Distanced and refined selves: educational tensions in writing with the power of knowledge

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We often look on the rise of disciplines and professions with some suspicion as they are rightfully seen as the site of the aggregation of power – power granted by the importance of knowledge in contemporary society, which is now being regularly designated as an information society (Bazerman forthcoming; Dizard 1982). We now have many historical, sociological and rhetorical accounts of how that power was aggregated and maintained within bounded disciplinary spaces (for example Bazerman 1999; Latour and Woolgar 1979; Shapin 1982, 1994), how institutions of knowledge grew and gained influence (Atkinson 1999; Hall 1984; Jacob 1988; Merton 1973; Morrell and Thackray 1981; Shapin and Schaffer 1985), how decisions became matters for experts (Porter 1995), how authority was constructed for those beyond (Gieryn 1999), how negotiations, cooperations and alliances were created with other powerful disciplines and social actors (Latour 1987; van Nostrand 1997) and how public issues became re-framed to incorporate or exclude various forms of disciplinary and professional knowledge (Myers 1990; Nelkin 1979, 1987; Rudwick 1985). Some of these studies take a highly sceptical view of these powerful formations (Barnes and Shapin 1979; Bijker *et al.* 1987). Others see that the knowledge developed within disciplines warrants the strong influence disciplines and professions maintain over their own conduct and over other domains which depend on their knowledge (Abbott 1988; Gregory and Miller 1998). And many take the middle ground, seeing inappropriately self-interested use of the power of knowledge, and the need for decision making to include interests and knowledge that extend beyond the bounds of the professions. Consider, for example, the history of environmental concern – where different sciences (including chemistry, ecology, biology and demography), government regulators, lawyers, corporations, economists, activists and community groups have all taken complex and shifting roles.

Similarly, some recognise great benefits in the knowledge that disciplines and professions produce and exercise (Heilbron 1979; Holton 1986). Others, while appreciating the knowledge, see it rapidly diffusing throughout society and see the need for all citizens to have a greater share in how the knowledge is used (Commoner 1966; Sclove 1995). And still others remain sceptical about the benefits, and call for Thoreauvian withdrawal (Winner 1977) – although Thoreau himself became a leading naturalist of his time (Thoreau 1980).

But no matter what one may believe about the legitimacy and complexity, openness or closedness of disciplinary and professional power – it is hard to deny that there is power in professions and disciplines. Further, forms of disciplinary expertise have become increasingly elaborate, requiring longer entry times and greater training. By and large disciplines are not games for beginners, though in new fields sometimes individuals can move very rapidly in non-institutional ways – think of the archetypal teenage computer programmer. Nonetheless, the rise of disciplinary and professional power can be seen as coincident with the growth of university education.

No matter how much we appreciate changes brought about by knowledge/power formations, we are caught in tensions between the democratic distrust of oligarchic authority and the aggregation of power in institutions, even if powerful institutions and elites are formed around something so valued as knowledge. In prior times church and royalty were also taken as the sites of true knowledge and as the sites of institutional power. Nonetheless, democratic revolutions have precisely served to limit the power of each and return degrees of judgement and choice to individuals and voluntary alliances. Are we now to allow institutional power and oligarchy to be reaggregated around disciplinary knowledge and professional expertise? This issue has been at the forefront of the public agenda at least since the introduction of nuclear weapons (Carson 1962; Commoner 1966; Nelkin 1979), and has precursors in earlier debates over technocratic bureaucracy (Layton 1986). The recent development of information technologies has only heightened the tensions, as these technologies provide wider ranges of ever more sophisticated information and communicative means, at the same time as they strengthen some forms of professional and technical authority (Yates and van Maanen 2001). Power and wealth is aggregating within new professions. With these information technologies, our daily choices are both expanding and ever more caught up within organised structures of knowledge and expertise

