The Writer’s Stance: An Exploration of Context in Invention and Critical Thinking

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Although social-epistemic rhetoric has found a prominent niche in composition theory (see Berlin), and although many composition teachers are quite willing to accept certain nonfoundationalist assertions about the social construction of knowledge—that language and discourse are inseparable from thinking, that language use cannot be dissociated from groups of language users, that writing is a social activity—applications of such concepts have been limited. One such application, collaborative learning, has, of course, gained widespread visibility and adherence. Among its specific manifestations has been the creation of writing centers, such as the one in which I am both director and a tutor. Collaborating with students who are generating papers for courses across the curriculum has brought me face-to-face with a type of writing problem that itself seems best interpreted and addressed in terms of social construction.

What I call “intellectual vertigo” seems to be a common affliction of juniors and seniors who generally seem to be academically sophisticated. Intellectual vertigo is a kind of mental dizziness experienced by a writer who is so overwhelmed by his or her acute awareness of the complexity and possibilities of a topic that it is difficult for the writer to find an entrée for analysis; the effort to pursue one train of thought is continually exploded by the insistence of other points of view to be heeded and acknowledged. In the pages that follow, I will describe a heuristic conceit, “the writer’s stance,” that I have developed as a way of conceptualizing intellectual vertigo and that I use as a guide in my efforts to enable vertiginous students to regain control of the writing process. “The writer’s stance” differs from typical rhetorical models of ethos-pathos-logos in that it focuses directly and immediately on the writer’s relationship with a subject, stressing the need to select a vantage point—to locate a place or position vis-à-vis the topic—and the writer’s need to choose, and use, a frame of analysis that will allow him or her to discover and elucidate the insights to be gained from this perspective. While my development of this conceit could be called “pragmatic” in the common sense of the term—an expedient response to an immediate problem—it is also pragmatic in the technical sense of that branch of linguistics which studies
"the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding" (Levinson 21). Context is central in "the writer's stance." The conceit not only emphasizes the "filters" through which writers inevitably view their subjects, but offers ways for them to use these contextual constraints as touchstones in making specific decisions.

The writer's stance is certainly a practical device, but my purpose is not to propose it as "something to do on Monday," and my description of it will be sorely lacking in "before" and "after" samples of student prose. In my own teaching life, drafts are ephemera that come and go with their authors. My work is more directly with writers than with texts; I am most frequently engaged in dialogues that construct the ideas that will eventually inform texts. I offer this heuristic in the spirit in which it has been most useful to me: as a tool of translation which, on the one hand, provides a constructionist interpretation of the writing experiences of conscientious, intellectually involved students; and which, on the other hand, gives us a way of re-forming common rhetorical and pedagogical notions—focus, point of view, heuristics, invention, critical thinking—from a constructionist perspective.

Intellectual Vertigo

Intellectual vertigo can strike any student, but my classic cases are drawn from seniors in the international affairs department who are facing deadlines for the thesis they are required to present to the department chair and their peers. By the time these students arrive for a conference, they have already spent months conducting extensive research and thinking about the topics of their choice. While many have a "felt sense" of what they would like to say in their papers, their efforts to focus on a single point are frustrated not only by all the information they have gathered but particularly by their keen awareness of the many variables in and complexity of the international issues they are studying. Consequently, their minds become tangled with possibilities, and this is reflected in conversational patterns in which they pick up and drop various points so rapidly, cursorily, and randomly that it is difficult to comprehend what they are trying to communicate. This intellectual vertigo can be exacerbated by anxiety, sometimes verging on panic. They know that within the next few weeks they will have to produce a clear, cogent text that demonstrates their growing sophistication and expertise in this academic field.

