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Moving from Expressive Writing to Academic Discourse

Elizabeth Robertson

When I speak about the *move* from expressive to academic discourse, I realize I am perpetuating a notion which may interfere with the proper understanding of either of these modes. That is, my statement implies that there's a one-directional movement, that academic discourse is somehow higher up on a hierarchical scale. I do not, in fact, believe that to be the case. "Academic Discourse" as it occurs in practice in many undergraduate courses, may be among the least useful, least authentic forms of language use. Required term papers or critical papers often function as tests rather than as explorations. They are performances of certain required skills: use of sources, correct documentation, proper formulation of someone else's ideas. Writers are often actively discouraged from expressing their own points of view, from participating in their own reading, or indeed, from "appearing" in the paper at all. Yet if the expressive mode is truly the matrix from which other forms of discourse evolve as James Britton has claimed, then writers, in order to work successfully in academic modes, must move back and forth on the continuum from one form to the other, keeping the self always at the center.

The "will to learn" which Jerome Bruner asserts is an intrinsic motive in all of us, may be stifled when rigid and formal demands prevent students from engaging in more tentative, exploratory prose. "What the school imposes," say Bruner, "often fails to enlist the natural energies that sustain spontaneous learning—curiosity, a desire for competence, aspiration to emulate a model, and a deep-sensed commitment to the web of social reciprocity" (127).

In the Writing Lab at the University of Iowa we try very hard to engage—or perhaps to rekindle that will to learn in our students. Almost from the beginning of the semester, we ask each student to keep a journal about the

reading they are doing in other classes, about the lecture notes, about the ideas and concepts they are learning. The journal is “talking on paper,” as Lou Kelly, the lab director calls it, sometimes directly to us, telling us what they think they have learned and how it strikes them, sometimes talking back to the text itself, struggling to understand its new vocabulary, or asking questions about puzzling ideas. The central assumption behind the reading journal is that reading IS experience, and that the student is at the center of that experience, just as students are at the center of all other experiences they are telling us about.

And we ask them the same sorts of probing questions about the reading experience as we do about other experiences: *WHY* do you think what you think? What is the importance of this particular idea? to you? to others? to other ideas in the course? Is it just someone else’s idea or does it make sense to you? fit with *your* experience? with what else you knew? In other words, we try to provide what Bruner calls “the dialectical, almost dramaturgic quality of dialogue” (viii) which is the model for pursuing our own thoughts in the privacy of our own consciousness, the model for any interior, intellectual work.

We use the reading journal to help students participate in their own learning. But we also use it as a way into the formal papers they must write for other classes. Colleen, the student whose writing I’d like to discuss, does indeed learn to use her new fluency as a way of learning in her other courses. She came to the Lab, worried that she was failing her freshman rhetoric course, unable to follow her literature and psychology lectures because they “go by me too fast” as she put it, and feeling generally reluctant to write because she was embarrassed by the mistakes she made. In one of the earliest papers she wrote to me, she said,

I feel so much lower as in social class from other people in our Rhetoric class. I mean I talk different some. I make mistake. My family is poor. We not dirt poor. Just plain poor, as in a lot lower than the middle class or low middle. I mean why is it that some people never have to work for a damn thing in life and other have to work through everything they do?

Colleen and I talked briefly about her feelings. I asked her some questions and she was launched on a series of papers about how her father’s heart attack forced them to sell much of their farm, her responsibilities in a family of nine children, the job she had to carry in order to go to school. Most of these were “expressive” writings, that is, writings close to the self, writings which we were not as concerned to shape or to edit, as we were simply to make them clear, to Colleen herself and to at least one other reader. All these writings grew increasingly detailed and increasingly reflective. At the end of one such piece, Colleen wrote:

In a lot of ways I felt as though I was cheated out of the so-called best years of your life. My life at home took priority. I was a mother, cook, referee, servant, and chamber maid all combined into one. But then, again, there's a lot of good things that happened to me too. My dad's still alive, we're still surviving, I got into the Upward Bound Program which gave me 2 months of freedom—this also led me to college. I've got a basic grant to pay for part of my tuition—but who's to say my opportunity won't be taken away by our president. . . . It's a shame that when you have money and power some people want to keep it entirely among themselves. The rich stay rich the poor stay poor. I finally go back to my first question. Is it really fair for some people to have so much while others struggle to keep what little they have?

Here, Colleen is going all over the place—her responsibilities, her father's illness, the Upward Bound Program, Reagan's policies. Nevertheless, she is not *just* reporting, but beginning to reflect on the drawbacks and benefits of her situation; she is putting her own experiences into the perspective of a larger social context.

My questions on this paper led Colleen in several directions. I still wanted her to be able to write a more focused, detailed narrative. So I asked her about her father's illness and the changes it caused in their family's life. But I also wanted to see if she could pursue a subject related to her experience, yet which took her beyond it.

