WRITING AS A THOUGHT PROCESS: SITE OF A STRUGGLE

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Whenever we write, for whatever purpose, we locate ourselves in an arena of choices circumscribed by the structures of convention. Confronting these choices within the expectations of various conventions, we struggle to transform our rhetorical intentions to written text. Although this tension is an inescapable feature of all writing, composing written text in an educational setting engages both students and teachers in very particular struggles between convention and choice, resulting frequently in the negotiation of compromises with which neither teachers nor students feel entirely comfortable.

This tension exists at many levels. In its broadest sense, convention determines not only what is sayable or what is writable in any given context, but also what is thinkable. The linguistic traditions of each school discipline, by which I mean the nature of the language in which the concepts of the discipline are articulated, are powerful determinants not only of the manner in which teachers and textbooks present the subject in classrooms, but also of the nature of the language in which students are expected to conceptualize the evidence of the discipline, and to express their concepts in written text.

I am reminded, for example, of Julia, an eighteen-year-old studying history of art in the upper sixth form of a comprehensive school in South London. Having been asked by her teacher, Robert Christopher, to write her responses to a slide of Man Ray's "The Gift" (an iron studded on the sole-plate with jutting nails), she produced the following text:

> Once upon a time there lived an iron
> The Gift could be a gift given to someone to hurt them but there seems to be no relevance here.
> Perhaps the artist has made the gift a decorative item (like a painted road cone) to give to the public, thereby confusing them, making statements about the receiving of his work, etc.
> The symbol that 'iron' gives is a useful one. Iron-Ironing - housework?? = housewife??? equals non-creature consumer goods = functionalism.
> Metaphorical ironing???—taking the creases out of things but contradicting by putting nails in it.
> Perhaps this is how the artist sees the public???

We can see in this text verbal traces of Julia's mind racing in several directions as she tries to find her way into a meaningful response to Man Ray's "The Gift." Christopher's instructions to the class had been, in part, to

> write what it says to you. I want you to consider what is the difference between thinking about it and writing about it. The object triggers off referential paths that have to do with your own experience. I want you to trace those referential paths.

Drawing upon her experiential and intertextual knowledge, Julia establishes the fictive world of a nail-studded iron with her introductory "Once upon a time," then speculates upon the artist's intention in creating "The Gift." She next posits a syntacto-semantic relationship among "housewife," "non-creature consumer goods," and "functionalism," seeking to relate her experience with irons to her growing awareness of some concepts of art history. She concludes with an interesting distinction between symbol functioning as metonymic icon or sign (iron-ironing—housework) and symbol functioning as metaphor ("ironing ??—taking the creases out of things . . .").

This text does not function, nor was it meant by teacher or student to function, as a *demonstration* of learning, of what Julia knows about authorized readings of dada art, but rather as a *way into* or *means of* learning, a way into understanding through articulating her intuitive responses to a particular work

of art. When asked to read it aloud in class, Julia declined, as did all but one of her classmates. Why? She told me after class:

> It didn't seem—well, it isn't really sophisticated enough for this class—not at the right level—too basic . . . the language, the ideas, the overall concept—it just didn't seem to fit—you know—the level of conceptualization of the class.

In Julia's view, what is thinkable and what is writable in history of art is prescribed linguistically and conceptually by the traditions articulated in art history textbooks and by her teacher. She intuitively feels there is something flawed in the degree of authority accorded the powerful determinants of art history convention, and interprets the situation as a two-sided battle between authorized traditions and personal responses, between convention and choice. She writes in her journal:

> In history of art, examinings seem to require a particular attitude, and to question this would confuse the issue and me . . . I feel as though I'm not really sure what to do. To ignore all personal feeling and learn, parrot fashion, what the examiner requires does seem a little soulless, but to try, with what little experience I have, to argue around a point only conducted on a personal feeling seems a little stupid.

During one of our discussions about writing in history of art, her teacher, Robert Christopher, addressed the same struggle between convention and choice:

> How do you put into words the dynamics of the relationship between a large black square and a tiny red square, for example? The relationship is so much greater than language can convey . . . what the students must do is make manifest what happens in a glance by expanding that experience into a description . . . and there's a huge gulf between their experience of a painting and the presentation of ideas . . . The exam assumes an expectation of the nature of the sort of criticism involved—as though there is an absolute—a right way and a wrong way to read a painting . . . . There is some opportunity for individual interpretation

> within a contemporary context on the exam, but I doubt whether a student can be entirely honest in a personal reaction . . . . So I find myself in a dilemma—do you allow for individual interpretation or demand a common understanding? What I try to aim for is a move toward a common understanding . . . . We're restricted by trying to get them to pass an examination . . . . It encourages pat, glib reactions . . . and therefore stultifies concept development . . . . I feel what I'm doing helps individual perception, but I sometimes feel it's restrictive.

