the journal across-the-curriculum — for isn't that, surely, what we do? — is symptomatic of a dangerous tendency that could taint all of our writing across-the-curriculum affairs. As an emerging field, we have only just begun to sort out the significance of what we ourselves do in the peculiar no-man's land of writing classes. Now, rather suddenly, and in a sense before we are ready, we are being asked to export what little we know to new kinds of classrooms, where its significance is bound to be different in ways that we cannot pretend to predict. When we were experts only for ourselves, maybe our ignorance didn't matter so much: Writing programs seem to go on, to survive, however well — or badly — we serve them. But now the fate of a much larger, and much more fragile, enterprise is in our hands, and we need to keep our performance credible.

Fervor and zeal aside, therefore, we cannot proceed too cautiously. When we sell colleagues on journal writing — because *we* think of it as flexible, because *we* find it doesn't significantly add to our paper load, because *we* find that students take advantage of it to make kinds of inquiry *we* find exciting — we must remember that our experience of it is based on its use in our own, specific classroom communities, communities very different, by virtue of discipline, teacher, and class membership, from theirs. If we must play the expert, we would do better not to tell them what those activities we call journal writing can do for them, but to ask what they think they can make of them.

Notes

[1]James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1975, p. 83.

[2]Britton and his research team used these function categeories to answer the question, "'Why are you writing'" (p. 74) for the 2122 samples of student writing they had collected. They determined that function would be a sort of compromise between "'intention' and 'effect': those aspects [of texts] that were customary, part of the expectations shared by writer and reader, *typical*." (p 75, Britton's emphasis) Where they confuse matters is in their effort to claim a validity for the "typical" features they decide to focus on that transcends their sample, suggesting that these features derive from the "conventions and presuppositions maintained by the mutual acknowledgement of communicating subjects that provide a mature writer with a repertoire of known choices of function within our culture, and enable a mature reader to recognize what choice has been made." (p. 76) In other words, they want to claim that the texts they sorted were marked by features which, apparently independent of context, any literate adult member of our culture ought to recognize. But there are no such universal features or combinations of features of texts that would enable us to determine any given text's function. The features derive their significance—or, rather, we determine their significance — on the basis of our construal of the context in which the discourse occurs.

[3]This confusion has probably been reinforced by James Kinneavy's placement of journal writing under Expressive aim on a chart in his rather differently based, but also influential *A Theory of Discourse* (New York: Norton, 1971 — see Figure II, p. 61). Kinneavy makes all the appropriate disclaimers about the rarity of pure or unmixed aims in any given discourse, and about overlap between aims, but I suspect the chart is nonetheless taken at face value often enough.

[4]I am particularly indebted in my thinking here to David Bleich's *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). Bleich goes on to argue, however, that the classroom is the central source of knowledge for the discipline of literary studies. I am not ready — nor in a position, anyway — to make a similar connection between the classroom and any other discipline. The effort might, however, prove interesting.

[5]Fulwiler himself — and I find this a little puzzling — never actually uses the term 'expressive'. He does say that "Ken Macrorie calls journals the 'seedbeds' from which other, more public (transactional or poetic) kinds of writing will emerge" (p. 18), so that it is clear he thinks of it as "expressive." The best explanation for the omission is presumably that he is writing a mainly practical, how-to essay: describing, with plenty of usable examples, the many ways in which journals can be used. He may not, then, consider the philosophical issues I am raising here as particularly germane.

Stanley Fish's Theory of the Interpretive Community: A Rhetoric for Our Time?

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This essay seeks to provide specialists in rhetoric and composition with a critical exposition of Stanley Fish's most recent position on interpretation. It will identify the key hypotheses in his theory of the "interpretive community," locate it in the context of current thought in other disciplines as a means of explaining why it has already begun to influence our field and is likely to do so in the future, and specify ways in which I think it may and may not be true.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the story Fish tells in his *Is There a Text in This Class?* about a joke he once played on an undergraduate class. One summer school Fish wrote on the blackboard at the end of his first class, a course in the relationship between linguistics and literary criticism, the following list of names as an assignment for the next day's reading:

Jacobs — Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hayes
Ohman (?)

