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Exploring Voice as Integration: A Direction for Assessing Student Work in Learning Communities with Composition

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Learning communities have been one response to the call for integrative learning in higher education. This paper investigates the assessment of integrative learning in learning communities where a composition course is linked to a general education course and explores the role of voice in students' writing as evidence of integration. We begin by discussing approaches to the teaching of composition, suggesting a theoretically integrative approach, and then turn to the concept of voice, including the ways in which it can be developed in a learning community. We end by discussing possible directions for examining voice in student work that may serve as evidence of integrative learning.

In higher education, there has been a renewed interest in integrative learning. Interpretations and applications of this phenomenon are diverse and complex. In fact, Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings (2004) characterize integrative learning as coming "in many varieties: connecting skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences; applying theory to practice in various settings; utilizing diverse and even contradictory points of view; and, understanding issues and positions contextually" (p.13). The importance of integrative learning as dynamic knowledge practice has been attributed to the vast amounts of information available in our world, the demands of technology and globalization, and the rising need for flexibility and mobility in the workplace (Gardner, 2007; Huber & Hutchings, 2004).

Learning communities have been a primary site for responding to this growing national call. By linking courses in different disciplines,

learning communities potentially afford students integrative learning opportunities as they approach issues from interdisciplinary perspectives. Recent work in developing methods for assessing interdisciplinary learning (Boix-Mansilla, Duraisingh, Wolfe, & Haynes, 2007) looks for evidence that student work is not only grounded in each of the contributing disciplines, but also demonstrates synthesis, e.g., as a learner considers issues and questions and engages in problem solving or "takes information from disparate sources, understands and evaluates that information objectively, and puts it together in ways that make sense" (Gardner, 2007). While this emerging field of assessment-based research on integrative and interdisciplinary learning has been a fruitful area of study, the protocols used to examine student work did not emerge from studies of students' work in community college classrooms, and particularly not from learning communities that include composition courses. For us, a central question growing out of the Washington Center's National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities is what disciplinary grounding in composition looks like, particularly (though not exclusively) in community college learning communities. How do our expectations for student work produced in a learning community that links composition with psychology differ from what we would expect in student work produced in a stand-alone psychology course?

As professors of English composition in a community college interested in interdisciplinary assessment, we wish to explore, in the pages that follow, the question of what counts as evidence of integration in student work produced for learning communities that include a composition class. In particular, we want to pursue the question of what evidence of disciplinary grounding in composition looks like in a piece of student work. To address this foundational question concerning the focus, the logic, the content, the methods, even the boundaries of our discipline, we turn to a related question. Assuming that composition courses aim to introduce students to the discipline of composition, we asked ourselves about the stated student learning objectives for composition courses. We anticipate that by working backward from the learning objectives, we will be able to tease out the nature of the disciplinary grounding we might expect to see in students' work.

Student Learning Objectives for a Composition Course

For those not teaching composition, the answer to the question above might seem obvious—for students to be able to write well. The field of composition has yielded multiple answers—multiple ways

of characterizing "good writing." In fact, Richard Fulkerson (2005) argues that there is no single, agreed upon approach to the teaching of composition, nor to the attendant learning objectives. A central debate that emerged in the 1990s was whether instructional goals ought to center upon personal writing or academic writing (Bartholomae, 1985; Elbow, 1995), and Fulkerson reports that a developing branch of the field—critical/cultural studies—has complicated the nature of this debate. His review of scholarly work in the field of composition since 1990 yielded "three alternative axiologies" (p. 655), that is, theories of value—critical/cultural, expressivist (personal), and rhetorical (academic). Moreover, Fulkerson argues that the rise of critical/cultural studies has transformed the older *academic writing versus personal writing* debate into a debate about *insider versus outsider*. Rhetorical approaches, with an emphasis on academic writing, aim to help students become "successful insiders" in academic discourse communities whereas critical/cultural and expressivist approaches value students' "outsider" status with respect to academic discourse. Rather than inviting learners into the academy through the development of formal writing abilities, the aim of critical/cultural and expressivist approaches is to provide students with tools to stand outside these communities, to "become articulate critical outsiders," or to "come to know themselves" (p. 679).

