

The World According to Gambell

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In considering the writing deficiencies of students in a Faculty of Education program, Gambell asks: What is the problem as perceived by the students' professors, and just how extensive is it? Valid and reliable answers to those questions would presumably represent true statements about the world or about perceptions of that world held in the minds of certain professors. However, we have to remember that what you see when you look for the truth depends on where you look from and what you look with. These framework issues are separate from the question of the validity and reliability of Gambell's data as sources of answers within his perspective and that of his colleagues. While the data could certainly be challenged, in this response I will concentrate on the issue of the study's framework for investigating writing on the grounds that this issue is more significant than the generalizability and internal consistency of the data.

Gambell and his colleagues appear to regard writing as a neutral vehicle for the expression of thought. This view has been called the "monolithic" notion of writing (Faigley & Hansen, 1985). According to this stance, learning to write is assumed to be the mastery of a set of lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical skills which can then be transferred to writing tasks in different subjects or disciplines and for different purposes. Problems of writing, according to this view, are separate from problems of knowing and using knowledge in a particular discipline. Such an approach to writing is authorized by a correspondence assumption about language which, in turn, is based in a Cartesian duality of mind and world. Briefly, the construct of a knowing subject, or mind, separate from the object of knowing, leads to the notion that language is a means of representing reality to what Rorty (1979) called the "mind as a mirror," so that language stands between things and our ideas of them like some neutral window between the world and our conceptions of it (Morgan, 1987).

Gambell regards writing and problems of writing as involving formal categories such as syntactic structures (subject-verb agreement, for example) and rhetorical shapes (argumentative discourse, for example) which

exist as constructs independent of content and which can be learned as devices for the expression of thoughts independently of particular thoughts. This theoretical orientation clearly underlies his questionnaire categories of syntactic construction, usage, and mechanical problems. Moreover, it also motivates his other two categories of error types, conceptualization and organization, as the items under each of these headings refer to formal characteristics of general rhetoric. What is at stake here is a framework that assumes that, if students could but manage these formal, generalizable categories of written expression, their writing problems would disappear. Such solutions could be provided by university composition courses in cases where the high schools had failed to teach writing properly, an arrangement which Rose (1985) claimed has marginalized writing in the university by removing its teaching from the core of the curriculum. Within this framework, the value of Gambell's study would be that it has rank-ordered the categories of writing errors that professors think are the most prevalent, revealing at the same time a consistency between these judgements and those identified by other, earlier studies going back to at least the 1930s (for example, Leonard, 1932).

However, a language-as-representation framework is not the only one that could be used to investigate perceptions of student writing. Instead of proposing as the writer's task the accurate representation in accurate linguistic forms of an objective, positivistic, stable, and enduring reality, we could – following Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey (Rorty, 1979) – propose a reality that is culturally formed and therefore pluralistic. Language, in this view, does not simply represent reality but is implicated in its creation in particular social worlds. This is a dynamic view of language which sees words as socially constituted symbols which can act to bring meanings into being. Williams (1979) presented this view when he wrote of language as:

... not merely the creation of arbitrary signs which are then reproduced within groups ... but [consisting of] signs which take on the changeable and often reversed social relations of a given society, so that what enters into them is the contradictory and conflict-ridden social history of the people who speak the language, including all the variations between signs at any given time. (p. 176)

Such a non-neutral view of the relationship between language and reality is the source of the movement called “language across the curriculum” (Parker, 1985). One of the major assertions of this curriculum proposal is that learning takes place through speaking and writing as much as through listening and reading. Through talk and writing, one may construct new meanings and refine or elaborate old ones. The widespread use of writing journals in many levels of education, for example, is based on this epistemology, consciously traced from Vygotsky (1962).

If a dynamic, dialogic relationship between writing and knowledge is proposed, the question of what constitutes writing failure becomes much more complex because it cannot be separated, except at a superficial level, from learning failure. In university settings at least, the implication of this connection is that writing must be considered in relation to ways of knowing since it can no longer be treated as simply a way of expressing that which has become knowledge. Subjects of study – disciplines – have their own ways of knowing which are part of their justification as separate parts of the university curriculum. Presumably, therefore, writing as a form of coming to know will also have unique manifestations in different disciplines. Students in Faculties of Education are not involved simply in learning to write but in learning to write science, literature, mathematics, psychology, and curriculum and pedagogy. This complex array of writing abilities is but poorly captured in a discipline-neutral taxonomy of formal errors. Faigley and Hansen (1985) suggested the complexity when they outlined what teachers of writing in university settings should know about writing across the curriculum:

If teachers of English are to offer courses that truly prepare students to write in other disciplines, they will have to explore why those disciplines study certain subjects, why certain methods of inquiry are sanctioned, how the conventions of a discipline shape a text in that discipline, how individual writers represent themselves in a text, how a text is read and disseminated, and how one text influences subsequent texts. (p. 149)

The inseparability of writing and thought and writing's role in the formation of thought take a conception of writing problems beyond a simple failure to manipulate formal structures in conventional ways. The concept of discourse communities takes the issue a step further towards cultural politics. If the disciplines represent different ways of thinking and if writing, being more than the neutral transcription of thought, has discipline-specific characteristics, then learning to write in, for example, a social science discipline is a form of induction into a particular discourse community as an agreed-upon way of constituting and interpreting experience (Bizzell, 1982). As Bartholomae (1986) described this induction process in relation to writing, students have:

to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of (a particular) community ... where the rules governing the presentation of examples or the development of an argument are both distinct and, even to a professional, mysterious. (p. 4)

As Faigley and Hansen (1985) put it, students have to learn to manage the particular "negotiation of meaning among writers, readers, and subject matters" (p. 149).

