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RHETORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SCHOOL DISCOURSE FOR WRITING PLACEMENT

Recent emphasis on literacy and writing competence has caused composition researchers and evaluators to develop, review, and revise prompts and evaluation systems aimed at valid and reliable assessment of student writing. It is commonplace now that multiple-choice tests are invalid because they rely on the doubtful assumption that writing competence can be measured by mastery of its parts. Instead, evaluators have developed holistic scoring methods whose intent is to assess the effect of a sample of discourse as a whole on a human reader. Readers using this method are trained to internalize criteria for judging writing so that they can assign a reliable ranking to student writing samples on the basis of one reading. When holistic scoring was proved feasible by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), researchers, liberated from multiple-choice mass testing, immediately began to investigate ways to make holistic scoring ever more valid and reliable. Richard Lloyd-Jones found holistic scoring as used by ETS wanting, mainly because it admits no differences in the demands of various modes of writing. Together with Carl H. Kraus and others under the auspices of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Lloyd-Jones advanced the art of evaluation by making rhetorical concerns paramount. These researchers redesigned prompts to specify a full rhetorical situation: accordingly, the main criterion for judging the writers' level of success is the writers' control of the primary rhetorical demand, labeled the primary trait, of the particular assignment.

As NAEP implemented Primary Trait Scoring, the primary trait came to be identified with purpose. Ina V.S. Mullis states, "the method [Primary Trait Scoring] recommended for use by NAEP in the second

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assessment would evaluate the capacity to write for precisely defined purposes"(9). Thomas Newkirk, however, questions the possibility of providing students with purposes. He admonishes, "...we can no more present the students with purposes than we can present them with happiness. There is something coldly external about the way the term is used [by NAEP]" (111). The question of purpose in writing assessment is indeed problematic. Newkirk's criticism implicitly points to a larger problem in this regard, the ambiguity of purposes in what Les Perelman has recently termed "institution-based prose," especially school prose. In arguing that teaching writing as a way of knowing or means of discovery ignores the institutional context of classroom assignments, Perelman notes that students "...write papers not to fulfill some intrinsic goal but because the essays are assigned by an instructor" (471). He adds, "Even when we try to give an assignment that constitutes a 'real' act of personal exploration, the institutional context predominates over any real sense of authentic purpose and actual audience" (471). In other words, the students' dominant purpose is institutionally determined: in the case of school discourse it is to please a teacher to get a good grade.

In institutions other than the academy, writing is motivated by the functions it is intended to perform. In educational institutions, however, the situation is complicated in a way that is assumed but rarely addressed: students' purposes are at least dual. While their external purpose is to please the teacher to get a good grade, students must, at the same time, *invent* an internal purpose, one intrinsic to the writing. In other words, in school, unlike other institutions, there is a marked difference between the external purpose, the stimulus that prompts the writing, and the intrinsic purpose, the one conventionally encapsulated in the thesis sentence. Students are expected to use the latter, the message, in support of the former, the institutional evaluation.

This duality of purpose is also true of most testing situations, though not of assessments like the NAEP, which have little impact on the students themselves. Usually, tests result in evaluations that affect students immediately, so the students' external purpose is inherent in the situation. In the case of placement essays for freshman level writing courses, the performance determines the level of the writing course at which students begin their college writing instruction. Since the testing and the classroom writing contexts both manifest this duality of purpose, evaluators can and should incorporate this similarity into their criteria for placement scoring.

In this essay, I am suggesting that students' ability to use their intrinsic purpose (the purpose *in* the writing) to support their external purpose (the purpose *of* the writing) is an important measure of their understanding of the complicated rhetorical context of college writing. Students vary greatly in their awareness of how to handle this problem. Basic writers are certainly less able to manipulate content for rhetorical purposes than better-prepared students. I hope to support the proposition that the rhetorical problems of basic writers are as fundamental to their difficulties in college writing as their syntactical and mechanical errors. If this is the case, it has important implications for the focus of teaching in basic writing.

