

### 3 Our Ways of Reading and Knowing

Doesn't every piece have a special argument?

—Marlene

Partly as a way to test the assumption that each of us belongs to distinct discourse communities, I suggest that we bring in writing that reflects our own particular areas of interest and experience. But I do so for other reasons as well. For one, I want us all to experience the role of the expert. In one sense we are familiar with that role. Every time we stand before our students, we, and they, assume that we possess authoritative and expert knowledge. And yet it is the unique plight of two-year college teachers that our very expertise undergoes continual challenge—not by students but by the institutional culture of the two-year college. Given the comprehensive nature of the community college mission, faculty at the two-year college level are encouraged to view themselves as experts in teaching rather than experts in teaching a subject. Attempts to define ourselves as both expert teachers and expert scholars too often meet with indifference or outright discouragement. As in any discussion that unnaturally separates teaching from research (which must include scholarship), this debate goes against what we all know by common sense to be true: that what we teach is connected to how we teach and that the “what” constantly changes as our disciplines change.

But beyond acknowledging our own expertise in our subjects, another result may come from sharing disciplinary texts: Perhaps we will feel the discomfort that comes from being outside a knowledgeable community and from not knowing how to read the map of another discipline's text. I am, frankly, hoping that such discomfort occurs. It may cause us to reflect on the process that each of us has gone through to become part of our disciplines' conversations, a process that many of our students struggle with in our own classrooms.

What we bring in comprises an interesting medley. Some of us have brought in journal articles, others have brought excerpts from textbooks and other professional publications. Pat presents us with an American Dental Hygiene Association publication called “The Student Journal: Its Use in Teaching Ethics in Dental Hygiene Programs” (LeBlond 1992). Written in accessible, nontechnical language, the piece uses some of the literature about journal keeping in other fields (most notably the work of Toby Fulwiler) and applies it to the field of dental hygiene instruction.

Diane brings in an article titled “Are You up to Date on Diabetes Medications?” from the *American Journal of Nursing* (Kestel 1994). Written by a teaching nurse for working nurses, the article makes distinctions among various modes of diabetes treatment, and makes reference to various studies done in the field to make its point. Carol brings in an article on “Development of Cases for Business Report Writing Classes,” which details a specific teaching assignment using the case study approach as a basis for research and analysis. Drawing upon research on writing by corporate employees, the authors claim that analytical reports are indeed expected in the corporate environment. Interestingly, the authors implicitly recognize developments in composition when they recommend that teachers focus on the “writing process rather than on the researching process” and that students ought to work together to share their findings (Nelson and MacLeod 1993, 37, 39).

Clearly, these pieces say a lot about us. All the writing samples, while situated in particular disciplines, are accessible to the outsider. We—all of us—want to find common ground; the urge is very deep in us. We all feel discomfort with those disciplinary “picket fences” that Kenneth Bruffee mentions (“Keynote,” 1993). We are, after all, *community* college teachers. And yet each of us is a product of specialized training. Our thinking, the ways we read, write, and talk—all to some degree reflect that training.

That becomes clear when we look at a particular piece, Diane’s piece on treatment for diabetes. The pretext for our discussion of that work is to get at how a particular discipline uses sources—that is, how someone writing in an area makes reference to, and builds on, already established knowledge in that subject. More profoundly, we are interested in discovering how writers position themselves vis à vis that established knowledge. How do they establish a point of view next to authors whom they cite? As writing lab tutors, we often express our frustration at students’ inability to quote from, and cite, sources. Too often we read “research” writing from students that amounts to a crazy quilt of quoted passages, with very little evidence of the students’ own perspective (Meyer and Smith 1987, 245). But we also realize just as often that students rarely get classroom instruction in how to do genuine research, a crucial aspect of which is to know how to carve out a point of view and to weave that point of view together with the opinions of experts. Philosophically, the challenge for writers—novice and expert—is to understand that language operates referentially, and that particular discourse communities expect that writers make new knowledge while acknowledging the established, conventionally held knowledge. Claims need to be situated within or next to accepted belief. As one example, consider what it means to research and write in science:

An individual does well for him[-] or herself, his or her social network, and for his or her claims, by doing good science; that is, by creating representations of some stability and power when held against the accumulated and future experience of the community. (Bazerman 1988, 190)

Of course, writers within such a community need to have confidence (which means “power”) enough to make their claims even as they survey the stable knowledge of their community. Our students more often than not lack the confidence to assume the stance of “expert” next to the received knowledge that they research. They often fail to establish a point of view from which to mount an argument.

Interestingly, when we begin to discuss the piece that Diane has brought us on diabetic treatment, we argue among ourselves about the meaning of that very phrase “point of view.” More precisely, some of us wonder whether the piece indeed has any point of view at all. Kathy begins the “argument about argument” by separating what she sees as the “thesis” of the piece from any “point of view” (which she has difficulty finding). As she puts it, the “thesis” of the piece is, “You need to keep up with medications.” The point is made at the end, in a “classically organized essay.” Peter concurs by saying that the article offers “exposition rather than argumentation.” In other words, Kathy and Peter see very little of an argumentative edge, very little of an agenda propelling the writer and the piece itself.