My conversations with such students indicate that they define their problem as an organizational one: they ask for help in stitching together their ideas and the material they have amassed. If they have started drafts, by and large they have opted for an inductive approach, which usually means setting out all sorts of "background" information in the hope that by page twenty or thirty the issues will naturally resolve themselves into a neat conclusion. It is not accidental that the drafts usually stop short of these conclusions. However, the students' problem, in my view, is not one of organizing an
argument but of discovering one. While many of these vertiginous students have a "felt sense" of the point they want to make, this felt sense has yet to reach the stage where it can be articulated in a precise statement that embodies a logical, coherent, and thus meaningful interpretation of the object of their study. Finding such a statement rests upon writers' locating and adopting a specific point of view. Writers need to stand still long enough to isolate a promising vantage point from which to observe the topic, and then to do a systematic, methodical investigation to uncover the knowledge such a vantage point promises. In short, these writers currently have a thinking problem rather than a rhetorical one; or, more accurately, this is an instance in which, as contemporary rhetorical theory would put it, writing is an epistemic activity (see Young). These vertiginous students are still in the invention stage of the writing process. They need a heuristic that will not only enable them to find a point of view but that will produce the type of knowledge that will be considered meaningful and significant within the discourse community in which and for which the paper is being written.

Intellectual vertigo is not so much a pathological condition as it is a temporary imbalance in a normally homeostatic state. Ideally, all writers of nonliterary prose feel the counter pulls of centrifugal and centripetal forces throughout the writing process. From the time a writer decides to give some thought to a matter until the text has reached its final form, he or she wants to remain open to whatever new insights arise, to feel free to entertain alternative ways of conceptualizing the issue, to be flexible enough to follow prompts that suggest changes in his or her basic assumptions or premises. At the same time, the writer recognizes that this quest for knowledge and understanding also requires heeding the pull of the centripetal. Potentials need to be actualized; assumptions need to be articulated and tested; generalizations need to be applied. So the writer becomes committed to certain assumptions or premises, holds certain variables constant, looks for constraints that will enable him or her to pursue a point through to its logical conclusions; that is, the writer adopts some systematic and methodical mode of thinking in order to discover precise and specific knowledge. In these terms, the vertiginous student is in the thrall of the centrifugal. Such a writer needs a guide that will bring the centripetal into play in this mental dynamic—one that will, while stressing that only he or she can make choices and arrive at conclusions, slow the writer down sufficiently to see the choices and the criteria for making these decisions. "The writer's stance" is a visual conceit that offers such guidance.

"The Writer's Stance" as Visual Conceit

The visual conceit of the writer's stance has two simple, salient features. First, it involves the writer's visualizing a chosen topic as a three-dimensional object, something he or she can walk around—and through—like one of those massive models of the human heart common at science museums. The writer
needs to imagine being able to observe this subject from a variety of vantage points—inside or outside, close up or from a distance, from the northeast or the southwest, or anywhere in between. Secondly, it asks the writer to picture himself or herself, while walking around the subject, as wearing a pair of glasses or, alternatively, as viewing the topic through the lens of a camera.

Briefly, the heuristic function of this moving picture is to facilitate the student’s decision-making by bringing certain intellective operations to a conscious level and, at the same time, making the student aware of constraints on those operations. In picturing walking around a topic, the central factor, as I will show, is imagining moving slowly and deliberately, standing still at each location long enough to take in what is seen from this position and to assess its potentials for interpreting the subject. Obviously, it would be impractical—if not impossible—to consider every conceivable vantage point, and in practice the need rarely arises. Although randomly and cursorily, the vertiginous student has already been toying with a few potential vantage points, the general nature of which can usually be spotted in a draft or elicited in conversation, the conceit plays its heuristic role in prompting the writer to stop when one surfaces, to stand there long enough to consider what he or she sees before deciding to reject it or explore it further.

In addition to recognizing the need to find a place vis-à-vis a subject, the writer must also realize that what he or she sees is inevitably—and necessarily—mediated by “filters.” The awareness of, and conscious manipulation of, these filters is crucial to the successful completion of a project. Generally speaking, the filtering mechanism is, of course, the “meaning making” capacity and propensity of the human mind. It is appropriate, however, to talk about filters in the plural, first of all to differentiate between those factors affecting thinking that are inaccessible and/or unalterable and those which are available to conscious reflection. For the purpose of analysis, I will make a second distinction, one between the filter a writer uses in everyday dealings with the world, and the filter specifically related to a particular communication situation. In entering a discipline-based course, a student is entering a sociolinguistic context with a particular set of constraints, among which is the requirement that the writer consciously adopt a third filter I will discuss: a frame of analysis that will enable the writer to explore, in a systematic, methodical fashion, the potentials of vantage points he or she takes.

