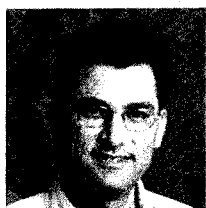


Literacy Link

Winter 2007

From the Editors' Desktops



A colleague asked us a few months ago how we liked being the co-editors of *Literacy Link*. "It is a great deal of work," he said. We turned to each other and smiled. "Yes, but we like it anyway," we replied. As most everyone knows, work is enjoyable if you find it to be worthwhile. And we believe talking, thinking, writing, and reading about literacy at SVSU is worthwhile work.

Most of the articles come from a variety of conversations with colleagues, memories of classroom experiences, snatches of moments with students, reflections on research that impact how we work and teach. It is not a complete representation of our work at the university: no publication could ever be this. Instead, it is a few selections that some of our faculty and staff have taken the time to put down in writing for us to read through and reflect upon. What you will find is an assorted collection of various recollections, carefully thought through and presented to us in these pages, held together by the common theme of ways that we explore literacy at SVSU. It is these writers who give us a clearer picture of the work we are doing and the work we still need to do.

This edition opens with Dr. Francis Dane's observations on our students' lack of reading literacy and what this means for students and faculty. Dr. Judy Kerman examines the discipline of creative writing at SVSU: how this major works and what it provides to our

university students. Ms. Diane Boehm offers a series of guidelines for effective teaching in the classroom, based on contemporary research and practice. As part of her internship duties for *Literacy Link*, Ms. Saun Strobel describes Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh's innovative service initiative with Bay City high school students and SVSU English 380 and 482 students. The edition concludes with a review of *"They Say/I Say": Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Ms. Helen Raica-Klotz and Ms. Isabell Deppe.

As always, in the midst of all the work we do, we believe *Literacy Link* serves as a reminder of the importance of developing students' literacy at SVSU, in a variety of different ways.

Christopher Giroux

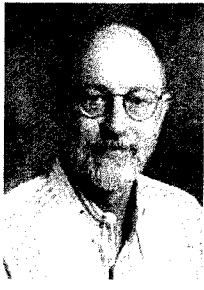
Helen Raica-Klotz

Co-Editors of *Literacy Link*

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I'm a Good Reader: I Just Have Problems with Comprehension



Francis C. Dane
James V. Finkbeiner Endowed Chair in Ethics & Public Policy

The title of this essay is taken from an exclamation made by a student during one of my shifts in the Writing Center. A first-year student needed help interpreting an assignment for a 100-level course. She seemed entirely unaware of the oxymoronic nature of her statement; I was too stunned to respond immediately—another “teachable moment” delayed—but eventually was able to discuss the point she was trying to make. Unfortunately, she meant exactly what she said; she believed comprehension was independent of reading.

What I found most shocking about her statement is that it could not have been a self-diagnosis. Perhaps in a misguided effort to maintain her self-esteem or to avoid the frustration associated with students’ (and parents’) reactions to any indication that their work is somewhat less than wonderful, someone gave this student a convenient peg on which to hang all of her academic difficulties, a peg that absolves her of personal responsibility. She is, after all, a good reader; it’s not her fault that she “just” has problems with comprehension.

According to reasoning that became apparent while I worked with her, those of us who might ask her to read course material should ensure that the material is at a level she can comprehend. Thus, the burden of education shifts from the student’s rising to meet challenges to the

instructor’s simplifying the material for the student, or the instructor’s choosing material sufficiently simple that it can be understood by a “good reader.”

While you begin to think that I’m making too much of a single student’s off-the-cuff remark in response to the frustration of her transition to college,¹ I offer this shift in educational burden—instructors must assign texts that do not challenge readers beyond the readers’ expectations—as the next phase in a cultural movement that began in the early 1960s. According to John McWhorter (2003), one of the byproducts of the counterculture movement in the United States has been a steadily declining interest in Americans’ consideration of English as a language to be enjoyed, revered, and loved, as opposed to a language merely used because it is convenient. He argues that many modern, American phenomena—the ever-narrowing gap between spoken and written English, an absence of rhetoric on formal occasions, the simplicity of styles in both spoken and written mass media, a lack of interest in grammar—result from our having accepted the message that “real” communication comes from the heart (or soul) and, therefore, material must be perceived as “not-formal” in order to be accepted as meaningful, as worthy of attention. In short, formal language has little or no place in the “real” world.

Thus, we encounter students who turn in papers so filled with grammatical, stylistic, and logical errors that we wonder how they ever made it to college, much less how they made it through however many years of education preceded their submitting that paper. We know they

¹ This semester, one of my students showed me a different textbook, written by the same author as the textbook I assigned, and asked if she could read that book instead of the one I assigned. Apparently, any book by one author is as relevant as any other book; reading is reading, no comprehension required.

