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“Why Do We Have to Write Another Essay?”: A Decoding the Disciplines Approach to
Academic Writing

Teachers of writing are often dashed upon the rocks of the discipline’s most fundamental question: Where to begin? The issues facing struggling student writers are many and varied, interrelated and mutually re-enforcing, forming a Gordian knot that may seem impossible to disentangle. Although the search for some ur-principle of writing that undergirds students’ success or failure within the discipline of writing is almost certainly doomed to failure, some elements of writing are surely more fundamental than others, particularly when we begin to consider student writing within a particular discipline. For both my partner, Professor Andy Connolly of Hostos Community College and myself, a teacher of English Language Arts at the Health Education and Research Occupations High School, a particular locus of our concern was academic writing, given that our curricula were designed with the mutual goal of preparing students for college-level academic writing. While the difficulty of each individual student may be as unique as a fingerprint, emerging from their own history, education and individual circumstance, there nevertheless may be some atomic principle of writing that an expert writer (or learner on the path to expertise) understands that the student who remains stuck in their progress does not. This putative missing element of writing is a classic example of a bottleneck, a “[point] in a course where the learning of a significant number of students is interrupted,” and it was the desire to know and name it that Professor Connolly and I began with in our investigation (Pace and Middendorf 5).

Step 1: What is the Bottleneck to Learning in this Class?

For both Professor Connolly and I, an overriding concern of our curricula is preparing students to write within the discipline of academic writing and the formal essay. Our inquiry pointed to one issue that we felt was a major contributor to the difficulties observed within our respective classes, namely the difficulty of writing for an audience within this specific discipline. As experts, we understand each essay, whether published or not, as an entry into a field of discourse. An academic essay, in other words, emerges out of and contributes to an ongoing public discussion of a given topic, and in some way, large or small, adds to it. Any deep understanding of the medium must grapple with the essential fact that the essay is inherently oriented towards a prospective audience and engaged in the work of altering their understanding of said topic.

For a struggling writer, however, something has gone awry along the way. Over and over again we observed that students lacked an intuitive sense of their audience, though it often manifested itself in different ways. The work of struggling writers within this discipline ran the gamut from students who merely summarize their sources, to students who run out of things to say after half a page, to students who list every argument they can think of in an undifferentiated stew of language, to students who ultimately write nothing at all. Yet in all of these examples are different to be sure, but they all in some way demonstrate a lack of engagement with their audience and, in particular, the specific audience that an academic essay demands. It is precisely this bottleneck that Professor Connolly and I chose to address in the course of our work.

There are two aspects to this bottleneck, one emotional and one conceptual. The emotional bottleneck results from the fact that the writing work students are given lacks purpose. With the infiltration of information technology into every aspect of daily life and the

pervasiveness of social media, students are likely addressing an audience more regularly than at any time in history. There's no doubt that many students do, in fact, engage in crafting a message tailored to an audience as they post, tweet, snapchat and otherwise manage their self-presentation online. However, these forms of communication come with an authentic audience that is easily understood and felt by the author, and are produced with a purpose likewise obvious to the writer.

Despite my own belief that students work best when they understand the underlying rationale of the work assigned to them, I must confess that I have done little to advance that cause when it comes to their writing work. True, students may understand the value of literacy for work and academics, but I have done little to justify why we devote so much time to the study of the academic essay in particular beyond the fact that they will be required to produce them in college. And while this is true, it answers the question "Why do we have to write an essay?" with a tautology: Students need to be able to write essays because they will be required to write essays.

Moreover, as students write academic essays, is it any wonder that they do not feel that their essay is a genuine entry into a public-spirited debate when the intended audience is generally, in fact, the instructor who assigned them the work, and perhaps a peer editor or two? Lacking the animating spark of discourse, an authentic speaking to, the essay is as meaningful as a multiple-choice test, a collection of boxes to be checked to receive a grade for the assignment. If students do not feel that their work is truly for an audience, it is perhaps unsurprising that the work they produce is lacking in the qualities that the medium of the essay demands. What need is there to craft an original argument, or to present one's best work through writing, revision, and

multiple drafts when the result is to be turned in and then forgotten about by both student and teacher?

Yet there is a more purposeful answer to the question of why students must learn to write academic essays, which is that the academic essay at both the high school and undergraduate level is ultimately intended to be a stepping stone to academic work at the highest possible level. The ability to participate in the academy is gated behind the accepted forms of discourse that it demands. Enabling our students, particularly those from marginalized populations, to write within the mode of the academic essay is ultimately a question of social justice. While many students will not pursue a path that requires them to publish in esteemed academic journals, it is also true that most students who study trigonometry will not become astronomers. The destination toward which our students travel is largely beyond the purview of a teacher, but ensuring they don't find the doors leading forwards slammed shut, doors open to their peers with better access to education, is something for which we must take responsibility.

