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BASIC WRITING IN CONTEXT: RETHINKING ACADEMIC LITERACY

ABSTRACT: *A number of writers have made it clear that we need to rethink the basic writing course. What may not be so clear is that we also need to rethink the view of literacy on which the course is often based. This article questions certain aspects of academic literacy and suggests ways we might reform writing instructions at all levels by looking at literate practices outside the academy.*

From any number of sources, we hear the call to rethink, to reform the basic writing course. The need for this reform is clear. Jerrie Cobb Scott reminds us of the widely shared concern that the course often reflects a "deficit pedagogy," a set of teaching practices based on the notion that students in basic writing classes possess relatively few rhetorical or communicative skills. This course and pedagogy often become, as Peter Dow Adams points out, a self-fulfilling prophecy: teachers expect relatively little of basic writers, and they live up to—or down to—those expectations. Consequently, as David Bartholomae tells us, those who teach basic writers may find they have "once again produced the 'other' who is the incom-

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plete version of ourselves, confirming existing patterns of power and authority, reproducing hierarchies we had meant to question and overthrow way back then in the 1970's" (18).

Clearly, then, it is important to get away from a deficit pedagogy, redesigning the course so that it builds on students' capacity for making inferences (Wiener) and develops their capacity for higher-order thinking (Brown). But what would such a course look like? And how would it relate to other courses—the public school courses that precede it and the advanced undergraduate or graduate courses that might follow it?

One answer to these questions is implicit in a trend Adams describes: increasingly, instructional practice in basic writing courses is moving "in one direction: toward that of the freshman composition course" (24). In one respect, this trend makes great sense; if students are to develop as writers, they have to do what writers do—drafting, learning from peers, revising—rather than work on decontextualized exercises. But in another respect, this trend is problematic: it assumes that current literacy practices of freshman composition and of the larger academy should be taken as a given, that they comprise a goal toward which students should be moving. My argument, however, is that, at all levels of our educational system, these academic literacy practices are, at best, questionable and, at worst, harmful. Basic writing needs rethinking, but no more so than does writing instruction for kindergarten children or graduate students. What we need to do is reexamine our assumptions about what students are capable of and about what it means to be a literate citizen of the twenty-first-century "information society." This reexamination leads to a powerful critique of customary academic practice and suggests ways we might go about transforming our teaching.

Understanding Students' Capabilities

To illustrate why we need to examine assumptions about what students can do, here are four assignments, four rhetorical tasks I have seen students carry out successfully in the last year or so:

1. Assess and revise a 100-page document the Chamber of Commerce provides to citizens who want to volunteer for various programs in the local school.

2. Prepare a fact sheet for low-income people to use when looking for a nursing home for elderly relatives.

3. Prepare a brochure for a local library; explain resources and clearly establish rules while creating a friendly image for the library.

4. Plan and carry out a conference for approximately 2000 people; take care of everything from writing a proposal to hold the conference, to negotiating fees for speakers, to preparing packets to give to people when they register.

One of these assignments was done in a twelfth-grade class composed of "disadvantaged" inner-city students, most of whom, if they go to college at all, will likely be assigned to a basic writing course. The other assignments come from a third grade classroom, an upper-level university writing course, and a graduate course in technical communication.

When I have shown this list of assignments in workshops, people are almost never able to figure out which tasks were done at which grade level. Indeed, it's not unusual for people to suggest that none of these tasks is within the capability of the third or twelfth graders. Only two workshop participants have ever correctly identified the task done by third graders, and one of these participants justified his identification in a way that said as much about his view of me as about his view of students' capabilities. He reasoned that I intended for people to be surprised to learn which students did which task, and he was certain that planning and carrying out the conference was the literacy task that lay farthest beyond the reach of third graders. Yet it was not. Their "Young Authors Conference," which drew approximately 2000 students and parents, required that the third graders: analyze the work of professional authors and determine which ones would be most attractive to their audience of parents and elementary school children; write letters of invitation to those authors; negotiate with publishers regarding authors' speaking fees; write proposals that would win administrative support for the conference; write introductions for featured speakers; design the packet of materials participants would receive when they registered for the conference; and so on. These, of course, are demanding tasks for adults; consequently, people routinely assume that they are well beyond what we might reasonably expect of third graders.

