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Alternative Discourses and the Academy

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# Academic Discourses OR Small Boats on a Big Sea

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In recent years, discussions of academic discourse in rhetoric and composition have raised provocative issues about the nature and processes of language use in the specialized territory of academe, but particularly the use of written language. A most distinctive dimension of these discussions has drawn contrasts between language in the academy versus language outside of it. By 1983 when Shirley Brice Heath published *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* and 1985 when Odell and Goswami published *Writing in Nonacademic Settings*, we were becoming increasingly aware of how thoroughly we had been ignoring in both research and practice the fact that writing (and literacy as the broader concept) occurs in many places using many forms and that there are quite likely intersections and resonances between academic and nonacademic settings that might be instructive to our work inside the academy.

Shortly after Heath and Odell and Goswami came the work of Harvey J. Graff (*The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*, 1987), Linda Brodkey (*Academic Writing as Social Practice*, 1987), Paolo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1988), and Deborah Brandt (*Literacy as Involvement: The Acts of Writers, Readers, and Texts*, 1990). By 1994 when Beverly Moss published *Literacy across Communities* and 1995 when Brian Street published *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education*, we were well on our way to understanding the cultural, social, political, and economic implications and consequences of literacy. Simultaneously, however, a second dimension of the discussions was also gaining momentum. In this case, the focus was on

the subtle and not so subtle distinctions among disciplinary communities, and we became more consciously aware of disciplinary values and expectations as they are enacted through various language practices. This research (e.g., Young and Fulwiler 1986; Russell 1991; Herrington and Moran 1992) energized the writing across the curriculum movement, creating successive waves of understanding, as illustrated most recently by scholars such as Zamel and Spack (1998), Duszak (1997), and Hyland (2000) who are encouraging us to raise different questions about how we might build language knowledge and enhance language abilities. Moreover, amid these concerns have been lingering issues of identity, gender, race, class, and culture, as evidenced recently by Gadsden and Wagner (1995), Shepard, McMillan, and Tate (1998) and Gilyard (1999) to name just three of an ever-growing set of volumes.

While the general conversation has indeed been varied and rich, when we place the focal point more directly on the teaching of writing in academic arenas or communities, we tend, nevertheless, to encapsulate this broader discussion of language use and to speak more reductively. Certainly, we acknowledge academic arenas or communities and disciplinary discourses, but, more often than not, we articulate our theories and pedagogies using images that inscribe a more monolithic viewpoint. Our use of such terms as academic language and academic discourse do not convey a sense of a collectivity of uses. These terms come through instead in quite untextured and singular ways. There is *the* language, *the* discourse of academe and there are *other* languages and discourses that are not academic. We distill the variations that we otherwise specify and use general terms in ways that suggest sameness, tacit understanding, and static, non-contentious representations, not just of language or discourse but also of *goodness*. Despite our occasional intent to suggest otherwise, such habits of distillation have engendered in our field hierarchies of power, privilege, and value, and they have continually reified notions of insider/outsider, center/margin, us/other, and also notions of good/suspect.

While these oppositional categories have, to some extent, actually helped us to see, display, and interrogate features of academic language use more dynamically, over time these binaries have also engendered a sense of primacy. Whether by intent or default, we have centralized in our conversations a default view of what can be sanctioned as good writing (as enacted often through a traditional view of the freshman essay), a view that has functioned ultimately to tether, rather than enable an evolving discussion. My purpose, then, with this short essay is to pose a shift in our thinking that begins by acknowledging the inconsistency with which we have accepted what we know about the nature of language and the formation and operations of language communities on one hand and marginalized and ignored this knowledge on another.

As evidenced by the body of research to which I refer earlier in this chapter, generally we have come to the following insights:

1. Academic discourse, like all language use, is an invention of a particular social milieu, not a natural phenomenon.
2. Academic discourse is not now, and quite likely never has been, an *it*. We recognize now that discourse in academic arenas is, indeed, plurally formed, not singularly formed, within the contexts of varying disciplinary communities as these arenas have been sites of social and intellectual engagement and as they have developed and changed over the histories of these engagements.
3. Academic discourses, even plurally formed, should *still* not be perceived as existing apart, above, or beyond the varieties of discourse around them.

These three points form the basis upon which I assert that academic discourses are small boats on a big sea. In placing this idea on the table in *bold* relief, instead of just in passing, I am suggesting that paying direct attention to these three basic points sets different parameters for a discussion of the future of literacy instruction.