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The SVSU *Literacy Link* is published two times per academic year. Those interested in submitting articles may contact either Christopher Giroux at ext. 4914 or cgiroux@svsu.edu, or Helen Raica-Klotz at ext. 6062 or klotz@svsu.edu. Articles may also be mailed to SVSU Department of English, 7400 Bay Road, Brown 355, University Center, MI 48710-0001.

Special thanks to the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs for funding and support of the *Literacy Link*.

Erratum

In the last issue of *Literacy Link*, Mike Mosher’s title was listed incorrectly. Mike Mosher is an Associate Professor of Art/Communication & Multimedia. We regret this error.

were exposed to good writing, and we know equally well that they were required to produce good writing prior to entering our class, yet they unapologetically submit substandard work. I suspect that most students attribute demands for good writing to the idiosyncrasy of the instructor who demanded it. Thus, when faced with a different instructor, who could not reasonably be expected to share the idiosyncrasy, students revert to cultural expectations, to "not-formal" writing.

And, I suspect, that we all too often allow them to avoid exceeding those (very low) cultural expectations. I know more than one instructor who quit assigning papers because grading poorly constructed papers was too difficult. Others quit assigning papers because they did not want to have to "teach English" in their course. Still others do assign papers, but have quit providing realistic feedback (and realistic grades) for fear of insulting, de-motivating, or otherwise adversely affecting their students. At the K-12 level, for example, experts are now arguing that receiving

an F on [an] essay, flawed though it may be, can be so defeating that the student will not even attempt subsequent papers. The grading rubric must therefore be designed to provide even the weakest writers with some evidence of success. (Ickes-Dunbar, 2004, p. 3)

Somehow, we have forgotten that we, the instructors, establish the requirements for a course, and that students are responsible for meeting those requirements. The student who chooses not to write subsequent papers has every right to earn an F in the course, but I argue that we cannot ethically provide false feedback to prevent the student from exercising the right to earn an F.

Many of our students do not want to write formally, to exceed everyday expectations for (and, unfortunately, experience with) writing. Too many of us don't require them to write well. And so it goes. The next phase may well be that we don't require them to read well. Whether or not the description given to the student I encountered in the

Writing Center originally came from an educational professional, the student somehow entered the university without having the description challenged meaningfully. Had it been so, she would not have offered it so willingly and so, well, without comprehension.

Ruth Sawyers (2004) has previously exhorted us to provide reading assignments that challenge our students, to require that they read, and read critically. In order to avoid contributing to the next phase in this cultural process, in order to avoid the process from being firmly established at the university level of education, we need to do more than provide challenging reading assignments. We must convince comprehension-challenged readers who have been told they are "good readers" that they were misinformed. Whether or not students are "good" readers, we must insist that they rise to meet the challenges we impose in our courses. We must avoid lowering our standards for the sake of convenience. We must unapologetically hold students accountable for having mastered reading assignments, and we must establish grading criteria that reflect that accountability. (Otherwise, we might as well base grades on how nicely they behave, how much effort they seem to exert, or some other, equally ludicrous standard.) We must avoid the temptation to be "good instructors who just have problems with feedback."

Somehow, we have forgotten that we, the instructors, establish the requirements for a course, and that students are responsible for meeting those requirements.

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Spinning Straw into Gold: Why Study Creative Writing at SVSU?



Judith Kerman
Professor of English

Creative writing professors and students who major in creative writing are sometimes asked what the degree is “good for” or what the student will “do” with it. Many academic disciplines are closely tied to career prospects, and most students expect their degrees to prepare them directly for the work they will do after graduation—so do their families, as most majors in Humanities disciplines can testify.

The hard fact is that a creative writing major, while it can prepare you for a career as a writer, is not usually direct preparation for making a living. Although million-dollar advances for best-sellers are reported in the media, the number of creative writers who make a living from their writing is extremely small. An even smaller number of literary writers, those whose works are likely to be valued by critics and scholars, make a living at it. It is no accident that so many practicing (and publishing) writers teach.

Most faculty in any discipline resist the reduction of a university education to career preparation. However, students often feel they don't have the luxury of following their curiosity; they need to understand the utility of their study. In my view, creative writing shapes the student's mind as well as the student's writing in useful ways. It leads to ways of thinking that are valuable throughout life and in many careers, even when the student doesn't go on to become a writer.

