

# BASIC WRITING AND THE ISSUE OF CORRECTNESS, OR, WHAT TO DO WITH "MIXED" FORMS OF ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

*ABSTRACT: Basic writing instruction has focused on the problem of how to enable under-prepared college students to write correct academic discourse. This definition of basic writing work assumes that there is a single stable entity called "academic discourse." If this was ever true, it is no longer. Published scholarship in many fields may now take the form of discourses in which the traditional academic mixes with non-academic discourses. These mixed discourses emerge as scholars wish to take full advantage of all the discursive resources at their disposal, reflecting the extent to which more and more people are culturally mixed. These discourses also enable people to do academic work that could be done no other way. These discourses should not be called "hybrid," perhaps, because the term is at once too essentializing and too suggestive of independent "parent" strands. But we should find ways to encourage them in our teaching.*

"Correctness" is a perennial issue in basic writing instruction. As I have recently suggested in "Hybrid Academic Discourses: What, Why, How" (1999), the historical development of basic writing instruction can be seen in three phases. The first, dating to about twenty years ago, depicted as cognitively deficient those students who could not produce academic writing that allowed them to succeed in school, and recommended as a remedy the strict inculcation of traditional academic discourse. "Correctness" was a relatively unproblematic issue here; it seemed relatively obvious that "basic writers" were those who could not write Standard English correctly and who were unfamiliar with academic discourse forms. For example, Andrea Lunsford's 1980 essay "The Content of Basic Writers' Essays" treats the reliance of basic writers upon personal experience in their arguments as one sign of their arrest at an early stage of Piagetian or Vygotskian cognitive development.

The second phase, with which my own earlier work is associ-

---

*Patricia Bizzell is Professor of English at the College of the Holy Cross, where she teaches first-year composition, American literature, and rhetoric. She has directed the Writers Workshop, a peer tutoring facility; the Writing Across the Curriculum Program; the College Honors Program; and presently, the English Honors Program. Among her publications is the fifth edition of The Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Writing, co-authored with Bruce Herzberg and Nedra Reynolds (February 2000).*

ated, attacked this characterization of struggling students because it ignored their real abilities with language. Second-phase scholars aimed to initiate students into traditional academic discourse in a way that remained respectful of their home languages and cognitive abilities. An example is my 1986 essay "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?", in which basic writers' difficulties are attributed primarily to clashes between their home world views and the academic world view, and their home discourse communities' resources are acknowledged. Be it noted, however, that here, too, the issue is still "correctness." That is, basic writers are still defined by the seemingly obvious fact that they do not produce Standard English and traditional academic discourse, and this situation is treated as a problem that needs to be remedied. Indeed, it could be argued that in spite of theoretical nuances debated over the years, the field of basic writing instruction still relies upon relatively obvious features of student writing as a basis for sorting students into basic writing courses. We quickly read a large number of writing samples, as the sorting process often goes, and the ones exhibiting many features of non-Standard English and non-academic discourse forms land their authors in basic writing classes, where their writing "problems" are supposed to be addressed.

In my "Hybrid Academic Discourses" essay cited above, I argue for a significant change in our orientation toward correctness. I try to launch a third phase in basic writing pedagogy, in which the unitary nature of traditional academic discourse as a target for composition teaching is called into question, on the basis of the proliferation in contemporary academic writing of forms that do not follow traditional criteria. If we look at published work in the field of composition studies, for example, such as that of Keith Gilyard, Geneva Smitherman, or Victor Villanueva, whose book *Bootstraps* (1993) I discuss in detail in the "Hybrid Academic Discourses" essay, we will see that Standard English and traditional academic discourse are no longer the only discursive resources used for serious intellectual work. These scholars, and others, are publishing work in which academic and non-academic discourses are mixed. For example, many of them deliberately draw on personal experience for illustrations in their arguments, a strategy that got students labeled as cognitively deficient in Lunsford's earlier essay (a label, by the way, that I am sure Lunsford would no longer endorse—witness her recent work on the mixed or "mestiza" rhetoric of Gloria Anzaldúa, cited below). I do not want to rehearse the entire argument of my "Hybrid Academic Discourses" essay here, but let me simply point out that I conclude by asserting that to prepare students now for success in school, it may no longer be necessary to inculcate traditional academic discourse. Rather, what is needed is more help for students in experimenting with discourse forms that mix the academic and non-academic, or what I have called "hybrid" forms of aca-

democratic discourse.