The second, conceptual, aspect of the bottleneck is that writing an academic essay that is properly oriented toward its audience is a cognitively demanding task that requires higher-order thinking specific to a discipline. As such, it is precisely the kind of disciplinary thinking that the Decoding the Disciplines model was created to address (Pace & Middendorf 2). There is a significant difference between writing for a *general* audience, in which a writer may be engaged primarily in educating the audience about a topic of which it has a limited understanding, and writing for an *academic* audience, in which the writer must advance some sort of original argument for the consideration of a knowledgeable and likely critical reader. These higher-order skills are precisely the ones that separate the student who come to the class "pre-educated" in the discipline from those who have not (3). As we will see, writing an essay for an audience, which

seems natural to the expert writer, is actually a highly complex and, in many ways, counterintuitive task that requires careful instruction to move all students past the bottleneck that it represents.

Step 2: How Does an Expert Do These Things?

It should be simple enough to remind our students to “Remember your audience!” and it’s not as though student are unaware that their writing will be read, if only by the instructor doing the grading. Yet as we began to consider what mental steps are involved in allowing an expert to write for an audience, we realized that students are being asked to perform a task of extreme abstraction and complexity. Expert writers in a sense split their consciousness; as we write, we also act as a reader, evaluating our writing. But, still more difficult, an expert writer reads their work from the point of view of a person who *might* read their writing, a person who, as the writing is as yet unwritten, does not yet exist and indeed might never exist. In essence, an expert writer imagines a fictive reader that is reading their arguments, anticipates their reaction to them, and responds to those anticipated reactions. With a task this cognitively demanding, it seems unsurprising that many students fall short of this ideal.

While the above considerations might apply to writing generally, there are also considerations of audience that are specific to academic writing. At first, Professor Connolly and I conceived of the fictive reader as something of a Platonic ideal of a reader, one who is constantly probing for weaknesses in the writer’s arguments, asking penetrating questions, and generally demanding the writer mobilize all their intellectual resources to convince the reader of their arguments. Eventually, however, we realized that what we were imagining was a reader like ourselves, steeped in an academic culture which rewards critical reading, a hermeneutics of suspicion, and an engagement with the field of discourse surrounding a given topic. What writing

an academic essay demands is not merely to position oneself as the fictive audience of one's own writing, but to also to take on the point of view of a particular kind of audience, one that is determined by the discipline in which one is writing. The question of writing for an audience within the discipline of the academic essay is thus also the inculcating of student writers into the culture of the academy.

The academic audience thus has several characteristics that inform the considerations that the expert writer must take into account. First, the audience expects that the expert writer's work does not appear *ex nihilo* but rather that the writer will be conversant with the ongoing conversation within the field and engage with what has already been said. Second, the audience expects that the writer will contribute to this ongoing conversation by advancing an argument that emerges from an engagement within the previous work within the field. Third, the academic writer's work is open to and invites critique. The expert writer in this field anticipates that the audience will read their work with a critical eye and thus holds themselves to a high standard of prose, argument and evidence. While there is much more that could be said about the mindset and expectations of academia, these are some of the fundamental considerations of audience within this discipline. More importantly, if struggling writers can be provided with an entrée into these disciplinary ways of thinking and writing, it will provide them with a steppingstone to the more advanced and demanding work at the university and graduate level that their academic careers may ultimately demand of them.

With these considerations in mind, Professor Connolly and I came up with a sequence of steps along which an expert writer proceeds to achieve the goal of moving past the bottleneck of writing an essay for an academic audience, with the caveat that some of these steps are unconscious or elided entirely by a writer that has truly achieved mastery within the discipline:

- Understand the expectations of an academic audience and the purpose of academic writing
- Establish expertise on their chosen topic
- Analyze the ongoing conversation surrounding their topic
- Determine their own perspective on the issue
- Synthesize knowledge of audience and topic into writing that is oriented toward an academic audience
- Evaluate whether their writing is in fact convincing the audience
- Revise and counter possible objections to their writing based on this reading
- Publish their work and review the work of others

Step 3: How Can These Tasks Be Explicitly Modeled?

In both Professor Connolly's class and my own, we were able to identify a common point within our curriculum wherein students produce an essay that requires them to educate themselves on the positions taken by others within an ongoing debate and situate their own arguments within that field. In my course, students identify and select one issue that is currently being debated in America, in which people are struggling for greater justice or acceptance. They are required to research the arguments surrounding the issue and write an essay explaining the arguments of both sides in a neutral manner before taking and arguing for their own position on the issue. This work is intended to connect our reading of The Laramie Project, a play about the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, to contemporary debates about issues of social justice.

