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The Context of Classroom Writing

As Maxine Hairston has noted, over the past two decades there has been a major shift in composition pedagogy towards viewing writing as a series of cognitive processes. As part of this paradigm shift, many theorists have followed James McCrimmon's lead in viewing the writing process as a way of knowing rather than a way of telling. The essential task of the classroom is not the teaching of a functional activity motivated by external constraints, but the teaching a method of internal discovery, of, as C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon state it, aiding students "in pursuit of a significance that matters" (12). For some teachers, such as McCrimmon, functional writing and writing as discovery are both valid activities, but it is the latter, they believe, that should constitute the goal of instruction in a writing course. For others, such as Donald Murray, the internal discovery procedure is the basis of all writing and applicable to all discourse situations. Implicit in both positions, however, is the assumption that the search for personal significance both precedes and is more important than any socially defined purposes and constraints encountered by a student.

Recently, Marilyn M. Cooper has argued persuasively that while the cognitive model of writing was a healthy corrective to earlier pedagogy, its failure to see writing as an essentially social activity limits both its perspective and its usefulness. Indeed, the notion of the solitary author whose main goal is the discovery and communication of personal meaning ignores the institutional context of classroom writing and the consequent attitudes students bring to it. Writing in the classroom is inherently a functional activity. Students often take a writing course not because they want to, but because it is required by their college or university. They write papers not to fulfill some intrinsic goal, but because the essays are assigned by the instructor. Even when we try to give an assignment that constitutes a "real" act of personal exploration, the institutional context predominates over any real sense of authentic purpose and actual audience. For the most part, students perceive that their purpose in writing is either simply to fulfill the course requirement, or, let us hope, to learn "how to write." Indeed, a recent study by J. D. Williams and Scott D. Alden reports that over 57 percent of the 300 freshman writing students observed were primarily motivated by extrinsic factors, mainly grades, rather than by intrinsic factors, such as the excitement of intellectual or personal discovery.

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In addition, our students do not come to us free of preconceived notions of what is supposed to happen in the classroom. More often than not, the twelve years of previous education have made them perceive the composition class largely in terms of external goals and restraints. Although we may sometimes be able to subvert our students' preconceptions and cause them to view writing primarily as a mode of self-expression, it is doubtful that we can overcome such deep-seated conditioning in the space of one or two semesters.

Before we condemn such attitudes on the part of our students, it is useful to recognize that almost all writing occurs in some sort of externally determined and possibly artificial context. Consequently, we need to examine exactly how the context of classroom writing is both similar to and different from other common discourse situations. Furthermore, by becoming more conscious of the ways in which the composition course informs both the production and reception of writing, we may be able to be more effective in teaching our students the underlying rules specifically governing the "English essay." Such an examination will also allow us to aid our students in developing the ability to discover the basic strategies by which they can comprehend and, consequently, fulfill the requirements of other forms of discourse.

A good place to begin such an inquiry is by examining exactly how we, as instructors, respond to student writing, how we function as an audience of student discourse. An essay written by a student describing the overhaul of a ten-speed bicycle, for example, might very well be quite informative for a teacher. The instructor, for example, may have just purchased a ten-speed without knowing how to maintain it. But do we give the essay a high grade simply because the apparent speech act of the essay—informing—does, in fact, inform? What if the instructor hated bicycles or already knew how to perform an overhaul? Obviously, we evaluate or at least try to evaluate the essay not on the effect it has on the instructor as an autonomous individual, but on how well it fulfills some purported discourse goal.

Again, these goals are defined almost solely within the institutional context of the classroom. We read student papers not to be informed or entertained, but to assess how well students can perform certain kinds of discourse acts, such as describing, reporting, or arguing. The reaction of the audience to a student's paper, then, is governed by the audience's role as a teacher and the existence of certain explicit and implicit rules within pedagogical institutions. Certainly, teachers have a great deal of discretion in determining what constitutes proper completion of an assignment, but their discretion is almost always bounded by institutional restraints. Some instructors may claim that they evaluate papers on the basis of their own personal interest. However, images of complaining students and parents, as well as administrators, make me doubt that they are always able to hold to such a criterion.