Marlene, however, reads the same article through very different lenses. She asks, “Doesn’t every piece have a special argument?” In asking that question, Marlene posits a view of language (and of writing and reading) that is quite at odds with the view of others in the group. In part, she reflects her own training as a historian: seeing history as a sifting of interpretations or counterarguments (Walvoord and McCarthy 1990, 99). For Marlene, historians don’t simply provide the facts but rather their interpretation of the facts. Moreover, Marlene sees a text and a writer coming out of a “certain tradition.” She sees writing generally as constructed by the world external to the page. Regarding the piece on diabetes, Marlene immediately latches onto the writer’s “point of view”: “She is definitely within the tradition of Western-style medicine. She is not looking at holistic medicine, at acupuncture, at homeopathy. . . . She’s accepting only a [Western] orthodox medicine.” If we believe, along with reader-response theorists, that a text is “made” in part by the readers who come to it, then Marlene’s reading may be seen as her shaping of that text.

Diane complicates our reading even further. She notes that the writer is herself a nurse educator rather than a physician. “Physicians,” she says, “just look at the diseases”:

They never figure out who has the disease, how it affects [the patient]. For example, a fifteen-year-old boy is going to be a lot more difficult to handle than a thirty-five-year-old man who has a routine pattern of exercise. Doctors are very hesitant to say you're a college student, you're not going to be eating at home so we have to look at the cafeteria. . . . Nurses have always done that because the physicians will prescribe. Then we will say to the patient, Did you understand that? Can you do that? . . . You find out this is a person.

The writer's perspective affects the writing itself in rather obvious ways, Diane says. She points to the references to particular cases and names: "Benny Brewster, 15 . . . was young, lean, and quite abruptly ill" (Kestel 1994, 48). The writing becomes compelling in its concreteness and in its humanity.

All these findings notwithstanding, Peter persists in stating that while the piece exhibits a writer's point of view it does not have a "thesis," which he defines as a "sharp, clear, definite position": "She's just giving us information. She's not really proving anything." Peter does not want us to "reduce point of view to prejudice," as he puts it: "I think point of view can mean everything you bring to a subject. It's your attention, your attitude, your way of looking at things. . . . Thesis is narrower."

The sparks between Marlene and Peter now begin to fly:

*Marlene:* [reading aloud what she feels to be the writer's point:] "I want to inform you of the latest update in. . ." Second, there is a break now with the past practice of treating diabetes, with the new, innovative method being basically better than the old ways of doing it.

*Peter:* You're going outside the article. Look, [let's assume that someone says] this is the way to draw blood and then they give you how to do it. And somebody else says I think there's another way to draw blood that's more effective. Argumentation would be, "Drawing blood is the first step in any physical." That's an argument.

Diane then jumps in: "I disagree with you, Peter, because of the title. When she asks the question, 'Are You up to Date [on Diabetes Medications]?', [she implies] that people are not up to date. I think it's a very provocative question."

What's happening here? Suddenly those "picket fences" that Diane mentioned earlier are being erected, with Peter and Carol (who believes, with Peter, that the article is an "informational piece") on one side and Marlene and Diane on the other, with Kathy seemingly uncertain as to the side to which she belongs. Are we stumbling over semantics or are these differences deep-seated? To get at an answer I suggest that we either reexamine our terms, like thesis or argument—perhaps getting away from using them altogether—or use altogether different words. What if

we use the word “purpose” instead? I ask. Peter immediately responds by saying that the word is “so general.” The argument about argument then branches out to become an argument about modes of discourse:

*Howard:* There has to be a motive for writing.

*Peter:* It usually is broken down into exposition, argumentation, description, and narration.

*Howard:* But I don’t buy into those distinctions anymore. In my mind there is an interconnectedness. And when we buy into the modes we’re saying that these are nicely sealed off.

*Peter:* I wrote two biographies that are straight narratives, the whole thing implied.

*Diane:* You didn’t have any arguments?

*Peter:* No. You are totally blurring the distinctions.

*Howard:* No, I’m not. I said “interconnected.”

In truth, I am “blurring the distinctions.” Peter is right. Perhaps I am bringing to this discussion all that I have been told about “blurred genres”—postmodern views of forms and modes as overlapping—and about the “situatedness” of language (Geertz 1983; Clifford 1986). To talk about a narrative as if it could proceed without “argument” seems misguided. Kathy offers a very astute comment about the slippery slope of an insular and formal approach to writing: “That’s the danger of assigning a form. If you have your students do an argumentative paper, then you’re having the form drive the message.” That form, she may as well add, exists only in the classroom—a fact that only adds to our students’ confusion when faced with such a task.

His protestations notwithstanding, even Peter will acknowledge that in a narrative “the whole thing [can be] implied.” That latter comment would suggest that what Peter is getting at is the difference in levels of explicitness. A writer may provide exposition explicitly but may also promote a point or agenda implicitly.

