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Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues

I love what's in academic discourse: learning, intelligence, sophistication—even mere facts and naked summaries of articles and books; I love reasoning, inference, and evidence; I love theory. But I hate academic discourse. What follows is my attempt to work my way out of this dilemma. In doing so I will assume an ostensive definition of academic discourse: it is the discourse that academics use when they publish for other academics. And what characterizes that discourse? This is the question I will pursue here.

As a teacher of freshman writing courses, my problem is this. It is obvious why I should heed the common call to teach my students academic discourse. They will need it for the papers and reports and exams they'll have to write in their various courses throughout their college career. Many or even most of their teachers will expect them to write in the language of the academy. If we don't prepare them for these tasks we'll be shortchanging them—and disappointing our colleagues in other departments. It's no good just saying, "Learn to write what's comfy for you, kiddies," if that puts them behind the eight-ball in their college careers. Discourse carries power. This is especially important for weak or poorly prepared students—particularly students from poorer classes or those who are the first in their families to come to college. Not to help them with academic discourse is simply to leave a power vacuum and thereby reward privileged students who have already learned academic discourse at home or in school—or at least learned the roots or propensity for academic discourse. (Shirley Brice Heath shows how middle class urban families instinctively give home training in the skills that teachers want: labeling and defining and so forth. Children from other classes and backgrounds get plenty of language training, but their skills are mistaken by teachers for no skill.) Still, I remain troubled.

The Need for Nonacademic Writing in Freshman Writing Courses

I am troubled, first, by the most extreme position—the idea of giving over the freshman writing course entirely to academic discourse. Here are three brief ar-

guments for teaching nonacademic discourse in freshman writing courses. These
are not arguments against academic discourse; only for teaching something else
in addition.

First, life is long and college is short. Very few of our students will ever have
to write academic discourse after college. The writing that most students will
need to do for most of their lives will be for their jobs—and that writing is usu-
ally very different from academic discourse. When employers complain that stu-
dents can't write, they often mean that students have to *unlearn* the academic
writing they were rewarded for in college. "[E]ach different 'world of work'
constitutes its own discourse community with its own purposes, audiences, and
genres. The FDA, for example, produces documents vastly different from those
of the Air Force; lawyers write in genres different from those of accountants"
(Matalene vi).

But to put the argument in terms of writing that people have to do is to give in
to a deeply unwriterly and pessimistic assumption—held by many students and
not a few colleagues, namely that no one would ever write except under compul-
sion. Why should people assume without discussion that we cannot get students
to write by choice? In my view, the best test of a writing course is whether it
makes students more likely to use writing in their lives: perhaps to write notes
and letters to friends or loved ones; perhaps to write in a diary or to make sense
of what's happening in their lives; perhaps to write in a learning journal to figure
out a difficult subject they are studying; perhaps to write stories or poems for
themselves or for informal circulation or even for serious publication; perhaps to
write in the public realm such as letters to the newspaper or broadsides on dor-
mitory walls. I don't rule out the writing of academic discourse by choice, but if
we teach only academic discourse we will surely fail at this most important goal
of helping students use writing by choice in their lives. I don't succeed with all
my students at this goal, but I work at it and I make progress with many. It is
not an unreasonable goal.

In a workshop with teachers not long ago I was struck with how angry many
teachers got at a piece of student writing. It was not particularly good (it was
about falling asleep while writing an assigned essay and waking up on a Greek
island with "topless maidens"), but what infuriated these teachers was not real-
ly the mediocre quality but that the writer said in a piece of process writing that
the piece was easy and fun to write and that he didn't revise it much because
most people in his group liked it. I sensed resentment against the most basic im-
pulses that are involved in being a writer: to have fun telling a story and to give
pleasure to others. We need to get students to write by choice because no one
can learn to write well except by writing a great deal—far more than we can as-
sign and read.

Second, I want to argue for one *kind* of nonacademic discourse that is particu-
larly important to teach. I mean discourse that tries to render experience rather
than explain it. To render experience is to convey what I see when I look out the
window, what it feels like to walk down the street or fall down—to tell what it's
like to be me or to live my life. I'm particularly concerned that we help students
learn to write language that conveys to others a sense of their experience—or in-

deed, that mirrors back to themselves a sense of their own experience from a lit-
tle distance, once it's out there on paper. I'm thinking about autobiographical
stories, moments, sketches—perhaps even a piece of fiction or poetry now and
again.

I am really arguing that we take a larger view of human discourse. As writing
teachers our job is to try to pass on the great human accomplishment of written
language. Discourse that explains is part of that accomplishment, but discourse
that renders is equally great—equally one of the preeminent gifts of human kind.
When students leave the university unable to find words to render their experi-
ence, they are radically impoverished. We recognize the value of rendering ex-
perience when we teach reading. That is, most of the texts we teach in English
courses are literary pieces that render experience. Yet we hesitate to teach stu-
dents to write discourse that renders. And if we don't do it, no one else will. For
virtually all of the other disciplines ask students to use language only to explain,
not to render. It's important to note, by the way, that rendering is not just an
"affective" matter—what something "feels" like. Discourse that renders often
yields important new "cognitive" insights such as helping us see an exception or
contradiction to some principle we thought we believed. (For example, a render-
ing of an evening's struggle with writing might well force us to adjust some
dearly loved theoretical principle about the writing process.)

Third, we need nonacademic discourse even for the sake of helping students
produce good academic discourse—academic language that reflects sound un-
derstanding of what they are studying in disciplinary courses. That is, many stu-
dents can repeat and explain a principle in say physics or economics in the aca-
demic discourse of the textbook but cannot simply tell a story of what is going
on in the room or country around them on account of that principle—or what the
room or country would look like if that principle were different. The use of aca-
demic discourse often masks a lack of genuine understanding. When students
write about something only in the language of the textbook or the discipline,
they often distance or insulate themselves from experiencing or really internaliz-
ing the concepts they are allegedly learning. Often the best test of whether a stu-
dent understands something is if she can translate it out of the discourse of the
textbook and the discipline into everyday, experiential, anecdotal terms.

