

A Response to Anthony Fleury's "Liberal Education and Communication Against the Disciplines": A View from the World of Writing

Charles Bazerman

Parallel to current trends in communication across the curriculum (CXC), the field of writing across the curriculum (WAC) earlier experienced a shift from generalized writing-to-learn emphases to more discipline-specific writing research and instruction. Based on studies of course demands as well as of writing in the professions, the consensus among WAC teachers now recognizes that the teaching of writing in disciplines must align with the particular practices of those disciplines, though that alignment is not always easy to achieve. Some critics of this consensus echo concerns expressed in this issue by Fleury, that teaching in a discipline-specific manner will fragment the humanistic mission of teaching speaking or writing. Yet, students wrestling to learn discipline-specific rhetorics can yet accomplish the humanistic tasks of finding identity and even challenging prevailing language conventions.

Keywords: Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing in the Disciplines; Communication Across the Curriculum; Writing Pedagogy

Anthony Fleury (2005), in this issue of *Communication Education*, decries the movement in Communication Across the Curriculum (CXC) from instruction in general principles of communication to instruction in particular communicative practices of disciplines. The growing focus in CXC on "coherent repertoires of symbolic practices that constitute the disciplines" mirrors a similar movement that occurred in the history of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) as it incorporated a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) approach. The following observations about what

has been learned over the history of WAC draw heavily on a forthcoming reference volume on WAC (Bazerman et al., in press). This volume provides resources to go more deeply into the literatures and issues that I briefly touch on here. In this comment, rather than responding directly to Fleury's argument, I want to offer the perspective of parallel experience in writing research and teaching.

Within writing studies, this gradual movement toward WID came from research into disciplinary writing and disciplinary classrooms, attempts to articulate what students needed to know, and by the kinds of discussions that occurred in interdisciplinary WAC seminars. These discussions, programmatic experiments, and research inquiries led to a recognition that faculty in different disciplines not only had different goals for writing assignments, but also held students accountable for producing different kinds of texts in different styles, making different kinds of arguments on different evidence. Further, students' socialization into disciplinary communicative practices was fraught with difficulties and multiple perspectives. Ultimately, it has led to a view that disciplines are not stable, fixed entities with specific practices for all time (Prior, 1998), although some disciplines attempt to regulate communication behavior and standards more than others (see Bazerman, 1987; McCarthy, 1991; McCarthy & Gerring, 1994).

While the general principles of writing to learn—encouraging student expression of response and attitude toward course readings and other materials in informal genres such as personal journals—found advocates (see Fulwiler & Young, 1982), faculty in other departments often saw this informal writing as outside the scope of their courses. They did not feel that course time and student effort should be expended in this way at the expense of their more disciplinary goals. Rather, they felt that students should be encouraged to develop the kinds of statements which count as thinking, argument, analysis, and evidence within their disciplines (McLeod, 1989).

This view, expressed in faculty seminars and other discussions, went hand in hand with research findings about student experiences, teaching practices in assigning and commenting on writing in disciplinary courses, and the communicative practices of mature researchers. Lucille McCarthy's 1987 study of a student in his first two years of college attempting to meet the writing demands of different courses and teachers revealed that the writing experience in each course was distinctive, requiring different kinds of writing in different learning contexts. The student summed up his experience of writing in cynical terms: "First you have to figure out what your teachers want. And then you have to give [it] to them if you're gonna' get the grade... And that's not always easy" (McCarthy, 1987, p. 362). This finding has been substantiated in a number of studies, cogently reviewed by Russell (1997, 2001).

It has also been found that the most general hopes of writing to learn (as expressed by Applebee, 1984; Britton, 1970; Emig, 1971, 1977) have been tempered by results suggesting the writing task needs to be well matched to the learning objectives of the courses (Langer and Applebee, 1987; MacDonald & Cooper, 1992). Specialized forms of writing to learn are now being developed within different disciplines.

Although it is now much clearer that writing instruction needs to align with the goals of disciplinary thought and practice, goals of teachers of writing do not

necessarily align with the learning goals of disciplinary instructors. Faigley and Hansen (1985) found that while English teachers responded to the form, disciplinary instructors in two social science classes were more concerned with familiarity with disciplinary knowledge and modes of reasoning, and thus looked to the conceptual depth and evidence of the argument, as viewed through disciplinary lenses. Schwegler and Shamoon (1991) looked further into the criteria eight sociologists used in grading student papers and found the professors had a highly developed model of what kind of work counted as good sociology.