Similarly, workshop participants rarely guess that it was the "disadvantaged" high school students, those prospective enrollees in a basic writing class, who revised the 100-page Chamber of Commerce handbook. By the most charitable estimation,

the original handbook was a mess. Information was incomplete, and the entire document was so badly organized that prospective volunteers could not possibly figure out what they might volunteer for, how they could go about volunteering, or even why they might want to do so. The students had to rethink the document, trying to make it possible for readers to find the information they might be interested in and discovering the information that would fill in the substantial gaps in the original document. In short, they had to do the same things that faculty at my school have to teach graduate-level technical writers to do. And, in so doing, they produced the document that the school district currently provides to prospective volunteers.

Rethinking Literacy

The third graders' and the high school students' success with their assignments challenge routine assumptions about what students of different age and ability levels can do. These assignments combined with the library brochure and the fact sheet (both of which I will discuss later), also challenge some assumptions about what it means to be literate in our society.

Routinely, people equate literacy with the ability to encode and decode, the ability to get the point or "main idea" of a reading passage or to write a text that observes accepted conventions of usage, syntax, organization, and idea development. But this view of literacy is a gross oversimplification, one that bears little resemblance to the complexity of literacy practices required in our society. This view of literacy represents, to borrow Alton Becker's term, a "graphocentrism" that ignores ways in which visual aspects of a text contribute to the text's message. Such graphocentrism seems unreasonable not only in light of Becker's work but also because of recent theory and research in technical communication. This theory and research demonstrates how the communicative power of a text comes not just from its words but from visual elements—its pictures and graphs, for example, and also from the text's arrangement on a page, its use of headings and subheadings, even the style and color of typography. These visual elements can make it easier for readers to locate the information they need, see relationships between sentences, remember information, or understand the organization of a text. (Thomas R. Williams and Elizabeth Keyes provide useful surveys of work in this area.)

Consider, for example, the library brochure that was com-

posed—I started to say *written*, but that word is not exactly accurate—by a graduate student in technical communication, who found herself limited to a single sheet of paper which would take the form of a trifold brochure. This format would allow her to fill each side of the sheet with three columns of information, each column approximately 2½ inches wide. She knew that library patrons would be unlikely to read the entire pamphlet from beginning to end; they were most likely to use it to find information about specific questions or concerns. Consequently, she had to work with headings, subheadings, and white space to make it possible for readers to locate information about specific topics. And these visual constraints helped shape the substance of what she said in the pamphlet.

This need to work with visual as well as written information introduced an unusual level of complexity to the work of this student and all the others I have mentioned. This complexity was only increased by a further assumption: the most engaging literacy practices flourish in—perhaps even require—a climate of uncertainty. In all of the assignments I've been talking about, students knew they were dealing with ill-defined problems. They knew there was no one authoritative source they could turn to in order to find out exactly what they were to say or how they were to say it. Further, their job was not one of satisfying a single reader but of meeting the needs of a wide range of readers, some of whom might be more knowledgeable than the students but many of whom would know far less and would, therefore, be depending upon the students' work in order to understand something they currently did not understand or do something they currently did not know how to do. Students had to figure out for themselves how they might best balance the diverging needs of these different audiences. Students could turn to their teachers for advice, but the authority of that advice was tempered since students knew that their teachers themselves were trying to figure out what the assignment demanded.

This was certainly the case with the nursing home "fact sheet" composed by the university juniors and seniors. At least initially, these students did not appreciate the wide range of readers the fact sheet would have to accommodate. Only after they got well into the project did they realize that their document would address a variety of audiences, ranging from low-income citizens who could be easily overwhelmed by complicated legal documents to attorneys who specialized in this area of the law. Moreover, neither the students nor their teacher

knew exactly what such a fact sheet would look like or what they would have to do in order to compose one. Nor did they understand the complexity of finding and making sense of the information that would eventually go into the fact sheet. Ultimately, they had to read existing laws for licensing nursing homes; try to interpret those laws by talking with lawyers and state officials; assess the reliability of the interpretation provided by a given lawyer or official; and talk with low-income people who might be eligible for the program in order to find out what their questions and misapprehensions might be.

