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INVENTING ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: TEACHING (AND LEARNING) MARGINAL POISE AND FUGITIVE TRUTH

ABSTRACT: *This article further develops earlier versions of transformative pedagogy (e.g., Bartholomae and Petrosky's, Bizzell's, Lu's, Horner's), demonstrating how the self-reflexive tactics required in an analysis of professional practice make visible the ways that compositionists authorize academic discourse. David Bartholomae describes this as the teachers' unconscious need to "see ourselves in what [students] do." The pedagogical method proposed explains how features like "objectivity," "clarity," and [constraining] "voice" in academic discourse are misrecognized in our own rhetoric AND in our evaluations of our students. Because we demand these stylistic and institutionalized conventions of academic discourse from our students, we should — the paper argues — include students in the practices by which we "normalize" these conventions. This article suggests how we might include students in our evaluative practices and discusses the successful results of one such effort.*

The course we've defined . . . demonstrates our belief that students can learn to transform materials, structures and situations that seem fixed or inevitable, and that in doing so they can move from the margins of the university to establish a place for themselves on the inside. At the end, however, these relationships may remain hesitant and tenuous — partly ... because they have learned . . . that successful readers and writers actively seek out the margins and aggressively poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university. (Bartholomae and Petrosky, 305)

For well over a decade now, we compositionists have been honing our search for pedagogy that disrupts hegemonic, oppressive power structures in the academy and its discourse. Our on-going effort to teach students how to transform rather than merely reproduce existing authoritative discourse(s) has produced various tools. Nonethe-

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less, we have seen little, if any, actual transformative effect emerging from this pedagogical theory and practice.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition helps us understand this persistent lack of substantive change: like the order operating in other social groups Bourdieu examined, our own daily professional practices "deny a truth known and recognized by all, a lie that would deceive no one, were not everyone determined to deceive him- [or her-] self" (133). With respect to writing instruction, this denied truth is that we ourselves — in our positions as writing instructors and in our disciplinary activities — are at least in part responsible for the practices that disenfranchise our students; we are at the center of the procedures of discourse. Breaking this cycle of institutional denial requires recognizing that the source of academic discursive authority is academic disciplinary practice. Such recognition facilitates our further realization that destabilizing the authority of academic discourse requires disrupting our professional practice. To enable this disruption, our pedagogy must make visible what we as teachers of writing take to be the "natural" and therefore — to us — uncontestable (because invisible) aspects of academic discourse.

In other words, a disruptive, transformative pedagogy must alter not just how students see but also how *we* see and practice academic discourse. Within these pages, I will demonstrate how we can move our recent disciplinary efforts forward in order to construct such pedagogy. I'll also describe one concrete application of a pedagogical approach that does intervene in our disciplinary practice. To conclude, I'll interpret the results of my piloting that approach with groups of basic writing students.

One Blade Shy of a Sharp Edge

Most of our efforts to identify and apply counter-hegemonic pedagogy have been concerned with empowering students to conceive of and practice academic discourse as a socially constructed process wherein writers negotiate the inevitable conflicts of authority present in competing discourses and/or positionalities. For instance, some feminist applications of critical pedagogy have introduced a concept called "positioned teaching." In general terms, positionality purports to de-center authority through the process of the teacher's and/or students' articulations and defense of their differences, their positions. By exploring conflicting positions, students come to see that hegemonic conceptions of True or Natural or Right are individual rather than universal truths (Jarratt, Bizzell).

Other scholarly accounts of our disciplinary efforts to enable students' critique and subversion of the authority and conventions of aca-

demic discourse center on the social contexts wherein discursive appropriation and surrender of power and privilege occur. For instance, many of us have accepted the challenge to apply to the classroom Mary Louise Pratt's notion of the "contact zone," a social space where people of unequal levels of power and differing language backgrounds meet to negotiate (or coerce) meaning and authority. Min-Zhan Lu, in her critique of the ideology of "linguistic innocence" and her interpretation of student "error," specifically attends to the configuration of power relations in the writing classroom ("Redefining"). Challenging earlier views of students' mis-appropriations of academic discourse, Lu considers "error" as writers' negotiations—sometimes intentional, sometimes not—between codes of Standard English and other discourses rather than as writers' cognitive or linguistic deficiencies. This reading of student "error," she shows us, disrupts students' hegemonic understanding and teachers' oppressive transmission of Standard English because it "broadens students' sense of the range of options and choices facing a writer. . .[and] leaves them to choose in the context of the history, culture, and society in which they live" ("Professing" 457-8).
Bruce Horner likewise reconsiders the "sociality of error"; he enjoins us to teach editing as a means for negotiating the conventions of different discourse communities and thus to position students as empowered agents exercising their choice to communicate effectively with a particular group of readers. Interpreting conventional editing practices as an exercise in mandatory error correction, Horner also argues that the process reinforces students' powerlessness and discourages their taking responsibility for their writing ("Rethinking").

Surely, we can see that these pedagogical approaches are commendable and useful. Indeed, all these methods can alter how students see language, can reveal its interface with power and politics. Yet these methods do little to intervene in the process by which discursive power is formed at the academy, for illumination of the source of discursive authority of language does not, of itself, subvert that authority; it simply reveals the authority for what it is. The illumination that these methods offer is only partial, for their presentations of the source of discursive authority ignore our inscription in it.