Let's start with insight #1. As a concept, *academic discourse* exists within a social milieu. In academe, as in other arenas of language use, we form communicative/interpretive communities based on sets of values, expectations, protocols, and practices. Thus, a central insight to keep fully present in our thinking, rather than on the periphery, is the necessity of resisting a tendency to view discourse (language in particular use) as a disembodied force within which we are inevitably, inescapably, innocently swept along. Quite demonstrably, as evidenced by the body of research cited earlier, discourse is *embodied* and it is *endowed*. It is, in fact, quite a *people-centered* enterprise, and it is the *fact* of its *people-centeredness* that endows it so insidiously with the workings of social, political, and cultural processes. By such processes, we contend with the imposition of values, beliefs, and expectations through language; with the deployment of systems of power, control, privilege, entitlement, and authority through language; with the engendering of habits, protocols, systems of value through language—all processes with which we are now all too familiar.

The point is, if we can acknowledge overtly that discourses operate at the hands and the will of a *people*, rather than as instruments or forces of nature, or as systems formed by an innate cloud of right-ness and good that floats around in the air somewhere just waiting to unleash its power, *then* we have already shifted the possibilities of literacy instruction. We shift because we start, quite simply, from a very different place in the scheme of things. In particular, we do not start instruction by assuming that our *boats* are gifts from nature, all duly constructed and already afloat, or that we are all in the same one. We start from a different point of view, from a different set of assumptions, assumptions that make clearer that there are many vessels in addition to our own on the sea around us and they are all sailing interestingly along, and that we—as the historically mandated champions of righteousness and good

in our own boat, academic writing—are not really being invaded at all. In fact, the enterprise is not about war or invasions; it's about sailing.

If we can shift assumptions overtly and explicitly so that we start with the question of how discourses are embodied and endowed, then the *alternative* in a conversation about alternative discourses is, quite simply, not really about alternative discourses at all, but about alternative *assumptions* about discourses. The process of interrogating discourses via the *people* who shape the discourses, use them, monitor them, and enforce their values helps to dismantle the mythology of *rightful stronghold* and *invading hordes* that has been so militaristically rendered in our field. The stronghold is not so *rightful*; the hordes are students, teachers, and other constituents on a variable and real sociocultural terrain; the invasion is the infusion of new understandings of the nature, ways, and means of knowledge-making processes as these processes operate in academic and nonacademic arenas. Debunking the myth, then, shifts our positions away from the limitations of such a myth in the interest of finding a view that is more generative and offers better interpretive possibilities for instruction. With a better and more enabling image, we have the capacity to think again about literacy instruction and to re-envision what and how we teach and learn. The opportunity is an opportunity to enhance our vision, as well as an opportunity to increase the capacity to see, interpret, and address problems with better effects for larger numbers of students.

To restate the point in different terms, what we have traditionally done is to set our assumptions in ways that prohibit a more fully textured sense of an analytical matrix that is keyed by contextual factors from operating with vitality and consequence. Typically, we have naturalized the academy as an exclusive space with predetermined, preset values and operations that should reign supreme and that can do so without such reflection or negotiation. Current research is compelling us, however, to move interpretively to alter these protections and to critically engage, raising questions about exclusions, about what is endemic, what is socially, politically, and culturally assignable, about what can be questioned and negotiated. The basic advantage of opening up our critical perspectives in such ways is that more discourses (inside of the academy and outside of it) can have room for inclusion in this general arena and, more importantly, room to operate there with greater visibility and consequence. In other words, there is considerable potential to create new possibilities for enabling both rhetoric and action. I note in particular the following:

1. Viewing literacy instruction as a people-driven enterprise dictates that we pay attention to who the people are in the arena, to their personal, social, institutional, and public locations; to students as *subjects* in the classroom, not objects; quite similarly, to teachers, the institutional keepers of rules and rites, as *subjects* too, and not just instruments. We notice discourse as an embodied experience with endowments that are often differently perceived by classroom *subjects*, i.e., often understood differently by students and teachers.

