsense and home truths in some way). The question, rather, was what price is not too high to pay: how much unequal treatment of students is not too much, how much sacrifice of the well-being needed to learn is not too much. Since *whose* well-being matters, this question should be recast as how many students to be sacrificed for the greater good is not too many. If we allow that some young people *will* get left behind, how many left behind is not too many? *Who* shall these students be?

The economic imperative, then, coincides with a significant rhetorical imperative: to affect policy by reasoning probabilistically about highly contested issues. That the economic meaningfully overlaps with the rhetorical proved, however, to be educationally insufficient, as I hope to show.

My students engaged the economic in the form of *Freakonomics*. I say my students "engaged" *Freakonomics*. "Embraced it" is better. Asked in the fall of 2005 to write with and against *Freakonomics*—to talk like it but also to talk back to it—students balked. Talk back to it?! They could not, protested my students (would-be accountants, computer scientists, K-6 teachers, and psychologists). *Why not?* I asked. *Because*, one student (an engineering major) explained, *you cannot argue with facts*. *Why not?* I asked again. *Because they're proof!* he said. *Facts are facts*.

As I understood my students, they took facts to be what was beyond question—that which was self-evident or had already been established. Facts, then, either had never been in question or had emerged from an intensive process of questioning. That facts had a privileged status was encouraged by *Freakonomics*' characteristic stance, evident in claims like the following:

> • But a closer look at the data destroys this theory. (121, emphasis added)
> • But a thorough look at the data reveals that the graying of America did nothing to bring down crime in the 1990s. (136, emphasis added)
> • [W]e are less persuaded by parenting theory than by what the data have to say. (157, emphasis added)
> • [T]he data do a nice job of answering the question that every parent—black, white, and otherwise—wants to ask: what are the factors that do and do not affect a child's performance in school? (161, emphasis added)
> • The data reveal that black children who perform poorly in school do so not because they are black but because they tend to come from low-income, low-education households. (164, emphasis added)
> • The California data prove . . . . The data also show . . . . (183, emphasis added)
> • What kind of parent is most likely to give a child such a distinctively black name? The data offer a clear answer: an unmarried, low-income, undereducated teenage mother from a black neighborhood who has a distinctively black name herself. In Fryer's view, giving a child a superblack name is a black parent's signal of solidarity with the community. (184, emphasis added)

These metaphors of speaking data and revelatory data reinforce the belief that facts are proof—for *everyone*, hence the emphasis on discovery rather than on interpretation. This emphasis has consequences: rendering irrelevant the questions of who looks; of whether there might be more than one way to see; of whether there might be more than one way to interpret what is seen, even for the one person who is seeing; of whether it matters how we listen to what the data have to say.

It is not my intention to deny that, in a given situation, there are statements and numbers that count as facts; it was, however, my concern that my students seemed reluctant to question how *Freakonomics*' facts should count. My problem, in other words, was whether *Freakonomics* could be read, could be responded to, more rhetorically.

In his 2003 book *Defining Reality*, Edward Schiappa argues that most people must be socialized out of logical positivism and into rhetorical contingency:

> Most people become socialized into an implicit picture theory of language that they never find necessary to challenge or modify; a fixed world, as pictured and "given" through language, is taken for granted. Early language education and socialization avoids the idea that our understanding of the world is relative and contingent . . . . (62-63)

The "picture theory of language" is referential: as children, we learn that the word "cat" refers to an object that can be pointed to and seen (an animal, an image). Part of such normative socialization into the visual is that we are not encouraged to question how our descriptions are dependent on any particular theory. Although we might wonder about the evidence for Schiappa's claim that most people never find it necessary to modify their picture of a fixed world, most of us probably accept the adjusted claim that our first-year students have been socialized if not to accept institutionally assigned non-fiction texts as authoritative, as factual, then to regard their meaning as contained, something (such as a thesis at the end of the introductory paragraph, say) that can be pointed to and seen in the texts themselves.