Thus, although we may be unsatisfied unless students can write about what
they are learning in the professional discourse of the field—majors, anyway—we
should be equally unsatisfied unless they can write about it *not* using the lingo of
the discipline. (Vygotsky and Bakhtin make this same point: Vygotsky, when he
describes the need for what he calls "scientific" or "formal" concepts to be-
come intertwined in the child's mind with "everyday" or experienced concepts
[82ff]; Bakhtin, when he explores the process by which people transform "the
externally authoritative word" into the "internally persuasive word" [*Discourse
and the Novel* 336ff].) I'm all for students being able to write academic dis-
course, but it bothers me when theorists argue that someone doesn't know a
field unless she can talk about it in the discourse professionals use among them-
selves. There are plenty of instances of people who know a lot about engines or
writing but don't know the professional discourse of engineering or composition.

There's something self-serving about defining people as ignorant unless they are like us. (Besides, much of the talk about students learning academic discourse in their disciplinary courses seems to assume those students are majoring in that subject. But most students are not majors in most courses they take, for example, most students in English courses are non-majors who never take more than one or two English courses in their career. Do we really expect them to write the academic discourse of English? If so, we must mean something peculiar by "academic discourse.")

Let me repeat that I've made no negative arguments against teaching academic discourse, only positive arguments for teaching something else in addition. But the case for teaching academic discourse is usually an argument from practicality, and I insist that it's just as practical to teach other kinds of discourse—given the students' entire lives and even the needs of good academic discourse.

Trying to Make the Problem Go Away

The fact is that we can't teach academic discourse because there's no such thing to teach. Biologists don't write like historians. This is not news. Pat Bizzell and Joe Harris, among others, write thoughtfully about the differences among communities of discourse. Linda Flower writes: "there is no Platonic entity called 'academic discourse' which one can define and master" (3). So although some students may need to write like historians or biologists, few of us in English can teach them to do so. To write like a historian or biologist involves not just lingo but doing history or biology—which involves knowing history and biology in ways we do not. In short we are not qualified to teach most kinds of academic discourse.

But I want to push this further. Suppose we made an empirical study of the nature of discourse in English studies. Think of the differences we'd find—the different discourses in our field:

- The bulldozer tradition of high Germanic scholarship. Give no prominence to your own ideas. Emphasize the collecting and integrating of the ideas and conclusions of others. Or if you want to say something, avoid saying it until you have demonstrated that you have summarized and shown the shortcomings of previous works in the literature. Cite everything—sometimes even your own ideas under the guise of someone else's. (Not such an alien practice, after all: it is a commonplace among journalists that the only way to get your article to say what you want it to say is to quote someone saying it.)

- The genial slightly talky British tradition—which also connects with the rhetorical tradition (e.g., work by people like C. S. Lewis and Wayne Booth). This tradition gives us discourse that is fully scholarly and professional, but it is nevertheless likely to talk to the reader—sometimes even make anecdotal digressions or personal asides. Citations and references tend to be kept to a minimum. We can deride this as a tradition of privilege and authority ("Gentlemen don't cite everything. If you don't recognize the tacit footnotes you're not one of us"), but it is also the tradition of the amateur that welcomes the outsider. (Notice the structural implications that have gotten attached to these two traditions. Most of my teachers in college and graduate school wanted opening and closing paragraphs that provided readers a definite map of what my essay would be about and a definite summary of what it concluded: the voice of the German tradition says "Announce

at the border what you have to declare." But I had other teachers who spoke for the British tradition and counted such sign-posting as a weakness in writing. I can still hear one of them: "Don't talk about what you're going to do, just do it. Just start with the point that belongs first and readers won't need an introduction." The same for transitions: "If you put your points in the right order, they won't need explanatory connections or transitions; they'll *follow*. Just think straight.")

- Poststructuralist, continental discourse: allusive, gamesome—dark and deconstructive. Again few footnotes, little help to those who haven't already read what they are alluding to.

- German Critical or Marxist discourse that is heavy on abstraction, special diction and terminology—and very consciously ideological. Practitioners would insist that anything less ideological is a cop-out.

- Psychoanalytic criticism uses its own linguistic and intellectual practices. When *College English* devoted two issues to psychoanalytic criticism in 1987, I heard colleagues complain, "These people write a completely separate language."

- The field of composition is particularly diverse. Some of its discourse is unashamedly quantitative and "social science." Imagine setting yourself the goal of publishing in *Research in the Teaching of English, College Composition and Communication,* and *PRE/TEXT*: you would need three different discourses. Steve North counts seven discourse communities in composition, involving not just different lingos but ways of knowing.

- I think of two Creoles: the Chicago Aristotelian dialect of R. S. Crane and fellows, and the New York intelligentsia dialect of Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe and fellows.

- Notice the subtle difference between the discourse of people who are established in the profession and those who are not—particularly those without tenure. Certain liberties, risks, tones, and stances are taken by established insiders that are not usually taken by the unannealed. Discourse is power.

- Notice finally the pedagogically crucial distinction between how academics write to each other and how they have come to expect students to write to them as teachers. We see here the ubiquitous authority dimension of discourse. Students must write "up" to teachers who have authority over them—often being assigned to write to experts about a subject they are just struggling to learn. In contrast, academics write "across" to fellow academics—usually explaining what they have worked out to readers who don't know it. (Sarah Freedman did an interesting piece of research in which she had teachers respond to essays by students—only some of the essays were actually written by teachers or professionals. One of her findings was that teachers were often bothered by the writing of the nonstudents—the "grov. n-ups" as it were—because it wasn't sufficiently deferential.)

- Suppose a student in a literature course asks me whether it's appropriate to bring in her feelings or some event from her personal life as part of the data for the interpretation of a text. There is no clear answer in English: it is appropriate in psychoanalytic and reader response criticism and certain kinds of feminist criticism—but not in many other literary discourses. What about data from the author's life and opinions? Again, for some English courses it's appropriate, for others not. Suppose a student argues against a critic's position by bringing in that critic's class, gender, politics, or sexual affiliations—or professional training. Some English professors call this out of bounds, others do not.

