RESEMBLANCE AND SIMILITUDE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Foucault, in *This is Not a Pipe*, distinguishes between the concepts of resemblance and similitude, ascribing to the former term an imitative quality, a connection to a "'model,' an original element," and to the latter an openness and indefiniteness, independent of the hierarchy implied by a model (44). My intention is to use these two terms as a guiding metaphor for an exploration of two prevailing notions of academic writing as it is perceived theoretically and pedagogically in composition studies. Such an exploration is, I believe, necessary for those of us who teach introductory composition courses in which we are expected to prepare students to be successful writers in courses they take subsequent to ours, though, as will become clear, I share with others in the profession some doubt as to whether this institutionally authorized goal is reasonable.

On the one hand, academic discourse is the writing done by academics—by people who have chosen to pursue research and scholarship and to engage in discourse with their peers. It is the discourse of journal articles, books, and conference papers, written for an informed audience of professionals whose interests and knowledge resemble the author's. On the other hand, academic writing is what students do when they write for college courses: exams, papers, reports of various kinds. The former definition of academic discourse finds support in some versions of writing across the curriculum, as it does in A.M. Wilkinson's assumption that the goal of linked writing and science courses

is to teach "the kind of writing that science and engineering students will do as professionals" (160). It is explicit in Peter Elbow's definition: "academic discourse. . .is the discourse that academics use when they publish for other academics" and in his assertion that students:

> will need it for the papers and reports and exams they'll have to write in their various courses throughout their college careers. Many or even most teachers will expect them to write in the language of the academy. (135)

It seems to me that such definitions distort, in a variety of ways, the rhetorical situation of a student writing for a teacher. While professional academics writing for their peers and students writing for their teachers may engage in discourse practices which, in Foucault's terms, resemble one another—the development and support of a thesis, the citation of others whose work is related, the attempt to demonstrate one's own insight—the purposes necessarily differ because the writer-audience relationships differ. As academics, we frequently cite the work of others not only to provide support and authority for our claims, but also to situate our discourse in a particular community of ideas and to extend, critique and challenge those ideas. Indeed, our audience is very likely to include those whose work we question. Our writing is evaluated—by our peers—according to how persuasive we are, the insights we provide, and so on. The conventions we follow, formally, stylistically, argumentatively, are those of a community of peers whose work ours resembles.

The situation for students engaged in academic discourse is quite different. Typically, students write primarily and often only for their instructor, an authority rather than a peer, a person with more information and expertise. Students write to demonstrate their understanding of specific course material or techniques so the instructor can evaluate their learning. Instructors read as experts, often looking for key words, concepts, or phrases which indicate that students have learned the lessons presented in lectures, discussions, and the text. Students write "essays" in response to exam questions, "term papers," and "lab reports" in which the emphasis is on correct information, authorized interpretations, and adherence to formal and stylistic conventions. Unlike the academic writing for peers, students are

not expected to critique the assigned readings or the lectures, unless they are specifically instructed to do so. If they take issue with the instructor's position or course materials, they do so at their own peril, since only rarely are they are expected to engage in the sort of academic debate their instructors do in the articles, papers, and books they write.

At issue here is what Elbow calls "the pedagogically crucial distinction between how academics write to each other and how they have come to expect students to write to them as teachers" (139). It is, I believe, a distinction rarely made in our journals or textbooks. Indeed, a brief survey of several popular, theoretically informed textbooks reveals that academic writing is rarely defined at all and that the skills students are expected to develop either focus on genres, on general strategies, or on specific techniques. For example, the third edition of Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper's *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* suggests that "typical college assignments" involve summarizing, taking a position, and writing monologues, descriptions, newspaper articles, letters, responses to course materials and so on. Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen's *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum* uses the general strategies of summarizing, synthesizing, and critiquing as guiding principles. Two representative books which focus on academic research, Christine Hult's *Researching and Writing Across the Curriculum* and Brenda Spatt's *Writing from Sources* treat skills such as using the library, notetaking, outlining, and documentation, as do the chapters on research in most comprehensive introductory rhetorics. In general, the kinds of writing and research described and exemplified in our texts do not ask students to conduct original field or textual research or to use academic journals. Sample papers typically rely on magazines, newspapers, and commercial presses. Thus our texts support the notion that student writing differs from the writing done by academics, though perhaps it resembles (that is, imitates) it in form and can be a vehicle for introducing them to reading and writing skills which both students and professional academics employ.