Now I would like to explore some refinements of the position sketched in that essay. In particular, I now question whether the new "mixed" forms of academic discourse in which I am interested should be termed "hybrids." My first major area of critique focuses on the reified notion of academic discourse underlying the "hybrid" concept, and its function in obscuring institutional dynamics of power. In order to conceptualize the hybridization of discourse from two distinct "parents," I have provided a taxonomy of the traits of traditional academic discourse. Doing so, however, seems to suggest that traditional academic discourse was a fixed and unchanging entity until very recently. This is certainly not the case, and one does not need to go back very far to discover that fact, as I myself noted in a retrospective analysis of the ground-breaking 1971 collection *The Prospect of Rhetoric* (1997). I point, for example, to Alton Becker's characterization of the subject in his essay in that volume as "'man in a modern . . . society,' one of whose annoyingly ubiquitous information sources is his wife" (42). This male chauvinist reference would probably be unacceptable in scholarly writing today. In short, it isn't difficult to demonstrate that academic discourse has continuously evolved over time.

Moreover, research by Michelle Hall Kells among English-Spanish bilinguals shows why it is dangerous to imply that academic discourse has not changed much over time. Such a presentation tends to give academic discourse an air of superiority that all too readily plays into linguistic minority students' tendency to see the academy's formal language as "more logical" or "purer" than their home dialects — "dialect misconceptions" that lead to "linguistic shame," as Kells describes it, which impedes learning and school success (137).

It might be more accurate to say that what has remained constant is the privileged social position of whatever currently counts as academic discourse. Teachers use their own preferred linguistic standards in functioning as gatekeepers to higher education, limiting access along already established lines of class, race, and gender privilege. David Bartholomae has shown that sorting students according to their language-using practices produces a "tidy house" within the academy, seeming to distribute students according to measurable linguistic features — those seemingly obvious issues of "correctness" I noted earlier. Yet as he argues, this common practice, on which the very existence of basic writing courses is based, too often ignores or suppresses the real linguistic resources that all students bring to school. Indeed, arguments that school success depends primarily on students' ability to reproduce the currently preferred form of academic discourse divert attention from the more significant social forces that strongly influence the unequal distribution of economic opportunity and political power in this country. Elspeth Stuckey has analyzed this dynamic in adult lit-

eracy programs in her book *The Violence of Literacy*, and Tom Fox has explained how it operates at the college level in his book *Defending Access*.

This is not to say, however, that I don't think new forms of academic discourse have begun to emerge in the last few decades. I do think changes have been happening, and I think that they may be characterized roughly in the ways that I present them in my "Hybrid Academic Discourses" essay, away from more individualistic, agonistic, and skeptical forms and toward forms more openly subjective, collaborative, and culturally diverse in allusions. The problems to which I have just been pointing aim to correct the idea that such change itself is a new phenomenon and also the related idea that school success, economic opportunity and political power are distributed solely on the basis of linguistic practices or "correctness."

At the same time, I want to note a second major area of critique of the term "hybrid" for the new kinds of academic discourse. The term is at once too abstract and too concrete. It is borrowed from postcolonial theory, and the problems with its abstraction are well analyzed in Deepika Bahri's work on applications of postcolonial theory to composition studies. I was attracted to the term "hybrid" because it upsets the dichotomy established in my earlier work between academic discourse and students' home discourses, and thus implies that discursive and cultural boundaries are more blurred and, perhaps because of that blurring, more easily crossed than had been thought in so-called current-traditional, error-hunting writing instruction. But Bahri points out:

If the concept of hybridity is useful in undoing binaries and approaching the complexities of transnationalism, as many would find in composition studies, I would warn that it also tends to avoid the question of location because it suggests a zone of nowhere-ness, and a people afloat in a weightless ether of ahistoricity. . . . The scores of underclass immigrants in Anglo-America and illegal border-crossers not only cannot "make themselves comfortable" with the same ease that other postcolonials have but also know that a border-crossing can be dangerous and potentially fatal. The deeply racial and class segregated nature of our cities, moreover, should also alert us to the intransigent borders within, rather than invoking the more glamorous cultural borders that metropolitan postcolonial celebrities [such as Homi Bhabha and Salman Rushdie] invoke. (39)

Bahri's argument here also links to my earlier point about the error of assuming that social inequalities can all be attributed to different lin-

guistic and discursive practices. I will have more to say in a moment about the need Bahri indicates to address the local and specific circumstances of our pedagogical situations.