Thus, I can't tell my students whether academic discourse in English means using lots of structural signposts or leaving them out, bringing in their feelings and personal reactions or leaving them out, giving evidence from the poet's life for interpretations or leaving that out, referring to the class, gender, and school

of other interpreters or leaving that out—nor finally even what kind of footnotes to use. Even if I restrict myself to composition studies, I can't tell them whether academic discourse means quantitative or qualitative research or philosophical reflection. In short it's crazy to talk about academic discourse as one thing.

But It Won't Go Away

Not only can't I stop myself from talking about academic discourse in the singular, I can't help looking for an academic discourse I could teach in freshman writing courses. Couldn't there be some larger entity or category—academic writing in general—a generic Stop and Shop brand of academic discourse that lies beneath all those different trade names? (And I often buy generic.) A certain deep structure or freeze-dried essence of academic discourse that is larger than what we've looked for so far? A stance or a way of relating to our material that reaches across the differences between disciplines?

What would seem central to such a conception of academic discourse is the giving of reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences: being clear about claims and assertions rather than just implying or insinuating; getting thinking to stand on its own two feet rather than leaning on the authority of who advances it or the fit with who hears it. In describing academic discourse in this general way, surely I am describing a major goal of literacy, broadly defined. Are we not engaged in schools and colleges in trying to teach students to produce reasons and evidence which hold up on their own rather than just in terms of the tastes or prejudices of readers or how attractively they are packaged?

Thus the conventions of academic discourse may seem difficult or ungainly, but they reflect the diligence needed to step outside one's own narrow vision—they are the conventions of a certain impersonality and detachment all working toward this large and important goal of separating feeling, personality, opinion, and fashion from what is essential: clear positions, arguments, and evidence (see Bartholomae 155; Olson 110). And so this idea of a single general intellectual goal behind the variety of different academic discourses is attractive.

But the very appeal of academic discourse as I have just described it tends to rest on the assumption that we can separate the ideas and reasons and arguments from the person who holds them; that there are such things as unheld opinions—assertions that exist uninfluenced by who says them and who hears them—positions not influenced by one's feelings, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, historical position, etc.—thinking that "stands on its own two feet." In the end, behind this conception of academic discourse in general is a bias toward objectivity or foundationalism—a bias which many of us have come to resist on the basis of work by a host of thinkers from Polanyi to Fish.

Most academics, certainly in English and composition, are more sympathetic to the contrasting rhetorical bias—a preference for seeing language in terms of speech acts: discourse is always talking to someone—trying to have an impact on someone. Grammar books and logic books may be full of disembodied propositions that we can think of in terms of disinterested truth value—messages with-

out senders and receivers—but *discourse* as used by human beings is always in-
terested, always located in a person speaking and an audience listening. We've
learned that many of our difficulties and disputes and confusions come from fall-
ing into assuming that discourse is detached, nonrhetorical, and not a speech
act—learned, as Bizzell says, that "an absolute standard for the judgment of
truth can never be found, precisely because the individual mind can never tran-
scend personal emotions, social circumstances, and historical conditions" (40).

In short, the very thing that is attractive and appealing about academic dis-
course is inherently problematic and perplexing. It tries to peel away from mes-
sages the evidence of how those messages are situated as the center of personal,
political, or cultural interest; its conventions tend toward the sound of reason-
able, disinterested, perhaps even objective (shall I say it?) men.

Am I saying that people who write academic discourse pretend to be objec-
tive or assume that there are absolute standards for truth? Of course not.
(Though some do—such as this professor of physics: "Scientific communication
is faceless and passionless by design. Data and conclusions stand bare and un-
adorne 1, 'n I can be evaluated for what they are vithout prejudice or emotion.
This kind of impersonal communication has helped science achieve the status of
public knowledge, a coinage of truth with international currency. It's like Sgt.
Joe Friday used to say: 'The facts, Ma'am, just the facts' " [Raymo 26].) Yet
when people use academic discourse they are using a medium whose conven-
tions tend to imply disinterested impersonality and detachment—a medium that
is thus out of sync with their intellectual stance—a bias toward messages with-
out senders and receivers. I wonder if this mismatch doesn't help explain why
the discourse we see in academic journals is so often ungainly or uncomfortable
and not infrequently tangled.

Let me illustrate these implications of detachment by looking at three vio-
lations of academic discourse that naive students sometimes commit. First, they
overuse the first person, for example, "I'm only saying what I think and feel—
this is just my opinion." Second, naive students are liable to use the second per-
son too much and too pointedly, sometimes even speaking directly to us as par-
ticular reader ("As you stressed to us Tuesday in class, . . ."). Third, they are
apt to refer to Hemingway as "Ernest." What interests me is how these vio-
lations highlight what the conventions of academic discourse usually disguise:
that discourse is coming from a subject with personal interests, concerns, and
uncertainties (even professional academics sometimes feel uncertain); that dis-
course is directed to a reader who is also situated in her subjectivity; and that
discourse is about an author who is also asserted to be a person like the writer.
(Notice yet another divergence among academic discourses in English: academic
biographers get to call Hemingway "Ernest.")

But of course if pure objectivity is discredited, it doesn't mean we must em-
brace pure subjectivity and bias: "Hooray! I've read Kuhn and Fish and there's
only subjectivity. Everyone has a bias, so I don't have to try to interrogate my
own." Good academic discourse doesn't pretend to pure objectivity, yet it also
avoids mere subjectivity. It presents clear claims, reasons, and evidence, but not
in a pretense of pure, timeless, Platonic dialectic but in the context of arguments

that have been or might be made in reply. Most academics reflect in their writing and teaching a belief that passionate commitment is permissible, perhaps even desirable—so long as it is balanced by awareness that it is a passionate position, what the stakes are, how others might argue otherwise. In short, as academics we don't pretend to write as God from an objective or universal spot of ground immune from history and feelings; nevertheless we feel it's possible to have a *bit* of detachment with our left eye as it were—a certain part of one's mind that flies up to the seventh sphere with Troilus and sees, "Ah yes, I'm really taking a strong position here—and I've got a big personal stake in this."

This intellectual stance transforms the dichotomy ("killer dichotomies" Ann Berthoff calls them) between subjective and objective. That is, the very act of acknowledging one's situatedness and personal stake invites, and is itself a movement toward, enlargement of view—not that it's a guarantee. Conversely, if someone pretends to be disinterested and objective, she invites smallness of view because she doesn't locate her interest in a larger picture: she tempts herself into believing that her view *is* the larger picture.

