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THE CONVENTIONS OF EXPOSITORY WRITING

A number of composition researchers in the past few years have come to the conclusion that students cannot think. Not the day-to-day thinking of ordinary life—it is admitted our students can get along there. But the abstract formulations and analytic conceptualization required for academic discourse are said to be beyond them.

As the basis for such assumptions, composition researchers have turned to the cognitive theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, both of whom developed schemes to describe the growth of concept formation in young children. According to these schemes, children move from sensory-motor operations to concrete operations to higher and higher levels of abstracting and synthesizing, until, at the age of puberty (ages 11 to 13), they reach the stage when they can carry out sophisticated problem-solving operations.

The problem, as some see it, is that our students have never attained the abilities that Piaget and Vygotsky predict will be achieved by early adolescence. Thus, Annette Bradford questions why “a large number of college freshmen have not acquired an ability which theorists link with ages eleven through thirteen” (19). Andrea Lunsford asserts that basic writers “have not attained that level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions or conceptions” (38). Elaine O. Lees finds in

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© Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1986

student writing "an absence of generalization, an apparent inability to go beyond talk of specific incidents and experiences to conclusions based on them" (145). And Marilyn Goldberg speaks of "the emptiness of [student] generalizations and the poverty of their supporting knowledge" (39).

I would like to take a step back from such categorical assumptions of inability and inadequacy. It is all too easy to conclude that those who do not do, or who do not wish to do, what we seem to be able to do are deficient and underdeveloped. But, more important, such assumptions about reasoning and its role in discourse are not borne out by experience. In this paper I wish to challenge the notion that students, including basic writers, cannot think abstractly. First, I will briefly question the underlying assumptions behind the deficit model; second, I will look closely at student writing samples to show that students are not inept thinkers but simply insufficiently familiar with the conventions of expository discourse; and, last, I will apply these insights to a prominent piece of research which purports to demonstrate that students are poor thinkers.

In concluding that students are cognitively undeveloped, composition researchers are assuming that the conventions of argumentation characteristic of expository discourse are absolute and universal. They take for granted both that the analytic patterns of academic discourse are equivalent to modes of thought and that the chains of reasoning characteristic of expository writing are the only forms of analytic thought. As the work of Walter Ong and others have shown, however, in other cultures other forms of argumentation can be viewed as persuasive (*Interfaces of the Word and Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*). Ong has found that primitive and nonliterate people are capable of developing intensely rich and complex forms of language based on oral traditions (forms based on rhapsodic patterns which employ ritualistic expressions, epithets, and proverbs).

Ong believes that modern society, enveloped as it is by the mass media, often exhibits a kind of secondary orality. As an illustration, Ong describes a teacher asking a class of Black inner-city students what they think of Nixon's actions in Cambodia, and being told by one student, "I wouldn't vote for that Turkey. He raised his own salary" ("Literacy and Orality" 4). Ong points out that, annoying as this comment may have been to the teacher, it shows the ability of the student to think analytically in accordance with the conventions of an oral culture which places primary emphasis on the *deeper issues of life*: "The highly oral student handled the instructor's query as a rhetorical example,

as a concrete instance referring to something at a higher, more generalized level of abstraction" (4).

What Ong's analysis is pointing to, I think, is that college freshmen are not retarded at an early stage of thought development but that, in learning to write, they are falling back on other, less academically oriented forms of reasoning. David Bartholomae makes a similar point about the syntactic difficulties of basic writers:

If we begin [by studying basic writing], we will recognize at once that "basic" does not mean simple or childlike. These are beginning writers, to be sure, but they are not writers who need to learn to use language. They are writers who need to learn to command a particular variety of language—the language of a written, academic discourse—and a particular variety of language use—writing itself. The writing of a basic writer can be shown to be an approximation of conventional written discourse; it is a peculiar and idiosyncratic version of a highly conventional type, but the relation between the approximate and the conventional forms is not the same as the relation between the writing, say, of a 7th grader and the writing of a college freshman . . . [basic writing] is a variety of writing, not writing with fewer parts or more rudimentary constituents. It is not evidence of arrested cognitive development, or unruly or unpredictable language use (254).

When basic writers try to argue, reason, develop ideas in academic discourse, they have the same difficulties that Bartholomae notes concerning syntactic fluency. Teachers reading the essays of these writers find the ideas messy, undefined, undeveloped; the writing seems overly general, or at the other extreme, too specific and personal. The points seem foolish or immature or unrealized.