To complicate the picture further, two instructors in the same discipline do not necessarily share goals, assignments, purposes for assigning writing, roles for student to adopt in their writing, and criteria for evaluating work (Herrington, 1985). Moreover, Herrington (1985) found that students' perceptions of what was required differed from their instructors'. As a result, there were distinctive approaches taken in the papers of the two courses, and uneven student success even within each class. Sometimes, such differences reflect patterned differences of interests between disciplinary specialists concerned with solving disciplinary problems and students trying to apply disciplinary findings to practical problems of life (Geisler, 1994). However, repeated findings commonly reveal student alienation from course material, resulting in decreased engagement in disciplinary writing (for example Greene, 1993; Chiseri-Strater, 1991).

These studies of the varying practices and challenges of writing in courses across the discipline have been matched by studies of the writing practices of professionals participating in their disciplinary work. Much of this research has examined scientific and technical writing (for example, Bazerman, 1988, 1999; Myers, 1990; Prelli, 1989; Sauer, 2003; Van Nostrand, 1997). Studies of the socialization of graduate students in writing practices of their fields (Blakeslee, 1997; Prior, 1998) have also given insight into disciplinary practices. At the same time, practitioners of primarily the social sciences have been examining the rhetorical activities of their own field with an eye towards addressing what they see as fundamental problems in the way their fields formulate knowledge. In anthropology, the central document is Clifford and Marcus's (1986) edited volume *Writing Culture*. In economics, it is McCloskey's (1985) *Rhetoric of Economics*. In sociology, Gusfield's (1976) article on the rhetoric of drunk driving research is viewed as the foundational work. The history and sociology of sciences have also contributed to our understanding of disciplinary writing practices, with perhaps the most well-known book being Latour's (1987) *Science in Action*.

Communication-based rhetoricians have also been part of the investigation into disciplinary argument, though they have tended to take an approach that applies general principles of rhetoric to scientific writing, rather than seeking out forms of disciplinary differentiation (see, for example, Gross, 1990). Further, they generally have not been interested in practical applications of their findings to skills instruction, for which they have been criticized by Gaonkar (1997). Nonetheless, scholarship in disciplinary argumentation provides some expertise in advancing the Communication in the Disciplines (CID) approach.

The turn of WAC toward a disciplinary focus has indeed evoked the same sorts of criticisms mentioned by Fleury (2005): that the focus on discipline-specific rhetorics fragments the humanistic tradition; that it leads students away from personal concerns and personal voice to empty structures and alienated forms of knowledge/power; and that it rides roughshod over class, ethnic, and personal identities. From my perspective, the social powers contained in these discourses are the very reason that they should be studied and the reason students should be given access to them. As far as personal identity, commitments, and interests, students are to be encouraged to find their own meanings and purposes in these disciplinary forms, so that they may inhabit and use them to overcome barriers and to bring diverse perspectives and interests into the disciplines. Identities can grow, gain strength, and provide greater opportunities for social engagement as they assimilate the powers of the professions. Further, only by learning disciplinary practices can students remake those disciplines in more equitable and less narrow ways, and only by learning disciplinary practices can students incorporate their experiences and perspectives into their evolving fields of practice (Bazerman, 1992).

I am particularly pleased that Fleury (2005) here identifies his entryway into disciplinary difference through the concept of style, even though I have found the concepts of genre and activity system to be ultimately more powerful tools to understand those differences. The pleasure comes from my deep respect for Ludwik Fleck's profound work from the early 1930s on the role of language in the formation of knowledge, translated into English in 1979 as *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (Fleck, 1979). This work introduces the concepts of thought collective and thought style. But Fleck's thought collective is, when you look at his analysis, the group of people among whom communications circulate. Similarly, Fleck's thought style is not an evanescent thing in the heads of people but the style of representation the researchers use in expressing their knowledge—so it could be as easily called “expression style.” While Fleck developed his insights independent of his contemporaries who were starting to think about genre and activity in new ways, his line of work is consistent with current genre and activity theories. By examining Fleck's view of the social origin, transmission, and effect of thought style (with implications for the development and circulation of ideology and stance), advocates of the centrality of style, such as Fleury, may find ways of talking about how the styles that disciplines use to express their intellectual work are closely tied to the life, meaning, and accomplishment of these knowledge-creating communities.

This close connection between the styles of communication and the most fundamental projects, meanings, and vitality of the disciplines has made the study of disciplinary writing and the practice of writing across the curriculum deeply rewarding and engaging endeavors. We get to experience and to have a special understanding of the accomplishments of the disciplines as we see how they have brought linguistic resources to their tasks. We at times even have fresh insights of value to disciplinary practitioners about the character of their knowledge and how its development, dissemination, and use may be improved by changes in writing practices—practices that may focus questions and evidence more tightly, may open up

the confining narrowness of some discourses, or provide ways for apparently incompatible discourses to find common project. More immediately and regularly, by working with students' disciplinary writing, we become deeply engaged in students' intellectual growth as they learn to articulate themselves into productive members of their disciplines and professions. When it works, it feels like real teaching, the kind that we went into the business hoping for. This is exciting work, and I wish the practitioners of communication across the curriculum the same fun I and my colleagues have enjoyed in our realm of expression.