Since we compositionists are the gatekeepers whose evaluations sanction or deny composition students' written product, we are at the center of the interface of language and power at the academy. Like all academics, we are the mainstay of our self-defined, self-professed, and self-authorized discipline; in particular, we writing instructors are the disciplinarians whose practices profess Academic Discourse, as opposed to, say, the Victorian Novel or Biological Psychology or Business Ethics. In effect then, we compositionists are the central authorizers of an autobiographical discipline: our practices define and embody academic discourse, and those practices drive our disciplinary

knowledge.

Though this wording may seem strange—in its gesture to auto-biography, for instance—the vision of professional practice that I'm presenting here is not unprecedented. More than a decade ago, David Bartholomae gave us this perspective on the authority of academic discourse when he described our positive evaluation of student writers as a matter of "seeing ourselves in what they do." He further applied Foucault's understanding of discourse and power to the enabling relationship between basic writers and the academy:

> . . . if the university officially places some students on the margins (in remedial writing courses), that *position* is a representation (perhaps in its most dramatic and telling form) of the position of every writer. ("Margins" 70)

And, of course, it was Bartholomae and Petrosky who showed us how to involve students in the self-authorizing practices through which scholars create disciplines, a process essential to "inventing the university" and appropriating its discourse. Their curriculum proposed to show students how to "actively seek out the margins and aggressively poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university," how to write simultaneously from inside and outside the dominant discourse ("Facts" 305).

Nonetheless—and despite the widespread popularity of their curricular improvements over earlier, atomistic and far-less-contextualized versions of writing pedagogy, despite their perspicacity in understanding our collusion in students' marginal positions—Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts* did not transform students' position in the dominant discourse at the academy. Their approach better illuminated the source of academic discursive authority, but it did not disrupt the *practices* that construct that authority.

Elsewhere, I've specifically demonstrated why the transformation promised by Bartholomae and Petrosky's curriculum did not occur and explained how the political, institutional contexts of writing program and placement practices not only position every writer at the university but also undermine *any* curriculum's capacity to enable students (or us) to self-liberate from institutional inscriptions ("Reinventing"). I don't need to rehearse those arguments here. Instead, I hope to facilitate our recognition of a crucial condition of transformative pedagogy: it must initiate not just new writing assignments and/or new rhetorical positions, nor even new understanding of the power relations in our discourse and our discipline, but rather new *practices* in our profession. Because our discursive practices drive our disciplinary knowledge, de-stabilizing hegemonic conceptions of academic discourse requires re-vision of disciplinary practice within the academic

site(s) wherein our determinations of what constitutes academic discourse are most likely to be publicly staged and [self-]authorized.

In order to make clear this crucial point about the formative power of disciplinary practices, I turn to Evan Watkins' notion of academics' "compensatory function." Watkins argues that professors' primary labor is not simply to perform their own competence but also to evaluate that of their students. In essence Watkins' claim is this: while English professors' *concrete* labor might be writing articles, giving lectures, facilitating group work, or advising students, the *abstract* form of their labor is evaluation. This abstract labor is the form that gets circulated as cultural capital. Unfortunately, the circulation of our evaluations does not enforce the ideological values represented in our courses' content or in our positionality as professors; rather, the importance of the content of any of our specific English studies courses "exists at all insofar as it also functions to circulate grades" (19). In this latter capacity, Watkins contends, we serve the market economy and thus the status quo:

> For you don't report to the registrar that [your student John negotiated] . . . a revolutionary fusion of contradictory ethical claims . . . . You report that 60239 got a 3.8 in Engl 322, which in turn, in a couple of years, is then circulated to the personnel office at Boeing as 60239's prospective employer. (17-18)

Thus, Watkins argues, altering the content of the English studies courses we teach does not significantly subvert hegemonic values, for the cultural capital circulated from the classroom remains consistent with capitalist values.

Perhaps now we can more easily understand the difficulty inherent in effectively transforming existing power dynamics in academic discourse: disciplinary practice—grounded as it is in the values derived from the social organization of the institution—co-opts the subversive potential of the values derived from our ideological critique(s). In our practice as evaluators, we remain at the center of academic power relations, disciplined into a certain and substantive relationship to the language and methods of the university.

It's not surprising then that our effort to construct transformative writing pedagogy has had little disruptive effect on oppressive social values. Positioned teaching, for instance, has certainly revealed its proponents' political position(s) within our practice and thus made it possible for students to debunk the pretense of an "unbiased" composition teacher who professes a "natural" discourse exemplifying clarity and/or impartiality. However, this teaching method neither illuminates nor disturbs the institutional context within which the self-authorizing work of academic discourse takes place. Likewise, view-

ing "errors" as social negotiations between conflicting discourses has indeed altered how some students view the agency involved in their decisions to conform (or not) to the conventions of academic discourse. However, that perspective does not of itself significantly disrupt how we teachers perceive academic discourse; nor does it destabilize our hegemonic practices of evaluating student writing.