These difficulties are attributed to a lack of ability on the parts of students to reason, to think analytically. However, the patterns of reasoning we have come to expect in academic writing are not inherent forms of thinking but conventional modes. These forms are so familiar that we conceive of them as natural and inevitable. Our students bringing other, more colloquial forms of reasoning to their writing, are also convinced of the superiority of academic argumentation. They struggle to employ it in their essays but they have learned the systems imperfectly so their attempts seem inadequate and immature.

It would help immeasurably if we could understand exactly what the conventions of argument in academic discourse really

are. Unfortunately, such understanding is difficult to achieve because conventions, by their very nature, are instinctual and automatic. As Douglas Park has pointed out, writers are usually not aware of the conventions that govern a piece of writing; more often it is merely a matter of "being on sure ground," of feeling comfortable with one's voice, and knowing intuitively that a piece is proceeding in accordance with one's own and the readers' expectations (254).

Once we look at the patterns of argumentation used by our students, it becomes clear that whatever their backgrounds may be, in school they are trying to employ the usual modes of reasoning of academic discourse—trying but not totally succeeding. The writing is characterized by conventional patterns that are imperfectly used and only marginally realized. Interestingly, the ideas themselves often seem reasonable enough but connections between ideas are often weak, generalizations needed to link minor and major ideas are often missing, supporting explanations may be only vaguely suggested or even entirely omitted. This lack of adherence to characteristic patterns of argumentation is evident not only in the development of ideas but also in the use of tone or voice.

For example, in an essay titled "My Strengths as a Student," a student in one of my basic writing classes wrote:

The only way I can accomplish what I want to in life is to have strength as a student. I want to do some kind of technical work with my hand, and if I don't finish my degree, I'll never accomplish what I set out to do.

With all the changes I went through with when I came to Register, I feel showed some strength of determination. My Job didn't help matters in fact they add to the confusion. I was told I would get a transfer and at the last minute they couldn't do it. I was left running around trying to get all the classes I needed to be a full-time student.

Now I am in school and I feel I can finish once and fore all if I keep my head in the books which shouldn't be too hard.

Aside from errors in spelling and syntax, or, more probably, partly as a result of these, the passages seemed scattered and irrational. While paragraphs one and three can be said to make some sense, paragraph two seems to have only a vague kind of connection to the other two—something about registration, something about a promised transfer (job transfer?) that did not come through. Readers might ask: How do the sentences on registration relate to the topic? Why is the transfer mentioned?

Actually, the sentences on registration are about the confusion and difficulty of registering for the first time (a confusion experienced by many freshmen). For this student the difficulties of registering were compounded by his not having received a promised job transfer that would have provided better working hours and placed him closer to the college. The argument my student is constructing, then, is that he has already shown great strength as a student—first, because he successfully negotiated the difficulties of registration and, second, because he got through these difficulties in spite of a hampering job situation.

As the ideas appear in the original passages, they seem run together, connections are tenuous, a very important piece of information (what the job transfer meant) is omitted. But the passage is not lacking in sense. In fact, once translated it makes fine sense and, once understood, forms a convincing argument. The first sentence in paragraph two offers the proper generalization for the argument (what I have already gone through to be a student shows that I have the “strength of determination” to succeed). The examples that follow properly support this point. This student simply lacks a sense of how arguments in expository discourse are characteristically developed, how a chain of reasoning is joined and filled in.

One convention of expository writing is that the audience must always be told more than it would need to be told in conversation. Mina Shaughnessy, exploring this difference between speech and writing, pointed out that speech, “looping back and forth between speakers, offering chances for groping and backing up and even hiding, leaving room for the language of hands and faces, of pitch and pauses” is “generous” in comparison to writing which requires more formal supports in accordance with “the rules of evidence” (238). Writers like my student, more attuned to the conventions of speech than writing, often omit information which a listener could supply from context, from tone or gesture, or from other conversational clues. Basic writers need to be helped to understand the limitations of the reading audience, the difficulties of making sense of text without contextual clues.

Even this analysis needs to be qualified, however, for it implies that the amount of information supplied by the writer is determined by the reader’s need to know. Actually, writers often supply much more information than readers actually need and convention permits that they do so. Take, for example, any feature article in the *New York Times* on the city’s beleaguered subway system which, as a matter of course, will describe in detail all the

unspeakable inconveniences that New Yorkers suffer daily. The newspaper's readers do not need this information; they know it only too well. These anecdotes are used not to provide information, but to evoke common feelings of anger and disgust. The extent to which a writer of expository discourse must draw out connections and provide background information, then, is not necessarily determined by the reader's need for knowledge.

