HYBRID ACADEMIC DISCOURSES:
WHAT, WHY, HOW

Almost twenty years ago, David Bartholomae and I and other scholars defined a pedagogical position that argued for using first-year composition to initiate students into the academic discourse community. Wherever students are in their language-using practices when they come to college, we said, what they must learn to do is to write within traditional academic discourse. In a 1985 essay, Bartholomae called this learning process “inventing the university,” and we usually talked as if it were fundamentally a one-way street. Students, it seemed, had to leave behind their home discourses and conform totally to the academic.

It is important to remember that this pedagogical position was defined against work that labeled struggling academic writers as linguistically and cognitively deficient. For example, in 1983, Thomas J. Farrell published an essay in which he claimed that Black English actually produced cognitive deficiency, causing its speakers to perform poorly on I.Q. tests. As can be seen by reviewing my 1982 essay “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty,” those of us taking the opposing view advanced the notion of “academic discourse community” to provide an alternative explanation for some students’ struggles. They most definitely were not linguistically or cognitively deficient, we argued, but simply unfamiliar with what Mina Shaughnessy called the “ways of winning arguments in academia” (“Some Needed” 319). Shaughnessy’s ground-breaking 1977 book, Errors and Expectations, had helped us see these writers not as “remedial” cases, but as what she called “basic writers” who needed instruction in the basics of Standard English and academic discourse conventions. Her work went a long way toward showing us how such instruction might proceed.

This position, advocating the teaching of academic discourse, has in turn been attacked, supplemented, and modified by later scholarship. For example,

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Min-Zhan Lu's powerful 1987 essay on her own struggles with the different discourses of her schooling in Maoist China, her parents' Western education, and her graduate work in English at the University of Pittsburgh show that our early arguments on the possibility of teaching academic discourse were too sanguine about the conflicts such teaching might generate for students coming from home discourse communities at great remove from the academic. Joseph Harris won the Braddock Award for his 1989 essay critiquing the fundamental idea of "community" that underlay our work, exposing the unfair pressures of conformity it places on students and the ways it disguises internal disagreements. I have been strongly affected by these challenges and, as the introduction to my 1992 book Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness explains, have modified my views on teaching academic discourse. I would no longer want to defend a pedagogical position that sees its inculcation as a one-way street.

From my experience through these years of debate over teaching academic discourse, I would now say that two points hold constant for me. One is that first-year college students are surely linguistically and cognitively competent, not to mention deserving of respect as human beings! The other is that it is my job as an English teacher to help them develop their language-using abilities so that they can succeed in college and in whatever work in the world they choose to do. I can say further that I still believe that there is such a thing as academic discourse, and I can even still say that I think it should be taught to students who are unfamiliar with it. But I now think defining "academic discourse" is a more complex task than I earlier realized, which concomitantly complicates the pedagogical strategies needed to teach it.

More specifically, while I still believe that a sort of traditional academic discourse can be defined, I contend that it no longer holds the field alone. To be sure, it still has many adherents, and students will encounter its hidebound proponents in more than one college class. But in many, many academic disciplines today, traditional academic discourse must share the field with new forms of discourse that are clearly doing serious intellectual work and are received and evaluated as such, even as they violate many of the conventions of traditional academic discourse. If I am going to do my job of preparing students for success in college, then, I cannot ignore these new forms of academic discourse, what I am calling "hybrid" academic discourses, in my teaching.

Moreover, it now seems to me that students are not ignoring these new forms either. Whereas once upon a time, I might have understood a non-traditional academic paper as simply the product of someone who did not know how to do traditional academic discourse, now, increasingly, I believe I am seeing work by students who are deliberately experimenting with new forms. If this is true, of course, I still need to know how to evaluate this new work and how to help students do it better, as well as to prepare them for those situations in which only traditional academic discourse will do. But as I noted above, the advent of hybrid forms of academic discourse complicates the demands placed on my teaching.

What I propose to do here is to explore the nature of these hybrid discourses, and then to offer some suggestions for how to teach them. I will begin by outlining the characteristics of traditional academic discourse, both because I believe it still needs to be taught and because it provides the "baseline" discourse against which the experiments of hybrid forms can be understood. Next I will try to analyze some examples of the new hybrid discourses, to help show what I mean by hybrid and to provide suggestions for hybrid rhetorical strategies that may be helpful to share with students. Finally, I will offer some tentative suggestions on teaching intended mainly to stimulate dialogue on these pedagogical issues.