Most people in the United States receive an education focused on skill development, information acquisition, and analytical thinking. They are often not encouraged to use their imagination, and they may feel that they are not creative people. Whether academically strong or weak, they often come to believe that they have

nothing interesting to say. The rarer students who see themselves as creative individuals may feel that they are “odd.”

Even in the Humanities disciplines, analytical skills and abstract thinking tend to dominate and be valued the most. The exceptions to this bias in American education are few but interesting: in addition to the arts, engineering and business schools sometimes have creativity programs to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship.

Creative artists explore the significance and innovative potential of their own lives and sensibilities. They learn to create objects (texts, in our particular case) that communicate with their audiences by providing new experiences. They become experts in making new connections.

It is not the case, as some students think at the beginning, that anything they write is “creative” because they wrote it. Creative artists struggle to separate out their own unique perceptions, ideas, and interpretations from what they have been taught. They build on their experience of the world and their knowledge of other artists' work toward their own creative synthesis.

Creative work such as the disciplined study of creative writing balances and enriches analytical and abstract ways of thinking by training the student in holistic perception and the exploration of concrete experience: the physical world, aesthetic awareness, and the emotions. With practice, the writer becomes more fluent in generating images, more skilled in recognizing new connections and perceptions, more able to create aesthetically-satisfying structures. We learn to weed out conventional elements that obscure the original and innovative.

Each writer learns to probe for what he or she, as a particular human being situated in a particular life experience, has to say that is worth others' attention. We learn to ask the piece what it needs to be, rather than telling it what to be. This is how we find out what we really perceive, feel, and think, going beyond what we are told we should perceive, feel, and think to uncover our own sense of the world. Our readers read our work in order to share that unique sensibility.

Creative writing, as writing, demands awareness of audience, flexibility of voice and approach, clarity of presentation, and an organic sense of organization. It demands well-developed critical skills kept firmly subordinate to the creative impulse. Both clarity and organization must be judged based on the purposes of the piece, which the writer discovers in the process of writing. These purposes may not be obvious by conventional standards. Developing useful critical standards to apply to our own writing is part of learning the craft.

Creative work is a delicate balance between radical freedom and self-criticism; our "internal critics" may shut that freedom down by pointing out how far we fall short of our aspirations. The workshop process used in creative writing classes sharpens the student's critical sense while supporting the effort to create and shape original material. Workshopping teaches the internal critic how to be a productive ally in our creative efforts.

Because creative writers are trying to find their way to an original experience and to communicate what they find to readers, mastery of technique is inherently rewarding; good technical skills help you to do what you're trying to do. Other kinds of writing have those same satisfactions, but they are more obvious when you are writing from your own imaginative resources.

Of the degree programs at SVSU outside English, creative writing connects most

strongly with Teacher Education. Many students in the introductory course do not see themselves as writers or even as creative people. They take the course as a degree requirement, and they often approach it with anxiety. One of the great pleasures of teaching English 261 is helping these students get reacquainted with their own potential for imaginative and creative thinking, perception, and writing. It's exciting when a novice writer produces a fresh, original, well-executed piece, one he or she had never imagined being capable of creating.

Some of these students become teachers with a better understanding of language arts instruction and the ability to support their own students' creative potential. Many approach literary texts with a subtler understanding of literary technique and the way literature grows from authors' lives and historical circumstances.

Creative writing shapes the student's mind as well as the student's writing.

Those who do not go into teaching go into other careers with an enhanced ability to make new connections, to perceive the emotional significance of practical events and situations for themselves and others, and to combine the functional and the aesthetic in ways that enrich lives. Those students have learned to use writing to discover themselves as well as to express themselves. They have confronted the belittling voice of the inner critic and developed a keener sense of their own ability to make something new out of their own resources.

Often enough, these students have learned to spin straw into gold.

Brain Change: The Power of Intentional Teaching



Diane Boehm

Director

Instructional Support Programs & University Writing Program

A recent issue of *Time* magazine had an extensive cover story on the human brain, its processes and its mysteries. As the fascinating images demonstrate, learning—in any form—actually changes the structure and functions of the brain in ways that can be measured and observed: “mental training had the power to change the physical structure of the brain,” changing both “its structure and function in response to experience” (Begley, 2007, p. 74). In short, learning = brain change. This makes us, as educators, agents of brain change. As Laurie Richlin (2006), executive editor of the *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, puts it, “Every action we take as instructors is based on our expectation that our students will be able to change something that they know, feel, or can do” (p. 25).

In other words, brain change for effective learning must be the foundation for our teaching strategies. One thing assessment has demonstrated is that good teaching is intentional, not accidental. Teachers who focus on what happens to the learner can and do effect permanent change. Peter Beidler, an award-winning college instructor, reminds us, “there is no teaching unless those being taught actually learn” (qtd. in Richlin, 2006, p. 25). We teach to cause learner change.

