

2 Are We Specialists or Generalists?

"[Whether] it's better to live than to die." I said [to my student] that's what [we're] going to discover.

—Peter

It is fast becoming clear to me that all of us sitting around this table have at least this much in common: that the question of what we teach cannot for us be reduced to a simple list of skills, nor our purpose narrowly defined as "instruction." As a group we see our mission as much grander and our role as transformative: we expect to change those students who happen to make their way into our classes, and change them in profound ways.

Historically, community college instruction has sought to avoid the kind of disciplinary specialization that marks university teaching and research. Departments at community colleges have significantly less authority than "divisions" and "programs." The master's remains the essential degree of all instructors rather than the specialized doctorate. The continued presence of career programs requires instructors to be mindful of the ways knowledge can be applied outside their classrooms. "What we teach," then, is not reducible to explicating a literary text, for example, but rather must transcend narrow disciplinary boundaries.

And yet it is easier, perhaps, to say what we don't teach than what we do. If we are not necessarily committed to giving our students specialized knowledge, then what are we giving them, exactly? Marlene gets the ball rolling when she tells us about the "turning point" in her teaching, her involvement in a critical thinking seminar followed by a change in her classroom practice. She begins by talking about the way, in those early days, she taught the Middle Ages:

I would ask a question and the students had to be woken out of a daze. It was really frightening. I consider myself a good lecturer. [Yet] they were so passive. . . . I know a couple of times when I put them into groups how they would come alive. I made a decision after the first semester that I wasn't going to do [just] lecturing anymore. . . .

Even as Marlene would shift more of the responsibility for learning onto her students, she rightfully claims as the subject of her course the "great guiding principles." That is, she regards what she teaches her students as life-enriching, rather than simply all they need to know about the Middle Ages.

At this point Peter offers a classroom narrative of his own. He recalls a student's walking up to him on the first day of his American literature class and telling him that her brother had advised her that the class was a waste of time. She wanted to know why she should take the course. Peter recalls:

It was after the riots in L.A., and a kid [on TV] was talking about a drive-by shooting. I don't know if he had participated in one but the interviewer said, "What if it had been your children?" And the kid said, "So what? It's better to die than to live."

Peter reverses that statement. "It's better to live than to die," he tells the student:

That's what we're going to discover. Some of the best minds in American literature can give us an affirmation that will make us believe that it is better to live than to die. And that's what I'm going to try to teach in this course: Can we give that kid some answer?

We are all touched by Peter's response, eloquently and passionately expressed. He reminds us that what we hope to accomplish in our classrooms must be bigger than a narrow shopping list of "what students need to know." Instead what we ought to be doing is reflecting on what drew us to our specialties in the first place and trying to impart the wisdom given to us by our study to those who enter our classrooms. "When doing an introduction to literature," says Peter, "I tend to pursue those things that I myself need in my life."

Peter's story prompts us to consider questions that we too rarely ask of ourselves: Why should students take our courses? What exactly do we expect our students to leave with? Diane amends the question, or supplements it, this way: "Why take this course from *you*? What is it that *you* give to the course . . . that would make the course more rewarding?" Diane's revision hardly surprises me, given who we are and where we presently teach. In restating the question this way, Diane nudges us to remember that whatever happens in the classroom derives in large measure from the quality of our teaching. We are teachers first and foremost. We bring something to our subjects and our classrooms that is indispensable if students are to learn.

But what is it that we teach exactly? What are the methods of inquiry peculiar to our subjects and disciplines? These are difficult questions for us to answer. In one of our readings for today's session, Lee Odell puts the problem this way: "Some of these ways of knowing may become so internalized that it is difficult to bring them to conscious awareness in order to help someone else understand them" (1992, 97). All of us have been trained in the methods of a particular specialty, whether in nurs-

ing, in mathematics, in English, in office management, in history, or in psychology. But to be able to articulate those methods—to render them explicit to ourselves and to our students—there’s the rub. Moreover, as has already been seen, many people sitting around this table may resist the pressure to highlight what separates us and instead want to build on “common ground.” Diane, in fact, tells us about listening to a keynote address at a recent conference that she attended. The speaker was Kenneth Bruffee (“Keynote,” 1993), who for years has written and spoken eloquently about collaborative learning. Diane remembers that Bruffee, in describing the various obstacles faced by tutoring centers, noted the peculiar divisions within the academy. “Picket fences,” he called them, structures erected to keep the barbarians out:

The whole focus [of Bruffee’s talk] was that the language of the profession is the picket fence that keeps out the uninitiated. . . . as you go along they give you more of the language so that you understand what they are saying.

