"Big Picture People Rarely Become Historians": Genre Systems and the Contradictions of General Education

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Abstract

This study synthesizes Y. Engeström's version of cultural historical activity theory and North American genre systems theory to explore the problem of specialized discourses in activities that involve non-specialists, in this case students in a university 'general education' course in Irish history struggling to write the genres of professional academic history. We trace the textual pathways (genre systems) that mediate between the activity systems (and motives) of specialist teachers and the activity systems (and motives) of non-specialist students. Specifically, we argue that the specialist/lay contradiction in U.S. general education is embedded in historical practices in the modern university, and manifested in alienation that students often experience through the writing requirements in general education courses. This historical contradiction also makes it difficult for instructors to make writing meaningful for non-specialists and go beyond fact-based, rote instruction to mediate higher-order learning through writing. However, our analysis of the Irish History course suggests this alienation may be overcome when students, with the help of their instructors, see the textual pathways (genre systems) of specialist discourse leading to useful knowledge/skill in their activity systems beyond the course as specialists in other fields or as citizens.

Introduction

In this chapter we'll introduce some basic principles of activity theory (in Y. Engeström's version, 1987, 1999, 2001) and genre systems theory (Bazerman's version, 1994) to show how they can be combined to analyze writing in human activities (Russell, 1997). The broad goal of this synthesis of activity theory (AT) and genre systems theory is to understand the ways writing mediates human activity, the ways people think through and act through writing. We look specifically at an educational use, though there are many others, as this volume illustrates. We suggest ways these theories can help teachers and students learn and critique existing discursive pathways (genres)—and create new ones—for expanding involvement with others.

The case we'll use addresses the role of specialized discourses in activities that involve non-specialists—a crucial problem in writing research. Specialist knowledge mediated through specialist discourse (and genres) can be useful in helping non-specialists solve problems. But it

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can also be alienating and disenfranchising for them (Geisler, 1994; Ronald, 1988). The problem of student alienation by specialized discourse is especially evident in undergraduate general education courses in U.S. higher education.[1] U.S. undergraduates are typically required to take a certain number of these (usually chosen from a large menu) that are not in their chosen field of study and not systematically related to it.

These courses are designed to give students a broader view of knowledge and, often, to teach what faculty hope will be generalizable information or skills useful in their chosen fields or, more broadly still, in their personal or civic lives. However, the institutional position of general education courses produces a fundamental contradiction, as their name suggests. On one hand, students and teachers are pulled toward one disciplinary specialization; on the other hand, they are pulled toward 'general' or broad education for civic life or other professional specializations—with alienation often resulting. The teachers are specialists in the fields they are teaching and tend to use that discourse and expect, to a greater or lesser extent, consciously or unconsciously, that students will also use it. But the students cannot and do not typically need or want to be specialists in each of the disciplines of the courses they are taking to satisfy their general education courses requirements. What knowledge and discourses (and genres), then, will students read and write?[2] And how—if at all—will they make sense of the knowledge and writing in the discipline they are being introduced to, in terms of the writing they do other courses and life activities? How will it engage them in such as way as to be generalizable?

Geisler (1994), in her incisive AT analysis of the contradiction, has forcefully argued that general education courses were historically the result of a compromise between proponents of professionalization and defenders of liberal culture. Because there was little effort expended to create a dialog between experts and non-experts in academe, the courses lapsed into either a recruiting campaign for majors, or "service courses" to "cover the content" with "no intrinsic value to the discipline itself." (p. 254). (In U.S. higher education students are not required to specialize until well into their undergraduate education.)

The contradiction, she continues, is made more intractable (and less obvious) by deeply entrenched contradictory attitudes toward writing in the modern U.S. university. On one hand, writing is viewed in terms of a transmission model, in which writing is thought of as a conduit for transmitting pre-formed content, and learning to write is thought of as the acquisition of a "remedial" set of transcription skills. On the other hand, writing is viewed in terms of a natural acquisition model, in which writing is a natural gift or unconsciously developed knack that cannot be taught explicitly but must be acquired through immersion in a discipline. Geisler concludes that this contradiction cannot be overcome unless professional specialists "reconnect expertise to the arena of civic action." We must "find our general readers and talk to them" (p. 253).

Geisler's analysis of the contradiction in general education is persuasive to us, and her call to action compelling: greater dialog among specialists and between specialists and non-specialists. We want her to extend her analysis by developing a theoretical model (Russell, 1997) that would help specialists and non-specialists to understand the specific relations between the genres of

specialists in a particular profession (e.g., research reports) and the genres of non-specialists encountering its activity (e.g., textbooks and journalistic accounts). Such analysis may be useful in designing curricula and teaching strategies that use writing in new ways, ways that serve both specialists and non-specialists.

We argue that Y. Engeström's version of cultural historical activity theory, combined with North American genre theory, can help us explore this contradiction in new ways, ways that allow us to trace the textual pathways (genre systems) that mediate between the activity systems (and motives) of specialist teachers and the activity systems (and motives) of non-specialist students. We'll illustrate this widespread problem of general education courses with examples from a university-level general education course in Irish history. Specifically, we argue that the contradiction in general education is embedded in historical practices in the modern university, and manifested in alienation that students often experience through the writing requirements in general education courses. This historical contradiction also makes it difficult for instructors to make writing meaningful for non-specialists and go beyond fact-based, rote instruction to mediate higher-order learning through writing. However, our analysis of the Irish History course suggests this alienation may be overcome when students, with the help of their instructors, see the textual pathways (genre systems) of specialist discourse leading to useful knowledge/skill in their activity systems beyond the course as specialists in other fields or as citizens.

We first outline the problem of specialist discourse in general education, then explain Y. Engeström's version of AT as we have used it to analyze the alienation experienced by students in the Irish history course. We then explain genre systems theory to understand how one student, Beth, used the contradiction to expand her learning in ways useful to her beyond the course.

Big Picture People: The Problem of 'General' Education

A Calvin and Hobbs cartoon illustrates well this basic problem of alienation through literacy practices in specialized fields. Calvin is taking an essay test in American history and the question is, "What was the significance of the Erie Canal?" He writes, "In the cosmic sense, probably nil." And then he tells us, "We 'big picture' people rarely become historians." We are all Big Picture People when it comes to most things. And our students are too. But of course we must specialize in our lives, particularly in our modern society. And writing some more or less specialized genres, such as a history class essay, is necessary to successfully entering adult life—as Calvin will find out when he gets his grade back on the essay.

The students in the Irish History general education course were mostly juniors at a good Midwestern public university, which we'll call MWU. They were middle-class young men and women who were mainly in the course because to graduate they needed to fulfill a general education requirement. They were not history majors and, generally, had no particular interest in Irish History before enrolling in the course. This course fit their schedules. The instructor, Corey, was very dedicated, and worked hard to put together a good course because this was his specialty

and he loved teaching. He was recognized in the history department as an outstanding classroom teacher, and had taught first-year composition (Rhetoric 101) as well.[3] He also believed in a common goal of general education and emphasized it in the course: making students critical readers and writers, for their activities as citizens or their activities in other fields. Developing the students' critical thinking through their writing was very important to him, and he found ways to accomplish this goal through the writing. At the end of the course, the three students we focus on in this chapter recognized, in new ways, the difficulties and rewards of writing to learn history. On an initial survey, they all checked the response: "Good writing is the same no matter the discipline." They left the course with a more sophisticated understanding.[4]

> **Mia:** It was interesting to see how some of us, actually three of us, had different hypotheses in relation to one particular newspaper article, Civil Rights. Corey was right when he talked about the high level of uncertainty that comes from making reasoned historical arguments. Writing history is certainly difficult and different. No doubt about it!
>
> **Michael:** One semester is not enough to learn the intricacies of historical writing. But I know, thanks to Corey's class, that writing history is not exactly the same as what we do when we write a paper for our religion class, for instance. I mean, writing varies according to the discipline. From now on, I'll keep that in mind

The third student, Beth, whom we'll concentrate on, also learned much about specialized writing in the course, as we will see in detail. But it was a struggle for them to arrive at that understanding because, we argue, of the contradiction in general education between specialist and generalist discourse and the resulting alienation.

The students warmed to the study of Irish history, its stories, its personalities, its cultural and intellectual currents--made more relevant by the events then transpiring in Northern Ireland. Yet initially these three students, like Calvin in the cartoon, saw little direct significance for them in the *writing* they did in the course. The three students we focus on all expressed a sense of alienation from the writing assignments. Here are some comments that show this initial alienation.

> "It's just memorization. You can't apply it to other parts of your life."
>
> "It was a waste of time, useless, just busy work, a painful chore."
>
> "I don't get it. These are his writing tasks and he wants me to write in his way."

These comments are, we believe, typical of many students in general education courses across the curriculum where writing is central to the learning (Geisler, 1994). How can we understand why some students feel alienated by the specialist writing? To answer this question we turn to an AT analysis of the contradiction in general education.

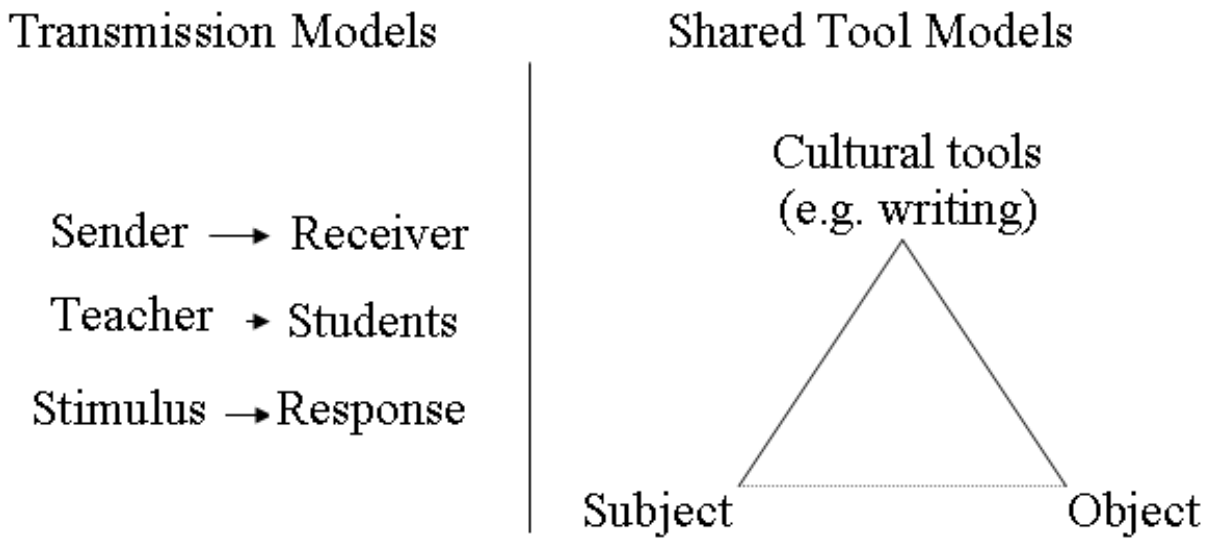

Figure 1. Transmission versus Shared Tool Models of Communication and Learning

What Is Activity Theory and What Is It Good For?