This work will begin with a short writing activity. Students will be shown a picture of a phone with an unsent text message reading, "Hey..." They will then be asked to free write on the following topic: "Who are you sending this text message to? Who is the recipient? What will they think when they get the message? How will they react? How will do you think they will respond?"

The intention of this exercise is to introduce what will be the ongoing work of audience consideration and activate their prior knowledge of writing for an audience. Students will then be introduced to the idea of the academic audience as a distinct group that academic writing is

oriented toward, paving the way toward the introduction of the writing project to which the unit will be dedicated. To accomplish this, students will be provided with a selection of academic journals from a variety of disciplines and encouraged to peruse them while considering a few key questions:

1. What topic is this journal dedicated to?
2. Who do you think reads this?
3. What do you think they look for or think about as they read the articles within the journal?
4. What would you need to know if you wanted to write something for this journal?

Step 4: How Will Students Practice These Skills and Get Feedback?

After this initial work framing the issue of writing an essay for an academic audience, students will then proceed through a cycle of activities of gradually increasing complexity that moves them toward producing an essay on their chosen topic, corresponding to the steps taken by an expert writer:

- Understand the expectations of an academic audience and the purpose of academic writing: Students will review and analyze a selection of academic journals and consider who their intended audience is, what expectations that audience has, and what it would take to contribute to them. This will lead into a discussion of the purpose and importance of academic writing as a discipline: the ultimate goal of teaching the academic writing in middle school, high school and college is to allow you, the student, to pursue an academic career if you so choose, and shape the conversation within your chosen field. The outline of the writing work that they will also be discussed, emphasizing that they

will be practicing the work of academic writing by contributing to an in-class academic journal that will be published and shared with both their peers and adults.

- Establish expertise on their chosen topic: Students research both sides of their chosen issue and create an annotated bibliography. They will be called upon and given resources to find scholarly articles pertaining to their topic, as well as resources targeted to a more mainstream audience.
- Analyze the ongoing conversation surrounding their topic: Using their research from the previous step, students map out what arguments are put forth by those on either side of the issue. For each argument, the student writes an objection or question informed by their research or their own logic.
- Determine their own perspective on the issue: Students make a final decision about which side of the issue they find the most convincing and then analyze their objections and questions from Step 3. For their side of the issue: what questions or doubts will you need to address to bring the reader over to your side of the issue? For the opposite side of the issue: what questions or doubts can you raise about the other side of the issue that will help to bring the reader over to your side?
- Synthesize knowledge of audience and topic into writing that is oriented toward an academic audience: Students use their accumulated knowledge of the topic and audience to craft the first draft of an essay which examines both sides of their chosen issue and takes up and argues for one side or the other.
- Evaluate whether their writing is in fact convincing the reader: Set up a peer reading protocol. Students are grouped in pairs, with each having a copy of the other's draft essay. The first student reads their own essay aloud while the second student reads along.

The second student has the job of pausing the reader at any time to raise an objection or ask a question about what is being argued in the essay, and they should do so as often as possible. After discussing the issue raised, the second student should add a marginal note to the first student's essay in the place where the reading was paused, and the first student should resume reading. This continues until the essay has been read through completely, and the essay, with notes, should be returned to the first student as a starting place for revision. The students then switch roles, and the second student reads their essay aloud.

- Revise and counter possible objections to their writing based on this reading: Revise essay based on results of the previous exercise before the final submission of their essay.
- Publish their work and review the work of others:
 - All completed student work will be collected and published on a publically available class website. Students will be given the opportunity to give informal presentations on their work in round-table discussions and discuss their work with their peers. In order to mark this as an achievement that reaches beyond the classroom refreshments will be served, and participants will be encouraged to dress in a professional manner.
 - The final drafts of the best student essays will be compiled and printed in a mock academic journal entitled The Journal of Contemporary Social Justice. This will be accompanied by a colloquium with the authors to review and discuss the published work. In order to mark this as an achievement that reaches beyond the classroom, selected adults will be invited to attend and participate in the discussion with students on an equal basis, refreshments will be served, and participants will be encouraged to dress in a professional manner. Furthermore,

this colloquium will take place outside of the normal class time and classroom space in location to be determined.