A Sharper Edge

My purpose here then is to extend that re-vision of pedagogy, to build on my earlier proposal of an alternative curriculum that "contextualizes the institutional practice of evaluating and placing writers in the university" and that consequently illuminates "for basic writers not only their position as writers in the university but also the position of non-basic writers, of honor students, and of the evaluators of writing in English courses" (62). First, I want to elaborate the method for my earlier suggestion that students "observe and record the language practices of academic groups" and then compare their observations with academics' (63); second, I want to evidence my earlier prediction that the strength of my proposed curricular approach is in "includ[ing] students in the process by which placement exam essays are evaluated [such that] they will be engaging in our practice as composition instructors" (74).

Let me begin by explaining briefly and in general terms what I see as the method for contextualizing the disciplinary practices of us experts on academic discourse—a group for whom evaluation is the most frequent practice. I ask students to participate in "mock" sessions[1] for grading Freshman Placement Exams. Equally suitable would be student participation in sessions for evaluating Writing Assessment Tests, Upper Division Proficiency Tests, Transfer Writing Assessment Tests, or any other institutionally-organized and holistically-graded exam whose purpose is to assign students to or exempt them from appropriate[d] writing locations within the university.

To support my argument that this approach will destabilize dominant discourse and practice, I ask you to consider that—in addition to placing students—these grading sessions have at least one other formative purpose: to calibrate instructors' notions of "unsatisfactory," "average," and "sophisticated" college level writing with the standards existent in specific departmental and institutional contexts. This staging of disciplinary wielding of power constitutes one of the very few instances of explicit discursive self-authorization performed in a more-or-less public setting wherein evaluators can be held immediately accountable, even if only to each other. Within this context, crucial institutional and disciplinary legacies are passed on, for here we specialists

tangibly identify the boundaries of discursive authority and our definitions of composition and academic discourse. In other words, our professional practice of holistically grading placement exams (especially as it involves graders from disciplines other than Composition Studies or English) provides the site wherein professors, by explicitly articulating their notions of "good writing," discover and/or re-assert their professional prerogative to authorize particular examples of academic writing and to denounce others. Thus, this context proves quite fruitful for student writers AND compositionists who want to examine, internalize, and/or critique the language practices of the university.

In some cases, students participating in this "mock" grading session may have already "flunked" or "passed" an exam prior to enrolling in the course which would require them to examine the context of placement exam evaluation; however, the purpose of students' studying and/or contributing to this context is not necessarily to better position themselves within our matrix of institutionally assigned placements. Rather, the purpose of including students in our evaluative practice is fourfold:

- to make explicit to students what their instructors see as "good" writing,
- to provide students the opportunity to analyze and critique the language system valued in composition courses and — some would argue — throughout the academy,
- to facilitate our recognizing the invisible [to us] ideologies of our own discursive practice, and
- to expose our evaluative practices to students' critique by staging evaluators' accountability for their [self-]authorizations of particular examples of academic discourse.

In other words, the purpose of including students in our practice should be to establish for students *and for us* the ways that English professors' evaluations of student writing are determined by their own social practice rather than by any transcendent or fixed standard. Professing otherwise is a mystification of our practice that delimits not just student writers but *all* writers in the institution, for it keeps us all in a dependent relationship to the hegemonic, foundational notions of our discipline and of the institution.

The brand of transformative pedagogy that I advocate here enables students to examine the ways in which authority is meted out in any language system and illuminates what Elbow describes as the "inherently problematic and perplexing" mystery of academic discourse: "It tries to peel away from messages the evidence of how those mes-

sages are situated at the center of personal, political, or cultural inter-est; its conventions tend toward the sound of reasonable, disinterested, perhaps even objective (shall I say it?) men" (141). Because of aca-demic discourse's inherent masking effect, an empowering and desta-bilizing writing pedagogy should reveal what's at stake for English teachers in the practice of teaching English; it must recognize that their self-authorization is essential to their definition of "good" writing in the academy. Developing multiple literacies and recognizing differ-ence alone do not confer this critical consciousness; neither does sim-ply studying the concept of discourse(s), noting the contextually-bound authority of texts and their authors, and negotiating one's own au-thority among those competing discourses. To enable critical conscious-ness in our students and destabilize their inscription in hegemonic and oppressive power relations, we should foster students' analysis of the context surrounding the relation of their writing to ours and to the missions of the institution AND insist on their participation in at least some of the multiple, disciplinary practices that sanction academic writing. Such activities would develop and sustain "a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university."

I call this collaborative process of knowledge-making and self-authorizing "inventing academic discourse." Crucial to this invention process is students' participation, for it empowers not just their critical consciousness but ours, destabilizes not just their inscription but our re-inscription in the academy's language and methods. In the process of generating new disciplinary/academic knowledge, students con-tribute an awareness that we as teacher/researchers often don't have and critically need: they can make "strange" what's "natural" for us. Like an ethnographer observing a foreign (to her) culture, a student can ask without pretense and with the genius of the uninitiated the same questions that seem clever when posed by sophisticated insiders who've spent careers "discovering" them, questions like "What's so ordinary about [your] ordinary language?" If our disciplinary prac-tice were to demand that we answer such questions without pretense, that we collude with non-initiates in our articulations of what consti-tutes good writing and thus in our invention of appropriate academic discourse, then our practice would require us to recognize the ideol-ogy informing our own commonplace knowledge and language. Such practice would surely de-center our insider vision.

