

Academic Writing and Difference

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Abstract

This paper addresses the theme of cross-cultural issues in the teaching of writing (**Theme 4**) through the cultural politics of knowledge and identity.

Success in academic writing is dependent not merely on general competence, but also on an understanding of the constitutive cultural system of academic writing. In negotiating writing tasks, writers must also negotiate underlying assumptions of reader expectations and writing strategies which have decided cultural bases (Grabe and Kaplan 1996).

What Canagarajah (2000) calls “the geopolitics of academic writing” (p. 85) arises from an asymmetry of power between academic writing and the Other discourses that it tends to negate. To perpetuate itself, academic writing conceals its own cultural roots which lie demonstrably in Western notions of rationality affiliated with the Enlightenment (Knoblauch and Brannon 1984). Thus what is, in fact, cultural is made to appear neutral.

I explore these issues and the possibilities for an ethnologically informed practice via Canagarajah (2000), Ivanič (1998), Buell (2004), Bleich (1993), Prior (2004) and others.

As Rohinton Mistry, prizewinning (East) Indian Canadian novelist recounts:

I left Bombay for Canada at the age of twenty-three, and assumed before I got there that it would be no new thing for me . . . The English I spoke was not the English they spoke. I mean there were so many different Englishes . . . At one time I thought this was the culture of the West but now I know it was something different. It was the Indian version of the West and it was mine. (2004 p. 199).

Rohinton Mistry’s fateful encounter with the many Englishes, seems to confirm Halliday’s (1978) suggestion that “language comes to life only when functioning in some environment” (p 28). Language is part of a larger cultural and social system not immediately obvious, especially from the margins. Yet one cannot help detect in Mistry’s confessional narrative a rather peculiar readiness, almost a complicity, with the discourses of the host culture which now define him. It is as though in the interstices of the “many different Englishes” Mistry encounters his difference mediated for him by the host culture, pre-eminently as an absence. Knowledge, even self knowledge, for the postcolonial subject cannot be legitimated without the help of the centre: thus Mistry’s “now I know.” His affirmation as a postcolonial subject can

take place, it seems, only through an epistemic struggle which Suresh Canagarajah (2000) also articulates eloquently in his ethnological study of academic writing.

Why, one feels compelled to ask, does the very difference that sustains Mistry as a writer later seem like an epistemic absence from the perspective of the host culture now at the outset? A lack of knowledge of the implicit assumptions of the host culture can appear reductively as a lack of intelligence, almost. But, borrowing Hymes' words, we may retort, "Character does not come in one accent alone; intelligence has many voices" (p. 209).

Mistry's experience, at once a parable of Otherness and the legitimation of knowledge in dominant discourses, has implications for academic writing, whose implicit codes, pose formidable challenges to the uninitiated. It is in academic writing that the different disciplines appear to organise themselves coherently as discourse communities; and it is through academic writing that we understand how such discourse becomes, as Herzberg says, "a means of maintaining and extending the group's knowledge and of initiating new members into the group." (1986, p. 21; Cited Swales 1990, p. 21). (See also Ivanič 1998, p. 78).

Entering a discipline thus means entering a discourse — in the form of academic writing. However, the entry process is fraught with complications. What appears as transparent and neutral to insiders is not so to outsiders. The roots of these discourses lie demonstrably in a European cultural and intellectual movement, the Enlightenment (Knoblauch and Branon 1984, pp. 51-76), which gave rise to that mode of 'disinterested' inquiry we call positivism. However, as Canagarajah's ethnological analysis of academic writing demonstrates, "disinterested positivism serves ideological interests" (p.57).

Academic writing can pose challenges for local and overseas students alike, although for different reasons. But for both groups it is their outsider status, their difference, in academia that compounds their difficulties. In the end, however, difference makes outsiders of us all.

To enter a discourse also means constructing ourselves in it, requiring the invention of what Roz Ivanič (1998) has called a "discoursal identity" (p. 181). Learning to do so, however, may require us to subsume our differences in ways that, for cultural or social reasons or both, we may be unprepared for.

What strategies, if any, does the conventional teaching of writing provide students for negotiating such difficulties of academic writing associated with difference? And what can ethnology provide?

There is an emerging realisation in both the theory and practice of academic writing, as exemplified by Grabe and Kaplan, that we need to widen our focus beyond issues of grammar despite its continuing importance: "The teaching of writing is separate and distinct from the teaching of syntactic accuracy and the teaching of various text conventions (e.g. spelling punctuation) (1996, p. 422)." To be meaningful, instruction has to account for the cultural, social or ideological underpinnings of writing tasks such as reports, case studies, assignments and so on.