At The University of Utah we begin each placement essay writing session by fully explaining to students the actual rhetorical situation in which they are writing. The essay administrator explains the four levels of freshman writing courses that we offer, informs students that they are writing a placement essay to determine which one will best introduce them to college writing, reads a simplified list of our evaluation criteria, and tells students that their placement will depend on the readers' assessment of these features of college level writing. In other words, students are told the purpose *of* the writing: they will produce a piece of writing that will be judged by college readers as evidence of their readiness for college writing.

The prompts used at Utah allow students considerable latitude to invent a purpose intrinsic to the writing. Students may respond to the prompt by informing, persuading, or arguing. No artificial rhetorical situation is specified or needed because the students are apprised in the instructions of their real situation. Their task, then, is similar to their task when writing college assignments: to invent a purpose within the writing that will demonstrate their competence in managing the demands of the external rhetorical situation.

If ability to control these rhetorical features of school discourse is a valid indicator of students' readiness for college writing, then rating criteria must focus on them. Proposing such criteria, however, could be seen as prescribing a generic set of criteria for use regardless of individual situations. Edward White in *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, while stressing the value of scoring guides to symbolize community agreement among readers (97-99), questions the validity of using a single guide across essay questions and student populations (228-229). He points out that different questions even having the same format vary in difficulty and that student populations vary in ability, requiring situation-specific criteria (227-229). White's points are persuasive, and I wish to emphasize that I do not offer Utah's criteria as a single scale that should be used by all institutions. On the other hand, since Utah's criteria address the rhetorical situation of every college student, they can be applied to a variety of local situations. Utah's student population is relatively homogeneous, consisting mostly of urban and rural White, middle class (in its broadest sense) students, though the approximately 12,000 students whose essays have been rated by these criteria have included representatives from across the socioeconomic spectrum. Utah's criteria have also been adapted for use in both the University's English-as-a-Second-Language Program and at a community college.

The description of the rhetorical qualities of good student writing given below were conceived by Susan Miller and have been refined and developed by me over the four years that we have required a placement essay at The University of Utah. Our categories—the writers' relationship to readers, to subject matter, and to the genre—reflect our focus on the institutional context of the placement essay. The readers we have in mind are college professors and teaching staff. When we speak of relationship to the subject matter, we mean students' ability to control their subject matter to support their intrinsic purpose. We rather loosely term the genre in which the placement essay operates as "college student writing."

Category 1: The Writers' Relationship to College Readers and Writers

Expectations:

> The most proficient writers recognize that any single piece of college writing is part of an ongoing written discussion about a topic and that they are expected to make a contribution to the discussion. They recognize that an authority (professor, test giver) identifies topics for discussion.

Evidence in the Writing:

- Writers participate in the discussion by acknowledging other perspectives of points of view, or by identifying the context which gives rise to their own point.
- Writers make a contribution by stating a point and creating individualized terms of discussion. In placement essays, writers usually individualize the discussion (a) by claiming a limited territory within the discussion as their own; or (b) by consciously redefining the prompt for their own purposes; and (c) by using details to support their point (in the case of Utah's prompts, students derive these details from personal experience or prior knowledge). The tone of the writing is qualified, ironic, or humorous.

Category 2: The Writers' Relationship with their Subject Matter

Expectation:

> College writers control their subject matter, pressing it into service to support the purpose *in* their writing.

Evidence in the Writing:

- The writers follow an agenda, either explicitly stated or implicit.
- Style and diction serve the writers' purpose.
- Various levels of abstraction are logically related.

Category 3: The Writers' Relationship to the Conventions of the Genre

Expectations:

> College writers employ syntactical units appropriate to their thought, precise vocabulary, and the mechanics and spelling of standard written American English.

The criteria as described above summarize the expectations for good college student writing only. In this essay I will not reproduce our entire scale for differentiating specific placement levels, because, as previously mentioned, scales should be determined in the local situation. I do want, however, to articulate the lower end of the continuum for Categories 1 and 2, because they involve somewhat more than simple negation of characteristics already described.