The first five men on the list as well-known linguists; the last, Richard Ohmann, is a literary critic who has sought to apply the concepts of transformational grammar to literature. Fish misspelled Ohmann's name, but because he knew he couldn't recall whether it had one or two n's, he placed a question mark after it.

Fish then told the students in his next class, which met in the same room but which was studying seventeenth-century poetry, that the assignment was a poem like those they had been studying and asked them to interpret it. The class apparently did not suspect anything amiss and went to work applying the critical tools they had learned in the course. The first student got the ball rolling by identifying the poem as a hieroglyph, either of a cross or an altar. This observation led to a discussion of specific words. Jacobs was taken as a reference to Jacob's ladder, a traditional symbol for the Christian ascent to heaven. The pairing of the word Rosenbaum with Jacobs suggested, however, that in this case the means of ascent was not a ladder but a rosenbaum, a rose tree, which the class saw as an allusion to the Virgin Mary, often traditionally referred to as a rose without thorns. The poem was thus seen to pose the question, "How is it that a man can

climb to heaven by means of a rose tree?" and to provide the answer: "By the fruit of that tree, by the fruit of Mary's womb, Jesus." Once the class had established this line of interpretation, all the other pieces fell into place with the exception of Hayes, which resisted explication. Thorne became an obvious reference to Christ's cross of thorns. Through the conventions of typological exegesis, Levin yielded two symbols for Christ, the tribe of Levi and the unleavened bread carried by the children of Israel. Ohman meant at once "Omen" (appropriate since the poem refers to Old Testament forerunners of Christ), Oh Man (appropriate since the poem tells the story of the intersection of human history and God's will), and "Amen" (appropriate to a poem celebrating the mystery of man's redemption through Christ). Thereafter the class turned to the poem's structure and found several parallels between its form and its content.[1]

Fish tells this story not to illustrate a critical *tour de force*, but to illustrate the manner of all reading and indeed all human thought as he now understands them. In the early 1970's Fish had sought to shift the focus of interpretation away from the text, where it had been in the New Criticism, to the reader of the text and to describe the reading process rather than its outcome. Meaning, as Fish's reader-response school of criticism conceived of it, was dynamic and temporal, rather than static and spatial. At the same time Fish wished to avoid one possible implication of his interpretive revolution — the implication that there is no single "correct" reading of a text, that in fact there are as many interpretations and texts as readers, no one of them superior to another. This potential for anarchy in the field of literary criticism, Fish now confesses in his introduction to *Is There a Text in This Class?*, prompted him to assume that all readers read in the same way and that the text existed as an object of investigation that shaped the experience of the reader. Fish was caught between wanting to locate the meaning of a text in the reader and wanting to say also that the meaning was not ultimately in the reader but in the text itself.

The solution to his problem has come through his new theory of the interpretive community, which he has formulated in a series of essays reprinted in *Is There a Text in This Class?* and in subsequent essays.[2] This new theory has two basic hypotheses. The first involves a rejection of both Fish's earlier views that readers in some sense construct the text through their interpretive activities and that the facts of the text shape their experience. Now reading is seen as a function of neither the text nor the reader, but of the reader's particular assumptions about the text and the world, his or her "interpretive strategies." The reader does not first obtain the facts of the text and then deploy an appropriate interpretive strategy; interpretive strategies are always at work *prior* to the act of reading, Fish insists, and determine both the activities of the reader and the facts of the text that the reader will find central or peripheral or even noticeable. The driving force behind the interpretation arrived at by Fish's class was not the words on the blackboard or the students themselves, but the concepts about poetry in general and seventeenth-century poetry in particular that were already in their minds. These concepts taught the students to look for and find in the poem a thesis, to tease out individual words for obscure and multiple meanings, to look for significance in the shape of the poem, to recognize typological and other Christian symbols, and so on.