I asked her first about the Upward Bound Program. Then about Reagan's budget cuts. She wrote more narratives, telling me how she got involved in Upward Bound, what the students were like, how the program helped her. But she realized she needed more information if she was to answer my questions about whom the program served, and how it was financed. She finally went to published sources and, at my suggestion, interviewed the director of the program at Iowa. She told me all about that information—on paper of course—and we worked together trying to pull her many papers together. At about this time, she was assigned to write a persuasive paper using sources in her rhetoric class. Her strong feelings about the effect of the Reagan budget cuts on the Upward Bound Program made this subject a natural one to pursue.

Her final paper had some ragged edges of course, but it was a genuine synthesis of her own experience and her reading. Colleen begins her paper:

In 1964, the U.S. Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act, which authorized a federal program to increase the number of high school students from low-income families or backgrounds to have a chance to go to college. The name of this program is called Upward Bound.

A big percentage of the students in our program at Iowa came from large cities and didn't have very much to live for. Most of them were from broken homes and living in the streets. It gave them a chance to see what college life was all about.

She goes on to tell us about a couple of cases—Effie, whose foster parents abused her, whose escape was the Upward Bound Program, and Eric, whose family had kicked him out and who didn't have enough to eat but whose goal was to start a home to care for the elderly. Then she generalizes about their experience.

The Upward Bound Program gave them a chance to see what college life was all about. It also kept a great number of 'problem kids' out of trouble. . . . It was amazing to find that so many deprived people when put in a learning environment, actually did get ahead.

Then Colleen goes back to her sources:

A report released by the U.S. Department of Education reveals that about 91% of the participants enter some kind of post-secondary school.

Colleen describes the report and quotes from another study.

Another follow-up study was done under the Department's Office of Program Evaluation. Among the studies, the major findings are these: Overall, Upward Bound had a positive effect on student persistence. But despite these results, the Reagan administration apparently feels that it's not important to try to educate and give a chance to low income people so they can better themselves.

She talked more about the budget cuts and finally ended with this:

I personally feel they're making a big mistake. I really learned a lot while I was in the Upward Bound program. I think it's a shame that people like me, and many who have it a lot worse off than I do, won't get the chance to make it to college.

Colleen moves back and forth: from narrative to exposition using her own knowledge and knowledge she has learned from sources. She's learning to see the implications of her own experience and to see how it contradicts or confirms the experiences that are documented in published sources.

As a teacher, I was trying to make sure that Colleen's progress towards the transactional was gradual enough so that, as James Britton says, "the self is not lost on the way; that on arrival, the self, though hidden is still there. . . . For the self is the unseen point from which all is viewed. There can be no other way of writing quite impersonally, and yet with coherence and vitality" (179).

Colleen had never really done a "research paper" so she told me, so she was startled to find herself in the middle of one almost before it was assigned in the class. She had not thought of *research* as something *she* needed to know, but as somehow writing about, as she put it, "important things in a book that nobody really understand."

All during that same semester, I had Colleen keep a reading journal on her psychology and literature classes. She wrote first simply about what was happening in the class:

On Friday two other girls and I will act out and read the part where Gloucester is blind, and tries to commit suicide. Edgar takes him up on this cliff, but he doesn't actually go through with it. We can use props. I'm supposed to be blind, so I'm going to get a cane, and maybe some sunglasses. Cindy, who plays the part of Edgar, has been practicing with me. We need help as far as acting goes. I think we're what you call professional amateurs.

I asked her about her role and how it fit in the play, and more about *Lear* generally. She was soon writing more thoughtfully in answer to my questions. Of *Lear* generally she wrote:

In the beginning of the play, we find out about King Lear. He is very popular, impulsive, old, mistakes words for feelings, and he owns and controls the whole country.

I picked up on her statement, "Lear mistakes words for feelings." It sounded like something Colleen might have heard in class, so I asked her what she meant by that. "I mean," she said, "that Lear was the kind of man who listened to what people told him in words more than what he was in his true feelings." And she went on to discuss Goneril and Regan's treatment of their father and Cordelia's honesty. Because Colleen herself was involved in a tangle of complicated family relationships, she had a great deal to say about how Lear misunderstood his youngest daughter. Once again, she was able to bring her own experience into direct contact with the texts she was struggling to understand. She came to know experience as "source and endless resource," as Sherman Paul puts it in a article about journal writing. Journal writing is close to the self he says. It gives us the right to participate in our experience. "Because of such engagement one will always have something relevant to say, one will never be a an end of words" (5-7).

