Students Being Disciplined: Getting Confused, Getting By, Getting Rewarded, Getting Smart, Getting Real

Charles Bazerman
Professor of Literature, Communication, and Culture
Georgia Institute of Technology

Keynote speech presented at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing 1994 Conference
"Looking Ahead: Writing In(tensively) the Disciplines"

Speaker Series
No. 4 ♦ 1996

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles,
Series Editor

Students Being Disciplined: Getting Confused, Getting By, Getting Rewarded, Getting Smart, Getting Real

Charles Bazerman
Professor of Literature, Communication, and Culture
Georgia Institute of Technology

Keynote speech presented at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing 1994 Conference
"Looking Ahead: Writing In(tensively) the Disciplines"

Speaker Series
No. 4 ♦ 1996

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Kim Donehower, Editor

The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing
University of Minnesota
227 Lind Hall
207 Church Street S.E.
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Director: Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Professor, English

Research Assistants: Kathleen Sheerin Devore, Kim Donehower, Christina Glendenning, Holly Littlefield

Policy Board: Lisa Albrecht, Associate Professor, General College; Chris Anson, Professor, English, Director of Program in Composition and Communication; Richard Beach, Professor, College of Education and Human Development; Robert L. Brown, Associate Professor, English; Terence Collins, Professor, General College; Ann Hill Duin, Associate Professor, Rhetoric; Toni McNaron, Professor, English; Carol Miller, Associate Professor, American Studies; Robert Scott, Professor, Speech Communication; Billie Wahlstrom, Professor, Rhetoric; Constance Walker, Associate Professor, Curriculum and Instruction.

Copyright © 1996 by The Board of Regents, University of Minnesota
All Rights Reserved

ISBN 1-881221-20-2

The University of Minnesota is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, or sexual orientation.

Preface

On May 12 and 13, 1994, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing held its fifth annual colloquium, "Looking Ahead: Writing In(tensively) the Disciplines." The colloquium focused on issues raised by the growth of "Writing Intensive" and "Writing Across the Curriculum" programs around the country. We invited Charles Bazerman, Professor of Literature, Communication, and Culture at the Georgia Institute of Technology, to deliver the keynote address published here.

Professor Bazerman's interdisciplinary scholarship has produced ground-breaking work in several areas, including rhetorical theory, the rhetoric of science and technology, social dynamics of writing, genre theory, and writing pedagogy. His books include *Constructing Experience, Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science, The Informed Writer, and The Languages of Edison's Light. He is co-editor of Textual Dynamics of the Professions and a volume of Landmark Essays in Writing Across the Curriculum.* Professor Bazerman's keynote address, "Students Being Disciplined: Getting Confused, Getting By, Getting Rewarded, Getting Smart, Getting Real," examines the ways in which students are currently initiated into or excluded from disciplinary fields of study.

The colloquium and the publication of Professor Bazerman's speech continue the Center's commitment to improving undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. Along with colloquia, conferences, publications, and other outreach activities, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- characteristics of writing across the University's curriculum;

- status reports on students' writing ability and the University;
- the connections between writing and learning in all fields;
- the characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effects of ethnicity, race, class, and gender on writing; and
- curricular reform through writing-intensive instruction.

We are pleased to present Professor Bazerman's keynote address as part of the ongoing interdisciplinary conversations about writing across the University. One of the goals of all Center publications is to encourage conversations about writing; we invite you to contact the Center about this publication or other Center publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor

Kim Donehower, Editor
April 1996

Students Being Disciplined: Getting Confused, Getting By, Getting Rewarded, Getting Smart, Getting Real

To those of us well-socialized and well-institutionalized in the academic world, disciplines loom large and strong and uniform—that is, when we are looking on disciplines other than our own. We each know in our own fields how specialization, division, individual perception, individual findings, individual ideas, and individual concerns create complex domains in which we must each find our own way, no matter how thoroughly our paths may be marked with official statements of standards and regulated procedures of work. Even the official statements and regulations are historically negotiated and at every moment interpreted, contested, and negotiable from the multiple positions and individuals constituting the discipline. Moreover, we are aware of the interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary and non-disciplinary perspectives that resist institutional closure and uniformity.

We define our disciplinary participation in knowledge production within these daily complexities, and we must help our students gain some understanding of them that is neither too confusing nor misleadingly oversimplified. We find our ways in these dynamic complexities not only to make careers, belong to groups, or find role-appropriate things to say in class. We search these complex realms to find what we consider real and important—what is worth our time and our students' time, what will make a difference in the knowledge of our fields, our lives, the lives of our students, and the life of society.
A number of years ago, when I examined how a few physicists read the research literature in their specialties, I found that at all levels their reading was driven by a dynamic view of their own research agenda within a perceived changing research front.