This change begins with the way we design the learning experience. Ken Bain (2004) describes the process of learning thus:

learners must (1) face a situation in which their mental model will not work (that is, will not help them explain or do something); (2) care that it does not work strongly enough to stop and grapple with the issue at hand; and (3) be able to handle the emotional trauma that sometimes accompanies challenges to longstanding beliefs. (pp. 27–28)

To create such a learning situation, we start by juxtaposing two basic pieces of information: the outcomes the course is designed to achieve and the likely skill level of the students when they enter. With this information, we plan the course, designing incremental learning tasks that build on each other—scaffolding a learning experience that takes students sequentially from where they are when they enter, to where they need to be at the end of the semester. To assess the understanding of students when they enter, a writing task the first week of a course can provide a baseline to gauge students’ mental models and identify students who may experience difficulty. And informing students about how the course outcomes will be achieved enables them to visualize where they will be at the end of the course and understand the purpose for the work they will do.

With these starting and ending points established, the next step is to design the sequence of learning tasks, both formal and informal. Designing good assignments to frame learning is an art. A learning task that is too complex or for which students are underprepared is unlikely to create a useful learning experience—it will more likely cause frustration. On the other hand, an assignment that is not challenging will not create the new mental models that move students toward the course goals. However, when each assignment intentionally builds on previous assignments throughout the semester and students can see their own progress, they are more likely to be motivated to continue on that path.

This process is particularly useful in courses with substantive writing expectations. There is no getting around the fact that coaching students, especially

student writers, is a time-intensive undertaking. Unless we find satisfaction in seeing students develop the power to command language, this work can become burdensome. But when we can see evidence of the progress students have made because of our efforts, then the time investment becomes rewarding.

There are limits, of course, both for instructors and for students, on the amount of writing that can successfully be integrated into a course. To be an effective writing coach, a teacher must be able to survive the workload. Here effective writing assignments can serve a dual purpose: generate learning of course content even as they develop students' communication skills. And not every piece of writing demands extensive critique. Students could, for instance, write several short papers, then revise the best for grading. Or they could submit a multi-phased paper in parts, with feedback on each phase, a common practice in many challenging courses.

This leads to the logical next step. Students are likely to make the most progress when strategic course design and engaging assignments that scaffold learning culminate in effective evaluation and feedback. I have found some practices particularly useful. When I coach student writers in my classes, for instance, I seek not only to understand the writer's meaning but also to analyze the developmental stage of the writer. This process of understanding the developmental stage of the learner can be applied to any kind of learning experience. When I analyze a student's writing, I ask myself questions such as these:

- Does this student have an effective writing process? Does the student know how to move from an early, chaotic writer's draft to a revised and edited reader's draft? How could the student improve his/her process to yield a stronger, more engaging paper? (Since I require submission of drafts, the student's writing process is generally easy to observe.)

- What writing skills has this student mastered/not mastered? What aspects of writing does the writer control well: thesis? organization? coherence? citation? What skills does the student lack: researching? distinguishing personal opinion from reasoned position? supporting assertions with evidence? using the appropriate academic voice? editing?

For each writing assignment, I create an evaluation/feedback rubric; each rubric overlaps and reinforces basic criteria from previous papers, and then adds new criteria based on the skills this assignment was designed to teach.

I also include one or more metacognitive processes with each rubric. For example, I ask students themselves to complete the rubric before they hand in the paper; that will allow them to compare their perceptions of what they have accomplished with my observations when I evaluate.

I also add metacognitive reflection questions such as these: what did you learn from writing this paper? in what ways does this paper show progress over earlier papers? what aspects of the paper would you like me to comment on? These metacognitive reflections likewise are motivating—students feel satisfaction when they can identify progress they have made, or when they can share their enthusiasm for having discovered something they didn't previously understand, for having changed their mental models.

This analysis of the student's process as well as his/her stage of development, together with the student's metacognitive reflections, help me decide what feedback to offer. I look first for something positive to say; I especially commend progress a student has made from one assignment to the next. Keeping in mind the ladder of competencies a student must climb, I then recommend one or two aspects the writer

An assignment that is not challenging will not create the new mental models that move students toward the course goals.

should focus on in the next paper, the one or two next rungs that will most help this student develop a command of language and mastery of course material.