Once we begin to make the distinction Elbow recognizes, we are faced with a number of complex questions: Should our courses in academic discourse emphasize writing as professional academics or writing as students or something else altogether? Does it make sense to teach students to write as academics

even though the majority of our students will not become academics, will never write an article for a scholarly journal or deliver a paper at a conference? Even if we answer yes, are we in English departments adequately prepared to teach such writing? Lester Faigley and Kristine Hansen point out that:

> If the goal . . . is to produce writers competent to write as professionals in a discipline, then English teachers need to internalize a great deal more than the stipulations of the relevant style manual. To be able to make confident qualitative judgments about writing in a discipline, they need to know how that discipline creates and transmits knowledge. (148)

Their argument here is an important one, for while we may recognize the forms discourses in various disciplines employ and demonstrate the typical format of an article in social science or education, while we may be able to teach students (as most of our research paper guides and rhetorics now do) the distinction between the MLA and APA documentation styles, these formal concerns do not get at the heart of how inquiry takes place in different disciplines, how knowledge is produced and accepted. The language of the academy which Elbow refers to is, as he and others acknowledge, not one language, but many. "[T]he academic discourse community," Patricia Bizzell points out, "is not such a stable entity that one can define our teaching problem in terms of how to get student writing to approximate a set of well-known and accepted academic models . . . the academic discourse community is more unstable than this—more fraught with contradiction, more polyvocal" (662-63). Academics participate in a variety of discourse communities, some quite different from others, and these differences, while reflected perhaps in vocabulary, conventions, and format, indicate how knowledge is constructed, presented, and accepted within those communities. Such differences, as Elbow points out, even exist within disciplines, as we can see in the differences between articles in *Research in the Teaching of Writing* and *College English*, or in the scholarship of cognitivists, expressionists, and social constructionists, as James Berlin reminds us. Thus it seems to me that we cannot accept the idea that our purpose in teaching academic discourse to first-year composition students is to enable them to

write as academics. To expect them to do so is to ask them to produce writing which merely resembles the discourse of academics in form but not in content or function, since neither they nor we are sufficiently a part of or familiar with the discourse communities they are just entering to do more.

Or should we, on the other hand, teach students to respond to essay exam questions, to write "term papers," to treat academic writing as part of the nesting process? This seems to be how Arthur E. Walzer perceives our task when he writes "Surely one goal of the general composition course is to prepare students to write academic discourse, specifically to enable students to write research papers in their majors" (154) And while it may seem a reductivist view of academic discourse, to underemphasize the role writing plays in the evaluation of students is as inappropriate as it is to suggest that students should be taught to write like professional academics. Lucille McCarthy's longitudinal study of Dave, a student writing in several courses over the period of three semesters, is instructive. She points out that while all three instructors, in Freshman Composition, Poetry, and Biology, identify becoming "competent in using the thinking and language of their disciplines" (244) as their goal, the writing "was, in all cases, informational writing for the teacher-as-examiner" (243). And, in all three cases, the responses Dave received to his writing were predominantly concerned with errors of mechanics, grammar, and form. In fact, only in his poetry course did Dave receive any comments which referred to his interpretations and evidence. And in that course, the comments reflected the instructor's disagreement with the interpretations offered by the student—that is, the student was wrong, indicating that the real purpose of the writing was to test the student's ability to learn the correct interpretations. McCarthy notes "the apparent absence of attention paid in any of these classes" to either the amount or relevance of what Dave wrote, calling it "puzzling" (251). I would argue that McCarthy's puzzlement can be attributed to her willingness to accept the stated function of writing in these classes as introducing students to ways of thinking and writing in specific discourse communities despite the evidence to the contrary. And I would point out that what McCarthy discovered about the dominance of the writing-as-examination model holds true in many courses. Her findings, as well as those of Susan Miller and her undergraduate writing students discussed

later, suggest that Elbow's "pedagogically crucial distinction" is one not recognized by many instructors in other disciplines, who, despite what they may say, treat writing primarily as a means of testing—when they require it at all.

