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Essay

Situated Writing Lessons: Putting Writing Advice in Disciplinary Context

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In the Grip of an Older Theory: When Writing-Intensive Faculty Are Over-Prescriptive

Even the most brilliant of college teachers can absorb only so much writing theory in a two- or three-day writing-in-the-disciplines workshop. The faculty who register for our writing workshops are typically committed to good teaching and believe in the importance of good writing, but they might maintain a polite skepticism about or impatience with current writing theory. Engineers, mathematicians, journalists, even fellow English professors may be less interested in what composition theory suggests than what Dr. Smith down the hall does or what Dr. Black across the table just said. Our challenge, then, is to balance workshop participants' initial desire for practical, clear-cut advice about "good writing" with our professional responsibility to stimulate a critical understanding of any such advice. What is particularly lacking even among seasoned, award-winning faculty in other disciplines is a rhetorical view of writing: an understanding that writing is not one set of generalizable skills and that most criteria for "good writing" are constrained by the occasion, the audience, purpose, and context.

To cast this problem another way, it is almost as if writing-intensive faculty are in the place that English teachers were a half century ago. English teachers might have had a dim awareness of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and of the proverbial advice to know your purpose. But it was a rare English teacher who understood writing rhetorically, from the perspective of audience, purpose, and context. In recent decades, in the wake of James Britton's massive study of the composition of British schoolchildren and the 1966 Anglo-American Dartmouth Conference, among other things, rhetoric has been revived and composition theory has mushroomed. Professional journals and conference calls ask compositionists to relate practice to theory—to reflect, to contextualize, to think rhetorically about writing. For English teachers, the tension between the arhetorical prescriptive pedagogy of the early-twentieth century, often called "current traditionalism," and the equally arhetorical post-sixties writer-centered pedagogy, often called "expressivism," has largely been put to rest. On a theoretical level, the tension between object-oriented philosophy and subject-oriented philosophy has been reconciled by such composition theorists as Louise Wetherbee Phelps in *Composition as a Human Science: Contributions to the Self-Understanding of a Discipline*. Not so, though, for an

agronomist coming for the first time to a writing-in-the-disciplines workshop. The agronomist, with plenty to absorb about assignment design, peer review, criteria for evaluating papers, and so on, might take in only a little writing theory. And, without time to reflect on current writing theory, the agronomist probably remains in the grip of an older theory, probably something close to current traditionalism, a rule-bound pedagogy giving unqualified prescriptive advice.

The problem with rule-bound instruction is not that the "rules" are "wrong"; rather, the problem is that rule-bound instruction might undermine the context-based decision-making that is at the heart of writing and revising. Students may not be exposed to the power of language and their own power to manipulate it for their own ends. Moreover, by over-generalizing one's own writing conventions, one might inadvertently perpetuate prejudices about other disciplines that for good reasons have different writing conventions.

Ignoring Writing Altogether: When Writing-Intensive Teachers Are Under-Descriptive

While some writing-intensive faculty are inclined to give writing advice in absolutist terms, as if conventions true for their own disciplines are the only correct conventions, other writing-intensive faculty deal with their uncertainty about writing by not offering much feedback at all. The problem of under-describing writing conventions extends even to some composition teachers when it comes to issues of grammar, mechanics, and formatting. Certainly, sentence-level issues may not be as important as such issues as thesis development, accurate content, and organization. Nonetheless, most disciplines or language communities do have some unique conventions, even on the sentence level, that have evolved to meet the needs of that community. To fail to teach students the conventions adopted by the communities they're in, even the "lower order" issues, is to put students at risk.

Particularly at risk are English as Second Language (ESL) students or any students new to an academic discipline. We observe among writing-intensive faculty something parallel to what ESL scholars Tony Silva, Ilona Leki, and Joan Carson observe in mainstream compositionists. In "Broadening the Perspective of Mainstream Composition Studies: Some Thoughts from the Disciplinary Margins," Silva, Leki, and Carson lament that mainstream compositionists view errors "somewhat monolithically" and "either [. . .] pay attention to them or not." (414). They argue that "learners need grammatical input that is unavailable in sufficient quantity from their peers" (415), but the "grammatical input" recommended is not a "correction" of something deviant as much as it is a context-specific alternative to add to the student's linguistic repertoire. Similarly, Vivian Zamel argues in "Strangers in Academia: The Experiences of Faculty and ESL Students Across the Curriculum" that, while ESL students don't want to have their difficulties viewed as deficiencies, they do want to have their difficulties discussed with explicit, specific feedback (365).