This individualized purpose-driven construction of the unfolding research literature characterized a wide range of their behaviors, from selecting articles to be read and deciding how carefully to read them to evaluating the arguments and synthesizing the findings with other claims made in their field. That is, everyone constructed their own vision of the field around those lines of work they considered important and amenable to advance, those lines they had invested their own professional energies into. Everyone had made their own separate bets on this, and so they all in some way read differently. And this, I remind you, was in as codified and highly elaborated field as high energy physics.

But of course, as social psychologists of prejudice have long noted, as much as we know the complexity of groups we are intimately affiliated with, we have a strong bias to see groups we know less well as much more uniform. Even though we may hear rumors of intellectual divisions in a department across campus, we are still ready to attribute a degree of uniformity to those disciplines. So when we think of students being socialized into disciplines we are likely to think of them being trained into a tightly defined set of practices and doctrines which overwhelm their minds and turn them into disciplinary clones—the Stepford chemists, or even worse, the Stepford deconstructionists; what some critics of macro-sociology call sociological dopes, unreflective creatures who cannot see beyond the practices, values, and norms that bind them to a particular communal identity.

But in fact, if we reflect on our own history of engagement with our disciplines, the process of becoming an active disciplinary member is a history of personal questioning and transformation. We constantly evaluate work in our field and keep making novel choices as we develop our own practices, concerns, work, and

understanding within complex disciplinary domains. We differ, we argue, we make new choices, we try to find new evidence of new sorts, we design new experiments or projects. If we weren't constructing something new and something a bit different we wouldn't be making much of a contribution (Kaufer and Carley).

In constructing the novel, we create ever new disciplines for ourselves and our work—ever new standards of argument, evidence, experimental procedure and care. Of course we speak to the disciplines and standards expected of us by others in our fields, both because we ourselves may believe that these disciplined practices produce better knowledge and because our colleagues will question the value and quality of our work if we don't speak to the general standards of the discipline and to the specific rigors and regimes developed for the particular problems at hand. So we incorporate the discipline's discipline within our own personal discipline. But no matter how stringently enforced by others or guided by our mentors, that discipline ultimately comes down to a regime we take upon ourselves.

Everyone's path into disciplined knowledge-production is different, and I will not presume to set forth one unalterable path of socialization. However, to suggest some common orientations a number of us pass through, I will summarize a series of findings concerning literacy in the disciplines in the form of a rough and dirty but plausible developmental sequence. This sequence is only meant as a suggestive heuristic for thinking through the kinds of intellectual positions our students may be taking in our classes and what those positions might mean for the kinds of communicative challenges and tasks our students face.

Literacy development is closely related to disciplinary socialization because much disciplinary work gets done on paper. How people read or what they write depends on who they believe they are communicating with, for what purposes, in what roles and relationships, in the context of which ideas and which projects. Literacy in any instance is part of a social event it transacts. Conversely, complex social events can require high degrees of specialized literate skills to be enacted successfully—such as a seminar, a supreme court hearing, or the production of an episode of Murphy Brown. So if we want to understand what sense students are making of our lectures and assigned readings and what goals students have in their writing—and if we wish to target assignments to stretch students just at the point of learning—we need to see how they are perceiving their relation to disciplinary activity. Moreover, if we wish to provide appropriate guidance and support in their communicative struggles in trying to participate within a discipline, we need to see what the struggle is, from the struggler's point of view.

Basic textbooks, the kind frequently used in secondary classrooms and introductory college courses, often present a codified, unproblematic, authoritative view of disciplinary knowledge to be learned. Students may have greater affinity for or alienation from the authoritative subject matter presented in each course and text, but their primary task is frequently simply to reproduce the taught material. Without going into the philosophy that drives this set of classroom relations or the advisability of that pedagogy, students here are not seen as active participants in the knowledge field, but just as people who need to be aware of the commodified knowledge products of those fields.

However, as college students are given tasks that ask for more than reproduction, they are frequently confused as to what is asked from them. In part this is, of course, a

consequence of the loss of narrowly focused authoritative demands and procedures. But confusion also arises because teachers in each field and in each course are asking different things of them, putting them in different positions where they are required to make different kinds of intellectual leaps, often with little explicit guidance. Without certainty about what to do or say, students may cling tenaciously to the security of repeating authoritative statements, summarizing the textbook or recounting narratives and plots. Those students who do allow themselves to step into the confusion often write vague, undirected, or unfocused papers, as they try to discover what it is they can or ought to write. Sometimes teachers reward this courage and guide it further into coherent appropriate form, but sometimes teachers draw back aghast or exhausted, preferring the disappointment of the neater packages of less courageous students. Some of the earliest investigation into students across the curriculum identified just these confusions as students traveled from class to class, having to psych out each teacher, to figure out the game of each class. (Herrington, McCarthy)