Such practice would also enhance our local, "practical" knowl-edge, capitalizing on the theory-building power of what Steven North describes as "practitioner lore." According to some, such improvement is crucial to furthering our disciplinary project and improving teacher/researcher methodology. Patricia Harkin, for instance, contends that learning to capitalize on our teaching lore will reveal not just "ways of construing relations of relatedness to which our ideology has made us

blind" but also the methods by which disciplinary "strategies achieve coherence by shutting out or repressing the contradictions that have their source in history" (135). At issue in her revisionary view of the authority of teacher practice, Harkin believes, is "nothing less than getting the academy to change its understanding of knowledge production . . . [to] look first to ways we might adapt existing frameworks to help institutions learn to see lore produce knowledge" (135). Adapting the existing framework of placement essay evaluation procedures can facilitate new knowledge production, and it can disrupt the practice — evaluation — central to our inscription in hegemonic power relations.

Like Harkin, Susan Miller foretells the need for revisionary practices in order for composition theory to maintain its vitality. In her specific arguments for a methodology, Miller explains well the link between transformative pedagogy for students and transformative methods for the discipline:

> We will need systematically to examine the situations in which readers read specifically identifiable kinds of writing, including our own reading of student texts, so that readers' expectations, requirements, and cultural or idiosyncratic prejudices become visible to student writers. We will need to account for evaluations of writing not in terms of its meaning or correctness, nor by gauging its expressiveness, but by investigating the actual results that a specific piece of writing — however well or ill formed it may be — has when both intended and accidental readers read it. (79)

Because the specific instance of placement essay evaluation that I've described constructs students as "accidental" readers, their responses to those essays disrupt the readings of the intended audience and make visible that audience's expectations. The exercise I suggest further requires that we and students investigate "actual results" of specific pieces of writing. In order to resist co-optation by the values derived from institutional social order, however, even the kinds of investigations that Miller describes must also disrupt disciplinary practice.

My proposal for letting students in on those practices — sketchy though it may be — is one of the few that offers such decentering. It supplies at least some of what Miller calls for, namely, multiple perspectives on how members of the "intended" actual audience read student writing. It's a method that can demonstrate not just the existence of an Author/student binary, but also how that opposition works in the academy and how one might combat its effects. It initiates bi-lateral negotiations between students and teachers by making our evaluations of students' academic discourse — our practices and thus our

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authority—negotiable. Especially if and when students' evaluations actually "count" as legitimate scores in the placement essay grading process, it fosters students' theorizing about and evaluation of "our" language. Consequently, my proposed method can also improve the status of our own theorizing and better enable us to see ourselves in what *we* do.

Susan Miller argues that such vision is crucial to the future of composition theory, for as of yet "the object that is theorized in composition studies remains fairly opaque because it still resides in the unarticulated but indomitable categories of 'high' and 'low' that first defined all academic textual studies" (76). "In its current configurations," she continues,

> writing is a slippery, overdetermined signification. Its "authorship" results from resistances among competing and already articulated ideas, a writer's specific access and reaction to them, a specific motive and occasion for writing, and the constraints of language itself as a writer encounters them. Like government documents and some academic publications, a text may be written *to have been written*, not to record, develop, or express a thought, and not to be closely, or even casually, read. (79)

Despite our insistent and naïve professions to the contrary, students are usually well aware that we often require a text be written simply for it to have been written; likewise they all too rapidly notice if and when their written texts are not closely or even casually read.

Our students' persistent and consistent recognition of this situatedness of the texts we evaluate speaks of their pervasive and subversive discernment of discursive authority. In fact, conceptually, they may well be better equipped—because differently located—than we are to recognize the situated-ness of academic writing. As the next section demonstrates, it's sometimes uncanny how—given the chance to witness and then theorize about our discursive practices—student writers even at developmental levels can divine the theories of some of our most respected scholars.

How the Sharper Blade Cuts

In order to determine the effects of including students in the practices of evaluation and placement, I piloted this approach twice. I wanted evidence, of course, that such a project could help students realize, emulate, and critique those features of good writing that composition teachers look for. Though I didn't set out to discover how students' perspectives on my own and other teachers' evaluations

would affect my own practices of inventing academic discourse, that discovery plays a major role in what I see as the project's success.

But before describing those effects, let me contextualize my "experiment." During two different semesters of basic writing instruction — representing three sections of approximately twenty-five students each — I incorporated placement exam training sessions into the last month of the semester. I emulated as closely as possible the process for placing incoming, first-year students into a composition course appropriate to their writing ability. At the university where the students and I were located that process is called the FPE (Freshman Placement Exam) grading session. At the outset of the process, graders of the essay exam are introduced to a rubric which lists the characteristics of writing that correspond to each of the four possible holistic scores a grader can assign. Next comes a norming session during which the fifteen to twenty graders (usually, but not always, graduate teaching assistants) read specially selected sample essays, assign a tentative score to each (1 the lowest, 4 the highest), and then discuss aloud their justifications for each score. In this way, the graders calibrate before the next step of actually scoring hundreds of placement exams. Finally, the administrative staff on site computes the average of two graders' scores and then assigns the FPE writer to the composition course (honors, "regular," developmental) indicated. In certain situations (for instance, when the same essay receives the lowest and the highest possible score from two independent readers), the administrative staff requests a third reading of an essay.