Students as Insiders versus Students as Outsiders

Fulkerson (2005) claims that rhetorical approaches to composition, focused on helping students become successful insiders in academic settings, are the most widespread nationally. He highlights three distinct emphases within rhetorical approaches: composition as argumentation, genre-based composition (the examination and production of various discourse forms), and composition as an introduction to an academic discourse community (writing that reflects common college-level "rhetorical moves"). Simultaneously, pedagogical emphases within rhetorical approaches are tied to a core set of theories and practices, including a greater stress on writing than on reading, the grounding of classroom activities in a wide range of drafting and revising tasks, and a view of teacher as modeler. In all rhetorical approaches, the centrality of writing for particular situations and audience is underscored.

In contrast to these rhetorical approaches, the primary instructional aim of critical/cultural studies courses is "'liberation' from dominant discourse" (Fulkerson, 2005, p. 660), thereby encouraging students to be critical outsiders of that discourse. Reading takes a central role, with

cultural theories, narratives, and artifacts employed as course "texts," and textual interpretation often occurring around a common theme (e.g., the Vietnam War). A primary intent within a critical/cultural studies approach to composition is empowering learners through an analysis of power imbalances in society, with student writing assessed by "how sophisticated or insightful the teacher finds the interpretation of the relevant artifacts to be" (p. 662). Given an emphasis on cultural interpretation and critique over "improved writing," Fulkerson sees critical/cultural approaches at the periphery of composition studies, noting that "papers are judged in the same way they would be in any department with a 'content' to teach" (p. 662).

Expressivist composition classes are similar to courses in critical/cultural studies in that they provide a rich yet "safe" social setting for students to examine their beliefs and experiences and, in this way, are not intrinsically aimed at helping students become academic insiders. Unlike rhetorical approaches, expressivist approaches are rooted in the worlds of individual learners, valuing writers' "imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development" as well as the ways "that development influences individual consciousness and social behavior" (Burnham, 2001, as cited in Fulkerson, 2005, p. 667). Kay Halasek (1999) claims the goal of expressivism involves students finding their center of writing, that is, becoming better able to tap into and express their beliefs, both to others and to themselves.

Furthermore, according to Christopher Burnham (2001), expressivism champions dissensus, or differences in opinion, as it emerges within a social context, echoing the outsider perspective of the critical/cultural studies approach. Burnham notes that "Dissensus concedes the power of groups and culture to shape individuals, but maintains the possibility of individual agency. Expressivism shares this belief and purpose. The proof of dissensus . . . is voice, the individual identity of the writer working in community" (p. 23). As such, voice—equated in expressivism with ethos or writer presence—serves as a centerpiece of the expressivist classroom. Activities such as freewriting, reflective writing, and small group discussion are used as strategies for fostering learners' processes of "coming-to-voice." This notion of voice as "writer presence" is called for across text types, including research-based pieces, and "whether explicit, implicit, or absent" serves as a central criterion for assessment (p. 19).

Although Fulkerson (2005) presents the insider/outsider debate as a dichotomy in the field of composition studies, we see the possibility of adopting an integrative approach to the teaching of writing. From the perspective of practice, as Fulkerson's review makes clear, lines defining

different approaches to teaching composition cannot be clearly drawn. Adherents to the various approaches described typically have views that diverge, overlap, and dovetail about matters of practice, including the roles of teacher, learner, text, task, course content, goals, plus the relationships among them. Moreover, in line with Fulkerson's argument, we think that two perspectives—writing as a process and knowledge as dialogically constructed—undergird the full range of current approaches to composition studies.