Here then, finally, is a definition of generic academic discourse that sounds right. It's essentially a rhetorical definition: giving reasons and evidence, yes, but doing so as a person speaking with acknowledged interests to others—whose interest and position one acknowledges and tries to understand. I'm for it. I try to teach it. I want my students to have it.

But there is a problem. Though this intellectual stance is characteristic of academic discourse at its best, it is also characteristic of much nonacademic discourse—such as that produced by writers like Montaigne, Woolf, Orwell, Paul Goodman, even William Gass or Joan Didion. If I get my students to achieve this admirable stance in their writing, they still might not be producing what most professors would call academic discourse or look for in assigned essays. Indeed have we not all sometimes sent and received letters that were written even in personal expressive discourse with this intellectual stance: in which we made claims, gave reasons and evidence, acknowledged our position—and just as effectively organized our discourse and set our arguments within the context of others who have written on the matter—without writing as we tend to write in our professional publications? (See *PRE/TEXT* 11.1 & 2 [1990] for a collection of personal or expressive writing engaged in the work of academic discourse.) In short, I think I've described a prominent feature of good writing—so of course it characterizes good academic writing—but it simply doesn't distinguish academic writing from nonacademic writing.

There are other attractive definitions of academic discourse which lead to the same dilemma. Flower writes: "The goals of self-directed critical inquiry, of using writing to think through genuine problems and issues, and of writing to an imagined community of peers with a personal rhetorical purpose—these distinguish academic writing . . ." (28). She further specifies two common "practices" which "stand as critical features of academic discourse which often limit entry and full participation in the academic community. . . . 1) integrating information from sources with one's own knowledge and 2) interpreting one's reading/adapting one's writing for a purpose" (3). Susan Peck MacDonald writes:

"[I]t is problem-solving activity that generates all academic writing" (316). (It is interesting to see MacDonald rather than Flower focus on "problem solving," but a moment's thought explains the apparent paradox: Flower "uses up" problem solving by characterizing *all* writing as problem solving.) These too are characteristic features of good academic discourse, but they are no more useful than my earlier definition for distinguishing academic discourse from nonacademic discourse. In short, we must beware of talking as though the academy has a monopoly on a sound intellectual stance toward one's material and one's readers.

Maybe it's not, then, the intellectual stance or task that distinguishes academic discourse but certain stylistic or mechanical conventions—not the deep structure but certain surface features.

Mannerisms: Stylistic Conventions or Surface Features of Academic Discourse

Just as it was interesting to dig for some common or generic intellectual practices behind the variations in different discourses, let me now try to dig for some common or generic surface features of academic discourse. An example will help: a paragraph from James Berlin's essay, "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories."

> My reasons for presenting this analysis are not altogether disinterested. I am convinced that the pedagogical approach of the New Rhetoricians is the most intelligent and most practical alternative available, serving in every way the best interests of our students. I am also concerned, however, that writing teachers become more aware of the full significance of their pedagogical strategies. Not doing so can have disastrous consequences, ranging from momentarily confusing students to sending them away with faulty and even harmful information. The dismay students display about writing is, I am convinced, at least occasionally the result of teachers unconsciously offering contradictory advice about composing—guidance grounded in assumptions that simply do not square with each other. More important, as I have already indicated and as I plan to explain in detail later on, in teaching writing we are tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student's place and mode of operation in it. Yet many teachers (and I suspect most) look upon their vocations as the imparting of a largely mechanical skill, important only because it serves students in getting them through school and in advancing them in their professions. This essay will argue that writing teachers are perforce given a responsibility that far exceeds this merely instrumental task. (766)

Berlin writes a clean, direct prose. That is, I could have chosen a sentence like this one from the currently fashionable theory laden tradition:

> Now, literary hypospace may be defined as the lexical space which, having been collapsed to exclude almost all referentiality but that generated by verbal echoes alone, glows like an isotope with a half-life of meaning co-extensive with its power to turn its tropes into allotropes or "transformational" (in the Chomskyan sense) nodes, capable of liberating the "deep structures" of metaphoricity from buried layers of intertextuality. (Rother 83)

Or this sentence from R. S. Crane and the venerable Chicago Aristotelian tradition:

> [A] poet does not write poetry but individual poems. And these are inevitably, as finished wholes, instances of one or another poetic kind, differentiated not by any

necessities of the linguistic instrument of poetry but primarily by the nature of the poet's conception, as finally embodied in his poem, of a particular form to be achieved through the representation, in speech used dramatically or otherwise, of some distinctive state of feeling, or moral choice, or action, complete in itself and productive of a certain emotion or complex of emotions in the reader. (96)

It's because Berlin's prose is open and clear that I look to it for some general or common features of the academic style. Berlin has just named what he conceives as the four "dominant theories" or approaches to composition and announced his plans to explore each in detail in his essay. Thus in this early paragraph he is "mapping" or "signposting" for the reader: explaining what he is going to do and laying out the structure. Even though there is a wide range of custom as to the degree of signposting in different academic discourses, signposting is probably the most general or common textual convention of academic discourse. Thus the last sentence of his paragraph—introducing his thesis near the start of his essay—is particularly conventional.

It is the convention of explicitness. That is, only nonacademic discourse is allowed to merely imply what it is saying. A nonacademic piece can achieve marvelous thinking and yet not really work it out explicitly; indeed the effectiveness of such a piece may derive from having the principal claim *lurk* rather than announce itself. Fine. But in academic writing it is a convention always to say what you are saying. Thus there is a grain of truth in the old perverse chestnut of advice: "First say what you're going to say, then say it, then say what you've already said." Academic discourse is business, not pleasure (and so business writing asks for even more explicit signposting than most academic writing).