Teaching as we do at a public, open-admissions community college, all of us feel some discomfort talking about the “uninitiated” and the kind of exclusiveness inherent in the disciplines-as-picket-fences metaphor. And yet all of us, whether we like to admit it or not, are among the “initiated” or, put another way, all of us have acquired a specialty or expertise that our students have not.

In the semester preceding our workshop, as part of our weekly staff meetings, we had begun the process of “thinking about our disciplinary thinking.” All of us had written down “what makes for good writing in our disciplines.” I had made the request because I thought that an increased awareness of disciplinary concerns might improve our performance as tutors in the writing lab as well as enhance the writing assignments in our own classes, and that such concerns would amount to evidence of the way a discipline represents itself in writing. Disciplinary writing and reading, as Charles Bazerman has observed, are “highly contextualized social actions,” symbolic activities with a distinctive rhetorical character (1988, 22). The results of our efforts had brought to the surface the group’s mixed feelings about discipline-specific ways of knowing. Some of us were more comfortable than others with the idea of articulating disciplinary differences. For example, Mia, a part-time philosophy and writing instructor who tutors in our writing lab (and who, alas, couldn’t attend our summer workshop), seems at ease when writing about her field’s “discourse” (take note, however, of the way she begins with commonality):

Of course, philosophy recognizes the writing traits which are universally characteristic of coherent written communication. However,

philosophy is no different from other disciplines in that it works from a distinct agenda. All philosophical discourse needs to begin with an inquiry. The writer then must engage him- or herself into the discourse which necessarily surrounds the inquiry. (For example, an inquiry into the existence of truth must first define truth rather than assume universal agreement on its meaning). The discourse should flow from a logical progression of thought wherein claims, arguments, and explanations are developed from empirical or a priori evidence. In addition, veteran philosophers (assuming that there is such a thing) are expected to employ the terminology of the discipline and to display a degree of scholarship in the subject matter surrounding the inquiry.

Mia lets it be known that her discipline's distinctiveness depends on more than just a specialized vocabulary. More fundamentally, she looks at philosophical discourse as a form of inquiry and argumentation.

Interestingly, Kathy, representing the extradisciplinary field of ESL, speaks most insistently on recognizing different ways of knowing: "I think . . . that it is very important that we allow these students to maintain the beauty of their individual voices and linguistic styles." She goes on to describe Robert Kaplan's scheme of "contrastive rhetoric," which distinguishes among cultures in terms of thinking processes and, by extension, the linguistic expressions of those processes (1966, 15). Kathy's point is that we need to respect such differences. She acknowledges, however, that, for all the need to retain their cultural styles, the fact remains that success for her students is measured by how well they write and think classroom English.

Marlene, in responding to what makes for "good writing" in history, chose in her earlier statement to focus on generalized or generic aspects of writing. A good history paper, she asserted, needs a "good introduction," a "clear argument with evidence," and a clear point of view. When she is asked, now, to describe to a student why she should take her course, Marlene goes much deeper, revealing some of her own (and the group's) conflicting notions of writing in the disciplines:

I think what I'm trying to do in my course is to give my students what it is like being a historian, not with the view that they will be historians, but with the view that there are certain things everyone should do, and that is to be very aware of your sources, where you get information, [be] aware of the authors and their perspectives, when they were born, the social classes they came from, the influences on their lives. You look at the arguments they make. Are they insightful? Do they make sense? Are the inferences that are drawn credible? That's the kind of thing that I want my students to get out of it . . . and to transfer that to other things in life. When they pick up the newspaper every morning, [then,] they realize that it is a profit-making organization and what they read may not be the whole story.

Marlene wants, in fact, to give her students a sense of what it means to be a historian, her protests notwithstanding. And it is clear to me that for Marlene history amounts to more than just a record of the facts. She sees history as the site of conflicting opinions and debatable inferences. She sees history as argument and as a construction of events as shaped by the writers' personal histories. At the same time, however, Marlene insists that the skills she is imparting to her students are transferable to "other things in life," and not specific to historical writing and thinking. The apparent discomfort that Marlene feels with seeing herself as a specialist imparting specialized knowledge is something that many of us in this room and in the community college feel: Are we teachers or specialists? That question implies, of course, that disciplinary knowledge has little to do with what we say and how we act in the classroom.