A Theoretically Integrated Approach: The Heteroglossic Classroom

Taking a Bakhtinian perspective, Halasek (1999) argues against viewing learners and their discourses through binary lens such as "insider" versus "outsider," or "home" versus "academic" language. Instead, calling for classrooms that honor heteroglossia, she advocates that the work of composition classrooms embrace discursive tensions and honor linguistic diversity. For Bakhtin, speakers do not speak alone, but carry with them the histories of those who have spoken before them and the anticipated responses of those they are currently speaking to. In Bakhtin's view, the primary unit of communication is the utterance (spoken or written). An utterance is "*dialogic* [italics added] along three planes: it uses and responds to past utterances, it is oriented to the immediate context of the situation, and it is addressed to future utterances and situations" (Prior, 2001, p. 59). In this way, utterances are heteroglossic, reflecting a "matrix of forces," including social and historical ones, that imbue our words and give them meaning (Emerson & Holquist, 1981, p. 428).

According to Halasek (1999), college writing classrooms are naturally heteroglossic spaces, "site[s] of lived and immediate response, full of addresses and answers, and marked by a certain restlessness, even a discomfort, over meaning" (p. 7). An integrated theoretical approach to the teaching of composition recognizes, and celebrates, these heteroglossic ambiguities and tensions; as Halasek writes:

> Basic writers . . . live precarious educational existences on the border between competing worlds of their home cultures and the foreign discourses of academia. Such a multicultural frontier provides every teacher of first-year writing a rich and unique landscape to survey. The student's essay is a subversive, centripetal text—a text of dissonance and harmony, rebellion and accommodation, of rejection and acceptance. The voices that infuse that essay cannot be extracted from it or from its writer without severing the elemental characteristics of linguistic and cultural identity. (p. 43)

By pointing to the historical, political, and cultural dimensions present in all utterances, Halasek (1999) advocates an approach focused on giving composition students new linguistic and cognitive tools, thereby granting them opportunities to "make conscious choices" about the language they employ in a variety of rhetorical situations (p. 34). Doing so calls for an integrative approach to the teaching of writing, an approach whereby a teacher encourages a student to "interanimat[e] one's own words and discourses with those already in use" (p. 172).

Similarly, arguing that students' personal or expressive language can mediate their acquisition of more formal, academic discourse, Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk's (2006) work in the composition classroom reflects such an integrative approach. Before requiring her students to take on the academic essay, Mlynarczyk asks them to track responses to their readings informally, in journals. In this way, Mlynarczyk is providing a place and function for personal language. While this kind of freewriting activity might be associated with an expressivist approach, Mlynarczyk points out that the central text in her classroom is not students' own writing, but rather the texts that she asks students to write about. She finds, however, that students' use of expressive language in response to these texts—language that, according to Britton (1970), is "close to the self"--serves to deepen their ideas, providing a bridge to the types of writing assignments typically favored in rhetorical composition approaches. In describing the work of one of her students, Roberto, Mlynarczyk provides a description of heteroglossia in action; she writes, "the freewheeling engagement with texts and ideas that Roberto practiced in his journal serves to broaden the academic conversation, bringing other voices into the dialogue" (p. 22).

Learning Communities: Supporting a Theoretically Integrative Approach in Composition

The composition classrooms described above have been shown not to treat writing students as either insiders or outsiders of academic discourse communities, but rather to build upon the languages students already speak, integrating aspects of various composition approaches to extend learners' linguistic resources and choices across texts and contexts. Given that integrative approaches are possible, why would instructors who see value across the various approaches feel the need to choose from among them? The only significant choice we see in terms of adopting an integrative approach is one for focus as measured by time. For example, Fulkerson (2005) shores up a bias against critical/cultural studies composition courses by arguing that such courses, focused as they are on

"reading, analyzing, and discussing the texts upon which the course rests are unlikely to leave room for any actual teaching of writing" (p. 665).

Learning communities, by their nature, support a theoretically integrated approach to composition in three key ways. First, they provide a rich interactive setting to support the social nature of writing and learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Second, since reading, writing, and discussion are distributed over at least two courses, students have more time to critically explore issues, themes, texts, and topics—interweaving language they already know with new disciplinary language. This contribution of more time is not trivial. As David C. Berliner notes (1991), time as a variable in a model of learning (Carroll, 1963) deserves our attention, and, as Lee Shulman (2007) argues, when we attempt to measure student success, our mistake is in "treating time as fixed and success as variable" instead of the other way around.

