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## RHETORICAL COMMUNITIES, THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT, AND BASIC WRITING

In a recent issue of *College English*, there appeared an article which opened with the following paragraph:

Teaching ESL composition in the university is a challenge—to our skill as teachers, to our creativity, our patience, our sensitivity, and our ability to interpret. Because of this it can be an exciting challenge, and not just the drudgery of myriad corrections. We accept an assignment to teach English composition to students whose native language is not English; very likely it is not even a language which uses our alphabet. We are expected to teach organization, rhetorical skills, graceful style, and argumentation to students most of whom have never learned these skills even in their native languages, who write outlandish, if charming, sentences and who still need help on the most basic elements of English. They may never have heard of Mozart, they may be convinced that the United States has the equivalent of the KGB because it has a “secret service,” and they may speak English only in their English class. But they may also be the brightest collection of students we have ever had in one classroom and may be better educated and more motivated than any other group of students to whom we have ever had to teach subject-verb agreement. (Oster 66)

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The article proceeds to report on the case of the Arabic-speaking student who gradually learned to write American academic essays. What fascinates me about this particular paragraph is its tone. One could imagine the author writing the same thing about a Black student twenty years ago or a Latino student ten years ago; were the writer a man even at the beginning of this century, about a woman. The tone of condescension about the student's past reminds me of expressed attitudes of past centuries or decades that we have come to abhor. It appears safe today for United States teachers to make such remarks about international students to United States audiences. Yet I would question whether such an attitude is either based on knowledge of other educational systems and their rhetorical standards or produces an atmosphere in which teacher and student can work well together. In this paper, I shall deal with the first issue and touch lightly on the second.

During the course of five years' research for the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA) which has examined the writing of students from fifteen countries in their native language, I have come to see that there exists within each culture or society at least one, if not several, "rhetorical communities." A counterpart to the interpretive communities of Stanley Fish (*Is There a Text?*)

Instruction in any discipline is acculturation, or the bringing of the student into the "interpretive community" of the discipline. And there is evidence that each discipline is also a "rhetorical community," which is to say a field with certain norms, expectations, and conventions with respect to writing. One can clearly see the differences among disciplines if one looks at the scholarly journals, even though language courses (being taught by humanistically trained teachers) often imply that the style of literary research is applicable to all other fields. Although any article has a beginning, a middle, and an end, the physical format will vary according to discipline as will the placement of certain kinds of material. In the humanities, the "review of research" comes either at the very beginning or, as is often the case, sprinkled throughout the text. In the social sciences, the review of research clearly is the second section in the article. In the sciences it occupies a minor role if it is there at all. Other obvious norms particular to disciplines exist in footnote style, in the use of external comment to the thesis, and the like. (Sometimes these norms are unknown to teachers of composition who therefore often do not adequately prepare their students for later work in other fields.)

If rhetorical communities can be defined by discipline, with

disciplines exerting their force across languages so that a scientific paper in Finland resembles a scientific paper in Chile, can we also say of less specialized writing that there are national rhetorical communities? From the very beginning, work on the IEA Study of Written Composition this question was pursued (Purves and Takala).

The idea of national styles of modes of writing is not a new one. Since the 1960s there has been an interest in "contrastive rhetoric," the study of differences in patterns of writing and organization. Most of that research, however, has examined the prose of writers learning a second language (Kaplan). Some studies have looked at literary styles as they change across geographical or temporal boundaries, but the IEA study provides a way of pursuing contrastive rhetoric using a systematically drawn sample of writing from an "average" population writing in the language of instruction.

In conducting this study, the first problem was to create a standardized set of descriptors that could be used for a cross-cultural look at writing in its relation to national style or national rhetorical communities. As an initial step, samples of essays were drawn in 1980 from secondary school students in Australia, England, Finland, Ivory Coast, Italy, Israel, Japan, Nigeria, New Zealand, Scotland, Thailand, and the United States. The students were generally able students from one or two classes. They were asked to write in class on the topic "My Native Town," a topic selected to be as nondirective as possible. If not written in English, the compositions were translated from the original language, the translator being asked to retain the style and flavor of the original and the translations being checked by bilingual teachers for fidelity to the original. If one were to examine the whole group of essays, one would notice a striking difference between countries and a striking similarity within countries. The following essays from Finland and Australia are to a certain extent exemplary of some of these differences: they have been selected as "typical" of a set of essays from one or two classes in each country (whether we are seeing class effects or national effects remains to be seen, although the whole Finnish sample came from two classes some 500km. apart—one rural, one urban).