These training sessions are very effective, I am told, because their holistic scores are "reliable," meaning that the graders generate very few 1/4 splits and that the course grades that the student writers ultimately receive almost always illustrate a "match" between the FPE-assigned course and students' writing abilities. Further, as an essential aspect of training first-year graduate students to be composition instructors, this calibration process promotes instructors' internalizing the standards of the department and — to a certain extent — of the discipline and the university. These are precisely the reasons why I chose to include this practice as an essential element of my first-year composition course.

In order to get to the point more quickly, I won't detail here my method for arranging the approximately month-long unit wherein I trained basic writing students to grade FPEs. (Those interested in the nuts and bolts can refer to Appendix A.) Instead, I'll simply list, in the chronological order of their distribution, the materials I provided for each student:

- the instructions, including the writing prompt, given to the students who took the Freshman Placement Exam (FPE),

- the rubric that explains criteria for each possible score,
- several sample student essays all written in response to one FPE prompt, including an essay that each student grader had written herself on the first day of class,
- access to the teacher-assigned scores on the sample essays (provided only *after* the student graders had assigned scores of their own),
- a synopsis of teacher comments on individual essays (again provided only after student graders had assigned their own scores),
- a questionnaire [Appendix B] which facilitated students' theorizing about the placement process and the nature of academic writing and to which student graders responded in their journals.

What I do want to detail for you here are those aspects of this teaching practice that were most engaging and useful, primarily from the students' point of view but also from mine.

One useful but not unexpected yield of the session was its evidence that the students had no trouble at all identifying the middle ground of "satisfactory" academic writing. Rarely, if ever, did their scores of "2" or "3" differ from the scores teachers assigned. I found it quite surprising, however, that students generated a plethora of 1/4 splits between their own and teachers' assessments. These splits occurred *only* on papers that the teacher-readers had perceived to be "honors" essays ("4") but that my students perceived as "developmental" ("1") essays. Such splits accounted for well over half of my students' responses to the scored honors essays.

The persistence of this discrepancy indicates a particularly rich resource for revealing teachers' inscription in and students' exclusion from a hidden cooperation of privilege and exclusion in academic discursive practices. And sure enough, our classroom discussion of these 1 / 4 splits made disturbingly clear to me the mysterious (to students) ideologies informing instructors' evaluations of "honors" level academic texts. Students' generally "common sense" and unanimous explanations justified the low scores they assigned to the essays that the teachers perceived as honors essays. As far as my students were concerned, essay writers who used movies or personal experiences or "opinions" to support their arguments were not writing good essays because they weren't relying on "facts." My students took particular issue with an essay written in response to a prompt for evidence to support the claim that feminism "still had far to go; " the writer substantiated that claim by using evidence from *Die Hard*. My students found the essay "stupid . . . because it just talked about movies and

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movies aren't real in the first place." The teachers, on the other hand, agreed that the writer's analysis of a popular movie had given clever and articulate evidence of persistent sexist attitudes in American culture.

Clearly, before encountering the views of the teacher-graders, my student-graders had *not* yet recognized that an academic writer's "authority is not established through his presence but through his . . . ability . . . to speak as a god-like source beyond the limitations of any particular social or historical moment" ("Inventing" 155). If they could not see the worth of that authority in another's essay, little wonder that they could not make in their own writing the "imperial gesture" essential to appropriating academic discourse. Neither did these students — as writers or evaluators — know how to "read" movies as texts available to be analyzed nor know that teachers might consider a movie's evidence "real."

To put this argument in other terms, I'll say that my students didn't recognize an important "subject position" available to them. "Purveyor and critic of pop culture's artifacts" is an inscription that we teachers recognize and generally favor. Lester Faigley has shown us several other, primarily self-reflective, expressive, and confessional subject positions that composition teachers tend to prefer. Like those other examples, the "Die Hard" essay's accounting for the pervasive sexism in the film inscribes a definitive subject position English professors often embody; it's disdain for the unsophisticated attitudes prevalent in popular (read "low") culture's texts also critiques "common" attitudes that many of my basic writing students hold. Yet, in reading through students' eyes the essay writer's scorn (condescension even), I discover what Faigley did in reading his samples of teacher-defined excellence in student writing:

> I'm struck by how similar student and teacher sound . . . I'm also struck by how . . . the truths 'exposed' and 'revealed' in the essay are a series of recognitions for a college English teacher. (124-5)

These recognitions, Faigley contends, constitute teacher-defined "authentic voice." As we all know, that definitive characteristic of "authentic voice" crops up in most grading rubrics and is usually described as a factor that distinguishes "excellent" from "good" or from "average" examples of student writing.

