On the outside Looking in: Students' Analyses of Professional Discourse Communities

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The writing-across-the-curriculum movement has grown up in the last few years. Its proponents have moved from asking global, beginning questions about how to organize such programs and how to get faculty from various departments involved to more theoretical, follow-up questions about exactly what rhetoricians and writing teachers can offer to students who need to write in professions besides English. Simply pointing out that different disciplines demand different sorts of writing is not enough anymore. Other disciplines sometimes see writing teachers as editors, arbiters of style and usage, or as patient people surprisingly willing to read all that student writing. But people in composition tend to believe they can offer more to the students, who often do not have a chance to explore how writing works within a particular community except within composition courses. Rhetoricians have acknowledged, with some humility, that they cannot teach the ways of knowing and arguing that constitute the social or the hard sciences, but they also believe, with some pride, that those fields urgently need specialists to help them teach students how rhetoric and knowledge come together to create a professional life.

Within the framework of the relationship between rhetoric and knowledge, some of the latest work in writing-across-the-curriculum outlines a role for writing teachers that I want to explore in this essay. Coming out of what Kenneth Bruffee, Lester Faigley, Lee Odell, and others have called the social perspective, many theorists are arguing that rhetoricians should use their strengths to help students discover how language invents, and is invented by, the constraints of the community in which it is used. This perspective assumes that language is a community-generated and community-maintained symbolic construct, not an individually acquired skill (Bruffee, "Localizing the Liberal Imagination"). Knowledge, in other words, is local, not universal, expanded and validated by a "community of knowledgeable peers." From this view, Lester Faigley and Kristine Hansen argue that basing our writing-across-the-curriculum courses on any assumptions about what constitutes "good writing" (in English departments, in other academic disciplines, or in the professions),

will not get us very far. "We will," they maintain, "have to adopt a rhetorical approach to the study of writing in the disciplines, an approach that examines the negotiation of meaning among writers, readers, and subject matters" ("Learning to Write in the Social Sciences" 149). Leslie Moore and Linda Peterson take this idea one step further and argue specifically that English teachers, uncomfortable about their role in the writing-across-the-curriculum movement, should pull back to take advantage of their own particular expertise: "an understanding of how conventions operate in a piece of written discourse." Teachers can, they say, show students how to analyze and use conventions, and thus introduce them to "the complexities of academic discourse at the same time incorporating the best impulses of writing to learn" (467). All these writers operate from what Lester Faigley calls the social perspective on writing: They see the individual writer primarily as a member of a culture and believe that language can only be understood from the context of a society, not in terms of the individual's intention or experience or meaning, for all those things originate in and are shaped by context ("Competing Theories of Process").

The most popular term for this context is *discourse community*. James Porter explains that a "discourse community shares assumptions about what objects are appropriate for examination and discussion, what operating functions are performed on those objects, what constitutes 'evidence' and 'validity,' and what formal conventions are followed" (39). Obviously people operate in many of these communities at once, but, especially in writing-across-the-curriculum textbooks and programs, some of the more well-established and clearest examples come from professional and academic discourse. Composition theorists like Faigley and Peterson, who see language acts primarily as attempts to strengthen ties to communities the individual already belongs to or to join new ones, argue that writing teachers should help students survey and analyze the discourse communities they hope to join. In this paper I first describe my students' attempts to use rhetorical analysis of texts as a way to understand the professional communities they study and intend to enter. Next, I analyze the students' responses to these texts in light of the social perspective, and raise some questions about whether this approach accomplishes what its proponents claim—that teaching students how to describe and analyze discourse conventions helps prepare them to write the language of particular disciplines or professions, in other words, to feel more like a member or *initiate* in that community. Finally, I will explore how such rhetorical analyses of discourse communities might contribute to our understanding of writing-across-the-curriculum as a whole.

For the past three years, I have assigned a rhetorical analysis to students in my upper-level courses in advanced composition and professional writing

at the University of Nebraska. I first ask students to write about their plans for a career and to write about their expectations and experiences with writing in these fields. (Most of the students have plans to enter professional communities such as law, politics, academics, business. A few hope to be professional writers of fiction or poetry. Even fewer, and these only in the professional writing course, are already working members of professional communities.) Next, I introduce the idea that one of the best ways to learn about a community of professionals is to study the ways they communicate with one another in writing—to look at texts in order to discover what "voices" and attitudes are accepted, what constitutes "proof" in a field, how writers define audiences, how their body of knowledge gets expanded and criticized. I introduce the term *discourse community*. Students, with the advice of teachers/writers in their discipline, select representative texts from professional journals in education and sociology, for example, or articles from law reviews, or legislative bills, or analyses of literary texts, or articles from business journals. We read these texts closely, in small groups, talking about what they say, how they sound, and using exploratory writing to move from subjective responses to critical glosses. I hope that this assignment will help them learn how to analyze the "rhetoric" of any piece of writing, how to describe the relationships among writer, reader, subject, text—and therefore help them maneuver as professionals who understand how language shapes their fields.