Finally, in a learning community where composition is paired with a non-composition, general education course, the latter can provide themes, topics, issues, and texts upon which the work of reading, writing, and discussion are based. And if such work is galvanized by a public issue (Lardner & Malnarich, 2007, 2008), the general education course can provide a critical disciplinary perspective on real-world problems. The contribution then, of an integrative composition course, is to guide and support students as they—grounded in what they know—read, write, and speak their way toward conscious participation in new discourse communities.

Evidence of Integrative Learning in Learning Communities

Learners' transformations from novice to conscious participants in the general education discipline is a central shared student learning objective in a learning community that pairs composition with a general education course. We argue that another way to describe this critical learning objective is as the development of voice.

Voice in Student Writing

We often talk of good writing as writing that has voice. If all words in our own writing reflect the "tones and echoes" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 88) of utterances put forth by others, what does it mean for a piece of writing to be judged as having voice from a socio-historical perspective? If the internalization of new knowledge is, in fact, a process (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), then as students write within a discipline, they may be internalizing others' expert voices from that discipline and gradually coming to own

their words. It is this ownership, this *population* of disciplinary ideas with a learner's *own intentions* that we might recognize as voice.

Viewed this way, we see the potential of composition courses linked with general education courses in learning community settings to help learners develop voice in their writing. With all approaches to composition sharing a belief in writing as a process (Fulkerson, 2005), students in composition classes have opportunities to step back from a piece of writing and reflect on it—in collaboration with teachers, peers, or by themselves. In fostering dialogues between readers and writers, composition courses may help learners write with voice as they engage with a disciplinary topic and an audience over time and respond to others' words over multiple drafts.

Thus, if we think about *learning to write* as the result of *writing to learn*, or the sense making that Paul A. Prior (2001) discusses, we should see the development of learners' voices as they draft papers on disciplinary issues in composition courses. Learners may begin to write solely with language that is "close to the self." However, through engaging in the composing process in the presence of expert members of new discourse communities, students may come to appropriate the voices of these communities and, through writing, gradually make them their own.

Assessing Voice

In assessing student work in a learning community with composition we ask: How might learners' voices—that is, their demonstrated ownership of disciplinary voices—become manifested through the writing process? A number of researchers examining the concept of voice from a socio-historical perspective point us in a direction for how this question might be answered (Brodkey & Henry, 1992; Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Palacas, 1994; Prior, 1998, 2001; Wertsch, 1991).

James V. Wertsch (1991), drawing from Bakhtin's work, poses the question "Who is doing the talking?" to illustrate how a socio-historical understanding of voice might be applied to a text. Examining a George Bush presidential nomination acceptance speech, he notes that a first reading might answer this question as George Bush himself. But a closer analysis sheds light on the "other concrete speaking consciousnesses" beyond the speaker that may be at work, noting, for example, the likely influence of speechwriters in such a way that "the end product is one in which the informed ear can hear a polyphony of voices" (p. 64). Prior (2001) makes a similar observation in his discussion of student writing in graduate programs. Describing his research as uncovering a "direct intermingling of voices" (p. 67) in student work, Prior (2001) cites an example of a learner

incorporating the numerous textual revisions proposed by her professor in an earlier draft—105 out of the 106 words the teacher had written, a "tacit co-composing of text" (p. 67). Brodkey and Henry (1992) looked at the writing of an architecture student as it developed from the responses of his professor and a teaching assistant, finding, and tracking, six voices in the work—including those of the composition teacher and the rhetoric of architecture. Studying the words selected by students in final drafts, and looking backward at earlier drafts to trace how these words changed over time through students' participation in their composition and general education courses, may uncover how learners are "positioning . . . and being positioned as part of a process of disciplinary enculturation" (Prior, 2001, p. 62), choosing which disciplinary voices to take on as their own.