Category 1: Unsuccessful writing in this category is characterized by failure to address the prompt, by failure to make a point, and/or by failure to acknowledge other perspectives or points of view. Absence of multiple perspectives often makes the writing seem dogmatic.

Category 2: Unsuccessful writing is characterized by lack of an agenda and/or lack of distance from the subject. Writing usually remains on a single level of abstraction throughout, though the level may be either fairly abstract or fairly concrete. Lack of distance is suggested when a writer appears to be ingenuously absorbed in the subject matter to the point that the subject, not the writer, drives the writing.

Examination of a few examples of placement essays written by freshmen at The University of Utah will show how these criteria work. Students were given 45 minutes to write to the following prompt:

> Unsatisfactory situations are a part of everyone's life. We may be forced to endure a job we dislike; we may be irritated by limited options for transportation; we may be unhappy with the difficulty of making friends in a given situation; we may be frustrated by a lack of personal attention from teachers in overcrowded classrooms. Briefly describe a situation that disturbs you, explain the changes you would like to see made, and discuss the reasons you feel these changes are necessary.

As I discuss the student essays below my emphasis is on the generally unrecognized demands imposed on students by the dual nature of school discourse: students have to invent a purpose within their writing that will serve their external purpose, impressing a grader. Certainly, other characteristics of college level writing—control of syntax, appropriateness of diction, and mastery of mechanics, for instance—are also important features of college writing, but they are commonly recognized and, I think, do not require further discussion here.

The first writer chose terrorism, a global issue sure to impress college readers, as his "unsatisfactory situation." He determined that his purpose *in* the writing was to convince readers that the United States must take action against terrorism.

Paper 1

> The spread of terrorist acts against the United States is a great concern to all Americans. America has become the sounding board for terrorists. American citizens are being kidnapped and killed. The Iranian hostage crisis and the recent TWA hijacking are two events that show how American citizens have become bargaining chips for terrorists. On other innumerable occasions Americans have been held hostage, tortured, and killed by terrorists.
>
> Not only must we be concerned with the increase in terrorism, but we must also be concerned with our ability to deal with these

activities. America seems unable to deal effectively with terrorists. Our concern for the safety of hostages and innocent people has prevented us from using military force against terrorists. Popular opinion in America has also kept our military force inactive. The American people are reluctant to let their government use force, either openly or covertly, to deal with terrorism. Many people feel that using force would bring us to the level of the terrorists themselves. The result is that Americans become the targets of terrorist acts.

The American people must change their attitudes about terrorism. We can no longer afford to let terrorists use American lives to gain headlines in newspapers. We must be prepared to defend ourselves against terrorism. Covert infiltration of terrorist organizations is one method of deterrence. By supplying faulty information and arms to terrorists, we could destroy terrorist organizations from the inside. Infiltrators could alert the American government to planned terrorist activities. Government warnings on travel abroad could help keep American tourists out of dangerous places and situations. American media restraints could deny terrorists the headlines they seek. Although a media blackout is not possible, the media could adopt voluntary restraints that would help reduce terrorist acts against Americans. And finally, the American people must accept that our military force must occasionally be unleashed against terrorists. In extreme situations, we must not be afraid to use military action to destroy terrorism.

Infiltration, government warnings, media restraints, and occasional military action are steps that can help America deal effectively with terrorism. By denying terrorists their goals, America can deter terrorism. President Reagan's harsh words mean nothing if the American people are not willing to take steps to save themselves and others from the hands of terrorists.

This writer managed quite successfully to use his intrinsic purpose to meet the expectations of his audience. First, college students are expected to recognize that any single piece of writing is part of an ongoing discussion about a topic and to assume the authority to participate in the discussion. This writer acknowledges the discussion by summarizing several views: "*Our* concern for the safety of hostages . . . *The American people* are reluctant . . . *Many people* feel that using force . . ." before moving to his own position, which he states with the authority of a person confident of his or her right to speak and be heard: "The American people must change their attitudes about terrorism." This student is clearly aware that the discussion of terrorism precedes him, and assumes that he can contribute to it.

