Jim Berlin’s Last Work: Future Perfect, Tense

Remembering Writing Pedagogy

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Jim Berlin’s posthumously published book, *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, reminded me, among things, that pedagogy is what I have always liked most about composition. I think of pedagogy as the animation of a syllabus, those expected and unexpected human interactions it sets into play, some of which I know about, most of which I don’t, some I deal with, some I don’t, some augured by a syllabus, some not. A course description is only an approximation of a teacher’s practical and theoretical commitments and concerns, but even so, Jim’s description of the lower-division course called “Codes and Critiques” also reminded me that had we talked about pedagogy, we would have talked about ways differences in our theoretical understandings of discourse would amount to practical differences in how we respectively imagined composition and what each of us hoped to accomplish by asking students to write in our courses. I think the best way to lay out the practical consequences of our theoretical differences is to describe how I tried to animate a poststructural rather than structural understanding of discourse by asking students to write an autoethnography, a form that I had read but not written when I first assigned it and that I taught myself to write to better understand the intellectual work entailed.

Over the last decade I have regularly taught a seminar most recently called “Ethnographies of Literacy” that enrolls graduate students in composition and literary studies and, on occasion, education, communication, folklore, and anthropology. When I designed the course, I imagined introducing students to theoretical and methodological literature on ethnography and to such well known ethnographies of literacy as Shirley Heath’s *Ways with Words* and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, and I further imagined students writing critical essays on these readings. With the exception of students from anthropology, however, nearly everyone found it exceedingly difficult and, for all practical purposes, impossible to remember that ethnographers conduct field work and base their ethnographies, however loosely, on field notes. The difficulty was usually more apparent in discussions of *Ways with Words*, which most students
summarily dismissed as boring, than in discussions of *Reading the Romance*, which most students took seriously enough to read and discuss. But, in fact, all students were reading pretty much as they had been taught in their respective fields, and were evaluating ethnographic texts accordingly. Students from literature looked for literary things, and students from education, educational things, and so on. And those from anthropology looked for anthropological things, like field methods, field notes, and methodological procedures for turning data into information.

Since there isn't time in this course to conduct fieldwork, I tried to simulate the experience by having students collect data on their own writing and reading practices. They begin by observing and recording all that they read and write over a two or three day period. The recording of such quotidian data usually makes at least two things obvious. First, few graduate students spend more than 20% of their literate time writing, and, second, data must be interpreted to be recorded. In other words, decisions about how to record events are critical to observation, and thus the recording of any and all "literacy events," to use Shirley Brice Heath's useful definition, entails a fair amount of interpretation ("Protean Shapes"). In addition to deciding what to call such reading practices as the daily reading of cereal boxes, the circumstances of such reading are also likely to be important, since deciding whether such literacy events are habitual or strategic acts may ultimately depend on the presence or absence of others. Similarly, deciding what to call such common writing practices as filling out the plethora of forms by which students are expected to surveil themselves at every turn is complicated by the fact that the form they are signing is usually also committing the writer to some action, paying a bill, attending a seminar, advancing to candidacy. The individual labor of collecting and recording data taken in tandem with the collective labor of comparing and contrasting the recorded literate lives of students in the class go a long way toward explaining why field work is work, and in turn give students some basis for comparing the kind of intellectual work required in the field with that conducted in other places, such as libraries and laboratories.

Simulating the collection of ethnographic data works better for students already familiar with other forms of data collection in the social sciences than for those unaccustomed to treating things not already identified as texts as worth their attention. Since the second group consists primarily of students in composition and literary studies, the core group for the course, I decided to simulate another common intellectual labor of ethnographers, namely, the deliberate transformation of *ta* into cultural information. The simulation begins with a kind of memory work, working back from the last to first thing students can recall writing, and then writing and presenting one of the "memories" as a literacy anecdote to the class, and ultimately extending that or another anecdote as a literacy narrative. While there's considerable variation in how far back people remember, what they remember, and what they have forgotten, over the years several things have held constant across groups, most notably that nearly everyone remembers liking the writing they did outside school and disliking the writing they did in school. This is invariably a surprise to students,
and the subject of a great deal of speculation, since graduate students are, by
definition, successful students, and most of them also are, by any measure but their
own, successful writers as well as readers.

The constant that interests me as a teacher and scholar who has been offering
variations of "Ethnographies of Literacy" for some years is that literacy
anecdotes are almost invariably remembered and told as psychological
anecdotes. They are so profoundly and persistently psychological that I think it’s fair
to say that the intellectual work of the course is in figuring out ways to interrupt
the discursive history that makes it seem obvious and natural for most people
to represent themselves to themselves as psychological cases. I am talking here
not about interiority itself, but about the valorization of modern psychological
discourses of interiority, about cultural discursive hegemony, about the triumph
in the twentieth century of psychological discourses of interiority that prevents
most students I have worked with from even imagining themselves as they have
been learned to routinely imagine others—as culturally constituted subjects.