Traditional Academic Discourse

I initially grasped academic discourse as the discourse of a community—hence the phrase, academic discourse community. Community, of course, is a word that invokes the presence of people. I believe it resonated for me precisely because the people around me—my students, graduate professors, fellow teaching assistants, among others—and their written and oral interactions first prompted me to study language in use in the academy. I was acutely conscious of how people were affected by the ways they used language, especially how individual students felt when their ways of using language were praised or disapproved. Thus it appeared to me, first and foremost, that what mattered most was who had access to what discourse. This led me to conceptualize "discourse community" as a group of people who share language-using practices. I considered that these practices are conventionalized, that is, there are certain customary ways of doing things. The way one employs these language-using conventions (with familiarity, grace, or tentative bravado, for example) establishes one's place within the community: people of higher status use language (within the shared conventions) differently than do people of lower status. Following these language-using conventions shapes participants' way of looking at the world—their world view—including notions of what's real, normal, natural, good, and true. The people in the group use the shared language to work together on some shared project in the world—something they are trying to do together.

In short: in a discourse community, shared conventions of language use affect social status, world view, and work. These elements are so powerful that the discourse could be said to take on a life of its own, independent of individual participants; it could be said, even, to "create" the participants that suit its conventions by allowing individuals no other options if they wish to be counted as participants. Thus, unlike a neighborhood in which people encounter one another face to face, a discourse community casts its discursive net over boundaries of geographic location, cultural background, socio-economic status,
and even time—the dead may participate in discourse communities if their ideas and their texts survive. There are many discourse “communities”—perhaps the term should go into quotation marks to clarify that we are not talking about human neighborhoods but rather fields of communication. Actual humans are usually acquainted with more than one discourse, without being essentially defined by any—which helps give rise to hybrid discursive forms in which the language-using practices of more than one discourse are blended, sometimes not smoothly.

The characteristics of the traditional discourse of the academic community may be summarized as follows. First, it employs a form of language called a “grapholect.” A grapholect, as the name suggests, is meant to be written and not spoken. It typically uses the most formal and ultra-correct form of its participants’ native language, treating as “errors” usages that would be unproblematic in casual conversation, which is why even students who have been fluent writers in less demanding situations in high school may struggle with it. The grapholect is too elaborate to be spoken. Audiences often have trouble listening to it when people give lectures in classes or read papers at conferences that are written in the grapholect.

Also, traditional academic genres shape whole pieces of writing, determining what the parts are and what the structure is. My first-year students often come prepared with the five-paragraph essay as a sort of proto-academic genre, a baby version, consisting of an introductory paragraph, supposedly including a thesis statement, three paragraphs presenting three supporting points or examples, and a concluding paragraph, which restates the thesis. This format usually cracks under the strain of more advanced college-level academic work, which is why I’ve seen papers with five paragraphs, each paragraph a couple of pages long! Academic genres as used by all but the rankiest beginners are more complex, and often discipline-specific: students use genres such as the lab report, the reflective journal, the critical essay, the research paper, and so on, and these have their counterparts for practicing scholars in the various academic fields.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the traditional academic discourse community enforces a typical world view, such that the persona speaking through academic writing projects the following characteristics. First, the persona is objective, evidently trying to prevent any emotions or prejudices from influencing the ideas in the writing (hence the traditional ban on the first person, the “I,” in academic discourse). Also, the persona is skeptical, responding with doubt and questions to any claim that something is true or good or beautiful (my husband has a quintessentially academic colleague whose license plate reads, “DOUBT”). Not surprisingly, the persona is argumentative, favoring debate, believing that if we are going to find out whether something is true or good or beautiful, the only way we will do that is by arguing for opposing views of it, to see who wins (this method goes back to ancient Greece—some scholars would say to the Sophists; it can be seen in Plato’s dialogues; and it is also embodied in our adversarial legal system). In this view, only debate can produce knowledge, which is not immediately available to experience or revealed from transcendent sources. Additionally, the persona is extremely precise, exacting, rigorous—if debate is going to generate knowledge, all participants must use language carefully (hence the ultra-correctness of the grapholect), demonstrate their knowledge of earlier scholarly work, argue logically and fairly, use sound evidence, and so on.