The Faculty Workshop and Beyond: Offering Writing Advice—in Context

We shouldn't be too surprised if it takes most writing-intensive faculty more than two or three days to feel comfortable reading and responding to student writing rhetorically. Faculty workshops provide an important first step but aren't enough to prepare faculty to think rhetorically about writing, to think beyond editing. Faculty need ongoing conversation and support, including opportunities to talk about materials presented at

the workshop. One indispensable text for our own workshops is John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom,* which is well worth revisiting in follo- up lunch bag seminars and one-on-one conversations.

In addition, we shouldn't be surprised if faculty need concrete teaching strategies, even though we don't want to give them quick fixes that reinforce a reductive view of writing. We don't want to give them "recipes" that reinforce the view that writing is one set of generalizable skills, but we do need to provide them with methods they can adapt for their own teaching.

An Alternative to Over-Prescribing or Under-Describing Standards of Writing: Situated Writing Lessons

Needed are concrete strategies to enable writing-intensive faculty to discuss a given writing principle, without on one hand being prescriptive or on the other hand simply ignoring the principle. One strategy that writing-intensive faculty can take back to their own classes in economics, abstract algebra, or chemical engineering is what we call a "situated writing lesson," a context-specific way of talking about a given writing principle, using both examples and counter-examples. The situated writing lesson expands the range of issues that could be addressed in a writing classroom from grammar and sentence-level issues, wonderfully addressed in Martha Kolln's *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, to whole-text issues such as thesis and concept development.

The concept of the situated writing lesson is similar to the concept of "strategy lessons" advocated by Nancie Atwell and other whole language teachers who discovered a need for short, context-specific teaching of language conventions. Unlike strategy lessons, though, the situated writing lesson describes examples and counter-examples to help novice writers better understand a convention in a given context and in alternative contexts. It is the concrete, context-specific counter-example that I have found missing in many discussions, particularly of sentence-level issues. Without the concrete, context-specific counter-example we have either context-sensitive but overly general advice, which is often the case in freshman composition, or overstated specific advice, which is often the case in writing-intensive courses. Moreover, the use of examples and counter-examples helps students better understand not only what to do, but also what not to do—and by what degree. A chemical engineering student might understand perfectly well that the materials section of a report should provide sufficient detail for another researcher to replicate the experiment. But how much detail is sufficient? This is an audience-sensitive matter of judgment that is developed by seeing examples of too much detail or too little detail relative to a particular situation. The situated writing lesson aims to help novice writers make informed decisions about when to and when not to apply certain writing principles—and to what degree. Figure 1 provides a general description of the situated writing lesson, while Appendices 1, 2 and 3 illustrate particular situated writing lessons, (one for thesis development, one for the materials and methods sections of chemical engineering reports, one for discussing plagiarism, and another for structuring arguments).

Situated Writing Lessons

Identify a writing or editing principle.
Give a few examples.
Specify a context: when it applies, when it doesn't apply.
Provide a rationale: why it matters (and when it doesn't).

Apply to a list of sentences culled from student papers.
Keep it short and focused.

Figure 1. General Model for Situated writing lessons

Faculty Response to Situated Writing Lessons

Both faculty workshop evaluations and anecdotal evidence suggest that local faculty and teaching assistants do value the situated writing lessons. The situated writing lesson about thesis development (see Appendix 1), for example, has become a staple in many writing-intensive classes at this university. However, my intention in providing some ready-made lessons is primarily to model a way for faculty to develop their own, which may happen slowly. Occasionally a professor, possibly an exceptional writer himself, initially lacks the confidence or vocabulary to isolate problems in his students' writing. Instead of developing his own situated writing lessons, he might bring me a stack of papers, which was the case for a professor of chemical engineering. Once I developed the situated writing lesson for the methods and materials sections of an experimental report (see Appendix 2), other lessons naturally followed. Even when other engineering professors don't make explicit use of the lab report lessons, the lesson handouts offer a concrete point of departure for conversations about the writing criteria they do wish to emphasize. Occasionally a professor wryly reports that her situated writing lesson turned into a one- or two-day discussion, but maybe that was just what was needed. And, occasionally, well-intentioned teachers design wonderful situated writing lessons for trivial issues (relative to other issues needing to be addressed). But, even when a particular lesson is only a qualified success, the situated writing lesson gives faculty a way of thinking about writing that is rhetorically-based and theoretically sound. If, as David Russell argues, faculty in the disciplines tend to think of writing as transparent, and if, as he contends, one of the goals of writing-in-the-disciplines is to "transform not only student writing but also the ways the disciplines conceive of writing and its teaching" (291), then the situated writing lesson is one small strategy for doing so.

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Appendix 1: Situated Writing Lesson for Thesis Statements

Situated Writing Lesson: Forming Thesis Statements from Topics

What is the thesis?