(Abbate 1999; Berners-Lee 1999, Bowker and Star 1999). We can fly most anywhere in the world we want on short notice – but only through the support and engagement of large professional and corporate information systems from such fields as economics, international law, aerospace engineering, flight professionals, air control and marketing. relying on

We are rightly anxious lest sciences and other professions become presbyter or magistrate or police force, and yet some institutional arrangements seem necessary to maintain knowledge production and use. People must be allowed to specialise, to communicate with others of like specialisation, to be supported in their learning and to be recognised as having some authority in their specialisation. Education sits precisely on this tension point: schooling makes knowledge democratically available at the same time as it prepares individuals to pursue careers of specialised authority and knowledge. In higher education, in particular, there is a direct meeting of the knowledge elites with large numbers of people who will carry out powerful roles in the community (Collins 1979). The university provides students with the means and motives to become members of one or another elite. Even the most democratic and egalitarian universities are about access to power.

Learning academic writing sits even more at this tension point between power and democracy, for learning academic writing entails learning to wield tools of symbolic power for immediate rhetorical purposes. What kind of authority, what purposes, what kind of reliance on special knowledge, and what kind of public accountability will be realised in each text we write? Professors in each discipline are evaluating how powerfully their students in their classes are writing within the powerful discourses of their fields (Schwegler and Shamoon 1991). Students are rewarded, and we hope supported and guided, in learning to make statements that are regarded as warrantable and consequential in each area. The professors in these disciplines would not say they are creating arbitrary hoops and distinctions for the general value of discipline, for they believe each of their disciplines provides consequential ways of talking about the world (Walvoord 1997; Walvoord and McCarthy 1990). They believe that the power of their disciplines can only be enacted and harnessed through writing in the ways developed and made accountable in the discipline. If students want the power of their discipline, they have to develop the appropriate ways of expressing and using the knowledge. Students need to learn to speak with voices recognisable as legitimate, warrantable and powerful within the disciplines and professions.

In writing we usually talk about this issue as one of voice, and then treat it as though it were an individual attribute, the way we think of distinctiveness of voice in creative writing (Elbow 1973). We consider it perhaps as something to be found unitarily inside the person needing to be expressed, or perhaps as an external accomplishment of general personality development, or perhaps as even a fragmented response to the multiplicity of the postmodern world (Faigley 1992). In all these ways voice is often perceived as something opposed to disciplines and professions that seem to suppress voice. But when viewed through the lens I offer here, voice can be seen as forming within engagements with the various forums life offers. Voice is developed in learning to speak within ways of being. Powerful voice is gained by learning to speak consequentially within the forums of power. Of course as writers learn to engage with these powerful discourses, their voices change, no matter how much of their old accents they carry with them.

This socio-political tension of developing professional voice also has personal cognitive correlates. The gaining of knowledge transforms the individual's perceptions, choices, affective structure and modes of relationship. As students move into their majors and as they move into the independence of life, their ways of thinking, perceiving and feeling change – even if they become alienated, disengaged or distrustful of the knowledge practices they are learning (Chiseri-Strater 1991; Zamel and Spack 1998). Our students graduate on their ways to becoming chemists, accountants, psychologists, managers, lawyers, novelists or professors – either by entering those lines of work or making decisions to enter further specialised professional training. Seniors already take on the distinctive thought, behaviour and dress of their anticipated professional role, whether engineers or journalists or politicians or actors (Freedman 1993; Freedman *et al.* 1994; Winsor 1996). Many educational theorists and psychologists have talked about the development of the self in relation to modes of engagements with others, the language that mediates those engagements, and the perception of one's own role in that participation – 20th-century social scientists like George Herbert Mead, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey and Harry Stack Sullivan, as well as 18th-century moral philosophers like David Hume, Adam Smith, George Campbell and Hugh Blair.

Yet these transformations that accompany intellectual growth, analytical skill, professionalisation, and the wisdom of learning, also seem to remove us from the most immediate forms of easily recognised human commonality.