At the same time as the concept of “hybrid” gets in trouble for being too abstract, however, it can also be critiqued for being too concrete. “Hybrid,” after all, is a biological metaphor, as in such statements as, the mule is a hybrid of the donkey and the horse. Using a biological metaphor for discourse risks essentializing people’s language use, as if to imply that, for example, the linguistic features of Black English Vernacular are genetically programmed into all people of African descent. I don’t entirely neglect this point in my “Hybrid Academic Discourses” essay, concluding with the specific statement that “I don’t think we should encourage [students] to think that each one has a unique, ‘authentic-voice’ sort of hybrid discourse that he or she must discover” (20). I cite bell hooks against such essentializing pedagogy, when hooks talks about her own experience in a college writing class:

Whenever I read a poem written in the particular dialect of southern black speech, the teacher and fellow students would praise me for using my “true,” authentic voice, and encouraged me to develop this “voice,” to write more of these poems. From the onset this troubled me. Such comments seemed to mask racial biases about what my authentic voice would or should be. . . . I had come to understand black poets as being capable of speaking in many voices, that the Dunbar of a poem written in dialect was no more or less authentic than the Dunbar writing a sonnet. Yet it was listening to black musicians like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and later John Coltrane that impressed upon [my] consciousness a sense of versatility — they played all kinds of music, had multiple voices. So it was with poetry. (quoted in Bizzell 1999, 20)

And so it is with academic discourse, as bell hooks’ own scholarly writing demonstrates.

There is a larger problem here, however, and that is the nature of the variant forms that are coming into academic discourse such as hooks’. The biological metaphor of hybridity implies that what mixes in the new forms, as I noted earlier, are two distinct “parents,” that is, distinct, well defined and culturally independent linguistic and discursive practices. It is not at all clear that this is the case, however. It may be possible to trace certain locutions in bell hooks’ work to Black English Vernacular, which is a distinct dialect of English; and in looking at Victor Villanueva’s work, we can notice which words are English and which are Spanish. It is not so easy, on the other hand, to

trace to Puerto Rican culture some of the discursive features that I identify in his work. Is “offhand refutation” or “appropriative history” distinctly Latino (14)? This would be hard to prove. Similarly, when Andrea Lunsford discusses “mestiza rhetoric” with Gloria Anzaldúa (1998), it appears that while some features of Anzaldúa’s prose may be traced to her racially and linguistically mixed background, other features can be identified no more precisely than to note that they are not traditional in academic discourse or that they are familiar from other writing by women.

In short, what is crucially left out of my “Hybrid Academic Discourses” analysis is the profound cultural mixing that has already occurred in the United States. Even students who are the first members of their families or their communities to attend college come with already mixed linguistic and discursive resources, as Scott Lyons explains in discussing the narratives of American Indian students:

To my mixedblood mind, the stories of Indian students are clearly *heteroglossic*—produced against, within, and in tandem with the grand narratives of contemporary American life and culture . . . . There is a European in every Indian and an Indian in every “white”—each relationship positioned differently—and the two are not together by choice. It is this kind of *contact heteroglossia* that has been repressed by educators and theorists for centuries, and that Indian students not only know, but also use daily—we can all learn from them in this respect. (88-89, emphasis in original)

Lyons argues forcefully for the need for Indian students to use Indian discursive resources in their college writing, but at the same time, he shows how very difficult it would be to tease out the Indian strands in academic writing that nevertheless may be clearly recognized as “non-traditional,” variant or new.

Moreover, Lyons points in passing to another important aspect of mixing that many of us have experienced in our classrooms today, and that is the “contact heteroglossia,” to use his term, that can be seen in the writing of European American students. Basic writing teachers know that it is a mistake to expect something like traditional academic discourse from all the students who appear racially white or who self-identify as white. Experimentation with new discourse forms certainly cannot be attributed to any essentialized linguistic heritage in the case of these students, although I may have misleadingly implied that new forms of academic discourse have emerged mainly because “more people who are not white males of the upper social classes are gaining access to post-secondary education and to positions as post-secondary teachers and scholars” (11). Yes, increased access has happened, and a

wide range of published scholarship employs new forms of academic discourse, as I have noted, but it is misleading to imply that new forms have emerged simply to make new students and scholars feel more comfortable. The new forms are being used by everyone, not only by students and scholars from under-represented social groups, and the reason is not far to seek. I should have emphasized this point more strongly:

Perhaps these new discourses are gaining ground, too, because they enable new kinds of intellectual work. I want to emphasize that I see these hybrid forms not simply as more comfortable or more congenial but as allowing their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse. . . . These hybrid discourses enable scholarship to take account of new variables, to explore new methods, and to communicate findings in new venues, including broader reading publics than the academic. (11-12)

What I describe here, after all, should be a major reason why academic discourse continually evolves, as I argued earlier that it does.