Trying to decipher this concept of "genuine voice" bewildered my students more than any other task involved in learning the terms on the grading rubric. Among themselves, they defined the term as "the quality that made you sure what someone's opinion was, the way that you could hear the personality of the writer." They wondered

why teachers would want someone to have this quality. For them the clearest example of a "genuine" or "natural" voice spoke in an essay in which the writer was, they said, "obviously a jerk because he showed he was a sexist and didn't think [i.e., realize] that female teachers would be reading *and grading* his paper." For them, this writer had an opinion—occupied a subject position—clearly unacceptable to English teachers; they apparently assumed, then, that a writer with an easily identifiable "voice" was one who had no good sense of her audience. Thus, to them, having "voice" meant "letting your opinions slip out" (especially your "negative" opinions); sounding "natural" meant "sounding like yourself," a reverberation that, they also assumed, English teachers would NOT appreciate. Common-sensical and unsophisticated as they may be, these assessments of our attitudes toward "genuine voice" are disturbingly accurate: English teachers would definitely not, I'd wager, author-ize the subject position of "uncritical and sincere appreciator of Bruce Willis movies and the attitudes they display," at least not publicly.

Now imagine, if you will, a grading session wherein instructors like you and students like these must mediate these conflicting definitions and criteria for excellence. Granted, such a session would be less efficient—much less—than ones wherein all graders are trained writing instructors and/or new graduate teaching assistants. But the calibration that would occur during the training would help mediate the discrepancies in teachers' and students' negotiations of meaning and the criteria for excellence. For my students, I did little if anything to "justify" the teachers' opinions of excellence (or lack) in the essays. I did, however, tell them that I had been one of the teacher/graders myself, and I often did "report" what teachers had said about an essay during our grading session when I also reported the scores that the teachers had assigned. In addition, I regularly made comments something like this: "Yes, I can see what you mean that this concept of 'genuine' voice is confusing. I don't really know why teachers call it that. I can see how your definition makes sense too."

Since that time, however, their comments have prompted me to search for more sophisticated theories explaining why "genuine" is a term we teachers often attach to voice. In that prompting lies some of students' capacity to invent academic discourse for me; from their perspectives emerges the power of this contact zone of professional practice. Granted, explicit purchase in this contact zone between students and teachers does not of itself equalize the disproportionate power relations, but it does de-stabilize them to some extent. More importantly, it demystifies some of our ideological assumptions because—at the very least—it holds us accountable for them. Can we deny the value in such mediations?

If you think we can, then consider the students' perspectives

on this process we underwent. In responding to my queries about the worth of the unit in our class, students *unanimously* agreed that it was helpful, most wished we'd done this work at the beginning rather than at the end of the semester, and many wanted to have spent more time on this section. Michelle's evaluation echoed many others':

> I am glad we did this unit because I think that until students become aware of this they are in the dark and left out of what is really necessary to succeed as a writer at the university.

Amy's explanation of the value of our study speaks most to me:

> I felt this unit was beneficial because all my teachers before made a 'game' out of writing and trying to figure out what they wanted on paper. It always seemed like I figured the secret out when it was too late. With this unit we went directly to what is expected and wanted and studied why.

Including students in the process of placement and evaluation has further value because it improves their writing in several ways. First, it facilitates the metacognitive awareness that makes for better revision, helps students to travel the terrain of global issues like planning and organizing and to avoid the tourist traps of excessive attention to grammar errors and other localized oddities. My students' reflections on their work with the placement process demonstrates that they were developing this awareness. For instance, when I asked them to compare their own FPE essays (written on the first day of our semester together and in response to the same prompt and time constraints as the essays they later "graded") with the other student essays they graded, Karen reflected,

> I realize/remember now that I did not have a plan for my essay . . . a student who can manipulate a topic so that he can incorporate what he knows into an essay is a student with 'good writing' ability.

Angie realized that

> The essays I thought were 1's were [really] 4's because of their creativity. Grammar wasn't most important.

Our study also improved students' writing abilities by revealing to them the complexity of the writing task, a task inextricably linked to making meaning and to negotiating the constraints of a particular context. For example, Lorena claimed that

The most surprising thing I learned was that I could manipulate a topic question and use it to my advantage; which I never thought of.

Jeff reflected that

The essay I wrote is almost identical to the other essay I read; they both lack what is needed to be placed in English 101 [the "regular" as opposed to the developmental course] and that is style, creativity and imagination. We both wrote what we thought the teacher expected us to write and that is the basic boring facts and statistics on feminism [the topic of the FPE] .... My assignment to this class isn't just involved in writing; it's also involved with thinking and imagination.

As these comments indicate, our study of the practices of evaluating placement exams also facilitated students' seeing that and how academic writing complicates the commonplace:

An honors placement is one that is complex enough to go over my head. . . . [T]his particular writer rather than taking the subject as one large spectrum, like I would have chosen to do, picked one instance or situation which she was close to or related with and shared this experience with his/her readers .... When I said essay #x was boring because she was telling us things we already knew, I realized my essay is just the same. (Jeanette)

Interestingly, many students' explanations of what constitutes good academic writing parallel the concepts and even the wording of Bartholomae's descriptions of what basic writers need to learn. For illustration, consider these students' written responses to my questions: "What kinds of rules does the group [of people who use academic discourse] have about what students should or shouldn't say?" and "How does the group keep outsiders out?"