The thesis is the controlling idea in a paper and is often located at the end of the introductory paragraph. The thesis doesn't merely assert the topic or enumerate the subtopics; it says something about the topic. If you begin your paper by thinking about a question and not just a topic, you might think of your thesis as a qualified answer or response to the question.

What needs a thesis? What doesn't?

What doesn't need a thesis?

An explicit thesis is effectively omitted in much professional writing. However, professional writers have other techniques for achieving coherence, other techniques to connect ideas and make them relevant to the whole. Narrative writing is often destroyed by making the thesis too explicit.

What does need a thesis?

Most academic writing has an explicit thesis, often in a predictable place in the paper (end of first paragraph). This minimizes ambiguity. Making the thesis explicit in student writing is an important part of writing-to-learn. The student who can articulate the thesis probably understands what he or she is talking about.

Three Counterexamples: Statements that are NOT strong theses

TOPIC STATEMENT

The two commercials that I selected to do my paper on are the Nissan commercial and the new Lemon Slice commercial.

BLUEPRINT STATEMENT

First, I will analyze the Flintstone vitamins commercial, and then I will analyze the Nestle Quick commercial.

OVERLY GENERAL THESIS

(a thesis with no tension) Though the quality may be high in regards to planning, I feel that the overall statement made in these two commercials is covered by details that in my opinion decrease the credibility of the product.

Evaluate a few thesis statements drawn from your students' papers.

Appendix 2: Situated Writing Lesson: Materials and Methods Sections of Chemical Engineering Reports

Identify a writing or editing principle:

Sufficient detail must be provided to permit the reader to repeat the experiment. How much detail is "sufficient," however, depends on the reader and therefore requires delicacy of judgment.

Give a few examples:

See list of sentences culled from student papers below.

Specify a context:

when it applies

Experimental work requires that sufficient detail is given so that other experienced workers can repeat the work and obtain comparable results.

when it doesn't apply

Work based on well-established methods may require a reference in the place of a procedural description. However, the reader usually appreciates being told at least the principle on which the method is based and any significant modifications.

Adapted from *The ACS Style Guide* (2nd edition) and *Scientific Writing for Graduate Students.*

Special considerations:

- Describe apparatus only if it is not standard or is not commercially available.
- Avoid using trademark and brand names of equipment and reagents (except

parenthetically).

Apply to sentences culled from three students' papers.

1. The method used in this experiment was the handout and the apparatus is shown on Figure 1.
2. We followed the lab operating procedures with deviations, see Anon, 1999. The deviations are as follows:

   We deviated by performing an additional flow rate at the same mixer speed for the pulse input in Tank 1 and Tank 3. We deviated by decreasing our flow rates instead of increasing our flow rates for the pulse input in Tank 1.

3. This experiment was completed based on the procedure specified in the lab manual with the exception of some minor deviations. First, the procedure called for recording four equally spaced flow rates from the minimum to the maximum flows of both hot and cold water, which would result in 16 flow combinations. With approval from the instructor, the flows were reduced to 3 between the maximum and minimum flow rates to give only 9 combinations. Second, a simplified equation for the heat transfer coefficient of water was utilized as can be seen in the sample calculations. Additionally, the flow meters were calibrated as can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

Appendix 3: Situated Writing Lesson: Plagiarism

(Failure to document sources, regardless of intent)

Plagiarism: Intentional or Unintentional?

Intentional Plagiarism

Intentional plagiarism is academic dishonesty and is a serious offense.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, to plagiarize means

1. "To steal and use (the ideas or writings of another) as one's own.

2. "To appropriate passages or ideas from (another) and use them as one's own."

Unintentional Plagiarism

Unintentional plagiarism is still plagiarism, even though it should not be considered academic dishonesty.

According to *The Blair Handbook*, "Most plagiarism is not intentional: many writers are simply unaware of the conventional guidelines for indicating that they have borrowed words or ideas from someone else. Nevertheless, it is the writer's responsibility to learn these guidelines and follow them" (246).

Citing Others' Ideas

Distinguish among plagiarism, quotation, and paraphrase:

Original Passage

While the Greeks sometimes defined man as a featherless biped, they had far more invested in another definition: man as a rational being.

—Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science*

Plagiarized Passage

While the Greeks sometimes defined man as a featherless biped, they had far more invested in another definition: man as a rational being.

(Direct quotation with no attribution)

Direct Quotation

"While the Greeks sometimes defined man as a featherless biped, they had far more invested in another definition: man as a rational being"

(Gardner, 1985, p. 360).

Note that different style guides (APA, MLA, ACS, etc.) have different conventions for citing sources.