Speech act theorists have long recognized what appeared to them to be the somewhat anomalous nature of pedagogical discourse. Searle, for example, notes that

> there are two types of questions, a) real questions, b) exam questions. In real questions S[peaker] wants to know (find out) the answer; in exam questions S[peaker] wants to know if H[earer] knows. (66)

Despite his awareness of the pedagogical context, Searle does not further discuss the distinction between the response to the two types of questions. In a real question, the hearer responds by providing information that he or she believes will be useful to the questioner. With exam questions, hearers respond with the intention to provide information that will be useful to themselves.

What most traditional speech act theorists fail to recognize, however, is that their normal formulation of discourse as a truly cooperative activity between two distinct, authentic, immutable selves, does not correspond to the reality of the exam question or of academic discourse in general. As mentioned before, both the examiner asking the question and the student who responds to it are occupying fairly well defined roles as "teacher" and "student." Although teachers have a great deal of personal latitude about what questions they might ask, they are still limited by the institutional role they occupy. On a Ph.D. comprehensive examination in English, for example, an examiner cannot really ask a student such questions as "What is your favorite color?" or "Who played third-base for the 1928 Yankees?" The individual, personal self of the instructor may really want to know the answer to such questions. But this particular self is not validated by the institutional context. In this type of discourse situation, only certain manifestations of the self, those that conform to the roles of teacher, examiner, and academic, will be deemed appropriate.

If, then, classroom discourse is by its very nature an anomaly, how can we teach students to write in "normal" discourse situations? Is there really an irreparable gulf between writing in the classroom and all other forms of discourse? The answer to this apparent problem lies in the reality that classroom discourse occurs in contexts quite similar to many other speech situations often ignored by discourse theorists.

First, the concept of normative discourse itself is one that is highly suspect. Mary Louise Pratt has attacked the tendency of some discourse theorists to stress speech situations that involve individual beliefs, desires, intentions, and responsibilities, while ignoring most situations in which people speak within an institutional or ritual role that exists apart from the person who occupies it. As she contends, "speaking 'for oneself,' 'from the heart' names only one position among the many from which a person might speak in the course of her everyday life" (9). Commenting on the limitations of Grice's Cooperative Principle, she observes that in hierarchical speech situations, such as a police officer to a suspect or an employer to an employee, the maxims regulating discourse are not governed by any sort of cooperative endeavor, but often are simply defined as the viewpoint of the party in power (13).

Even more important, Pratt criticizes the assumption that all speech situations are characterized by shared objectives among the participants. Just as the objectives of the student and teacher are often quite different in a composition class, so often are the objectives of a customer and salesperson. Consider a pitchman on television selling a new "wonder" tool for the kitchen. Do we really think of his advice as being only given in the belief that the audience will benefit from the product? Clearly, his goals in this speech situation are quite distinct from those of his audience. Or consider a lawyer defending a mass murderer.

Whether or not she sincerely believes her client to be innocent is irrelevant. Like a salesperson or a student writing a paper for English 101, part of the lawyer's job is to convince her audience of her sincerity in asserting the propositions dictated by the institutional role she occupies. The lawyer, the student, and the salesperson all have to follow rules of relevance, manner, and quality that are primarily dictated by the institutional context in which the discourse takes place.