My concept of a meaning-making, filtering mechanism is drawn from cognitive science, which sees the mind as a composite of interconnected frames, scripts, or, as they are most frequently called, schemata. These gestalts or knowledge structures provide frameworks—“ideational scaffolding,” in Anderson’s words (416)—by means of which an individual organizes and interprets the world (Brown and Yule 247). These schemata not only affect the meaning a person makes of his or her environment, but they are the source of the person’s ability to make meaning. I will be calling the complex
of a specific writer's schemata his or her "personal filter." In doing so, however, I must note that this filter is built from concepts lifted from one's cultural milieu as well as formed by personal experiences; thus, while a person's filter is individuated, it is not, by and large, idiosyncratic. Since a culture can be conceived as a complex of schemata or frameworks (see Goffman, chapter 2), many of an individual's schemata are shared by other members of the culture(s) in which he or she participates. Schemata adopted from one's cultural milieu include theories, knowledge, and ways of thinking acquired through formal education. For teachers and students, the salient issue is the degree to which academic frames have been integrated into ordinary thinking patterns. Academics have so successfully assimilated schemata from their professional training that, in Clifford Geertz's words, "disciplinary matrices . . . are more than just intellectual coigns of vantage [for them] but are ways of being in the world" (155); using these schemata has become so automatic for us that we are rarely aware we are bringing a filter into play. The intellectual vertigo of some students may likewise be traced to such successful assimilation of disciplinary thought; paradoxically, however, intellectual vertigo may also derive from an incomplete assimilation of disciplinary thinking, those "ways of proceeding" which some social constructionists say define and distinguish disciplines.

Isolating Vantage Points

Asking students to visualize themselves as wearing glasses is not to suggest that the personal filter should be removed; that would be not only impossible but undesirable. I include the image to make students aware that all their perceptions, including their perceptions of the topic at hand, are necessarily mediated perceptions. It is equally important for vertiginous students to realize how efficiently and automatically they use schemata. The process of locating vantage points, interestingly enough, will require them to slow down their minds sufficiently to bring relevant schemata to a conscious level. Selecting a point of view ought to be a "rational" choice; to make such a choice, the writer needs to see options clearly and consider them carefully. Each tangle of incomplete trains of thought, too cursorily entertained and dismissed, must be sorted out into articulated, separate points of view.

Becoming aware of vantage points qua vantage points in some cases is as simple as writers' bringing to the level of consciousness those presuppositions or premises that are part of a schema, and that, in fact, demarcate the area in which they are currently standing. In their vertiginous state, students often swoop past such premises and assumptions as unquestioned "givens." When I, panting to keep up with a student's train of thought, stop the student with a question like, "Are you operating here on the assumption of a bipolar balance of power?" the reply is often a surprised "obviously!" While the premise was certainly not obvious to me, what has become obvious is that a premise such as this one forms a direct and immediate warrant for the claim
the writer is formulating. Looking forward to the paper the student will be writing, such warrants will have to be made explicit, since they will be important cues to the reader about the author’s point of view. But the student also needs to articulate these premises at this point in the writing process because they are important cues about general locations the writer is trying out.

More problematic are instances in which the writer experiences intellectual vertigo as an amorphous conflict of competing claims. These claims have various sources: the writer’s perceptions of the topic before beginning formal inquiry; schemata from the personal filter he or she is unconsciously using in observing the subject; ideas formulated from his or her research; the specific points of view of the experts the student has been reading. In some cases, these felt conflicts are strictly intellectual: the writer senses validity in several perspectives, and either feels that to choose among them is somehow to present a distorted picture of the subject, or has no criterion for selecting one over another. In other cases, the student may experience these competing claims as a personal, even ethical dilemma. I think immediately of a woman I worked with before I had developed “the writer’s stance”; her strong feelings about migrant workers, with whom she had worked as a counselor, were clearly interfering with her efforts to complete a research project on the subject. In retrospect, I assume that her vertigo was created by what she experienced as conflicting claims between “being objective,” like the authors she was reading, and her propensity to take the migrant workers’ point of view.

