

CONSTRUCTING EXPERIENCE

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Temporary Boundaries over Unstable Land Masses

The distinction and/or relation between process and content of writing is as slippery and dangerous as that other ancient binary chestnut of the arts of representation: form and content. At times these distinctions are useful to examine particular issues and at other times they act as reifying roadblocks obscuring alternative useful conceptions of the way meaning or content comes into the world through a process of creation and use, taking on particular presences in the formal expression that locally embodies and realizes the content. Without getting into tiresome undergraduate rhapsodies about the dancer and the dance, and the dancing master, and the morals of the dancing master, and without getting into the endless and irresolvable philosophical debate about whether there exists a form of knowledge independent of the occasion, terms, and practices of its expression, I simply wish to remind us that employing this distinction conjures these ghosts.

Given the perils of the distinction, the prudence of using the distinction depends on the occasion and what we hope to make of the occasion. Using this distinction is a way of talking to achieve certain ends. On certain occasions we can find it useful to talk about content knowledge as distinct from the procedural knowledge of how to formulate. One such situation is when content is taught in one particular standard form and forum (i.e., textbook knowledge in a rote classroom) so that only certain kinds of statements found in certain places count as archetypical knowledge or the ideal type of knowledge. Then if a student is asked to use this archetypical knowledge as transmitted in the textbook in a different context or if the student is asked to switch roles from a passive receptacle for this knowledge, the student must then clearly do something different with the "content," reformulating it into new forms and forums. In order for us to describe what is happening and to give the student guidance on what to do in order to actively

use this textbook content, we may indeed find it useful to employ a content/process distinction.

Another occasion where the content/process distinction might be wisely employed is when a number of forums are similarly structured so that a variety of materials are treated similarly once we enter the doors of these separate forums—we might then notice a similarity of process that seems independent of content, as when various government agencies collect heterogeneous materials from the many domains of life and reduce them to the common realm of aggregating categories, mass statistics, and budgets in order to be processed by standard bureaucratic procedures. Or we may reasonably invoke the process/content distinction if we want to teach students how to absorb a wide variety of materials from a variety of sources and integrate them through a single set of universal practices, which are good enough for many practical purposes, as when we teach students general study procedures that will serve them well enough until they get involved into the peculiarities of their advanced college courses. These are the kinds of situations and problems that I think David Kaufer is wondering about in his paper for this symposium.

Cheryl Geisler in her paper wonders about different kinds of situations and problems. She is wondering about how we (as students and practitioners) represent to ourselves what we do know and whether it might not be advisable when we face certain tasks to readjust that representation so as to bring the many things we know together in new and useful configurations. The kinds of representations she considers (which she organizes into *task world*, *domain world*, and *narrated world*) are a consequence of the kinds of social institutions of knowledge discussed above that separate rote learning of the textbook and encyclopedia-like statements (domain world) from that which happens in the "real world" beyond the classroom door (the narrated world) and from the active application and reformulation of that domain knowledge in specific situations (the task world).

Gilbert and Mulkey (whom Geisler cites) describe a situation where these separate knowledge representations are not only distinguished but are never discussed in the same breath. The difference is not only within the representation of knowledge domains but also on the occasions that one would make public those knowledge representations, so that in the laboratory one talks about the task world of making the experiment work, in the hallways one talks about the narrated world of how one manages to create the appearance of authority in this

contingent world, while in one's papers, talk about the domain world dominates. Gilbert and Mulkey argue that scientists keep the occasions of the representation of the knowledge worlds so well insulated from each other that they are never really fully aware of all the parts of their mental universe in an integrated way; the only conscious meetings of the representations are in the absurd clashes of jokes. If one were concerned with creating mental integrity for these scientists, one might indeed want to open doorways wider than jokes for the scientists to bring their representation worlds together into a coherent integrated whole. On the other hand, if scientists indeed do keep these repertoires separate, we must ask whether there were practical reasons that drove the creation of such a peculiar set of boundaries with separate internal organizations of discourse.

In looking at an entirely different disciplinary community, Geisler has found that philosophers, to carry out successfully their professionally defined tasks, must indeed bring all three of these worlds together into a single discourse (something undergraduate philosophers have not yet been able to do). To help undergraduates learn how to become more successful philosophers, indeed she must help them locate and become proficient in using the doorways among the different representational worlds constructed in our contemporary educational system.

On other occasions, it is more prudent to view knowledge as inseparable from the practices by which it is created. If, for example, we want to understand why a discourse field emerged to advance certain kinds of representations as knowledge, it helps to see the entire formulation as a unified linguistic practice embedded within other linguistic, social, and material practices. Thus, to understand how anthropologists came to write ethnographies as relevant formulations of socially desired knowledge, we need to look at the role and activity of anthropology within nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American-European culture, politics, international relations, and economics in dominating relationship to the other peoples of the world. There is no baseline truthful content of anthropological reality that allows us to separate the procedures of formulating that knowledge from the content knowledge itself. I do not wish to get us into the morasses of epistemological debate, so I will not raise the hard cases of mathematics, logic, and physics, nor do I wish to deny that empirical experience can act as serious constraint on and goad to the stylized discourse activity of knowledge-creating communities. I have my own particular ways out of these conundrums. But here I only want to suggest that once you move out of the protection of the taken-for-granted assumptions and

discourse arrangements of particular epistemic communities, it becomes very difficult to agree on a baseline content that exists prior to the procedures of formulating it.