Thus, rather than being anomalous to "real" writing situations, classroom writing can be considered as a subset of a general type of communication that can be defined as *institution-based discourse,* and such discourse that is inscribed, that is written, as *institution-based prose.* In institution-based discourse both speaker and hearer exist largely as projections of institutional roles rather than as idiosyncratic individuals. True, an individual can personalize an institutional role, or institutional roles may be performed in quite different ways, but the extent to which a role can be personalized or the number of ways the role can be acted out are always limited by institutional rules and goals. Teachers or judges, for example, might be able to interject more of their own personalities into their institutional roles than drill sergeants, but all of them are still required to act and speak very differently from the way they would in other, much more loosely defined roles, such as parent, friend, or spouse. In one very real sense, these latter roles are also institutional, since they can be considered to be defined by socially preconceived notions of each role and by the socially constituted institutions of the family, friendship, and marriage. Nonetheless, institutionality in discourse exists on a continuum. These latter cases can be considered to be much less institutional in that the exact definition of the institution lies more with one or more of the participants than it does in the former examples, where there are more sharply defined external constraints.

In institutional discourse the notion of sincerity in discourse exists primarily as a requirement that the individual believe that he or she is acting out the role correctly, not that he or she necessarily believes what is being said. Thus a judge may free a criminal on a technicality without personally believing that the criminal should go free. Similarly, a student doesn't need to believe what he or she writes, but only needs to give the appearance of believing it. When we criticize a paper for insincerity, what we are actually doing is criticizing its inability to convince the reader of its sincerity in much the same way the owner of a clothing store might criticize a salesperson for being unconvincing in telling customers that the suits are beautifully made and of the finest quality.

When people write today, when they inscribe their speech, they do so largely in performance of a specific institutional role. As Walter Ong and others have noted, writing itself is a technology that has had profound effects on the form, content, and context of language use. New technologies, such as the telephone, have further redefined how writing is used. Although I know of no empirical studies on the subject, I doubt that few people would disagree that the advent of inexpensive long-distance telephone service has greatly reduced the amount of personal writing. However, one important feature of writing as a technology, its permanence, makes it ideally suited as a mode of communication in contexts where institutional roles need to be documented.

These views may appear to be overly cynical and reductive, but they are neither. The basic insight afforded by speech act theory, from Austin to Grice, is simply that discourse is a form of action. Speech is, as Grice states, "a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior" (47). For the most part, we choose writing as opposed to silent reflection because of an expectation that our discourse will produce some tangible or intangible effect in the world.

In addition, of course, the lawyer, the student and the salesperson mentioned above can be considered, at some level, to be insincere. Any notion of insincerity in these cases, however, is predicated on a personal level of belief outside of the institutional context. Certainly, such levels are important and should be considered. Yet it is also clear that in institutional writing, the institutional context demands that a speaker or a writer fulfill the appropriate role. The penalty for adhering to some sort of personal self at the expense of the institutional self is often severe. Indeed, the inherent conflict between institutional and personal roles has been a reoccurring theme of Western literature from at least *Antigone* onwards. While we should not urge our students to ignore their own personal ethics, we also need to have them consider the ethics dictated by the specific roles they occupy as writers.

Furthermore, the notion that there is a true, unified, central "self" that is the ultimate source of all discourse is itself highly suspect. Foucault and other continental critics have demonstrated that the concept of the unified subject, who is the center of all truth, is a construct that emerged at a specific point in history, validated by specific social conventions. Indeed, the notion of the "inner-self" as subject is not normative, but only one of many roles informed and validated by social institutions. Even psychoanalysis, an institution and practice that claims as its goal the uncovering of the deepest levels of the self, validates some types of discourse at the expense of others. Merton M. Gill has recently demonstrated that psychoanalytic patients are prodded by the analyst to discuss their feelings towards persons and things, especially their feelings towards the analyst, but in subtle and not so subtle ways, more rational and abstract discourse is discouraged as a manifestation of psychological defense mechanisms.