We see that in response to his dilemma, to the conflict between felt response and authorized response, between choice and convention, Christopher negotiates a rather awkward compromise, moving his students away from their individual, idiosyncratic reactions in the direction of what he refers to as "a common understanding"—the response authorized by tradition. This compromise is reflected in the writing he assigns his students. Of the twenty writing tasks in upper sixth form history of art, only two focused on personal response composed in the expressive mode of Julia's "The Iron." Although Christopher realizes the value of this kind of writing for helping students to explore their personal responses to works of art in relation to their growing understanding of art history, he is reluctant to engage them in this type of writing task more often. His reasons show, in his case as in the case of many other teachers in all disciplines, how conventions function to circumscribe and constrain choices:

1. it is not the function of writing that has been traditionally valued by examiners or required on examinations;
2. it is not a function of writing that formed part of his educational background or that he feels comfortable using;
3. under pressures of time, it does not seem to be the most efficient means of processing information; moreover, it takes time away from other activities which are essential to completing the history of art syllabus.

Students and teachers of English are confronted with struggles between convention and choice similar to those articulated by Robert Christopher and Julia in history of art. Linda, an

eighteen-year-old studying English in the upper sixth form of the same comprehensive school in south London, writes in her journal:

> I find getting across what I think and feel in English very hard. When talking about poems, for example T. S. Eliot's poems, it is very difficult to convey the meaning they give. To account for the different impressions that you gain from a poem is very difficult, because how can you explain what the poem makes you feel?

Yet Linda is very effective in elaborating upon her reactions to Eliot's poems orally to her teacher and classmates during class discussions. The tension she describes above exists in articulating her responses in institutionally authorized written text, in negotiating a comfortable fit or integration between the conceptualizations and formulations of her personal responses and the conventionalized conceptualization and formulation of literary response as it has traditionally been portrayed in English classrooms. In English, as in all disciplines, students' exposure to printed text is frequently limited to finished products. For the most part, they have little or no access to the struggles and choices involved in conceptualizing and formulating the text. As literary scholar Terry Eagleton points out:

> The text does not allow the reader to see how the facts it contains were selected, what was excluded, why the facts were organized in this particular way, what assumptions governed this process, what forms of work went into the making of the text, and how all of this might have been different (170).

During one of our talks about writing in the school context, Jane Elliot, Linda's English teacher, expressed her sensitivity to the tension between convention and choice that her students experience when composing written responses to literary works:

> Most essays genuinely want [the students'] opinion, but we do assume that it will be a considered, thought-through opinion, formed from standing at the far side of the book, and looking back over it and thinking about the whole thing. Perhaps we don't give them enough time—perhaps

we should give them the essay while they're still uncertain, while they're still working through their response.

This view of writing resonates with Christopher's intention for his in-class writing response to Man Ray's "The Gift." Jane Elliot and Linda in English and Robert Christopher and Julia in history of art are converging from slightly differing perspectives upon a view of writing as the site of a struggle—the struggle to resolve the dissonance between each individual's personal construction of the world and the view of the world conventionally authorized by the discourse of particular subject areas and, in a broader sense, by the discourse of educational institutions.

I spent a full year observing Christopher's history of art class and Elliot's English class in Crown Woods School in London, as well as a biology class, a sociology class, a history class, and a geography class. During the course of that year, I explored the manner in which written text emerges from the classroom and wider socio-cultural contexts. I talked extensively with teachers and students; asked twelve students to record their perceptions of their writing development and their responses to writing tasks in journals; investigated teacher-student interactions, specifically those in which teachers try to enable students to transform information, knowledge, and understanding to written text; and read the texts themselves.

It is a rare privilege to be able to spend such an amount of time observing the day-to-day class interactions of six teachers and their students. I had virtually complete access to the arena of struggle in which students are positioned with respect to writing in the educational context, a struggle exacerbated by the specific sixth-form context, wherein writing functions ultimately to demonstrate to an unknown external examiner the extent of discipline-specific information, knowledge, and understanding a student has acquired and can articulate coherently and conventionally in written text.

Not only in history of art and English did students express their perceptions and frustrations concerning the difficulties of integrating their continually changing, continually growing construction of the world with the conventionally authorized linguistic and conceptual structures of discipline-specific universes of discourse. I hear Kate's uncomplaining, pragmatic assertion in history class that

> I could have brought more in [to the essay about Parnell] but it wouldn't have been much good because it is, at the moment, doing work for the exam, and that's it. We're not working at things you're especially interested in. We're looking at the sort of questions which are likely to come up. If we have a special interest in something that isn't likely to come up, what's the point in using time on it? . . . it's an intermediate phase—not something to enjoy, but working towards an exam;

and Christine who, after attempting to integrate her own voice more assertively into the conventional discourse of history, sighs in frustration:

> Possibly I'm fussing too much about trying to adopt an interesting style, when at this stage I should just have a structure and try to stick all the facts into it as quickly and as neatly as I can.