#### Finland

##### My Home Country

My home village is Petajavesi which is situated in central Finland. Petajavesi has good connections by road to Keuruu,

Jyvaskyla, Multia and UUrainen. Petajevsi is a small church village with 4000 inhabitants. The people of Petajavesi have clean nature and waters, two beautiful churches, the new and the old, the older church has received much admiration and fame even from afar in the world. A little to the side of the center there is the old Lemettila farm where every now and then in the summer tourists come to see the old-fashioned house and the emotional values held within it.

Modern times are seen also in Petajavesi, one can buy almost anything in the stores of which there are more than ten. The Recreation Hall which was completed a few years ago, has facilities for meetings and for sports and a library. There are two schools in the church village, the lower level and the upper level which also includes high school. Among places for further education, let us mention the School of Home Industry in Petajavesi. Speaking of industry, Petajavesi has its own bakery, shoe factory, plastic plant and a free-time clothing factory which is being built.

There are not enough jobs, but this new factory needs many female workers and it might improve the employment situation in Petajavesi.

There are also opportunities for hobbies, there are many different kinds of clubs and societies, a new skating rink, sports field, ski tracks and two sports halls.

## Australia

### The Place Where I Was Born

The road in which I was born is still lined by the Norfolk Island pines of my childhood. Sixteen years has thinned the rows considerably, but far more evident is the mark that time has left on the house. The old fir tree that once dominated the front garden, has since made way for a rose garden, and the iron gates that had at one time been so good to swing on, now stood, rusting on their hinges, badly in need of oil and a coat of paint. Creeper now grows over the house, to such an extent that it covers the gutters, whilst the concrete driveway that had been laid long before my arrival, is now cracked and uneven with moss growing between the slabs of concrete. Such is the place where I was born.

Childhood memories paint a different picture; the house was still young and in its prime, with the noise of a growing family to cover that of the cars outside. In the dead of night

the ocean could be heard, pounding the rocks half a mile away. On a windy night the salty air would penetrate inside the house, and the smell would linger on throughout the next day.

The salt air is still apparent today, and the house murmurs of childhood noise. But the grass has grown long, and plans to widen the road threaten even the pines. But the ocean can still be heard, pounding the rocks half a mile away.

Clearly one needs to find some way of describing these differences and similarities as well as of providing a framework by which they could be compared as to quality. Carroll (1960) used the repertory grid technique and factor analysis to determine what aspects of prose readers noticed. He found six factors: 1) good-bad, 2) personal-impersonal, 3) ornamented-plain, 4) abstract-concrete, 5) serious-humorous, and 6) characterizing-narrating (or descriptive-narrative). Carroll's raters mingled evaluative and descriptive categories but, as he argues, factors 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 can be supported by evidence for particular aspects of the text.

The analysis of essays on "My Native Town" from Australia, England, Finland, Ivory Coast, Italy, Israel, Japan, Nigeria, Scotland, Thailand, and the United States suggests that some of Carroll's factors were noted by three independent judges who sought to describe the dimensions of the differences they noted:

*Personal-Impersonal.* This factor depends primarily on the frequency of references in the text to the writer's thoughts and feelings about the subject.

*Ornamented-Plain.* This factor may also be defined as "figurative-literal" and alludes to the amount of metaphor and other figures of speech in the text.

*Abstract-Concrete.* This factor is defined in terms of the amount of specific information, details, or references in the text.

Two of Carroll's factors, humorous-serious and characterizing-narrating did not appear in our analysis: the first because this factor contains an evaluative dimension; the second because Carroll's characterizing-narrating factor appears to apply primarily to texts other than the kind called for by the assignment which allows such modes as exposition or argument, though it is related to the two other factors that were identified in the essay analysis.