Arbitrarily choosing a stance because one feels compelled to simply doesn’t work. Adopting the point of view of an expert because experts are always right leads at best to inexpertly executed plagiarism. And simply telling oneself one should stand here doesn’t resolve conflicting claims; it only drives them more deeply underground. Unresolved cases of intellectual vertigo can produce papers in which the author confounds the reader by unintentionally shifting from one perspective to another, sometimes within the same paragraph. I have read papers in which the explicit argument is continually confused—if not undermined—by an unacknowledged subtext. The perspective a writer selects must be the writer’s own perspective—not in some ethical sense that the writer should stand up for personal beliefs; nor in the sense that the writer’s view must be unique or original; but rather in the sense that this is a way the writer has actually looked at the topic and, in his or her judgment, it is a legitimate and fruitful way to view it. The perspective an author takes must be consonant with his or her personal filter, whether this means selecting a point of view using frameworks brought to the investigation, or deliberately and very consciously adjusting the personal filter to accommodate a schema the writer has developed, or found, in conscious study of the subject.
The problem vertiginous students are up against is not conflicting perspectives, but the fact that they don’t really know the nature of the confusion they are experiencing; they don’t know what claims are competing for their attention; they haven’t discriminated among schemata they are bringing into play. The first and most crucial step they have to take is to recognize a vantage point as one vantage point; this means isolating and articulating the perspectives they are unconsciously and incompletely considering sufficiently to differentiate one from another. Writers need to see their options. Once this articulation occurs, the vertigo of many students seems to disappear. For example, often a student realizes that there really is no conflict; one perspective stands out as “what I was really thinking.” At other times, mental tension dissolves when the student recognizes that it is possible to adopt a perspective in a “middle ground,” equidistant from two vantage points between which the writer had been fruitlessly leaping. The particular way that these amorphous states of confusion resolve themselves varies from writer to writer, and project to project. But one central feature remains constant. Sorting out points of view gives vertiginous students not only the opportunity to see, but to weigh and judge. They consciously experience the act of making a choice, and with that act they take back control of the thinking/writing process.

I must add that recognizing different perspectives doesn’t automatically mean it is easy for a student to remain focused or to shift perspectives knowingly and deliberately. Recently, I worked with a senior political science major who was writing a thesis on the Green party in West Germany. He already had a tentative thesis: the party is in decline because members are unable to resolve internal tensions created by the demands of being a political party and their conception of themselves as a social movement. His conscious desire was to locate himself at a distance from the Greens to analyze the nature of their conflict. But our conversation was like those I’ve had with other vertiginous students: he had decided to compose a standard comparison/contrast of the characteristics of political parties and social movements, but I had to keep tugging him back to this task. He exacerbated his own confusion by continually slipping into the conflicted thinking of the Greens. The various difficulties these students have with isolating points of view and maintaining one perspective may be symptomatic of their natural tendencies toward associative, “holistic” thinking; it certainly points to their inexperience in applying formal operational thinking in situations that demand methodical, systematic inquiry. But methodical, systematic inquiry of the potentials of a vantage point is rightfully the function of another filter: the frame of analysis.