But there is also a convention of inexplicitness in academic discourse. Look at the first sentence of Berlin's paragraph: "My reasons for presenting this analysis are not altogether disinterested." He is not using this mock-elegant double-negative to hide what he is saying, yet the conventions or voice of academic discourse have led him to use a double negative rather than come out and say positively what he is actually saying, namely, "I have a stake in this analysis." And those same academic conventions have led him to write a sentence about reasons with the verb "to be" rather than a sentence about a person with an active verb (my reasons not being disinterested rather than me having a stake). Perhaps some readers hear a tone of quiet irony in his phrase, "not altogether disinterested," but I don't hear him actually being ironic; he's just falling into a syntactic commonplace of academic discourse, the double negative combined with understatement. For after this sentence he virtually comes out and says (using a number of "I"'s), that his analysis of composition into four theories is designed to show why his theory is best. Indeed the subtext of the whole article is a celebration of the idea that all discourse is interested or biased—by definition—and that an "altogether disinterested" position is impossible. Yet in an essay that never hides its "I" and in which Berlin takes full responsibility for his interested position, discourse has led him to conclude the paragraph with a sentence about the essay arguing rather than him arguing. It seems to me, then, that in the convention or voice of his academic discourse, there are locutions left over from an intellectual stance of disinterested objectivity: the ideal of conclu-

sions issuing "perforce" from reasons and arguments rather than from the play of interested positions. Somewhere in his new book, *Works and Lives,* Clifford Geertz makes a distinction between "author-saturated" and "author-evacuated" prose. The stylistic conventions of academic discourse are the conventions of author-evacuated prose.

Double negatives and irony are both ways of saying something without saying it. I'm not calling Berlin evasive here. Rather I'm trying to highlight the interesting fact that in an extremely non-evasive essay, his use of academic discourse led him into a locution that goes through the motions of being evasive—and a locution whose verbal conventions carry some wisps of former irony. This may sound like a paradox—conventions of both explicitness and inexplicitness—but it is not. Academic discourse tries to be direct about the "position"—the argument and reasons and claim. Yet it tends to be shy, indirect, or even evasive about the texture of feelings or attitude that lie behind that position.

Because Berlin's prose is not pretentious or obscure, it illustrates all the more clearly that academic discourse also leads to a somewhat formal language. I'm not talking about technical terms that are necessary for technical concepts; I'm talking about a tendency simply to avoid the everyday or common or popular in language. For example, academic discourse leads Berlin in just one paragraph to say "full significance of their pedagogical strategies" rather than "implications of how they teach"; "mode of operation" rather than "how they act." It leads to words and phrases like "imparting of a largely mechanical skill," "the dismay students display," "perforce," "merely instrumental task," "far exceeds." This is not difficult or convoluted language by any means; merely language that avoids the ordinary more than he probably would do if he were writing the same thoughts in a memo to the same teachers he is addressing with this article—or in *Harpers* or *Hudson Review*.

Berlin uses a special term, "epistemic," as central to this essay. One might call it a technical term that is necessary to the content (you can't talk about penicillin without the word "penicillin"). But (and colleagues argue with me about this) I don't think "epistemic" really permits him to say anything he couldn't say just as well without it—using "knowledge" and other such words. Admittedly it is the mildest of jargon these days and its use can be validly translated as follows: "A bunch of us have been reading Foucault and talking to each other and we simply want to continue to use a word that has become central in our conversation." But through my experience of teaching this essay to classroom teachers (the very audience that Berlin says he wants to reach), I have seen another valid translation: "I'm not interested in talking to people who are not already part of this conversation."

Indeed, there is what I would call a certain rubber-gloved quality to the voice and register typical of most academic discourses—not just author-evacuated but also showing a kind of reluctance to touch one's meanings with one's naked fingers. Here, by way of personal illustration, are some examples of changes made by editors of academic journals working on manuscripts of mine that were already accepted for publication. The changes are interesting for being so trivial:

that is, there is no reason for them except to add a touch of distance and avoid
the taint of the ordinary:

- *who has a strong sense of* changed to *who retains a deep conviction that*
- *always comes with* changed to *is always accompanied by*
- *when I dropped out of graduate school* changed to *when I interrupted my graduate education*
- *I started out just writing to aid my memory* changed to *At first I wanted only to aid my memory*
- [About a teacher I am interviewing and quoting] *he sometimes talks about students as though he doesn't give a damn about them* changed to . . . *as if they meant nothing to him*

I chose Berlin for my analysis because we can see academic discourse leading
him into locutions of indirectness and detachment, even vestigial objectivity—
when he is clearly taking the opposite intellectual stance. But I also chose Berlin
because I want to piggy-back on his main point: "in teaching writing we are tac-
itly teaching a version of reality and the student's place and mode of operation in
it." I agree, but I want to state an obvious corollary: in *using a discourse* we are
also tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student's place and mode of op-
eration in it. In particular we are affirming a set of social and authority relations.
Here are four things that I think are taught by the surface mannerisms or stylis-
tic conventions of academic discourse:

(1) A version of reality. The convention of explicitness and straightforward
organization in academic discourse teaches that we can figure out what we really
mean and get enough control over language to actually say it—directly and clear-
ly. I confess I more or less believe this and think it's a good convention to teach.
Of course I also acknowledge what has come to be called the deconstructive
view of language and reality, namely that we can never get complete control
over language, that there will always be eddies of subversive meaning and wisps
of contrary implication in anything we write, no matter how clear and direct we
make it, so that a new critic or deconstructor can always find gaps (*aporiae*) in
what looks straightforward. Indeed, as I insisted in my opening section, we
should also try to teach the opposite convention of inexplicitness—teach people
to relinquish control over language so that it leads where we never expected it to
go, says things we didn't think we had in mind. I am talking about consciously
trying to unleash the subversive forces of language (for example in freewriting)
instead of trying to keep them in check. This subversive kind of writing is equal-
ly valuable and leads to an equally important view of reality. Nevertheless the
convention of explicitness is something I affirm and want to teach.