For too long we have also been fixated on simplistic formulations of difference. “Differences in languages,” which was used in contrastive analysis to account for “all the variance that arises with language learning” is, as Buell (2004) asserts, somewhat inadequate in the end. Because this form of analysis failed to capture many other nuances. Citing Selinker (1974), Buell offers the notion of “interlanguage” as a possible alternative (p. 101). In this explanatory model the variations in native and non-native productions occur not simply because of differences in the languages but primarily because in using a foreign language one actively creates an interlanguage, an in-between language, whose “structures neither mirror the learner’s first language nor follow the usual patterns of the target language” (p. 101).

Historically, the shift in explanatory models also marks the development of contrastive rhetoric out of contrastive analysis. And it is in the emergence of the latter Buell sees the promise of “inter-rhetoric, where learners of new rhetorical codes may creatively produce novel, border zone forms, new combinations and transformations that mimic neither the code they are learning nor the code they already know” (p. 102). While Buell’s analysis is meant to work well with other interpretive procedures . . . “intertextual, and ethnographic approaches can work together to enrich an understanding of codes and code-switching in written texts” (117) . . . , it is still grounded to a large extent in issues of second language writing. In this sense, the linguistic approach, the very discourse of contrastive rhetoric, cannot also escape completely the scrutiny from ethnology. Although Buell may be the first one herself to admit this (“the goal of analysis then is not to definitively state the boundaries of monolithic codes” (p. 118)), we cannot ignore the dangers Caanagarajah warns against when he says, “the linguistic explanation smacks of blaming the writers for a deficiency, and the culturalist paradigm benignly ghettoises” writers “under the guise of tolerating differences (p. 107). The linguistic approach is, we might say, a logical positivist concession to difference.

Understanding writing, it must be emphasised, entails going beyond the conventional ensemble of issues associated with it that has evidently constricted the possibilities for all parties: teachers, students, theorists. This may be illustrated most vividly through the work of Knoblauch and Branon (1984):

In traditional practice, commenting on student writing is essentially a product-centred, evaluative activity resembling literary criticism. Students write “papers” so that teachers can describe their strengths and weaknesses, grading them accordingly . . . The assumption has been that evaluating the product of composing is equivalent to intervening in the process. Teachers have concentrated, therefore, on retrospective appraisals of “finished” discourses . . . (p. 123)

The inherent limitations of traditional writing pedagogy is not only the privileging of product over process but more remarkably the conflation of the two. Moreover, the deafening silence of the student writer is only deepened by the feedback given in the traditional writing class. The actual dynamics of power existing in the traditional

writing class between the teacher and the taught is enacted through a crucial but poorly understood interrelationship between writing, feedback and revision as dissected here by Knoblauch and Branon.

Using actual samples of feedback on student writing, they demonstrate further how the use of “facilitative feedback” as opposed to “directive commentary” (p. 126) can improve students’ attempts to be more effective writers. Interestingly, the two different forms of feedback also correspond to two different forms of writing instruction, namely, the writing workshop and the traditional writing classroom, respectively. As a mode of instruction the writing workshop has definite potential to free learners from the strictures of the traditional writing class in which writing instruction stagnates into a few set formulas:

The writing workshop depends on a style of response which differs altogether from that of traditional instruction because its concern is not merely to elicit writing in order to judge it, but to sustain writing through successive revisions in the pursuit of richer insights and concurrently the maturation of comprehension. (Knoblauch and Branon 1984 p. 122).

The writing workshop eschews the write-and-be-judged protocol of conventional instruction in favour of a write-and-explore protocol which incidentally also finds a ready sympathy with the ethnological ethos. It is also in the workshop that we may return some of the power to student writers by raising their status from silent interlocutors to that of active partners in knowledge construction.

The search must now be widened to capture the denser pragmatics in which academic writing remains embedded and for which the ethnological procedure is particularly well suited. In this enterprise our fields and laboratories are none other than our classrooms — and the artefacts none other than the texts that our students produce. Students become not only our informants but “co-researchers” (Ivanič 1998, p. 110) in the larger social reality of learning.

The ritualised forms of the academic writing scene is overdue for ethnological analysis. Because regardless of whether student writers are native or non-native speakers of the language both have to learn, as Buell observes, the same “multiple and fluid codes” that constitute target texts in, unsurprisingly, “graduate seminars and disciplinary fields” (102). Due recognition needs to be accorded to students’ struggles as outsiders: in academic writing tasks students are indeed endeavouring to enter a highly organised but largely invisible social system. The rituals of academia are enacted very often in academic writing. Target texts cannot be produced by students in designated academic settings such as the graduate seminar simply by following instructions – a belief that seems to underpin much of conventional teaching instruction, itself a product of the ruling ideology. Producing target texts in designated settings requires entering textual processes ultimately grounded in issues of power. Academic writing is simultaneously a style of writing and a form of social practice that sustains and is in turn sustained by academia. Its codes reflect the values of its practitioners.

