Some Theoretical Speculations on the Advanced Composition Curriculum

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Recently in CCC ("Four Philosophies of Composition," 30 [1979]. 343-348) I argued that the four-part perspective which M.H. Abrams brought to literary studies in The Mirror and the Lamp can be used to highlight a similar structure underlying composition and its teaching. Studying the history of literary theory, Abrams noted that at various times one of the four elements in any artistic transaction (artist, audience, work, universe) dominated, and the dominance created a coherent perspective about what literature was for, how it should be produced, and when it was successful.

Changing Abram's terminology somewhat, I asserted that much controversy within the discipline of composition is clarified if one accepts the existence of a parallel group of four discourse theories-- theories often held unconsciously and sometimes even contradictorily. The following table makes the terminology clear:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element Emphasized</th>
<th>Literary Theory</th>
<th>Discourse Theory</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>[Abrams]</td>
<td>Expressive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reader</td>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Rhetorical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>Formalist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Universe</td>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Mimetic</td>
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These are four theories of discourse, that is, of what discourse as a whole is for and therefore of how it is to be judged, not (I want to emphasize) four types of discourse. Pieces of writing can not usefully be classified according to this scheme, and single pieces of writing can usefully be examined from several perspectives. But most of us tend to see and judge all discourse primarily from one of these perspectives. Doing so without being aware of alternate theories causes both confusion and frustration.

In three ways Abrams's model might apply directly to advanced composition. First, as a friend of mine is fond of saying, "The model has curricular implications." Freshman composition is either a survey of composition or a simplified practical course for everyone; but advanced composition, like advanced work in any discipline, allows for increased selectivity and specialization. Hence, at the advanced level, we might offer a variety of more probing composition courses, perhaps one based on each of the four theories of discourse. Students could then be required to take certain courses or allowed to select the one or ones best fitted to their personal or professional needs.

We would thus have (at least) one course in Advanced Self-Expression. Professional writing especially reflecting an expressive theory, such as the essays of James Baldwin, George Orwell, and Joan Didion could be studied as models. Techniques of self-discovery at the prewriting stage would also be emphasized; free writing and journals would be crucial, and writing would be judged for such qualities as depth of insight, honesty, and openness. Since such writing is not primarily done for readers, reader-effectiveness might be regarded as unimportant, as would most matters of form. So-called "creative" writing would be appropriate, but not demanded.

We would have yet another course in which audience analysis and adaptation
was crucial, Advanced Rhetoric. Here students would study theories of persuasion and methods of appealing to various audiences, including probably the findings of Madison Avenue. As models they might examine instances of conspicuously successful persuasion in public politics. They might even study the effective use of fallacies and doublespeak. Their writing would probably be submitted to some real audience for evaluative response as well as to mock audiences composed of students in class.

And we could have one or more advanced composition courses emphasizing form. Students might well learn to write specified sentence patterns, such as cumulative sentences, or the curt style, or colloquial versus formal styles. Close imitation might be a major activity. Or perhaps only one manuscript form judged crucial for these students would be emphasized, such as laboratory report form, or technical proposal form, or grant writing form, or letter writing form. The goal of the course and the measure of student success would be mastery of the form or forms emphasized. We already have a few courses in this category: some courses in the form of business writing and some in the forms of fiction or drama. Many departments also have an advanced course in grammatical form, but it is not usually a composition course at all. And I teach a course in advanced composition for pre-law students which emphasizes certain forms of reasoning used by lawyers and a form of presentation known as IRAC, an acronym referring to a paragraph structure that moves from Issue, to Rule, to Application, to Conclusion.

Finally we could have a course in Advanced Investigative Writing, a course that would emphasize the truth of the writing to reality. Research and investigation would be stressed, including accurate observation, methods of interviewing, ways of gathering data via questionnaires, using the library, validity in inference, etc. From the other direction, the ways that language can distort or conceal reality would be studied, but in this case such linguistic distortion becomes a defect--even if likely to appeal to an audience. Journalistic accuracy, including perhaps comparisons among different accounts of the same news event, would certainly be relevant. Judging the quality of the student writing in such a course would be a practical difficulty, though the abstract standard of judgment is clear. Specialists in content areas might be asked to rate the papers for reliability.

Such theorizing highlights one problem with almost all composition courses, especially advanced ones: there is now far too much relevant, even crucial, material to cover. Hence, given the present status of composition in the advanced curriculum, selection is necessary. But often the selection is erratic as we choose key notions from several approaches and mix them together.

Few universities have the freedom or the resources to allow such curricular diversity in practice. If they did, the English major would probably be in the unenviable position of having to take four or five advanced composition courses. The same friend who pointed out to me that these four discourse theories could have curricular implications is one of the new breed of English teachers who actually consider themselves primarily as composition teachers; he sees nothing bizarre in the suggestions made above. He says, “We now expect the English major to know English literature, American literature, literary genres, literary theory, as well as specialized material such as Shakespeare. And we expect such a major to take a variety of advanced courses in order to gain this knowledge. Why shouldn’t we demand from our students equal breadth in composition?”