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (abbreviated CHAT or AT) is one of many social approaches to learning, and its insights are very compatible with other social approaches, so much so that AT is not really a single theory as much as an orientation to learning. It grew out of L. S. Vygotsky's cultural psychology (1978, 1986), and was developed by his collaborator A.N. Leont'ev (1978, 1981) and, in the last 20 years, by many others worldwide (see Mind, Culture, Activity website, http://communication.ucsd.edu/MCA).

AT is a way of analyzing human activity over time, especially *change*—including that kind of change called *learning*. It does not claim to provide a neat way to predict outcomes, but rather offers tentative explanations. It is a heuristic. That is, a way of finding useful questions to ask. It asks those questions not to find any final answer, but to give people working in some activity a useful perspective from which to develop new approaches, new mediational tools (or new ways of using old tools) to transform or "re-mediate" their activity.

Activity theory (and the North American genre theory we'll get to shortly) view writing and learning in very different terms than transmission models of writing and learning. We illustrate the difference in Figure 1, Transmission versus shared tool models. Transmission models view communication and learning as fundamentally between individuals, such as sender-receiver (the engineering model), teacher-student (the banking model), or stimulus-response (the behaviorist model). Writing is a container for knowledge, and learning is putting knowledge "into" individual minds to be put back "into" writing for assessment. In contrast, shared tool models like AT view communication and learning as social in origin, and human activity as collective. In these models, we humans (subjects) act together with others humans and material tools to change something in our world, the object of our activity. The tools that we use, including writing, mediate our thinking and doing. One such tool, writing (and the action of writing) actively mediates—shapes—both our thinking and our action together, our activity.

An analogy will illustrate. In basketball, players (subjects) use a ball, a hoop, and a lined floor (tools) to try to score more points than the other team (the object of the activity or game). In the Irish history class, the teacher and students used such oral and written genres as lectures, discussions, readings, book review assignments, and so on to teach and learn Irish history, the official object of the course activity.

Notice that learning is not neatly "transferred" from one activity to another. A lot of games are played with a ball, just as a lot of fields use the tool called writing. But the ball is different, the rules of the game are different, the object of the game is different. And knowing how to shoot a basketball (or write in one way, one genre) doesn't mean you know how throw a baseball (or write in a different activity or genre). Learning a new game (or academic field and its ways/genres of writing) means participating in a new activity, and using tools (including the tool or technology we call writing) in different ways. Knowledge and skills are not things to be transferred between individuals through a conduit but social accomplishments developed through joint activity with mediational tools.

Learning by Expanding: The Problem of Con-text

Activity theory, then, sees learning in broader—and messier—terms than transmission theories. Higher-order learning (unlike rote learning or mere imitation) is viewed as expanding involvement with others over time, in systems of social activity, mediated by tools, including writing. This change through social and material involvement with others is part of what Y. Engeström (1987) calls *learning by expanding*. And as we argue later, the written genres people use are often pathways for expanding involvement. However, in this view, learning is devilishly hard to analyze, because it is hard the result of complex interactions of people and tools over time.

As Figure 2 suggests, the transmission models of learning and communication generally see transmission of between individual minds (or brains) as the focus, and lump everything else together as context (the left side of Figure 2). Social context is what *contains* the interaction. Shared tool models (the right side of Figure 2) see context as a weaving together of people and their tools in complex networks. The network is the context. Context (con-text) is actually from the Greek term for weaving, as in textile, or texture. In this sense, context is what is "woven together with" (Cole, 1996). We view the diagram on the right, the messy one, as a much more accurate picture of what instructors and researchers face when they try to figure out what's happening with a student or a classroom. Students' interactions, past, present, and (hoped for) future, all play a part in their (and the instructor's) learning. The problem is that it is hard to know what to focus on in our analysis. How can we do justice to the complexity while still coming up with a useful analysis?

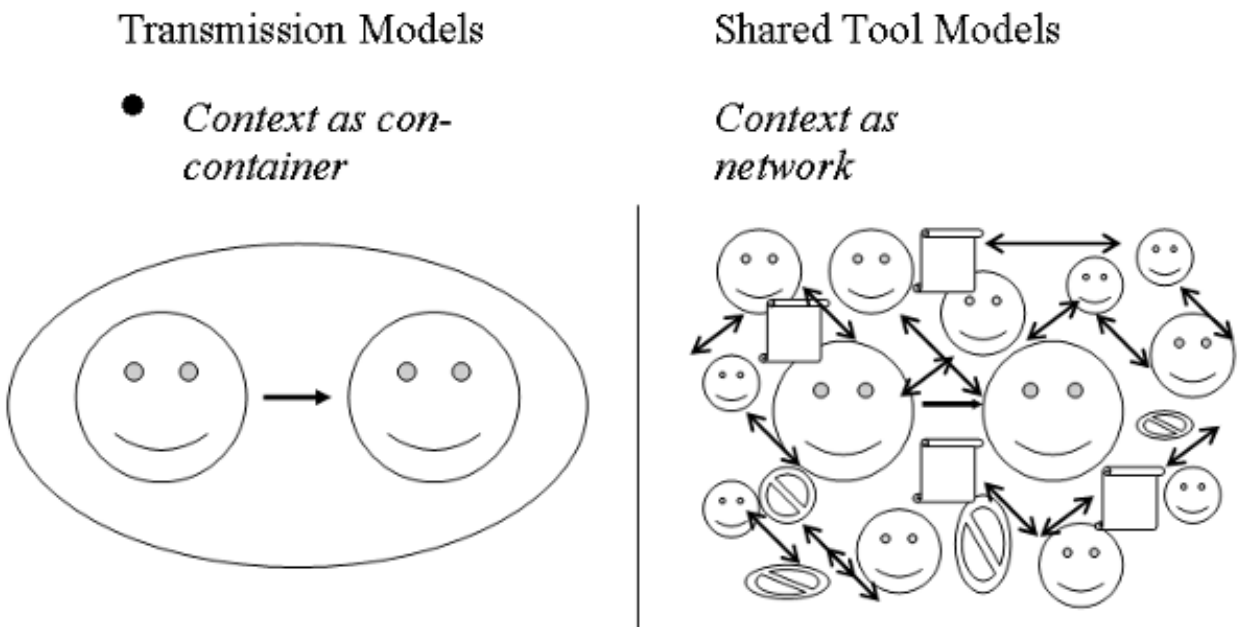

Figure 2. 'Context' as Container or Network

Activity theory tries to make sense of these networks of human interactions by looking at people and their tools as they engage in particular activities. Activity theory calls these networks *activity systems.* For example, singing (like writing) is a single human activity, but it is immensely varied—from a celebrated diva singing a Mozart aria at the Met to a writing researcher singing "Your Cheatin' Heart" in the shower. But this activity of singing goes on in lots of systems that we can identify. Just because you are an opera singer doesn't mean you can croon a country ballad or scat an Ellington tune. And each activity system of singing has its own genres, its own expectations and norms and rules, its own culture and historical traditions and ways of making sounds in the air with the voice. Writing (making marks on surfaces) is even more varied than singing, because it is used to mediate so many more human activity systems. What do we need, then, to think about in order to analyze specialized systems of activity mediated by the tremendously plastic tool called writing? What do we need to analyze writing (as we usually put it—ignoring the differences among activities that mediated by writing)?

We need a way of going beyond specific interpersonal interactions (the unit of analysis of transmission models) to understand ways broader social interactions, mediated through various tools, condition interpersonal interactions. Though AT is a dynamic and evolving orientation to learning, several basic principles are shared by its adherents, which we adapt from Cole's important book, *Cultural Psychology* (1996).

- Human behavior is social in origin, and human activity is collective (Cole and Engeström, 1993).
- Human consciousness—"mind"—grows out of people's joint activity with shared tools. Our minds are in a sense co-constructed and distributed among others. Our thoughts, our words,

and our deeds are always potentially engaged with the thoughts, words, and deeds of others. Through involvement in collective activity, however widely distributed, learners are always in contact with the history, values, and social relations of a community—or among communities—as embedded in the shared cultural tools used by that community(ies) to mediate activity.

- AT emphasizes tool-mediated action. Human beings not only act on their environment with tools, they also think and learn with tools. At a primary level these tools are material, "external"—hammers, books, clothing, computers, telecommunications networks. But we humans also fashion and use tools at a secondary or "internal" level—language, concepts, scripts, schemas, and (as we will see) genres. Both kinds of tools are used to act on the environment collectively (Wartofsky, 1979).
- AT is interested in development and change, which AT understands broadly to include historical change, individual development, and moment-to-moment change. All three levels of analysis are necessary to understand people learning (beyond mere rote learning).
- AT grounds analysis in everyday life events, the ways people interact with each other using tools over time, historically.
- AT assumes that "individuals are active agents in their own development but do not act in settings entirely of their own choosing" (Cole, 1996, p. 104). Individual learners learn, of course, but they do so in environments that involve others, environments of people-with-tools that both afford and constrain their actions.
- AT, as Cole says, "rejects cause and effect, stimulus response, explanatory science in favor of a science that emphasizes the emergent nature of mind in activity and that acknowledges a central role for interpretation in its explanatory framework." Accordingly, it "draws upon methodologies from the humanities as well as from the social and biological sciences" (1996, p. 104).

An Activity System

Activity theory, in Y. Engeström's version, expands the basic mediational triangle we saw earlier to consider essentials for making sense of activity. This expanded triangle is a theoretical tool, a kind of heuristic lens, for viewing complex activity (as is Burke's pentad, for example). It doesn't give us neat answers, it gives us useful questions. We'll use this model to think through the Irish history course. It provides us a way to focus in on essential aspects of human social interactions to construct a flexible unit of analysis. Figure 3 depicts Y. Engeström's expanded mediational triangle, an activity system. We'll start on the left of the diagram and move clockwise.