I hear Vernon's comments on the degree of specificity required in scientific discourse, and the extent to which he feels his choices at the syntactic level are arbitrarily, and sometimes unnecessarily, constrained:

> . . . it is no use saying, 'The particles pass through the holes in the membrane'; you have to say, 'The molecules diffuse across the semi-permeable cell wall.' The first sentence is too vague and apparently open to misinterpretation even though I personally would understand exactly what I was trying to say, and so would everyone in this class.

In response, Nicholas Fox, Vernon's biology teacher, would suggest that discipline-specific discourse conventions actually generate thoughts that, as Patricia Bizzell writes in "What Happens when Basic Writers Come to College?", *would not be accessible without the conventions* (296).

I recall one particular biology class in which Barbara, another student, began an answer with the words, "The fish diffuses salt into . . .":

> 'No! No! No!' interjected Fox. 'A fish cannot diffuse salt into itself . . . . Your statement is biologically wrong. The way I worded it expresses a physical principle. You get

> your answers wrong not because you don't understand the concept but because you get the language wrong.'

Now here's the critical bit:

> 'Is your understanding different depending on whether you use your phrasing or mine?: The examiner will think so.'

It is evident here that Fox views the conventions of biological discourse not just as syntactic correspondences to semantic intentions, but as conceptual organizers, and possibly even determinants, of semantic intentions.

A similar event occurred in sociology class when students questioned whether the perceptions they articulated in what they referred to as "common sense language" were equally valid for examination responses as those articulated in what they called "sociological language." What follows is a fragment of discussion between Ronald Goodman, the sociology teacher, and Steve, one of his students:

> Goodman: The first section is 95% interpretive. Make sure that theoretically that's where you score. You have to . . . marshall all the theories, and then cite evidence . . . relevant, concrete, empirical material, preferably from your own experience . . .
> Steve: How'm I gonna actually employ some of that 'own experience' stuff without coming across as being commonsensical?
> Goodman: Certainly in past examinations some people have dealt with these sorts of questions in a very commonsensical way, without referring to specific theories or sociological concepts, and then afterwards, when we say, 'Well, you should have, when giving those examples, referred to "cultural specificity" or "historical specificity" and they've said, 'Ah, I didn't think of that.'

In a pragmatic sense, Goodman is suggesting that sociological terminology which represents sociological concepts or modes of classification, such as "cultural specificity" and "historical specificity," can function as heuristics to prompt deeper sociological analysis. From that perspective, the discourse of the discipline has the potential to enable students in that most critical area of composing: drawing upon their internal resources of

knowledge and understanding and transforming that knowledge and understanding into written text. By using the linguistic conventions of the discipline, what Janet Emig calls the "root metaphors" and "organizational paradigms" (Emig, 1983), for example, "social order," "social change," and "social differentiation," as conceptual "hangers," students can more readily apply their tacit and intuitive "common sense" knowledge to sociologically authorized ways of conceptualizing the evidence of the discipline. To return to Fox's question of whether what is spoken about changes in some crucial way depending on the terms of reference or signifiers used, Goodman implies that a more comprehensive, more focused, and deeper response will result from using discipline-specific language. If so, it would appear that using discipline-specific linguistic conventions as conceptual "hangers" for intuitive, personal, or common sense responses does change what is signified, shifting it from the realm of personal or even "common" knowledge into the more rarefied and authorized realm of discipline-specific knowledge—at the same time that it allows for an integration between what is authorized and what is intuited, between convention and choice.

This relationship between convention and choice is critically different from the relationship with which I began this discussion. We are still in the arena, still struggling with choices, but the view of that arena that I would now like to offer is *defined*, rather than *confined*, by the structures of convention. If the relationship between convention and choice is perceived as dichotomous, either in terms of one or the other, or pedagogically sequenced so that conventions need to be mastered before choices can be made, the resultant tension is likely to be a struggle of frustration, in which teachers and students are forced to negotiate uncomfortable compromises, as we noted in parts of the preceding discussion. If, however, the relationship is perceived as dialectical, the resultant tension will be a struggie towards linguistic growth. Bizzell describes the discourse of the academic community as "a convention-bound discourse that creates and organizes the knowledge that constitutes the community's world view" (297). The discourse communities of the other language communities in which our students dwell—their homes, their neighborhoods, their interests or hobbies, such as team sports or music lessons—similarly create and organize the

knowledge that constitutes each community's world view and, in the best of all possible worlds, combine and integrate and inform each other as students develop their own emerging construction of the world in which they live. Such integration, however, is neither automatic nor easy for many of our students, and clashes frequently occur, particularly when there is tremendous dissonance between the discourse conventions of the academic community and the discourse conventions of the students' other language communities.