As if to highlight that point, Peter's account of "good writing in an English class" seems strangely acontextual. For him, good writing in English must have a "voice, a dramatic voice, the feeling that an honest-to-God person is speaking to you. . . . There's a poetic economy to good writing. . . . Good writing is re-creative. There's a vividness to it, the surprise of fresh imagery." Interestingly, the writing done in English becomes for Peter a kind of writing that can be taught regardless of the discipline that generates it.

In contrast, my own account of writing in English begins as a description of my training in writing about poems, that is, a kind of writing more directly rooted in the academy:

I was trained to write what is called an "explication of the text." By that I mean a close, well-reasoned discussion of what a poem has to offer: from the twists and turns of the argument to the texture of language and patterns of sound. When I was in graduate school, New Criticism (which was at least thirty years old by then), still provided the means by which to explicate a poem: treat the poem on its own terms, as a discrete unit; apply whatever tools the discipline offers (from parsing verse to reading for irony and back); and *never* confuse the writing and the writer, *please*.

But that was then and this is now. I write that I have since then moved "beyond" the New Critical approach:

Instead I ask my students—especially in an introductory literature course—to connect the poem with their lives. That doesn't mean ignoring the text but rather seeing the poem as expressive of the world. In addition, I am more likely in discussing a poem to consider the social and cultural pressures that helped to produce it.

As I think about the "change," I can see that, while I no longer confine my response about a poem to the text on the page, I am nevertheless

talking about a rather specialized kind of writing and thinking (and reading), and that the writing I describe emerges from the reading. I focus in my statement on writing that is situated within a particular disciplinary context.

Returning to the workshop, I am surprised, in the light of Peter's acontextualized account of good writing, to hear him saying that he prefers to see each discipline as applying "particular metaphors . . . ways of speaking, actions. . . a way of structuring reality in order to get at a particular meaning." At this point, Marlene, the historian, rightly reminds us that what we call disciplines were not considered so before the late nineteenth century, when the German university model was adopted in this country. Having said this, she presses us further to make this entire discussion more concrete. What kinds of differences are we talking about, anyway, she asks?

To try to render our discussion more concrete, the group turns to a passage from our previous night's reading, in which Lee Odell (1992) talks about "context-specific ways of knowing." To illustrate the distinct demands a discipline may make on student work, Odell draws upon student reports from a mechanical engineering assignment. The assignment is to "design a mechanical advice that can be used to develop the 'technological awareness' of fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-grade students" (93). One group of students decides to design a "mock wind tunnel" to test the aerodynamics of model cars, and Odell pulls out two design descriptions done by members of the group. Their differences could not be more clear-cut. One begins, "The mock wind tunnel is designed to demonstrate, in a crude manner, the behavior of air flow over a child-size model of an automobile that the child assembles himself" (93). Another student writes the description in a very different way: "The mock wind tunnel consists of a tube 46" long, 3 1/4" ID [interior diameter], 3 1/2" OD [outer diameter]. The tube is supported at each end and in the middle" (93). When asked which of the two he prefers, the instructor chooses the latter because, he says, while the first provides a useful overview, the details given in the second show that the student had indeed designed the product, and provides the necessary information to convince readers "that it would work" (95).

Are these differences significant or, rather, is the second example more typical of writing in engineering design? Kathy prefers to restate the question to "What were the expectations of the writing [assignment]?" She sees the difference as purely a matter of audience. The first student, in providing a view of the big picture, simply addresses a different audience from what the teacher has in mind, an audience with less technical expertise. But, of course, that merely begs the question of what the student needs

to do and know in order to satisfy the instructor's expectations. Those expectations seem rather specific to engineering design (to show "that it would work").

Kathy's discomfort with the notion that particular disciplines set up particular expectations becomes quite obvious in an exchange between her and Peter (who now has become associated in Kathy's mind with disciplinary "picket fences"):

Peter: By being true to your discipline, you make the work most relevant to your students. . . . I think the world is best perceived through one window [that is, of our particular discipline]. I think if you look through that one window as best as you can, you give your students . . . the truth that you have.

Kathy: You said you have to give them what you know, the truth as you see it, but you also have to give them what's relevant. So [Howard's] not focusing on the literary terms is not changing the mission [of the college].