Similarly, the concept promulgated by some composition theorists, such as Donald Murray, that a student should select his or her own topics and that a student should be allowed "to explore his own world with his own language, to discover his own meaning" (91), reflects and is ultimately validated by the academic context in which writing instruction occurs. For the most part, writing teachers are academics, fiction writers, or poets. Unlike most other institutions, the institutions in which these individuals act, and which validate their activity as scholars, novelists, and poets, allow them a relatively large amount of choice in both the subject and development of their own discourse. In the case of most college faculty, there is a specific institutional rule—academic freedom—which partially restricts the institution from dictating the exact subject of inquiry and the conclusions reached. Indeed, academics possess a relatively privileged position in our society in their ability to select the subject of their professional discourse. Consequently, it is quite possible that underlying the belief that students should be allowed to choose their own subjects and seek their own truth is the

assumption that academic discourse is normative and all other types of discourse are debased aberrations. Yet in most of the writing situations our students will encounter they will be allowed to pick neither the subject nor the apparent truth to be argued. Lawyers are required to argue the cases given to them. Similarly, salespersons do not decide whether they should advise a customer to buy or not to buy a product. A manager writing a memo may be able to select a specific stance toward a subject, but the subject itself is often predetermined.

Despite the relative freedom of academic discourse, there are still some of the same constraints on it which exist in all forms of written discourse. The act of writing, as distinct from the act of thinking, is not successful until it communicates, until it becomes a part of a specific communal activity. Academic discourse not only has to be heard or read within the framework of a specific academic discipline, it has to possess the ability to convince others within the specific conventions of that discipline. While questionnaires may be a perfectly valid form of evidence in sociology or composition research, they are currently not considered so in economics (McCloskey 514). Consequently, if one wishes to participate in the institutional "conversation" among economists, one has either to forego employing almost all forms of self-report as data, or spend a considerable amount of the discourse in justifying such an approach. In either case, preexisting institutional conventions of discourse significantly determine its nature.

Even the requirement of some teachers that their students' writing should be of interest to them is predicated on the preexisting roles of writer and reader of popular magazine articles. Indeed, if this kind of journalism did not exist, it would be extremely difficult to either these instructors or their students to conceptualize the kind of discourse act they were participating in. Similarly, underlying the choice of essays included in most Freshman anthologies is the existence of the belletristic essay as a specific institutional form and such magazines as *The Atlantic Monthly* in which this form occurs. When our students have problems in achieving what we consider an "appropriate" voice and in considering an "appropriate" audience, it is often simply because they are unfamiliar with the context and the institutional conventions in which such discourse occurs.

Teaching students to produce such discourse is indeed a valid activity. However, we as writing teachers need to realize that it is not the only form of discourse, that it is in no way normative. Such writing assumes only one of the possible roles our students will occupy as writers. Rather than teaching them how to write in only one institutional role for only one type of institutional audience, we should help our students discover the basic strategies by which they can determine and fulfill the requirements of various types of discourse. While some of the specific requirements of discourse in one institutional situation may not be what W. Ross Winterowd calls transferable writing skills (1), the ability to decipher the rules governing any type of institutional writing is not only transferable to other writing contexts, but is one of the most essential skills we can give our students.

One effective way to teach this skill is found in the recent movement toward "writing across the curriculum," which once again focuses on the crucial relationship between writing and the context in which it occurs. Instead of inventing

yet a new role for students as producers of what Robert Scholes terms "pseudo-non-literature" (13), these courses utilize the existing roles students already occupy. Students learn how to write within specific institutional situations, bound by specific institutional strictures and requirements: the humanist analyzing a play or a novel, the social scientist reporting a case study, or the natural scientist giving an account of a laboratory experiment. By learning the specialized procedures, conventions, terminology, and rules of evidence in various disciplines, a student learns the process of how to step into various communicative roles. Such an approach to the teaching of composition not only helps students write academic discourse—what Elaine Maimon calls "the communication of reasoned belief" (2)—but it also can start to teach them the skills by which they can decipher the rules and conventions of yet other discourse roles they may occupy.

