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"A LANGUAGE OF ONE'S OWN": A STYLISTIC PEDAGOGY FOR THE DIALOGIC CLASSROOM

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As writing instructors, many of us are familiar with the problem of having to teach in content areas about which we have little knowledge, or perhaps even worse, little interest. No doubt, the restraints imposed by textbook "readers," standard syllabi and course descriptions, as well as WAC-inspired approaches to teaching the research paper, all seriously delimit the range of choices available regarding which topics we explore with our classes. Assuming, then, that most of our graduate and professional training has occurred within the broad confines of the humanities, I suspect that we approach the teaching of, say, Herrick's "Delight in Disorder" with the kind of happy confidence lacking in our pedagogical approaches to cognitive dissonance or transverse waves. Though my characterization may be too general to stand as a truism for a profession as thoroughly "dappled" as our own (Lauer), I am certain that there are those among us for whom the above description is an accurate one.

Now in order to understand this problem, it is necessary to examine the assumptions which inform whatever misgivings composition teachers have about developing a writing pedagogy in, for example, one of the social or natural sciences. Foremost among these is the belief that it is somehow the writing teacher's responsibility to impart knowledge to students about a given topic. In this traditional scheme of things, the writing teacher must possess mastery of the particular content area under discussion, must in fact possess some degree of specialized knowledge which, frankly, many of us do not have. Too often, then, we are likely to find ourselves in the uneasy situation of having to keep "one step ahead" of our students, compelled by a misguided epistemology that says, at the very least, we ought to know what we're talking about.

But, indeed, what we're talking about — or, rather, what we should be talking about — is not simply knowledge, but *ways of knowing*. The distinction is an important one, for if, as we claim, process approaches to the teaching of writing encourage the discovery of knowledge, then the writing classroom must necessarily be a place where *learning how to know* assumes greater importance than *conveying what is known*. Obviously, none of this is meant to disparage the content of existing fields of inquiry, but only to assert that it is neither essential nor especially desirable for writing teachers to possess expertise in a wide range of disciplines, even if such were possible. The traditional model of the classroom teacher who bestows information upon quietly scribbling students is one that is antithetical to the purposes of the writing classroom. Rather, the proper concerns of the writing teacher center upon the relationship between knowledge and language and how best to reveal some part of that relationship to our students.

The pedagogy offered here, then, maintains that the content of any particular knowledge is largely a function of the language in which that content is expressed, and that, further, of the many languages available within a given language, each is representative of an approach to knowledge or "way of knowing." Thus, those students intent on increasing their "word-power" through disciplined vocabulary-building, or those students eagerly perusing a thesaurus in order to find an impressive synonym, are all considerably limited in their understanding of what stylistic choices imply. To be precise, every stylistic choice our students make reflects a consciousness about how something is to be understood, whether that

something be the myth of Icarus, quantum mechanics, or planned obsolescence. Affirming one of our more venerable slogans, then, this pedagogy seeks to return to students "a language of their own," fully realizing, however, that such is possible only through encounters with *the language of the other*. By providing occasions for such encounters, we can help our students develop an awareness of how the plurality of language communities betokens a multiplicity of approaches to knowledge. And in so doing, we also suggest to our students that stylistic choices have more profound implications than simply "finding the right word." However, before discussing the sequence of exercises that I offer here, it will first be useful to examine the theoretical basis from which they derive.

FREIRE, BAKHTIN, AND THE DIALOGIC CLASSROOM

In "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom," Paulo Freire argues that the "value-free" classroom is neither a worthy nor possible educational goal. Pedagogy and the knowledge it seeks to understand are not exclusively subjective or objective phenomena, but rather comprise "a process of orientation in the world," manifested as an "event in which subjectivity and objectivity are united" (206). What this means, among other things, is that all instruction occurs within, and is largely defined by, broader cultural and historical contexts, a world which teachers cannot simply choose to ignore. To posit the "act of knowing" as a "process of orientation in the world" is to posit likewise a classroom wherein knowledge is gained through a shared process of realization of dialogic exploration between teacher and student who, in their mutual endeavor to understand the world, transform that world by virtue of their common desire to know. As Freire points out, such a pedagogy is far removed from the typical "nutritionist" concept of instruction wherein the teacher generously "fills" the minds of undernourished, hungry students with the knowledge she has accumulated through experience and study (207). Such an educator conceives knowledge to be static, one-dimensional, what Freire might term "monologic" in nature and transmission. By contrast, the dialogic educator

is a knowing subject, face to face with other knowing subjects. He can never be a mere memorizer, but a person constantly readjusting his knowledge who calls forth knowledge from his students. For him, education is a pedagogy for knowing. The educator whose approach is mere memorization is anti-dialogical; his act of transmitting knowledge is inalterable. For the educator who experiences the act of knowing with his students, in contrast, dialogue is the sign of the act of knowing. (217-18)