It might also be said that this persona is male, and white, and economically privileged. It might be said that the characteristics I have just outlined are most congenial to those actual humans who are white men of the upper social classes, that is, that these characteristics are most in accord with the personality traits that they are already socialized to develop. Certainly, for example, women are not encouraged to take aggressive postures, attacking the ideas of others and so on. Traditional academic discourse seemed to be quite a white male preserve until very recently, as can be readily verified by reading any scholarship written, say, before 1970, and looking at the range of references, kinds of jokes, cultural allusions made, etc. James Sosnoski has gone so far as to characterize this traditional discourse as a “mindless man-driven theory machine,” arguing that its preferred agonistic stance, which in his analysis comes to sacrifice really useful scholarship to merely winning an argument, is linked to traditional male socialization.

**Hybrid Academic Discourses**

As I said earlier, the traditional academic discourse that I have just described is certainly not dead. It still has many proponents. But it is sharing the field with new forms of discourse, and I believe that this is happening at least in part because the academic population is becoming more diverse. More people who are not white males of the upper social classes are gaining access to post-secondary education and to positions as post-secondary teachers and scholars. With the diverse population, slowly but surely, come diverse discourses from people’s various home communities. Previously non-academic discourses are blending with traditional academic discourses to form the new hybrids. These new discourses are still “academic,” in that they are doing the intellectual work of the academy—rigorous, reflective scholarship. We find these discourses appearing in articles in top-rank academic journals and in books from prestigious academic presses. But they have combined elements of traditional academic discourse with elements of other ways of using language that are more comfortable for the new academics—after all, in how many communities is it considered appropriate to critically question everything one’s interlocutor says, picking apart the other person’s statements and even her or his grammar and word choice, while keeping one’s own emotions and investments in the topic carefully hidden?

Perhaps these new discourses are gaining ground, too, because they enable new kinds of intellectual work. I want to emphasize that I see these
hybrid forms not simply as more comfortable or more congenial but as allowing their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse. That is why these discourse forms are pervading so many academic disciplines today—new discourse forms that are openly subjective, incorporating an author’s emotions and prejudices, forms that seek to find common ground among opposing positions rather than setting them against one another head to head, forms that deviate from the traditional grapholect by using language that is more informal, that includes words from other languages, that employs cultural references from the wide variety of world cultures rather than only the canonical Western tradition, and so on. These hybrid discourses enable scholarship to take account of new variables, to explore new methods, and to communicate findings in new venues, including broader reading publics than the academic.

Let me mention a few examples of the kinds of discourse I am talking about, taken from the field of composition studies (but examples could be found in literary studies, history, anthropology, or many other fields): a book on struggling college writers that was much acclaimed in the popular press as well as in scholarly venues, Lives on the Boundary, by Mike Rose, an Italian American of working-class background; Helen Fox’s book Listening to the World, on teaching traditional American academic writing to foreign students in U.S. universities; and two academic-prize-winning accounts of how the authors, coming from home discourse communities at great remove from the academic, succeeded in the academy and came to use composition scholarship to understand their own struggles, namely African American Keith Gilyard’s Voices of the Self and Puerto Rican American Victor Villanueva’s Jr.’s Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color. None of these authors is a white male from the upper social classes—probably not a coincidence. Reflecting the relatively recent advent into the academy of people from more diverse communities, Rose’s book was published in 1989 and all the others in the early 1990s (Gilyard’s in 1991, Villanueva’s in 1993, and Fox’s in 1994).

Each of these writers has his or her own distinctive hybrid discourse, yet I believe that their new forms of academic discourse have some traits in common, which I derive from my analysis of Villanueva’s Bootstraps (“Rhetorics”). Hence what I am going to do here is to try to summarize some of these hybrid discourse traits, using my analysis of Villanueva and some additional guidance from Fox’s work.

First, the grapholect issue. Clearly, none of these books is written in the traditional academic grapholect. I do not think, however, that the dialects typically found in hybrid academic discourses can be helpfully conceptualized as forms taken directly from other discourse communities. True, there has been some debate in composition studies about “students’ right to their own language,” as it was phrased by Richard Lloyd-Jones and colleagues in a 1974 resolution at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. This way of thinking poses a conflict between traditional academic discourse and the home community discourses of students whose home communities are socio-economically and politically marginalized, far from the privileged position of the upper-class white male paradigm. This conflict can be dramatized, for example, as a conflict between Black English and the traditional academic grapholect: some say Black English cannot be used for intellectual work; Geneva Smitherman, for one, shows that it can be by writing scholarly work in Black English. But increasingly, I think we will see hybrid forms such as exemplified in Villanueva’s writing. Bootstraps is written in neither traditional academic discourse nor what some of my students call “newyorican English,” but in a hybrid form that borrows from both and is greater than the sum of its parts, accomplishing intellectual work that could not be done in either of the parent discourses alone.