Critiquing Academic Literacy

Some of the assumptions I've been discussing will sound very familiar. Increasingly, our profession has realized the importance of having students write to audiences other than their teachers and of addressing questions that do not allow formulaic, pat answers. But when we examine the literacy practices that are required outside school, we sometimes find literacy practices that are so complex, so challenging that they constitute a powerful critique of the work that often goes on in the academy.

For one thing, the literacy practices that flourish outside school make us realize just how graphocentric academic literacy is—witness the appearance of this essay. But relatively few people write—or actually read—academic essays. Instead, their literacy practices center around things like proposals, instructions, brochures, forms, oral presentations, even multimedia presentations. Granted, all of these practices involve composing with language and comprehending the messages other people convey through language. But they also depend heavily on visual information to help make the language comprehensible and effective. With the increasing availability of computers, desk-top publishing, video, and multimedia, it seems fair to say that we are almost at a point where people in our society will not be considered literate if all they can do is encode and decode written language.

Further, the literacy practices people engage in outside school often show us just how passive we allow—invite? require?—our students to be when they read. For example, Dixie Goswami, Doris Quick, and I (1983) once spent a good bit of time interviewing people who were just two or three years out of college, trying to find out about their reading and writing practices and comparing what they were doing with what students were do-

ing on campus. In one case, we talked with recent college graduates who were employed by a state legislature to write "bill memos." analvses of legislation that was to come before the state house of representatives. As we talked with them, it became apparent that their reading of this legislation was very different from what we found going on in classrooms.

When they "read" pending legislation, these young professionals tended to ask the same questions over and over:

Who wrote this text?

Why did they write it? What were they trying to accomplish?

How does this text relate to others that are currently being discussed? Is it more adequate or less adequate?

Is it likely that this text will accomplish what the writer intends?

Is it going to have some unexpected, perhaps undesired consequences?

What individuals or groups have an interest in this subject? How will they react to it?

In short, when these people read texts associated with their jobs, they were unwilling to take a text at face value; instead, they analyzed, criticized, and drew their own conclusions as to the meaning of a given text. Further, they asked these questions not only of themselves, but also of coworkers, some of whom gave differing answers. In these respects, their reading was radically different from what we found in the work of a group of undergraduate political science majors, many of whom intended to work in state or federal government when they graduated from college. By and large the undergraduates seemed to approach the texts they were reading with just two questions:

What is this text saying?

How can I use what the text is saying in order to support my point (or to figure out what my point is)?

The undergraduates never talked about the context surrounding the texts they were reading—never speculated about the agendas, biases, or purposes of the writer; never tried to locate these texts in relation to other texts; never thought about the possible consquences of what was being said in these texts. They were very uncritical, unanalytical, and passive in their reading.

Is this a fair comparison? Are these students representative

of students at large? Maybe, maybe not. But what Dixie Goswami, Doris Quick, and I saw in the reading and writing of students that we studied parallels more recent work by Cheryl Geisler and by Christina Haas and Linda Flower. Geisler points out that there is a long tradition of seeing texts as autonomous objects that can be understood "without independent knowledge of who was speaking, with what intention, and for what purpose" (5). From this perspective, reading entails recognizing the meaning that exists "in the text" rather than constructing meaning by locating a particular text in a larger context of human actions and intentions. This sort of reading was characteristic of the work of college freshmen that Haas and Flower studied. For these freshmen, reading was simply a matter of "getting information from the text" (175). By contrast, more experienced readers were much more likely to use "rhetorical" reading strategies, "constructing a rhetorical situation for the text, trying to account for [an] author's purpose, context, and effect on the audience" (176). This rhetorical reading enabled the more experienced readers to assess a writer's claims and construct their own meaning from a text rather than expect to find meaning located in a text. In light of all this work, I propose this hypothesis: many academic literacy practices often allow—even invite—students to read passively, trying to extract meaning from a text rather than construct it. The reading and writing students do outside school often requires them to read more assertively and more critically.