This passage is important not only for its affirmation of knowing as a social activity, but also in its refusal to grant knowledge a fixed, permanent, or absolute ontological status. Rather, it is through dialogue that knowledge is created and revised, and thus the world transformed. But as the term itself suggests, *dialogue* effects such transformations through language, through the word. Thus, Freire observes that when authentic dialogue exists in the classroom, "the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teacher. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (*Pedagogy* 67). Freire warns that dialogue "must not be a situation where some men name on behalf of others" (77), and that teachers who do so, clearly perceive their students to be depositories for information, rather than "critical co-investigators" (68).

For a different perspective on dialogic literacy, Mikhail Bakhtin's studies of the novel reveal how language itself orchestrates the ongoing cultural dialogue represented by the several languages of which it is comprised. The multiplicity of languages within a language — what Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia* — is in fact a characteristic of all languages, especially those which might be traditionally referred to as "national" languages. Thus, Bakhtin notes that "one's own language is never a single language: in it there are always survivals of the past and a potential for other-linguagedness that is more or less sharply defined by the working literary and language consciousness" (66). Heteroglossia is not a linguistic feature that develops through time, but is rather an inherent characteristic of all languages, no matter how uniform or insular they may seem to be.

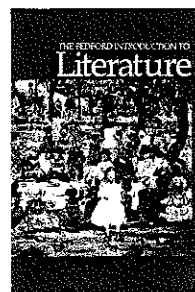
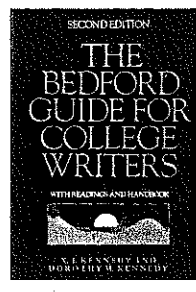
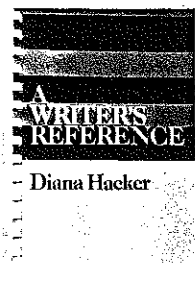
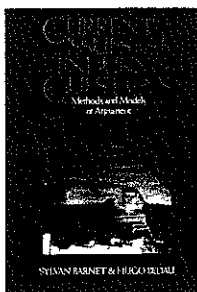
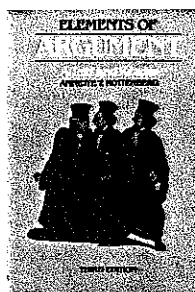
According to Bakhtin, the various languages that comprise heteroglossia represent a kind of cultural "argument," since dialogue itself presupposes some measure of disagreement. Certain of these languages Bakhtin calls "intentional hybrids," languages that derive their distinctive voices from a parodying of the dominant language(s) at large in any given culture at any given time. The relationship between the parodying language and the language parodied is necessarily one of conflict. But the argument between and among languages goes much deeper. Bakhtin claims that

all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meaning, and values. As such, they may all be juxtaposed to one another, contradict one another, and be interrelated dialogically. (292)

Thus, each language of heteroglossia cannot help but to assert its own consciousness, which is to say that within each language, "all words and forms are populated with intentions" (293). Often, of course, these myriad intentions are quite at odds with one another, and the argument that ensues is an explicit one indeed. But more often the conflict is a symbolic one, the representation of competing perspectives, each language voicing its own intentions, its own specific orientation to the world. The individual caught up in this decidedly complex argument will, in fact, have no language of her "own" until such time as she appropriates someone else's words to serve her intentions. Implicit in Bakhtin's thought is the suggestion that authentic literacy is not possible unless the individual confronts "the necessity of having to choose a language," reminding us, however, that doing so is "a difficult and complicated process" (294-5).