Along with using a hybrid form of English in his writing, Villanueva also exemplifies another common trait of hybrid discourses, namely his willingness to use a variant range of cultural references. Although he shows himself to be fully conversant with the traditional published scholarship in the field of composition studies, he also does not hesitate to use Puerto Rican American cultural references to make his points. For example, he illustrates his difficulties in adjusting to a move to California when he was a teen-ager by describing his shock upon learning that local school custom requires him to shave off his mustache:

Que portorro doesn’t have a mustache? His is respectable, neatly trimmed always, never did wear a chico, the little strip of hair from the bottom lip to the chin; never did let the mustache turn into a chincho, the Charlie-Char like droop below the lipline. He wore his mustache like his father had, like his uncle Diego, like the respectable men of the block, like Zorro. But this is not TV California; it’s his new world, and he’ll comply. (37)

Villanueva apparently assumes that most of his readers will recognize the reference to Zorro (whom he has already discussed, ironically, as one of the few Latino images available to him in the popular media when he was a child). But he provides some minimal interpretation here for those of his readers who are unfamiliar with the culture of facial hair in the Puerto Rican American community—probably more guidance than traditional academic writers would be likely to give when alluding, for instance, to Midwestern white Fourth of July picnic customs. I suspect, however (not being initiated into the culture of facial hair myself), that he does not give enough information for the uninformed to fully understand the reference. This does not worry him. Note, too, that he does not bother to translate all the Spanish words he uses. Such cultural mixing or hybridization would be anathema in traditional academic discourse, at least without lengthy footnotes.

Now some larger generic issues. Once again, these are illustrated from Bootstraps but can be found in variant forms in other hybrid discourses. For one thing, personal experience, which is absolutely taboo in traditional academic
discourse, may be used in hybrid forms to add persuasive force to a point by invoking an emotional response from the reader. In Villanueva this strategy is used, for example, to convince us that change is needed by invoking our sympathy for the writer’s suffering under the current educational system, in which he was advised that he was not college material and that he should consider a manual vocation. Personal experience may also be used in a less emotionally charged way, as a source of illustrative examples, as when Villanueva uses vignette portraits of his childhood friends to illustrate John Obi’s distinction between “immigrant” and “caste-like” minorities. These personal examples present shades of meaning more clearly than an abstract description of traits could do.

Another violation of academic tradition, in this case the agonistic stance in argument, can be found in a strategy I call “offhand refutation.” This is not a rigorous frontal assault on an opposed scholarly position but a casual critical remark. This non-confrontational strategy still leaves the reader in no doubt as to Villanueva’s position. One example occurs in his discussion of the work of Carl Bereiter and other proponents of deficit theories of African American children’s school difficulties. Having described several of these theories, when Villanueva is ready to begin his argument against them, he says, “Round and round she goes. Since the question is always ‘what’s wrong with them,’ the answer gets repeated too: bad language equals insufficient cognitive development’” (11). He does not say, “what Bereiter ignores is . . .” or any of the other combative lead-ins that we might expect. Thus, perhaps, he wins a better hearing from readers who might be disposed to believe Bereiter. He does not antagonize them even before presenting the points that he hopes will change their minds.

In the paragraph that follows this offhand remark, however, Villanueva, while maintaining a relatively informal and non-aggressive style, nevertheless cites a number of scholarly sources to support his position against the deficit theorists. Thus, as in traditional academic discourse, he pays his respects to existing scholarship by acknowledging its conclusions and alluding to them with proper documentation. He blends traditional and non-traditional discursive approaches.

When the conclusions of established scholarship are believed to be tainted by prejudice, however, such respect may be unwarranted. Then, instead of committing oneself to a lengthy process of refutation, one might employ a strategy I call “appropriative history”: a creative retelling of traditional history in which the writer’s agenda for needed new research is highlighted, as when Villanueva traces a genealogy from the Greek Sophists to American Latino rhetoric. This is a common strategy in women’s studies—no more “The pioneers crossed the plains with their wives and children . . .” I don’t think this strategy is intended to substitute for the work of re-writing scholarly history; but it is meant as an intellectual prod, to alert readers that new research is needed.