The second hypothesis in Fish's new theory is that interpretive strategies are the creations of interpretive communities, groups of people who share purposes and goals. Interpretive strategies serve social and institutional "interests."[3] A main premise here is that "selves are constituted by the ways of thinking and seeing that inhere in social organizations."[4] We are all conventional down to the beliefs that guide our reading and our lives. It was not Fish's class that actually read the poem on the classboard, but the interpretive community into which those students were being inducted through classes like Fish's. In our world an interpretation is not "correct" because it is based on verifiable hypotheses, for such do not exist: there are no facts apart from hypotheses about the facts. Rather an interpretation is "correct" only in the sense that it adheres to the interpretive strategies of the dominant interpretive community at the time. An unstated corollary of Fish's two hypotheses is that just as interpretive strategies and communities decode texts, they also encode them. Thus "reader," "author," "text," and "facts" are postulated terms that are useful in discussing perception and interpretation (the two are identical), but that refer in a sense to non-existent entities: interpretive communities create them all.

Among those who will be following the debate in literary circles that Fish's latest and most provocative theory has touched off are composition specialists, for Fish challenges our understanding of the most basic terms in our field. To judge from recent articles in composition journals, his views are gaining acceptance. Edward M. White, for instance, finds that "Fish's concept is . . . creative, powerful, and useful," but not revolutionary because composition teachers have for some time established interpretive communities when they come together in holistic grading sessions.[5] Thomas Newkirk, even though he does not mention Fish specifically, clearly has him in mind when he argues against the practice of advising students to "write to their peers" because his research indicates that students and writing teachers assess papers in different ways. They belong, he claims, to "distinctive evaluative communities."[6] And, to cite another example, Elizabeth P. Rankin, arguing for "a new theory of style . . . grounded in sound and consistent epistemological assumptions about the nature of language and reality," claims that such an accurate account of language and reality is provided by the "concept of the rhetorical community" and observes that "in this community, which Stanley Fish has called the interpretive community, the essentially arbitrary and self-referential nature of language is acknowledged, yet a flexible set of acceptable meanings and standards is agreed upon."[7]

One might be tempted, in looking at these studies, to believe that the appeal of Fish's theory lies in its ability to justify pedagogical practices that are already known — holistic grading, teacher (not peer) assessment, and stylistic analysis. But to grasp why the new Fish has already begun to find favor in our field, and will, I think, continue to do so, we need to probe more deeply into the philosophical malaise of our time and into the long-term forces at work in our culture. "For almost two centuries," writes Mircea Eliade, "the European mind has put forward an unprecedented effort to explain the world, so as to conquer and transform it." Timothy J. Reiss, quoting this remark at the outset of the first chapter of his *The Discourse of Modernism*, goes on to observe that in our time "we are beginning to realize that the expression and implementation of this desire [for conquest, dominion, and possession] is the mark of a particular epistemological inflection that is far from the only one possible, or even available."[8] Fish rarely adorns his writing with the technical vocabulary of philosophy and semiotics that is fashionable among Continental literary critics, but he no less than they is burdened by a sense of the exhaustion of an epistemological era and by a need to inaugurate a new one.

To understand the direction his theory has taken, it is helpful to follow (as best one can) Reiss' account of our current episte-