My ultimate goal is that my evaluation and feedback will help the student be able to accomplish that most challenging of all teaching/learning goals: transfer of knowledge. Students often see coursework as a series of dissociated pieces without common ground. They may see their purpose for writing, for instance, as geared to the expectations of a specific teacher, rather than as developing overall practices for effective writing. For this reason, it's often useful to identify the specific conventions of our discipline and how those conventions reflect the issues and values of the discipline, all the while placing these within the larger context of "effective communication." Reinforcement of principles and writing vocabulary from previous writing courses, such as first-year composition, can further help

students see the sequential nature of their development as writers.

When this teaching/learning process works well, we are truly engaging in intentional, scholarly teaching, "a method of designing and implementing a course to improve the learning of the students in the course" (Richlin, 2006, p. 3). Students are changed; they no longer think as they did when they arrived. Learning has happened. Outcomes have been achieved. Perhaps our syllabi should include a disclaimer: "brain change effected here."

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Building Literacy Links beyond SVSU



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When *Literacy Link* examines how professors use literacy in the classroom, we often forget that literacy is also found outside the classroom. One successful literacy project on campus is the writing academy developed by Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh of the English Department. What makes this project so unique is that SVSU students are reaching out to high school students to help them become better writers. The Bay City Schools Academy is a collaborative endeavor between SVSU and the Bay City Public Schools. However, Dr. Cavanaugh didn't start out to develop this opportunity between high school students and her

English 380 and English 482 students; it just happened.

During her sabbatical in Fall 2005, Dr. Cavanaugh mentioned to Ms. Kaye Walker, a teacher at Bay City Central High School (BCCHS), how she wanted to find a way to improve the connection between high schools and colleges. In particular, Dr. Cavanaugh wanted to find a way to prepare high school students for the writing expected of them in college. Before obtaining her doctorate in English Education, Dr. Cavanaugh was a high school English teacher in the Bay City Public Schools and has always been

interested in the difference in expectations between high school- and college-level writing.

Ms. Walker immediately challenged Dr. Cavanaugh to do something, instead of just researching the issue. Dr. Cavanaugh accepted the challenge but expected the usual academic process of discussions, scheduling issues, and finally implementation. Ms. Walker, however, had no intention of letting the idea suffer a long incubation period; she immediately set things in motion, and a few months after their initial discussion, Dr. Cavanaugh had developed a learning opportunity for a small group of BCCHS students.

The Bay City Schools MEAP Sweep Project (as it was known in 2006) was a short-term writing academy to help eleventh-grade students who had the potential to score well on the MEAP but needed a bit more tutoring. This project brought together SVSU education students, BCCHS students, and literacy coaches from the Bay City Public Schools for two days of instruction, at SVSU, on writing and revising personal narratives.

Dr. Cavanaugh designed the MEAP Sweep Project to include both large-group instruction, led by literacy coach Jan Sopczynski, and small-group work, led by individual literacy coaches. The BCCHS students started out by learning effective techniques for writing a personal narrative. Then the group broke off into smaller groups each consisting of a literacy coach, an SVSU student, and three or four high school students. In the small groups, students wrote a draft of their narrative and shared their writing. Their group offered suggestions for improvement, and the drafts were revised. This arrangement allowed the high schools students to work



in a nurturing environment while gaining confidence in their writing.

An important component of this first day of the writing academy was to provide Dr. Cavanaugh's English 380 and 482 students practical experience while working with high school students. Most of her students were preparing to become teachers, and watching the literacy coaches and high school teachers instruct and interact with high school students was a lesson not easily recreated in the university classroom. Hands-on experience in the workshop setting put into practice the techniques Dr. Cavanaugh taught her students. This initiative also supported Dr. Cavanaugh's firm belief that students who take advantage of volunteer opportunities will become better teachers.



Another goal of the writing academy was to draw the younger students out while offering constructive criticism to stretch their writing abilities. Dr. Cavanaugh remembers one BCCHS student, a football player, being paired with a football player from SVSU. Because of their common interest, Dr. Cavanaugh found the high school student accepted the suggestions about his writing more readily and did not dismiss the critique as quickly as he might from a "teacher." In fact, even though most of the high school students were initially reluctant to participate in a writing workshop, they were soon motivated and enthusiastic about the process. Dr. Cavanaugh warmly recalls one student during lunch asking if he could return to the room early to work on his narrative.



Other successes stemmed from the participants' willingness to share what Dr. Cavanaugh found to be "quite poignant" writings. One narrative, in particular, dealt with a mother's illness and eventual death. When the student finished reading the piece to the whole group, "there wasn't a dry eye in the room."