Buell suggests that “code switching,” a further analytical framework for understanding the complexities of the writing process, “highlights, as other theories do not, the social significations of linguistic and rhetorical codes in terms of how they both reflect and produce social identities, relations, and contexts” (102).

Thus linguistic constructions in students’ work that strike us as different and which we are generally inclined to dismiss as nothing more than the lack of proficiency in the target language or perhaps the discourse of academic writing, if they are first language speakers, may be emanating from a far more complex set of reasons than we are prepared to admit. In the first place, this understanding appears to be modelled on our commonly held beliefs about writing: we tend to conflate writing with the mechanical act of transcribing. Our pedagogies based on such simplistic understanding of writing tend to target the most superficial issues — grammar, mechanics — as if no other problems existed. For instance, in writing there is an intense tripartite struggle for meaning between writer, text, and audience, which supersedes the mundane occupations of the general run of the mill writing instruction.

As Paul Prior (2004) suggests, “in everyday usage, ‘writing’ signifies two distinct acts, inscription and composing, that are treated as one . . . when we think of writing, our first image is probably of an act of inscription . . . (p.168).” The very “writing processes . . . where texts come from (p.167),” therefore, remain insufficiently theorised. Texts are also, if anything, notoriously non-homogeneous entities, derived from “varied materials” (p. 167), which impart to them a complex dynamics. Textual theorists such as Derrida have pointed out that “the ‘objectivist’ or worldly consideration of writing teaches us nothing if reference is not made to a psychical space of writing” (p. 212).

Capturing the rich dynamics of the text which is essential to the teaching of writing requires a considerably broader approach. Consider, for instance, the matter of scholarship in research articles signalled overtly through the use of “para-textual conventions” (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 177) without which knowledge cannot be transformed into a legitimate “textual product” (p. 165) as Canagarajah demonstrates. The “geopolitics of academic writing” (p. 85) arises from the dominant culture’s one-sided valorisation of its own textual practices at the expense of others. There is a concomitant Othering of knowledge through the Othering of textual conventions — which are, as Canagarajah demonstrates, in many ways material practices, too.

As far as writerly strategies are concerned, para-textuals are the overt reminders of learning. But even subtler devices are available. Ellen Barton’s “rich feature analysis” of academic texts demonstrates how the use of “evidentials . . . words that express a writer’s attitude toward knowledge” (2000, p.72)” have a decisive effect on how writers sound in their texts. The writer’s “epistemological stance” (74) is intimately connected to the authorial persona they are required to create for themselves. In discourse communities which essentially transact in knowledge the lack of appropriate knowledge stances can mean failure to gain entry:

Experienced academic writers use their epistemological stance to establish and maintain authority as individual knowledge-makers.

Inexperienced academic writers, in contrast, use their epistemological stance to establish and maintain general society as the authority over knowledge . . . This contrast between inexperienced writers' identification with general society and experienced writers' identification with the academic community is one of the classic conflicts between professors and students, experts and lay people, town and gown. (Barton 2004, pp. 74-75).

Thus from the outset writers can find themselves inside or outside the discourse depending on the identities they create for themselves through their epistemological stances as Barton demonstrates here. In written texts writers are attempting to convey more than information. How central the issue of identity is in relation to writing may be seen from the recent work of Roz Ivanič (1998) who points out emphatically that where writing is concerned “ . . . it is not so much a problem of the meaning I want to convey as a problem of what impression of myself I want convey” (p. 336). Ivanič demonstrates this evocatively through the self-performing inaugural of her book *Writing and Identity*:

Who am I as I write this book? . . . I am a writer with a multiple social identity, tracing a path between competing ideologies and their associated ideologies. I have an idea of the sort of person I want to appear in the pages of this book: responsible, imaginative, insightful, rigorous, committed in most of my social roles, but not all. (1)

Do our students know how to become the sorts of persons they are required to become in their written work? Do we tell them how they should project themselves? Our failure to do so is not a simple one as it makes us complicit in serving as relays for an ideology.

We should ask not only who we become as we write, but, more crucially, who do our students become or try to become as they write for us? What histories, cultural and personal, do they bring to the task of writing? How does the writing task require writers to shape their respective social identities?

Pedagogic strategies for teaching writing at the university based on these interrogations can lead us to a much broader understanding of how texts are produced. This focus on texts and textual strategies shifts the ground of inquiry: no more are we interested only in mere catalogues of linguistic differences (ungrammatical vs. grammatical; native vs. non-native; novice vs. expert) but an examination of writers and writing.