The wording of my 2005 assignment did too little to help students read and analyze rhetorical contingency. Their objective was, in the words of the assignment with quoted material from *Freakonomics*,

> to "question something that people really care about and find an answer that may surprise them," to "overturn the conventional wisdom" (89). Conventional wisdom is something people usually accept because it "'contributes most to self-esteem'" and is "simple, convenient, comfortable, and comforting—though not necessarily true" (90). This definition leads us to where questioning should begin: namely, where the "conventional wisdom may be false—... the contrails of sloppy or self-interested thinking—is a nice place to start asking questions" (90).

You can "see" why this assignment led to responses like the following (the student work here and in Section IV, below, is used by permission):

> [December 2005]: Have you ever wondered the true meaning behind things that occur in your life everyday? If you looked into the interactions over your day would you be able to sort through the real and fake interactions? Most people are oblivious to the lack

> of care that people and material items represent. When there is a specific job to be done by either a person or item it is most likely going to loose the sincere care. Therefore grocery stores and Barbie dolls are similar because they both portray something different than what they really are.

By imitating one aspect of a *Freakonomics*' technique—the reversal of conventional wisdom by yoking together two unlike objects—the fall 2005 papers reproduced, and exposed, what was arguably non-academic about that technique: its "cleverness problem," as one critic has labeled it. This same critic also called *Freakonomics* "an academic parlor game" (Scheiber 28). Such name-calling is, I think, unfair. If *Freakonomics* is an academic parlor game, it is not always just that. Parts of it may be gimmicky, however, or (more fairly) can be taken as such: the parts in which the conventional wisdom is less engaged than staged, the parts in which there is no reading of what others have written. There are parts in which there is no explicit attention to the rhetoric of problem-formulation; my assignment prompt unwittingly directed my students to those parts.

IV. Explicitly Teaching *Freakonomics* Rhetorically

This reaffirmation that students do read strategically, looking to the assignment instructions for direction, compelled me to give more explicit attention to problem-formulation, or rhetorical framing, the next time around. That attention affected the assignment instructions for the paper on *Freakonomics*, some of which follow:

> *Analyze* how *Freakonomics* frames **one** of its arguments and *present* an alternative frame no less compelling than theirs. You will need to incorporate and analyze at least **four** (**4**) quotations from the particular argument you choose from *Freakonomics*. Some of the templates from *They Say/I Say* that should prove useful are those for "Introducing an Ongoing Debate," "Capturing Authorial Action," "Introducing Quotations," and "Explaining Quotations." Depending on how you critique and analyze the quotations, other templates will also help. . . . Thanks to *Freakonomics*' insights into how incentives drive behavior, how information is abused by experts, and so on, we can see how elementary-school teachers are like sumo wrestlers, how drug dealers run their business like McDonald's, and

> how anything that reduces the number of unwanted children also reduces crime rates. Perhaps more significantly, we see the power of principle, for in every freakish comparison, what unites the odd couple is an underlying principle (such as *getting more for less* or *avoiding the stigma of shame*). An implication for you, however, is whether the frame that leads you to see a crucial likeness is, at the same time, also deflecting crucial unlikenesses (how, for example, are school teachers importantly *unlike* sumo wrestlers?).

In preparation for a reading of *Freakonomics*' rhetoric, we worked with Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say*, which provides explicit templates for framing, such as "At first glance, teenagers appear to _____. But on closer inspection _____" (173). To see skillful framing in action, we read experts trying to define important concepts: Harry Frankfurt on "bullshit," Marita Sturken and Kirk Savage on "memorials," Barry Schwartz and Robert Sapolsky on, respectively, the relations of "choice" and "stress" to "happiness." And to theorize these definitional arguments, we read Schiappa on the distinction between "real" definitions and "lexical" definitions: i.e., "Lexical definitions remind us that the relevant question is not 'What *is* rape?' but 'What shall we call "rape"?'" (61).

Because I was trying to keep alive the question of whether facts were proof, I directed my students' attention to Schiappa's chapters on legal arguments over the status of the fetus and over the definition of rape in marriage, arguments that foreground the contingency of facts. The following summary from Schiappa illustrates this contingency: it is possible "for two observers to describe the same event in a contradictory manner: 'It was rape' and 'It was not rape.' There is no neutral or theory-independent way to decide whether such behavior 'really is' rape or not, but such a determination may be readily made once one definition or another is taken as prescriptive" (64). One implication that Schiappa derives from taking a definition as prescriptive is that to define is, therefore, already to plead a cause: "Whether we are talking about a group of scientists or the citizens of a community," he concludes, "our beliefs are intertwined with our needs and interests" (66). I pushed the possibility that this claim might apply to a rogue economist as well.