Though Bakhtin's central purpose in these studies is to achieve a historical understanding of the novel, and though Freire's pedagogy is more overtly political than I have indicated here, both theorists have much to say about how we might approach the teaching of literacy in our classrooms. In Freire, we find dialogic approaches to teaching to be preferable to more traditional methods that merely aim to "fill" the student with information or facts to be memorized. His premise that knowledge is in constant flux is one that complements his view that knowledge is created, and the world *recreated*, through the dialogic process. Similarly, in Bakhtin, we find a conception of dialogue that hears in language the many voices at large contending for influence in the arena of consciousness. Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia is significant in its assigning of specific perspectives to specific languages, for doing so implies that stylistic choices not only reveal, but ultimately demand, what might be called an epistemological stance. That is, stylistic choices embody *the way we choose to know something* and thus reveal our purposes as learners, knowers, and writers.

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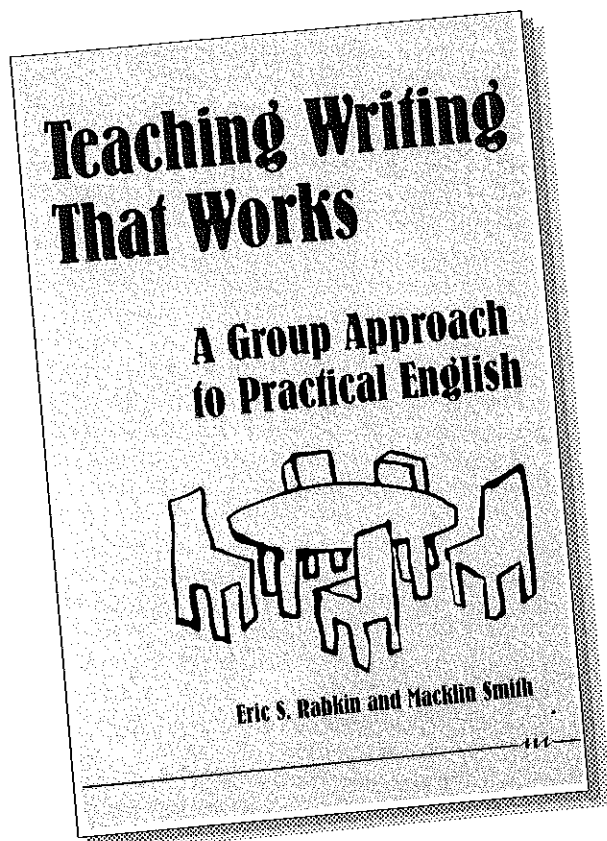
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In the exercises that follow, I have attempted to synthesize the ideas of Freire and Bakhtin into a pedagogy suitable for a writing unit in the natural sciences.

A PEDAGOGY FOR STYLISTIC CHOICE

In recent years, the interest in popular science writing has burgeoned to the degree that such writing may be rightfully said to comprise its own genre. Noted authors such as Stephen Jay Gould, Isaac Asimov, Richard Selzer, Berton Roueche, Lewis Thomas, Roy Selby, Alexander Petrunkevitch, and others have all contributed to the literature of science writing that has emerged over the past three decades. Another science writer deserving note, however, is Oliver Sacks, whose collection of essays, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat* (1987), quickly became a national bestseller. I chose the title essay from this collection as the focal point for a natural sciences unit on the neurological condition known as *agnosia*, or more exactly, *prosopagnosia*.

Before introducing my class to this essay, though, I asked each student to locate one article on prosopagnosia, requiring only that this article be written for a general or popular readership. In addition, I asked each student to find a definition of the same condition, stipulating that such a definition must be taken from a specialized medical encyclopedia or dictionary. The following exercise sequence proceeds from students having already completed their initial research.

EXERCISE SEQUENCE I

- 1) Using both your article and definition, *but quoting from neither*, write a one-page summary description of the condition referred to as prosopagnosia. (Out-of-Class)
- 2) While listening to other members of this class read their individual summaries, take careful notes on each presentation, making sure to write down any information which was not included in *your* summary. (In-Class)
- 3) Drawing upon whatever new knowledge you have acquired from your classmates, revise and expand your original summary to include what you learned from our in-class reading. (Out-of-Class)

This initial sequence of exercises attempts to provide a foundation for much of what is to follow in the remainder of the unit. Recalling Freire, note that the responsibility for acquiring a basic knowledge about this subject is a shared one, resting primarily among class members, not with the teacher. Moreover, by having students revise "old" or incomplete knowledge in order to accommodate "new" or more thorough knowledge, students participate in a process analogous to what actually occurs in the various disciplines themselves. Indeed, one could hardly imagine a better model for the continual need to revise knowledge than that provided by the natural sciences.