The very term "institution-based prose" would appear to imply an extension of Linda Flower's distinction between writer-based prose and reader-based prose. Flower posits two separate cognitive stages in writing. The first, writer-based prose, is egocentric internal communication with its structure deriving from personal associative patterns. In reader-based prose, on the other hand, writers shape their discourse to create a shared context and language between themselves and the reader. Flower discusses how one model of the composing process can be viewed as a series of transformations from writer-based discourse to reader-based. Extrapolating from Flower's model, we could possibly view institution-based discourse as the result of an additional series of transformations where reader-based prose is modified to reflect the institutional roles occupied by the writer and reader.

Flower's own example, however, does not support the conclusion that a writer's awareness of his or her institutional role occurs relatively late in the cognitive process of writing. Rather, institutionality appears to precede the other stages, informing both the perception of reality and the conscious choices made in both the writer-based and reader-based stages of discourse. Flower gives us two drafts of a progress report written by students in an organizational psychology class as an example of the distinction between the two stages (22-25). Yet even a cursory analysis reveals that in both versions the writers are clearly occupying an institutional role. The first version, the example of writer-based prose, begins with an account of the meeting where the group decided to evaluate a brewing company and the several reasons given for the decision. The institutional position and goals of the students are reflected in the justifications given for the selection of this particular company: 1) two members of the group know employees in the sales department and 2) the financial problems of the firm indicate potential organizational weaknesses. Each reason is specifically relevant to the function of the writers as students and researchers. Other possible reasons, some of which may have had a real effect on the actual choice, are excluded from both drafts. The brewery might have been selected because it was convenient for the group to get to, because one or more the members of the group particularly liked one of the employees with whom there would be contact, or possibly because the production of alcoholic beverages would be of more interest to college students than the making of, say, plumbing supplies.

Similarly, although the first version reflects more directly a chronological list of various persons and objects encountered by the writers, there is much that has already been excluded. The writers do not tell us how the various individuals they encountered looked, how they dressed, or what were their speech mannerisms. They do not mention the quality of the food in the company cafeteria. The writers clearly sense that these facts are irrelevant to the role they are assuming as consulting analysts of organizational structure. In other less structured, less overtly institutional discourse contexts, such as one of the students telling a friend about his or her experiences at the plant, the student's impression that the company's food was not fit for human consumption might be a relevant item of conversation. But in the context of the report such an observation would be appropriate only if it were explicitly related to the task of analyzing the plant's organizational structure. Consequently, what is often defined as "rhetorical purpose" is really only the fulfillment by the writer of some specific institutional role.

Egocentric speech of the types posited by Piaget and Vygotsky may indeed occur at an early stage of the discourse process. But the clear implication of the above analysis is that early on in producing a text, a writer also determines what sensory input is appropriate to the specific role and context in which the discourse occurs. Such a determination is probably both conscious and unconscious, reflecting part of what Chomsky refers to as pragmatic linguistic competence, "the knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use, in conformity with various purposes" (224).

An essential goal of writing instruction, then, should be to help our students to attain the pragmatic competence necessary for institutional discourse. Yet this is not a call for increasing the vocational component of writing instruction, nor is it an attack on the concept of the liberal arts curriculum. The most effective way to teach students how to write in all the institutional contexts they will encounter is to teach them the basic strategies for uncovering the rules that govern discourse in any particular context. In addition to the three elements of the Aristotelian triad, speaker, subject, and audience, we need to make our students aware of the specific ways in which these elements themselves are determined and informed by institutional contexts. In so doing, rather than imprisoning students in specific institutional roles, we are helping them attain the tools by which those roles can be both effectively performed and transcended. And a good place to start is in the composition classroom. Rather than deny to our students that there is anything peculiar about the type of writing they produce in our classroom or attempt to make it more "real," we need to make them aware that there is no one normal or correct form of discourse, just as there is no one correct way to dress. While teaching them to be comfortable in the garments we require them to wear for us, we need to instill in them both a sense that there are other equally valid forms of clothing and a knowledge of how to wear them.

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