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Writing 100

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Reading Response #1: Bartholomae's "Inventing the University"

Within the piece “Inventing the University” by David Bartholomae, we discuss the different aspects of successful discourse and learn how to employ these techniques. Bartholomae suggests that in order for discourse to be successful, the participants must be able to reach the audience clearly and give the impression of knowledge of his/her field by adapting to different writing styles. This means that simply presenting an argument with evidence is not enough to convince a reader, the writer must also be able to master the more technical terms of writing such as style, word choice, conciseness, and also be able to strategize different techniques for different audiences. This is highlighted by Bartholomae in which he states “He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (Bartholomae, 4).

Bartholomae’s takes a unique stance on academic discourse communities by making the defining factor the style of speech and how well it relays with the reader. This contrasts with the literal definition where academic discourse communities are simply a group of people who share a set of discourses. Bartholomae argues that in order to be a participant of an academic discourse community, the writer must obtain skills to participate in any discourse community, not simply his own in which was already mastered. He also defines commonplace as problematic as it limits our creativity and does not allow the reader to connect well with the writing. He states that “Commonplaces are the ‘controlling ideas’ of our composition textbooks, textbooks that not only insist upon a set form for expository writing but a set view of public life” (Bartholomae, 8). Here in our academic careers, we experience many commonplaces in our writing that are often taught as proper. Take for example the five paragraph essay, and also the standard thesis/evidence/opinion structure in which many essays share. Although this may be positive in learning the basics of writing, it is when writers begin to over rely on these techniques that we are faced with bland writing which does not successfully expose the writer’s knowledge.

I can relate this transition with my own experience in writing as I previously was not able to apply an academic tone to non-academic writings. Take for example my essay on discourse communities in which I state, “Language is always an essential part of any culture and can either form bridges or barriers to other discourse communities. Within skateboarding, this aspect is evident as there is specific trick terminology, combinations, and a variety of other behaviors which can be tracked to its origins of other communities such as surfing and longboarding”. Although I defined skateboarding as my discourse community in which I have knowledge/experience, writing about it was more difficult as I had trouble applying my understanding to a different audience, in this case, my professor/peers. This process that I went through is the same process that is defined by Bartholomae. By understanding my audience and adapting my writing styles to match the reader, I am able to successfully maintain my argument and also connect with my reader. In many cases, writing for another discourse community will strengthen your writing as it emphasizes critical thinking and allows you to draw new connections between discourse communities. I experienced this insight when comparing my discourse community of skateboarding with that of my audience’s. Here I stated “As you borrow and create new words from other cultures, it drives you to learn and study more about those other communities, and in doing that, you may find new values and beliefs with them”. With this new critical thinking, I was able to understand how discourse communities can relate to each other and also draw connections between different groups, “. This specialized vocabulary lies within the onset of trick skateboarding beginning in the 1970s when surfers needed a way to surf when the waves were low and developed skateboarding. With the advent of this new pastime, the surfing community branched off into new sectors as members shared their terminology and language with the newly established skateboarders”. Overall, we learn to apply language in a way which provides a forum for debate. By specializing your writing towards specific audiences, you allow them to engage in a debate with your arguments as your writing is now more easily understood.

* Identify Bartholomae’s major claims, and describe the nature of support (evidence, analysis, etc.) for those claims.
* Explain what the terms “academic discourse community” and “commonplace” mean to Bartholomae, and the ways in which “basic” and “advanced” writers might demonstrate these concepts in their writing.
* Review your written university work and identify one example text (essay, diagnostic, short answer exam response, laboratory report, etc.) that represents your effort to “invent the university.” Include actual excerpts from the work, and then analyze them. Do the claims presented in “Inventing the University” confirm or challenge your experiences as an undergraduate writer?