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The second, and more realistic, way to make use of this four-part model of discourse theory in advanced composition is to attempt to present and make use of all four perspectives within the same course. Here instead of making the advanced course more specialized, we make it more broadly synthetic. At this level students should be ready to integrate information into a coherent and comprehensive picture, and seeing composition from these four perspectives can provide such a synthesis.

Again the course could be built in several ways. In addition to presenting the theories explicitly, one could devote sections of the course to different discourse theories. Within each unit the writing would be evaluated primarily from the perspective of that unit. And each assignment would include specifications of characteristics the paper would need in order to be rated successful, a pedagogical application of primary trait scoring. Each student would thus experience each approach to composition and evaluation, perhaps even writing on the same topic from several perspectives. Alternately, after the theories are explained, on a given assignment the students might choose from which perspective they want to approach the writing. This would be a more explicit version of what we sometimes claim to do-- judge the text in terms of its own purpose as far as it can be determined.

Especially in the cases in which advanced composition students are English majors who are likely soon to be teaching in the public schools, it is terribly important that they be introduced to this rounded view of composition-- for they are likely to assume that composition is (and will be for their students) whatever their previous courses' biases have been, usually a combination of formal correctness and exposition for an artificial audience. Real writing is much broader than that, and classroom approaches to writing, especially at the advanced level, need to be also. Future public school teachers need as wide a variety of approaches, holdings in a bag of tricks as it were, as possible. Approaching composition through these four theories of discourse could help to broaden perspective, and put some of the less common tricks into the bag.

A practical problem for any teacher interested in such a synthetic approach is that almost every textbook has its own theoretical orientation to what good writing "really" is. For general studies composition we choose texts from the utilitarian perspective by trying to decide which approach is best for the greatest number of our students. So one school uses a Macrorie-Elbow-Stewart approach emphasizing self-discovery and self-expression. Another assumes form is most important for most college students (especially when the cry is back to basics) and chooses a solid handbook. Another, assuming reader impact matters most, selects a classical rhetoric such as Corbett or Weaver, or a modernized version such as McCrimmon or Adelstein and Pival's The Writing Commitment. And still another institution assumes that learning to think well about reality is most crucial and chooses either a thematic reader with provocative essays (one used to be called Contemporary Controversy, another The Sense of the Seventies) or a text emphasizing effective thinking such as Moss's Composing by Logic, or Kytle's Clear Thinking for Composition. In fact a recent survey of advanced composition courses by Mike Hogan indicates that just such a diversity of texts as those listed is also used in advanced composition courses across the country.

As far as I know, no text presents a full spectrum of these theories. Kinneavy's valuable Theory of Discourse asserts the existence of four types of writing, each
based on emphasizing one element of the four, but it could never work as a
writing text. So any advanced composition teachers seeking to follow my
suggestions in one course would need either to create his or her own materials or
to select a variety of apparently contradictory texts and hope somehow to mix
olives with strawberries in a way that works.

A third application: at the very least the model of four theories of discourse can
help us clarify and be consistent about what we are doing even within current
curricular outlines especially about evaluation. One of the model's most im-
portant implications is that it can help us recognize our philosophical biases in
evaluating prose. At any level it is unfair to lead students to think their writing
will be judged from one perspective when in fact the teacher, consciously or not,
has a predisposition that good writing is really writing which suits another
discourse theory.

I recall a friend recently given her first advanced composition course. Like
most of our sections, it consisted primarily of English majors, the majority
planning to teach at either secondary or college levels. She began by asking that
they seriously probe their past experiences with composition classes and write a
thoughtful essay on what they had learned and how they had been treated. Upon
receiving the papers, she was shocked: "These students aren't ready for advanced
composition. They can't write decent sentences yet!" Such a comment reveals a
world of assumptions about what is important to good prose. It especially reveals
a theoretical conflict on the teacher's part. My friend's classroom behavior had
implied that what was to be "advanced" on this assignment was the depth of
insight shown in the writing, normally a component of an expressive value
theory. But she had assumed-- without apparently making it known-- that an
"advanced" command of sentences was also requisite. That is, she actually had in
mind as a basic criterion of good writing that her students would write well-
formed ("decent") sentences. In her grading, this formalist perspective
dominated. Small wonder that honors students broke into tears of frustration
when their papers were returned with D's and F's. This probably could have been
avoided had the teacher first thought out her own criteria for evaluation and then
followed the suggestion made above that writing assignments include the
standards of judgment to be applied. In advanced composition as in all com-
position, theoretical clarity and consistency is of the utmost practical importance-
and too often lacking.

I do not want to imply that I think I have solved in my own teaching the
problems raised here. They will present a real challenge the next time I teach
advanced composition for our majors. At this point I know only that, as a result
of having pondered the four-part theory of discourse outlined above, I will not be
able in the future to teach composition as I have in the past.

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