**Frames of Analysis**

In the previous section, I blurred the differences between “selecting a vantage point” and “adopting a point of view.” The processes, however, are
not identical. Developing a point of view begins with writers' locating themselves at some position vis-à-vis their subject. Simplistically, the point of view is what they see from that location. More accurately, a point of view is a coherent organization of select features of a subject perceived from a vantage point; in other words, it is an interpretation. Once they have located a promising vantage point, writers' development of such an interpretation is contingent upon their now consciously adopting another filter: a frame of analysis. Writers of successful academic papers—be they students or practicing scholars, whether they suffer from intellectual vertigo or not—consciously select a frame of analysis in order to examine a perspective in a methodical, systematic fashion. A frame of analysis is a theory or model or methodology or "formal approach" that writers purposefully interpose between themselves and their topic to act as a concrete scaffold with "slots" that point directly to relevant data and that organize these data into a coherent whole. The frame of analysis may be highly structured and elaborated: an expert's model of international conflict, for example. Or it may more closely resemble a heuristic inasmuch as it is a plan or guide for thinking along normalized but more general lines. For example, a writer is using such a frame when he or she sets the historical facts of a change of government in a particular country against a commonly accepted, three-sentence definition of a political revolution to determine if this governmental changeover should be called a revolution; so is the writer who, taking basic principles of game theory, plays out patterns of "if/when ... most likely/least likely" with variables he or she isolates in a general topic like terrorism or resource allocation. In terms of the completed text that will result from this process, the frame of analysis could be equated with the explicit argument or line of reasoning of the paper, and thus it is most readily and directly associated with point of view in a rhetorical sense.

But, as I have been suggesting, adopting and using a frame of analysis is part of the thinking/invention/discovery process. The writer uses this frame to uncover specific knowledge and insights incipient in a particular vantage point. With it the writer is able to formulate a sharply defined conclusion or generalization (thesis statement), whether the writer has ostensibly been operating in an inductive or deductive manner. If the writer has not yet reached a conclusion, the frame guides him or her to such a conclusion by pointing to salient features and a way to put them together; if the student has a "felt sense" of the point he or she wants to make, the frame allows the student to turn this intuition into an articulated idea. At the same time that it is an instrument of discovery, the frame of analysis is also a tool of assessment. However a conclusion or generalization has been reached, its reasonableness can be tested by sifting the reasoning upon which it is based through this frame. To return to the image of the writer viewing a subject through the lens of a camera, the writer/photographer may select a particular angle or position in relation to an object, but the viewer doesn't know what he or she will see
from this angle—doesn't even know if there is a picture there—until the viewer brings the camera into focus. Even then, the writer/photographer will probably make further adjustments in angle and focus until satisfied that what results is a coherent composition. In other words, the frame of analysis allows the writer to crystallize and refine a point of view.

The Sociolinguistic Context

Not all frames of analysis, however, are equal. Writers choose a frame that is most likely to produce meaningful and significant knowledge; and the issue of what determines this meaningfulness and significance leads to a third filter: the specific communicative environment in which a writer carries out an investigation and in which the writer will present its results. There are many terms available today for this particular filter—speech community, discourse community, knowledge community, interpretive community—but I will call it the sociolinguistic context in order to stress the notion of context. Calling it a filter is consistent with the imagery I have used up to this point in "the writer's stance." But since it represents the communicative environment in which a writer is functioning at a particular time, it would perhaps be more appropriate to think of the sociolinguistic context as a specific landscape in which the various visualized activities of the writer's stance occur. Whichever way it is depicted in the conceit, the sociolinguistic context constitutes an interrelated set of constraints or "givens" which, under normal circumstances, are incorporated into a writer's personal filter and which are thus automatically used in selecting and developing a point of view. Providing necessary criteria for what defines meaningful knowledge, these constraints become touchstones for writers in making numerous decisions, including the decision to adopt a frame of analysis and the determination of which frame is most applicable.

For my students, the sociolinguistic context is the discipline that informs the course for which they are writing a paper, and it is to this discipline that they should turn in selecting a frame of analysis. But the vertiginous student is at best only partially aware of the influence of this context, and another heuristic function of "the writer's stance" is helping the writer recognize how to make positive use of a discipline's constraints in this process of finding a point of view.