In class, topics are often discussed at length by teachers and students before students write on them. No matter how much discussion takes place, however, convention requires that a writer provide some amount of background explanation for the reader even if it is unnecessary. Teachers familiar with the conventions of academic writing often feel that students are poor thinkers when they do not supply such background, forgetting that logic, in this case, is actually on the students' side. For example, a basic writing college class of mine was once asked to argue for or against a writing proficiency examination that had been proposed for the next year. As background, I described the plan for the examination to my students in detail. Nevertheless, I was very surprised when I received a whole set of essays that took for granted that the reader would know all about the proficiency test and its use. My students, as the following introductory paragraph shows, did not realize that convention required that they set the scene by giving known background information:

In my opinion, we the students of Queens Community College don't need this proposed requirement. We have already taken enough exams from the beginning to determine our proficiency in writing. Those who failed the placements tests, were penalized already by taken remedial courses. It would unfairly penalize then again.

The lack of explanation in this paragraph interestingly contrasts with the work of a second, more savvy freshman writer in another college, who was asked to evaluate the effects of an exam already in place:

There are many exams that students are given throughout their lives in order to evaluate their abilities and weaknesses. One such test is the proficiency exam in writing, which must be passed in order to graduate from Hofstra University. Many feel that this requirement should be done away with, but I do not agree. While this test may have its faults, it does measure a students ability to reason logically, put their ideas on paper, and also shows their level of vocabulary.

The first writer was totally unaware that the proficiency examination had to be briefly described in her paper, that the context had to be given. The second student is aware of the conventions and does describe the examination, but, interestingly, he does so with a certain degree of stiffness. He has not yet worked out ways to include unneeded information gracefully.

Aside from logical connections and the use of background information, academic writers also must be concerned with making clear the generalizations upon which their arguments hinge. In less stringent circumstances, for example in conversation, a point can be made swiftly in passing, without a detailed explanation of how it relates to the main theme. In expository writing, however, explicit statements are needed to relate supports to basic propositions. For example, in a passage taken from another paper on the topic of the proposed proficiency examination, the writer suggests a relevant well-reasoned point, but fails to offer a generalization to show how her point relates to her claim that proficiency examinations are an unfair measure of a person's writing ability:

Another point that I will like to make is that what if a person with an A average somehow does not do well on the essay and a person with a D average happens to do the essay well, it would be wrong not to give a degree to the A average person who work so hard to achieve an A average and get the degree and not get it and the D average to get the degree and not even had work that hard with the rest of the work.

The syntax is somewhat difficult to unravel, but the implied point is clear. Using an example, the student argues that the grade on a proficiency examination reflects achievement on one test whereas an overall grade point average reflects achievement in many courses over several years. Therefore, overall GPA is a fairer measure of writing ability and of a student's qualifications to graduate than a proficiency test. The point makes sense, it supports the writer's basic contention and it is neither unreasonable nor simplistic. The student, however, fails to express it explicitly. Basic writers often need help with this important step. They are not aware that convention requires that examples and supports be tied to generalizations with statements that explicitly explain the relationships between them. The student is aware of this relationship or she could not have come up with the example. She needs merely to be told about and given practice with the convention.

An opposite problem, generalization used without an appro-

ropriate elaboration, often appears as well. The following passage in which a student suggests ways of improving registration procedures is an example of this type:

To improve registration procedures they should have all the cards, computers, teachers, chairmen, etc. all in one room. In doing this they will avoid having students running all over the place.

The counselors are a great help but they really can't spend much time with each student. They should also have many more lines of teachers at each booth.

The suggestions for improving registration seem sensible. However, the student is not explaining or supporting his arguments. He is merely stating his ideas without backing them up. Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor have pointed out that cause and effect arguments are supported by the use of a ruling assumption called "agency." Since members of a society are likely to share a number of casual assumptions about human and physical nature, the extent to which the writer must articulate and explain the role of agency in argument is often a matter of judgment:

. . . whether or not we articulate agency in a casual argument depends largely on audience. For example, if we argue that a significant cause of teenage vandalism is violence on TV, the agency between these two is imitation. Since most audiences will readily accept imitation as a human motive, we would not have to stop and argue for it. But if we claimed that wearing a mouth plate can improve athletic performance (*Sports Illustrated*, 2 June 1980), we will certainly have to explain agency (25).