(2) Academic discourse also teaches a set of social and authority relations: to
talk to each other as professionals in such a way as to exclude ordinary people.
That is, in the academic convention of using more formal language and longer
and more complex sentences with more subordinate clauses (for example, call-
ing that kind of language "the deployment of hypotaxis rather than parataxis"),
academics are professing that they are professionals who do not invite conversa-
tion with nonprofessionals or ordinary people. Many groups act this way. Doc-
tors don't say "thumbbone," and the medical profession went out of its way to

mistranslate Freud's *ich, ueber ich* and *es* into *ego, super ego,* and *id*—rather than into the *I, over I,* and *it* that Freud clearly intended with his German (Bettelheim 49–62). It may be common for groups to try to prove that they are professional by means of this kind of exclusionary language, but I wonder if we really want to teach this discourse-stance once we notice the messages it sends: "We don't want to talk to you or hear from you unless you use our language." (Ostensibly the goal is to exclude the hoi polloi, but the bigger threat may be from intellectual non-academics who may be more learned and thoughtful.) Howard Becker is a respected sociologist who argues that there is no need for jargon and exclusionary discourse even in that field. He describes a graduate seminar engaged in revising and untangling someone's cssay, where a student suddenly blurts: "Gee . . . when you say it this way, it looks like something anybody could say." Becker's comment: "You bet" (7).

(3) I often hear behind the stylistic and textual conventions of academic discourse a note of insecurity or anxiety. Students may deal with their insecurity by saying, "This is just my opinion. . . . Everyone is entitled to their own opinion" and so on. But having led many workshops for students and faculty members, I've noticed that faculty members are usually *more* anxious than students about sharing their writing with each other. Of course faculty members have greater reason for anxiety: the standards are higher, the stakes are higher, and they treat each other more badly than they treat students. But it turns out that the voice and stylistic conventions of academic discourse serve extremely well to cover this understandable anxiety. Think about how we talk when we're nervous: our voice tends to sound more flat, gravelly, monotone, and evacuated. We tend to "cover" ourselves by speaking with more passives, more formal language, more technical vocabulary. We often discover that we sound more pompous than we intended. Bakhtin ("Discourse in Life") explores how meaning is carried by intonation and how our speech tends to lose intonation and thus meaning when we feel unsafe. Even in Berlin's fairly direct language, I hear that characteristically flat tone with little intonation. Not, probably, that he was anxious, but that he availed himself of stylistic conventions that avoid intonation and take a somewhat guarded stance.

(4) Finally, I sometimes see in the stylistic conventions of academic discourse an element of display. Despite the lack of intonation, there is often a slight effect of trying to impress or show off (though I don't see this in Berlin). That is, even though academics can write as peers and professionals to colleagues, it is helpful to notice how even grown up, full-fledged academics are sometimes so enmeshed in the rhetorical context of school discourse that they keep on writing as though they are performing for teachers with authority over them. Many academics have never written except to a teacher. We may be three thousand miles away, tenured, and middle-aged, but we are often still writing about the same field we wrote our dissertations on and writing to the very same teachers we had to impress in order to get tenure. Think about the stylistic stratagems of bright, intellectually excited, upperclass majors who grow up to be professors: how do they deal with that school situation of having to write "up" to readers with more knowledge and more authority—and needing to distinguish themselves from

their peers? I believe that the conventions of academic discourse—voice, regis-
ter, tone, diction, syntax, and mannerisms—often still carry vestigial traces of
this authority transaction of trying to show off or impress those who have au-
thority over us and to distinguish ourselves from our peers.

Really, of course, I'm talking about *ethos*: how do academics create authority
and credibility when they write to each other? William Stafford thinks we get off
easy on this score compared to poets:

> If you were a scientist, if you were an explorer who had been to the moon, if you
> were a knowing witness about the content being presented—you could put a draft
> on your hearer's or reader's belief. Whatever you said would have the force of that
> accumulated background of information; and any mumbles, mistakes, dithering,
> could be forgiven as not directly related to the authority you were offering. But a
> poet—whatever you are saying, and however you are saying it, the only authority
> you have builds from the immediate performance, or it does not build. The moon
> you are describing is the one you are creating. From the very beginning of your ut-
> terance you are creating your own authority. (62–63)

As academics, that is, we have various aids to authority. The most obvious one
is to take a ride on the authority of others—and so (naming, finally, the most
conspicuous stylistic convention in the genre) academics use footnotes and
quote important figures in our writing. What we write is not just a neat idea we
had that we send out to be judged on its own merits; it builds on Aristotle and
echoes Foucault. And our discourse conventions teach us to be learned not only
in our quotations and citations but also in the other linguistic mannerisms we
use. And so—though we may be modest, open, and democratic as persons—the
price we pay for a voice of authority is a style that excludes ordinary readers
and often makes us sound like an insecure or guarded person showing off.

Implications for Teaching Freshman Writing

I hope I am not too unkind in my reading of the stylistic conventions of academ-
ic discourse, but it helps me understand that I can happily devote a large propor-
tion of my freshman writing activity to the admirable larger intellectual tasks like
giving good reasons and evidence yet doing so in a rhetorical fashion which ac-
knowledges an interested position and tries to acknowledge and understand the
positions of others. (Also Flower's "self-directed critical inquiry . . . to an imag-
ined community of peers" [28]; or MacDonald's "problem-solving.") These are
the kinds of intellectual practices I want to teach—and in fact already do. But
now I can continue to work on them and not feel guilty or defensive about neg-
lecting academic discourse for merely "sensible" writing. Indeed my work on
these goals should be slightly transformed by my knowledge that in pursuing
them I *am* working on academic discourse—which is only one kind of discourse
and that, as Berlin implies, it involves a particular reading of the world, and as
Bizzell insists, there are "personal, social, and historical interests in academic
discourse." And as I see better that these admittedly sensible intellectual tasks
are only some among many, I feel more secure in my commitment to spend a
significant portion of the course emphasizing nonacademic discourse with other
intellectual tasks—discourse that renders rather than discourse that explains.

I want to emphasize here, however, that my reason for isolating the stylistic mannerisms and giving less attention to them is not just a matter of personal distaste. Serious pedagogical consequences are at stake. The intellectual tasks of academic discourse are significantly easier for students to learn when separated from its linguistic and stylistic conventions. That is, it is not alienating for almost any students to be asked to learn to engage in the demanding intellectual tasks of clarifying claims and giving reasons and so forth (however difficult they may be), but it is definitely alienating for many students to be asked to take on the voice, register, tone, and diction of most academic discourse. If we have to learn a new intellectual stance or take on difficult intellectual goals, we'll probably have better luck if we don't at the same time have to do it in a new language and style and voice. (Teachers of English as a second language have learned that students do better on difficult school tasks if they can use the language they find comfortable.)