Another purpose of this first sequence is to confront the student immediately with the problem of integrating multiple languages within a single text. Although the scope of medical dictionaries and encyclopedias available is likely to encompass a range of languages, I suspect that almost all of these will be decidedly more technical in style than the usual article in a popular or general science magazine. That being so, it is possible to make the student more aware of these multiple languages by requiring him to integrate and summarize two very distinct voices into a third, one that asks him to use his "own" words to distill information from, and mediate between, the published languages he encountered as sources.

After completing this first sequence of exercises, students are then asked to read "The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat." The very title of the article, usually provokes a good deal of interest and curiosity among students, and, as the title suggests, this essay is actually a story of sorts, a narrative case study that relates the author's efforts to understand the strange behaviors of a certain "Dr. P.," a brilliant musician and professor whose particular prosopagnosia leads him into certain "magoo-like" situations at once both tragic and humorous. Like many good short story writers, Sacks artfully manipulates his readers' expectations, although the story he tells is not a fictional one. Unlike the conventional storyteller, Sacks is overtly discursive, as evidenced by his inclusion of a "postscript" wherein he speculates about how Dr. P.'s condition represents a "comic and awful analogy" (20) to Sacks' own profession. To be sure, Sacks' purposes in writing this essay are varied and considerably more complex than what might be found in technical definition or scientific reportage. Yet, how do we know this to be true? Why is this so?

EXERCISE SEQUENCE II

- 1) After reading Sacks' essay, underline those passages that you consider to be *key to understanding* what this article is about. Then, looking back over the passages you selected, write a one-two page summary of Sacks' essay. Conclude your summary with a brief statement explaining *why* you believe Sacks wrote this piece and *for whom* it was intended. (Out-of-Class)
- 2) Of your underlined passages, choose *one* that you would like to have discussed in class. Be prepared to explain to your classmates why you chose this particular selection for discussion. (In-Class)
- 3) Most of the readings in your textbook conclude with a brief questionnaire designed, presumably, to guide you in your understanding of that particular reading. The Sacks article, however, includes no such questionnaire. Imagine, then, that you are charged with the responsibility of helping your classmates grasp the important points of Sacks' article. In your small-groups, devise a questionnaire that will guide them in their efforts to do so. (In-Class)

The first exercise in this sequence aims to challenge those students who equate knowledge with information. Sacks' largely narrative approach in this article poses considerable difficulties for students who perceive their mission to be a fact-finding one. This is not to say that Sacks' article contains no factual information; it most assuredly does. But the information contained in this text is almost entirely subsumed by its pervasive narrative structure. Ideally, then, students will have to confront the question of why Sacks wrote *this article this way*. Although I required students to address the problem of Sacks' intentions in a concluding statement to their summaries, I am rather more hopeful that this question will occur logically as a consequence of having to define exactly what a "key to understanding" this article might be. In any case, the first exercise should prompt class discussion concerning the relationship between Sacks' narrative approach and the intentions embodied in that approach.

Likewise, the next exercise in this sequence is also designed to engender class discussion. But less obviously, it is intended to foster a practical sense of the communal nature of knowing. Even though students were *required* to choose one passage for class discussion, that choice itself is assumed to be based on what the individual student seeks from the class at large. Does she need a point clarified? A question answered? An interpretation confirmed? An argument disputed? Confronting the student with the necessity of having to explain why a particular selection was chosen for group discussion

is one way to explore the diverse motives for social dialogue among learners and knowers.

The final exercise continues to affirm the dialogic method employed by this pedagogy. Rather than having to answer *someone else's questions* at the end of a textbook selection, students instead generate their own heuristic for their own purposes. The attendant shift in perspective is a significant one, for in deciding how best to teach others, they ultimately decide how best to teach themselves. Since each group usually develops some questions not found in any other group's questionnaire, I compile a master study guide of all questions that I distribute to each member of the class. While there is obvious value in addressing these questions through group discussion, there is also considerable value in attempting to identify the kinds of questions each group devised. Likewise, it is useful to explore the *kinds* of questions that might have been asked but, for whatever reasons, were not. In these latter strategies, the intent is to effect what Freire sees as the critical distance necessary for authentic literacy. In Freire's pedagogical theory, asking questions is not always as important as understanding why particular questions are asked.