College students are also expected to distance themselves from their subject so that they can marshal their subject matter to support their purposes. This student's agenda demonstrates that he manipulated his information both to support his internal argument and to address the prompt. He begins by stating the problem, America's vulnerability to

terrorism (the unpleasant situation), and then narrows to his particular concern, our reactions to terrorism, first stating reasons for the failure to react adequately, then positing his solutions (the changes he would like to see), and finally summarizing his position by telling us why the changes are necessary. His internal control of agenda is impressive. Note the statement in the final paragraph, "By denying terrorists their goals, America can deter terrorism." Though he does not say so explicitly, I think this refers to the statement in the introduction that "American citizens have become bargaining chips for terrorists." His suggestions, to provide misinformation and faulty arms to terrorists, to infiltrate terrorist organizations in order to get accurate information to American officials, and to warn tourists away from dangerous areas, are all intended to make Americans unavailable as bargaining chips, which would deny terrorists their goals. Clearly, he follows the course he set for himself at the beginning of the essay. But more impressively, he weaves the essay prompt's agenda into his own writing so well that it appears that describing an unpleasant situation, suggesting changes and explaining why they are necessary (the requirements of the prompt) were entirely his own idea. To accomplish that, he employs the required description of the unpleasant situation as the context or background information for his essay in his introductory paragraph, uses the required reasons for change to complicate the problem in the second paragraph, uses as his thesis a generalization about the change he would like to see (Americans must change their attitudes about terrorism), and incorporates more specific suggestions for changes into support for his point.

College readers also expect a qualified, exploratory tone as opposed to single-minded didacticism. Another of this student's achievements is that he manages even-handed treatment of opposing viewpoints in spite of his clear preference for active opposition to terrorism. He gives legitimate reasons for opposing action: our concern for the safety of hostages and other innocent people, the conviction that using force would bring us to the level of the terrorists themselves, and the fear that using force would provoke more attacks on Americans. He also refrains from insisting on what he sees as a particularly useful solution, a news blackout, because he implicitly recognizes that it is contrary to American values ("Although a media blackout is not possible . . ."), and suggests instead that "The media could adopt voluntary restraints . . ." This student has maintained a tone of reasonableness while discussing a highly charged issue.

This student manages to control his agenda, subject matter, and tone so that they serve his internal purpose of recommending active opposition to terrorism and, at the same time, fulfill the rhetorical expectations inherent in college writing. Though the essay has faults, it is clearly the work of a rhetorically sophisticated student.

The second paper that I will discuss is not as sophisticated.

Paper 2

> Many unsatisfactory situations are bound to exist in one's life. Such situations appear as one must make a career choice. Personal satisfaction, income, and other benefits must all be considered. In many fields unsatisfactory conditions are present in one of these areas. The fine arts major must deal with several of these problems, including possible low incomes and a lack of interest in many regions.
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> The area of dance is particularly affected by these hardships. The wages of a dancer are extremely low and frequently force the artist to obtain a second job. In many situations stagehands are paid a higher salary than a dancer. It is ironic that one who trains and studies for most of his life receives a lower income than one whose job requires little background.
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> Low incomes in the fine arts field are often due to the lack of interest by the public. Greater appreciation of the arts is needed in many parts of the country. Such interest must be sparked in order to allow the artists to receive the benefits they deserve. Clearly, unsatisfactory situations exist in the areas of fine arts. However, in the future, such conditions will hopefully be improved as a greater appreciation of the arts is developed.

This student's first problem is her failure to come up with a clearly stated internal purpose appropriate to the prompt, but we can guess that she intends to convince us that artists are not appreciated, as evidenced by their low salaries. Granting her this implicit point, we can further examine her rhetorical awareness. We expect students either to posit a point of their own, or, if that's asking too much, at least to appropriate a common position as their own. The position this writer adopts is not her own, but a common complaint among artists (as well as humanists), and, more important, she does nothing to appropriate the complaint. She might have given specific details about her own experience or presented a case for change as the first student did, but she misses both opportunities. I do not think we have the evidence in this paper to hypothesize about whether she *could* have met these expectations had she been aware of them; the evidence in her writing simply tells us that she was not aware. Indeed, if we assume she could make an individual contribution to this discussion of artists' wages if she were only aware that she was expected to, we are given clear direction for teaching.