The discipline has already affected the writer's conscious choices in a number of ways. In finding a topic, the student has been restricted to the particular subjects of study of that field; in isolating potential topics—a problem, an issue, a promising avenue of inquiry—the writer has been influenced by the discipline's current definitions of problems (see Toulmin, Human Understanding 152). The writer's general purpose and audience, likewise, are provided by the discipline; the writer joins other members of the field in the mutual quest to make this phenomenon intelligible. Thus, these givens limit the type of knowledge the writer is seeking.
Finally, disciplines restrict the knowledge the writer seeks by dictating methods by which meaningful and significant knowledge is to be attained. If a discipline is the source of frames of analysis, it could also be said that a set of such frames defines the discipline. "A discipline can be thought of as a commitment to a specified methodology," Linda Brodkey has noted in *Academic Writing as Social Practice* (20). Social constructionists would say that disciplines are best defined as individuals who, in James Boyd White's words, "participate... in a set of social and intellectual practices" (56) or who, to use Toulmin's description of the natural sciences, share and use given "constellations of explanatory procedures" (*Human Understanding* 160; also see 262). The centripetal pull toward systematic inquiry is thus formalized in fields of knowledge through normative ways of proceeding and thinking which function both as guidelines for the discovery of new knowledge and as touchstones for judging the meaningfulness and significance of what is discovered. The constraints provided by these frames of analysis allow full­fledged members of a field and students alike to engage in critical thinking.

**The Contextual Nature of Critical Thinking**

Generally, then, intellectual vertigo is the result of a student's trying to think in a vacuum. Conversely, "the writer's stance" rests on the premise that productive thinking can occur only in a specific sociolinguistic context. Behind it lies a principle adopted from social theorist Anthony Giddens: if structure constrains, it also enables (37). Berger and Luckmann, in an important work on the sociology of knowledge, pursue this notion further. Habitualized activities, which they see as the source of social institutions, provide "a stable background in which human activity may proceed with a minimum of decision-making most of the time, [thus freeing] energy for such decisions as may be necessary on certain occasions. In other words, the background of habitualized activity opens up a foreground for deliberation and innovation" (53). Charles Willard brings this point directly into the realm of rhetoric in *Argumentation and the Social Grounds of Knowledge*. Subsuming notions like discourse community and speech community under Toulmin's concept of argument fields, Willard suggests that while an individual may sacrifice some autonomy in entering such a field, this action could be perceived "as an effort after freedom: because a field's assumptions and procedures give order and coherence to events, they endow the field actor with freedom from the events" (224).

This general notion of an assumed "background" freeing individuals to focus their energy and attention on decisions necessitated by a specific "foreground" event is directly applicable to our use of language. In ordinary conversations we regularly make choices about whether or not to speak, when to speak, what to say, how to say it—based on our reading of each communicative situation. In turn, our reading of a specific communicative situation is based on the assumption that all participants in this dialogue mutually share
certain knowledge, knowledge not only pertaining to the subject at hand but also knowledge about the way conversations are conducted.\textsuperscript{3} If writing is a form of functional language use, then the foregrounded, conscious decisions a writer makes are similarly based on background knowledge the writer assumes he or she shares mutually with the audience. Moreover, if language use and knowing are inextricably related—as is axiomatic in nonfoundationalist concepts of knowledge—then the assertion “writing is an epistemic activity” has a dual meaning. Writing may enable an individual to bring thinking to a conscious, articulate level or to pursue the ramifications of an idea; but the individual’s ability to write and to think in this way is made possible by the sociolinguistic/epistemological domain in which this conscious activity takes place. The impetus to think, the goals of such thinking, and the types of thinking most likely to produce the desired outcomes are all constrained—and enabled—by the context in which the individual is operating. In adopting the notion of the relative nature of knowledge, the field of composition has put the emphasis on the freedom it implies. When Kenneth Bruffee justifies collaborative learning with social constructionist theory, he uses its premises as a warrant for throwing off restricting orthodoxies and institutionalized hierarchies, and for reconceptualizing classrooms as egalitarian communities of inquirers. Without denying the possibility—or the fact—that individuals and communities can critically evaluate and change their constructs of the world, I focus on those initial constraints within existing cultures that not only enable individuals to think critically but which determine what “critical thinking” is.