Furthermore, the writing that students do outside school can be more complex, more rhetorically challenging, more in line with the best thinking in our profession than is the writing they sometimes do for their classes. For example, here's a situation described to me by a junior-level manager in a bakery that has plants in several states. In addition to the letters, memos, and reports he routinely wrote, he had been asked to write a recommendation/report that would eventually go to a vice president of the firm, the eldest son of the family who owns the bakery. This vice president had come up with a plan that would require several thousand employees to work on Thanksgiving day. This had all the makings of a real nightmare: employees had never before had to work on Thanksgiving day; employee morale was already bad because of recent layoffs; the union was certain to be unhappy. The junior-level manager had been asked by his supervisor (who would ultimately report to his supervisor) to assess the plan and write a recommendation as to whether

it should be implemented.

Consider the basic rhetorical problem this manager faced: the vice president didn't want to hear that his proposal was not a good one. But he also didn't want trouble with the union or a loss of productivity that could come if employee morale got any worse. There was thus no way the manager could just tell the reader what he wanted to hear. So how was the manager to frame his analysis so that he could keep his job and still make it possible for the president to hear something he didn't want to hear? What kinds of arguments were most likely to be consistent with the vice president's values? What sort of language would let him convey the severity of the situation without seeming alarmist or making the vice president look foolish?

It would be nice to think that students are routinely grappling with ill-defined problems and trying to articulate their ideas to audiences who actually expect to be informed (persuaded, moved, assisted) by students' work. But practical experience suggests that students are typically given assignments where there is a single audience (the teacher) that already knows what constitues an acceptable response. One brief example appears in a professor's comment I once saw on a student paper: "I can almost hear myself talking here. It's nice to know someone was listening. A+" A more complicated example comes from a freshman course at my school, a course in which instructors wanted students to reflect upon the ways their educational experiences may have limited their development as writers and thinkers. Students in this course received the following assignment: "Write an essay about ways in which your education has arbitrarily restricted the choices you may make as a student."

In the context of this specific course, there was relatively little uncertainty in this assignment. There was no question about who the audience was or what the audience wanted to hear. Nor was there much question about how students were to develop their ideas; students were told to refer to their own experiences in school and were encouraged to refer to course readings that talked about ways in which education arbitrarily limited students. In their effort to liberate students from the arbitrary constraints of their education, these instructors arbitrarily constrained students to develop a thesis that the instructors had already determined to be, in effect, the "right answer." To the best of my knowledge, none of the students felt free to use this essay assignment as a prime example of the practice

their instructors wanted to criticize. Granted, these may be extreme or isolated cases. But if they are, why do students keep asking us while they are working on their assignments (even assignments for which they have become far more knowledgeable about a particular subject than we are), "Am I on the right track?" "Is this what you want?" They seem to have gotten the notion that what their audience wants is relatively simple and straightforward and that there is someone—us—who can tell them whether they are making correct choices of language, organization, and content. They often assume that there is a single, correct solution to a conceptual or rhetorical problem and that we, if we're at all competent, should know what that solution is, although we may withhold it simply to "make them think."

Where did they ever get such an idea? Maybe the idea is partly related to what William Perry has referred to as their level of intellectual development. Perhaps they are still at a stage where they assume that important questions can have a single, correct answer and that some authoritative source knows what that answer is. But I don't completely buy that explanation. Even very young students can learn to make complex rhetorical judgments. Unfortunately, they can also learn that such judgments are not valued by the academy. By the time they begin postsecondary education, students seem to have learned this all too well. And much of their experience in college may do little to change their point of view.

Rethinking Teaching

So what do we do? How do we restructure our courses so that students begin to develop the kinds of expertise that will allow them to be literate citizens of twenty-first-century society? We can begin by looking outside our classrooms, trying to understand the range of nonacademic literacy practices people engage in for their personal needs (Gere), for their jobs (Agnew; Odell and Goswami), or for community organizations (Ball). Then we can incorporate the best of these practices into the assignments students do for our courses.