Though Colleen was finding herself unexpectedly fluent in writing about literature—and was discovering that she had enough knowledge and sufficiently strong feelings to write about an issue of public policy, she was still concerned about the major big research paper she was to write in psychology, a paper which was to summarize Freud's major theories and discuss how later psychologists adopted and expanded his ideas. I was a little worried about it myself as a matter of fact. But once again, I had Colleen read and then explain her reading to me, in her own words, trying to relate what she was learning to anything at all she already knew. In one paper, for example, she told me that they were studying the psychopathology of aging. "I really don't know the true definition of pathology so I looked it up and it is the branch of medical science that treats the origin, nature, causes and development of disease."

Colleen *still* didn't know what psychopathology was—so I asked her if the book said anything about the specific diseases of the aged. She looked back to the book. "Dementia and depression," she said, still not knowing

what that was. Finally I asked her if she knew any elderly people. “Oh yes,” she told me. She worked at a nursing home. I asked her to tell me what the people were like there, why they seemed to be there, what her job was. Then we went back to her psychology text—and Colleen began to realize that when she had written about how the old people she worked with “spent all their time sleeping or just sitting around,” or how they “talked about the olden days and some confused the past with the present,” or how some had “bad grooming habits,” or how others took, as Colleen said, “the role of a turtle—they just crawled into their shell,”—that *here* perhaps were some of the symptoms of dementia and depression, those words she thought she did not understand, thought she knew nothing about.

Pulling the research paper together was not easy certainly, but we had plenty of material, for Colleen had by now written in her lively way about all the reading. She came to focus on Freud’s theories of sexuality and was especially incensed about his views on women. “He’s just another of those males who believes in keeping women in her place. And that’s at home.” She wrote,

I suppose he’s brilliant. But there are times I think he didn’t understand what he was writing his theories on. One that I really think he was mistaken on was he felt women are inferior to men because of what they don’t have.

Because the rather rigid specifications for this paper demanded a formal and impartial statement of someone else’s ideas, we had to edit out much of Colleen’s colloquial style. But her own ideas provided the frame for the paper. And she was, with help from my questions and some editing suggestions, able to recast those ideas as she discovered that others thought much as she had. She found in Karen Horney, for example, an early Feminist statement of opposition to Freud’s theories.

The opposition to this theory was first mounted in 1926 by Karen Horney who said that Freud was in a poor position to know what little girls think. According to Horney, ‘it is not little girls who perceive their condition as degraded. Rather, it is little boys and men who eventually come to see their counterparts as deficient and who then created the self-fulfilling prophecy that has doomed womankind to inferiority.’

Most recent feminist writers have taken this argument further and have reflected that the age old cultural bias is ‘a devious attempt to justify the continuance of male supremacy.’ What they’re saying is that many feel that Freud was just another one of those males who, consciously or not, believes in keeping the woman in her place.

This paper, like the Upward Bound paper, was rough in places. By no means had Colleen thoroughly mastered her subject. But she did have a grasp on it. And more important, she realized, as we went back and forth from writing about the reading to writing about her experience, that she *did* have ideas about even this difficult subject.

Sondra Perl in her study of basic writing students has spoken of their dogged concern to extend the previous sentence (qtd. in Flower and Hayes 371), their concern, that is, just to look for more words. And their tendency to keep returning to the assignment, seeking ready-made goals instead of setting goals of their own. That tendency was certainly typical of Colleen in much of her writing assigned for other classes. But she moved far past that stage as she struggled in the Writing Lab to *adapt* what she had already written, the structure of *her* ideas, to an assignment.

Even the choices we made, as we edited the paper for another audience, gave Colleen a special kind of power and control over her writing. She was not forced desperately to squeeze out just any words she could. She could choose what to include in the final paper and in so choosing, she learned that writing does involve a rhetorical stance, that she has control over the way she presents her thoughts to a particular audience. We left out as much in the final paper as we left in, but Colleen realized that she had written a series of papers which could serve different purposes or suit different audiences.

Colleen wrote at the end of the Writing Lab course:

I think the most important thing I've been taught this semester in the Writing Lab is you achieve or learn something by writing a paper, maybe even learn about yourself. Now it seems I do know what you will question me about when I'm writing a paper. Sometimes I try to compete over you by answering questions before you have asked them—sometimes I made a paper too long and drag things in. But then I can cut things out if I need to if I think the reader does not want to learn that. I approach my writing in different ways and it's easier than it used to be.

I think that Colleen had indeed learned or at least, experienced, that writing can lead to new knowledge, that it is central to education and not a peripheral skill, or an obstructive course one must pass through. She had begun to learn, too, to be her own editor, to ask the sorts of questions that other readers might ask, to anticipate her readers' needs.

One semester was probably not sufficient for Colleen to *unlearn* old habits. She would perhaps have to make that move—from expressive writing to academic discourse—over and over again, with different teachers and in different subjects before she could truly learn how integral writing is to the making of meaning. But I tried with her, and continue to try with others, to begin the process of making an unfamiliar, even hostile academic world more comfortable, more accessible, a world spacious enough to include what students have already learned as well as the things they have yet to master.

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