mology, an account that *is* embedded in semiotic terminology, particularly that of Michel Foucault. In every episteme (Foucault's terms for an epistemological era) one "'class' of discourse" ("the particular network of relations ordered by given practices of signifying systems") will "provide the conceptual tools that make the majority of human practices meaningful."[9] This discursive mode is inevitably accompanied by an occulted practice whose activities evade recognition by the dominant mode but which in time help to subvert it and establish a new dominance. The discursive class that has dominated European culture since the Renaissance has been variously called "positivist," "capitalist," "experimentalist," "modern," and so on, but Reiss chooses to designate it "analytico-referential" in order to stress what he takes to be its enabling hypothesis: that "the 'syntactic' order of semiotic systems (particularly language) is coincident both with the logical ordering of 'reason' and with the structural organization of a world given as exterior to both these orders."[10] Along with the conception of the world as grammatical, logical, mathematical, went the assumption, formulated by Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, that concepts adequately represent the world and that words adequately represent the concepts. As a consequence, "the properly organized sentence (a concern dominant among grammarians of the second half of the century) provides in its very syntax a correct *analysis* of both the rational and the material orders, using elements that *refer* adequately through concepts to the true, objective nature of the world."[11] Thus the semiotic systems of the day — the systems that designate what is and what is not meaningful, what will be noticed and what not noticed—are not simply the creations of a particular culture in a particular time and place, but context-free, accurate representations of reason and the world, all three of which coincide. Occulted by this assumption of the inevitable rightness of all phenomena, whether natural, social, or ethical, is "the enunciating subject *as discursive activity* and, therefore, of its responsibility for the status of the objects of which it speaks."[12]

The physical science of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries is the protypical discourse of the discursive class that Reiss defines, of course, and even though modern physics has accepted notions of relativity and complementarity, the older physics has served as the discursive model of much of the social sciences and the humanities in the twentieth century. New Criticism, for instance, despite its anti-scientific polemics, clearly owed its success in establishing itself as an academic discipline in the modern university to its conformity to the linear, impersonal style of analytico-referential discourse.[13] In this interpretive methodology there was no gap between the semiotic systems of the text and the critic. They spoke the same language, shared the same cultural assumptions, reasoned the same way. The critic needed only look carefully at the facts of the text and he or she would discover truth. To see was to know, for the categories of one's own conceptual world were isomorphic with those of the objective world.

The subject of our writing classes has also been the intellectual presuppositions of analytico-referential discourse. "To teach writing is to argue for a version of reality," James A. Berlin has observed;[14] our reality has been that of an epistemology and a discursive class that reached full steam in the Enlightenment. Alexander Bain's modes of discourse, which have structured the essays of students in writing classes for a century, descend via association psychology from the postulate of Locke's *Essay* that the structure of our ideas reflects the structure of the world itself.[15] Bain's rules for the paragraph, another key feature of what has come to be known as the Current-Traditional method of teaching composition,[16] derives, as Paul Rodgers, Jr., has shown, by way of deduction from the rules of the sentence.[17] And since Bain's followers then applied his rules for the paragraph to the essay as a whole, grammar became the model for all discourse. Bain does not discuss the audience in writing for he assumes that audiences think alike. What counts in writing is logical precision, in the choice of words, in the syntax of sentences, and in the ordering of paragraphs and essays.

The New Criticism and the Current-Traditional paradigm continue to dominate classroom practice. But the English profession is also suffering a return of the repressed, the emergence of the occulted practice. Both Fish's reader-response criticism and his theory of the interpretive community are two forms in which this concern for the perceiving, knowing subject has surfaced, but the writings of Jacques Derrida, Harold Bloom, Wolfgang Iser, and a host of others, however diverse, share a similar orientation. In composition the growing attention to the enunciative act has led to a process-oriented pedagogy and to at least two prominent rhetorical schools, differing in their underlying epistemologies. One is a new Romanticism initiated by Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, which argues for the rightful place in the school curriculum of "reflexive" writing (in which the focus is on the writer's thoughts and feelings about his or her experiences), not just "extensive" writing (where the focus is on the writer's conveying a message to an Other).[18] In this vein, Ken Macrorie, William Coles, Jr., James E. Miller, Stephen Judy and others have written textbooks that teach writing as a means of discovering an authentic, personal voice. The reality to be referred to through language is not the external world of fact but the inner self. Another trend, represented by Ann E. Berthoff, Young, Becker, and Pike, Linda Flower, and others, has been called the New Rhetoric or Epistemic Rhetoric by Berlin. It assumes that truth is created out of the dialectical interplay of writer, audience, reality, and language; as Berlin puts its central hypothesis, "truth is always truth for someone standing in relation to others in a linguistically circumscribed situation."[19]