If a student can make a teacher think or view a topic from a different perspective, the student has succeeded. (Lorena)

I think this "group" [teachers] is implying not to be stereotypical or be one sided on debatable issues. . . . The one whose voice isn't respected is the one who's stereotypical. (Karen)

The group thinks that a writer's personality and style should

be unique . . . [but] most outsiders don't know what is meant by "mature content" [a term on the grading rubric]. (Gladys)

Similarly, students' answers to my question "Who has authority to speak in this academic discourse community?" exemplify Bartholomae's definitions of academic specialization:

> The kind of writing that the university wants is writing that shows a lot of knowledge in one area not a lot of knowledge on everything. (Troy)

Finally, and perhaps most important as evidence of the interventionary edge of my proposed approach to basic writing instruction, my students' responses to the practice reveal their growing awareness of the power relations that pervade academic discourse. They began to recognize the kinds of gestures that authorize our discourse. They realized that

> The person who is most qualified to talk or have a say-so is the person who has the confidence to talk either because he or she has an experience or knows vocabulary or has the right conception or belief . . . . The voice that is not likely to be respected is a person's voice who has little experiences in talking, has limited vocabulary, has limited exposure to certain concepts and beliefs. This can be the kind of person the group is trying to shut out. This can be also a person who isn't familiar to this kind of language use and refrained to [use it] and as a result chose to be silenced in which he or she has no control over the language use the group uses. (Gladys)

As Gladys intimates in her recognition that the "voice" NOT respected is the one with only limited exposure to "certain concepts and beliefs," these basic writing students are certainly capable of critique of the systemic practices that keep them in their place. They see how teachers' practice (their uses rather than their theories) of academic discourse and discursive authority belies their typically-professed, egalitarian values and beliefs. Gladys' and other students' critiques demonstrate their nascent realization that the subject position(s) that teachers recognize and often embody is elitist, self-authorized, and often self-congratulatory. Consider these responses to my request that students theorize about the ways members of the academy use language as a means for uncovering the values and beliefs academics might have:

> They also value honesty and uniqueness, an individualist. I think their view of the world is one that's very competitive.

Their specialized language gives them a label—a group of individuals with a place in society, a career and status. Being that they view the world as competitive, they play in the game. They use this language because it sets them apart. (Michelle)

This group probably views the world as a dull and fairly uneducated place. The effect on "mainstream" people who hear these people use this language is a sort of hostility. "Why do they think they're so good" may be the question. (Angie)

In total, these students' responses indicate at least three advantages to this proposed approach to writing instruction: students find it useful; it facilitates their understanding and production of the kind of writing that the academy expects of them; and it accords them the opportunity to reflect on and theorize about the nature of language and power relations in the university. Thus, it supports students' learning how to "poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university," to see that successful writers'—indeed, even teachers'—authority is of their own construction.

What I see as another essential aspect of this approach to writing instruction is that it facilitates *our* learning, not just students'. It helps us to utilize practitioner "lore" to de-center the hegemonic authority of our discursive practices. It capitalizes on that "post-disciplinary," experiential, we-use-it-because-it-works local knowledge. It sanctions our classrooms as a site for expanding the horizons of our disciplinary knowledge and for resisting institutional appropriation of liberatory pedagogy. Inviting students to collaborate in our evaluation procedures disturbs the status quo: since, as Evan Watkins' contends, evaluations are the cultural capital—the abstract labor—that English professors circulate into capitalist society, disrupting the production of that surplus capital is definitely one means by which we might perpetuate our counter-hegemonic project and effect change.

Furthermore, if—as Bizzell believes—the process of changing a discourse "begins when change in the material world impinges more frequently or urgently than before," then this student intervention in professors' evaluative practice is fruitful because it provides just the material change needed to reconstruct the "institutional structure of the discipline" (216). Students' deconstructive analyses of how our academic language works present me—and, I hope, you too—with insights; they can challenge us to recognize our discursive inscriptions and our positions not as gods or wizards but simply as local examples of professionals whose

specialized language gives them a label—a group of individuals with a place in society, a career and status. Being that they

view the world as competitive, they play in the game. They use this language because it sets them apart. (Gladys)

The pedagogical approach that I've proposed here provides a way for not only our students but also us professors of English to know and locate our places as writers in the institution, for us professors to step to the side of our own practice and keep a watchful eye on our often unconscious or inadvertent choices about where to locate ourselves and, by implication, our students.

Van Slyck argues, in "Repositioning Ourselves in the Contact Zone," that it's we teachers who must

> help students see that unreflective group consensus does not constitute an ethical position and that sometimes becoming an individual means standing apart from one's community and questioning its practices. (156)

I see an additional responsibility, and that is to allow students to help *us* see the benefit of questioning our practices. As compositionists, as members of a community committed to teaching for social change, we can facilitate students' and therefore our own reflection on our ethical positions and fulfill our objective of intervention in hegemonic power relations. Students' critique and reflection on academic discourse can bring us the "largeness of mind" that Clifford Geertz advocates:

> . . . [I]t is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes. (16)

As Geertz entreats anthropologists, I entreat us to remember that our mission "is to keep reteaching this fugitive truth" (16).

