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LITERACY & IDENTITY

Pay attention to the man behind the curtain: The importance of identity in academic writing

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"I do enjoy reading your columns," a person told me at a conference. "Though I'm not so sure that an academic journal should be focusing so much on identity when what we're supposed to be doing is teaching academic literacy."

In that comment I heard the echoes of so many others that I have come across over the years. I heard again all the arguments about how objective, rationalistic, academic literacy leaves no room for issues of identity as well as the comments that anything remotely personal has, at best, a limited role to play in school. It reflects a clear and often widely accepted binary set of definitions. There is personal writing. There is academic writing. The two forms exist on their own, separate and identifiable. Issues of identity belong with personal writing but have no influence on academic writing, which is objective, detached, and analytical. Yet the ease with which we often construct these categories and boundaries conceals from us just how permeable these divisions are. Just as writing that is traditionally considered personal can be rigorous and analytical, academic writing is always enmeshed in issues of identity. What we miss by talking and thinking in such binary terms is what actually divides the thinking about academic or personal writing beyond a specific use or absence of personal pronouns or the experiences of the author.

It seems so easy at first to dismiss identity from academic writing. Writing for academic exposition or argument is perceived to be objective, analytical, and impersonal. The whole point is to clear away the identity of the writer so that the reader can focus on the ideas, the evidence, and the analysis. In that way the reader will not be influenced or biased by the identity of the writer. Instead, the concepts and facts will be weighed dispassionately and the truth will emerge. Identity issues, in such literacy practices, can only muddy the discourse. Identity distracts the reader from the data and analysis and focuses instead on irrelevant issues such as the gender, class, cultural background, or experiences of the writer. In fact, as proponents of academic writing maintain, by erasing identity from writing it can be truly egalitarian and allow anyone to succeed, regardless of gender, race, or social class.

In terms of literacy education, the teaching of academic writing and reading has focused on providing students with the "skills" they need to

prosper in school. Such an instrumental approach to literacy education regards academic writing as the key to success in the classroom, and subsequently in future careers. The conventions, or just as often the formulas, of academic writing can be taught to students in literacy classes. The students can then take those conventions to their other classes and employ them whenever academic writing is needed. The most reductive and inflexible of these approaches is the five-paragraph essay. Many students are taught that using the five-paragraph essay form with any semblance of identity removed is the core of academic writing and will allow them to march triumphantly through the writing assignments of one class after another.

By contrast, such a position regards any writing that explicitly addresses identity as emotional, subjective, lacking rigor, and impossible to grade. Bringing up issues of identity, even using a personal pronoun, is irrelevant to the academic study of data and evidence. If such literacy classes include personal writing or reading, it is only as a first step in teaching students to do academic writing. Such a conception of academic writing is part of a larger culture that privileges science, rationality, linearity, and argument. To place your faith in objectivity, detachment, and analysis results in a concurrent belief that emotion, narrative, and experience are soft and weak.

Can we define academic writing?

There are several problems with this ideal of academic writing. The reality is that academic writing is a slippery concept. Though each teacher in each discipline may think all academic writing is the same because all writing in a particular teacher's classroom is the same, there is a broad and divergent variety of writing within any education institution. As Bartholomae (1995) noted, "If you collect samples of academic writing within or across disciplines, it has as many types and categories, peaks and valleys, as writing grouped under any other general category" (p. 63). Such diversity reflects not only different ways of communicating but also different ways of creating knowledge (Zamel & Spack, 1998). Some disciplines value numbers as evidence, others narrative, and still others textual examples. If we admit that there are different ways of creating knowledge, then we must also acknowledge that such differences can be influenced by the culture around us. Once we find ourselves thinking about culture we are also thinking about identity.

It is also difficult to believe that there is a single set of academic writing skills we can teach students. Arguments from Street (1995) and Gee (2001) have reminded us forcefully that literacy is not a static thing—not an autonomous set of skills. Instead, scholars have argued that literacy is always a cultural construction, always situated in specific contexts, and always shaped by institutional forces, but it is not bound by them (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Indeed, what distinguishes academic writing from other genres, these writers would argue, is not that it is more worthy, closer to the truth, or more analytical but that it reproduces the discourse of a particular social class and institution (Fox, 1999; Lillis, 2001).