My students hate this assignment at first. They have a difficult time getting beyond the *subjects* of the texts they choose and when they do, they say things like "The language is specialized because the writer is addressing a group of specialists." These advanced writers, majors in criminal justice, advertising, physics, business administration, English, and art, cannot seem to see the implications of the most obvious rhetorical clues—the presence of abstracts to help the audience decide whether or not to read the piece, the careful articulation of methodology that characterizes the social sciences, the presence of a collective rather than individual voice, to cite just a few examples. The students seem content to stay with obvious generalities, that writing in the law, for example, uses "Latin words," or that writing in psychology is "boring." They go through all sorts of avoidance routines to distance themselves, I thought at first, from a very difficult assignment. But now I think their strategies for writing this assignment come from more serious sorts of distancing—the kind of distance that outsiders in a group always feel.

One source of all this avoidance is my students' realizations that they don't know very much about writing in other disciplines. One effect of this realization is a sense of panic or despair in the classroom—these students

are juniors and seniors who have long ago declared a major and now realize that they don't know what they're getting themselves into. They know there's a club out there that they want to join, but they don't know the rules. However, these students seem to understand that the rules are based in language, that "sounding right" is the key to admittance.

This assignment always gets four kinds of responses that, to one degree or another, demonstrate these students' awareness of the ways that community-generated language contributes to the individual's identity. The students all identify themselves as outsiders, either by focusing on language as the barrier between themselves and the professional community, or by using a language different from their own and the profession's to position themselves on the outside of the group. The four kinds of responses/positions I will call the "literary persona," "the apprentice," "the defeated cynic," and "the insider critic."

In the first kind of response, the literary persona, about one-fourth of the students write sophisticated analyses of writing from history, education, criminal justice, literary criticism, business, and so forth, but they do so according to the conventions (and the spirit) of another discipline—specifically literary/English studies—not the one they are planning to enter. Here's the opening from a paper analyzing the rhetoric of specialists in education titled "The Case of the Slaughtered Sentence Structure":

> The date—November 8, 1986. The place—the United States Supreme Court. The defendants—David J. Flinders, Nel Noddings, and Stephen J. Thornton of Stanford University. The crime—destroying the English language. These pitiful representatives of the teaching profession are on trial for their article, "The Null Curriculum: Its Theoretical Basis and Practical Implications." Let us now look into the courtroom where prosecuting attorney Lance M. Svehla [the writer/my student] is questioning the defendants. "Mr. Flinders, would you agree with the charge that your writing is nothing but a string of prepositional phrases, verbs of being, and a slew of unnecessary words; that your writing denotes an audience that surely is educated but will accept or expect standardized drivel; and that these faults ruin an otherwise important subject with unnecessary weight?" Answer from defendant: "No, no, I simply express myself in the accepted format for my discipline." Prosecutor: "All right, let's look at the writing."

Lance goes on to cite sentences that he finds full of wordiness, in-group
vocabulary, and pretension. One might say that he is dealing only with the
surface of the text he's analyzing. But in a major section of his paper, he
analyzes the article's method of proof: Again "prosecuting" the author, he says,

> "Let's talk about the subject and its relation to the writing
> and the audience, Mr. Flinders. Your subject is the null
> curriculum—that part of the educational curriculum that doesn't
> get taught. I concede that you define it well and you have some
> brilliant insight into the subject. The problem comes from how
> your insight is substantiated. Every argument is circular.
> Conclusions are based on the work of other researchers in your
> profession. A vicious circle is created where the profession feeds
> its own rhetoric to itself and the audience. The audience accepts
> and then demands this rhetoric from the educational system.
> Your honor, Mr. Flinders and his associates have taken an
> important subject and turned it into a wordy mess."