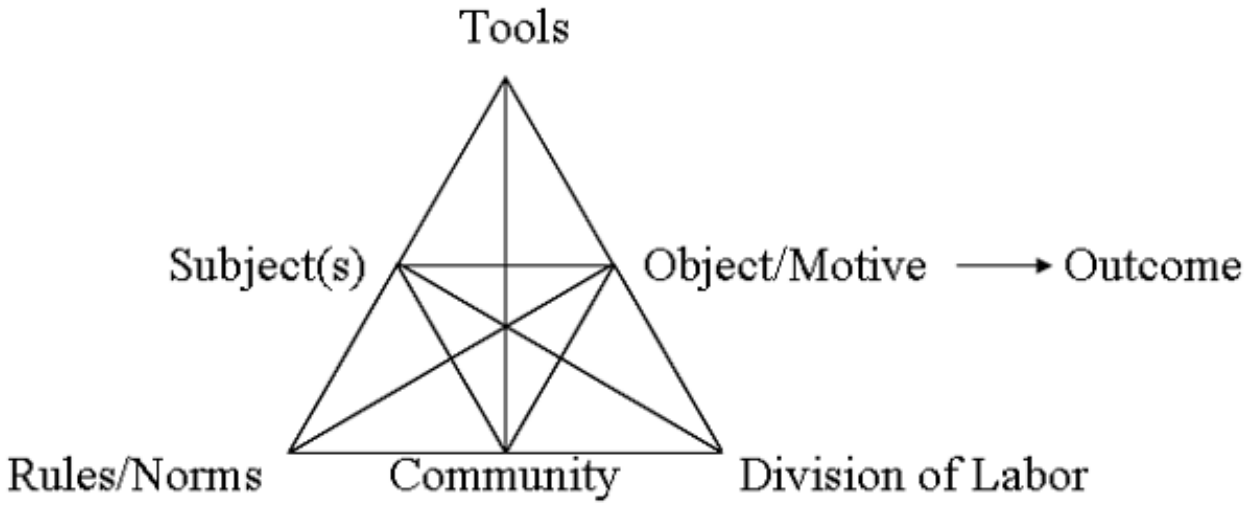

Figure 3. An Activity System

Of course there are the people involved, the students and teacher. These are the *subjects*, with their identities, their subjectivities. And we could use this flexible triangular lens to zoom in and out to one student, to several or all the participants, or to the whole university, depending on the question we're asking. We're asking here why some students felt alienated by the writing in the course and how one student moved beyond that alienation. So our unit of analysis is, to begin, the students and teacher and the tools they use together to mediate their joint activity.

The course has a range of *tools*. There are desks, chalkboard, and so on, but also other material tools (sounds in the air and marks on surfaces) which we will analyze as discursive tools in various *genres*, oral and written: syllabus, lectures, discussions, readings, writing assignments, grade book, grade report forms. It has an *object and motive*, though here we get into difficulties because the teacher and the students sometimes had very different—even contradictory—perceptions of the motive. Officially, the object is Irish History. And the motive? Corey thought of it primarily in general education terms, as developing students' critical thinking and writing. One of the students, Beth, saw the motive as learning interesting facts about Irish history *and* getting a good grade on a general education requirement so she could graduate and get a job as a journalist—a basic motive in her life (she was already working as news director at a small radio station). So we have a potential contradiction in motives, which we will analyze later in much greater detail as it shaped the writing and learning.

There is a *division of labor.* The teacher does certain things and the students do other things. One has more power than the others. There is a *community* in the classroom, though the kind of community differs in different classrooms. There are *rules*, both official rules and that kind of unofficial unwritten rules we call norms. Some of these rules or norms are expectations, conventions for using writing in the university and in the discipline of academic history—genres. Finally, the activity system produces *outcomes.* People are potentially different when they leave, one way or another, individually and perhaps collectively. Learning (a kind of change) went

on—though not always in ways that the teacher, much less the students, had in mind. Let's look a little deeper, using this heuristic lens of activity systems.

People Act in Multiple, Linked Activity Systems

The Irish history course is linked, through its participants and tools, to other activity systems. All of us carry on multiple activities in multiple systems. That's what makes us different, and sometimes produces conflicts, contradictions, and change—even learning. Figure 4 shows *some* of the activity systems that participants mentioned as affecting their behavior in the course.

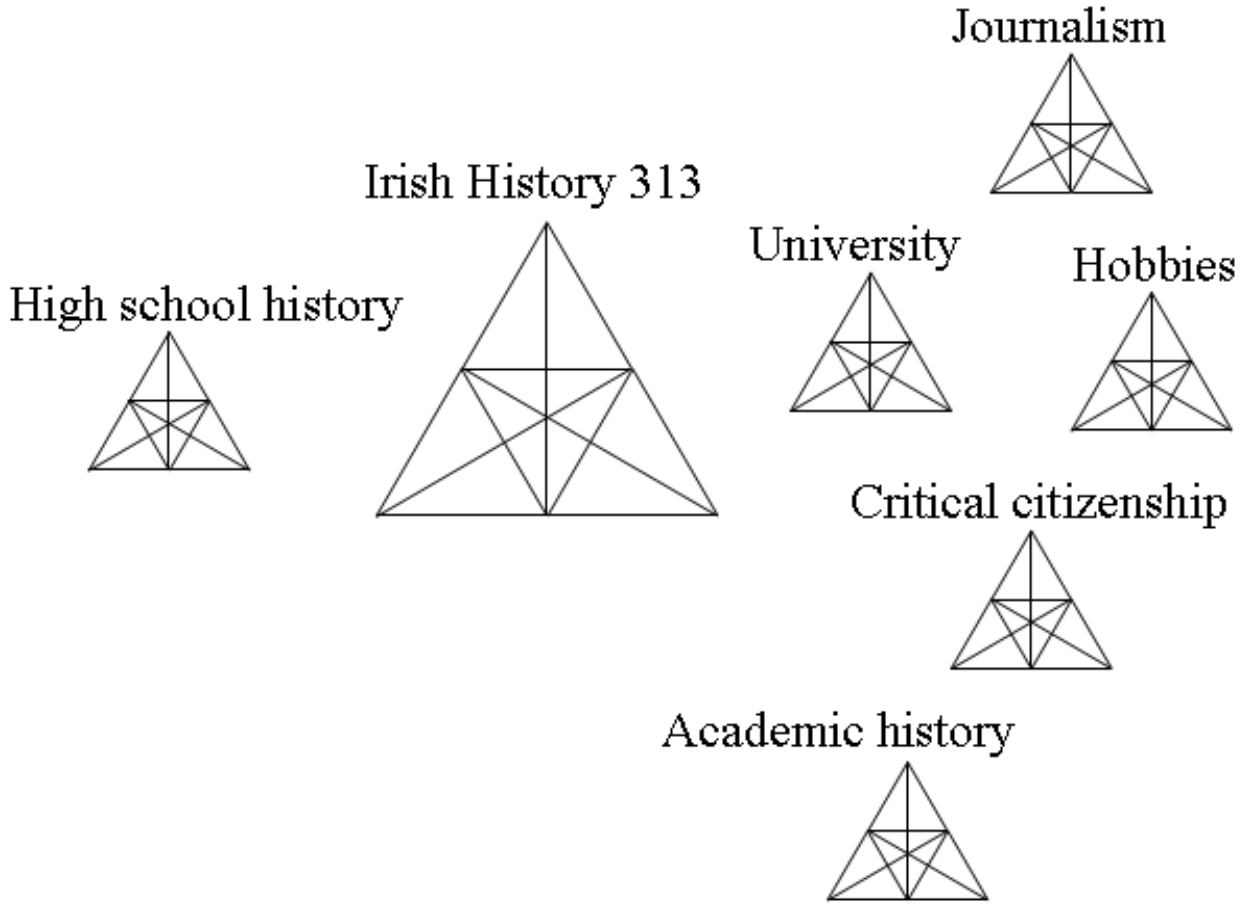

Figure 4. People Act in Multiple, Linked Activity Systems

All of the students had taken high school history, which very much affected their perceptions of and actions in this course, including their writing. Students expected a similar object and motive, similar tools (including genres) and rules (for those genres) in this college general education course. They expected to find interesting facts—and a single truth. Corey wanted them to orient toward another activity system, that of academic history, whose object, motive, tools (including

genres), and rules (for those genres) were different, in subtle but important ways, from high school history, as we will see. All were part of the university activity system, with its characteristic tools (grades, for example) and rules (such as general education requirements) and division of labor.

Some individual students, such as Beth, were hoping the class would involve them in ways that would be useful in other activity systems important to their lives. Because Beth wanted to be a journalist, she saw the course as potentially useful in helping her get historical background and improving her writing skills. Other students sometimes mentioned religion, sports, or hobbies. Corey (and the MWU's official goals for general education courses) mentioned citizenship, in various ways. By looking at other activity systems that participants belong(ed) to, we can broaden our lens to construct a wider unit of analysis. As we will see, these activity systems are often intertextually linked through systems of genres that mediate them.

Each of these activity systems has a history, which is important to an understanding the subjects' interactions with tools of literacy. Yañez (1999) has traced the history of MWU's general education program back several decades. Others (Russell, 1991; Veysey, 1965) have traced the history of general education in the U.S. This historical analysis suggests that the contradiction in general education we noted earlier is deeply embedded in the institution of U.S. higher education.

Dialectical Contradictions

These differences in participants' perceptions of the object and motive, within and among activity systems, mean that people are often at cross-purposes. The object and motive of the activity system are inevitably contested, negotiated. Similarly, the tools, rules, community and division of labor are often perceived differently, and thus also resisted, contested, and/or negotiated—overtly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously. In Y. Engeström's version of AT, these tensions within and among activity systems are viewed as symptoms of deeper *dialectical contradictions*, "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (Engeström, Y., 2001, p. 137). All human activity is contradictory at a very basic level. Human actions are at once individual and social. In each culture and each activity system specific contradictions arise out of the division of labor. These contradictions are the source of discoordinations, tensions and conflicts. "As Leont'ev shows, in complex activities with fragmented division of labor, the participants themselves have great difficulties in constructing a connection between the goals of their individual actions and the object and motive of their collective activity. This is what gives rise to alienation" (Engeström, Y., 1999, p. 173). But contradictions also present a constant potential for change in people and tools (including writing)—for transforming—re-mediating—activity systems. Thus, there is always potential for learning, both individual and social, for becoming a changed person and changed people, with new identities, new possibilities—often opened up (or closed down) through writing in various genres. These deep dialectical contradictions within and among activity systems profoundly condition (but never finally determine) the what individual teachers and students do (and do not

do)—and what they learn (and do not learn) (Engeström, Y., 1987, Chapter 2) [Note: References are to the searchable online version.]

As we noted above, one fundamental contradiction in U.S. higher education is between disciplinary specialization and 'general' or broad education for civic life (Russell, 1991). Curricular documents and interviews with faculty at MWU revealed ways this contradiction conditions attitudes toward writing. "Effective writing" was universally acknowledged as an important goal of general education courses. But there was no agreement on what effective writing is, no operational definition useful for pedagogy. These ambiguous attitudes toward the role of writing in general education can be seen, in part, as a reflection of this fundamental contradiction.