Inaccurate Paraphrase

Howard Gardner believes that man is rational, not bird-brained. (p. 360)

Note that the original sentence describes the Greek view, not Gardner's view.

More Accurate Paraphrase

Although Gardner values rationality, he suspects that the Greeks, as well as the early cognitive scientists of this century, had too much faith in our human capacity to be rational. (p. 360)

Note that the rest of the text (not included here) makes clear that Gardner thinks the Greeks were somewhat misguided. Take care not to take words out of context.

Synthesis of Several Sources

Empirical studies have called into question the assumption that human beings think and behave rationally (author, year; author, year; author, year).

Avoiding Plagiarism

The Blair Handbook, 2d Ed, offers the following advice for ESL (English as Second Language Students) on page 247:

ESL Advice: "To students educated outside the United States, our conventions for quoting and documenting sources may be unfamiliar and may even seem illogical. For example, in some cultures it is considered a sign of a good education to be able to integrate quotations from well-known sources directly into one's own writing without using quotation marks or indicating sources. In the United States, where an individual's words are considered personal property, such practices would be considered

plagiarism."

Evaluate a few weakly paraphrased sentences drawn from your students' papers.

Appendix 4. Situated Writing Lesson: Structuring an Argument

(Structuring a coherent set of reasons and evidence in support of a claim)

Identify a writing principle:

Most college writing assignments are arguments requiring a claim, reasons, and evidence.

What is an argument? What isn't an argument?

"Argument" has many meanings. In academic writing, an argument is the coherent structure of reasons and evidence in support of a claim. In this context, an argument is not mere wrangling, dispute, contentiousness, or quarreling.

An argumentative paper can be distinguished from other kinds of academic writing. When writing an argumentative paper, the author is putting forward the claim and reasons; when writing an abstract, summary, review of literature, or report, the author is not putting forward any claim at all, although the author might summarize someone else's argument.

Three Examples of Argumentation

A Classical Model of Argumentation (adapted from Bean and Ramage*, Form and Surprise in Composition: Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*)

- Introduction
- Background and preliminary material
- Summary of opposing views
- Discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing views
- Presentation of arguments supporting your own position
- Anticipation of possible objections that your audience might make to your position
- Rebuttal of objections to your argument, including a concession to those weaknesses that seem insurmountable
- Conclusion

An Alternative Model of Argumentation: Opposition/Refutation (adapted fromBean and Ramage, *Form and Surprise in Composition: Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*)

Introduction

- Summary of a position opposing yours (clearly highlighting each reason)
- Presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing view
- Refutation: an attack on each of the opponent's reasons (previously highlighted)
- Conclusion placing the issue in a larger context

An Alternative Model of Argumentation: A Rogerian Strategy - adapted from Bean & Ramage, *Form and Surprise in Composition: Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*

- Introduction—presents issues but not your position

Sympathetic summary of opposing view

- Recognition of common ground between opposing view and writer's initial position
- Recognition of minor differences
- Modified argument, demonstrating some compromise or synthesis of positions

Specify a context:

When argumentation applies, when it doesn't apply.

Examples of writing that *do require* argumentation

- definition arguments, which argue that "X is/is not a Y"
- evaluation arguments, which argue that "X is/is not an effective Y"
- ethical arguments
- aesthetic arguments
- some philosophical arguments
- some methodological/critical arguments
- some procedural arguments
- some historical arguments
- proposal arguments, which argue that "we should/should not do X"
- causal arguments, which argue that "X causes/does not cause Y"
- some historical arguments
- some philosophical arguments
- many scientific and engineering arguments

Examples of writing that *do not require* argumentation:

Writing in which meaning is best implied through telling details and conclusions are not overtly stated:

- narrative writing (although stories are written from some perspective and may imply certain arguments)
- report writing in which the writer is making no claim, in which the writer is demonstrating to a teacher observations of some phenomenon or understanding of someone else's text (although such reporting may still imply a perspective and may summarize an argument)

Writing in which conclusions may be overtly stated but are not yet justified with reasons and/or details:

- exploratory writing (although exploratory writing may lead inductively to a claim that will later be justified in an argument with appropriate kinds of evidence)

Provide a rationale: why it matters (and when it doesn't).

Why argumentative writing matters:

- Professionals in every field ask questions, make claims, and justify their claims with arguments of some kind.
- College writers are learning to write like professionals in their fields.
- Analytic and argumentative writing require higher-order, abstract thinking.
- When argumentative writing doesn't matter:

- When the meaning and reasons are best left implicit.
- When the writing has a social or interpersonal purpose.
- When the writing is exploratory.

(There may be other conditions, too.)

Apply to several passages culled from student papers.

Keep the exercise short and focused!

—Martha Patton

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