Kathy's last comment was in response to my own admission that in my introductory literature course I no longer require my students to use conventional literary terms. It is no longer important to me that my students parse a line of verse. I draw on their own experiences as a way to engage the text. As a consequence, I ask, "Am I teaching my students something outside my discipline, for the sake of 'relevance'? And if so, is my course somehow less an English course?"

Peter's metaphor of the disciplinary "window" is a useful one for our group. Indeed, it is most revealing, since it suggests that although we may see the world through our distinctive disciplinary perspectives we may not always be aware of the frame or pane itself. We need to be more aware, I think, of what frames our knowledge and our teaching.

To that end, I ask Pat, from our dental hygiene area, what specific skills she wishes her students to have when they finish their program of study. "Making connections between observations," she replies. She continues:

In an oral exam, making connections [between] an observation [and] what you've read in textbooks about conditions that might apply, [for example] viral or chemical burn. Bleeding or poor gum tissues can be the result of many things. Students need to be able to look at it and put the pieces of knowledge together, visually observing what they are seeing, connecting it to what they already know.

Knowledge, in other words, is made when what we know and what we observe come into conflict. Diane, from the perspective of nursing, calls such knowledge-making the "so-what hypothesis," that is, taking what we agree to be the "reality" and juxtaposing it to the observed condition of a patient and the appropriate behavior of the nurse: So what if that text-

book case happens? What are the implications of the condition for patient and practitioner?

Such questions lead us invariably to the idea that an observer's perspective—the voice from the ground, so to speak—plays an important role in the construction of knowledge. What I'm hearing from Pat and Diane brings me to speak about what I've read in Kenneth Bruffee and Richard Rorty about the socially constructed nature of reality, the view that knowledge is made by the consent of a community of learners (Bruffee 1984; Rorty 1979).

Marlene observes that "at any moment there are multiple truths." She points to historical texts that disregard the perspectives and truths of what she calls "ordinary people," the forgotten or silent figures. "Revolutions," she observes, "are not made by men at the top but by millions." Marlene's insistence in her courses that students know something of "class interests" makes clear her particular perspective on historical events, the lens through which she views the past. Generally speaking, says Chris, we all rely on various "categories" with which to organize our perceptions.

Chris makes that remark in part because of Marlene's comments but also because of an anecdote that I had shared with the group. I had had a conversation with a colleague from our chemistry department, who had his students report on all the things they saw when observing a candle burning. They were to begin by writing down what they expected to see when a candle is burning. Then they were to light a candle and observe in as much detail as they could what they saw. The teacher told me that some students reported roughly fifty independent, observable details. Like Pat's and Diane's students, these students learned in part by juxtaposing what they expected and what they in fact observed. But, more profoundly perhaps, they engaged in a kind of seeing that may very well be specific to a particular community. Were the students given certain categories of observation, certain habits of seeing to which the rest of us don't have access? Marlene, similarly, sees her role as getting students to see the "patterns" of history, discrete categories with which she organizes historical events. Chris makes the important point that disciplines have clear, definable boundaries, although overlap exists. Distinct lines separate physics from chemistry—ways of observing and testing phenomena.

Interestingly, Diane remarks that some teachers are reluctant to render those expectations explicit in the writing tasks that they assign their students. "Sometimes," she notes, "it's almost as if we are afraid of giving away the secret." Somehow—through osmosis perhaps—students must find that secret in order to become successful, but there is precious little explicit guidance. Marlene admits that she is not explicit enough in the instructions that she gives to her students, out of fear of "giving away" the

assignment. When she asks them, as we have seen, to define the Renaissance, she would like them to discover that a variety of perspectives, including that of the peasants, exists on the subject. “The more I talk [about such perspectives], the more I elaborate,” she says, “but I am also setting out the choices for them.” Chris disagrees. He feels that the economic analysis of history—the lens through which she views it—might simply guide Marlene’s students. “They’re still going to have to struggle to analyze,” he reminds us.

As I reflect upon Marlene’s concern, I see that in some ways she is closer to the crux of the matter than any of us. She connects the special expertise that marks us as members of a disciplinary community with the authority that it confers on us. We teachers have the knowledge; our students simply do not. Although Marlene would like her students to discover that knowledge, our assisting with explicit guidance may indeed be seen as “giving away” the very stuff that buttresses our authority in the classroom. For Marlene, then, the issue becomes whether we should “lower our standards” in order to get the work that we would like from our students. In fact, that is less the issue than whether we are prepared to welcome the outsider into our knowledge community and whether we are prepared to assist in that process.