Another expectation is that college students acknowledge the previous conversation on the topic. In her introduction this writer participates in the conversation by sketching the outline of a general discussion about benefits and disadvantages in any career before narrowing to her area, fine arts, and, particularly, dance. But, beyond the introduction, the writer gives us only her own perspective. For instance, she seems to think that her opinion that "It is ironic that one who trains and studies for most of his life receives a lower income than one whose job required little background" is self-evident, needing no development or exploration. There is little sense of a conversation with multiple perspectives beyond the first paragraph of the essay.

Besides recognizing that they are participating in an ongoing written conversation, college students are expected to control their subject matter to support their intrinsic point. Part of the evidence of such control is the presence of an agenda in the writing, an agenda which also needs to support the demands of the external rhetorical situation. These complex requirements both comprise the area of this writer's best achievement and, at the same time, point to her lack of sophistication. Her introductory paragraph establishes the agenda, competently setting the context for her discussion by relating the prompt to her intrinsic purpose, to show that artists are not appreciated. Her second paragraph develops the point by moving a step towards concreteness with the example of dance. Thus far she has followed an agenda for supporting her implicit point. But, at the beginning of the next paragraph, the dual agendas cause trouble. The writer demonstrates her awareness of the external demand to respond to all parts of the prompt by shifting from discussing the problem to addressing the prompt's second requirement, that she describe the changes she would like to see. Here this writer fails to make her intrinsic purpose conform to the demands of the external rhetorical situation. She is unable to bridge the gap between her own agenda showing that artists are underpaid and the (accurately) perceived requirement to address the second part of the prompt; in fact, after retreating to the passive in her attempt to address needed changes, she finally gives up and concludes with a simple summary. And, by retreating to the passive in the final paragraph, she avoids personally contributing to the discussion: "Low incomes . . . *are often due to* the lack of interest *by the public*. Greater appreciation of the arts *is needed* . . . . Such interest *must be sparked* . . . ." Though this student is aware of the dual rhetorical demands of her situation, she has trouble coping with them. She does not respond with the sophistication of the terrorist essay writer.

Reading placement essays from this perspective does more than illuminate salient features of writing for accurate placement; it also expands the reader's understanding of how student writing succeeds or fails.

To further illustrate this, I'll examine one more example, this time from a student who was placed into Utah's preparatory writing program.

Paper 3

> I feel that while at work women are looked on as less capable workers. I have found that men also feel that they being men, assume that a woman should be treated as nearly a sex object and therefore harass women with vulgar and disgusting comments about their bodies. Another large problem is found when men, jokingly or seriously, grab the woman's body against her will. These irritating working conditions can in return cause stress or extra tension to the persons being harassed by men.
>
> Today women work with men in almost all fields. We are no less intelligent or capable of doing the job then a man, yet we are not protected against harassment. I feel that there should be a stop put to the sexual harassment of women on the job. We should be

> treated equal to our entelligence, treated as if we are capable of doing our jobs! Woman was created by a man's rib not from his head to be above him, not from his feet to be below him, not from below his arm to be protected by him, but from his side to be his equal. Put here to share the difficulties of life with him and not to be dominated by him. I feel that if sexual harassment was to be stopped women and men could work together, side by side with less difficulty. together more can be accomplished then when bitterness flows in the mind of one and disrespect and hatred for ones accomplishments!

