

Research Discourse for Education Undergraduates

Writing for Empowerment: Research Discourse for Education Undergraduates

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In the faculty room, my colleagues in the Curriculum and Instruction department and I exchanged gripes about student writing:

They can't write research papers

They emote; they don't observe.

They can't do citations

Why can't they analyze problems?

And so on. We were talking about students in teacher education— juniors and seniors we had selected for teacher training, who made satisfactory marks in a year long English course, and in all other aspects of undergraduate study. While spelling and grammar were reasonably good, objective writing, it appeared was beyond them. When asked to describe the process of a tutoring session, they produced narratives which read something like this:

*I went to see Lillie Jane, who is the daughter of my friend Katie who used to work with me at MacDonald's. Lillie Jane is five years old, and she was wearing the cutest little T-shirt with lace around the neck and matching overalls. I wrote my notes in a little pink notebook I use for special things. Lillie Jane likes to play with dolls— what little girl doesn't—and she knows all her letters. We sat down on a big, white comfortable couch and started reading out of *The Golden Book of Favorite Stories*...*

And on and on.

The students gazed at us injured and doe-eyed when they received less than stellar grades on these productions. What was wrong?

The fault, I think was partly ours. In the English sequence students took before coming to us, much writing was personal. Then in our program, students journaled about placement experiences, which contained often more personal material than we ever asked for or cared to read. But because their journals included information and reflection, they were awarded good grades. The students apparently generalized their personal narrative style to other assignments. While the students could write clearly in English, they did not control academic discourse. Gee's work on Discourse and identity provides a useful framework for understanding the students' difficulty (1999). In this framework, a Discourse is not simply a style of writing but a complete "identity kit" which shapes and is shaped by a particular view of the world. Gee capitalizes the word when he uses it in this broad sense; when considering language-in-use and stretches of text, he writes it uncapitalized, 'discourse.' For Gee, a Discourse includes not only the rules for expression in speech and writing, but imposes global rules for self-expression, and for organizing and perceiving reality in a particular culture, enterprise, or discipline. It dictates the style in which questions are posed and addressed, and contains complex rules as to which questions may not be asked at all. Marxism is a discourse; so too is whole language reading theory, fundamentalist Christianity and academic writing.

Our students' clumsiness in writing academic English resulted, stemmed, it would seem, not from an inability to write English prose, but from a failure to acquire the Discourse appropriate to observation in education. They enjoyed planning lessons

and developing classroom activities and this evidenced an awareness of underlying educational theory. How could we help them conceptualize and write in a more objective way?

Possible Approaches

Gee (1999) distinguishes between primary Discourses acquired in early childhood and those learned later. Southern Mountain English, Cantonese, and Midwestern English are primary linguistic Discourses, which may be absorbed unconsciously as we learn to speak (Pinker, 1995). We acquire them as we mature, just as we learn to use forks or chopsticks. Academic writing is not a primary Discourse acquired in infancy. All of us learn it later and because we are taught. But the amount, intensity and content of necessary instruction varies with past experience with language, the nature of our experience as readers, and our familiarity with academic culture. We not only learn Discourses; we absorb the identity and approaches to the world which they embed (Gee, 1999).

It has long been acknowledged that university students require instruction in academic reading and writing. In her pioneering *Errors and Expectations* Shaughnessy (1977) argues against labeling struggling academic writers as “disadvantaged” and offers specific suggestions for working with developmental writers. Shaughnessy’s work with developmental students at the City College of New York challenges us not to be dismissive of students who fail to control academic genres when we meet them. Dismissiveness can be played out in many ways, and need not culminate with the

students' failing our courses. When, as faculty members, we griped about student writing without addressing the problem, we were also being dismissive. It can be easier to "lower the bar" and assign genres with which students have experience than to insist on more challenging projects. Fitts (2005) speculates that many college students subtly encourage their teachers to assign them writing connected to feelings because they grew used to such assignments in high school. Personal writing is a Discourse they control (Gee, 1999). Similarly, many of our undergraduates had earlier been schooled in what Wood (1997) calls the *traditional* approach emphasizing grammar and vocabulary. Then as part of the undergraduate program, students had been required to take several "writing intensive courses" which utilized a process approach involving prewriting, editing, and the preparation of several drafts. But the tone of their writing had remained essentially personal.