The second stage of the academy occurred a few weeks later when the BCCHS students returned to SVSU. Students again worked in small groups and later in the computer lab. The workshop culminated with the development of an anthology of the students' writings. The group designed the cover and selected the title, with each student submitting a piece for the anthology. After the anthology was reproduced, a celebration and author signing was held in the BCCHS library. Dr. Cavanaugh and Ms. Walker thanked the students for participating and making the first workshop such a success. One student corrected them, responding, "No. Thank you for caring."



teachers usable techniques they could take back to the classroom to benefit all their students. As in the first year, the students developed an anthology to be distributed during a celebration held at each school.

Since its beginning in Winter 2006, the academy has expanded beyond SVSU and BCCHS in ways Dr. Cavanaugh and Ms. Walker did not imagine during their first conversation. The literacy coaches have taken the project to students at Bay City's Wenona Center; ninth and tenth graders at BCCHS and Western are being offered writing workshops; and the students from BCCHS continue working collaboratively three days a week during seminar hour. In addition, the students from BCCHS have asked to create an academy for students at Bay City's Washington Elementary.

Dr. Cavanaugh is already planning next year's workshop and, yes, it is expanding. The 2007–2008 Bay City Schools Academy will include tenth and eleventh grade students from both high schools.



After such a successful start, the writing academy expanded in 2007 to include students from two Bay City schools—BCCHS and Western. Now called the Bay City Schools Academy, the workshop also included more high school teachers (five from each school) and switched its focus from the MEAP to the ACT. This year's writing prompts focused on persuasive writing rather than personal narratives.

Students again worked in small groups to refine their writing; however, each group now included a high school teacher who observed what was being taught and the methods being used. The goal was to offer

Call for Papers

The editors of *Literacy Link* invite members of the campus community to submit articles for review and possible inclusion in the 2007–2008 issues.

Articles may address a variety of literacy practices including such topics as issues, strategies, activities, research, critical thinking, writing across the curriculum, or book reviews. The editors are especially interested in how literacy is defined by different disciplines, how professors use literacy in their various classes, what professors expect of student writing, what professors encounter from student writing, and how students respond to literacy expectations.

Articles for *Literacy Link* should run 500 to 1,500 words in length. Authors should follow either MLA or APA format.

Submit articles to
SVSU Department of English
Literacy Link
7400 Bay Road
Brown 355
University Center, MI 48710-0001

Submission deadline for the Fall 2007 issue is **September 15, 2007**.

Submission deadline for the Winter 2008 issue is **February 1, 2008**.

Book Review

"They Say/I Say": The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing.

Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein.

New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006. 164 pp.

Reviewed by

Helen Raica-Klotz, Lecturer of English, and

Isabell Deppe, Adjunct Instructor of English

Helen Says:

I have to admit, I hated this book before I even read it.

I was at a Michigan Writing Center Conference, listening to two graduate students from MSU giving a presentation on "Literacy Moves in the Center," and one of the presenters referred to *"They Say/I Say."* "This is a great book for incoming freshman writers," he raved. "It's a bunch of templates for thesis statements, transitions, paraphrases: all the student has to do is plug in the subject he or she is writing about and wa-la! An essay." "Right," I remembered thinking. "Composition pedagogy reduced to fill-in-the-blank Mad-Libs."

A few months later, I was holding the book in my hands, and I have to admit, my initial impression was not altered. After all, to someone who was raised on Strunk and White, this 164-page book, rife with cartoon drawings, subtitles in large fonts, and, of course, the requisite fill-in-the-blank templates seemed, well, juvenile.

But then I started reading. On the first page, Graff and Birkenstein write,

despite this growing consensus that writing is a social, conversational act, helping student writers actually "enter a conversation about ideas" remains a formidable challenge. This book aims to meet this challenge. Its goal is to demystify academic writing by isolating its basic moves, explaining them clearly, and representing them in the form of templates. (ix)

Graff and Birkenstein begin the book by arguing that by teaching students

some basic academic moves, we can help students become better writers, readers, and thinkers. And, to my surprise, their argument is very persuasive.

Certainly, Dr. Gerald Graff, future president of the Modern Language Association in 2008 and professor of English and education at the University of Chicago, is no lightweight in the field of higher education, having published a number of books, including *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* and *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*. His co-author, Cathy Birkenstein, a lecturer in English at the University of Chicago, first developed the series of templates that appear in this book by working with her introductory composition students.

Organized quite simply, the bulk of the book is rhetorical instruction, which discusses the purpose of the templates in academic writing, provides the templates themselves, and concludes with a short list of suggested writing activities and exercises. The first section, "They Say," focuses on how to quote and summarize other people's arguments. "I Say," the second section, discusses ways to respond to these arguments: agreeing, disagreeing, or doing a bit of both. The third section, "Tying It All Together," offers additional tips about transitions, metacommentary, and personal voice. The book concludes with two appendixes: one provides all the templates discussed in the book, the other contains three essays for the students to read and identify the rhetorical templates each author used.