My next explicit intervention was two-fold: to foreground rhetoric and, thereby, to complicate the metaphor of data as entities that speak and reveal. One effect of foregrounding *Freakonomics*' rhetoric was to reconnect the roguishly mute, data-subservient knower with the known. *Freakonomics*

sometimes specifically castigates "rhetoric": "Notwithstanding the [crack gang's] leadership's rhetoric about the family nature of the business, the gang's wages are about as skewed as wages in corporate America" (Levitt and Dubner 103). Yet *Freakonomics* itself is full of rhetorical devices, devices that perhaps contrast with the rhetoric of numbers:

> • Who cared if the crack game was a tournament that only a few of them could possibly win? Who cared if it was so dangerous—standing out there on a corner, selling it as fast and as anonymously as McDonald's sells hamburgers, not knowing any of your customers, wondering who might be coming to arrest or kill you? Who cared if your product got twelve-year-olds and grandmothers and preachers so addicted that they stopped thinking about anything except their next hit? Who cared if crack killed the neighborhood? (112—*epiplexis*: use of questions to attack)
> • Legalized abortion led to less unwantedness; unwantedness leads to high crime; legalized abortion, therefore, led to less crime. (139—*sorites*: a logical chain; note that the authors do not consider whether unwantedness leads to legal and/or culturally sanctioned forms of proving oneself)
> • Or will they? Parents *must* matter, you tell yourself. Besides, even if peers exert so much influence on a child, isn't it the parents who essentially choose a child's peers? Isn't that why parents agonize over the right neighborhood, the right school, the right circle of friends? (155—*prosopopoeia*: an absent person is represented as speaking; *anaphora*: repetition of the same word at the beginning of clauses and phrases)

Complications of the speaking/revealing metaphor are implicit even in many of *Freakonomics*' characteristic claims:

> • But a careful analysis of the facts shows that the innovative policing strategies probably had little effect on this huge decline. (129, emphasis added)
> • So what does an analysis of the ECLS [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, a project begun by the U.S. Department of Education in the late 1990s] data tell us about school-children's performance? (163, emphasis added)
> • The result is an incredibly rich set of data—which, if the right

> questions are asked of it, tells some surprising stories. (161, emphasis added)
> • How can this type of data be made to tell a reliable story? (161, emphasis added)

The data matter, but they require interpretation and analysis, careful analysis. The facts may show, but what they show is probably the case. The data may talk—if the right questions are asked. The data are capable of telling a reliable story, if they are made to. In sentences such as "Now a researcher is able to tease some insights from this very complicated set of data" (162), data are not garrulous but reticent, requiring a playful courtship—involving people who come armed with certain questions and on the look-out with interest-filled eyes. Note the entanglements in the following: "But this data set tells a different story. After controlling for just a few variables—including the income and education level of the child's parents and the mother's age at the birth of her first child—the gap between black and white children is virtually eliminated at the time children enter school" (164). The data tell a story that corrects the story we typically tell ourselves. But in this story, can it really be that the gap itself controls the variables, or is the dangling modifier a logical extension of *Freakonomics*' metaphorical frame, even though by the logic of the world as we know it, the gap could not have controlled itself into virtual elimination? Put another way, is the dangling modifier a symptom of the belief that numbers talk, or are the authors of *Freakonomics* guilty of the kind of stylistic sloppiness student writers themselves get called on?

Whichever answer one deems better, attention to such questions opens the text to critique. In the following excerpt (from the summer of 2006), the student writer had noticed an interesting piece of language in *Freakonomics* that introduced one of the sections she was critiquing: "To overgeneralize a little bit" (175). If I may overgeneralize, eighteen-year-olds right out of U.S. high schools are selectively intolerant of generalizations, especially when that generalizing is done by people their parents' age. For the authors of *Freakonomics* to generalize, to in fact overgeneralize, and then to add "a little bit"—this not only failed to disarm my student; it got her guard up.