I liked this essay. I thought it was clever, well-written, and showed some
real insight into the way the article from the educational journal operated:
the structures, tone, and conventions of research and scholarship in
education. Even though he does not understand that citing another
researcher is not "circular," this student sees how researchers depend upon
"the literature" to build their cases. But I worried about what he thinks about
those conventions. I worried about his choosing a stance as outside judge
of a profession he wants to spend his life working in. Yet I knew that Lance
had, in a real sense, "caught on" to this academic language. He doesn't
want to use it himself, and doesn't want to sound at all like a student of
this language, and so he chooses a persona very distant from the educators'
he has read.

Here's another example of a student taking on a new persona, this time
from an analysis of literary research. Its title is "In Appreciation" and it
opens this way:

> You ain't heard of me for hundred 'n one years but that ain't
> no matter. Kate Ronald—Jim's comp prefessor Kate
> Ronald—she wants me to look over the rhetoric and analyze an
> essay by Janet McKay called "An Art So High: Style in the
> *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." I guess she figured I knowed
> better than anybody else on accounts of the essay's written 'bout
> me—the narrator. Ms. McKay, she's a might powerful sort and

all. She praises my book from the beginnin' and makes the reader
feel real comfortable and want to read on.

From later in the essay: [after McKay has mentioned that some readers don't
like the Norton critical editions]

> I ain't too sure who this Norton fellow is but a stuffy critic
> who's written essays sayin' bad stuff 'bout other people and their
> work, he ain't gonna like this essay by Ms. McKay. . . .

On conventions, Jim writes:

> Ms. McKay's knowledge of Huck Finn is real noticeable and
> I can tell she's done some might powerful researchin' into the
> novel. At the end of the essay, there's a whole two pages ain't
> nuthin' but names of other essays and their authors and I knowed
> she'd read every one of them, she did, to help her write her own.
> She even makes reference to each one 'cases the reader don't
> believe but she's the only one that thinks that way. She says
> Twain wrote in a humorous style and then she takes a reference
> from this Mr. Tanner and he says darn near the same thing and
> she puts it right below what she'd just finished sayin'.

I enjoyed this essay thoroughly, and I thought it showed insight into
how literary researchers establish authority and demonstrated a confident
sense of the conventions of literary criticism. Unlike Lance with the
education article, Jim is praising this particular writer, but he's doing so by
comparing her to other literary critics whose language and style are not
so accessible. Like Lance, he understands the language that is operating
here, the methods of supporting and validating an argument in literary
criticism. But by taking on Huck Finn's voice, Jim distances himself from
the student's role. His persona is above the game. Another student adopted
the same strategy, this time in the field of international affairs. The title
of this paper was "Thanks, Henry" and it opens this way:

> Tonight I am attending a dinner with the French elite. I think
> I'll wear my white suit. Last time I wore that suit I was on the
> cover of *Newsweek* under the headline, "Young US Diplomat
> creating new liaisons with the French." A few weeks ago I was
> on the cover of *GQ* as "the most eligible bachelor." It's funny
> to think I owe it all to Henry.

Dan goes on to say that reading Kissinger's *American Foreign Policy* while an undergraduate helped him learn how to communicate with "people of varied interests" and not use "political in-group jargon." He ends his essay with the comment: "Because I read his book as an undergraduate and recognized what separated Kissinger from the others, I have also reached the top of my profession."

That these students have taken on a persona different from their own in order to get through this analysis of writing in the professions they are planning to enter I find interesting in itself and think maybe it points to larger issues involved in asking even advanced students to perform such analyses. These three students are having fun with the assignment and clearly are learning something about writing in education, literature, and politics, but each chooses the stance of an outsider, creating (or should I say disguising) distance between himself and a professional world. I want to pause for a moment to pose some theoretical reasons why a good percentage of my students use this distancing strategy in their attempts to uncover the "rules" governing the discourse communities they want to enter.

First, I think they're scared, pure and simple. And when people are scared, they pull back to strategies that have worked for them in the past. Most of these students' past writing experiences have been with English teachers. So, they revert to using conventions of *my* discourse community. Perhaps they use this strategy because of the inherent collaborative nature of writing. Kenneth Bruffee has demonstrated that even when writers work alone, they are always engaged in a "conversation" with members of a community that has taught them "group-licensed" ways of seeing the world ("Writing and Reading as Collaborative or Social Acts"). Citing Thomas Kuhn, Bruffee shows that people learn these ways of seeing when they learn the language and the exemplars, or evidence, used by a certain group. Each of the student essays above employs the language and the conventions of the discourse community called English studies—dialogue, an engaging persona, an authentic "voice," smooth flow. The students clearly feel on the outside of the community of professionals in law, politics, and literature—they can't "collaborate" with them and so they, in effect, collaborate with me. Their presence in advanced and professional writing courses attests to the rewards they find in the English department community. And second, these students tap into what I would call a group *ethos* or pride that belongs to English—a putting down of the language of other disciplines and an inherent belief in "voice" as the dominant characteristic of good writing. As I've said, I really liked these papers, but I'm not sure the proponents of rhetorical analyses intended for students to look down, as it were, at professions they are planning to enter.