Interviews revealed that some faculty in some moments separated form from content: the content to be taught in a course in some subject, the form to be taught elsewhere (secondary school or first-year composition [general writing skills instruction or rhetoric] courses). Writing in this view is a conduit for content, transparent—and rather uninteresting intellectually. At other moments some faculty thought of "effective writing" as a developing accomplishment bound up with a discipline, in which content and form are inseparable. In this view, writing is an essential tool of learning to become a well-rounded citizen or a competent professional. And helping students develop writing is considered the "responsibility of all." Thus, "effective writing" was sometimes viewed as related to discipline at other times independent of it, sometimes the responsibility of others (who teach "general" skills or education), sometimes the responsibility of those who teach a discipline.

A "historical perspectives" general education course was one of several general education requirements for all students (Irish History was one of many such courses). The goal of these courses was, officially, "to develop an understanding of historical processes and a sharpening of students' analytical skills through training in the evaluation of evidence and in the development of generalizations and interpretations" (Bulletin, College of Liberal Arts, 1998-1999). Was the motive to teach students the methods of professional academic historical research (knowing that they would <u>not</u> become professional academic historians)? Or to reinforce and develop ("sharpen") general analytical skills (<u>not</u> knowing the activity systems in which the students would write)? Or if both, what is the relation between the two? In AT terms, there was a contradiction in the motive, which made it difficult to decide what and how and <u>why</u> students would write in general education courses.

MWU's official policy suggests what organizational communication theory calls "strategic ambiguity" (Lerner, 1980; Eisenberg, 1984; Hartman, 1978). It allowed the MWU to pursue both motives without confronting the consequences. The strategic ambiguity made it possible for faculty and administrators to invoke one and ignore the other of these two official (and admirable) motives when necessary or convenient in working out the division of labor (who would teach what to whom and when). Not having to examine the relation between GE courses and students in terms of the writing (genre) allowed a much more flexible apportioning of human resources for teaching and research. Graduate students, for example, generally taught the

"historical perspectives" courses, freeing tenure-line faculty for teaching majors and doing research. MWU's Goals for General Education carefully construct this ambiguity: "Effective use of the English language" is a goal and courses should include writing and speaking, but only "where feasible and practical." And the "kind and amount" will "vary widely." The official goals list a wide variety of possible genres, and specify they are to be "evaluated for form as well as content," but there was scant oversight of these policies and, more importantly, there was no process in place for discussing what "effective writing" is or how to develop it (College of Liberal Arts Classroom Manual, 1996, p. 12).

This seems to us an example of what historian of education Gerald Graff (1987) calls the "patterned isolation" of U.S. higher education, particularly in the humanities. Patterned isolation and strategic ambiguity are useful in an organization with multiple and contradictory objects and motives. Writing is acknowledged as important as a tool, but the forms and uses of that tool are ignored. In this sense, writing becomes "transparent," a tool that is used—and officially praised as important—but rarely examined.

And alienation is often the effect of this contradiction, with its strategic ambiguity and patterned isolation—particularly for those who do not benefit from the division of labor this contradiction makes possible. Students and instructors are sometimes caught in this contradiction, which was dramatically manifest in the activity system of the GE Irish history course. We now turn our lens back to the class as our unit of analysis, to see the ways students experienced this contradiction in the motives of general education courses, as they used a central tool of the course, writing. Y. Engeström (1987) argues that individuals often experience these deep dialectical contradictions as what Bateson (1972) and others have called a *psychological double bind*, an inner contradiction arising out of the dialectical contradiction in the activity system. "In double bind situations, the individual, involved in an intense relationship, receives two messages or commands which deny each other" (Chapter 3). The individual is unable to resolve the inner dialog. The result is a feeling of "I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't!" Over time, "important basic relationships are chronically subjected to invalidation through paradoxical interaction." (Dell, 1980, p. 325)

We look now at some double binds that Beth experienced in the class, as revealed in her comments. Her inner contradictions, we argue, grow out of contradictions arising from the historical contradiction in general education. And as we'll see later, these contradictions are manifest in the intertextual genre systems linking the course to other activity systems, such as previous schooling (especially high school history), future professions, and future civic activities.

Contradiction in Motives: Exchange Value v. Use Value (Doing School v. Doing ?)

Y. Engeström (1987, Chapter 3) argues that the fundamental contradiction of educational activity in capitalist societies is that of exchange value versus use value (socialist education has its own contradictions, which require a different analysis). This contradiction, he says, produces alienation, as in many other activity systems in capitalist societies. Are students just 'doing

school,' doing it 'for the grade,' which will be exchanged or cashed out later? Or are they doing something for which they can see some use value in their lives, now or in the future? This is fundamentally a contradiction between the subject (e.g., Beth), and the official object/motive of the course. What am I doing here anyway? Where am I headed with all this Irish history stuff? At times students expressed this alienation very eloquently. Another student, Mia, put it this way when she discussed trying to write initially: "I feel like I'm just drowning in this class. I'm just in this perpetual dark. I'm like, there's no light switch, no exit sign. I can't! I'm lost! I know there's a floor, but I can't find the wall, and I know it is a big room."

Beth often experienced a double bind in terms of the relevance of the specialist writing in the Irish History course to her motive of becoming a journalist. As the blue line in Figure 5 suggests, one motive for her being in the course was to get a good grade so she could get a degree so she could get on with her life as a journalist. In this sense she was operating in the university activity system only, obediently hoping to get some exchange value. But as the red line in Figure 5 suggests, there was a contradictory motive she perceived, one with use value. Was there something she might learn about writing history in this course that would be useful to her—and to those she hoped to serve one day in her career?

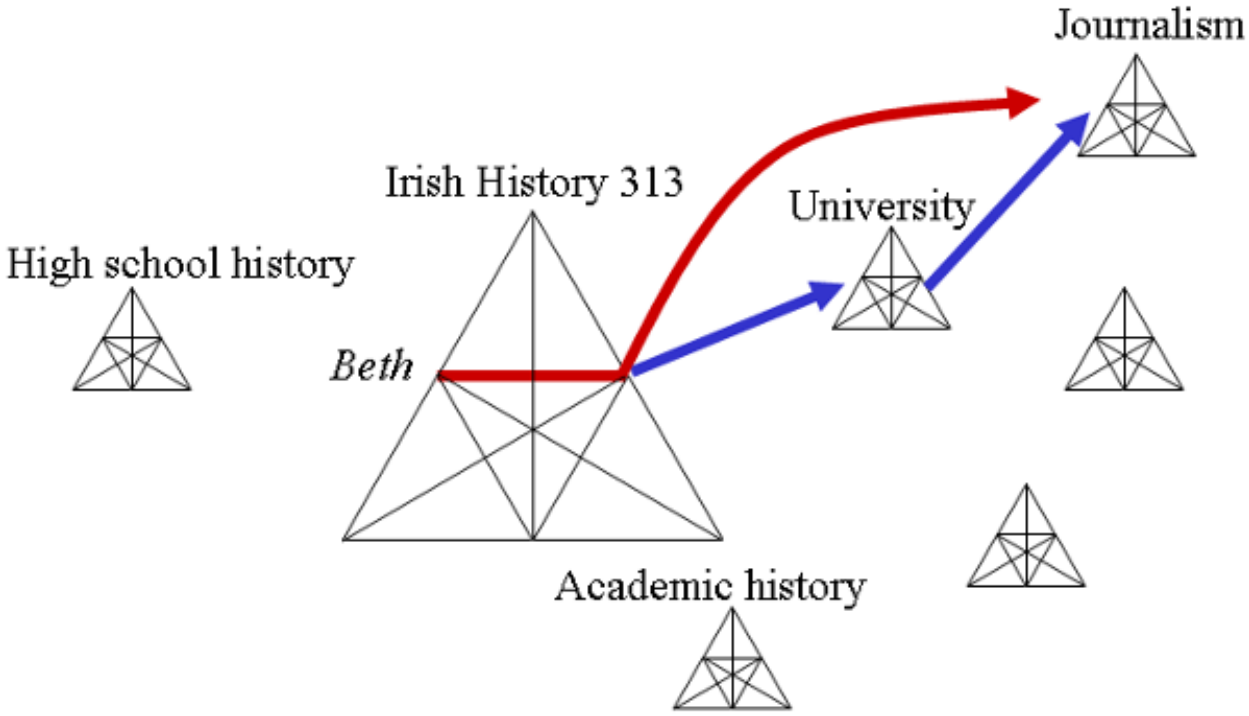

Figure 5. Contradiction: Exchange value versus use value for Beth

"You know," she remarked of Corey in an interview, "we have very different writing styles. The thing is that I'm a journalism major and he's a historian." Initially, she saw his writing expectations as restricting her professional style (which she was committed to in forming her

identity as a journalist)—and then grading her down for it. She experienced a frustrating double bind when Corey wrote a comment suggesting that she make a *historical* argument in a book review she was writing. He "made me mad about that. Because he wrote all these comments on my [paper] about how it didn't have, like what was the argument of the book? . . . I was frustrated that he didn't tell [me] that the first time around. Why didn't he point that out earlier? I could have gotten an A instead of a B on it." (Actually Corey repeatedly discussed the importance of making a historical argument but, as we shall see, Beth had initially interpreted that discussion in terms of her current understanding of history as fact-telling.) Her conflict over writing 'style' was symptomatic of a deeper contradiction in motives: pleasing the teacher for a grade (to be exchanged for a diploma and grade point average) in the activity systems of schooling—versus resisting the teacher in order to make meaning useful to her life and future as a journalist. What Beth felt at this stage in the course was a painful psychological double bind: damned if she wrote her way and damned if she'd write his way. Writing in the ways (genres) the course seemed to her to demand would get her a high grade. But to her those ways of writing seemed to require she violate the rules of writing in her field—and thus invalidate the learning she had come to MWU to accomplish.

Contradiction in Tools and Object/Motive: Recall v. Expanding Involvement

Another very common—and related—contradiction has to do with the tools and object/motive. Are these tools going to get me where I want to go or where somebody else wants me to go?

As Figure 6 suggests, if students see themselves acting in terms of the university (requirements, grades, etc.), then the literacy tools in various genres (such as readings, lectures, writing assignments, etc.) are interpreted in that light (exchange value: for the grade). They are tools for recalling information and algorithmic procedures that will result in a grade (and perhaps a diploma). But if students see the tools as potentially useful in activity systems beyond the university, then the literacy tools of the course have use value for expanding involvement with other activities, other people and their ways of being and doing. New transformations of the activity (and identities) are possible.

Many students in Irish History saw the course (and other general education courses) primarily as a hurdle on route to a diploma. Students often opted to be "a grade maker, not a sense maker," in Y. Engeström's phrase (1987, Chapter 3). Mia, for example, could not see a rational motive in Corey's insistence that the tools of a professional historian were relevant to her: "Well, he wanted us to become good history writers. Why he wanted us to become good history writers didn't really make much sense because we're not history majors." Beth struggled with this too. She complained in interviews that the writing assignments were a hurdle to the grade she wanted but not relevant to her future as a journalist. But as we'll see, she moved past this contradiction, at least in part, as her struggle with the double bind led her to work with Corey on the writing. Corey and Beth were able to negotiate a provisional, mutual understanding through the tools of writing Corey taught. Corey was able to see her professional goals in her style. And she came to

understand something of the potential for writing in those ways to teach her something useful for her career. She transformed her understanding of the writing tools of the course from facilitating recall for a grade to a different and less alienated motive, expanding involvement with history to critically engage its relation to journalism.