> [August 2006] At first glance, because of the way it was framed, [Levitt and Dubner's] argument [that perfect parenting is largely irrelevant], although shocking to most, stands pretty solid; even though it is hard to believe, the way they set up their proof makes it very convincing. But again, after reviewing the text and its so

> called "facts," the argument tends to become much weaker as more and more questions and doubts begin to arise from it. The reason why so many holes can be found in their argument is because of the weak frame they used to support it. Levitt and Dubner, being the "Rogue Economists" they claim to be, use test scores as proof to their argument that "it isn't so much a matter of what you do as a parent; it's who you are" (175).

Although the writer contradicts herself, calling Levitt and Dubner's frame "weak" after having claimed it "stands pretty solid," she locates this contradiction in *Freakonomics* itself: "'The typical parenting expert, like experts in other fields, is prone to sound exceedingly sure of himself' (148)? Why should we believe them when they themselves tell us not to believe the experts they so strongly resemble?"

The use of *Freakonomics* against itself continues as the writer examines its position that what correlates with high test scores for children is not what their parents do but who their parents are. This distinction is the principle that informs the eight "factors that go hand in hand with test scores," of which the writer selects one in particular, "The child's parents speak English in the home." Against Levitt and Dubner, who frame this fact as something parents *are*, the writer reframes it as an *act*:

> Having parents who speak English in the home is not just who they are, but also it is what they do. There are many parents who speak different languages, and still decide to speak English. For example, my sister speaks English and Spanish. She grew up knowing only Spanish, but now she only talks to her kids in English. This was her decision just like it is the parents' decision to speak to their children in whatever language they want. . . . This is something a parent decides to do. . . [four more inversions of *Freakonomics*' distinctions between "is" and "do"]. From these results, one can see that it is not just who your parents are, but also what they do.

Whereas *Freakonomics* labels the speaking of English in the home as really a matter of who the parents *are*, this paper relabels the speaking of English in the home as something parents *do*. While accepting the facts disclosed by *Freakonomics*, the writer contests the frame—contests, in other words, how the facts are spoken for. Speaking for the facts she knows—that is, the facts she knows have yet to be represented—she reconnects the known with the

knower, breaking *Freakonomics*' link between the data and the known. This move warrants her conclusion that "Levitt's and Dubner's framing of their argument isn't good enough to convince me in believing that parenting styles are insignificant when it comes to how smart a child is. There are far too many factors that have been left out of their argument that would have been of use to better convince the reader."

The explicit teaching worked, in my opinion, but at what cost? How should we, in other words, describe the relationship between what my students learned to do and who they were?

V. Cost-Benefit Analysis

I will end with the problem formulated by Williams and Colomb and quoted earlier in this article:

> When we explicitly teach specific feature [F] in situation [S], how many students [N] reap benefit [B] (learning, retention, adaptability, confidence, etc.) at what cost [C] (time, demands on students, knowledge and training required of us, etc.)? (253)

Keeping in mind the discussion above and plugging some of its particulars into Williams and Colomb's "formula," we might get the following:

> When in the ten weeks available to us in the quarter system we explicitly teach rhetorical framing to incoming first-year students (placed, on the basis of their performance on the California State University English Placement Test, into non-credit-bearing basic-writing classes, despite their self-identified native status in English and demonstrated proficiency, as confirmed by among other things the California High School Exit Exam), all students significantly develop their ability to write analytical papers that will gain a hearing in an academic setting, provided that the instructor spends time explicitly teaching rhetorical framing in the context of the source material to be analyzed—at the necessary expense of other kinds of instruction, other kinds of reading, and other kinds of writing.

My version of explicit instruction made the material available in a certain way—as material designed to have designs on readers, as problems framed to frame readers. This instruction worked, in my opinion—"worked" in the

sense that it prepared students for first-year writing, which their records confirm. But the question remains whether such intervention, however modestly effective, is worth it.