References

- Applebee, A. (1984). Writing and reasoning. *Review of Educational Research*, 54, 577–596.
- Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping written knowledge: The genre and activity of the experimental article in science*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bazerman, C. (1987). Codifying the social scientific style. In J. S. Nelson, A. Megill, & D. N. McCloskey (Eds.), *The rhetoric of the human sciences: Language and argument in scholarship and public affairs* (pp. 125–144). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bazerman, C. (1992). From cultural criticism to disciplinary participation: Living with powerful words. In A. Herrington & C. Moran (Eds.), *Writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines* (pp. 61–68). New York: Modern Language Association.
- Bazerman, C. (1999). *The languages of Edison's light*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bazerman, C., Little, J., Bethel, L., Chavkin, T., Fouquette, D., & Garufis, J. (in press). *Reference guide to writing across the curriculum*. Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse. Retrieved from <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/>
- Blakeslee, A. M. (1997). Activity, context, interaction, and authority: Learning to write scientific papers. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 11, 125–169.
- Britton, J. (1970). *Language and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Chiseri-Strater, E. (1991). *Academic literacies: The public and private discourse of university students*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. E. (Eds.). (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Emig, J. (1971). *The composing processes of twelfth graders*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Emig, J. (1977). Writing as a mode of learning. *College Composition and Communication*, 28, 122–128.
- Faigley, L., & Hansen, K. (1985). Learning to write in the social sciences. *College Composition and Communication*, 36, 140–149.
- Fleck, L. (1979). *Genesis and development of a scientific fact*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fleury, A. (2005). Liberal education and communication against the disciplines. *Communication Education*, 54, 72–79.
- Fulwiler, T., & Young, A. (1982). *Language connections: Writing and reading across the curriculum*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Gaonkar, D. P. (1997). The idea of rhetoric in the rhetoric of science. In A. G. Gross & W. M. Keith (Eds.), *Rhetorical hermeneutics: Invention and interpretation in the age of science* (pp. 25–85). Albany: State University of New York.
- Geisler, C. (1994). *Academic literacy and the nature of expertise. Reading, writing, and knowing in academic philosophy*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Greene, S. (1993). The role of task in the development of academic thinking through reading and writing in a college history course. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 27, 37–48.

- Gross, A. G. (1990). *The rhetoric of science*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gusfield, J. (1976). The literary rhetoric of science: Comedy and pathos in drinking driver research. *American Sociological Review*, 41, 16–34.
- Herrington, A. J. (1985). Writing in academic settings: A study of the contexts for writing in two college chemical engineering courses. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 19, 331–361.
- Langer, J., & Applebee, A. (1987). *How writing shapes thinking: A study of teaching and learning*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Latour, B. (1987). *Science in action: How to follow scientists and engineers through society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MacDonald, S. P., & Cooper, C. M. (1992). Contributions of academic and dialogic journals to writing about literature. In A. Herrington & C. Moran (Eds.), *Writing, teaching and learning in the disciplines* (pp. 137–155). New York: Modern Language Association.
- McCarthy, L. P. (1987). A stranger in strange lands: A college student writing across the curriculum. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 21, 233–365.
- McCarthy, L. P. (1991). A psychiatrist using DSM-III: The influence of a charter document in psychiatry. In C. Bazerman & J. Paradis (Eds.), *Textual dynamics of the professions* (pp. 358–378). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- McCarthy, L. P., & Gerring, J. P. (1994). Revising psychiatry's charter document, DSM IV. *Written Communication*, 11, 147–192.
- McCloskey, D. N. (1985). *The rhetoric of economics*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- McLeod, S. (1989). Writing across the curriculum: The second stage, and beyond. *College Composition and Communication*, 40, 337–343.
- Myers, G. (1990). *Writing biology: Texts in the social construction of scientific knowledge*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Prelli, L. J. (1989). *A rhetoric of science: Inventing scientific discourse*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Prior, P. A. (1998). *Writing/disciplinarity: A sociohistoric account of literate activity in the academy*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Russell, D. R. (1997). Writing and genre in higher education and workplaces. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 4, 224–237.
- Russell, D. R. (2001). Where do the naturalistic studies of WAC/WID point to? In S. McLeod, E. Miraglia, M. Soven, & C. Thaiss (Eds.), *WAC for the new millennium: Strategies for continuing writing-across-the-curriculum programs* (pp. 259–298). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Sauer, B. (2003). *The rhetoric of risk: Technical documentation in hazardous environments*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Schwegler, R., & Shamoan, L. (1991). Meaning attribution in ambiguous texts. In C. Bazerman, & J. Paradis (Eds.), *Textual dynamics of the professions* (pp. 216–234). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Van Nostrand, A. D. (1997). *Fundable knowledge*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Received April 2004

Accepted May 2004