

Local Knowledge, Local Practices: Writing Communities and the Case for Writing in the Disciplines

Two Excerpts

A.

instruction in higher education in North America. Russell asserts there is a contradiction between disciplinary specialization and the traditional view of writing and mechanical skill. He makes the case that effective instruction in writing and thinking in the disciplines requires taking a socio-rhetorical approach to understanding the local conventions sub-

From _____, by David Russell (Southern Illinois Press, 2002) 12-14.

The transparency of rhetoric in academic disciplines is in many ways a function of specialization. As the disciplines became separated from one another and from the wider culture, persuasion became so

taken for granted by members of the community. Scholars saw little need to enter other symbolic worlds, little benefit in making their own discourse accessible to outsiders, little reason to translate their knowledge into the genres of other communities and thus reconcile their activities and conventions of discourse with those of other disciplines.

Yet the naive, mechanical conception of writing which specialization fostered contradicted the actual practice of academics, for whom writing was a very human thing, a complex social activity involving a whole range of rhetorical choices, intellectual, professional, and political, as recent research into the

conditioned by a community. By its very nature it is local, context specific, dependent on a community for its existence and its meaning. Literacy is thus a function of the specific community in which certain kinds of reading and writing activities take place. Standards of acceptable discourse vary among social and disciplinary groups, a fact that we implicitly recognize in our daily affairs. As Brazilian sociolinguist

because she can barely decode recipes and take down phone messages, but complain that her students.

This social perspective on writing embeds each text in a context of human behaviors. Genre becomes, in Car

recurrent situations, the habits of a community, give rise to repeated formal elements in texts: conventions of argument, evidence, diction, style, organization, and documentation which allow those familiar with the conventions to recognize and understand the writing of a particular community.

In the activities of modern mass education and disciplinary inquiry, the language that counts most is written but written in ways characteristic of the various cooperative activities, the various

communities and subcommunities that make up the system. As Arthur N. Applebee says of the symbolic provide tacit guidelines about proper lines of evidence and modes of argument. Though rarely made explicit, their influence is pervasive;

- B. The second excerpt is taken from an account of research carried out by two rhetoric and composition specialists within a biology course. It issues a caution against WAC assumptions that fostering writing within content areas will be advanced best by those who play the anthropologist versus those who play the missionary.

Young, in

, ed.

complete Experiment III, to plot the turbidity of the culture, as requested in the report section of Experiment III and then to describe the resulting curve. This was to be completed in five or six sentences, since as I said in Appendix I, more words did not convey more meaning. . . . Since the material that they were writing would be an integral part of their final report, this exercise was not a "ghost" or "dry" effort. (Sept. 7, 1988)"

At the inception of the pilot project, Velez and Young had been taking the first approach to WAC and not paying much attention to the second. This was apparent in their efforts to introduce journal-keeping into the biology class and in their lack of any effort to learn about education in biology. When Kauffman rejected the proposal to expand the functions of the lab notebooks, Velez and Young realized that they were outsiders, strangers in a strange land, so to speak, and that they needed to find a more appropriate strategy to guide their activities in the project; as it turned out, this required moving from the generalist-epistemic approach to a more discipline-oriented approach. They realized that they needed to learn a great deal more about language practices in biology before they could be useful to Kauffman and before they could hope to introduce useful changes that would persist in her class. As Velez now recalls, both she and Young had been talking too much. But this was understandable, she says, because neither she nor Young had known what to listen for. She further recalls this moment as the point at which she started to immerse herself in biology materials, thinking that if she was going to help redesign a course, she had better first know something about the course. Metaphorically speaking, Velez and Young abandoned their role of WAC missionaries and became something like anthropologists investigating the culture of academic biology.

Vele

surveys, tape-recorded interviews with Kauffman and students, taking notes on what went on in lectures and labs, and assembling sets of syllabi, assignments, and student reports. Their immediate goal was a deeper knowledge of language practices in the lab course as a reflection of broader disciplinary practices and the rhetoric underlying those practices.