Of course, humor is absolutely forbidden in traditional academic discourse save for the very occasional and very dry donnish witticism. Villanueva, on the other hand, makes frequent use of wry humor, as, for example, when he tells us how he succeeded in graduate school by employing what he calls “Professorial Discourse Analysis.” The term itself seems to mock disciplinary jargon. “Professorial Discourse Analysis” is what Villanueva did when he went to the library and read a professor’s published work before attempting to write for that professor; he then imitated the professor’s style as closely as he could in his own work. Villanueva reports on the success of this practice: along with the As and Bs he got comments such as “I never saw this before” and “too novel” (11).

As with several of the other strategies I’ve discussed, such as the uses of personal experience, this free use of humor seems designed to court the audience, to woo readers’ attention, and to persuade them that the author is a likable person, that is, to enhance the author’s ethos. Using humor to get a hearing is a time-honored strategy of people addressing others who have social power over them and who may be negatively disposed toward them; here Villanueva adapts it to an academic form.

I want to emphasize that Villanueva’s book is not a personal memoir. It is a scholarly work, published with a prestigious press in the field of composition studies, in which he shows wide familiarity with previous scholarship and in which he makes a serious argument about American education. But it is not written in traditional academic discourse, and, I have attempted to show, it is therefore the more effective.

I can add to this list of generalizable traits of hybrid academic discourses by looking at how Helen Fox describes characteristics that can be found in the writing of students who have been schooled in other academic traditions before coming to the United States. English is a second language for these students, although it may be close to second nature from early childhood study; and it may be a form of English other than American—Indian or African inflected, for example. I will summarize some of the textual features she finds, as follows.

One is a stylistic preference for indirection—deliberately not coming to the point quickly, stating a thesis at the outset clearly, or proceeding to the conclusion linearly. Indirection may be evidenced in an extended metaphor or narrative that might seem “off the point” to a traditional American academic; or in heavy use of abstraction and generalization; or in sentences that seem too long and elaborately entangled for traditional American academic readers. Her students have told Fox that they intend to show respect for the reader’s powers of inference by using indirection, as well as to tantalize the reader into reading on. In a May 1998 workshop I attended conducted by Fox, she gave the example of Paulo Freire, whose work has been widely read and respected in composition studies, as a heavy user of this strategy of indirection—a comment I found very helpful in understanding the difficulties I always have with reading his work.

Fox also notes that her students are governed by assumptions of a group-oriented culture, in which people are highly attuned to each other’s
unexpressed thoughts and feelings and in which collective views are assumed to exist and to be valued. Thus the posture of the traditional academic arguer may seem arrogant. For these students, something like Villanueva’s strategy of off-hand refutation would be preferable because it avoids direct confrontation. However, as Fox points out, the traditional academic reader has to be schooled to understand that such a way of presenting points is fully rigorous and representative of neither fuzzy thinking nor a desire to disguise fuzzy thinking.

Another group-oriented attitude, related to this reluctance to attack and completely discredit scholars with whom one disagrees, can be found in foreign students’ views on what constitutes “original” work. Fox uses a friend’s play on the word “original” to get at these writers’ attitudes toward scholarship that has already been done. Whereas the traditional American academic views “original” work as work that corrects or supersedes what has already been done, these writers view “original” as going back to the origins, that is, relying heavily on the most highly respected work that has already been done. These writers might quote lengthy passages from this work, sometimes without attribution since the “original” work, a source of wisdom, is assumed to be community property.

I want to emphasize that the traits Fox finds enter these students’ writing from other academic discourses in which they have participated. These traits describe writing that does serious intellectual work—just not in the way favored by traditional American academic discourse.

Let me now quickly review the traits of hybrid academic discourses that have been sketched here.

- Writing in a variant form of English, not the standard grapholect.
- Using a non-traditional range of cultural references, including words and concepts from cultures other than upper-class male European, and sometimes not providing exhaustive explanations of these.
- Using personal experience to evoke the reader’s emotional response and sympathy.
- Using personal experience as a source of detailed, nuanced illustrations.
- Employing “offhand refutation,” in which an opponent is not attacked head-on, but more casually, indirectly, or gently questioned.
- Employing “appropriative history,” or writing oneself into the story.
- Using humor—especially ironic, wry humor, which is hard to see at first.
- Coming at one’s main points indirectly, meandering, holding off the main point.
- Assuming that all readers know and share the writer’s emotions and cultural assumptions, rather than claiming and valuing an individual and individualistic viewpoint.
- Showing respect for important earlier work by reproducing it, rather than seeking to be “creative” by superseding earlier work.