Note

1. In the "mock" sessions I have conducted, students evaluated actual placement essays generated in earlier testing sessions and then compared their scores to the "actual" scores and comments assigned by authorized graders. Hence, my students' evaluations didn't "count" in the sense that their scores did not assign any physical person to a material site. As you shall see, my students clearly realized that their scores weren't "real." Nonetheless, they were eager to participate in a practice that illuminated how teachers learn the criteria for judging

writing and earn their positions as authorized graders; having to assume responsibility for assigning their peers to a specific writing location may well make students even more eager to participate. I firmly believe that many — maybe even most — of these students are quite capable of success in "norming" practices and thus of earning their own positions as authorized graders. Of course, permitting students' evaluations to have such material effect in grading sessions would more powerfully and politically authorize them and their critiques, more effectively de-center the hegemonic authority of the evaluation process. No institutional reality that I've witnessed has yet permitted that degree of intervention. The potential for such reality inspires my persistence.

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Appendix I

Outline for my Basic Writing Unit (approximately 4 weeks) wherein students emulate the process of evaluating Freshmen Placement Exams (FPEs)

I. Preparation of Materials

Using a prompt that had been retired from actual FPE exam settings, I asked the instructors of two sections each of English 100 (basic writing first year composition course), 101 ("mainstream" first year composition course), and 103 (honors composition course) to have their students write responses to the prompt. All students were given the same time period (30 minutes) and instructions given in an actual FPE exam. A group of four experienced FPE graders scored the approximately 150 exams generated. Each exam was assigned at least two scores; I then read and scored all exams myself. Thus, I had access to at least three teacher evaluations for each of the sample FPE exams.

II. Initial In-Class Preparation

On the first day of English 100 class, students wrote a diagnostic essay in response to the same prompt and with the same instructions as those given to the students who wrote the materials described above. I told them that I would read their essays to make sure that they had been placed appropriately and that we would be referring to their essays later on during the semester.

III. In-Class Work with FPE Exams

During the last month of English 100, we spent about four weeks on a unit dedicated to examining "academic discourse." During this time, we read sections of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, in particular sections about the "academic club" and academic writing (Chapters 6 and 7). In addition, we enacted the graders' "calibration" process as follows:

a. Students read and studied the rubric for grading FPEs. In addition, they read eight FPE essays, evaluated and assigned a holistic grade to each, and wrote their justifications for the scores they gave.

b. During class, we all talked about the scores the students had assigned and compared the students' scores with the instructors'. We discussed at length any discrepancies between the students' evaluations and the instructors' and reviewed carefully the justifications each group gave for the scores.

c. Each student read two other placement exams assigned only to her

and then also read the one she herself had written on the first day of class. Students wrote about the similarities and differences in their exams and the others they scored and about the ways that their writing had improved since the beginning of the semester; we discussed their responses to these assignments.

d. Students wrote a letter to someone they knew back at home who might be going to college soon. In the letter, students were to explain *in their own language* what it is that they think English teachers are looking for when they score placement exams.

e. Students wrote out answers to the questions on a handout I gave them. The questions require students to think about the language that teachers at the university use, to theorize about the nature of academic discourse, and to reflect on their experiences during the process of grading FPEs. (See Appendix II)

Appendix II

Questionnaire Basic Writing Students Completed at the end of the FPE Unit

By reading the rubric for grading Freshman Placement Exams and by seeing what kinds of scores the teachers gave certain exams, you've had the opportunity in the last few days to examine the language that teachers use. Mike Rose calls this group (teachers and students who do well in these teachers' eyes) the "academic club." Other people (like the teachers themselves) call their language "academic discourse" and say that academic discourse is the language that people use at the university. What I want you to do is think and write about these questions. By doing this, you will be "theorizing" (creating a philosophy or hypothesis) about the nature of "academic discourse."

1. What kind of "rules" does this group (i.e. teachers who grade these exams and students who do well on them) have about what students should or shouldn't say? Are there specific words or topics that the group considers forbidden? Does the group have any special words that only insiders understand? What words? What phrases? Do they ever use these special words as a "secret code" that's meant to keep outsiders out? How would you define these words/phrases for "outsiders"?

2. Who is most qualified to talk or have a say-so, according to this group's "rules" for using language? In other words, whose voice is

respected the most? What will that voice sound like? Whose voice is not respected in the group? What kind of person or sounds will the group try to shut out? Why? How does a person get the authority to speak in this group?

3. Based on the language that people in this group use, what other things can we notice that they also value? What sort of view of the world (a safe place, a hostile place, a dull place, a competitive place, etc.) does this group have? How does the group members' specialized language reflect their lifestyles and beliefs? Why do you think they use this language? What effect(s) does this language use have on more "mainstream" people?

4. Do you think *all* teachers in the university prefer the kind of language that's valued in the placement exam grading sessions? Why or why not? What teachers in specific might think differently? What kind of language or writing would those teachers value? If all teachers at the university don't agree, then why would English teachers be the ones who are in charge of this exam and of shaping the way you write?

5. What was the most surprising thing that you heard, learned, realized, read while we were working with the freshman placement exam essays and materials?

6. What was the most useful thing you learned while reading the placement exam rubric and the sample placement essays? Why is it useful?

7. Are you glad we did this unit in our class? Why or why not? If you were teaching new English 100 students, would you do this exercise? Would you use more class time, less time, or about the same amount of time to discuss these placement exam essays? What would you add or leave out of the lesson?