Fish would agree with the premise of the New Rhetoric that truth is a function of circumstances. He would, however, argue that there is a philosophical evasiveness in the New Rhetoric when it claims on the one hand that, as Young, Becker, and Pike put it, "language provides a way of unitizing experience," but that on the other hand, again to quote Young, Becker, and Pike, "each man segments experience into discrete, repeatable units."[20] Which organizes experiences and generates truth, language or the individual? For Fish language is not a personal possession but a social imposition that determines how an individual will perceive a text and the world. He would say that the New Rhetoric has refused to face the logical but unpleasant conclusion of its premise that language pre-organizes experience: the self too is not a stable source of meaning, but context-dependent, always interpreting the world along socially defined lines.

Foucault, Reiss, and many other contemporary theorists would back Fish. The most attractive feature of Fish's notion of the interpretive community to Reiss would be Fish's claim that he has eliminated the subject-object dichotomy, a dichotomy that he posits as the creation of analytico-referential discourse. In order to dominate nature, mind had first to separate itself from nature. For Reiss "enunicating subject" is a postulated term, referring to a helpful concept but to a non-existent reality. He prefers "enunciating entity," where *entity* is an "empty metaphor marking the production of discourse (at once produced and pro-

ducing)."[21] For him all particular discourses are constituted by discursive classes; the words of an individual are embedded in the language, assumptions, and practices of a given culture at a given time and place. Reiss' discursive classes, in other words, are Fish's interpretive communities.

Fish's basic concept that knowledge and the self are culturally mediated in fact enjoys the status of an "advanced" theory in a variety of academic fields today. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan have edited a collection of essays for social scientists, including one by Stanley Fish, that illustrates the "interpretive turn" that they at least imply will replace both Romantic subjectivism and Positivist objectivism (in the forms of behavorialism and structuralism) in the social sciences. The notion in both these ideologies that there is a truth behind our everyday world of shared meanings, practices, and symbols "has always been proposed in the face of the dependency of the constructs of both 'self' and 'law' upon the very context they were intended to replace."[22] Their assumption is that "the web of meaning" spun by culture "constitutes human existence to such an extent that it cannot ever be reduced to . . . any predefined elements."[23] For the philosopher Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* man is das Man, the abstracted Other, lost in the world of situations, as he is also for the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, forming his ego from the idealized image of parents. Among literary theorists E. D. Hirsch holds fast against interpretive relativity, locating the source of meaning in the author's intentions, but Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" seems more attuned to the times. Fish's innovation is to give us the death of the reader.

In such a climate it does no good simply to protest that Fish reduces truth to the level of rhetoric and power politics. He and others would take it as a virtue of his theory that it obliterates distinctions between description, exposition, and argumentation, and between knowledge and belief. Yet despite the conformity of his theory to the mood of doubt and self-criticism in some academic circles, both of its hypotheses are open to serious objections. Fish prosecutes his argument that texts are indifferent to the way they are read with considerable ingenuity, but his examples always seem capable of being turned against him. The name "Hayes" is a fact of the text that Fish's students were asked to interpret, and the inability of their interpretive strategy to make sense of it may not diminish their enthusiasm for that strategy but would count as evidence against it to an outsider. Nor does it seem true that any list of words or names would have served equally well for Fish's students, as Fish is required to maintain by his theory. Had Fish spelled Ohmann's name correctly, it might also have proved recalcitrant to interpretation. And Fish does not enhance his credibility by citing as evidence that any words would do the names of faculty at Kenyon College —Temple, Jordan, Seymour, Daniels, Star, Church—as if they were a random list. Moreover, had the students in Fish's class been told that the words on the blackboard were either a seventeenth-century religious poem, an assignment from a course in literature and linguistics, or Fish's grocery shopping list, they would have been able to rank these possibilities as more or less probable on the basis of the simplicity and ease with which they account for the data. The view that a text does play a constraining role in its interpretation is only common sense. *Hamlet* may be interpreted endlessly because its words may be placed in endless contexts, but there are facts in the text that cannot be denied. One cannot say, for instance, that Hamlet is the son of Polonius or that he lives on at the end of the play.[24]