Defining critical thinking as “the propensity and skill to engage in an activity with reflective scepticism” (8), John McPeck insists that it “always manifests itself in connection with some identifiable activity or subject area and never in isolation” (5). Taking issue with school curriculums that attempt to enhance critical thinking by teaching formal systems of logic, he contends that reflective scepticism is impossible in a vacuum because “the criteria for the judicious use of scepticism are supplied by the norms and standards of the field under consideration” (7-8). Thus, McPeck follows Toulmin, Willard, and others who bring nonfoundationalist premises to notions of logic, rationality, and argument by insisting that critical thinking is field-dependent. He stands with Toulmin in viewing validity as “an intra-field, not an inter-field notion” (\textit{Uses} 255). Pointing to the diverse logics that have been developed over the past 125 years in various fields, McPeck argues, “The very proliferation of these logics testifies to the fact that different areas of human inquiry require different methods of validation. No single logical system can capture the validation procedures of every discipline, nor all the problem areas within a single discipline” (31).

Moreover, McPeck contends that logic plays a relatively minor role in critical thinking compared with knowledge of and experience in a specific field:
Since it involves the skills necessary for engaging in an activity, critical thinking cannot be divorced from the skills that make the activity what it is. For example, critical thinking about an historical question requires, first and foremost, the skills of an historian; similarly, critical thinking about a scientific question requires the knowledge and skills of a scientist. (9)

McPeck concludes that far more important than formal logic in properly assessing statements and arguments are field-specific elements such as “tacit rules of evidence” (25; emphasis added)—raising, as James Boyd White does in his discussion of “The Invisible Discourse of the Law,” the paradox that lies at the heart of the vertiginous student’s problem.

In normal instances of thinking/speaking, the background against which participants’ conscious decisions are made remains a tacit realm of givens because it is assumed to be mutually shared by all participants; moreover, an individual’s reading of a particular communication situation in this shared environment, if not itself an unconscious act, at least involves unconscious decisions about what constitutes relevant features of or appropriate touchstones in the situation. But if we accept another popular notion in composition warranted by social constructionist tenets, we assume that, in entering college, students are entering a discourse community that may be unfamiliar to them (see Bizzell, Robinson). Although I have said that vertiginous students appear to be academically sophisticated, their sophistication may be limited to an aspect of disciplines which, in foundational thinking, defines them: those theories, concepts, and bodies of information set forth in textbooks and learned for tests. Their vertigo suggests that they have been less successful in grasping the tacit knowledge of specific fields, those social and intellectual practices that White very pertinently labels an “invisible discourse.” Yet, as I trust my discussion of intellectual vertigo shows, this invisible discourse can and does directly impact students’ production of visible, written discourse. “The writer’s stance” tries to bring an outline (general though it is) of these less-than-obvious ways of proceeding and thinking to the attention of students, pointing them toward specific touchstones they can use in particular sociolinguistic contexts to make the decisions writers must make.

I have called this piece “an exploration” both to stress the tentative status of this heuristic conceit, and to invite its revision and rethinking. Those abstract and theoretical conversations that are going on in our professional journals have already problematized many of the notions I have used to describe and explain “the writer’s stance” (as one example, see Pratt and Harris on the notion of “discourse community”). As I consider the best way to help the student sitting in my office, I don’t want to neglect insights developing in this theoretical dialogue. In so far as “the writer’s stance” enables some students to complete a writing project successfully, and in so far as it gives teachers a way to bring theory closer to practice, it has its uses;
nonetheless, it is only a metaphoric construct, and its applications should not betray the theory upon which it is based.

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Notes

1Although Wayne Booth used a similar phrase in his 1963 article, "The Rhetorical Stance," the ways that my conceit differs from his more traditional model will become obvious as I proceed.

2See, for example, Anderson; also see Brown and Yule 236-56.

3In pragmatics, the general term used for this complex of "givens" is "mutual knowledge." As an area of linguistics, pragmatics is particularly interested in the norms and conventions that govern the conduct of conversations; see Levinson, especially chapters 3 and 6. For specific applications of pragmatics to writing, see Beale and Nystrand.

Works Cited