*Single-Multiple.* This factor refers to whether the text focuses on a single main point or is otherwise delimited, or whether it treats of several related topics or appears to contain a number of diverse points around a central theme.

*Propositional-Appositional.* This factor (not unlike Glenn's [1981] abstractive-associative) refers to its pattern of coherence to the types of connectives that hold the main propositions of the text together. A propositional pattern uses such structures as the hypothetical (if-then), cause-effect, comparison-contrast, and classification-definition. An appositional pattern may use a temporal or narrative structure, a spatial or descriptive structure, an associational structure, or an additive structure (an accumulation of ands), and it often omits connectives and appears digressive.

Clearly, compositions can be classified according to such a system, which was also successfully applied to a number of compositions on the topic "What is a friend?" If the classifications using these factors are stable within each country (as was the case), one might characterize the compositions on "My Native Town" from the ten countries as in Figure 1 (*such characterizations cannot yet be seen as definitive of national styles but as illustrative of the coding system*). Such a characterization must be seen as descriptive rather than evaluative. If a country's compositions on several topics were rated consistently (e.g., Australia—highly personal, figurative, single, and propositional; Finland—impersonal, plain, multiple and appositional), curriculum makers and teachers in that country might inquire whether such a style is to be desired or valued. The fact that the compositions come from "good" students suggests that these students have learned and are applying the norms of their rhetorical community. The question remains as to whether the virtues of each composition is desired. The purpose of the IEA study is to raise that issue, not to prescribe a set of values for all countries.

In the main IEA study, now going on, the actual compositions may produce descriptive data about ways that students have of responding to different tasks. The tasks used in the study are drawn from a variety of cells within the domain of school writing (Figure 2). The initial study of stylistic differences was limited to an expository-descriptive domain, but from the preliminary sample of compositions drawn from other domains, some additional dimensions of stylistic variation emerge.

For example, one set of tasks is designed to elicit what many

**Figure 1**

F A C T O R

	Personal	Ornamental	Abstract	Single	Logical
<u>Country</u>					
Australia	High	High	Low	High	Low
England	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Low
Federal Republic of Germany	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
Finland	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Israel	High	Medium	Low	High	High
Italy	High	High	High	High	High
Ivory Coast	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Low
Japan	High	Low	High	High	Medium
Netherlands	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
New Zealand	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low
Nigeria	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Scotland	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Thailand	High	High	Medium	Medium	Low
United States	Low	Low	Low	Medium	High

call functional writing, that is the writing of notes and letters in specific contexts—such as a letter of application or a note to the head of the school postponing an appointment. From the latter task come two examples (both translated) which illustrate a clear difference in approach:

Mr. Principal!

I would hereby like to inform you that I regret to be unable to attend our agreed appointment at 2 o'clock due to an urgent private matter. It is the funeral of a distant relative of which I have only recently been informed. I hope that you will understand my situation.

Sincerely,

**Figure 2**  
THE DOMAIN OF WRITING AND SCHOOL WRITING

Cognitive Processing		REPRODUCE		ORGANIZE/REORGANIZE	INVENT/GENERATE
		Facts	Ideas		
Dominant attention/purpose	Primary Content Audience			Events Visual images, facts, mental states, ideas	Ideas, mental states, alternative worlds
To learn (metalingual)	Self			X	
To convey emotions, feelings (emotive)	Self Others			X	X
To inform (referential)	Others			X	X
To convince/persuade (connative)	Others			X	X
To entertain, delight, please (poetic)	Others				X
To keep in touch (phatic)	Others				
PRIMARY MODE OF DISCOURSE		DOCUMENTATIVE DISCOURSE		CONSTATIVE DISCOURSE Narrative Explanatory	EXPLORATORY DISCOURSE Interpretive Literary (Expository/Argumentative)

Nonshaded areas include the primary cells of school writing instruction. An X indicates a cell included in the IEA Study of Written Composition.



Mrs. Headmistress:

Very respected madam, I write you to apologize myself for being unable to go to your office at the time you asked me to since something unexpected happened at home.

I will go to your office early tomorrow if you think it is appropriate like this, to give you the corresponding explanations.