Citing Valentin Voloshinov (1973), Wertsch (1991) also notes that a particular phenomenon of interest to Bakhtin is reported speech, whereby "one voice (the 'reporting voice') reports the utterance of another (the 'reported voice')" (p. 80), a practice that also speaks to the written work of college courses across multiple disciplines. In our own informal observations as composition teachers, we find that as students delve into disciplinary texts to inform their writing, they often begin, in their earliest drafts, by heavily quoting text as a way of reporting what they have read. As student writers come to have a better grasp of the ideas they are grappling with, they may continue to report. However, they may start to step back from quoting and instead paraphrase, drawing bits and pieces of the language of the text (Ivanic, 1998) mingled with their own to approximate that of the text. In this "intermingling" of voices, students make a number of linguistic choices that reflect their views and understanding of the material. While students, even in the act of quoting, position themselves in relation to disciplinary texts in the way they introduce the quoted material and in their choice of material to quote, *how* they use other's words in their writing may serve to uncover their process of internalizing new disciplinary material—how deeply they choose to "infiltrate" (Voloshinov, 1973, as cited in Wertsch, 1991, p. 81) another's voice with their own.

As students take increasing ownership of disciplinary texts, they move beyond reporting to reflecting, discussing, and evaluating—connecting others' ideas and experiences to their own. In this process, they no longer depend on quotations and paraphrases to serve as the primary content of their papers, but use these instead to advance their own positions. Drawing from Bakhtin's heteroglossic view of voice, Arthur L. Palacas (1994) identifies two aspects of voice that demonstrate how writers express both "factually presented truths" and "evaluations of" these truths, arguing that shifts from factive to reflective voices are often

signaled by parentheticals such as "I think" and "I disagree," which can take an evaluative stance. In this way, writers are able to draw connections between utterances and present "a sense of self-consciousness" (p. 126). Studying how students linguistically move between factive and reflective worlds in their compositions might be a mechanism for uncovering how their use of multiple voices serves to construct and support their disciplinary arguments.

We have suggested some ways to examine how voice might be assessed in pieces of student writing in learning communities with composition courses. With Wertsch's (1991) Bakhtinian question: "Who is doing the talking?" guiding the discussion, we have proposed that students' gradual ownership of new disciplinary material might be revealed in their writing process as they draft compositions and respond to their own words, the words of peers, and such disciplinary experts as authors and professors. We have also suggested that specific linguistic phenomena, including paraphrases, reported speech, and parentheticals, might be fruitful areas of investigation, uncovering how students integrate their own voices with those of others. Drawing from this review, the final section below will revisit questions posed in our introduction, and point our exploratory answers in the direction of future empirical research.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper, we raised two questions: (1) What, besides the form of student work (i.e., a piece of writing) counts as evidence that the work is grounded in the discipline of composition? and (2) How do our expectations for student work produced in a learning community that links composition with a general education course differ from those we would have for student work produced in a stand-alone general education course?

We see the answer to both questions in terms of the development of voice as defined in socio-historical terms. Of course voice, defined here as a students' incorporation of other disciplinary voices into their own, can be present in student writing for stand-alone general education courses. However, we see the potential role of composition courses as providing, through the activity of process writing, opportunities for student voice to develop in richer and more intentional ways as students take gradual ownership of new disciplinary material through dialogue and drafting.

In a learning community that pairs a general education course with composition, students benefit from extended time to appropriate the concepts and discourse of the general education discipline through focused

attention on the development of voice. For community college students in particular, time to develop voice is crucial—allowing students to make conscious choices between different types of discourses and employ new tools for expressing themselves.

In this paper, we have explored the idea that voice, understood as simultaneously personal and social, may point to integrative learning in student work for learning communities involving composition courses. We have also argued that voice may be developed in an integrative composition course as learners dialogue about new disciplinary content with teachers, learners, and themselves through the drafting of process writing. Finally, we have considered some possible ways to view student work in light of a socio-historical view of voice and have suggested that the development of voice may be tracked and assessed through the choices students make as they revise their work in collaboration with others. A future research project entails our collection and analysis of student work in linked composition and general education courses to inductively explore how, through drafting, their voices layer with those of others, how these voices might change and interweave over time, and how students use linguistic devices to express their growing internalization of new, interdisciplinary knowledge.

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