This is by no means a complete list. It is meant merely to illustrate the possibilities for successfully varying traditional academic discourse. These traits are all drawn from successful, published academic discourse that nevertheless takes hybrid forms.

A teacher can learn more about the diversities of hybrid discourses not only by alertly reading the increasing number of examples to be found in published scholarship in the field, but also by performing a thought experiment: she should give herself the task of writing about something valuable she has learned about teaching writing, discussing at least one piece of published scholarship that helped her learn it (the traditional academic argumentative move), and also bringing in at least one instance of personal experience—instantiation, illustration, whatever—that helped her learn it (the hybrid move). This is a kind of writing that academics have traditionally performed in private reading journals, from which ideas for publishable work may come, but it is an interesting experiment to try to produce such writing with the idea in mind that other scholars might read it.

Teaching Hybrid Academic Discourses

The thought experiment I have just described is also a useful exercise for the teacher who wants to expand her repertoire of academic discourse teaching strategies to include the new hybrid discourses. It exemplifies the kind of teaching I think will work best, namely to give students opportunities to experiment. I do not recommend taking into class a taxonomy of hybrid discourses, such as I have just sketched, and requiring your students to produce texts that conform to it. That can hardly be done even with long-established, traditional, and exhaustively analyzed academic genres. So it certainly can’t be done with these sorts of academic discourses that are hybrid, experimental, and in the process of emerging. Rather, it seems to me that what we have to do is to create conditions in which students are encouraged to experiment with their own forms of hybrid discourse.

Course conditions that will encourage experimentation, I believe, must focus on what the students are reading as well as what they are writing. A key feature of hybrid academic discourses is that these discourses attend to reading, to previously published scholarship—as I noted above in reference to Villanueva, these discourses are not memoirs, not purely personal essays. So, the course must have “outside readings,” that is, something other than the writing of the students in the course.

This outside reading should focus on a cultural crux of our day, the sort of vexed problem that professional academic scholarship grapples with, such as gender role definition, the limits and possibilities of political protest, the immigrant experience and what it means to be or to become an “American,” and more. Whatever crux is chosen should be carefully derived from local conditions, in what the teacher’s own students might be interested. Although students might be asked to choose their own area of study, a difficulty in
pursuing that route is that gathering, copying, and distributing the reading material would take a lot of time. It might be better for the teacher to do some research before the class begins, analogous to that which Paulo Freire recommends to his literacy educators when they are identifying generative words, to find a good crux to explore and to collect, if not all, at least a substantial amount of reading material before the class begins, to which the students can add.

I suggest that this “outside reading” be a collection of materials from what Mary Louise Pratt would call a “contact zone.” Pratt works in comparative literature, and she’s interested in texts produced in a time and place where different cultures and possibly also different languages are coming into contact with each other in uneasy ways, where there is something at issue, where some groups have more power than others. A “contact zone” is her name for such a historical moment and the texts it generates (for more on the application of this concept to composition, see my essay “Contact Zones and English Studies”). Bruce Herzberg and I have published a composition textbook called Negotiating Difference in which we have compiled several collections of the kinds of materials I am talking about, for “contact zones” such as the antebellum debate over the uses of the Declaration of Independence in arguments about slavery, or the controversy during and after World War II about the American internment of the Nikkei, Japanese Americans. Be it noted that these contact zones, like the ones Pratt discusses, have historical roots and develop over time—such richness is a valuable asset, whatever collection of materials is used.