The concluding sequence of exercises centers upon a research article by Antonio Damasio entitled "Review of Research on Prosopagnosia." Written in the "style of presentation favored by scientific journals" (525), this article causes many students considerable difficulty because of the highly technical language in which it is cast. Nonetheless, Damasio's article is an excellent overview of existing scientific knowledge on the condition of prosopagnosia, or what he terms, "knowledge without awareness" (525).

EXERCISE SEQUENCE III

- 1) Based on your reading of Damasio, identify the major findings of current research on prosopagnosia. In a two-page report, summarize these findings, *using your words only*. (Out-of-Class)
- 2) In your small groups, analyze both the Sacks and Damasio articles for stylistic differences and similarities. Specifically, attempt to identify those passages in Sacks that "sound like" Damasio. Likewise, identify those passages in Damasio that "sound like" Sacks. What do these *authors do* to give themselves identifiable voices? How do those voices relate to their intentions as writers? Why do their respective voices sometimes change within the same article? (In-Class)
- 3) Reread closely the three summaries you have written for this unit. Are there any noticeable changes or differences in the language you used to write your summaries? If so, do these changes or differences correspond in any way to the particular reading upon which the individual summaries were based? How? In what ways? If not, then describe the features of your own style that remain constant. (Out-of-Class)

Throughout the entirety of this unit, I have emphasized summary and paraphrase as media through which students can move in and out of (or back and forth through) the various "languages" encountered in the assigned readings. In a sense, students were required to "translate" each selection back into a language they felt most comfortable or familiar with. The first exercise here continues this strategy, though, like all preceding summary exercises, its ultimate goal is not the student's comfort with his own words, but rather his forced *discomfort* with the words of another. The rationale for this strategy is best explained by Bakhtin himself:

The importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological

consciousness, is enormous. One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse... a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual's consciousness (just as they struggle with one another in surrounding social reality). (348)

Again, through designed encounters with "another's discourse," the student is asked to contend with the heard perspectives he or she confronts in the assigned texts for the unit, to enter into dialogue with other voices that are likely to seem, at first, strange and problematic. Yet, it is only through such a process, however uncomfortable it may be, that the student is eventually able to claim her own voice among the chorus of others. The many summary and paraphrase exercises in this unit attempt to provide occasions for such encounters and build toward a final assignment that allows students the opportunity to voice their own perspectives on their recently-acquired knowledge about prosopagnosia.

The second exercise in this final sequence aims to deepen the students' awareness of stylistic choice by introducing the task of rudimentary stylistic analysis, though not of any traditional sort. That is, rather than have students catalogue tropes and figures, or calculate T-Unit length, or analyze levels of generality, or in any way hope to establish what Stanley Fish calls "an inventory of fixed significances" (84) that supposedly correspond to linguistic features, I ask them instead to trust their (admittedly impressionistic) "reader's ear," to listen for the tonal and inflectional qualities of written language. How is it that a reader hears a voice "behind" the printed word? In what ways do written voices differ from one another? Do writers change voices to suit their varied intentions or purposes? Do multiple voices occur within the same text? Obviously I don't expect any final answers to these questions from my students. That, however, does not invalidate the worth of asking such questions, for in drawing attention to these concerns, we force students to consider an often neglected aspect of their own discourse, namely style.

For this reason, the final exercise requires students to ask many of the same kinds of questions of their own writing. Not only is this one way to resist the tendency to valorize published texts at the expense of student writing, but it is also a way to participate in what Freire calls the "admiration of the object to be known" ("Literacy" 215). Freire observes that "if the act of knowing is a dynamic act... then in order to know, man not only admires the object, but must always be readmiring his former admiration. When we readmire our former admiration... we are simultaneously admiring the act of admiring and the object admired..." (215-16). Applied to a progression of summary writings, this idea demands once again a level of self-consciousness that our students are not likely to have experienced in traditional schooling. To ask of students that they identify the distinct features of their own voice, or to ask them to identify any noticeable changes or differences in that voice, is to ask them to *readmire* their previous admirations of assigned readings. Freire might say that the ability to do so provides the student writer with a method by which to escape the "domination" of another's language, as well as a warrant for the continued and necessary revision of former perceptions and knowledge. To know, in other words, is to have a clear sense of oneself in the active process of knowing.

