

In Reply

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THE ISSUE

One problem of reviewing and critiquing a piece of research done in one's area of expertise is that the research is rarely conducted, reported, and written in the manner in which the reviewer and critic would do it. Philosophical differences go much deeper though, to the core of what constitutes the problem for research to address. Variations involve formulating the questions to be addressed and so orient the researcher to an appropriate research design and methodology. And so it goes through to the final reporting of the findings. But diversity in how research is conceived and conducted adds to the wealth of the discipline and enables progress to be made.

In Harker's response to my paper, we have a picture of how another researcher might have conceptualized the problem and conducted the research. But Harker's conceptualizing of the problem is quite different from mine, and Walker's is too. Theirs both focus on the student and the student's writing; mine focuses on the professor and the professor's perceptions of the student's writing. I believe that Harker's comments would be those expected at the next stage of research, namely, a study of actual student writing as a function of the types of assignments given by professors which we now know to be in argumentative discourse.

Let us reestablish the context for the study. The setting is a college of education in a Canadian university. Students write formal essays as course assignments to be handed in to professors who will grade them. The writing task is assigned; the audience is the professor; and the purpose is to explicate, argue, and convince. The context is restricted and restrictive; there is very little flexibility in the variables. Students know that academic discourse is narrowly defined within rhetorical limits that are firmly drawn by and rigidly adhered to by academics. They see themselves as writers governed by the same traditions.

Given that such a discourse tradition conditions the expectations of professors for university writing, it is reasonable to surmise that their responses to student academic writing will be shaped by their expectations

and knowledge of what academic discourse is and does. And this is the point of my study. Professors make statements about student writing problems; yet most have restricted notions and knowledge of what writing is and does, what constitutes error, and what constitutes development in writing.

I concur wholeheartedly with Harker's conclusion that the real problem likely lies in students' sense of audience, that is, the restricted audience of professor as examiner and critic. If only we could have students become aware that by varying their audiences they are free to pursue modes of discourse other than the argumentative or expository and to organize and present content in a multitude of interesting and unique ways! Then they could reconstitute part of the discipline, molding it in ways that mirror different conceptualizations but still fit the boundaries of the discipline. By doing so, students could create meaning for themselves and readers in other than a traditional mode.

Such rhetorical freedom, of course, depends ultimately on the professor's willingness to forego partially the roles of examiner, arbiter of truth, and defender of the discipline. As professors, we are members of discourse communities, and we spend most of our professional lives reading and writing within our respective discourse communities. Our first task is to become metalinguistically aware of the discourse community we inhabit – to become aware of the dominant mode or modes of discourse, how content is organized and structured, and what syntactic and rhetorical structures and principles dominate the encoding and explication of knowledge. Once aware of these processes and features, we will be able to examine and experiment with different modes of discourse, different audiences, and different rhetorical means of dealing with the content and knowledge of our disciplines.

In other words, we need to become aware ourselves of our writing processes before we can make students aware of the processes that dominate our disciplines. The professor is the key to student writing development and to student writing problems because it is the professor who determines what constitutes acceptable writing in the discipline. This is the main point of my study. I think Harker saw it as the main point too.

THE DISCOURSE OF DISCIPLINES

Jerome Bruner (1986) proposes "two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality" (p. 11). One is *argumentative*, the other *narrative*. Both can be used as means for convincing another, yet what they

convince of is quite different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their likenesses.

The argumentative mode, called by Bruner the *paradigmatic mode*, employs language regulated by requirements of consistency and noncontradiction. Its domain is defined by observables as well as by the set of possible worlds that can be logically generated and tested against those observables. Many professors belong to disciplines where the paradigmatic mode characterizes the discourse community in which they operate. They see in the discourse of their discipline the application of the paradigmatic mode leading to good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, and sound argument. Paradigmatic imagination – the paradigmatic mode and imagination not being antithetical – is the ability to see possible formal connections before one is able to prove them formally.

Many education professors, educated in disciplines where the paradigmatic mode determines a logico-scientific discourse, expect student writing to adhere to the linguistic norms of that discourse. For them, good writing involves articulation of that same good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, and sound argument. In short, they expect writing that conforms to an academic argumentative mode of discourse.

The narrative mode “deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (Bruner, 1986, p. 13). It strives to grapple with the particulars of experience, and to locate the experience in time and place. Story constructs two landscapes simultaneously. One is the landscape of action where agent, intention or goal, situation, and instrument correspond to a *story grammar*. The other is the landscape of consciousness which is what those involved in the action know, think, or feel, or do not know, think, or feel. Stories have no place for testability.

Walker charges me with rigorous adherence to a paradigmatic mode of thought in this study and argues that a narrative mode is more appropriate in his discussion of an alternate way to study writing problems. My belief is that *both* modes of thought and research are appropriate, and I have deliberately chosen *one* in this initial foray into the area of university student writing. Let me describe why I made that decision, and, in doing so, reply to Walker.

The study is one of education professors' perceptions and attitudes toward student writing. It is not a study of student writing nor of students' writing problems or errors, and I believe that Walker has missed this essential point. His comments are more germane to the developing writer – to the student learning to write. Had I wished to investigate student writing, I would have used students and their writing processes directly as

my sources of data. My focus on professors as the source was to determine how they perceived student writing in relation to their expectations for writing in their various disciplines. I describe the achievement expected of student writers – where the process approach advocated by Walker wants students to end up.