This writer encounters difficulty in meeting most of the rhetorical expectations for college writers. She neither acknowledges the ongoing conversation about women's liberation nor makes the point her own. Her recognition of other points of view, with one exception that I will mention separately, consists only of positing a male attitude about women in the workplace. In contrast to the writer of the terrorist paper, this writer does not use opposing views to complicate the discussion or to qualify her own views. The opposing view serves merely as the occasion of her diatribe. Though this writer did succeed in inventing an intrinsic purpose in her writing, to show that women are treated unfairly at the workplace, she avoids appropriating it to herself. She presents herself with the opportunity with the sentence, "We should be treated equal to our intelligence, treated as if we are capable of doing our jobs!" Without the exclamation mark, this writer could have appropriated the topic at this point by giving examples from her own experience, which, indications are, is rich with material, but instead she appends the homily, "Woman was created by a man's rib not from his head . . . ." Again, we cannot tell from the writing sample whether the writer could individualize the issue if she knew she was expected to; we know only that this in one expectation of college writing of which she is unaware.

The degree to which students can maintain distance from and control over subject matter is, we have found, one of the most telling rhetorical expectations for identifying students needing basic writing. Evidence of students' ability to distance themselves from their subject matter can be found in control of the agenda, the presence of a reasonable, ironic, or humorous tone, and stylistic choices that show a writer crafting a work. This essay offers an intriguing study of unsuccessful attempts to control these features. The sentence, "Another large problem is found when men, jokingly or seriously, grab the woman's body against her will," manifests the writer's struggle to maintain distance from a close subject. She begins in a reasonable, even-handed tone by adding the free modifier " jokingly or seriously," recognizing that men may think their approaches are playful rather than offensive. (This is the single example I mentioned above of the writer's recognition of other points of view.) But she loses the distance with the next word, "grab," a verb not capable of ambiguity. At this point, the writer does not seem to know whether she should go with the emotionally charged language that her feelings suggest or maintain what she sees as proper academic distance.

That she opts for academic distance is illustrated by the next sentence, which ends with the hyper-formal ". . . conditions . . . cause stress or extra tension to the *persons being harassed by men.*"

The writer loses control throughout the second paragraph, though she begins by attempting to address the second part of the prompt (the changes she would like to see). But, once she states that a stop should be put to sexual harassment, no recognizable agenda remains. Instead of employing her subject matter, which I take to be her personal experiences with harassment, to support the purpose *in* her writing, she seems to fail to recognize that this could be her content. Then again, the problem may be that she guesses the homily about Adam's rib is more appropriate to formal academic prose than specific experience, in spite of the cues in the prompt. In either case, her past writing experience has not taught her what is considered appropriate evidence in a college essay. The penultimate sentence gives indications of regaining control: the syntax is competent and diction suggests reasonableness. However, she loses control entirely in the final sentence, "together more can be accomplished then when bitterness flows in the mind of one and disrespect and hatred for ones accomplishments!" This is not the sentence of a writer crafting her material, but of an experiencer so caught in the emotions of the experience that she loses control of agents and objects. This writer is to be admired for engaging a topic of personal significance and for struggling with an intractable problem, but she needs to learn how to make her argument convincing in an academic context.

In our experience reading placement essays at The University of Utah we have found that failure to control rhetorical features invariably identifies students in need of preparatory writing. These students are unaware of the rhetorical expectations of the university. They do not have the confidence to appropriate a position for themselves, they do not know what tone to adopt for college writing or what considerations determine the tone, and they do not know what they can legitimately use as evidence. Inability to control these fundamental concepts renders students incapable of the more sophisticated expectations we have for style, diction, and organization. The important implication for teaching from evaluating student essays in these terms is that preparatory writing classes must address these rhetorical expectations to give students a chance for success in college writing. In David Bartholomae's words, our role is to teach "the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (134). To concentrate on atomistic aspects of writing, such as sentence structure, paragraph development, or modes of discourse—still the staples of many basic writing courses—is to deny students the opportunity to learn the rhetorical expectations essential for successful college writing.

I do not claim that students can be placed accurately solely on the basis of the rhetorical terms of The University of Utah's first two categories. Writing assessment is as complex as writing itself. But our rhetorical criteria do illuminate a generally unacknowledged dimension of school writing that has important implications for teaching. If our goal in freshman composition classes is to help students succeed in

college writing, we must explicitly address the complex rhetorical expectations of school discourse.

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