All of this may seem at a considerable remove from the problem at hand, namely, to encourage the student to develop her own language, or voice, or style. The exercise sequences to this point have been designed to expose students to a myriad of perspectives on the condition of prosopagnosia, and, correspondingly, to a myriad of languages in which that same condition is known. But

none of this is sufficient in itself, to cultivate the opportunity for exercising what might be called a "language of one's own." The word of the other, Bakhtin reminds us, becomes one's own only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Before this, "the word...exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions. It is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (293-4).

The final assignment for this unit, then, attempts to provide the student with an occasion for a purposeful use of acquired knowledge, as well as a context that might allow for the kind of appropriation Bakhtin refers to.

FINAL ASSIGNMENT

This assignment asks you to provide a general overview of the knowledge you have gained about the neurological condition known as prosopagnosia. Your audience is next semester's English 102 class, who, like yourselves, will also explore, research, and discuss the same topic. Your papers should include a minimum of three sources, two of which may be taken from your assigned readings.

My purpose in devising this assignment is, to some extent, a selfish one. Simply put, I hope to receive two or three good papers that might serve as useful introductory material to the unit we have just completed. You might find it helpful to assume that *your* paper will be the first exposure to knowledge about prosopagnosia that next semester's class will receive. You might also find it helpful to think about what kind of paper or article would have been useful to you at the beginning of this unit.

In any case, you will need to make some decisions about the kind of knowledge you wish to convey, and, given the situation outlined above, how best to convey that knowledge to an audience of less-informed peers.

Once more, students are asked to assume a teaching role with regard to their peers, thereby reinforcing the dialogic methodology introduced at the beginning of this unit. Also, students are confronted again with the necessity of *readmiring* their former selves as a way to glean a sense of audience for this assignment. But perhaps most importantly, students are faced with the task of having to choose their own perspective on the kind of knowledge they wish to convey — a choice inextricably bound to whatever understanding they have of their own intentions. Whether the individual student prefers to review current empirical knowledge, or to write an extended definition, or to relate a human interest narrative, or to submit a piece of scientific reportage, such a choice will inevitably reflect that student's judgment regarding the *best way to know this subject given this situation*. And that choice, in turn, cannot help but to express itself in a chosen language, a voice that ideally complements the chosen perspective.

None of this is to say, of course, that having once completed this unit students will possess identifiable voices of their own. Indeed, style, as conceived here, is situationally determined and is thus meaningless when discussed as an abstracted or generalized quality. Still, as writing teachers, we can at least provide rhetorical opportunities for our students to express themselves in language appropriated for their own purposes. In so doing, we convey to our students a belief that stylistic awareness develops through social dialogue, but that the former also, as Richard Lanham observes, makes possible dialogue with ourselves, and thereby enables us to foster a keen self-

consciousness about human perception and knowledge (132).

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INTERNATIONALIZING THE FRESHMAN ENGLISH CURRICULUM

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In "Becoming Literate: One Reader Reading," Dennie Wolf reflected that literacy is:

a mercurial thing, conditioned by time and place. Colonists were literate enough if they could sign their name, or even an X, on loans and deeds. When immigrants arrived in large numbers in the 1800's, educators urged schools to deliver "recitation literacy" to the foreign children who filled the schoolrooms. That literacy was the ability to hold a book and reel off memorized portions of basic American texts, such as the opening paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, a part of the Gettysburg address, or some Bryant or Longfellow. With the coming of World War I, and the prospect of large numbers of men handling new equipment in foreign countries, army testers redefined reading. Suddenly, to the dismay of men used to reading familiar passages, passing the army reading test meant being able to make sense, on the spot, of never-before-seen text. Currently, that kind of "extraction literacy," so revolutionary in 1914, looks meager. Finding out who, what, when, where, or even how simply does not yield the inferences, questions, or ideas we now think of as defining full or "higher" literacy. (1)

In my opinion, this "higher" literacy goes beyond deciphering, or even critical thinking, to knowledge of one's own heritage and history as well as that of other nations. But many educators across the country have found that their students know very little about their own surroundings or the world at large. In fact, the young come to college with such poor backgrounds in history, geography, and the common knowledge once taken for granted by educated individuals that the situation has become a major crisis. Anecdotes of student errors are quoted regularly on campuses and in the press. One of my