Students' failure to acquire the academic writing genre could be due in part to the way students processed what they read. There is, after all, a recursive relationship between the way we read and the way we write. Caverly, Nicholson & Radcliffe (2004) note that critical reading involves metacognitive and affective processes closely related to effective writing. Similarly, Rao (2005) notes that contextualized writing goes hand in hand with reading and fosters the development of critical reading. Some authors advocate specific instruction in summary writing for students struggling with academic literacy Friend (2001), but in our department, many

instructors were employing these methods, and the results did not carry over into other varieties of exposition.

Perrin (2004) argues in favor of individualized instruction in writing centers, which, the author believes more effective than remedial writing courses. Our university has an excellent writing center which many students visited; however, the problem of overly personal writing remained. Perhaps the problem was one of exposure. Today's students are very accustomed to literacies embedded in electronic technology, but less comfortable with paper journals and print. Several authors note there is a changing interface between literacy and technology. Kuehner (1999) observes that rapid technological change is making computers ubiquitous in teaching reading and writing. Williams' (2005) even extends the definition of "writing" beyond conventional rhetoric to include the ability to use graphics and argues for specific instruction in visual communication because images carry extraordinary power. Quible (2005) notes that the blog is becoming a dominant literacy and suggests it can be used for writing instruction.

Our Approach

This reflective paper describes our experience in developing a course to help elementary education students at East Tennessee State University write objectively as educators. There were several factors to consider in planning. We wanted students to develop research writing skills that would serve them well in our program and beyond. Probably because of the emphasis on positivistic research in our science

curriculum, our students seemed largely unaware there was such a thing as qualitative research, although they had read many examples. For us, this was not only an academic issue, but a professional one. Qualitative research is most easily carried out in classrooms. Stephens (1998) observes that we have lost control of the knowledge making in our field. Since the advent of the National Reading Panel, teachers are increasingly required to implement programs developed by researchers from other fields; most such investigators have never taught reading. It made sense to empower students as disciplined observers and objective writers both to augment their individual skills and to interest them in research as an integral element of practice. We also hoped to develop an awareness of the cultural function of literacy (Fishman, 1988), as this was a gap in our curriculum. Our upper level reading courses focused on pedagogic and methodological issues rather than on broader issues in literacy.

To address these needs, our Curriculum and Instruction faculty developed a one hour, semester long course, *Current Issues in Literacy* in which students would learn to write objectively. The course would be the first in our Elementary Education sequence, so students would be prepared for the writing tasks awaiting them later in the program. Because in our college APA style is used almost universally, this manner of formatting would be taught. The major requirement in this writing intensive course was the preparation of five APA style papers of increasing difficulty about literacy in our society. To provide background for the writing, there would be several readings to complement presentations by the instructor and class discussion.

We developed assignments to foster objective observation about literacy-related topics and appropriation of educational Discourse. The first assignment was a self-observation of literacy in daily life. Students were instructed in objective writing and collected data on what they read and wrote over a period of several days. They learned to prepare their work in standard APA form with introduction, methodology, results, and concluding sections. Later papers introduced the use of outside sources, the writing of a literature review, the inclusion of interview data and the preparation of bibliographies and abstracts. In one assignment, students examined the changing face of education in the Southern Mountains, where our university is located. For this paper, they read Stewart's classic *The Thread that Runs So True* (1949) and interviewed an older member of their families about educational experiences. To help students realize that tone is affected by subject, we permit a slightly more personal approach in this assignment. A culminating paper on the *No Child Left Behind Act* required multiple outside sources and an interview with a practicing K-12 teacher. Mini lessons (Atwell, 1998) on editing and such topics as parallel structure are presented on an "as-needed" basis.

Admittedly, this was a great deal of work for one credit, and many students complain about all the writing. Frankly, we would have preferred for *Current Issues In Reading* to be a three hour course. But our students may only take a limited number of hours in education, so we could not increase the course hours; however, the

availability of writing intensive credit, required at our college was partial compensation.