Moreover, the view of writing which Ivanič adopts enables us to understand how writer's identities are shaped by that discourse of higher education we call academic writing. The notion of “discoursal identity” (Ivanič 1998, p. 181) opens up the possibility of understanding texts as a set of different identity positions in writing. Some of these are offered to us; others we must create for ourselves. But nothing is

fixed and everything is open to negotiation and contestation. Once freed from its traditional concerns thus, the teaching of writing can become an initiation into the richness of a textual dynamics registered through knowledge stances, identity positions, conscious and unconscious responses to generic expectations, the successful or unsuccessful emulation of disciplinary discourses and so forth. These priorities require us to look at writing as more than a set of determinate outputs — “as though the text in its present form were a fixed entity” (Knoblauch and Branon 1984 p. 125).

Texts themselves may provide some clues. However, a more comprehensive picture can be developed by exploring these issues through open-ended interviews with student writers. The very act of helping student writers explore their own texts in this manner and develop narrative accounts of them retrospectively leads to a greater awareness of the writing process on the part of the students. Much of the work undertaken by Ivanič (1998), Buell (2004), Bleich (1993), Prior (2004) and others corroborates this.

Bleich outlines the possibilities of ethnology for the teaching of writing thus:

The situation of academic ethnography is political, but some ethnographic studies of school classrooms are helpful correctives. Focusing attention on the classroom as an institution (a culture? a community?) can loosen the boundary between theorists and teachers, and between academic ethnographic work and the work of writing in classrooms. (177).

This, in fact, seems more a manifesto than a description of the possibilities of ethnography as a pedagogical tool. Bleich’s statement exhorts us, it seems, to reinvent ourselves within the institution as researchers of writing — if we are not always already so by virtue of our profession. The loosening of boundaries Bleich mentions appears to place theory and practice on the same continuum. No longer can we content ourselves to be the purveyors of the rules of ‘good’ writing. We must become the mediators of that form of self-understanding which is peculiar to the project of writing. “Bringing identity explicitly onto the agenda in the learning and teaching of writing,” as Ivanič observes perspicaciously, “transforms it from a local ‘fix-this-essay’ undertaking into a much more broadly conceived project (338).” This may be justifiably read as an indictment of conventional practices in which students and teachers both, it seems, are equally implicated in conceptualising writing simplistically as a set of responses that could be learned and applied unthinkingly. Even such a casual remark (“a local ‘fix-this-essay’ undertaking”), almost an aside, carries a telling resonance of that sort of populism which perhaps prevails in university writing centres.

It is precisely here that the ethnological project provides us with a means of countervailing the pervasive reductionism surrounding the teaching of writing: we correct grammar, therefore we teach writing, seems to be the literalist mantra. But when we teach writing we effectively teach a form of social practice which may not be understood without, first, recognising that writing, to reiterate an earlier point, far exceeds the simple act of transcription: we occupy various discourse positions in

writing, which are in the final analysis socially conceived. Thus as Basso (1974) states: “Armed with an adequate code description, the ethnographer of writing may turn his attention to a more complex set of problems involving the code’s manipulation in concrete situations” (p. 428) — which in our case happens to be academic writing.

An ethnology of academic writing will necessitate, first, the rescuing of writing from simplistic formulations. We will need to understand the institutional setting of higher education as a discursive process and the challenges it poses in negotiating identity and difference for many students. Working closely with students we can develop a better understanding how writing can be both a possibility and a limit. At the moment we deliver writing instruction normatively. Ethnology can shed light on the actual conditions in which writing as composition takes place and the textual practices that emanate from it. One can envisage the specific form of changes that an ethnologically informed writing practice may lead to, if we consider how the workshop vis à vis the conventional writing class has greater emancipatory possibilities as delineated earlier here through the work of Knoblauch and Branon (1984). Workshops provide the means for rehearsing the many identity positions and their concomitant voicing strategies — which ethnologically formulated responses to student writing can help foster.

Failure to internalise the voices in which apparently routine academic tasks are performed leads inevitably to an epistemic devaluing even as difference becomes confounded with inability. For instance, the voice of disinterested inquiry in academic tasks, we might find, is none other than the voice of the gentleman scholar. But for social or cultural reasons it may not be equally available to all of us. Thus as Ivanič (1998), reminds us “women, older people, Black people, homosexual and bisexual people, and working class people might bring with them to their studies,” a perception “that they do not have the right to a voice in the academic community” (p. 340).

Academic writing tasks, as we can see, are not socially neutral. Left uncorrected thus, writing instruction can easily replicate the very conditions of disadvantage that prevail in the larger society. Ethnology can provide this much needed corrective while enabling us to formulate strategies not for the containment but the promotion of difference. The present study serves as a prolegomenon to a much more detailed engagement later.

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