From a different perspective, there are many others who have argued that work that is explicitly personal and addresses issues of identity can be as intellectually rigorous as what is conventionally considered academic (Bishop, 1999; Newkirk, 1997). Though this is an issue I plan to take up in a later column, I do want to note Tobin's (2004) observation that if we accept the idea that writing instruction should prepare students not only for their course work "but also help them come to see and use writing as a lifelong source of discovery and pleasure, it is not at all self-evident that the teaching of personal narrative is in any way outside our mission" (p. 106).

The preceding paragraphs are sprinkled with citations of writers who have provided persuasive critiques of the traditional concept of academic writing, and they are only a few of the many who have done so. Given the breadth and

depth of the critique, it is surprising that the idea of a monolithic, culturally superior academic literacy, detached from any concerns of identity, holds on so tenaciously in the field of literacy education. Yet in many textbooks I see and with teachers I talk to and students I meet, academic writing is discussed as being a definable, unchangeable, and impersonal skill that students should be taught.

Identity is always present

My interest here, however, is not simply to repeat previous critiques. Instead I want to point out two less discussed shortcomings of the idea that academic literacy has nothing to do with identity. The first idea, simply put, is that identity is *always* present in writing. The idea that any writing can be disconnected from identity is absurd. There is no writing, not a scholarly article, a newspaper editorial, or a technical manual, that does not carry with it an identity of the author. The difference with these forms of writing is that the identity of the author is implicit and assumed by the reader. Most often in academic writing it is an assumed identity of a particular kind. When we pick up a piece of academic writing, without explicit descriptions about the identity of the author, we often move to our cultural default setting of whom we assume the author to be. In the West, there is a cultural image of the scientist as a white man in a labcoat (or in the humanities, as a white man in a tweed jacket). That image, of course, is not the reality; but it is the dominant image. One argument for writing that does not explicitly address identity is that it could be written by anyone. But we make assumptions about the identity of the author that rest on dominant culture ideas and images, which for scientists and scholars are white, male, and professional class (Spack, 1997). Writing that explicitly addresses identity could also be written by anyone; it's just that we would know who that "anyone" was.

But identity is irrelevant to academic writing, so the argument goes. It doesn't matter who conducted the research or analysis if it was done well. Such a position, however, ignores the reality that what is considered relevant knowledge and how best to communicate that knowledge can vary by culture, gender, or class. Does a different rhetorical style mean that we should discount research or knowledge that comes from a culture different from our own? Or should we realize that the conventions of academic writing we think important are simply conventions, agreed upon and reproduced by culture (Canagarajah, 2002)? If we read the results of the same research written in different ways, with different ways of expressing the identity of the authors, we might find new possibilities for interpreting the information. Rather than assuming that the identity of the author makes no difference in how we read a piece of academic writing, what would happen if we assumed that it did?

The person behind the research

It's not just that identity is always present in writing, even if it is only an implicit acceptance of the default images of a culture. Identity is present in the best academic and scholarly writing as a positive force. We have all read work by scientists, politicians, business executives, and others in which the power of what they have to say comes in part from the power of the identity they perform on the page. We value their identities and experiences, so we value what they have to tell us about their experiences. Success comes from passion and commitment, and in the best writing we get a sense of both. We expect that great artists, musicians, and authors are driven by their passions; we too often forget that the best scholars and researchers are driven by a similarly forceful passion for intellectual work.

When we get the opportunity to see inside intellectual work, to have identity and experience revealed to us, it can be as thrilling and inspiring as a symphony or a sonnet. The excitement from reading *The Double Helix* (Watson, 1968) comes

not necessarily from a deep love of chemistry or even a thorough understanding of adenine–thymine pairs or purine residues. It is not even the discovery of the nature of DNA that has continued to make the book popular. What is compelling in *The Double Helix* is the combination of Watson's distinctive personality with a breathtaking passion for his work. He is so engaged in his research with Francis Crick and others that he pulls us along with him through the mundane tasks and the moments of breakthrough. When Watson, playing with models of molecules, makes a crucial shift in how he is putting them together, the suspense and elation he feels are palpable. Even the controversies surrounding the veracity of Watson's narrative and the ethics of his actions as a scientist would not be available to us without his book. Instead, his book and the responses to it by Maurice Wilkins and others open up for us important questions that otherwise would have remained unknown.

What is unfortunate is that the display of such passion and the revelation of identity are often reserved for people like Watson—the award-winning and prominent scholars, scientists, and business people. Students in particular are not allowed the same permission to write about their intellectual passions—to connect their identities with their work. Rather then helping students understand that the best intellectual work is always the most passionate, we more often teach them to believe that intellectual and academic work is dry, cold, and detached from emotion and identity. Instead of letting students see that researchers are human, imperfect, and capable of learning from their mistakes, we more often present research and academic writing as pristine pursuits that are somehow unsullied by human fallibilities.