Enacting the Program

No course is uniformly successful, but judging by the reactions of our faculty, and those of the students, *Current Issues in Literacy* has been extremely successful in teaching our students to write academically. Intensively, and over a short time, the course fosters an ability to write objectively and think critically. While students sometimes feel burdened by the amount of work, most are appreciative of the academic gains they make in the course. We have found that the students enrolled in the course fall in three groups. Some have experience with research writing, but have not done critical papers in education; they struggle with APA style. A second group, the largest, show reasonably well-developed writing skills in journals and personal essays, but have little or no experience with objective writing. Finally, a smaller group, struggles with writing of any kind. These students had difficulty with the English composition sequence, and their problems in writing continue. At the time they enter our program, some members of this group could still be classified as developmental students.

In this section, I present representative statements by three “graduates” of the class. These students were collaborators on this article, and are credited as co-authors, not anonymous subjects of research. To address institutional requirements, I listed them as research subjects in a protocol submitted to the Institutional Review

Board (IRB). But their contributions should be viewed as those of collaborators and colleagues, rather than data from qualitative research. The first statement is by Cindi Ramsey, a “non-traditional” student, i.e. one who did not come to our university directly from high school, but has had years of intervening life experience. Many such students have family responsibilities and full-time employment. This was true of Ms. Ramsey, who had a strong business background. Her child was in middle school when while Ms. Ramsey was enrolled in READ 3000. Ms. Ramsey had moved through our program very gradually, and had therefore experienced the changes in our curriculum over time. Ms. Ramsey had some experience in academic writing, but had never collected interview data nor integrated it with knowledge about literacy in society.

Student opinion: Cindi Ramsey

Current Issues in Literacy [is] ... a junior level course... Obviously, it is of great importance for students to understand and be able to write papers in the APA style; many professors expect students to be able to do this without having to take their class time to teach it. [This course] teaches the students how to conduct their own research in order to interpret data collected by themselves. Conducting one’s own research and constructing an APA paper from it is vastly different than merely studying someone else’s findings.

...[The instructor] began by teaching students how to construct a basic APA paper.

Students were to study their own literacy; reading activities were recorded in two hour

blocks for two days. My research paper, entitled “Literacy: A Study of My Daily Life,” surprised me by making me aware of how much I read without even realizing it... Gradually [we learned]... more about APA research, including interviewing techniques. Another paper I wrote, entitled “Literacy in Schools: A Study of Popular Views,” not only included research conducted from magazines that were not professional journals, but also included an interview with the mother of a student. The mother I interviewed was in agreement with what the ETSU College of Education Department teaches education majors about teaching children; she definitely thought teachers should be using hands-on activities to make literacy more palatable for students. She was not in agreement with what is learned as an education student, however; she believed teachers should only teach the classics rather than including trade books and popular literature. This assignment taught me how to construct a complete APA paper while teaching me how the public regards literacy education at the same time.

Current Issues in Literacy is a unique and valuable course... Students ... learn about the many aspects of teaching literacy, such as whole language versus phonics and the historical background of teaching literacy in the United States. Students who complete this course have a firm grasp of public and educational opinion as well as research and writing techniques that will serve us well as we complete our undergraduate courses and will also serve us in the future as we seek master’s degrees and doctorates.

Ms. Ramsey had experience academic writing prior to taking *Current Issues in Literacy* and felt the course increased her competence. By contrast, Connie Rosenbalm had little experience with writing in academic discourse. In many ways, she was a strong writer. Her vocabulary and organization were excellent, and there were no significant problems in mechanics. Her writer's voice was strong. But she had not written objective pieces. Over the term, this student learned to use academic Discourse clearly and effectively. In her final paper, she advanced an argument against the *No Child Left Behind Act* which I, as a Northerner I had never heard—namely that it violated states' rights. Her ability to integrate objective writing into her value system evidences how fully she appropriated academic discourse and made it her own.

Student opinion: Connie Rosenbalm

Prior to enrolling in this course, my writing experience consisted mostly of creative writing assignments and business writing. *Current Issues in Literacy* is a one hour technical writing course offered at East Tennessee State University for pre-service teachers. During the semester, the class explored many current topics in education. Reading assignments ... were incorporated into class discussions and offered an introduction to writing assignments. Throughout the course... [we were] taught research writing skills and APA formatting in progressive phases. The first assignment for the course was a brief self-study paper that required nothing more than gathering data from observations of our personal use of literacy. This assignment

contained the extreme basic structure of an APA research paper; a title page and five basic headings. In the following assignments the paper's structure expanded to include appendices, references, literature reviews and abstracts.