Refinement is traditionally a class marker, and much of education historically is associated with producing class distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Some of those class markers we now see as arbitrary, simply reproducing cultural values that reinforce the hold of dominant classes with little value to the rest of society in return (Aronowitz 1988; Foucault 1970, 1980), though medieval clerics and colonial bureaucrats may have given very different accounts of the value of their refined practices and personal development. As long as we hold to some social value for our current set of knowledge practices – as most of us would at least in part – then we set the conditions for classes of people who gain specialised access to these practices. Dedication to the power of learning seems inevitably to create the refined *habitus* of lawyers, mathematicians, litterateurs, engineers (Bourdieu 1990). We suspect these personal refinements may make us forget who we are and our common cause with others. The Richard Rodriguez (1981) story about ambivalence over leaving one's community behind to enter the professional classes is not just one of the struggles of poor Chicano boys. Nor even just the struggles of ethnic identity. Nor even of class loyalty. Even the children of the upper classes become distinguished, culturally and intellectually, from their families as they proceed down particular paths of professionalisation. The pace of professional refinement is now so rapid and so transformed by new technology that professional education is in many fields quite different than it was a generation ago. Even children who follow the professions of their parents may be entering new worlds.

We suspect refinement as elitism. We suspect these refinements may become the vehicles of self-aggrandisement and contempt for others. And again education and particularly learning academic writing sits exactly at the tension point, for it is in our becoming academically articulate that we learn to present our refined selves and commit ourselves to refined perceptions and thought. We learn to use big and unusual words, and we learn to believe them, for we wrote them.

As teachers of academic writing we are caught in the tension between helping students express their thoughts and bringing them into new ways of thinking found within the academy. If we ask them to write from just where they are, we do not ask them to engage the new worlds of powerful knowledge around them. We may even be creating a safe haven for them to reject or deny these new challenging worlds they are coming in contact with. If, on the other hand, we ask them to behave too professionally prematurely, the authority of the disciplinary discourses may wash over and obliterate their ability as individuals to engage with and grow into disciplinary possibilities. We may put them into positions too distant from their current selves for them to make sense of. In both extremes we deny the students the power of the discourses the university offers. It is an important part of our challenge as teachers of academic writing to find the positions of learning and engagement that will allow our students to grow into the power of transforming voices.

For our students, we see these tensions in their struggles to adopt the discourse of their fields, in their sense of discomfort or estrangement or artifice. But if we support the right opportunities and create the space for students to work through the tensions of their discursive transformation, we can witness their integration of knowledges and selves, and their development of complex discursive resources and presentations.

Writing Across the Curriculum and other forms of academic writing draw us into such issues as the emergence of student identities, the meanings and forms of thought students develop and the fractures of power that constantly remake the worlds we live in (Herrington and Curtis 2000). We need to consider where discursive powers come from, what those powers are good for and how they may be used and abused. Teaching academic writing draws us into reflection on the power and ethics of professional being. It is hardly surprising, then, that in the field of the teaching of writing, academic and disciplinary writing is controversial along just these lines.

The root of these tensions is in the ways in which literacy has historically allowed us to gain distance on the world we describe and project, to view the world as more of an object, to free our relationships to an extent of the pressures of face-to-face amity and hostility. These tensions have grown as literacy has facilitated broader communities of inquiry with wider nets of available information, institutions of specialisation, and the reorganisation of daily life on the basis of specialised knowledge. These tensions then have pervaded our very identities – as literacy has helped form communally sharable spaces of personal contemplation and reflection, large publicly available archives that become the basis for cultural knowledge, and social authority and role based on our specialised knowledge. By sorting through our ambivalences about the power of knowledge and academic writing, we can sharpen our sense of social and personal purposes in academic writing. We may also contemplate the consequences of information technologies for proliferating specialised knowledge and its democratic availability. At the very least, we can recognise where our discomfort comes from, as we are caught within the dilemmas of the power of knowledge.