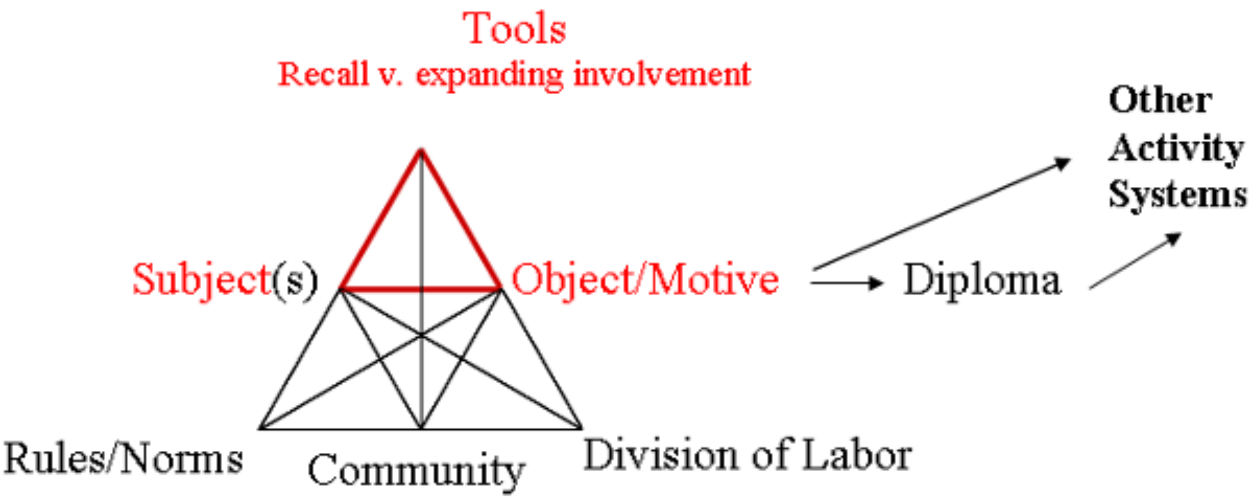

Figure 6. Contradiction: Tools for recall versus expanding involvement

Contradiction Among Rules, Tools, and Object/Motive: Just What Are We DOING on This Assignment Anyway?

Part of Beth's alienation from the specialist writing had to do with another contradiction—among rules, tools, and object/motive. Here's what she wrote in her book review assignment, critiquing the author's lack of objectivity:

> **Beth:** (critiquing a book in a required review): "We must expect the author not to be biased or slanted when reporting…"

And here's Corey's marginal comment on her book review:

> **Corey:** "Actually, I would suggest that objectivity is a myth. We must expect that the author is biased."

Beth later recalled in an interview: "I felt really frustrated. Kind of mad." She expressed an inability to do things right, no matter how hard she tried (and she tried very hard, despite a very full class schedule and work commitments at in the radio news department). What lies behind this psychological double bind?

As Figure 7 suggests, this double bind seems to grow out of a contradiction among the rules, tools and object/motive. Beth was writing a book review, something she'd written in high school and in journalism. It was a tool of historical discourse she thought she understood and could use.

But the rules of the game, the genre expectations, were different in this new activity system—without her knowing it. There was a fundamental contradiction between the genre rules or norms she'd come to expect in writing high school history or writing journalism (the activity systems she had operated in when writing about past events) and the rules/norms of writing in this course (on genres as rules, see Engeström, R. 1995).

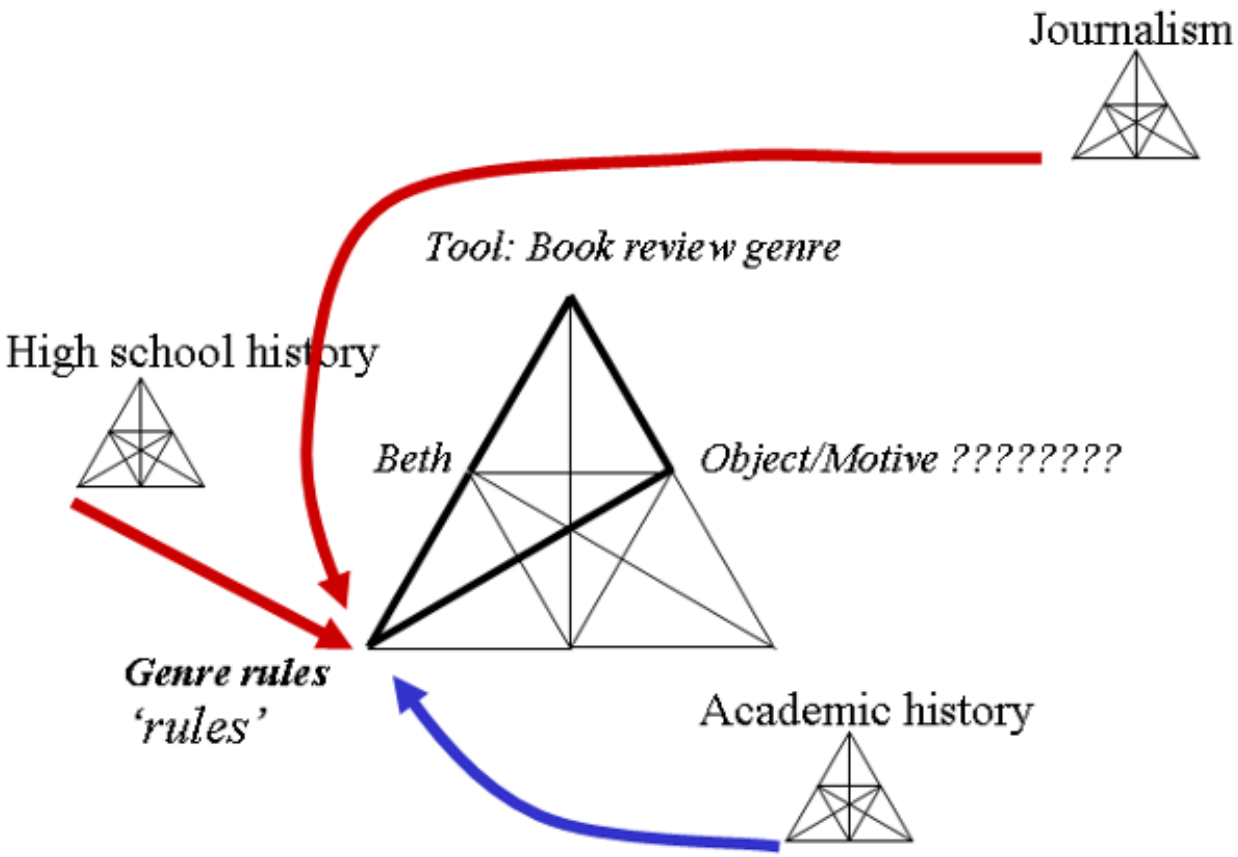

Figure 7. Contradiction in rules and tools: Conformity versus rebellion

Irish History seemed to be a history course, and she'd written book reviews before in history. But this similarity proved to be maddeningly deceptive. In AT terms, she was in a new activity system for her, academic history. The double bind she felt grew out of this contradiction. She didn't see, initially, that the object of the activity was very different than that of high school history or journalism, as she understood them. And therefore the genre rules were different. Corey was trying to lead Beth and the other students to an "understanding of historical processes" and "a sharpening of students' analytical skills through training in the evaluation of evidence and in the development of generalizations and interpretations," as the College of Liberal Arts Bulletin puts it. The "historical processes" are processes of interpretation, and the genre rules (and the epistemology and methods of academic history those genres mediate) require that one not treat history as if one could move past interpretation to final and absolute

historical truths. And "sharpening analytical skills" means writing about the past in the critical ways that professional historians do. However, to sharpen in one activity system meant (in Beth's perception) to dull her critical edge in journalism—give up her quest for objectivity. And because the system of general education does not provide a forum, a ground, a vocabulary for articulating these differences genre rules—which are also differences in the methodological tools and the objects and motives of disciplines—she and Corey had to struggle toward some understanding between the contradictory poles of expert and lay (complicated by the fact that the laity include specialists or would-be specialists in many other fields).

Contradictions & Genre

The issue of genres, as tools and rules, leads us to see the specialist/lay divide not in terms of a neat division or unassailable contradiction, but in terms of the circulation of discourse, how genres intertextually link activity systems. Activity systems are not hermetically sealed, neatly divided between specialist and generalist, but in complex textual (genre) systems, through which the specialist/generalist contradiction is created and maintained. In the case of Beth and Corey, we're talking now about a genre, the history book review. But from the perspective of AT and genre systems theory, it is a single genre in name only. As Beth found out—with great difficulty and much frustration—a history book review is different in crucial ways when it is written in different "contexts" or, in AT terms, activity systems. The object and motive of the different activity systems have historically led people in each activity system to expect different things of the genre—thus there are different genre rules or norms.

As Figure 8 illustrates, the students came into the course perceiving history primarily as *facts,* the most common perception held outside of professional historians (Welton, 1990). In Beth's view, one norm or rule for a book review in a newspaper book section is *Be factual*, because the object/motive is to inform readers of the interest and accuracy of the book, to help them make a decision about whether to read it. In a typical high school history class, one genre rule is also to *Be factual*, because the object/motive is to learn the facts or, more generously, to become accurately informed citizens. But in a book review in an academic journal of history, another rule is to *Critically interpret,* because the motive is to persuade other experts that one's interpretation is the most believable.

But what about activity system of the General Education Irish History course? What are the genre rules? And at a deeper level, what is the motive of this course that gives rise to the genre rules? Is it doing professional history? If so, the motives of the instructor and Beth's motives are deeply contradictory. Is it learning something about writing that will help her as a journalist? She expressed that hope. But if so, what's the point of writing 'opinions,' as she called them? Beth was caught in a contradiction and felt a painful double bind. Will she write in his way or her way?