The second category of student responses to this task shows even more clearly how much students are on the outside looking in. Another one-fourth of my students' papers—the "apprentices"—exhibit the range of characteristics of someone trying to get into a closed society. They are alternately eager and despairing, simultaneously worshiping and criticizing. Here's the opening of a paper analyzing the rhetoric of legal writing. Its title is "When in Rome Do as the Romans Do":

> Law writing requires facts and the logical interpretation of those facts. Here lies my problem, because all I have ever written are stories about myself, and I do not know how to write about judicial matters. I am vaguely familiar with law style writing and I emphasize vaguely because it is totally different from any other style that I have encountered. What worries me is that I do not have the ability to understand the profession and its style at an acceptable level. If I am to achieve this level of knowledge it will require a tremendous amount of effort, but my labor will not be in vain if I earn admission to the elite law profession.

Clearly this student feels on the outside of the profession he is planning to enter, aware of rigorous standards but unsure about exactly what they are and about whether he will ever "measure up." In another portion of his essay, he describes how legal language defines the limits of this closed community:

> The law profession's writing is unique and hard to understand but it is designed this way for a purpose. The people familiar with law writing are society's elite and they are similar to an exclusive club. To become a member of this club an individual spends a large amount of money and numerous years studying and familiarizing themselves with law. This "Law Club" controls society and makes a tremendous amount of money while doing so. The law profession enjoys its privileges and seeks to keep others from doing so by writing in ways only they can understand.

Paul exhibits the mixed feelings of any apprentice, I would say—a desire to be admitted, finally, into the group and a wariness about wanting to be the sort of person that would get admitted. One could call this the reverse, perhaps, of the Groucho Marx statement: "I wouldn't want to be a member of any club that would admit me." Here, Paul doesn't want to be the kind

of person that would get admitted to the "Law Club." He understands that
he would have to sound different. Here's an excerpt from another paper
by a student who feels the same way, but has worked herself further through
the dilemma. Its title is "Law School???"

> Before this assignment I was relatively certain about a few
> things in my future. I knew that lasagna was my favorite food.
> I knew that most likely I would not reach 6'5". I was also pretty
> sure that I would go to law school if I ever get out of this won-
> derful institution. However, after reading one too many Supreme
> Court decisions and talking to several other prospective law
> students, I am quite confused about this entire prospect.
>   There are quite a few reasons why I have changed my mind
> about law school. I will spare you the completely bizarre reasons
> and write about two obvious, well-founded reasons. First of all,
> lawyers are snobs. Their writing is filled with huge words only
> understood by other lawyers, and the actual words they use place
> them above people. Secondly, I enjoy writing now, but legal
> writing is boring. There is not much room for creativity and I
> like being creative. In this paper, I plan to make grotesque gen-
> eralities about legal writing which should, regardless of my
> attitude, get me thrown out of law school if I do decide to attend.

   Like the students who wrote the analysis of professional writing in
education, or in international affairs, Kelly here feels above or outside the
writing in the law. One of the reasons I have persisted in giving this
assignment is to help students take a close look at the way writing defines
their professions in order to make some decisions about whether or not they
want to enter those professions. Kelly is not sure now; however, she is not
willing to abandon her plans altogether, so she uses another distancing strat-
egy that many of my students adopt in writing these analyses. She decides
she's "different." Here's the ending of Kelly's paper:

> While working on this paper and a little while before, I
> realized that I am different from the average applicant to law
> school. I like simple, easily understood writing. I feel patronized
> by language that refers to people as "your honor" and do not
> like having decisions "handed down" to me. Lawyers communi-
> cate among themselves in definite patterns. They insulate
> themselves from other professions by their intricate methods.
> Although I have been picking on them throughout this paper, I

> do not think their methods are all bad. In fact, they make sense.
> Law is supposed to be the most important language in our country.
> The people who clarify, write, and change those laws need to use
> lofty language and do regard themselves highly. I'm not sure if I
> will end up in law school or not, but this assignment has made me
> consider some points I hadn't thought of before. Since I began study-
> ing this "discourse community," I do know I will not be like an
> average lawyer if I do go through law school. I want to be creative
> and change things. I'll have to wait and see. I still may grow 5
> inches and have cravings for refried bean dip, too.