Caught in such circumstances, students can plausibly develop cynicism about giving the teacher what he or she seems to be asking for. The difficulty of producing such course-appropriate comments may lead to an abandonment of any hope or desire to write something that one feels important or committed to. Formality, sloganizing, and increasing emptiness lead to a simulacrum of learning that satisfies neither teacher or student, but allows them both to get through the course. Readings and lectures become alienating resources and patterns to construct what the student can best determine that the teacher wants. Insofar as the student finds these materials confusing and personal statements of understanding ruled off the field, mimic behavior is likely to be only

marginally successful, if at all. Nostalgia for reproduction of authoritative statements may overwhelm the student, for at least then it was pretty straightforward what you had to mimic. If such is the student's experience in any course, the student is not likely to take a follow-up course, and the student is lost to this discipline or at least this one teacher's approach to the discipline.

On the other hand, some students find a kind of sense in getting by. They may find disciplinary knowledge actually helps them understand some part of the world that interests them. They sense personal intellectual growth. Imitation of disciplinary models may also provide a form in which to discover new meanings. Getting by seems to feel like real learning. In this situation, several further kinds of rewards are likely to flow, rewards that are likely to draw students into further participation in the intellectual and investigatory world of the discipline as interpreted in that teacher's course. The personal reward of making sense of the world may be reinforced by the teacher's recognition that here is a student who is understanding and thinking in a discipline-appropriate way—good grades and the teacher's personal approval are powerful rewards. Moreover, the consonance between the student's valuing disciplinary work and the teacher's personal valuing of a chosen career can create a very strong kind of approval and communication. Further rewards may result from the student's gaining a sense of being a potential professional (Berkenkotter and Huckin).

The rewards of understanding may not always move the student into some disciplinary identity, for one may find disciplinary knowledge useful in non-disciplinary ways and thus take on a consumer relationship to the discipline. An ethics course may help sort out personal dilemmas or the thermodynamics course may help one gain a grasp

of engines one has always been fascinated by or the history class may help explain current international tensions that the student wants to resolve in a career in the state department. These extra-disciplinary rewards may appropriately engage students deeply in the course's material without creating disciplinary recruits. Of course it is not appropriate that all our undergraduates, nor even all our majors, become graduate students and researchers in our field—it is indeed much more appropriate that those students who do not go onto graduate study and research understand the way in which the discipline can serve as a resource for other concerns and endeavors (Geisler). Such considerations of course have great implications for the kinds of problems you pose for students in their writing assignments, both in what kinds of problems will engage their deepest, most motivated attention and what kinds of problems will help them learn what it is most useful for them to learn.

That subset of students who start to take on disciplinary problems in an engaged, creative, knowledgeable way are those who are likely to complete a major and perhaps continue to graduate education. But as they move beyond the tutelage of a small group of teachers to come into contact with the wider resources of the discipline, students then have to learn to both evaluate the potential usefulness of the wider range of material and to mine those resources efficiently and deeply in appropriate ways. That is, they have to learn to negotiate their ways in the complex and crowded and contentious landscapes that many disciplines are (Prior, "Contextualizing"). This means, in part, seeing all disciplinary statements as strategic interventions in ongoing discussions and debates; that is, students at more advanced levels start reading rhetorically (Haas). In part it also means that in their own writing they begin to address rhetorically the wider audiences in the

profession with their interests, concerns, standards, shared knowledge, and styles of argument, rather than just the local professor or classmates (Blakeslee). But students also need to start to look at the variety of disciplinary work as potential resources to be mobilized in more cosmopolitan arguments (Connor). Moreover, students gain by learning the value of alternative formulations and agendas and the multiplicity of ways of getting at issues. In graduate training students will face more rigorous methods than had been demanded earlier, which are perhaps at odds with the approach that drew students to the subject in undergraduate courses. Students not only need to learn a new way of doing business, they have to learn to come to see the value in it—how they can invest these new modes of business with their own concerns, and how they can also take on the questions of specialist groups with some commitment. If students cannot find these new discourses and forums places for committed participation, they are likely to pursue other interests. If they stay, motivated by other concerns, they may take on limited and safe questions, adopting a more narrowly careerist approach (Casanave).

During this period students are also likely to make their choices as to where, at least initially, they are likely to locate their work within the complex disciplinary landscape. Such identification of discursive realm is most obvious in the choices of dissertation adviser, committee and topic, but usually there has been some migration earlier.

As one begins to identify a position within the complexity of the field, a normal first impulse is to strongly reject those positions one leaves behind to adopt a full commitment to a particular approach. However, with time one may learn to accept the wisdom or at least serious work that goes on under a number of different flags. This

means both learning how to position your own statements against and with the statements of others who have other modes of procedure and intellectual commitments, and how to listen constructively to the critiques they may take of your position. You need to learn what criticisms to take to heart and in what way, with what operative force on your own claim making. You also need to learn what critiques to resist and even oppose as part of the disciplinary argument. This is a matter of getting smart (Prior, "Response").