A major question remaining is how composition pedagogy should evolve in turn. On this head I want to return to Bahri's point, reinforced also by Lyons and Kells, that successful pedagogies must take local circumstances into account. Here, I recommend engaging students in reading and writing about "a cultural crux of our day" that is "carefully derived from local conditions" (17). This approach would engage students in studying and producing texts from what Mary Louise Pratt calls a "contact zone," the very antithesis of the "zone of nowhere-ness" against which Bahri inveighs, and the source of what Lyons terms "contact heteroglossia." Pratt describes the "contact zone" this way:

I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. (34)

Using this concept to suggest directions for composition pedagogy would not, presumably, lead us to ignore the structural inequalities to which Bahri points in her critique of the concept of border-crossing, since Pratt highlights "asymmetrical relations of power" and their influence on discursive practices. For suggestions on how to develop such pedagogical materials, see my "Hybrid Academic Discourses" essay, or my earlier piece on contact zones. Also, Bruce Herzberg and

I have co-authored a textbook, *Negotiating Difference*, which collects materials from American contact zones. Of course, it should be said that I somewhat contradict my own principles by publishing such a book. For pedagogical materials to be truly local, they probably should be developed on site, and in collaboration with the students one has in front of one in any particular semester. But I am hoping that some teachers will luckily find in this textbook materials relevant to their own local situations. An important point to be made here, however, is that if basic writing pedagogy is to shift to fostering variant forms of academic discourse, I believe that we will still be obliged to try to encourage these variant forms to be done well. If traditional "correctness" is no longer the issue, student skill and application still will be important. "rhetorical dexterity" managing the voices.

One further point on which I could perhaps be questioned is my avowed aim to help students succeed in school, a perennial goal of basic writing instruction that, I believe, we would do well to retain. One could argue that this is merely a reformist, and not a revolutionary, goal, and hence will do little to correct the glaring social inequalities that should gall the heart of anyone committed to the ideals of American democracy. If newly evolved composition pedagogies help to democratize access to the academy, however, their ultimate consequences might be more far-reaching. Democratizing access may help along the changes in academic discourse described in this essay, thereby serving social justice—or at least, so I may be allowed to hope.

### Works Cited

- Bahri, Deepika. "Terms of Engagement: Postcolonialism, Transnationalism, and Composition Studies." *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 18 (1998): 29-44.
- Bartholomae, David. "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum." *Journal of Basic Writing* 12 (Spring 1993): 4-21.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "Contact Zones and English Studies." *College English* 56 (1994): 163-69.
- — —. "Hybrid Academic Discourses: What, Why, How." *Composition Studies* 27 (Fall 1999): 7-21.
- — —. "The Prospect of Rhetorical Agency." In *Making and Unmaking the Prospects for Rhetoric*. Theresa Enos, ed. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1997.
- — —. "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?" *College Composition and Communication* 37 (October 1986): 294-301.
- — —, and Bruce Herzberg. *Negotiating Difference: Cultural Case Studies for Composition*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1996.

- Fox, Tom. *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1999.
- Kells, Michelle Hall. "Leveling the Linguistic Playing Field in First-Year Composition." In *Attending to the Margins: Writing, Researching, and Teaching on the Front Lines*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1999.
- Lunsford, Andrea. "The Content of Basic Writers' Essays." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (October 1980): 278-290.
- — —, and Gloria Anzaldúa. "Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric: Gloria Anzaldúa on Composition and Postcoloniality." *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 18 (1998): 1-27.
- Lyons, Scott. "A Captivity Narrative: Indians, Mixedbloods, and 'White' Academe." In *Outbursts in Academe: Multiculturalism and Other Sources of Conflict*. Kathleen Dixon, ed. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1998.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* 91 (1991): 33-40.
- Stuckey, J. Elspeth. *The Violence of Literacy*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1991.