Just as texts put up a strong fight against some interpretive strategies, so do people at times put up a strong fight against conventional thinking. As Walter Davis puts it, "the fact that the self is initially and for the most part social is a beginning, not an end."[25] Heidegger offers the possibility that through critical self-reflection one may become aware of one's alienation in the world of others and constitute an authentic self. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire also sees in reflection a liberating, humanizing potential, though in more political terms. The psychological movement he calls "conscientização" enables one to challenge cultural givens and achieve a form of ideological self-consciousness he calls "critical transitivity."[26] Much of at least Western literature would attribute such maturation to experience itself. Fish might say that the achieved subjectivity of Akhilleus or King Lear is no less conventional than the consciousness it replaces, but such an objection would be a statement of belief entailing ontological and ethical commitments that many in the humanities would be unable to accept.

One has reason to remain skeptical of the "strong" version of Fish's theory in which objective and subjective worlds are made to disappear. But what does seem undeniably true is a weaker but still immensely significant version—that *much of the time* we see the world through the conventions of our social class, nationality, sex, profession, and the other interpretive communities to which we belong; that these conventions often seem to be eternal verities to those within an interpretive community; and that these conventions serve the goals and purposes of the groups they regulate and are thus inherently ideological and political. Our Freshman English textbooks rarely attempt to convey such astringent lessons, perhaps because they remain wedded to the model of analytico-referential discourse and its celebration of the ideal of reason. But Fish's new theoretical writing should help give renewed prestige to the study of rhetoric and to the Freshman English course. Thomas Newkirk is commendably honest in saying that we ought not to ask our students to write to audiences other than ourselves because we do not know how those who belong to different interpretive communities would react to an argument. But such a practice would obscure the point that Fish wants us and our students to see, that the world is made up of groups of people who see and read in profoundly different ways and who seek to make their way of seeing and reading prevail. By understanding the enunciative act within its broader cultural and political context, we undertake it with greater care.

Keeping in balance the rival claims of the subjective, objective, and cultural worlds—or in Freud's terms, of the id, ego, and superego—requires agility in our epistemological and rhetorical theories as well as in our daily lives, but it seems essential to our mental well-being. Perhaps the greatest mistake in our writing theories has not been that we have argued for the wrong version of reality but that we have argued for *a* version of reality —a version that is partisan and that excludes other possibilities. At this turning point in our profession the temptation is to formulate a new rhetoric purely by way of contrast with the old. Fish reminds us, both when he is convincing and when he fails to be convincing, that philosophical eclecticism may be our most prudent course.

Notes

[1]Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 322-325.

[2]"Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser, *Diacritics* 11 (Spring 1981): 2-13; "With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 693-721; "Profession Despise Thyself: Fear and Self-

Loathing in Literary Studies," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (December 1983): 349-364; "Fear of Fish: A Reply to Walter Davis," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (June 1984): 695-705; "Consequences," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (March 1985): 433-458.

[3]*Is There a Text in This Class*, p. 14.

[4]*Is There a Text in This Class*, p. 336.

[5]Edward M. White, "Poststructural Literary Criticism and the Response to Student Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 35 (May 1984): 193.

[6]Thomas Newkirk, "Direction and Misdirection in Peer Response," *College Composition and Communication* 35 (October 1984): 309.

[7]Elizabeth D. Rankin, "Revitalizing Style: Toward a New Theory and Pedagogy," *Freshman English News* 14 (Spring 1985): 7.

[8]Timothy J. Reiss, *The Discourse of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), p. 21.

[9]Reiss, p. 11.

[10]Reiss, p. 31.

[11]Reiss, p. 31.

[12]Reiss, p. 42.

[13]Stephen Mailloux argues that the New Criticism gained academic respectability by adapting itself rhetorically to the scientific ideology of American universities; see "Rhetorical Hermeneutics," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (June 1985): 633-637.