With thanks,

At this point, identifying the country of origin might be misleading because the sample from which these examples come was drawn to illustrate a range of performance rather than typicality. Nonetheless, inspection of the samples from the countries represented by these two lectures indicates that the uniform practice in the first was to be rather direct and laconic, and in the second to be highly apologetic and almost obsequious. Certainly the second focuses more on the feelings of the reader and the first on the message of the writer. Such a pattern of differences also appears in a letter of application for a job written by students from the two countries. The pattern reflects the value differences of the countries of Hofstede's (1980), power-distance index.

To take another example, here are two compositions from two other countries in response to a task calling for a reflective composition on the generation gap (again both are translations):

Many young people of today think that it is difficult to talk to and understand middle-aged people.

How you have grown! What a good time you have. I only want to say that in my time . . .

When I was smaller that was my conception of older people. Perhaps it seems to be a narrow view but it was all one heard when grandparents came to visit. My generalization that all older people were the same, can depend upon that I did not come into contact with so many people from the older generation. I always thought that it was rather tiring when relatives came for a visit, because it meant that you were to sit outside and talk and be pleasant. Actually you wanted to be out on the grass and play football or skip with pals.

When I grew older and to a certain extent more mature I suffered from my childhood conception of older people. Now when I wanted contact and wanted to hear how it was earlier

then I had extremely difficult to get that mutual confidence which is necessary for a pleasant conversation. When I talk to an older person today I have a certain fear that it will be the same for me as I felt for them when I was smaller. In spite of this I have a much better contact with my grandparents than I had before. I regard them as any other ordinary people (apart from a certain reverence that you nevertheless feel for their age). Only a few months ago I have come closer to an older person than I ever have been before. My grandmother got cancer during the Christmas vacation. This was and is terribly awful, especially at the beginning before one understood the implication of the whole thing but one should of course see the positive side of everything that happens on this earth. The positive side is that my grandmother and I have become much closer to one another. Anyway I experience it like that. In and with that she can speak so openly about her illness and its outcome so she had something to talk about at the beginning. Seems terrible but it was a marvelous experience anyhow. Now we can talk about everything under the sun from love problems to finances. It is however rather sad that something like this should have to happen so that I should "learn" to talk to and understand older people.

This composition takes a personal note and is opinionated or emotional in addressing the topic. The writer uses personal experience to support the argument. The composition does consider various aspects of the subject and finds that the matter is not one of simple good or bad. The ending is a bit abrupt, but one might well imagine that the pressure of time forced a quick concluding sentence. The writer could have added a great many more examples without damaging the essay.

### Adolescents and Conversations, Manners Toward Middle-Age People

Teenagers are hot tempered, hard headed unteachable: They like to take a risk; are not considerate. They have problems. Adults are fussy, grumbling, irritable and they like to preach. Sometimes they like to use authority. Teenagers and middle-age people, thus, seem to move in the opposite direction. Their habits are incompatible. Age differences between these two groups of people is another cause for the problem.

Modern teenagers often refuse advice and preaching from others. It is hard to bring these two groups of people together. To familiarize teenagers with adults, we have to start at an early age and within the family. Because family is the first society of children. They will learn valuable things from families; from talking to manners, respects, and etiquettes. Parents with willing docile kids will find it easy to teach them also. But when they grow up, being in the teenage stage, the parents, will find it difficult to teach them. Teenagers reject adults as their enemies. Adults are frightening devils.

They do not want to get advice from adults. When they have no advice from adults, their actions often lack good ideas. They take actions on no reasons. This causes a lot of problems. At the end, adults are in turmoil.

Nowadays it is rare to find any teenagers who would like to see and consult with adults concerning education, finance, peer selection, or responsibilities. This is because adults often use authority, like to set up regulations and are too obsolete. Teenagers lack confidence in adults. They look at adults as having out of date ideas, living in a different era. Thus the teaching is not quite satisfactory. As a consequence, teenagers might turn to delinquency.

Modern teenagers should listen to advice from adults since they have good intentions. They consider us their off-spring. We should realize and think that we are growing up everyday. Such a matter is nothing if we are to be good leaders, have responsibility and are ready to give advice to off-spring in years to come. We should pay attention to adults now before there will be no adults to pay attention to.