Graff and Birkenstein say, “templates do more than organize students’ ideas; they help bring those ideas into existence” (xvi). How? By providing students with rhetorical frameworks in which to present information. The templates of language allow students to worry more about their ideas, and less about the mechanisms of expressing those ideas. And certainly these templates form the core of the book. “In the discussions of X,” reads one template, “one controversial issue has been _____. On the one hand, _____ argues that _____. On the other hand, _____ contends _____. Others maintain _____. My own view is _____” (24).

However, what Graff and Birkenstein do well in this book is not simply provide students various templates as a way to frame arguments, craft thesis statements, and integrate outside sources; the authors explain why these rhetorical patterns are used in the university. The templates are models with meaning: why do professors ask students to explain the context of quotations, to qualify arguments, to acknowledge the opposition? In this sense, probably the most useful part of this book is not the templates themselves, but the explanation behind them.

Perhaps the most significant discovery for new writers in higher education is Andrea Lunsford’s idea that academic writing is dialogue. That is, to begin to argue a claim, you must first demonstrate that you are responding to another person’s argument and that the argument is a viable claim, one worth responding to. This is a key concept that many freshmen (and a significant number of upperclassmen) at SVSU fail to understand: after all, they have been raised on MEAP and ACT essays that ask students to respond to a brief summary of a contemporary issue using their opinion only. Imagine the shock of an incoming first-year student when she discovers that no one in the university cares what she thinks about global warming or animal testing or the relative merits of Title IX. That is, not unless she can demonstrate she has carefully read other people’s informed opinions about that particular issue *and*

her writing is a carefully crafted response to these ideas.

Graff and Birkenstein also encourage students to go beyond simple agreement or disagreement with outside research by qualifying their arguments: agreeing with some points, while taking issue with others. This, the authors tell students, requires more critical thinking, but may ultimately be more rewarding. “After all,” they note, “the goal of writing is not to keep proving that whatever you initially said is right, but to stretch the limits of your thinking” (85–86).

There are problems, however, with some of Graff and Birkenstein’s moves. First, the authors’ templates often include the use of the first person, even in the title of the book, “*They Say / I Say*.” While the use of the personal voice is acceptable in some disciplines, it is certainly not acceptable in all.

The second problem is more significant. Graff and Birkenstein provide as samples three previously published essays in the back of their text for students to read and then identify common rhetorical patterns. The problem is that all three of these essays include references to outside sources without any documentation. For example, in Susan Bordo’s “The Empire of Images in Our World of Bodies,” she writes, “the most recent statistics, from 1989, listed 681,000 surgical procedures performed. In 2001, 8.5 million procedures were performed” (151). “Says who?” I imagine writing in the margin if this were an English composition essay. “Where did you get this information? Citation?” While Graff and Birkenstein urge students to integrate other voices in their essays and strengthen their claims through research, they do not provide the students with models that clearly demonstrate how to do this to avoid plagiarism. Nor do they address this issue anywhere in the text. Two chapters, “Her Point Is: The Art of Summarizing” and “As He Himself Puts It: The Art of Quoting,” offer students ways to signal to the reader what information belongs to the outside source, how to introduce and

integrate quotations, and how to select key pieces of outside information to integrate into their writing. No mention is made, however, of the importance of citing these sources. In an academic culture that has a growing problem with plagiarism, this seems like a significant oversight.

"*They Say/I Say*" might be useful as a recommended text in any writing-intensive course, particularly those courses filled with first- and second-year students, who are just beginning to decode the language of academic discourse. While not a comprehensive rhetoric, this text may be accessible and useful to students. But I say you decide. After all, in the end, it's your move.

Isabell Says:

Last semester I taught English 111, Composition I, for the first time. It was an interesting and exciting experience; it was also frustrating and disconcerting as I quickly learned that a significant number of incoming university students were not prepared for academic writing. These new writers encountered the greatest difficulty with argumentative writing. As I reflect on the semester, I wish I had used this "short, user-friendly guide to the basic moves of academic writing" (1). Its cartoons, its models, and most especially its templates contribute to creating a very readable text, one that will capture students' attention so much more readily than the hundreds of pages of pedantic and insipid language, lists, and charts usually found in most required academic writing manuals. In short, unlike Helen, I immediately loved this book.