[14]James A. Berlin, "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," *College English* 44 (December 1982): 765-777.

[15]Jon Harned, "The Intellectual Background of Alexander Bain's 'Modes of Discourse,'" *College Composition and Communication* 36 (February 1985): 42-50.

[16]The term derives from Richard E. Young, "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention," in *Research in Composing*, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana: NCTE, 1978), pp. 29-47. For historical studies of the paradigm, see Albert R. Kitzhaber, "Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900," Diss. Univ. of Washington, 1953; and James A. Berlin, *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 58-76.

[17]Paul C. Rodgers, "Alexander Bain and the Rise of the Organic Paragraph," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 51 (December 1965): 399-408.

[18]Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana: NCTE, 1971), p. 4.

[19]"Contemporary Composition," p. 774.

[20]Quoted in "Contemporary Composition," pp. 774, 775.

[21]Reiss, p. 28.

[22]*Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), p. 8.

[23]*Interpretive Social Science*, p. 5.

[24]Telling criticism of Fish's examples may be found in P. D. Juhl, "Stanley Fish's Interpretive Communities and the Status of Critical Interpretation," *Comparative Criticism* 5 (1983): 47-58; James Phelan, "Data, Danda, and Disagreement," *Diacritics* 13 (Summer 1983): 43-45; and Robert Scholes, *Textual Power* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 149-165. For criticism of Fish's epistemological position, which amounts to an application of Kant's doctrine of the synthetic a priori to the world of culture, see E. D. Hirsch, "The Politics of Theories of Interpretation," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (September 1982): 235-247, and, in the same issue, Stephen Toulmin, "The Construal of Reality: Criticism in Modern and Postmodern Science," 93-111, which argues that purely objective description and purely subjective interpretation are the opposite ends of a spectrum and that most inquiry in both the natural sciences and the humanities falls somewhere in between.

[25]Walter A. Davis, "The Fisher King: *Wille zur Macht* in Baltimore," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (June 1984): 667.

[26]Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

FRESHMEN, "FOCUS," AND WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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Teaching students to "focus" an essay — to limit and define a controlling main idea (or "thesis") and to marshall reasoning, illustration, and evidence around that main idea — is a central goal in most freshman composition courses. We like to tell ourselves that focusing is one skill that students can carry with them to their writing in other disciplines and in the professions. That assumption, however, is more complicated than it seems, and teaching students how to transfer their focusing skills to writing outside the composition class requires deliberate and thoughtful pedagogical strategies.

The difficulty is illustrated by a typical freshman composition student of mine I'll call Tami — a bright, responsible student who paid attention when we studied the importance of focusing around a limited, specific thesis, and of organizing evidence logically to support the thesis, and when we discussed the uses of writing to discover a focus or thesis. She wrote several nicely focused essays. I told the class that these same skills should be applied to all their writing. The same semester, however, Tami wrote a history paper that appeared as though it had been produced by someone who had never heard of the need to focus around a specific, limited thesis. It was a cut-and-paste pastiche of encyclopedia facts about the assigned topic. Tami was not synthesizing her freshman writing skills with her history class, nor was she using writing to synthesize information in history. When I asked her what her paper's thesis was, she looked at me in shock.

The history professor obviously had a part in what happened — more about that later. Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling that if Tami was shocked at the very idea that "thesis" was relevant in the history class, I had not done all I could for her. And not I alone. Preliminary analysis of data from a longitudinal study of three college students by Lucille McCarthy indicates an ambiguous and problematic relationship between their freshman writing course and their writing as sophomores in other courses.

Before we can determine how best to help our students acquire and use focusing skills, we need some idea of how "focus" appears in a variety of disciplines. The record of Tami's writing process in history, as well as data colleagues and I have collected from college students writing in biology and business classes, will offer a "bore hole" sample of the shapes "focus" takes, and the skills needed to achieve it, in courses at various levels and in various disciplines across the curriculum.