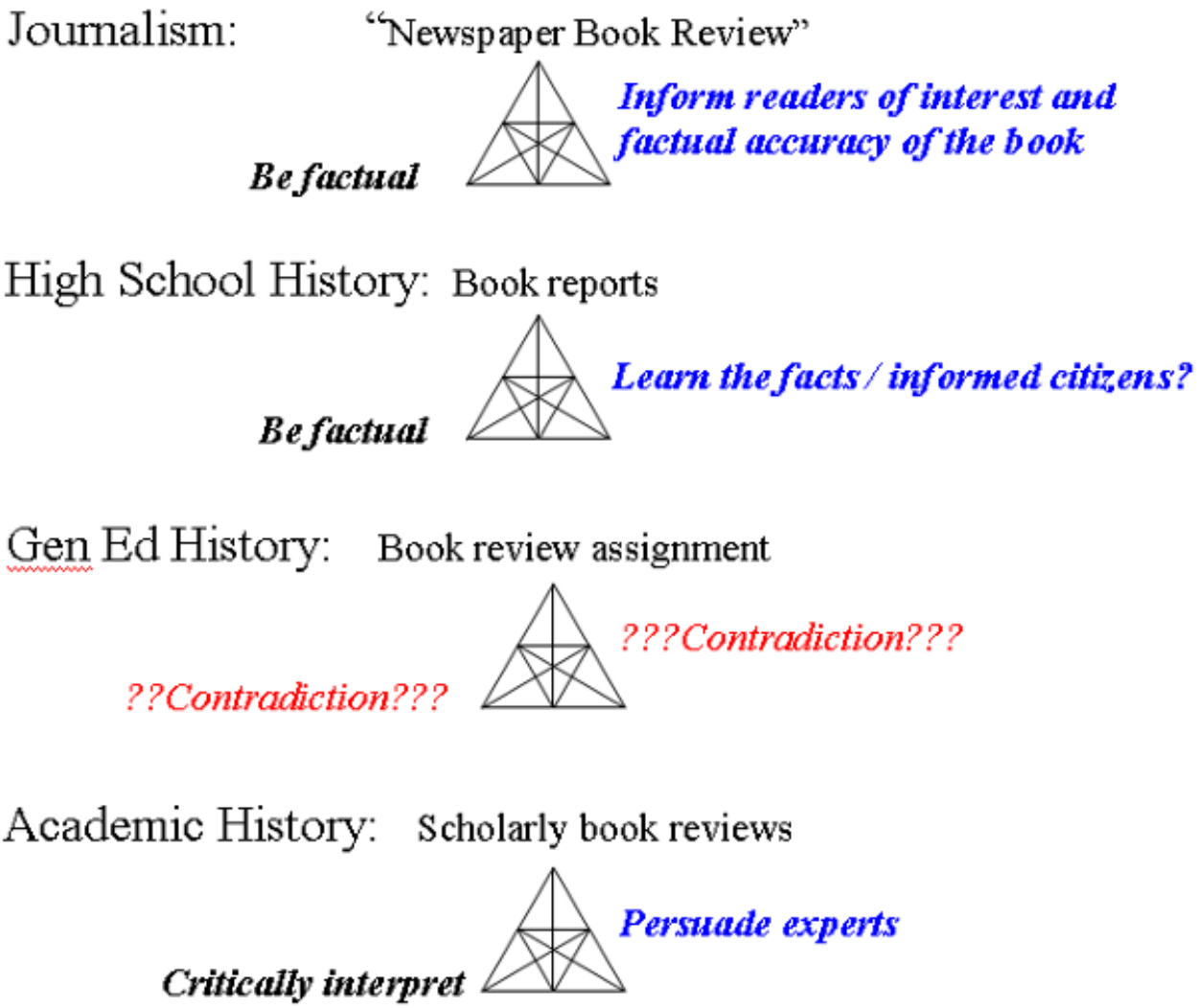

Figure 8. Contradictions in the course's system of genres

Students Personalize What Is Professionalized

One common way the three students in this study responded to double binds arising from this contradiction in general education was to personalize what is, from the teacher's point of view, a professional (and pedagogical) motive. In interviews, Beth and the two other students perceived that it was the instructor's individual, personal preferences for writing that lay behind his comments. As one student, Michael, put it, "I don't get it. These are his writing tasks and he wants me to write in his way."

But as we suggest in Figure 9, from Corey's point of view these were not personal preferences but the collective ways of doing things in his profession, the genres and rules of the activity system of academic history. He was re-presenting his profession. These ways with words, these genres and genre rules, had become central to his professional ethos and identity. He saw their value to the profession in making the study of history a socially useful critical enterprise, where

interpretations of history are continually negotiated and, perhaps, refined. He also saw their value in general education and their potential use value in students' lives beyond the course, in terms of critical citizenship. He communicated that often in his classroom presentation, in his assignments sheets, and in his comments. Yet despite Corey's efforts, the genres of academic history often seemed to these students to be dichotomous, contradictory, unrelated to the genres in which the students had previously experienced history textually (in textbooks, popular history, and so on). Because of the historical contradiction in general education, there was no textual space (in Geisler's term) for representations of history outside of expert versus popular.

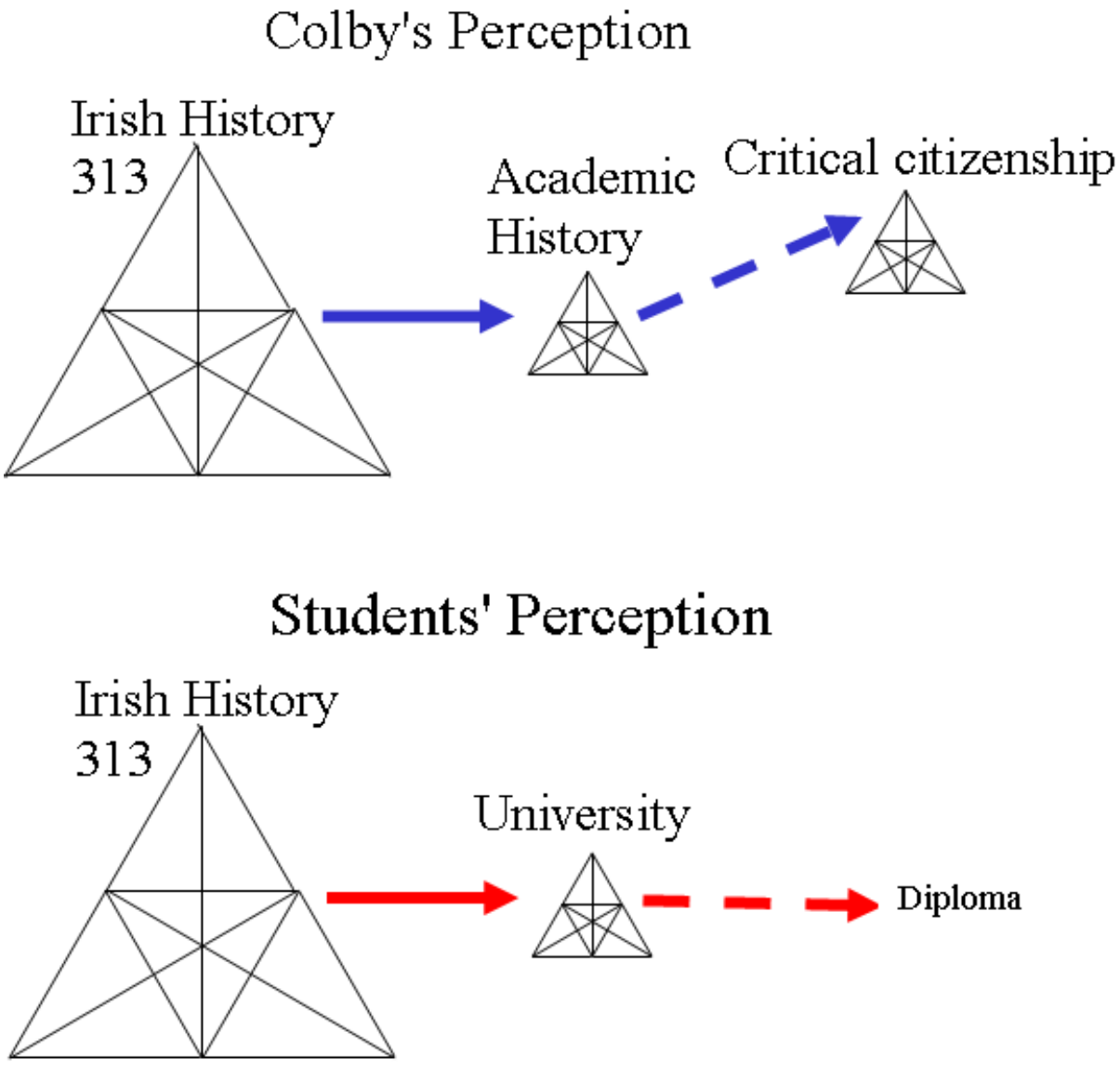

Figure 9. Students personalize what is professional

Mia responded to Corey's attempts to get students to write critically about history by perceiving his comments in the activity system of schooling, teacher versus student. "He is too picky. I think he values more how I say it than what I say. Now, I can see that that [first] sentence can be improved, but you know, he's always looking for those mistakes to dock my grade. There is nothing I can do about it." She realized she was not perceiving historical issues in the way he did. "I don't know what I should be questioning [in the papers] and what I shouldn't be questioning. My questions are based out of confusion." She had no map of activity system of academic history, no sense of its object and motive, that would allow her to make meaning of the readings and discussions, to engage in expansive learning rather than making a grade by doing 'picky' things. His comments were perceived as being 'about' the facts or 'about' the writing, not about the ways critical historical analysis might work for her, textually, in the circulation of discourse in the field of academic history—and beyond.

Some students, like Mia, took a long time to see that Corey was trying to lead them to expand into his activity system *in order* to see the potential for critical citizenship that his disciplinary activity offered. Students are alienated in part because they don't see the genres assigned as part of a human activity that makes sense that has uses beyond pleasing the teacher to get a grade. Instead they often personalize what is professional because they do see beyond the individual person to the discipline he re-presents. Typically, they do not see the history of the activity system, the many people who have talked in these ways (genres) for these reasons (motive) in the past. Nor do they often look into the future, to see how the insights of this discipline—and its ways of writing—might help them and their culture to think and act in new ways, ways that might improve their lives and those of others. This takes time spent in the field, something that general education students do not typically have.

So how can teachers and students expand to see and experience these relations mediated by genres? To make sense of specialized literacy? Beth's work with Corey suggests ways students can get past the double binds and alienation that specialized discourse in U.S. higher education creates.

Genre Systems of History

We've been using the term genre here in a way that some may not be used to. So we need to explain further. In North American genre theory (Freedman and Medway, 1994a, 1994b), genres are understood not merely as formal textual features, the *what* and *how* to write. Genres are also seen as expected ways of using words to get things done in certain recurring situations—the activity system, in AT terms. This brings into genre analysis questions of social motive and identity. The *why* and *who* of genre.