Graff and Birkenstein's model templates are intended to guide students, to help them engage their ideas, and then shape them into well-written argumentative writing. Some skeptics, however, might question whether prescribed templates inhibit students' creativity and originality. In fact, the authors have heard students complain that using prescribed templates will "turn us into writing robots." In response, Graff and Birkenstein assert that "templates do not dictate the *content*

... but only suggest a way of formatting *how* you say it" (11). The templates allow emerging academic writers to focus more on developing complex thoughts, creating original ideas, and expressing subtle arguments as they engage and converse with their written work rather than "how" to formulate them. As a result, the authors maintain that students' writing will become "*more* original and creative, not less" (10).

In addition, Graff and Birkenstein effectively argue that less sophisticated writers may require the extra assistance that the templates provide. While a few students can pick up the basic moves of argument quickly and without effort, the rest of them will need clear instruction. The authors note:

many students will never learn on their own to make the key intellectual moves that our templates represent. While seasoned writers pick up these moves unconsciously through their reading, many students do not. Consequently, we believe, students need to see these moves represented in the explicit ways that templates provide. (xv)

Isn't this similar, for example, to learning how to play a musical instrument? Some students will initially labor over the notes, the tempo, or the rhythm, and will require more detailed instruction and rigorous practice. These students need to learn the complicated moves of the activity before they become accomplished musicians. In order to write well, students must also learn the complicated moves that the templates offer. Eventually, the student will rely less and less on the templates. "Once [the student gets] used to using them," the authors state, "[the student] can even dispense with them altogether, for the rhetorical moves they model will be at [the student's] fingertips in an unconscious, instinctive way" (11).

Graff and Birkenstein also explain academic argument in uncomplicated language. Unfortunately, it is often difficult for students to fully understand the concept of an argument. Since their understanding of an argument is a verbal fight with another person, how

does the writer “fight” with a text? As a result, writing argumentative papers is too abstract and too difficult for many first-year university students. To remedy that, the authors spell out what is needed to argue well: “You need to enter a conversation, using what others say (or might say) as a launching pad or sounding board for your own ideas” (3). This, of course, is the foundation for the book’s title and its most rudimentary template: “They say _____, I say _____.” This template helps students make sense of what is meant by argumentative writing.

Graff and Birkenstein advance another compelling argument claiming that the templates and the “they say/I say” model “can improve not just the student writing, but student reading comprehension as well” (xiii). When students use the templates to write, they learn to recognize the rhetorical moves and patterns that occur in their reading. Reading and writing are “deeply reciprocal activities,” write Graff and Birkenstein, and “students who learn to make the rhetorical moves represented by the templates . . . become more adept at identifying these same moves in the texts they read” (xiii). By showing students rhetorical patterns, we teach them not only how to write them, but how to read for them: how to decipher texts and others’ views.

Although I agree with Helen’s observation and concern about the use of first person in this text, I have to add my own “yes, but _____.” Yes, it is true that many disciplines in the university view the use of “I” as an anathema. But it makes more sense to me if the less sophisticated writer did not have to worry about the “acceptable” use of voice, at least until he or she became more adept at the use of the templates and argumentative writing in general. This technique would allow the student to focus on developing his or her argument.

Furthermore, the authors suggest incorporating informal or colloquial styles

into academic writing, as students “can often enliven academic writing and even enhance its rigor and precision” (116). In fact, they “encourage [writers] to draw upon the kinds of expressions and turns of phrase that [writers] use every day when conversing with family and friends” (115). However, unsophisticated academic writers may not be able to discern when it is acceptable (or not) to use colloquial language in a way that it will enhance their writing.

Perhaps a more significant issue is what Graff and Birkenstein state they will *not* cover: “logical principles of argument such as syllogisms, warrants, logical fallacies, or the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning” (xvii). One of the most common difficulties that occur with incoming writers is their inability to avoid logical fallacies, in particular overgeneralization and oversimplification. Interestingly though, the authors introduce their own hasty generalizations when they provide templates and examples of more acceptable writing. Instances are found in chapter five, “‘And Yet’: Distinguishing What *You* Say from What *They* Say,” and in chapter six, “‘Skeptics May Object’: Planting a Naysayer in Your Text.” In one situation, the authors suggest that instead of “Liberals believe that cultural differences need to be respected. I have a problem with this view, however,” the student should write “I have a problem with *what liberals call cultural differences*” (69–70). Two templates provide other examples: “But *social Darwinists* would certainly take issue with the argument that _____,” and “*Biologists*, of course, may want to dispute my claim that _____” (79). In none of these examples are qualifiers used to avoid the logical fallacy.

Although “*They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*” could not take the place of a more detailed English composition textbook because its focus is too limited, I would, without hesitation, include it as a required supplemental text in English composition classes.