Both Paul and Kelly illustrate the tension between wanting in and
wanting out. They seek the knowledge of the community of law, and its
status, but they know that taking on the language of the law will change
them somehow. David Bartholomae has described this dilemma by saying
that "the struggle of the student writer is not the struggle to bring out that
which is within; it is the struggle to carry out those ritual activities that
will grant our entrance into a closed society" (300). I would argue that these
students' struggles are between carrying out those ritual language activities
and *preserving* some of what is within.

The third category of response comes from students who seem to have
given up the struggle before they've begun. If becoming a member of a
discourse community means "entering a conversation," as Kenneth Bruffee
says, then some students are refusing to talk ("Collaborative Learning and
'The Conversation of Mankind'"). These students I call the "defeatists," or
the "cynics." Michelle is a criminal justice major who is adamant about
NOT going to law school, and she resents having to read legal writing. Her
title, "Another ##@*#! Paper!," clearly reflects her frustration. She begins
her analysis of an article in *Criminal Justice Review* this way:

> I think this article is dull and boring. I seriously doubt if I
> would have read that article unless I had to. I picture the writer
> as a man in his 30s or 40s presenting it to his colleagues at
> a lecture. To me it seems like the researcher is pleased with
> himself for getting paid handsomely for doing some totally trivial
> research. He has a positive attitude about the research—as
> upbeat as you could get about the research anyway.

Many of my students display this cynicism about the writer's reasons for
writing a professional article, an attitude that I find fairly sophisticated and
another mark of an apprentice. They question the motivation of the mentor

or think that surely the mentor had an easier time learning the craft than
the learner is experiencing. However, Michelle goes on in her analysis to
take herself completely out of the context of this discourse community. In
her concluding paragraphs, she says:

> I would like to say that this text has nothing to do with my
> chosen profession. The work I am interested in would probably
> be classified as field work. I used to want to be a probation offi-
> cer, I'm no longer sure, but any job I take will have little to
> do with scientific research. I will probably be dealing with people
> who have already committed crimes, so knowing that the baby
> boomers have a higher delinquency rate than other cohorts is
> really not going to help me much when I'm dealing with
> someone who committed armed robbery.
>
> CJ used to be taught with medicine and biology because the
> belief was that there were certain types of criminals and one
> could tell what types of crime an individual would commit by
> the lumps on their head. Would be nice if it were so simple.
> CJ is now one of the social sciences but I don't like to consider
> it a science because it is dealing with people and I don't think
> that people can be reduced to a science. Each person is very
> much an individual. It is impossible to judge what a person will
> do based on what they have done before or what others have
> done. I don't think people can be stuffed into an equation.

I worried about this kind of despair that Michelle displays. On one level,
like Paul and Kelly, she is absolutely correct in her analyses of writing in
the law and criminal justice—it is elitist, designed to keep insiders in and
outsiders out. But its precise language and careful wording have other
purposes that these students have not yet explored. She seems unwilling to
consider what criminal justice might deem "evidence," for example, relying
instead on her own definitions of evidence, or on her own discourse
community's standards of validity and proof. Perhaps I can complicate the
call for rhetorical analysis even further and define this student's struggle
as one between the professional and the personal discourse communities.
Much of the zeal of theorists who adopt the social perspective on writing
has its roots in post-structural criticism, where as Barthes reminds us, the
"reader" of a text is made up of a plurality of contexts, roles, selves, drawn
from other texts, other conversations (10). My students don't understand
themselves as this kind of reader and, not understanding the clash of com-
munities, define themselves as different or despairing.

Some of my students in this third category take on an even more cynical stance and place themselves completely on the outside of the professions they are planning to enter. One of my students is an advertising major in despair over his choice of careers, and his analysis, titled "Price Depreciates as Dust Accumulates," begins:

> I had heard much about David Ogilvy, and when I received his book I was surprised to see a 2 dollar price tag on it. My brother had bought the book in a second-hand book store, and I was certain that the proprietor could have shown little more disrespect had they stuck the tag across Ogilvy's face on the cover of *Ogilvy on Advertising*. This is how David Ogilvy, famed wizard of advertising, entered my home—in the form of a cheap paper back and a favor. And I wasn't sure I appreciated the thought. After all, for months I had said terrible things about advertising as a disease of society, and had bored friends and family with a steady stream of comments about my wishes to abandon it as a course of study and cleanse my soul of the impurities of ambition. So a brotherly favor turned into an annoying reminder that life is full of distasteful choices and that I had openly made a poor one. I put my new book on the shelf to gather more dust than even my Bible. It would have taken an act of God to make me read *Ogilvy on Advertising*, and so it was that the clouds parted and an English assignment descended upon me.
>
> Reading Ogilvy is like going to a job interview. To satisfy my tendency to rebellion I sat reclining on the floor in my underwear as I began reading. And immediately I felt as if I were sitting in a plush office surrounded by big picture windows and looking very small and silly there on the floor in my underwear. Across a dark and looming oak desk stood Ogilvy, pipe in mouth, scrutinizing and impressively leaning on his hands better to see weaknesses more deeply rooted than my lack of wardrobe. "So you want to be in advertising, eh?" For an instant a familiar apprehension rushed down the back of my neck and into my stomach as old ambition stirred and I readied myself to jump through whatever hoop Ogilvy might hold. But an instant passes quickly. I answered, "No."
>
> I suppose he hadn't expected to speak to hopeless moral idealists who question capitalism, disdain ambition and run about the house in colored underwear. Somewhere there were millions of pups who eagerly wiggled in anticipation of whatever scrap

Mr. O might toss. And as I sat bored he tossed scrap after scrap.
From magazine advertising to TV to advertising giants to
political campaigns, Ogilvy covered it all and never failed to
throw in some quote or saying, playing the part of the grizzled
veteran hero of THE BUSINESS. I skipped to the end. I have
met men like him here at the U. Men who like to impress you
with the movie actresses they have met and then proceed to chop
up whatever work they've just forced you to do and make it
better by writing it themselves. So while they bitch about how
you work you mentally get up and walk out to the water
fountain.

For students like Chris, the professional community is the enemy. He
has tried to enter the conversation but has been silenced. So he defines
himself as the "idealist," or the "cynic," above the mundane, immoral world
of advertising. Despite his completely outsider stance, however, Chris is
closer to understanding what "discourse community" might imply than
perhaps the apprentices like Paul and Kelly. Linda Peterson and Leslie
Moore define a "field of discourse" as both an "area to study and a way
of studying (or writing or thinking about) that area" (468). Chris objects
not only to the business of advertising but the way it does business. Most
of all, he objects to the sound of the language, the tone that reflects the
"distasteful" choices he faces.
    These students represent the typical range of responses to my assignment
over the last three years. When asked to explore the written conventions
within a certain discipline and speculate about how those conventions define
a community of professionals, students usually take one of these approaches:
the false or literary persona, the role of apprentice who wants to enter the
community without losing identity, and the cynics who see themselves
completely on the outside of the group. Each writer takes a position outside
the community he or she is analyzing, and each understands that language
defines insiders and outsiders. Raymond Williams, in *Keywords: A Vocabu-
lary of Culture and Society,* points out that the term *community* historically
has been consistently used in a positive sense, implying a desirable state
of human interaction. But Faigley and others who advocate seeing writers
as members of such communities, or apprentices to them, are just beginning
to worry about the converse of such a definition: *Community* itself implies
that some are in, and some are out. Faigley cautions that in trying to identify
conventions that define communities of writers, "commentators on writing
processes from a social viewpoint have neglected the issue of what *cannot*
be discussed in a particular community, exclusions Foucault has shown to

be the exercise of power" ("Competing Theories" 539). My students, perhaps, understand this dual definition of community better than their teachers. They want to discuss other subjects in the law, business, the social sciences, for example, and at the same time they want to use other kinds of evidence and a different sounding language. But they don't know how to reconcile those impulses, which have been constructed in other communities, with the conventions they see in print. They assume they have to choose between the two constructs, and that choice seems risky, or at least "distasteful."

Moore and Peterson's and Faigley's calls for rhetorical analysis of writing in particular disciplines seem somehow too simplistic in this light. They are right, of course, that English teachers cannot teach students the knowledge of other disciplines, but they neglect Kenneth Bruffee's important distinction between "contact" and "conversation": Entering the dialogue, not simply analyzing it, leads to knowledge. Rhetorical analysis from the distance my students take seems merely like the briefest contact. No wonder they find the alternatives unreconcilable. Despite feeling like outsiders, my students understood the basic idea I was after all along: that language defines professional communities. Bruffee calls this language "conversations," and my students, in effect, were eavesdropping on conversations they had not been asked to join.