And as for those students who are sophisticated enough to take on the voice of academic discourse without much trouble, many of them get seduced or preoccupied with that surface dimension and learn only to mimic it while still failing to engage fully the intellectual task. Putting it crassly, students can do academic work even in street language—and indeed using the vernacular helps show whether the student is doing real intellectual work or just using academic jive.

Besides, learning new intellectual practices is not just a matter of practicing them; it is also a matter of thinking and talking about one's practice. Or, speaking academically, students need metacognition and metadiscourse to help them understand just what these new intellectual practices are that they are being asked to learn. Toward this end, many teachers make heavy use of "process writing" in which students try to describe and analyze what they have written and how they went about writing it (see Elbow and Belanoff 12 and passim).

But everybody does better at metacognition and metadiscourse if he or she can use ordinary language. Flower provides intriguing evidence for this point. She starts with her finding that "students often demonstrated the underlying cognitive abilities to analyze, synthesize, or reconceptualize that would support these high potential strategies, . . . [yet] such strategies do not appear to be live options in their repertoire. Why?" (7). She goes on to note that "metacognition could play a large role in helping students to learn and engage in new types of discourse" (8). Her essay suggests that her research process itself is probably one of the best ways to produce this meta-awareness and task awareness in students. That is, she had the students produce speak-aloud protocols of their thinking and writing, then look at those protocols, and then discuss some of them in class. Here are a couple of examples of metadiscourse or process writing that students had a chance to discuss:

> So anyway, . . . So I wrote five or six pages on nothing, but I included the words "African nationalism" in there once in a while. I thought, why this is just like high school, I can get away with doing this. I got the paper back, and it was a C minus or a C or something like that. It said "no content." And I was introduced to the world of college writing. (9)

> I started with "There are several theories as to the most efficient strategies con-
> cerning time management." Which is really bad—And I wrote like a page of this. I
> just stopped and I went: This is just so bad—and I just said, like—I have to take
> this totally from my own point of view. (PAUSE) *But first I have to get a point of
> view.* (12)

Flower doesn't make this point, but it seems to me that the students probably
wouldn't think so clearly and frankly about their own thinking and discourse if
they weren't using ordinary language. The vernacular helps them talk turkey.

The intellectual practices of academic discourse are not only more appealing
to me than its stylistic conventions, they are also more useful. That is, even
though there may be differences between what counts as evidence and valid rea-
soning in various disciplines and even subdisciplines, the larger intellectual ac-
tivities we've focused on are useful in most academic disciplines—and of course
in much nonacademic writing, too. The stylistic conventions, on the other hand,
seem more local and variable—and in my view carry problematic intellectual and
social implications. No one seems to defend the stylistic conventions them-
selves—merely the pragmatic need for them. I find many academics dislike them
but feel guilty and furtive about it. Richard Rorty put it bluntly in a recent inter-
view: "I think that America has made itself a bit ridiculous in the international
academic world by developing distinctive disciplinary jargon. It's the last thing
we want to inculcate in the freshmen" (7). Finally, I suspect students can learn
the surface features of academic style better if they have first made good prog-
ress with the underlying intellectual practices. When students are really succeed-
ing in doing a meaty academic task, then the surface stylistic features are more
likely to be integral and organic rather than merely an empty game or mimicry.

What specific teaching practices does this analysis suggest? I've tried these:

- Ask students for a midprocess draft that summarizes something (for example, a
  piece of reading, a difficult principle from another course, the point of view of a
  classmate, or a discussion): pure summary, simply trying to get it right and clear—
  as it were for God. Then ask them for a major revision so that the material is not
  just summarized but rather interpreted and transformed and used in the process of
  creating a sustained piece of thinking of their own—and for a real human audi-
  ence. And ask also for process writing with each piece and spend some class time
  afterwards discussing the differences between the two intellectual tasks.
- Ask students for a piece of writing that renders something from experience. The
  test of success is whether it makes readers experience what they're talking about.
  Then ask them for a different piece of writing that is built from that writing—an
  essay that figures out or explains some issue or solves a conceptual (rather than
  personal) problem. I don't ask them to suppress their own experience for this
  piece, but to keep it from being the focus: the focus should be the figuring out or
  the solving. The test of success for this piece is whether it does the conceptual
  job. Again, ask for process writing with each piece of writing and then discuss in
  class the differences between the two intellectual tasks.
- Ask students to write a midprocess draft of an essay, and then for the next week's
  assignment ask them to make two revisions of the same draft: one in which they
  try to be completely objective and detached, the other in which they acknowledge
  their point of view, interest, bias—and figure out how to handle that rhetorical
  problem. Again, process writing with each piece and class discussion afterwards
  emphasizing the differences between the two intellectual tasks. This system also

speaks to another concern: how to get students to do substantive rather than per-
functory revising—how to insist that revisions be genuinely different, even if not
necessarily better.

As for those problematic stylistic conventions of academic discourse: my
analysis helps me feel a little better about neglecting them, but I will continue to
spend a bit of time on them in my course. The obvious approach would be to de-
scribe these stylistic features formally or as a genre. But Sheryl Fontaine points
out that there's an uncanny similarity between teaching academic discourse for-
mally and teaching correctness. In both cases we are back to a game of right and
wrong; all authority is with the teacher (as the only representative of the aca-
demic discourse community in the room); and the student's whole task is finding
right answers of which the teacher is sole arbiter.

Besides, a form or genre is always an artificial construct that represents a
compromise among the actual practices of live writers. If our goal is to tell stu-
dents what stylistic features are characteristic of the writing in a given discipline,
no answer will fit all the particular teachers they will meet—and the answers will
be even more out of whack if we are talking about the discourse teachers actu-
ally want from students on assignments, because those practices differ even
more widely.

- To help students think about style and voice not as generic or formal matters but
  as audience matters, I use a variation on the process I just described: asking for
  two revisions of the same midprocess draft, perhaps one for me as teacher and the
  other for casual friends; or one for people who know a lot about the topic and the
  other for readers who don't; or one for adults and the other for children; or one
  for a school newspaper and the other for a teacher.