Such intervention is not worth it if it is not the right thing to do. And it might not be. Williams and Colomb concede that the "particular generic forms" of college and workplace writing come with "ideological commitments and consequences" (262). A focus on policy argument will require different commitments and seek (if not cause) different effects than will, say, a focus on lab reports. Each form has its place. But it is not just form that is at issue; there is also the question of pedagogy. I have to be accountable to my students not only for what I am teaching but for how as well. Above all, what justifies my decision to intervene in—to interrupt, to manipulate—their learning?

My answer has three parts. First, I find congenial Williams and Colomb's hopeful belief that "explicit teaching" may be a "necessary step in the process of empowering students to choose how they participate in the communities they encounter and to what degree they will let that participation define who and what they are" (262; see also Gee 541). Explicit instruction in these forms will be worth it, in other words, if students learn to reflect on their participation in strategically important (and often new) communities—reflecting on what participation means, on whether and how it might change them.

This hopeful emphasis on choice seems well founded. Whether participation in our "ideological commitments and consequences" conflicts with who our students are and who they wish to become is a question they can better engage and contest, once it has been explicitly laid out and performed. This emphasis, nevertheless, begs the question of what we require students to choose among. The curriculum I have described limits the choices of students who might prefer learning strategies to write more expressively, of students who would rather find information they can spread, of students who desire a non-rhetorical focus on correctness, of students who want to read something by non-whites, non-males, non-academics. Even more generally, this curriculum puts at a disadvantage students who wish to be rewarded for strengths that are not explicitly asked for by assignments such as mine.

Such students (despite having passed out of remedial writing) may well feel left behind, which is why my answer has two more parts, two beneficial features of this experience that serve as partial insurance against the many possible costs: the stylistic reframing of college-level writing as ritual and the value this experience held for students.

A review of some canonical images from David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts* will help bring these two benefits into relief. Bartholomae and Petrosky represent college-level "reading and writing as a struggle within and against the languages of academic life. A classroom performance represents a moment in which, by speaking or writing, a student *must enter a closed community, with its secrets, codes and rituals*" (8, emphasis added). They frame this "closed community" as a drama, speaking of the "participation in *the play of reading* that goes on within the boundaries of the academic community" (9, emphasis added) and of instruction in revision as having students "reimagine the *roles they might play* as readers and writers" (7, emphasis added). The emphasis on enforced participation surely describes much academic experience.

What if we continue framing the enforced participation in college-level writing along these lines—as the dramatic play of ritual? Here is the second part of my justification: If we pursue the implications of "the roles [students] might play" as they redefine participation in communities, we can better address the question of choice: why would anyone want to join this spectacle? Even better: why choose to write this way? I think of my first-year students, seemingly unaware—much too unaware—of how they were letting received wisdom define them and their relation to authoritative discourse. They took *Freakonomics*' thoughts as revelations, the revelations as facts, the facts as proof. But what if, against their way of taking, we resisted with Kenneth Burke's claim that the "'thoughts' of a writer are not the mere 'revelation,' not the statement of a fact"? What if we act on Burke's claim that the writer's "'thoughts' are the framing of this revelation in ritual. . . . The 'thoughts' of a writer are the non-paraphrasable aspects of his work, the revelation and ritual in fusion" (Burke 168-69)?

Here Burke is referring to the aesthetic phenomenon of repeated pleasure, how a song or painting can be experienced repeatedly and yet with increasing rather than diminishing returns. A prose writer's thought is also, however, "revelation and ritual in fusion"; a reader experiences a writer's thought in the moves of her prose: its twisting and turning, its bending and manipulating in response to the reader's needs and activity, its renaming and reframing of the Big Question. A writer's thought is not so much paraphrased as enacted, a claim that pointedly applies to *Freakonomics*: its thought—which is to say, in this case, its classroom value—lies less in its revelations (as though students could imitate *Freakonomics* best by repeating its discoveries or declaiming revelations of their own) than in its fusion of these revelations in ritual (the shared ways it recognizes and then deviates

from the conventional wisdom, ways that students can in turn and with help recognize, imitate, and adjust).