And thus genres, as Bazerman (1994) has argued, form systems that follow and mediate the work pathways within and among activity systems. They realize social motives, focusing attention and coordinating action, and they shape (and are shaped by) the identities of participants. In a hospital, for example, medical records in a huge range of genres are all intertextually linked, now on computer: medical histories, test results, prescriptions, insurance forms, and on and on

(Bawarshi, 2000). To take another example, in a university, grades are entered on grade forms and then transcripts and eventually produce diplomas, one hopes.

Genres and their systems help us make sense of what's happening. They allow us to do certain kinds of work that are otherwise impossible (imagine a hospital without medical records). But of course they can also be constraining (they are expectations, rules, norms, after all). Teachers and students may potentially follow these genre pathways to new ways of getting involved with others, new ways of living, new identities, as students come to read and write similarly to some and differently than others, expanding their involvement with some activity systems and perhaps restricting their involvement with others.

However, the expectations created by the genre may not allow one to do the kind of work—or learning—that one wants or needs to (as happened to Beth). So genres are also sites of contestation. In genres (tools for coordinating actions) deep dialectical contradictions are instantiated and negotiated, and the political and personal struggles those contradictions give rise to. In this contestation, learning can also occur, as participants struggle with the constraints, and see new possibilities for transforming (re-mediating) their activities, themselves—and their genres, for genres are always only stabilized-for-now, as Catherine Schryer (1994) puts it.

These stabilized-for-now genre systems, evolved over months, years, decades, even centuries, can explain much about the ways students and teachers perceive and do their work. The genre system of history, for example, reveals Beth's predicament. Figure 10 analyzes some aspects of the system of genres in history relevant to the course. Professional historians (at the bottom of the diagram) critically examine and interpret (and reinterpret) primary documents according to the methods (rules, norms) of history. They argue and debate to persuade other experts. And when enough experts (or the enough powerful experts) arrive at consensus, that consensus is put into textbooks for high school students and generally perceived as 'fact.' And, perhaps, that consensus is eventually put into popular history books, of the kind that journalists review and the rest of us Big Picture People sometimes read—to find the 'facts' of history.

But historical facts and genres are only stabilized for now. They can be reopened to debate, as new evidence or new theory or political pressures move experts to take another look. And in this sense, the genre system works in the other way too, if we take a long enough cultural-historical view. Academic historians often read old newspapers and other kinds of popular documents to write history. And political pressure from the 'public' can force historians to defend or even rethink their views, as in the famous Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian (Kohn, 1995).

Thus historical knowledge circulates in a system of genres, though a very loose and unofficial system (at least as compared to the system of medical records, for example, which is highly regulated, often by law).

So in the light of the genre system of history, Beth's position in the General Education Irish History course is ripe for learning from the contradictions we noted, placed between the activity system where historical knowledge is produced (as contested interpretation) and activity systems where it is primarily consumed, in K-13 schooling, journalism, politics, and so on. She was in a

good position to get a critical view of 'facts,' to see how and academic history works the way it does, to learn how facts are made (and sometimes unmade) through interpretation. And this has use value, potentially, for many people besides professional historians. It is useful for journalists because they also interpret information, and shape what is considered to be fact. Journalists are integral to circulating discourse in various genre systems (which is why some journalists even specialize: in science or medicine or politics, for example). And for every citizen, too, a critical perspective on history may be useful, when they are reading a history book—or a newspaper.

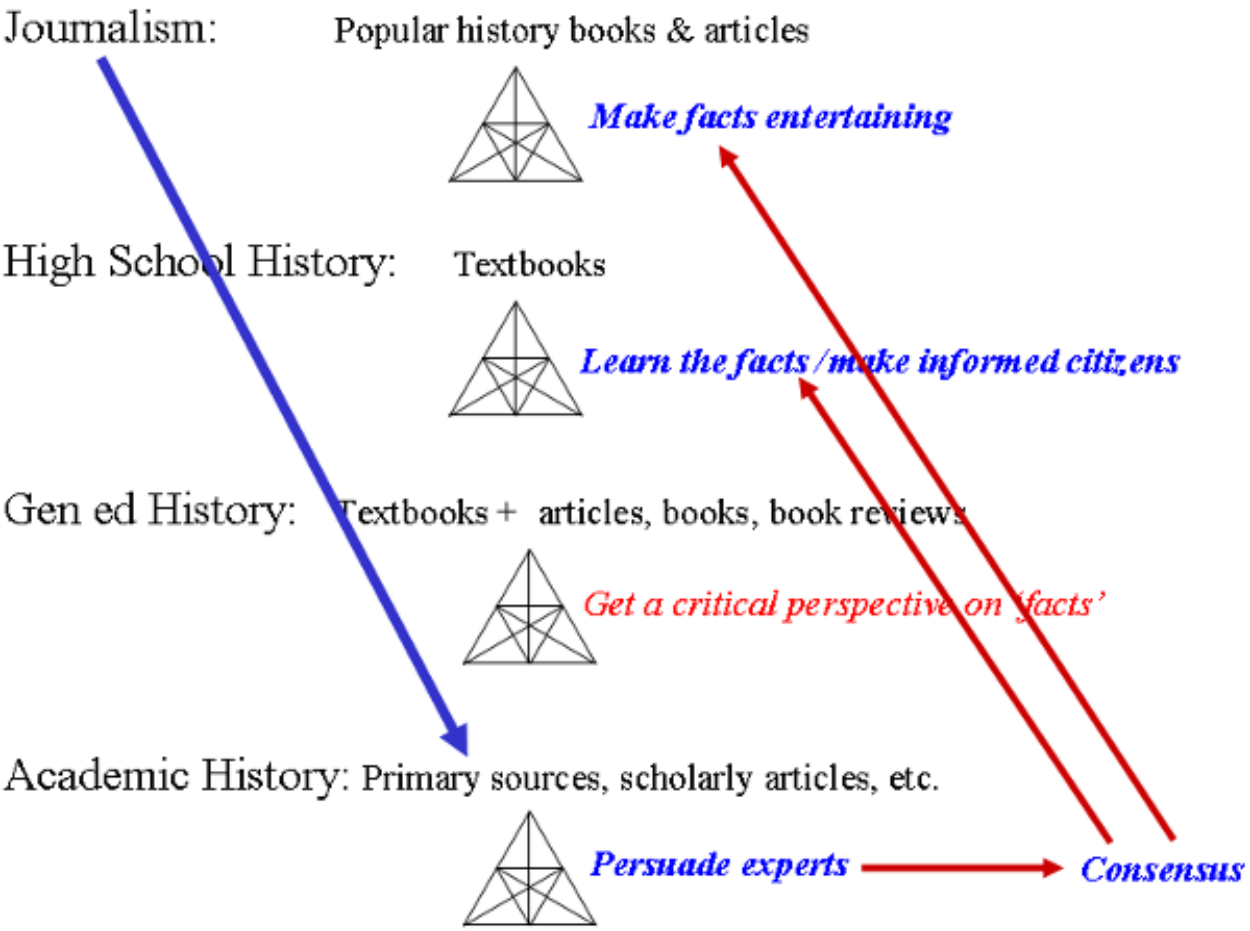

Figure 10. The genre system of history

Using Contradictions for Learning by Expanding

Beth struggled mightily with the contradictions in the course, and she seemed to use those contradictions to learn by expanding her views of history and writing. As we noted, Y. Engeström argues that double binds can sometimes lead people to transform their activity, to

expand their ways of knowing and acting with others—learning not by merely reacting but by expanding. And that seems to have begun to happen with Beth.

At the beginning of the semester, when the students took a survey of their attitudes toward writing, Beth, like most of the other students, checked the response: "Good writing is the same no matter the discipline." When Corey introduced and explained the assignments, none of the students asked any questions or expressed any concerns. Indeed, Beth was frustrated with all the talk of writing, because to her, "This [was] just Rhetoric [101, the first year writing course] all over again." They did not recognize this was a new activity system, mediated by different discursive tools with different motives and rules. Indeed, the terms Corey used to explain the 'writing' were the 'same' (thesis, argument, organization, etc.). Unfortunately, we do not have a robust vocabulary for talking about the differences in writing in different activity systems, which can make the differences salient—in part because of the patterned isolation and strategic ambiguity the contradiction in general education gives rise to.

But after experiencing great frustration over not being able to satisfy him (and being particularly grade-motivated), Beth came in to talk. "What would it take to get an A?" she asked. Corey's answer did not satisfy her. In her opinion, he "was kind of vague, like listed off the same things that he told me before, like 'you need to have a thesis statement,' blah, blah, blah, blah. You know that was kind of vague." She concluded, "I didn't get a lot out of those conversations in his office."

Yet when Corey realized that Beth was a journalism major, he was at least in a position to dramatize the differences. For example, Corey commented on one paper, "This intro seems journalist-like. It is broken up into several paragraphs perhaps unnecessarily. History intros are typically longer and flow towards the thesis w/out paragraph breaks." After the paper had been returned, she said in an interview, "I use a lot of long introductions, because that's the way I like to write. You know we have very different writing styles. The thing is that I'm a journalism major and he's a historian."

The differences in the activities (and thus genres) had become an issue that could be negotiated. He could understand her writing expectations because he was familiar (as most all of us are) with journalistic conventions (genre rules). And she could see him as fundamentally different—not merely that he was a teacher but that he was an academic historian, going about a very different activity, yet one that might have value for her beyond the grade.

For her final paper, Beth chose to write a critique of a *New York Times* account of a meeting between Gerry Adams and Tony Blair. Her critique shows that she had come to see the value of the academic historian's critical perspective for her chosen field, Journalism. She had used the double binds she experienced to transform her understanding of both activity systems through the mediation of a genre that combined both journalism and academic history. She begins her critique with a typical "Five W's" journalistic reporting of the meeting. But she quickly moves to "how differently this story might have been reported and relayed in Ireland, Great Britain, and beyond." This concern for how the news was handled outside the United States suggests that

Beth was well aware of the newspaper's American "bias," as she put it (still using the epistemological framework of her understanding of journalism).

It seemed that Beth had begun to question her earlier, dearly held belief in the objectivity of the news. In this respect, she pointed out that "even from various media in America [United States] we see unique perspectives to this story." In the closing paragraph of her introduction, Beth highlighted the limited knowledge of some journalists about the history of Ireland. In contrast, she stated that her "historical background knowledge [of Ireland] will form the basis [to analyze] this paper['s perspective on the event]." This comment suggests Beth had begun to view the news from the epistemological perspective of academic history rather than journalism.

As the paper continues, Beth begins to use the analytical language of academic history, and for similar uses (though not entirely). Acknowledging an audience that will be critical of her claims, she qualifies her statements, usually with "seemed": "seemed to almost play it [the handshake] down" and "this seems to suggest an understanding by Blair. . ." She uses (almost correctly) the terminology of academic history: "Some journalists do not know Ireland's history, therefore, they are very inclined to be [synchronically] biased," as opposed to the "diachronically biases" of historians. Beth is still looking to root out "bias" (a value of the activity system of Journalism, in her view), but she sees bias in more complex terms—and both in journalism and academic history. This use of analytic terms and metadiscourse suggests she is aware that arguments are not to be regarded as unalterable truths, but as dialectic interpretations. She is between activity systems, between discourses, but trying to use this expanded perspective in ways that will be useful to her.