One relatively simple way to do this is to work with nontraditional examples of literate practice, introducing these examples to students in ways that help them become experts. For instance, the high school students who revised the Chamber of Commerce document also engage in other kinds of literacy practices, both oral and written: making recommendations, writing

instructions, preparing reports, creating brochures. A key part of each of these efforts is examining what appear to be effective examples that are currently in use. Students understand that their work is not to be a slavish imitation of these models; rather, they look closely at them, asking such questions as: What's helping this document succeed? What are the weak spots, the things that bother me? How clearly does this document treat its subject? How effectively? How honestly?

Out of these discussions there begins to emerge some consensus about how they might proceed with the document they hope to create. As we know, the composing process rarely proceeds in a neat linear fashion. Consensus emerges, falls apart, re-forms; sometimes what seemed to be a model document serves principally to show students what they do not want to do. But in all cases, students' sense of what constitutes effective, literate work comes not from a textbook but rather from careful reflection on what people in our society seem to need to do if they are to make sense of and communicate facts, feelings, experiences, ideas.

All this reflection, of course, presupposes two further points: that students are being assigned to compose the same types of documents (proposals, brochures, instructions, fact sheets) they have been analyzing; and that these documents will actually be read and used in some context outside the classroom and for some purpose other than simply assessing students' writing ability.

One relatively easy, safe way to do this is to set up an assignment, late in the semester, in which students must revise a badly written document that is used in the campus community (i. e., outside our class), a document that other students, for whatever purpose, need to understand. (By the end of the semester, students should know that "badly written" means a document that is unorganized and badly thought out as well as marred by inept usage and sentence structure.) In a recent semester, my students found a range of such documents. One student who worked part-time in Student Health Services found an informational brochure that was almost impossible for anyone other than a doctor to understand; another brought in a campus user's manual for a recently installed computer system; another concentrated on a syllabus for a psychology course that was needlessly inaccessible and confusing. In all these cases, students had to analyze the document in terms of concepts we had studied. Then they had to revise the document and—most

important—test their revision with a reader who would read the document not as part of a class exercise but in an effort to accomplish some important purpose—using the computer system, for example, or understanding a particular health risk. And then, of course, students had to revise the document in light of what they learned by testing it, justifying their choices of language and content not by my expectations as a writing teacher but by the needs of an authentic reader of the document.

The preceding example represents my own rather timid first effort at incorporating community-based writing into my teaching of an undergraduate writing course. Other people, however, are more venturesome. For example, Gary Braudaway, the English teacher whose inner-city students revised the Chamber of Commerce manual menttoned earlier, makes a practice of having his students work directly with business and community organizations, producing materials that these organizations need to have written or revised to get on with their daily business. In this, Braudaway's inner-city students followed an educational practice employed not only in other grade levels in Fort Worth, but in approximately half of the freshman English courses at Stanford University, and in Dixie Goswami's Writing for the Community program at Clemson University. It was Goswami's students who spent an entire semester writing (and rewriting) the health fact sheet for low-income citizens.

On the strength of all this experience, my own school is developing a writing internship program. Graduate students in communication work for a semester as interns in local organizations ranging from Planned Parenthood to a local homeless shelter to a manufacturing plant of a multitnational corporation. The principal requirements for this course are that (1) students must spend 6-8 hours per week on site in a local nonacademic organization, (2) they must produce documents that their supervisors in these organizations can actually use, (3) they must test these documents with the intended readers and use what they learn in revising the documents, and (4) they must assess the final documents they produce, justifying choices of language, content, and organization in terms of their intended audience and in terms of the organizational "culture" in which they write.

After the last two semesters of work on this internship program, it's easy to see both the strengths and the weaknesses of the sort of instruction I've been proposing. Some of the writing

done outside school is routine, almost formulaic. And some of it raises ethical problems: who would want to train students to become effective spokespersons for, say, the tobacco industry? Yet we also know that a lot of composing goes on outside school (see, for example, Anderson or Gere) and that, as Eleanor Agnew has pointed out, even apparently routine work can be quite challenging. At its best, at its most complex and most demanding, this work gives us a way to rethink the definition of literacy underlying instruction at all levels of education. Such a definition lets us raise the stakes for all our students, expecting them to do more complicated, more interesting, more profound work, whether they are basic writers, elementary school students, or graduate students. If we want to base our instruction on a self-fulfilling prophecy, that doesn't sound like such a bad one to start with.

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