When we teach students to write and read academic work, we should make them aware of how identity, either explicitly or implicitly, shapes such writing. We should show them how identities are always assumed in a piece of writing. The question is only how explicitly they are displayed. We should teach students that scholarship and research are driven by passionate curiosity that influences how research is conducted and communicated.

Finally, we should show students how identity in writing in academic settings is about more than whether the writer uses a personal pronoun. Writing about research often requires the use of a rhetorical *I*—the establishment of a position and an identity regardless of whether the writing is done in the first person. The introduction to Milgram's (1995) famous study on destructive obedience is an excellent example. Originally published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, it is clearly academic research and writing. Yet the introduction also makes clear Milgram's identity and motivation in conducting the study:

> Obedience, as determinant of behavior, is of particular relevance to our time. It has been reliably established that from 1939–1945 millions of innocent persons were systematically slaughtered on command. Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacture of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of persons obeyed orders. Obedience is the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose. It is the dispositional cement that binds men to systems of authority. (pp. 23–24)

It is impossible to read this passage without a sense of the passions that drove Milgram's inquiry and what importance he placed on the results. Don't we assume that the writer who speaks so passionately about the Holocaust has lived through those events? The identity of the writer is clear here in ways that illuminate for us what is at stake for him and for the world outside of his lab.

Identity in academic writing assignments

Part of what we should be doing as literacy instructors is helping our students understand that an academic identity in writing is not a disap-

pearing act but a way of connecting passion, point of view, experience, and identity with research, evidence, and analysis. We need to teach them both in writing and reading to seek a more clear and full consideration of what and who the author is and how this influences the writing. Certainly many teachers do just this by approaching issues of identity and writing in academic settings with nuanced and sophisticated lessons.

We can start by teaching students to understand that the detached impersonal position of a writer in much academic work is a performed identity and by encouraging them to ask questions about that identity. Can they tell who the writer is? If they can't tell, who do they imagine the writer to be? What sex? What race? What nationality? What is the default definition or image of a researcher or textbook writer in their minds? Why do they make these assumptions? Would their assumptions about the writing change if the identity of the writer were more explicit or if the identity of the writer changed? Why or why not? Then we can begin to show students how identities are written into academic texts, such as in the Milgram example, in ways they might not detect but are clear to readers experienced in those genres.

Students should also get the opportunity to read narratives by researchers and scholars about how they did their work. What passions or questions motivated them? How did they overcome obstacles? How did it feel when the work paid off? I don't mean simplistic biographies about "great men of science" but the narratives of the researchers themselves, of which there are many available. Students need to see that intellectual work is not always easy, that it is often frustrating, and that it is carried out by people no different from themselves, whose identities, weaknesses, and strengths shape their lives and work.

When it comes to writing about research or scholarship, I start by telling students that if they cannot find questions to research that they are passionate about, then their work will suffer as a result. We look at what has motivated other researchers, including emotions such as fear, anger, or frustration, and then consider what subjects motivate the students in the same way. Once students have an idea, I have them write informally about what they think and feel about a subject before they read more on it. I tell them that their initial thoughts and emotions will influence how they approach forming and answering questions and that it is better to get such things down on paper where they can be reflected on than to pretend they don't exist. I also ask them to write about what is at stake in completing a piece of research writing, from a grade in the class to answering a question that has always intrigued, angered, or frightened them. Then, throughout the process of research and writing, I have the students keep short logs of how the work is proceeding, from the frustrations to the joys and how they work through those moments.

Finally, when the students begin to write about research we talk about the different positions they could take in terms of identity. Will they decide to be explicit about their identities and how those influence their work? Will they make identity more implicit in their writing, relying on the cultural assumptions of their readers to construct an identity for the writer. What will be the effect of such a choice on the information they present? What conventions will their audiences expect, and to what degree should they fulfill or challenge those conventions?

I tell my students that researchers who spend hours working on AIDS vaccines in labs, digging at archeological sites, or poring over archival documents don't do so because a teacher assigned them that work. For such scholars their work is inextricable from their identities, just as it was for a scientist I once heard remark in a casual conversation that his goal was "to be a physicist who didn't build bombs." We will help educate the next generation of passionate and humane scholars if we help them understand that there is no writing or reading without identity.

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