Answers to the questions I have been raising are no less complex than the questions themselves, in part because we know very little about the nature of writing students actually do once they leave our composition courses. There has been too little research like McCarthy's. On our own campuses, we typically know very little about what our courses in academic discourse should prepare our students for. If our institutions have incorporated writing across the curriculum or writing intensive programs, we may at least be confident that students will do some writing in other courses—that they cannot say as did one senior I heard recently, that he's not had to write a single paper or take a single essay exam since freshman composition. But unless the goals of such programs are very specific, we still will not know how writing is used in these courses, or how much is assigned, or how it is evaluated, or how much it counts. At the conclusion of a fascinating collaborative article in the February 1990 *CCC*, "Cross-Curricular Underlife: A Collaborative Report on Ways with Academic Words," Susan Miller explains that her student co-authors' reports on their experiences with writing in other courses revealed to her that she:

> had not realized how little of my course would, or could, be taken to other settings, and especially how little of its attitude toward student participation in shared creations and validations of knowledge would be recognizable in their introductions to other fields. (Anderson et al., 28)

And even if we could understand such relationships, are we closer to deciding what our emphasis should be in introductory composition courses? Should we attempt to teach undergraduate students to write the academic discourse of experts in the disciplines they will be studying, even if we know that students will only be asked to feed back what they've read or heard? Is our responsibility instead to teach students to write the safe essay exam response or term paper?

It is here that the concept of similitude may be helpful in our reconceiving academic discourse and how to teach about it.

"Resemblance," Foucault writes, "makes a unique assertion, always the same: This thing, that thing, yet another thing is something else. Similitude multiplies different affirmations, which dance together, tilting and tumbling over one another" (46). When we conceive of academic discourse only as the discourse of professional academics, we ensure that students will only be able to produce inadequate imitations of the "real thing," which they lack the disciplinary and discourse knowledge to create. When we define academic discourse as the writing students produce for their instructors, we see it resembling a different kind of thing—a test of how well they have understood what has been taught to them. The concept of similitude allows for a broader conception of academic writing, one which encompasses both the expert-to-expert and student-to-teacher models, and which examines these and other models of discourse relationships as different affirmations of the academic and the academy. It suggests that we encourage students to think about how writing is always situated in particular contexts and that within the university these contexts vary from course to course, even within the same discipline. We need to help them understand the degree to which the broader institutional context influences instructors to view writing as a means of testing and the implications that has for them as they move from class to class. Though we may be disheartened by McCarthy's student Dave who says his advice to incoming freshmen would be "I'd tell them . . . first you've got to figure out what your teachers want. And then you've got to give it to them if you're gonna' get the grade" (233), we need to recognize the legitimacy of his claim without being defeated by it. That is, we need to help students develop strategies for dealing with the fundamentally hierarchical relationship between themselves and instructors at the same time we enable them to see that it is only one of a number of possible rhetorical relationships. If we teach students strategies for essay exams, we need to do so not only in a way that will enable them to take such exams successfully, but also in a way that will enable them to consider the reasons such exams are given in some courses and not in others, including what it says about the value of discourse in the discipline and to the particular instructor. When we talk with students about the various discourse communities they are being exposed to, we need to discuss how such communities function professionally and insti-

tutionally, how they serve as gatekeepers, both including and excluding, that they assume a relative equality of status among members, that becoming a member involves more than becoming familiar with the forms and vocabulary they demand. Our courses in academic writing should provide students with opportunities to become familiar with both the discursive strategies employed in the disciplines they study and with the issues and topics which "count" in those fields. We can encourage students to study how fields as diverse as economics, political science, history, anthropology, and agronomy study topics such as the distribution of food in developing countries. We can suggest that students in different majors work collaboratively on research projects, thus bringing to the project perspectives from several disciplines and reinforcing their understanding of the socially constructed nature of knowledge. Students can begin to negotiate the difficult terrain of academic journals, discovering for themselves and pointing out to one another that articles in many of those journals assume a familiarity and expertise which students will only gain through several years of study.

Above all, we need to teach courses which focus upon the always shifting emphases in the relationships among writers, readers, language, and the world, emphases which constitute the similar, yet not identical or imitative, versions of realities of academic discourses. Such a conception is surely attractive, consistent with the tradition of liberal education and with the study of rhetoric. And I believe it is appropriate as well, for within the frame of a rhetorically based academic writing course we have the opportunity to examine the varieties of discourses which can be called academic, to explore their purposes within the academy and the academic world, to understand both the inclusionary and exclusionary nature of discourse communities, to recognize how the rhetorical situation of exam and term-paper writing differ from the rhetorical situation of scholarly debate, and to help our students understand that as rhetors, they are constantly in the position of analyzing and negotiating the academic discourse communities their courses represent.

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