The picture of disciplinary socialization I have been drawing is of deepening perceptions of disciplinary possibilities and complexities. This deepening perception is in dialectic with individual acts of engagement that demand ever higher degrees of precision, focus, and disciplinary sophistication in making statements. People, in finding disciplinary activities rewarding and engaging, discipline themselves—of course with the guidance, support, and demand of the their mentors as well as against the challenge of those who disagree with them. The discipline is not a hickory switch held by the esteemed professor, although mentors can set expectations and set targets of excellent possibility— earning the respect of people you admire can draw you to ever higher levels of care and thought and daring. Disciplining is what professionals do to themselves in the environment of contention, support, creation, recalcitrant problems, and puzzling objects of study. Disciplining in this sense is a long and never-ending process.

This brings me to the last getting—a getting that starts early, but must remain to keep the disciplining going at each stage, and that is getting real. Getting real is particularly salient once one finishes the final degree or leaves a subordinate role in a work group, when you are left to your own devices. When others, whether professors or lab leaders, set the investigative agenda and provide a validation for what is worth doing

and what is valuable, one does not need to question too deeply what is worth doing. And perhaps even in the early part of an independent career, economic necessity and desire for job security may cause you to suppress doubts about the conventional work you feel compelled to produce. But once a career is established, the discipline no longer has an external hold on one's work choices. Past that point, what drives ever more disciplined and focused work can only be a deep sense that you are doing something of value and importance, for yourself and others, that you have been able to wend your way through the complexity of the discipline, its resources, its critiques, its demands, its politics, and its competition to find something really worth doing—and further that disciplined and disciplinary methods will aid you in your struggle.

In studying the writing of those scientists, thinkers, and creators who have advanced the knowledge we have all come to live by—Isaac Newton, Adam Smith, Joseph Priestley, Thomas Edison, and more recently Steven Jay Gould, Robert Merton, and James Watson and Francis Crick—one thing I have found in common is a communicative fire that comes from the deepest commitment to their projects, the sense that they are working on the work of the greatest importance, of such great importance that they keep digging deeper for ways to communicate their ideas, to rearrange the discourse in ways that will help people see what it is they see. They feel they are onto something that is worth arguing for.

That sense of "real" is important from the earliest process of finding one's way out of the confusion of distribution requirements into active engagement in every course, and in keeping motivation, commitment, and focused practice at every level (Petraglia). And while there are many rewards along the way that can keep alive some simulacrum of

disciplinary activity, when all those other motives are gone, you are left only with what you really want to do. Disciplinary work then has to be perceived as an opportunity and a space for one's deepest commitments. Unless students are helped to locate what is important for them in the disciplines, how the disciplines can serve as tools and vehicles for those concerns, and how they can wend their way through the swamps, redoubts and hospices of disciplinary work without losing their direction, at some point the steam may run out. And that is about as much discipline as anybody is going to impose on themselves.

References

Bazerman, Charles. Shaping Written Knowledge. University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

Bazerman Charles. Constructing Experience. Southern Illinois University Press, 1994.

Bazerman, Charles and James Paradis, eds. Textual Dynamics of the Professions. University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

Blakeslee, Ann. Inventing Scientific Discourse. Ph.D. Dissertation. Carnegie Mellon University, 1992.

Berkenkotter, Carol and Thomas Huckin. Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication. Erlbaum, 1994.

Casanave, Carolyn. "Local Interactions." Academic Writing in a Second Language. Ed. D. Belcher and G. Braine. Ablex, 1995.

Connor, Ulla. "Learning Discipline Specific Writing." Paper delivered at the American Association of Applied Linguistics, Baltimore, March 1994.

Geisler, Cheryl. Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise. Erlbaum, 1994.

Haas, Christina. "Learning to Read Biology." Written Communication 11 (1994): 43-84.

Herrington, Anne. "Writing in Academic Settings." Research in the Teaching of English 19 1985): 331-359.

Kaufer, David and Kathleen Carley. Communication at a Distance. Erlbaum, 1993.

McCarthy, Lucille. "A Stranger in Strange Lands." Research in the Teaching of English 21(1987): 233-265.

Petraglia, Joseph. Ph.D. Dissertation. Carnegie Mellon University, 1991.

Prior, Paul. "Contextualizing Writing and Response in a Graduate Seminar." Written Communication 8 (1991): 267-310.

Prior, Paul. "Response, Revision, and Disciplinarity: A Microhistory of a Dissertation Prospectus in Sociology." Paper delivered at Social Studies of Science, West Lafayette, Indiana, November 1993.