At this point, despite having all my postmodern sensibility firmly in place, I nevertheless cannot help blurting out, “Can we not agree on what the damn thing is saying?” Does our argument about argument make it impossible to state the gist of the piece? Marlene reminds us of Diane’s reading of the writer’s point: that the latest innovations in diabetes treatment should be chosen over more conventional therapy. But Peter insists that if this is true the writer is just “making an assertion”: “If she were making an argument she would have to marshal evidence, saying this is the quality of the new medicine. This is how it is better than the old, back and forth, back and forth.” I am glad that Peter says this because in asking “Where’s the beef?” he is forcing us to go back to the text and to

become close readers of the piece. He forces us to go to the writer's words (and to reexamine our own). If we were explicating the text, we would have to provide the evidence for what we say. Diane and Marlene have stated that there is in fact a kind of argument here in the contrast between treatments, and therefore they must show where in the text they see an argument, a line being drawn.

And they proceed to do so. Diane, like a good, close reader of a text, points to a passage on page 50 where the writer refers to "outdated but still common" kinds of therapy. She reads that line to mean "still common" with doctors "[but] not with the people who are reading the article." Moreover, Diane notes, the writer observes that the traditional treatment given to Benny, the fifteen-year-old patient, "may not," in the words of the writer, "provide adequate overnight glucose coverage" (Kestel 1994, 51). Diane is crafting a very nice argument of her own, of course. She is providing evidence, methodically and thoughtfully, that the writer uses a language of critique. The writer, Diane is saying, makes judgments and weighs treatments.

This discussion makes me think of the difficult task of showing our students how to master a critical language, both as writers and as readers. If a room full of experienced teachers and readers can respond in such varied ways to a writer's critique, and if such a critique can appear in such an unobtrusive form, what chance have we to make our students sensitive to such language? Taking up this subject, Jerry, who has been quiet during this "argument about argument," tries to look at the article from the student's frame of reference. Students, he says, would be guided in their "translation" of the article by their teachers' instructions. If their teachers want them to "find an argument" they will find it. I can tell that for Jerry Diane's reading of the article would make little sense to our students. But, of course, that is hardly surprising. Those students would not bring Diane's breadth of experience to the text. Indeed, very few in this room are bringing that kind of experience to their reading of the piece.

What do we do then with that word "argument," when all is said and done? Peter himself suggests that we "get rid of that." He asks us to look at the "narrative quality" of the article. By that he refers to the effective use of anecdote or case studies. He sees a dramatic quality in the writing: essentially, the willingness of the writer to tell stories. And to be concrete. He asks us to consider such stories as powerful evidence which the author uses to support her convictions. Once, Peter tells us, a student apologized to him for "being anecdotal" in a paper. He said to her, "Why?" We, in fact, all know the answer to that one: teachers have been notorious in their resolve to take students, and what they consider the "merely" personal or subjective, out of their writing.

Now, it seems that Peter and the rest of the group are moving together at the center: agreeing that writers can indeed present a thoughtful point of view without contriving a full-fledged argument. But just when you think you have Peter, he surprises you. The very next day, Peter brings in a reading himself. Taken from *Atlantic Monthly*, the piece is entitled “The Sex-Bias Myth in Medicine” (Kadar 1994). It is a contentious and provocative piece, for sure. Peter is clearly saying to us, “You want an argumentative piece of writing? Try this on for size.” The writer begins with a long passage detailing accusations from women’s groups that women have for too long been ignored by the medical field, that their needs have not been met. Peter points to the writer’s skillful use of “rhetoric”:

I think the introduction is really important. He gets the reader saying yes and almost gives the reader the sense that this is just another piece, a predictable piece, and then presents a thesis which turns it all around. . . . it suggests a whole strategy to draw you in . . . and surprise you.

The thesis that is finally given amounts to the view that while there is indeed a sex bias in medicine, that bias favors women and not men. The writer proceeds to critique, with some vigor, previous studies on gender bias in health. But Peter does not give us the whole article, nor do we see the list of works cited. As Pat noted, “It would make the article more credible if [we] could look at [the references].” Marlene concurs, taking some offense at what she sees is the trivialization of “the other side” in this piece. She calls for argument that is “principled.”

But Peter is making a larger point here. He knows full well that balance and logic are important ingredients in an effective appeal to change people’s minds. Yet he also puts some stock in expressiveness, on emotion. Classical rhetoricians, he tells us, put stock in the “emotional appeal, the ethical appeal, and the logical [appeal].” An argument might then draw upon all three.

Marlene reminds us all how cold and bloodless is so much of our students’ writing—especially when drawing upon external sources. How do we encourage students to stake out, and support, an opinion—emotionally, ethically, and logically? Can writers be both passionate and objective, asks Diane? Peter responds by drawing upon Wordsworth’s view of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion, but emotion recollected in tranquility. “There should be passion,” he says, “but passion always passed through” thoughtful reflection. It is of course one thing for students to write passionately on matters close to their own experience, but what about the French Revolution? asks Marlene. How do I encourage passionate argument in history?