

Writing/Disciplinarity

A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy

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Writing is a constant struggle, as we project a text by considering multiple resources, memories, and experiences; conversations with colleagues and mentors; perceived restrictions imposed by genre, audience, and occasion; our attitudes and desires; and a thousand other considerations that bear on the moment of articulating our thought. Some of these forces consciously weigh, whereas others appear without our reflecting. Some we manage to harmonize and coordinate with each other, whereas others are just there, almost by happenstance within proximity of the others. In the end, if we are lucky and persistent, we have something neaten up enough to put into an envelope and give the appearance of a completed product. When I was in college more than a few years ago, a friend of mine (whose name I no longer remember) wrote a poem on the elegant symmetry of a paper clip, ending with the line, "our words do not deserve such grace."

Paul Prior perceives the apparent coherence of a completed text as the result of a mangle of practice and the lamination of experience—terms borrowed from Andrew Pickering and Erving Goffman. Prior, through his ethnography, reveals the complexity of experience of writing we always struggle with, as we try to press too much together with the hope that somehow the cloth will hold. This represents the first half of his compound title *Writing/Disciplinarity*.

However, in the writing is also the creation of *Disciplinarity*, the second half of Prior's language. As these graduate students write, they socialize themselves into a discipline. They inscribe themselves and are inscribed as disciplined scholars and, in interaction with their professors and peers, they influence the disciplinarity of each other. At sufficient distance, disciplines

appear to be coherent, bounded, ordered wholes, made up of well-focused individuals engaged in distinctive practices and the distinctive texts they produce. However, Paul Prior reminds us that up close all those people are struggling with the mangle of practice and the lamination of experience, trying to produce something that will represent their contribution to an ever-changing disciplinary space constantly being recreated by the utterances of people just like them. Despite the institutional force of disciplines that impress on us their solidarity, they are liquid; if you look closely with Prior, what you see is a process of disciplinarity as people write themselves into authorship.

This sophisticated and precise study reveals people in the process of becoming—within the context of their chosen fields, their mentors, their peers, and their research experiences. Paul Prior reveals graduate education is nothing so neat as the training of individuals in a fixed and disciplined practice. It is rather the messy production of persons in situations, a process as much determined by the persons who inhabit the situation of graduate students as by the professors who may mistakenly believe they control more than a small (although influential) part of the situation.

However, Prior shows us something more than why graduate students may feel wrung out after they are put through the mangle of practice. Writing is draining to all of us, and we are all constantly being produced as authors by the situations we find ourselves in and put ourselves into—situations we only understand in their complex laminations and contingency as we come to live through and try to address them within the mangle of our writing. By constantly engaging in the process of disciplinarity through writing ourselves into disciplinary being, we rewrite ourselves and rewrite those around us who share the disciplines we believe we subscribe to.

Paul Prior, by disciplined research, provides as rich a picture of the writing experience of graduate students he studies as we experience within ourselves. In doing so, he helps us articulate why writing is so hard—and so rewarding. This is a remarkable book.