Similarly, her analysis contrasts depictions of Blair and Adams in the account (adjectives, number of mentions, etc.) to make the point. And she accounts for the differences with a cultural explanation ("We are more familiar with British's government, their leaders, and their culture from our own history."), which is developed in terms of the contrast with Irish Catholic versions of the history. In her conclusion, she maintains that the article did not fully depict "the importance and the possibilities for this meeting, simply because [the author] does not utilize a wider historical perspective." For Beth, the use value for journalists of the "wider historical perspective" of critical—academic—history was apparent. But this expansive learning was purchased at the price of struggle with the contradictions of general education.

When the semester was over Beth admitted that she had "improved a lot as a writer, [and] learned a lot from him." In balance, for Beth "this class was very beneficial. I learned a lot about Irish history and about historical writing. Specifically, I learned about how historical and journalistic writing are different." When asked in the final interview if she was a better historical writer, she replied,

> I don't know. But I can tell you that I'm more aware of historical writing these days. I'll be more careful about analyzing arguments. Like if I'm in a position where I have to agree or disagree with an author, I'll consider the evidence used by the author to support her argument. As a result of this

> class, I think that I'm also a more critical historical reader, too. I don't know. Does that answer your question?

Her writing and comments suggest she had begun to perceive use value in the experience of writing the genres of academic history. (And she got her A.) In a sense, she had realized the general education goals Corey had for the course ("promote learning of modern Irish history and analytical thinking abilities") and the hopes she had for a course (getting an A and improving her writing skills). Yet this happened in a way that surprised her, that made both history and writing different for her, as she confronted the contradictions of general education.

Making the Contradictions Productive of Expansive Learning

In general education history courses, sensitive, insightful teaching to deal with issues of motivation and the expert/lay split, such as Corey displayed, and expansive learning, such as Beth displayed, are not uncommon. But we suspect it happened after a struggle with the contradictions of general education—and with the wider contradictions that the division of expert/lay labor in the wider culture creates and maintains. For the contradiction in general education is part of the wider contradiction between the knowledge and activity of experts and the knowledge and activity of the rest of us Big Picture People, in our various systems of activity, when we encounter academic history at various points in its genre systems. One cannot eliminate the contradictions that specialization creates by changing the genres by fiat (that would mean changing the activity systems they mediate). But this synthesis of AT and genre theory may help us think through work in new ways, and perhaps even make the contradiction productive of expansive learning through re-mediating activity with new tools, including new genres.

Let's return to our original question: How can we understand why some students initially felt alienated by the writing? We have argued that the fundamental causes do not lie in the actions of the teacher or the student. The teacher was skilled and dedicated; the students were competent and willing. Rather the causes lie in the constraints under which they carried on their activity, the deep dialectical contradiction in U.S. general education between specialist and non-specialist activity and discourse, as it is manifest in capitalist schooling.

The students' alienation occurred in terms of the writing, because they had to use this tool in these genres (with these genre rules) to pursue their motives (grades and useful knowledge/skill). Yet the motives seemed contradictory. The institution (department, general education program, university) did not have to encounter the contradiction in written texts that mattered (the official documents were strategically ambiguous and mediated the patterned isolation of their activity, which in turn afforded greater flexibility in the division of labor for the faculty and administrators). Our analysis of the genres in these various intertextually linked genre systems suggests that the alienation students experienced can be traced to the ways the activity of history is mediated in a complex circulation of texts in genres. That is, that the contradiction in motives

(and the alienation it gives rise to) is embodied in the ways people read and write texts of various kinds.

We have also suggested that the contradiction can, under the right conditions, become productive of expansive learning. Beth and Corey were able to use their differences in approaching texts ("styles," in Beth's word) to expose deeper differences in motives. Beth found textual pathways to connect two specialized activities, academic history and journalism. Through the writing, she was able to transform the activity of the class from "grade-making" to "sense-making," and find use value where she saw only exchange value.

However, Beth was a highly motivated student who said from the outset, "I really like writing and I like doing research." She was working in a professional field already. And she was highly grade-motivated. Other students were not so research-competent, grade-driven, or career-motivated that they were willing to endure the double binds and alienation of the general education contradiction long enough to transform the activity from doing school to doing some new activity, one with use value. And Beth also had the advantage of finding, through Corey's guidance, an individual connection between her future and academic history, through which she could expand intellectually and professionally.

How then might an activity and genre analysis offer tools for exploring ways of making the general education contradiction afford, rather than constrain, expansive learning for a wider range of students? Further studies might explore ways of making the contradiction—and the genre system of a field—explicit, a specific and conscious part of the teaching and learning. Representations of the genre system (looking at texts in various genres and discussing their relation) might help teachers and students locate their motives in terms of the motives of the discipline, as Beth did.

Viewing teaching learning through the lens of activity systems and the genre systems that mediate them may give teachers and students a sense of what goes into the making of, for example, historical argument, the *why* (motivation through potential use value) as well as the *what* and *how* of writing academic history. Similar research among advocates of critical pedagogy in the discipline of history suggests various strategies: for example, starting students with primary sources (because that's where academic historians often start), and then comparing differing accounts, popular and academic, to understand how interpretation works within and beyond academic history (Greene, 1994; Shay & Moore, 2002; Leinhardt & Stainton, 1994; Leinhardt & Young, 1996; Newell & Winograd, 1996; Perfetti & Britt, 1995).

Ultimately, however, the means to make the contradiction more widely productive of expansive learning lie beyond changes in individual classrooms. They lie in the activity systems where the general education contradiction was constructed: departments, universities, professions. We agree with Geisler that "we need to use the curriculum to find a way to interact with those who are different from us and intend to stay that way . . . to acknowledge the difference between expert and amateur perspectives and give as much attention to educating the one as the other" (p.

225). And we agree that professions should "reconnect expertise to the arena of civic action" and specialists should "find our general readers and talk to them" more (p. 253).

But a genre systems perspective would suggest that there are already people in each discipline who do just that (textbook writers, writers of popularizations, teachers of general education courses, etc.)—though this work is of lower status. The division of labor in professions is such that few professionals need routinely carry on a dialog with other activity systems. Yet professionals who interact with non-specialists as part of their work—not least teachers of general education courses—might more productively carry on that work if they analyzed—and, when useful, taught others about—the system of genres that mediates their profession. With such a recognition, it might be possible to understand the contradictions that the division of labor creates and to re-mediate their work (and recreate their genres) to make those contradictions afford rather than constrain possibilities. Activity and genre theory offer a vocabulary for discussing the contradiction in terms of writing, for having a dialog among professionals in a field (such as those teaching general education courses in a department) as well as among those in other professions and publics.

Conclusion: The Challenge of Working Through Writing in Our Fields

Students and teachers might profit from thinking about the 'big picture,' how their courses (and the disciplines and professions they re-present) work in terms of their own discursive systems—and in relation to those of other systems of activity. Teachers might be able, as Corey did with Beth, to help students see genre pathways for expanding into a discipline or, using a discipline's critical tools, expanding into other systems of activity, civic, personal, or professional.

For general composition courses, AT and genre systems theory are particularly significant (Russell, 1997) because students (like those in this study) will participate in systems of activity and read/write genres that are very different than those of their general composition courses. Seeing writing as 'Big Picture People' means teaching students to recognize and in some sense analyze those new systems of activity and genre. They must not only learn new ways of writing but also learn when to ignore what they have learned about writing elsewhere—even when the terms used to discuss writing seem the 'same'. To do that in a critical way, they must learn (or at least sense) not just 'what' or 'how' to write in a new discipline, but also the 'why' or motive of writing. They need ways of understanding the differences, especially differences in motives for writing in different activity systems, intellectual and emotional (*mot*ive and e*mot*ion are both ways of talking about what moves us to activity).

A long tradition of WAC research, beginning with Lucille McCarthy's (1987) appropriately titled article, "Strangers in Strange Lands," suggests that students often react to the unspoken differences in writing across disciplines by feeling alienation and even cynicism. What they learned about writing often seems to do them little good—or even be counter-productive—as they move from course to course. They must continually ‘reinvent the university', in David

Bartholomae's (1997) phrase, often working in isolation. They (and faculty) have few theoretical tools (lenses) for getting a critical perspective on what they feel and on the meaning of their work in 'writing'. Critical consciousness of race, class, and gender differences is crucial, and has received much attention in composition. But disciplinary and professional differences are important too (and interact powerfully with the former).

That is why seeing writing in terms of activity systems and genre systems may be helpful in developing students' (and our own) critical consciousness. These theoretical lenses remind us that writing is never writing period. It is always writing as part of some system of human activity, as infinitely varied as modern life. And as Bakhtin (1986) says, every text is in some genre. We've tried to show that these genres can be seen as working together in systems, intertextual pathways that mediate and shape activity. From this perspective, writing cannot be learned as a single generalizable skill, once and for all, like learning to ride a bicycle. It is a developing accomplishment, like learning a musical instrument (in some genre/s of music, but never all genres).

Because writing is so varied, it is hard to study (and teach). It tends to disappear into the activity it mediates. It is messy to analyze, because contexts are networks, not containers. People act in multiple, interacting systems of activity where writing that seems the 'same' as what one has read or written before is in practice very different—and not only in the formal features, the 'how' of writing. Lying behind the *how* are the *who*, *where*, *when*, *what* and—most importantly—the *why* of writing, the motives of people engaged in some system of activity. Furthermore, because of these differences in activity, the writing that mediates human activities is as full of contradictions as the activities themselves, always only stabilized-for-now, yet useless without that more or less temporary stability that genres bring to our human interactions mediated with writing.

We've tried also to show that activity theory and genre theory can help us ask useful questions about what's involved in writing—and how to involve students in our fields through writing. We've suggested some ways that these theories of human activity and genre systems can be useful for thinking through and working through writing in our fields. And thinking through the systems of activity and the genre pathways of education, may suggest to us and to our students new pathways for expanding involvement with others. Learning, in a word.

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Notes

[1] "General education" in the U.S. refers to a requirement that undergraduates take a range of general courses in various fields, usually selected from a menu of approved courses (typically in sciences, social sciences, foreign languages, and humanities). It is similar to the "modular courses" introduced recently in the U.K.

[2] For the methodology used in the study, see Yañez, 1999.

[3] First year composition is a 10- to 30- week for first-year university students (typically 18 or 19 years old). The course is a requirement students in almost all universities in the U.S. Though the content and methods of the course vary widely, the course usually is usually intended to prepare students for writing in higher education.

[4] All names of students are pseudonyms.