To act as though college-level writing were thoughts ritualistically framed would mean inquiring into how the ritualistic templates of college-level writing pattern participation in different kinds of conversation. It would mean making more visible the social nature of these conversations, which are, in Anne Haas Dyson's apt formulation, "new sorts of dialogues with the world" (152). Based on her observations of young schoolchildren, Dyson concludes that the agency required to enjoin these dialogues is driven not by "'sentence' meaning nor even by 'conceptual' meaning but by meeting, negotiating, or resisting the expectations and conventions of the social goings-on" (149). If to participate in these social goings-on, these rituals, is to learn to play different roles, then to play these different roles is to act out ways of thinking with different audiences for different purposes.

The *Freakonomics*' assignment sequence did not ask students to play it safe; it did not ask students to reproduce a single correct answer or to follow a recipe for an essay-length paper. It asked them, rather, to act out some ritualized ways of thinking with an audience different from those they were used to; it asked them to read something challenging and say something back to it and to those in the community it represents. As best I can tell—and here begins the third and last part of my justification—my students did not experience their *Freakonomics*' role-playing as infantilizing or dehumanizing. Because the rituals associated with No Child Left Behind, such as fill-in-the-blank worksheets devoted to standardized-test content and pre-circumscribed essay formats that are audience-proof, have narrowly limited students' curricular exposure to "new sorts of dialogues with the world," the college-level ritual of examining the rituals we use to make knowledge seems comparatively adult, respectful, substantial, important, interesting, pleasurable, and helpful. If the community that students "must enter" is a community that asks important questions, it is thereby a community students are willing enough to enter. To the degree they are interested in what a community does, the degree they therefore desire inclusion, that community is less closed to them than if they were indifferent to that community's work—or, and this seems to be the case, than if they were ignorant of it. The big question in *Freakonomics* of whether parenting "perfectly" really matters was for nearly all my students an important question, one they were motivated to answer.

There appears to be a significant difference, however, between these basic writing students and the doctoral students in economics who inspired

Professor Chetty's exasperated declaration: students are not thinking, "What important question should I answer?" (qtd. in Scheiber 28). The difference is not necessarily that first-year students *are* thinking of such fundamental questions, questions so fundamental that the closer one gets to a Ph.D., the farther one's memory has receded from them. Rather, the difference may be that first-year students are less aware that something as fundamental as good parenting is in question. So while I must acknowledge that my students had incentive to disprove what they found freakish—i.e., the claim that what parents can do makes no difference, only who (or what) parents are makes a difference—it is also the case that explicit instruction played a key role in arousing, if not constructing, their highly motivated desire to "communicate with [the] non-intimates" (Gee 541) making questionable claims about them and their families.

As such, the curriculum described above helped student writers imagine, as Barbara Couture says a curriculum ought, "how they as persons speaking to other persons might be seen to have merit or worth in the eyes of their chosen audience" (47). The strategy implied by Couture's words is primarily pathetic, not ethical. Student writers generally do not begin with already established ethical appeal (I've heard several colleagues, when "outsiders" ask them what they do, say that they get paid to read bad writing. So much for the ethos a student starts with). For a writer's ethos—his credibility, quality, and value—to have effect, it must be "recognized by others" (Couture 44). Writing that is ethically effective might show the writer's life "as having a purpose in a world of others, as expressing the care and attention for others that will ensure reciprocal care and attention to his or her own singular needs" (47). But how can these qualities be enacted for, and thereby communicated to, "non-intimates"?

Such care and attention, I suggest, is demonstrated when a writer undergoes the expected rituals: framing the problem, naming the big question it raises, renaming what really matters. This imitation of others and essayed immersion in their world are not only the fusion of revelation and ritual (a person performs his respect for what his audience values; his prose embodies the desire to relate his values to theirs); they are pathetic appeals. They are something students can *do* because of who they *are*. They are people who desire to join new dialogues about the world. And in choosing to do this, students are choosing less an economy of gains and losses, in which to write one way means to trade some other way, than an economy of development, in which one writes to become more like who one wants to be with certain others.

Author's Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Don Daiker, Professor Emeritus at Miami University, Ohio, as well as Richard Courage, Professor of English at Westchester Community College, SUNY, each of whom gave insightful, helpful feedback to an earlier draft of this article.

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