One might say that to my student, the improvements he is suggesting are so obvious that they represent the kinds of casual connections that people in shared cultures can take for granted. The student needs to be made aware that the conventions of academic discourse require that he support or somehow detail his assertions. The extent to which propositions must be explained and supported, however, is a matter of judgment, since no argument can ever be said to be "proved" in this fashion, no matter how many examples or supports are provided.

In addition to lacking facility with the conventional strategies for reasoning and arguing, many students are also unsure about voice and tone. Related to this inability, I think, is the common perception of teachers that much student writing is too personal, too highly confessional and emotional. This perception, while it

seems to be about the treatment of the topic, often turns out to be about voice. Students are approaching topics in what is felt to be an unacademic and overly emotional way. For example, a student of mine, several years ago, wrote the following passages on Jimmy Carter, who was President at the time:

Our new president Jimmy Carter a peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia. My prediction is that frankly he is like the rest of those so-called Presidents down deep inside, corrupt, sinister, indignant, bombastic, malice.

Jimmy Carter is just a figment of speech not a figurehead, he really is Big Business.

Most academic readers would thoroughly disapprove of this passage. Admittedly, the arguments are not subtle, but advanced in a more measured tone, they could be perceived as more persuasive. For example, I think another one of my students, making similar points in the passages below, would be judged to be arguing at a higher level:

Lets look at Jimmy Carter as he was before the election as the governor of Georgia. Down in the south he owned a peanut plantation and became one of the most wealthiest men in the state, yet he plans to pass laws to help the common man, this doesn't seem possible, why wouldn't he pass laws to help his own business, does it make sense to help the common man and hurt himself, or to hurt friends who are in big business. If this question is not on your mind it should be if you take what happens in the government seriously.

There is a tacit agreement among readers of academic discourse that we live in a world of reason, understanding, and for the most part, good intentions. When a writer uses a tone that is consistent with this view—that is, measured, reasonable, non-accusatory—the reader feels confident and will consider the writer's arguments. However, if the writer resorts to bombast or emotional display, his or her ideas will be suspect.

Another convention of expository discourse is that self-interest alone is an unacceptable rationale for an argument. Even if self-interest is the real reason for an assumed stance, the writer must pretend otherwise. Equally important, the writer must signal that he or she is aware of the value system of the reader. For example, one of my students arguing against the proposed proficiency examination displays a fatal lack of awareness of his reader's value system:

In regard to the proposed writing proficiency exam, I fail to see why students already enrolled at this college should be subjected to it. The failure of this exam would deny a student his or her degree. I consider this highly unfair, because the students already attending this college would have a chance of coming out with nothing.

If the primary audience for the paper had been other students in the class, the writer's contention probably would have been accepted. However, the primary audience was actually to be the class's teacher, and for a teacher the major reason for attending college would likely be to acquire an education, not a degree. If the writers show themselves to be ignorant of the value system of their audience, their ideas are likely to be viewed as lacking substance. If they acknowledge the belief system of their audience, even if these beliefs are totally rejected, then their ideas can be taken more seriously.

In the following paper we see the arguments of a student who has learned to take the assumptions of her readers into account. Interestingly, this writer seems to have the same values as the student who wrote the previous paper. However, she has learned to mask this somewhat to appear more persuasive to an academic audience:

In regard to the proficiency examination, I do believe it is very strong in principal. We are in college to earn a degree. So I do think we should work a bit harder to get a wider and voluminous vocabulary and come out to the world with greater knowledge. However, this exam requires a great deal of perfection, "fewer than 5 errors in grammar and spelling" has a big meaning in a 500 word essay. However, if the rules or procedures could be changed to the official decision of a smaller essay and classwork it would be easier to accept as a better rule. I suggest it not take place next spring. We should wait and have another view of this matter.

The more writers show that they are aware of the value schemes of their readers, the more they can appeal to their audience's reasonableness.

The proper use of convention assures readers that they are being led through an argument by an educated and initiated person. Such use signals that the writer understands the tacit contract between reader and writer and can be trusted to carry it out. However, conventions are not the same as thought or

intellect. Those who are unfamiliar with expository conventions cannot be assumed to be lacking in subtlety or understanding.