This brings me to another critical point in Walker's response, that of authority. Ever since the landmark writing study of Britton, Burgess, Martin, and Rosen (1975), with the preponderance it reported of writing in the audience category of "teacher as examiner," English teacher educators have recognized that the evaluator of student writing constitutes the audience for which students write. Students need to be consciously aware of the audience and write for their audience, the professor as examiner. The professor as examiner and evaluator is a reality in terms of the discourse expectations associated with writing in and of the discipline.

The expectation on the part of professors that students should demonstrate knowledge of the discipline in the accepted writing conventions of that discipline through the argumentative mode constitutes an implicit reality that needs to be brought to the conscious awareness of professors for only then will they be aware of the restricted audience demand they make on students. Only then will professors become further cognizant of the power of audience as a construct in the writing processes of students and allow students to write for audiences other than that of professor as examiner. This latter point, thought allied to the point about authority made by Walker, is an implication of the study, not part of it.

Walker lends insight in his discussion of the initiation of students into the discourse community of the discipline, be it Education in the broad sense or specific areas such as Educational Psychology, Educational Foundations, and so on. Discourse communities in the university are comprised of those who teach and conduct research in the academic community; in other words, the discourse community is defined by those who belong to it. Students become initiated into those communities through no direct ritual or instruction. It is a trial-and-error process conducted primarily through written discourse.

Our task as educators, particularly English educators and writing instructors, is to first determine what professors as members of discourse communities subconsciously understand and know to be the linguistic norms that make up their discourse communities. Only with that knowledge made explicit through research are we able to help students in their initiation into the academic community with its discourse norms and boundaries. Such was the intent of my study. However, to elicit from professors their subconscious understandings of those linguistic norms which define their respective discourse communities, I needed to use

syntactic descriptors and systems of linguistic description that would be understood by professors in diverse subject areas. I try to make this point clear early in my paper. Although many readers may recognize, as Walker does, that subject-verb agreement is a shibboleth of scholarship, we must also recognize that in most academic discourse communities subject-verb agreement is an expected norm.

I am arguing that it is essential first to make professors themselves aware of the discourse norms circumscribing their disciplines. The need for such revelation is borne out by a study by Freedman (1987) who observed and reported how law students learned to write in their genre. She found that neither the students nor their professors could articulate the specialized discourse forms they were using though both knew the forms were idiosyncratic to their discipline. Students did not go to papers written by law students in past years; law texts did not provide models, and neither did law professors. These students had developed their own discourse structure which was below their level of consciousness and below their professors' level of consciousness.

It was important for me to include categories of grammatical and rhetorical skills because it is the students' ability to demonstrate these skills that professors tend to look for when they attempt to articulate problems they see students encountering as these students struggle with the discourse of the discipline. We know from other studies (Freedman & Pringle, 1980) that a breakdown of rhetorical and grammatical skills often accompanies attempts at more complex writing tasks, the type that students face when writing papers in disciplines new to them.

The notion of failure was not addressed in my study though Walker introduces it in his response. Qualitative judgments of student writing, as well as notions of passing and failure, were not a concern in this study of professors' perceptions and attitudes. To include qualitative judgments would have required professors to include the student papers; and this, in turn, would have required student permission and could have changed how professors evaluated those papers. In short, a different study would be required. As it happened, most professors in the study seemed satisfied with the quality of student writing they received.

Walker also raised the issue of "real" writing as opposed to examination writing. It is an important point worth clarifying here. My study did examine real writing done by students when they wrote formal essays as major course requirements for education professors. Professors were specifically asked to provide examples of student writing and in all cases these examples were from essays written by students as major course requirements. Most professors I spoke with were quite aware of the need for tolerance of syntactic, grammatical, semantic, and orthographic lapses

and irregularities in examination writing, knowing that such writing resembles first draft composing without the opportunity to revise and edit.

Walker's comment about education students faced with two discourse communities is a particularly interesting one. Those teachers who adopt a process approach to writing with their students value an experiential base for writing and knowing, and some students would have been exposed to such teachers during school practicum experiences. As well, a process approach to writing is part of English language arts methods courses that students take as part of their teacher education programs. But students too are well aware of the other discourse community for which they write, that of the paradigmatic mode requiring argumentative and expository discourse. Students I speak with are well aware of what mode is embraced by each professor, be it narrative, paradigmatic, or both.

I cannot but end my reply to Walker by taking up his point that we all commit errors, and such proclivity to err occurs often not from ignorance but from the academic community's lack of understanding and agreement of what constitutes error. Walker provides an example of this using my study as a source. He labels the sentence "Again, anonymity and confidentiality is guaranteed!" in the directions to professors as problem 7(a)4, subject-verb agreement. Corder and Avis (1979) disagree. They allow this exception to agreement of verbs with compound subjects: "When the words of a compound subject refer to the same person or are considered together as a unit, the verb is usually singular" (p. 73). The two nouns *anonymity* and *confidentiality* constitute a compound subject because lexically they collocate.

The thorny problem of error was one of the major points of my study because what I had anticipated and found was that professors had a penchant for focusing on surface features of the written language such as apparent grammatical and syntactic errors as a way of describing the real underlying writing problem which was one of conceptualization, organization, and rhetorical and discourse choices. To focus solely on error requires the evocation of an ultimate authority on grammar and usage, and with a dynamic language such authority is ephemeral, existing only for a brief point in the evolution of the language.

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