... Each class [began] with a brief lecture on the elements and characteristics found in the section. For example, literature reviews were to be brief overviews of an article, not lengthy summaries. Dr. Gann provided handouts outlining the new section being added to the next paper, which served as an example of correct structure and tone.

At the beginning of the semester, I struggled with the format of the APA paper... With each paper... [I was] offered ways to improve upon my writing. I had never been given so much feedback on one paper. I welcomed the constructive criticism and used it to improve my writing. I also met with... [the instructor] outside of class to discuss problems I was having. During these meetings, she was very supportive and offered honest as well as critical instruction that assisted me with my writing.

The No Child Left Behind Act: One Teacher's Opinion was the final assignment completed for the course. Therefore, it contained more elements of an APA research paper when compared to earlier papers. It contained the same basic structure as previous assignments, but required an abstract as well as more critical analysis of the data collected. The assignment was to examine the *No Child Left Behind Act* through journal article, critiques and an interview with a K-12 teacher. I

began the assignment by gathering information about NCLB from juried publications.

After reading many articles, I decided to focus on the issue of states rights and their loss of autonomy. Next, I interviewed a high school social studies teacher and discussed the satisfaction and dissatisfaction that he had as a teacher. During the interview, the teacher and I discussed NCLB and his opinions regarding the legislation. His opinions were similar to that of the articles I chose for my paper. Finally, I critically examined the data collected through the interview and articles.

With this final paper, I feel that my research writing skills have improved tremendously when compared to my writing at the beginning of the course. I am more confident in my writing abilities, both grammatically and structurally.

Student opinion: Jessica Buell

Ms. Rosenbalm and Ms. Ramsey were reasonably strong writers before they enrolled in *Current Issues in Literacy*. The situation was different for Jessica Buell who came to East Tennessee State University from a small mountain high school where the offerings were general, and an academic sequence had not been unavailable. Although she had passed basic English composition, this student still struggled with writing at a fairly rudimentary level. She spoke a robust form of Southern Mountain English—not at all unusual for our students-- and had little concept of which dialect features could not be used in formal writing. We met privately many times. Often, she brought drafts of her papers, so we could critique

her work before grading it. She worked very hard and made great strides in her ability to write in the academic genre. About her experience in the class, she says:

I at first found [this course] frustrating because it was different from anything I had every done. It took me a few papers to get the hang of it and it took me until the end of the semester to become confident. I began enjoying writing this way. In a summer science education class, our class was asked to write a paper using APA, and when I turned mine in she was impressed. The instructor said she just thought we knew how to use APA for our references but she enjoyed my paper in APA style, and I found it an easier way to write a research paper. Professors are impressed that I as an undergrad I know how to write this kind of paper. Any time I can impress a professor I take the chance.

Having overcome her difficulty in using academic discourse, this student has been able to proceed with her program with increased confidence.

Why We Feel Strongly About *Current Issues in Literacy*

In our *Current Issues in Literacy* class, no student is labeled as “developmental.” We believe most undergraduates need help in mastering academic discourse. Some students arrive having done more academic writing than others, but we think every student in undergraduate education can benefit from opportunities to do critical writing and observation in literacy. Where review of basic English is needed, we provide it either in comments on papers, individual sessions, or class-wide “mini-lessons” (Atwell, 1998).

By providing this course to all undergraduates in elementary education, we hope to develop in our students a sense of responsibility for knowledge-making in our field. Our education students seem more aware of research which includes hypotheses and control groups, rather than action research, which can actually be carried out by teachers in classrooms. *Current Issues in Literacy* provides a foundation in objective writing for research, which may later translate into independent observational projects (Mills, 2000). We are committed to *educating* new teachers for knowledge making, rather than to *training* them to implement other people's ideas. For we want to develop teachers who ask, "If what I am doing is not working, how can I do things differently today?"

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