It is crucially important, in my view, that such a collection of materials be conceived as a traditional “case study,” which usually devolves into “pro” and “con” sides. Contact zones are typically much more complex than that, as Pratt’s research and my own suggest, and students are helped to appreciate the necessary complexity and ambiguity of serious argumentative positions if they see a crux addressed in a variety of ways. For example, in the Negotiating Difference collection on antebellum debate about “women’s sphere,” a range of positions is taken both by the men and women who want to restrict women’s activities and by the men and women who want to enlarge them. Some who argue for restriction adduce female inferiority, while others, hotly denying this, still urge women to subordinate themselves in the interests of domestic and civil order. Some who argue for enlargement base their case on special spiritual powers presumed to inhere in women, which society is presumed to need, while others insist that restrictions are absurd for women because they are exactly the same in their mental and spiritual powers as men. Race comes into these arguments in complicated ways as well: Louisa McCord argues that all white women, like all African Americans of both sexes, are inferior to white men; Elizabeth Cady Stanton argues that the oppression of white, married women is similar to, and equally reprehensible as, the oppression of black slaves. These are the kinds of complexities that will stimulate students to experiment, as they may well feel that the charged material cannot be adequately addressed in traditional academic forms.

Let me also note that what Pratt and I both mean by “texts” are not only all sorts of written texts (letters, sermons, histories, poems, captivity narratives, etc.) but also any human artifact that can be “read” or interpreted—all sorts of visual representations, from drawings to computer screens, craft objects, music, films, posters, etc. Again, I think it’s a good idea that whatever collection of materials is used be generically diverse, to provide students with a lot of examples of discursive strategies to adapt.

What should students do with these readings? That is, what should they be writing about? I suggest that they both analyze and imitate the materials. Reading comprehension questions to be addressed in class journals and/or discussed in class would not be amiss for materials of the level of challenge that I am recommending. While one does not want to talk down to students, it is also damaging to assume they understand when they do not: the object should be to create a classroom environment in which questions can be asked without embarrassment. Imitation exercises, too, are excellent facilitators of analysis, helping students really to see how a text works.

Students should also be writing papers in which they connect the materials with their own experience. They must cite these texts and engage them rigorously; but they must also talk about their own experience in ways that feel right to them. For example, texts on the Japanese internment raise issues of citizenship in poignant ways, which students can relate to their own experiences and notions of what it means to be a citizen, what rights and responsibilities are entailed, whether or not they were born in the U.S. It will not be easy for students to control such hybrid experiments, and their texts will probably need a fair amount of revising; but the students will probably be able to go far beyond the usual stale, rush-to-closure “this is my opinion.” In attempting to interweave rigorous responses to their reading and their own reflections, it could be said that they are devising a new version of the essay genre for the academic setting. If, at the same time, students are asked to write some more traditional academic papers—which I think would be a good idea—they might also be able to make these papers more essayistic, more charged with their own particular blends of discourses. They might research in greater depth some aspect of the crux or contact zone under study. For example, I have asked students to write papers in which they do research and argue, in traditional academic fashion, for the inclusion of some author or selection of material into the unit we are studying.

Incidentally, since we are talking about developing experimental discourses, for which no sure models can be provided and in which every writer will have to find something of his or her own path, within the constraints of the available discourses that may be hybridized, I think it’s a good idea to build in a lot of class attention to process and revising. With materials clustered around a particular crux, too, students will find that similar issues come up for them in
consecutive papers, and I like to encourage students to cannibalize earlier papers for parts to use in later papers and generally to think of themselves as intellectuals whose ideas on the issues under discussion are developing. Class discussion and collaborative projects, too, contribute powerfully to this process.

In all this, the goal is to help students develop a range of experimental discourses. I don’t think we should encourage them to think that each one has a unique, “authentic voice” sort of hybrid discourse that he or she must discover. Rather, I am encouraging a sort of craft-person attitude toward writing, in which various tools are developed and students learn to deploy them with greater facility. Bell hooks, for one, has written eloquently about the need to allow students to develop this sort of range and above all, not to essentialize their supposedly appropriate discourses based on race, gender, or other variables. She says this about her college creative writing class:

Whenever I read a poem written in the particular dialect of southern black speech, the teacher and fellow students would praise me for using my “true,” authentic voice, and encouraged me to develop this “voice” to write more of these poems. From the onset this troubled me. Such comments seemed to mask racial biases about what my authentic voice would or should be... I had come to understand black poets as being capable of speaking in many voices, that the Dunbar of a poem written in dialect was no more or less authentic than the Dunbar writing a sonnet. Yet it was listening to black musicians like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and later John Coltrane that impression upon [my] consciousness a sense of versatility—they played all kinds of music, had multiple voices. So it was with poetry. (11)

If it can be so with academic discourses as well, I believe students will be well served. That is why, while not forgetting that students will need to know how to “write a sonnet”—how to employ the conventions of traditional academic discourse—I am encouraging more attention to the development of hybrid discourses.

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