- Once in the semester I ask for a paper that explains or discusses something stu-
  dents are studying in another course—and again two revisions. One version is for
  us in this course, considered as amateurs; the other version is for students and the
  teacher in the other course, considered as professionals. I ask the students to try
  out both drafts on us and on some students in the other course—and if possible on
  the teacher in the other course. A rhetorical and empirical approach dictates these
  procedures, a way of learning by interacting with readers and seeing how they
  react, rather than by studying forms or genres of discourse.

- I also like to get a teacher from another discipline to visit my class and distribute
  copies of a couple of essays that she has assigned and graded and to talk about
  them. I ask her to tell what kind of assignments and tasks she gives, what she is
  looking for, and especially to talk in some frank detail about how she reads and
  reacts to student writing. I try to get this colleague to give some movies of her
  mind as she reads—in effect an informal speak-aloud protocol of her reading. And
  there are two issues I bring up if she doesn't do so: how does she react when she
  finds a vernacular or nonacademic voice in student writing? And does she assign
  any nonacademic discourse in her course (for example journal writing or stories or
  letters or newspaper articles about what they are studying)? I want students to
  hear how this teacher from another discipline reacts to these issues. I also try to
  get her to speculate about what her colleagues would say on all these matters.

- In effect, I'm talking about doing a bit of informal ethnography—realizing that I
  am the most convenient ethnographic subject. That is, in recent years I have often
  found myself giving my reactions to students on their papers in a more reflective
  way: noticing myself as a member of the profession and as an individual and try-
  ing to help students interpret my reactions in a more anthropological way. I think

more about multiple audiences and find myself making comments like these: "I am bothered here—I'll bet most teachers would be—but perhaps general readers wouldn't mind." Or "I liked this passage, but I suspect a lot of teachers would take it as an inappropriately personal digression—or as too informal or slangy."

The central principle here is this: I cannot teach students the particular conventions they will need for particular disciplines (not even for particular teachers within the same discipline), but I can teach students the principle of discourse variation—between individuals and between communities. I can't teach them the forms they'll need, but I can sensitize them to the notion of differences in form so that they will be more apt to look for cues and will pick them up faster when they encounter them. Or to put it somewhat negatively, I'm trying to protect myself and keep my students from saying to my colleagues in history or psychology, "But my freshman English teacher likes this kind of writing that you failed me for!" What I want my students to go away thinking is more like this: "My freshman English teacher was good at telling us what went on in his mind as he read our papers—what he found strong and weak, what he liked and didn't like. But he set things up so we were always seeing how different members of the class and even people outside the class had different perceptions and reactions and standards and followed different conventions—how other people in other communities read differently. He tried to get us to listen better and pick up quicker on conventions and reactions." (If only we could write our students' evaluations of our teaching!) This inductive and scattered approach is messy— frustrating to students who want neat answers. But it avoids giving them universal standards that don't hold up empirically. And more than that, it is lively, interesting, and writerly because it's rhetorical rather than formal.

A Final Note: "But at my Back . . ."

Don't forget to notice how fast academic discourse is changing—certainly in our discipline and probably in others. And these changes are really an old story. It wasn't so long ago, after all, that Latin was the only acceptable language for learned discourse. Gradually the other European dialects became acceptable— vernacular, vulgar, and of the people, more democratic, closer to the business of the everyday and to feelings. Yet it seems to me that many academics seem more nervous about changes in discourse—and especially incursions of the vernacular—than about changes in ideas or content or doctrine. Many happily proclaim that there is no truth, no right answer, no right interpretation; many say they want more voices in the academy, dialogue, heteroglossia! But they won't let themselves or their students write in language tainted with the ordinary or with the presence and feelings of the writer.

Yet despite this fear of change, change is what we are now seeing even in the deep structure or central intellectual practices of academic discourse:

- Deconstructionists make a frontal attack on straight, organized prose that purports to mean what it says. They have gotten a good hearing with their insistence that language always means something different from what it says, that seemingly plain and direct language is the most duplicitous discourse of all, and that fooling around is of the essence.

- Feminists attack the idea that good writing must follow linear or hierarchical or deductive models of structure, must persuade by trying to overpower, must be "masterful."
- Bruner and scholars of narrative attack the assumption that thinking is best when it is structured in terms of claims, reasons, warrants, and evidence. Narrative is just as good a form for thinking.
- Academic discourse has usually focused outward: on issues or data. But now the focus of academic discourse is more and more often discourse and thinking itself. In effect, much academic discourse is metadiscourse.
- In a host of ways, genres are becoming blurred. It is worth quoting Geertz:

> [T]he present jumbling of varieties of discourse has grown to the point where it is becoming difficult either to label authors (What is Foucault—historian, philosopher, political theorist? What is Thomas Kuhn—historian, philosopher, sociologist or knowledge?) or to classify works. . . . It is a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map—the moving of a few disputed borders, the marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes—but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think. (19–20)

Arguments that any currently privileged set of stylistic conventions of academic discourse are inherently better—even that any currently privileged set of intellectual practices are better for scholarship or for thinking or for arguing or for rooting out self-deception—such arguments seem problematic now.

In the end, then, I conclude that I should indeed devote plenty of time in my freshman writing course to the intellectual practices of academic discourse; but also work on nonacademic practices and tasks, such as on discourse that renders rather than explains. (And our discussion about the difference between these two uses of language will help both.) Similarly, I should devote a little bit of time to the stylistic conventions or voices of academic discourse; but only as part of a larger exploration of various voices and styles—an exploration centered not on forms but on relationships with various live audiences. Let me give Joe Harris the last word: "What I am arguing against, though, is the notion that our students should necessarily be working towards the mastery of some particular, well-defined sort of discourse. It seems to me that they might better be encouraged towards a kind of polyphony—an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own" (17).*

*Interested readers will want to consult the growing body of empirical research on representative academic texts of different disciplines and on what happens as actual students engage in learning to use academic discourse. I am thinking of the work of people like Bazerman, Herrington, McCarthy, and Myers. Also a note of thanks: I have been trying out various versions of this paper for two years now and I've gotten enormously helpful responses and suggestions from more people than I can mention here. I am very grateful to them.

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