Some other perspectives on writing-across-the-curriculum might explain my students' distanced stances. First, looking at texts alone is not enough to help students learn about discourse communities. James Porter recently suggests that teachers should introduce students to the idea of intertextuality, to the fact that texts do not exist in isolation but are part of a continuing conversation ("Intertextuality and the Discourse Community"). Research into collaboration tells us that the talk surrounding any text is at least as important as the writing. Simply looking at texts is like reading the musical score and then analyzing the symphony. I think perhaps I should complicate this assignment and ask students to observe the *talk* that goes on in teachers' coffeerooms, for example, or to investigate the ways law school students do research.

There is one, very small group of students (about two in each class of 24) who have already had such experiences with the "intertext" of their discourse community. These students are what Joseph Williams would call "socialized"—they understand the conventions of their profession, they practice them, and they usually use this assignment as a way to criticize or break away from them. They make up the last group of responses to my assignment, and represent the "insider critics." Here's the ending from a paper titled, "Passive Polemic," about academic writing in journalism:

> Literary journalism is not an oxymoron. The real oxymoron
> is limited journalism. Narration, scene-setting, changing points-
> of-view, rhythm, imagery, dialogue . . . all these and other
> 'literary techniques' help us reconstruct past and present reality.
> We will continue to use the best means we can find to portray
> our subjects. And, thank God, we won't have to go to boring
> journalism quarterlies to find them.

This student is a working journalist who sees conventions the way Linda
Peterson and Leslie Moore say full-fledged members of a community do,
as "boundaries within which and against which the members of a discipline
defined and test their ideas. The writer's relationship to a field of discourse
includes, therefore, not only an acceptance of conventions, but sometimes
a challenge to them" (470). I would like all my students to get further
towards this stance through my rhetorical analysis assignment. But they will
need to do more than look at texts. And their teachers will need to do more
than assign texts for analysis. One conclusion from these student responses
should be that teachers, as experts, let students in on how their communities
use language—how disciplines operate—not just the community of
academics in English, but in all disciplines, not only in print but in the ways
they formulate questions, work on answers, negotiate with one another.
Lucille McCarthy's study of one student's journey through the "strange
lands" of a college curriculum suggests that the "native speakers" in a
discipline must "make explicit the interpretive and linguistic conventions in
their community, stressing that theirs is one way of looking at reality and
not reality itself" (263). James Reither criticizes composition studies'
message that "writers do not need to know what they are talking about:
they can learn what they are talking about as they compose; they can write
their way out of ignorance" (622). Clearly, my students could not write their
way out of what they do not know about professional discourse communi-
ties, nor could they write their way into membership there. Reither argues
that teachers and researchers need to think more broadly than in terms of
rhetorical analysis: "We must also think in terms of the other kinds of
knowing required to belong to a community" (624). That kind of knowing,
he insists, must come from immersion in reading, talking, and writing within
a "knowledge community," not simply from analyzing the written
conventions of a discourse community.
    One implication of Reither's argument and my students' responses to
texts from professional discourse communities is that students should be
asked to be part of the conversation, inquirers in the knowledge community,
in all their classes, which, of course, would mean radical changes in the

structures of many classrooms, particularly outside the English department. But here writing-across-the-curriculum programs can lead the way by modeling teaching situations where the possibility for conversation does exist. My students' careful reading of these texts from the professions would be much more effective in biology and business classes, where the teacher was a practicing writer in those disciplines. Group work in responding to such texts, discovering together how questions are posed and answers offered, seems to be the logical direction for writing-across-the-curriculum classes. One beginning might be to help teachers in other fields see how their students' attempts to write in their discipline can become a way to take on new identities, without completely sacrificing old ones. Asking students in English or composition classes to analyze the "rhetoric" of other disciplines does not work; asking teachers who are indeed insiders in other knowledge communities to analyze that rhetoric might. Those teachers, then, become not dispensers of the "codes" or explicators of conventions that will unlock doors to professional status for students, but people whose own language use, like their students', represents a negotiation among many conflicting communities.