Throughout this sequence, there are numerous opportunities for students to receive feedback, both formally and informally, from both instructor and peers. In addition to the feedback built into individual steps in the sequence, students will have frequent opportunities to conference with me, as I reserve in-class writing sessions for my classes on a weekly basis and use this time as an opportunity to give students formative feedback on their work and address any difficulties an individual student encounters.

Step 5: What Will Motivate Students?

There are several aspects to this project that will serve to motivate students. The first, and perhaps most important, is the way in which the assignment is intended to build on existing student interest. Topics for the essay are chosen by individual writers and guided by their own interests. Though this necessitates additional work around topic selection at the beginning of the process, students are able to choose an issue of social justice that they are truly passionate about and about which they have something to say. In the past year, I had students choose topics as diverse as the legalization of prostitution, transgendered people's service in the military, health disparities resulting from racism, government assistance for the homeless, and the ethics of gender reassignment surgery. While assigning students a topic for the essay would significantly reduce the complexity of the project and abrogate the need for students to sort through sources of varying quality, I preserved this aspect of the assignment for its efficacy in motivating students.

Moreover, framing the assignment around an issue that is currently the subject of public contention helps to nurture the feeling in students that their writing really does in some sense contribute to an ongoing debate. In contrast, writing an essay on a major theme of William

Shakespeare's The Tempest, as students do at another point during the year, likely lacks something of this urgency. While new essays and dissertations on the works of Shakespeare continue to fill academic journals, students are unlikely to be conscious of their own writing as an entry into the field of discussion. Certainly, it is worth considering how the questions of writing for an audience can be taken up and extended upon when students are writing about issues that are less urgent and of the moment.

Finally, as previously noted, one likely demotivating factor in student essay writing is the very real lack of an authentic audience and a missing sense of underlying purpose. Throughout the sequence of instruction, there is a continual reinforcement of the idea that their essay is written for a reader, for an audience, beginning with the opening exercise and a shared understanding that the ultimate goal of the project is publication, which should help to raise the stakes for the student writer. They should be aware from the beginning that their writing will be read by not only the instructor, but also their peers and, ultimately, a wider audience if they are chosen for inclusion in the published journal. They will thus be held accountable for presenting their ideas in the best possible light. The creation of an authentic audience will contribute to the sense that they are writing for an audience, as obvious as that may seem. Furthermore, the actual publication of student work and its celebration through the colloquium encourages the notion that academic writing is about more than getting the desired grade for an assignment. There will be a tangible reward for mastery that mirrors that of the academia itself: the chance to have one's work read and taken seriously by one's peers and authorities with one's field.

Step 6: Assessing Student Mastery

Each stage in the sequence of activities provides opportunities for the instructor to provide formative assessment of student mastery of the specific mental operation targeted.

Occasions for informal assessment occur at all stages of the sequence. During each activity, the instructor and any co-teachers present will circulate around the class, conferencing with students, asking questions, and addressing any concerns or misconceptions that might occur. Students are also frequently invited to self-assess and evaluate the work of others.

More formal measures are also built into each step of the sequence. For most, there is a concrete product that students are asked to create. These serve a dual purpose. On one hand, they serve as opportunities for the instructor to evaluate whether the student is advancing through the sequence *en route* to advancing past the bottleneck. On the other, they also serve as self-created resources for students to draw upon as they tackle the progressively more complex and cognitively demanding tasks later in the sequence. In Step 2, for instance, “Establish expertise on their chosen topic,” the creation of an annotated bibliography of sources gives students a pool of easily accessible research that they can draw on in the succeeding step, which requires them to map and analyze the arguments of both sides.

Finally, there are robust opportunities for summative feedback as well. Students will receive a numeric grade based on the vertically-aligned academic writing rubric, which evaluates student work along five axes: Ideas (a strong thesis argued consistently throughout the essay), Supporting Details (strong reasoning, and well-chosen evidence), Organization (essay structure), Conventions (writing mechanics), and Presentation (appropriate MLA formatting). In addition to this conventional assessment, students will also receive summative feedback from their peers during the roundtable discussion of student work. Those selected for the academic journal (and the selection itself is already a form of summative feedback, albeit in a binary fashion) will further receive feedback during the colloquium as their work is further discussed and critiqued.

While there are many practical obstacles that must be addressed in the future implementation of this project, organizational, curricular and practical, I feel confident that the work outlined above is a positive step towards authentic and engaging academic writing work that reaches out to more students struggling within the discipline of academic writing. The application of the Decoding the Disciplines model to academic writing has pointed the way to resolving one of the more intractable bottlenecks that students encounter and moving more students toward success in higher education.

Works Cited

Middendorf, Joan, and David Pace. "Decoding the Disciplines: A Model for Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, vol. 98, 2004, pp. 1–12.