As an interesting contrast to the ideas presented here, we can look at an article by Janice H. Hays, "The Development of Discursive Maturity in College Writers." Hays, pointing to the work of Piaget and others on the cognitive development of children, suggests that college students have difficulty in writing because they have not successfully negotiated the move from lower to higher stages of cognitive development. Using a scheme developed by William G. Perry, Jr., Hays suggests that the ability to conceptualize develops in nine stages—from the lowest in which "students perceive the world in dualistic terms of right and wrong, good and bad" to the highest in which students realize that "knowledge is contingent and all values relative" (128).

According to Hays, Perry's scale traces the evolution from "simple and concrete to complex, abstract thinking" (130). Hays uses student samples to show that those identified by her as poor writers also score very low on Perry's scale; in other words, Hays is asserting that poor writers have not developed the ability to think abstractly and conceptually. Looking at the same student samples, however, I wish to propose an alternate conclusion: freshmen writers certainly can think abstractly but they have not yet learned to present their ideas in accordance with conventional expectations.

First, Hays found that many of her freshman writers had a great deal of difficulty in responding to her assignment guidelines. The assignment asked students to pretend to be on a panel addressing an audience of community representatives on the subject of either abortion or marijuana; later, these talks were to appear in a local paper. Hays asserts that few of the writers showed any awareness that they were writing for a particular kind of audience, thus indicating low levels of cognitive ability. I maintain, however, that the assignment is quite complicated, involving both a speaking and writing context, neither of which corresponds to the real context, writing for a teacher who will be evaluating each essay. Students having difficulty with such a complex task need not be assumed to be at a lower stage of development, but merely less familiar with the very subtle academic conventions that would govern such a situation.

In Hays' scheme, discursive maturity is said to be attained when students create texts with "multiple perspectives," when they can argue from a more qualified and measured position that takes opinions other than their own into account. Judged by

Perry's scale, Hays identifies the following essay as being at a very low level of maturity:

. . . . If a woman has been raped or sexually abused or has been the victim of incest the woman should be able to decide on an abortion or not. There should be no legal hassles.

. . . I feel the woman who has control over her body should be able to make her own moral decisions of whether to have an abortion or not. There shouldn't be all this hassle with all these other feelings when it is the woman's own decision

. . . . (132).

Viewed from the perspective I offer, the student can be seen to be stating her views clearly and persuasively. If there is a problem with the writing, it is not with the ideas or the student's lack of understanding of opposing positions (in fact, Hays quotes an earlier passage in which the writer mentions that pro-life factions believe that abortion is equivalent to taking a human life). Rather, the writer lacks politeness. If it is a convention of expository discourse that the world is a place of reasonableness and good intentions, then emotional outbursts, even somewhat mild ones, will certainly seem out of place. What is needed here is more development of the author's generalizations, in a more measured tone, with the elimination of words like "hassle," which signal the reader that the writer is unaware of the vocabulary conventions of academic writing.

In another example from Hays' article, the following passage on the issue of marijuana is given as another instance of simplistic reasoning:

The Declaration of Independence states that all people are created equally and that this is a free country. The question is, is it? . . . it seems that the government is dictating what we can and cannot do. Instead of hiring policemen to chase after pushers they should be working to capture criminals (134).

In my view, the passage is making two relatively significant and persuasive points that should have been separated and developed—first, that marijuana laws might well be considered an infringement on other basic rights to freedom and privacy and, second, that the enforcement of such laws requires the expenditure of great numbers of resources that might better be employed in controlling other, more serious forms of crime. Actually, both arguments could be considered old standbys in the marijuana

debate and both have been used extensively in published articles. The problem with this passage is not with the ideas themselves but, instead, with the conventions of exposition, voice, and tone.

Overall, my use of Hays' article is to suggest that we should look more carefully at our judgments of student reasoning. Hays is suggesting that students do not have sufficient cognitive maturity to argue successfully in academic discourse. I am suggesting that our students have the ability to reason and think analytically, but that they lack a sense of how to apply this ability, lack a sense of how the conventions of written academic discourse must be used in order for readers to take their arguments seriously.

I think we should reconsider some of the conclusions that composition researchers are fast reaching about our students' lack of cognitive maturity. Such assumptions are not helpful; they lead to a lessening of insight and they are demeaning. Teachers must become more adept at reading the essays of their students with understanding so that they can show their students how to acquire the skills they need to make their arguments seem persuasive to their readers.

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