2. We recognize, as writing textbooks have been moving toward in recent years, the importance of meeting students wherever they are in their knowledge, experiences, and thinking, and finding ways to expand their horizons, and to enhance their abilities. The shift has been away from an absorption of knowledge by those in varying states of ignorance to a recognition of prior knowledge, the constructing of knowledge pathways, and an understanding of what it means to participate in knowledge making as an ongoing, rather than a static, enterprise. We envision the work of classrooms as dynamic, multidirectional engagement with the expectation of dynamic rewards, rather than as places where the goal is mainly to match the norms and to replicate ordinary outcomes (e.g., to produce a grammatically flawless text that answers the questions asked).
3. Provocative questions arise about rhetorical decision making and the use of various resources in definable arenas of engagement. In other words, the language of the academy becomes an analytical moment for both the academy itself, as well as for a variety of communicative opportunities within the academic world. Such notions also raise, perhaps even more provocatively, questions about the personal as an appropriate site for learning, intellectual engagement, and writing, and they raise as well the more intimidating specter of the ethical complexity of understanding where *privacy* begins. How do we set values for communicative/expressive success in arenas that we are seeing now, interpreting, and understanding in more open and fluid terms than ever before? Where do we start our intellectual work? How do we direct our reflections and inquiries? How do we encompass personal, social, institutional, and public imperatives while simultaneously respecting the often competing mandates for both privacy and well-deliberated public engagement?

Using this last point as a springboard, my experience as a teacher and researcher suggests that the search for ways to talk about the differences between the personal, the social, the institutional, the public, the private is just not enough. In the least, I see the need to talk with students directly about the truths and consequences of disclosure, about ethos (see Crowley 1994 and Royster 2000) as a situated identity and an invented or negotiated identity, about the importance of assessing, not just using, personal knowledge and experience in making good decisions about what is private, what is social, what is public, what should be written or said, while recognizing in explicit ways that classrooms are not private spaces. They are public spaces and require of students tremendous leaps of faith, especially when their sociopolitical locations situate them as intruders, or at best visitors who must/should be tolerated, or perhaps from a more liberal view, as outsiders who should be graciously accommodated—alternate though they are quite likely to be positioned still. In other words, when we anchor instruction as a people-centered enterprise, what becomes visible is more than the interplay between anointed and alter-

nate/other discourses. What becomes visible is that writing and learning in a socially and politically contentious nation is for many students and teachers alike—who embody variously those contentious—a high-risk act, especially when we define the academy (i.e., the context of their engagement) in passive, disembodied ways.

Finally, in focusing more on one of the pedagogical mandates that arise from this type of paradigmatic shift, when we position literacy instruction as helping students to understand and to participate flexibly in multiple discourses, and especially multiple academic discourses, then part of the pedagogical mandate is a question of identifying, negotiating, and reconfiguring certain communicative gaps. Again, we start with *who* is bridging the gaps in which contexts with what range of prior experiences, for what range of purposes across what range of available rhetorical options and genres. Given the mounds of recent research and scholarship that we have already generated in the field, we, of course, acknowledge the resources that students bring to the communicative enterprise, regardless of where they begin. We are also beginning to acknowledge the extent to which more open communicative enterprises ultimately function to question and reshape what constitutes a bridge, an architecture, a connective artery, a mechanism, and thereby to reconfigure the possibility that knowledge and experience is capable of having significant impact, regardless of the source from which it comes.

If a critical goal in literacy instruction, especially in higher education, is to help students to forge connections between what they already know as language users and the more that is available to be known, we, along with our students, can explore how to strike good balances across various gaps so that affirmation, empowerment, and ultimately learning are possible. The mandate is to search for ways to connect, for ways to engage masterfully. The mandate is to search for classroom practices that use, build upon, and enhance experiences and that permit the re-definition and reconfiguration of acceptable forms of expression, representation, and presentation—a mandate, of course, that explodes the primacy of the academic essay. By contrast, the mandate is not focused so much on the effort to conform to the already tried and prescribed or on having work anointed only by traditionally valorized beliefs, expectations, and habits.

The bottom line here is that new assumptions, new paradigms, and fewer imperial exclusions in academic arenas should give rise to new forms of expression and to unanticipated values added, and that, I believe, is exactly what we are seeing in progress across composition programs around the nation and, indeed, around the world. This thought brings me full circle to where I began. In academic arenas we find ourselves traveling in small boats on a big sea that we have virtually ignored as a sea because we could. Typically in the presence of our students who are testing our commitments to just staying where we are, some of us are being pushed to notice that life in the world of composition

could occupy a different space. If we really think about it, we might not even want to limit ourselves to traveling in boats anymore. We might want to experience the sea of discourse in a different way. In other words, if we set our minds to it, the world of composition could actually turn on different assumptions. Change is possible. At this point, however, in determining whether our possibilities will have consequence, the question that remains is whether we will seize the opportunity to chart new, and, possibly, different theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical pathways where the openness and fluidity that we know exist have the capacity to flourish.

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