The significance of this concept of initiation into discourse communities for the matter at hand is that it leads to a different view of writing difficulties than the one that formed the framework for Gambell's study. Students present themselves to the university (or to the Faculty of Education) at different stages of readiness for this initiation, the differences being attributable to inequalities in the distribution of innate intellectual abilities, quality of schooling opportunities, or social advantages. University writing competency tests are designed to cull students falling into the first category but may serve to further discriminate against those in the second two categories who have not had the opportunities to engage in academic-style discourse with its emphasis on abstraction, generalization, and distancing of self and personal experience. As Bizzell (1982) noted about a social group favoured in this respect,

the middle-class students' real advantage is that they are already familiar not only with a range of codes (including the one most appropriate to school usage, which Bernstein calls 'elaborated'), but also with the range of social cues that indicate where and when a code is appropriate. (p. 196)

This surely raises the question of whether the debate about writing standards in universities is not just the visible part of a larger issue of cultural politics regarding whom we admit to our discourse communities and whom we exclude. Agreement between subject and verb may, in this regard, be more important as a part of an easy-to-recognize shibboleth than as a prerequisite of genuine scholarship.

Access to the privileged language of university discourse also involves encounters with relations of status, power, and control. Students who are learning to "extend themselves into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals, gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions, and necessary connections that determine the 'what might be said' and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community" (Bartholomae, 1986, p. 11) encounter professors who have the authority to diagnose their problems with writing, for example. Indeed, the Gambell study is an interesting exercise in professorial authority to set up the categories of the problem, to collect data (from professors), and to report the results in a professorial journal!

Bartholomae (1986) placed this question of power relationships at the centre of the problem of academic writing. When students are assigned writing tasks to be read by professors, they are expected to assume a position of authority to argue or report for an audience that knows the topic much better than they do and that already controls the way of knowing and, therefore, the way of writing authorized by the discipline. No wonder many students seem to struggle with abstractions and gener-

alizations expressed in opaque academic jargon as they try to “take on our peculiar ways of reading, writing, speaking, and thinking all at once” (Bartholomae, 1986, p. 11). Perhaps the surface blemishes in their written work go unnoticed by students in this deeper anxiety.

Moreover, when, as Gambell noted, much of what students have to write is accomplished in testing situations, errors of form are to be expected since they are usually caught and corrected in the editing phase of “real” writing. Bartholomae (1986) suggested a deeper alienation in writing used for purposes of evaluation:

Much of the written work students do is test-taking, report or summary, work that places them outside the working discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do, rather than inside that discourse, where they can do its work and participate in a common enterprise (p. 11).

Brodkey (1987) noted that research indicates that most students construe writing in the college in terms of their teachers and that writing assignments are usually tests. Furthermore “writing is usually evaluated in terms of a few selected grammar rules and discourse conventions” (p. 414). Since examination writing was widely used by professors surveyed in Gambell’s study, the implications of his findings may be more applicable to single-draft writing under pressure than to “real” writing. As a Grade 10 student said to his teacher, “Exams are a different world, aren’t they, sir?” (Robertson, 1987, p. 137).

From the point of view of university writing as discipline-specific meaning construction and negotiation, an interesting alternative way to study writing problems in pre-service teacher-education programs would be to consider how knowing and writing are authorized and used by the discourse community of teacher educators and how education students are taught to use them. This would call for an analysis of the writing demands of the academic discourse of education and would raise the question of the relationship between mastery of this discourse in the university and subsequent good teaching in the schools. Maybe a perceived discontinuity between the academic study of education and its successful practice is implicit in Gambell’s findings. Perhaps students in Faculties of Education are faced with two discourse communities: the school valuing experiential ways of knowing represented in narrative and anecdotal language, on the one side, and the university valuing academic ways of knowing represented by argumentative and expository language, on the other. Some students may not be convinced that genuine engagement with the second leads to success in the first.

Finally, epistemology and cultural politics aside, we have to approach

writing errors with some humility. Joseph Williams (1981) noted:

if we read any text the way we read freshman essays, we will find many of the same kind of errors we routinely expect to find and therefore do find ... if we could make the ordinary kind of contact with those texts that we make with other kinds of texts, then we could find many fewer errors. (p. 159)

He went on to note that writers of handbooks on correct English, including solid authorities such as Fowler and White and Strunk, sometimes offend the rules of grammar and usage in their very proclamations of the rules (pp. 156-157). In other words, anyone, even linguistic patrol officers, can trip into the pitfalls of written Standard English. The kind of errors that Gambell's colleagues reported to most frequently occur in their students' writing are found all around us, even in the writing of professors. Let two examples suffice. The 1987 Learned Societies Conference at McMaster University used a form for the reservation of lodging for delegates that was headed "Request for Campus Accomodation." Gambell's own questionnaire contained the sentence, "Again, anonymity and confidentiality is guaranteed!" This would be categorized as problem 7(a)₄ in Gambell's own taxonomy, subject-verb agreement.

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