This translated composition is certainly nicely written with its parallel introduction and its use of imagery. The composition is less personal than the first and more dispassionate. But its argument progresses in a circular fashion, repeating the sense of the first paragraph in the second, third, and fourth. It is more appositional and the first more propositional, but the second is a closed form to which little could be added, while the first is open and both expandable and contractable.

As we looked at other tasks in the preliminary set of compositions, we sensed that there may be other differences as well. In writing narrative, for example, students from some countries

tend to use dialogue much more than do students from other countries. This distinction may prove to be similar to Carroll's characterizing-narrating distinction.

One task that sought to capture directly these distinctions among national rhetorical communities asked students to write a letter of advice to a younger person coming to their school. The advice concerned how to do well in writing. In addition to being rated, the compositions are soon going to be analyzed for their content. A preliminary examination of that content analysis, however, indicated that students from different countries are more similar than they are different: their advice does not concern writing style and organization as much as it concerns manuscript form, spelling, grammar, and content—as well as such niceties as handing in the paper on time. Yet even the small sample also suggests some difference among groups of students. Students from one culture appear to stress originality, from another to stress impressing the teacher with fancy style, and from still another to stress using a simple style so as not to “get into trouble.”

It would appear that this task will probably inform us more than any other about how students perceive the rhetorical community in which they have passed the novitiate but are not yet expert. I suspect there will be points of commonality between national communities, such as the importance of correctness in mechanical aspects of writing and the importance of knowing the subject about which one is writing. But these points of commonality may well be overshadowed by the points of difference. Again, these differences likely will be multidimensional; they likely will encompass structure and style; the patterns of any one community likely will vary significantly from those of another in at least one dimension; and the differences among national communities likely will be sharper as they progress further through the educational system. Too, these differences seem to reflect important differences in the values and cognition styles of the culture (Glenn, Hofstede).

To me, the evidence from the IEA study as well as other studies of non-native writers, suggests that teachers like Ms. Oster need to reconsider their stance towards international students. Students have learned to become members of the rhetorical community that dominates their educational system; that is a part of their survival in that system. When they enter another system, they are asked to participate as full-fledged members of the second system without fully knowing what its rules and conditions might be. In the United States, most non-native students have learned

a good bit of the grammar and lexicon of English, but they have seldom been taught about the patterns of organization and style expected of academic writers in the United States. If they have studied patterns of discourse in the target language, most generally those have been patterns of oral communication—what to say in a restaurant or in an office. If they have studied at their university in a field which has a transnational pattern of discourse (particularly one of the sciences), they may have acquired that pattern; still they may not be sure of the pattern for discourse in other disciplines or general communication (such as the business letter). Furthermore, many non-native students report that once they do learn the United States pattern of discourse for general correspondence, they have to relearn their native patterns upon return to their native country.

In our study we have begun to specify the nature of these patterns (or structures) of discourse, with sets of continua such as those I have set forth in this paper. There may, however, be other dimensions such as an inductive-deductive dimension that would further differentiate rhetorical communities. In the meantime, I think it is important for the United States teacher of the non-native student to make clear to the students that what they are going to learn in a composition course is not the way to think and write (or in Ms. Oster's words, "organization, rhetorical skills, graceful style and argumentation"), but the particular form of these aspects of writing that is valued in the academies of the United States. This shift in posture acknowledges that with organization, style, and argumentation, one is dealing with convention, just as one is dealing with conventions of grammar and diction and punctuation.

That the academy of the United States has conventions has long been known; I happen to believe that it is useless to try to do away with them or to substitute other conventions—such as some writing teachers recommend. I also do not believe that one should advocate cynicism. I do believe that it is appropriate pedagogical behavior to deal with convention as convention and to acknowledge that these conventions are created by humans with all their wisdom and folly. As conventions, those that the United States espouses are no better or worse than those espoused in other cultures. Such an attitude combined with an eye that can analyze differences in writing without passing judgment on those who are not the same as us is the best way for the teacher to deal with the non-native student—in a basic writing class or in any writing class.

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