Second, Les Perelman, in "The Context of Classroom Writing," warns that English teachers are so caught up in their own worlds of writing that they don't see beyond their own noses—when they ask students to analyze writing from other disciplines, they may not go any further than philosophy—and rarely do they get beyond academic discourse. Very few students will choose an academic career, yet writing-across-the-curriculum programs and textbooks seldom look at writing in the world of commerce, the law, industry. (The exception is work such as Odell and Goswami's collection, *Writing in Nonacademic Settings*, Bailey and Fosheim's *Literacy for Life*, and Anderson, Brockman and Miller's *New Essays in Technical and Scientific Communication*.) Despite the widespread acceptance of the social perspective on writing, its predecessor, the romantic view of the writer as isolated and inspired, persists right beside it. Our students, particularly those who have mastered the game in English departments, seem to subscribe to this view of writing and the writer. They have been taught to value an individual voice, a personal perspective, and they have been rewarded for writing that was modeled after poets and storytellers. This romantic view of writing has persisted, Patricia Bizzell says in "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty," because teachers weren't aware that the literary models they were using also displayed the same kinds of idiosyncratic, group-controlled conventions as do texts from law or business or physics. Susan Peck McDonald's analysis of the way problems are defined in the sciences vs. the humanities, "Problem Definition in Academic Writing," reveals English

teachers' biases. She shows that the conventions governing literary interpretive discourse are less publicly discernible, less well-defined, and almost unlimited in number, when compared to the problem-posing conventions of the sciences or the social sciences. As a result, she concludes, English and writing teachers "privilege innovation or individualistic problem definition." Further, she warns that writing-across-the-curriculum programs need to "bewareof provincial attitudes about writing—of privileging individualistic or innovative kinds of problem definition that occur in writing about literary subjects"(329).

Students like Lance and Jim, then, take on a different persona in order to please me, the member of the literary discourse community that "privileges" innovation. Students like Kelly and Michelle need to define themselves as different from the disciplines they want to enter because they don't understand that they are already operating in one discourse community where they are comfortable, the English class, and they don't see any connection between that community and the professional one they hope to enter, much less a connection with the many other language communities they belong to. None of these students has moved very far toward belonging to the communities whose texts they are investigating. So, teaching students to analyze the rhetoric of other disciplines has to mean more than saying in effect to them, "Come on up here with us and notice the ugly stuff that business, social science, and legal people write." In other words, if teachers really want to help students learn about writing across the curriculum, they will have to broaden their definitions of texts and contexts. They will have to find ways to show students the connections between communities. Rhetorical expertise, which seems to work so well in interpreting and analyzing literary or political texts, may not serve so well in analyzing professional discourse communities by looking at their texts. Outsiders simply do not have the knowledge shared by members of that community. Writing teachers, like my students, are outsiders when it comes to analyzing the knowledge that a community of scientists or sociologists share, knowledge which shapes their language and their written conventions.

However, we do have rhetorical knowledge not shared by members of other fields, and we can help students recognize the ways language shapes communities and communities determine language. Perhaps if I started further back with this assignment, and asked students to explore the conventions that control other kinds of discourse—the dinner table, the dorm conversations, arguments among family and friends, the talk that goes on at work—then they might be better able to analyze the conventions of professional discourse. And, they might be more comfortable with their role of outsider, knowing that entering any community means a trade-off of some

kind, a making of choices that are not always comfortable or easy. Robert Kegan says in "Self and Other in the Making of Meaning" that growing into any community means learning its language, and that in itself means unlearning other languages. Teachers in the writing-across-the-curriculum movement should be helping students articulate and understand this dilemma as a natural part of growth in writing. Students and teachers, at any given time, are both insiders and outsiders. Both make choices about what language to adopt and what to reject all the time. But teachers, perhaps, tolerate the tension better than students.

Ideally, students could use the tension among what they see as conflicting languages to examine their own places in these communities. I now think that asking students to analyze the conventions of a particular discourse community is in itself asking them to set themselves apart from that community. Criticism, after all, is not engagement, despite Faigley's and Moore and Peterson's suggestion that learning the rhetoric of a discipline helps one to enter it. My students' responses here can be seen as resisting the act of criticism, resisting the distance they are being asked to take on a community they are already committed to. And I think that, despite our humility in investigating writing in other professions, the English department's pride may be one source of this response in students. I'm sure teachers send mixed messages to students when they hold up the model of a writer as an individual, clear voice next to the model of a writer constructed by a community of peers. The writing-across-the-curriculum movement needs to become more sophisticated, more aware of the social contexts that surround any writing, including students' and professionals', before teachers set students about analyzing texts or dropping in on conversations. My students need to understand that distancing themselves from professional discourse communities is an opportunity to learn about the nature of language and community, not an occasion for despair. And writing-across-the-curriculum teachers need to acquire some of that distance on their own assumptions in order to make programs work according to their stated goals—helping students use writing to define themselves as individuals and professionals at the same time.

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