Such an integrated approach to knowledge formulation not only deflates the pretensions of certain fields' hegemonic claims to absolute timeless formulations that rise above the social-cultural climate to breathe the pure air of absolute knowledge, but this integrated approach also provides a way to instruct students in the heterogeneity of professional discourse, a way of becoming adept at the whole array of social, material, linguistic skills necessary to make successful statements happen.

It helps us teachers, for example, to be aware that even apparently the same formulation takes on different meanings and uses to students at different times, as they are engaged in different concerns and discourse networks. Sensitivity to the place of "content" formulations within the students' discourse systems can help us to interact with the students' discourses and draw them into the ones that we as professionalized citizens wish to draw them into as part of the large social project we call education. Consider the familiar formulation of $E = mc^2$. To bright primary school children, the memorized formulation becomes a symbol of genius, a mantra of affiliation and desire and power, to be repeated upon occasions of identity assertion. As the child "learns" school science, the formal definition of the terms in the equation becomes a token of competence as well as an affective entryway into the immense mystery of the powerful universe, often to be exercised in comic books. Later it becomes an explanation for things like atomic power. Only later when the student enters certain domains of mathematics and physics problem-solving does it become a way of calculating equivalences; and even later a way of deriving a fuller network of equivalences, as guided by already established common knowledge of physics professionals. Then it becomes a resource in solving novel problems and deriving new experiments and claims, then a theoretical claim to be always potentially open to question and comparison to alternative claims. At each stage the formulation is so operationally different that one could not say there is a stable content, even though there are linkages among the various systems so that the same formulation can carry across the social boundaries and in fact can help lead the person from one context to another.

Let's consider another bit of knowledge everyone knows: In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue. This statement is clearly part of a culture that has a historical consciousness, elevates particular events,

has developed a quantitative identification of date based on an event of political/theological significance for European consciousness (the birth of Christ), tends to believe in the significance of individual heroic accomplishment deserving transcendent recognition, respects nationalistic concerns, aims at the development of nationalistic consciousness, measures its history in relation to Europe, and distributes such cultural knowledge widely through public education that relies in part on mnemonic rote learning. Not only does seeing these things help us become a bit better as teachers, filling in the missing contextual pieces that might make our students learn such things if we desire them to, this analysis also becomes a tool to lead our students into other realms of understanding cultural knowledge, if we and they so desire.

Seeing knowledge formulation as an integrated complex practice helps us establish the classroom and social contexts in which students can become adept at such formulations, points us to the heterogeneity of such practices, provides an analytically specific tool to help students understand their discourse and move among varieties of knowledge as well as to transform their knowledges appropriately and integrate them successfully, and finally helps us all avoid fetishizing any knowledge as absolute.

So I have just presented three kinds of occasions, appropriate to the formulations of Kaufer, Geisler, and myself, respectively. But of course the platform from which I have constructed the account of three situations is the last, of integrated practice. I have been implicitly claiming that Kaufer's and Geisler's formulations are kinds of local knowledge, arising from and useful within particular contexts. I hope I have co-opted Kaufer and Geisler, but I am afraid they might claim first that, based on my own stated beliefs, I would have to admit that my own formulation is also local. Kaufer might further say that my art of writing has allowed me to explore and synthesize apparently contradictory content worlds hierarchically under the rubric of a single concept-content, indicating that knowing the tricks of writing allows you to get away with almost anything—and that therefore writing knowledge is hierarchically superior. Geisler might claim rather that I have found a doorway to connect my particular domain world with theirs, by turning each of them into a narrative of local knowledge activity—to realize my own task of asserting hegemony.

And from my platform, I could not say they were wrong for their purposes, since I doubt that we are going to find any of this hard-

wired in anyone, nor are we going to find a standard program that will constitute all our mutual software, because we each program ourselves as to best meet our own needs and experiences as they evolve in our social experiential material contexts. Nor are we going to find a single "content" of universal truth, especially within a strongly activity-oriented set of concerns. Moreover, in this particular case I am employing local conceptual practices that incorporate precisely such processes as Geisler and Kaufer are discussing.

The only thing I can say in favor of my perspective is that from the point of view of giving an account of all knowledge-formulating and reformulating practices to help us in pedagogy and our own writing, my account I believe is more general and encompassing. Geisler and Kaufer I believe have presented accounts of local knowledges useful in certain kinds of situations, incorporating certain local developments of learning and text-production processes that have proved useful in a range of modern academic tasks within American institutions of learning. I imagine that is good enough, useful enough, worthy enough, without having to claim that we have come to some universal substratum of mental activity that can be characterized in universal terms, free of the projects, practices, and discourses of our disciplines. Indeed, the perspective I offer has such tendencies toward high-level abstraction and philosophic tangles far removed from any concrete experiences of discourse worlds, that it must constantly be localized into the kinds of specific discourse systems where generalizations such as Geisler's and Kaufer's can take hold.