As a profession, for over two decades we have been addressing this problem, the problem of helping our students to integrate their broad, tacit knowledge of wider communities of discourse conventions with specific subject-related discourse conventions in order to broaden their range of language choices in their written text. As a profession, we have a lot more to do. We need to look critically at the linguistic traditions which carry the burden of conceptualizing and classifying the bodies of knowledge that comprise the various disciplines, and academic discourse in general. Those that no longer serve a useful purpose, which have become, in Harold Rosen's words, "stultifying and irksome", should be discarded and replaced. Those that, to continue with Rosen's phrasing, "have been perfected to embody rational thought, ultimately at its highest level" should be made accessible to students in order that they may feel at ease in the registers that denote that intellectual-linguistic aspects of the discipline.

Such critical analysis and questioning of long-held language traditions can be seen in several professional areas outside the academic community, most notably in the recent move towards more straightforward, less jargon-burdened phrasing of legal documents, insurance documents, and religious documents. Within the academic community, this critical analysis of conventions is most evident in writing-across-the-curriculum programs, which offer a richer view of functions of writing and language use in different disciplines than was traditionally valued in the school setting. It can also be seen in the move toward collaborative learning in classrooms structured as studio workshops, in which students integrate their own language with the language of the discipline as they talk and work together while engaging with discipline-specific evidence. The major finding of my inves-

tigation of these six different classrooms in six different subject areas suggests that the more interactive and experience-based the classroom, the more readily students are able to utilize the discourse of the discipline while engaging with the evidence of the discipline. I will close with a summary of a lesson from the geography class that exemplifies just one application of this principle.

Peter McLeod, the geography teacher, was concerned about the difficulty his students had in determining not just what specific *facts* to include in written tasks, but what *kind* of geographical concepts to bring to bear in conceptualizing and formulating written responses. He used the following activity to enable his students to develop a procedure—a set of strategies - to help them respond to the informational, conceptual, and discipline-specific discourse requirements of specific writing tasks. After writing the topic, "Why do rates of marine erosion vary from time to time and from place to place?" on the board, he suggested the following procedure:

a) individuals brainstormed facts, phrases, concepts, or potential lines of argument (3-5 minutes);

b) small groups sifted collective responses and categorized them according to main points, supporting details, conceptual organizers, etc. Students were encouraged to use star diagrams, mapping and webbing techniques, or outlines (about 10 minutes);

c) groups verified and amplified their lines of argument using texts, reference books, and notes (about 15 minutes).

d) each group collaborated to generate one outline of the line or argument—with supporting details—that its members could pursue in developing a written response (20-25 minutes);

e) the class as a whole discussed each group's line of argument, exploring possibilities and limitations in the five alternate approaches explored.

I choose to highlight this particular discourse activity because of its sensitivity to current understanding of language and learning in relation to students' struggle between convention and choice in academic writing. The initial brainstorming activity encourages students to use processes of association to tap their recallable and tacit knowledge. Most students, during this part of the process, are pleasantly surprised to discover how much

discipline-specific knowledge will come readily to mind, as well as how much of their broader tacit knowledge of their experience with the world they can draw upon in relation to specific questions. The group deliberation involves processes of selection, categorization, and more association as students talk through the task. The following fragments of discussion in the class indicate the complexity of decision making and the degree of collaboration required in the struggle to transform information to conventionally appropriate written text:

Would you start with. . .
Have we considered. . .
Next, I think we should bring in. . .
Do you think we ought to mention. . .
Would we give a whole paragraph to. . .or would we just. . .
How do we bring in. . .
What's it called when. . .
It's the transportation, the deposition, how it varies. . .
We'll rough out the. . .
Yes, put that in. . .
We'll conclude with. . .

Verifying with printed material as an intermediate rather than beginning step puts the responsibility for initial conceptualization and formulation of the response squarely on the students. Their intuitions, their initial choices, guide the nature of their responses, while later checking with authorized texts enriches their intuitive knowledge with conventional knowledge. The next step, generating a line of argument as a group, offers a language-rich opportunity to explore and discuss a variety of ways of conceptualizing and formulating a written response to a question and to develop some means of critically assessing why one might be preferable to another. These language skills are further developed in the final step of the process, during which students analyze and discuss each group's proposed line of argument.

In just under eighty minutes, these students engaged in a tremendous amount of talking, reading, writing, and critical thinking about choices within discipline-specific language conventions. Moreover, they were involved in ways of determining for themselves what constitutes meaningfulness and effectiveness

in writing by generating, talking about, and assessing a range of alternatives. In so doing, they showed writing to be a mode of inquiry that embraces a rich variety of language transactions, dialectically incorporating convention and choice as students struggle towards further learning and deeper understanding of the world in which they live. As a profession, we must try to do and to show the same.

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