Modernist maps of the self are arguably constructed by superimposing the
familiar and fascinating cartographies of human interiority charted by psychologi­
cal theories onto the landscape of personal experience. By this end of the century,
for instance, every reasonably well-educated, white adult professional I know
seems to have amassed an extensive repertoire of therapeutic narratives. In addition
to being able to represent ourselves to ourselves, and to anyone else who is willing
to listen, as interestingly neurotic, many of us are also fluent in a rather remarkable
variety of modern psychological “dialects”. We know our undergraduate and
graduate GPAs, our IQs (often on more than one test), and the precise percentile
of our academic achievement scores on any number of the standardized tests
administered over the course of schooling, not to mention secret knowledge of where
we rank on self-assessment surveys published in popular magazines. Those of us who
have children also track and teach them to track their scores with equal precision.

I doubt that I or anyone else could exaggerate the normative sway of
psychological discourse over white professionals and, increasingly, profes­sionals of color in the United States, a discourse so widely dispersed at this end
of the twentieth century that an entire class of people has become so utterly
fascinated with its mental health that psychological well being can be linked to
physical appearance. Capitalizing on this fascination in Make the Connection,
Bob Greene and Oprah Winfrey have recently gone so far as to “connect”
professional fitness to physical fitness via “self-esteem,” which, given the
 ancestral drift of the academy, suggests that “buff” will soon be as necessary a
credential for academics as it has long since become for most other professionals,
with the possible exception of those in computers, who are reputed to be
exercising their right to feed themselves from vending machines. I have taken
license here with what I have been calling psychological discourse in order to
draw attention to what I see as the most insidious discursive impediment facing
anyone from the professional class who attempts to see themselves as social and
cultural as well as psychological subjects. Even the most socially committed
scholars I know, including myself, are implicated to the gills by psychological representations of the self and the normative effects of sorting and ranking not only themselves, but also the students whose writing they are hired to surveil.

While students in the graduate seminar reimagine themselves as cultural subjects by exploring in their autoethnographies some of the cultural possibilities attenuated in their anecdotes, the essays produced in the seminar are recognizably more in the tradition of psychology than cultural anthropology. Yet nearly everyone is at least intermittently able to make themselves strange to themselves, as it were, and culturally situate themselves and their writing (see "Writing on the Bias" and the student autoethnographies in *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only*). This postmodernist and poststructural practice of othering the self may superficially resemble the more familiar modernist and structural practice of self-alienation, but whereas self-othering explores multiple subjectivity (difference) as the effects of an indefinite number of interdependent and competing discourses of human subjectivity, self-alienation is an entirely predictable effect of dehumanizing ideologies. Put another way, self-othering is a strategy for writing and rewriting the self, but self-alienation is a strategy for reading and rereading the self.

Were I more a modernist than a postmodernist, that is, if I also saw discourses as cultural codes, as Jim viewed them on the strength of Pierre Bourdieu’s structural analysis of cultural codes in *Distinction*, I would probably ask students to decode interiority, perhaps decode the scholarly and popular literature that is commonly invoked to warrant psychology as the exclusive discourse of the self: IQ, achievement, and placement tests, talk therapies, drug therapies, conduct manuals, domestic fiction, and so on. In other words, I would ask students to reread themselves by decoding such texts. Although the perverse hegemony of psychological discourses often makes me wish psychology were a cultural code, or even a set of cultural codes, rather than a vast and pervasive discourse, I try to resist my modernist impulses, resist assuming that discourses are literally encoded in texts that students need to learn to decode. In my own work, I have tried to distinguish between discourse as it is used in poststructuralism (ideology) and discourse as it is used in structuralism (text), but I know of no one who has more carefully explained the variation in what is meant by discourse across modern and postmodern theories than the applied linguist Alastair Pennycook (1994). Jim’s modernist conflation of discourse and cultural code in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* reminded me that while his pedagogical assumption that texts can be ideologically encoded and decoded is warranted by the structuralist elision of discourse and text, my pedagogy rests on poststructural distinctions of texts from discourses.

If I do not imagine that texts are encoded, I can’t very well ask students to decode them. Instead I assume that it’s the discursive hegemony of psychology rather than psychological codes that disrupts the writing of autoethnography in the graduate seminar I’ve been discussing. The discourse is so widely dispersed that our psychological stories about ourselves seem uniquely our own. Yet internalized cultural discourses of the psychological self (as in self-esteem, or the
lack thereof) are increasingly inflected across class, race, gender, sexuality, age, and nearly every other social or cultural grouping I can imagine, as can be documented by guests who routinely articulate themselves as psychological subjects on television talk shows, where it is patently obvious that only experts still labor under the illusion that psychology is a discipline rather than a discourse, a profession rather than a way of life in the U.S.

The intellectual labor of writing autoethnographic accounts of literacy entails locating and exploring the sites where people learn to think of themselves as readers and writers, and where even the most able among them rarely learn to see themselves as good writers. That so few people see themselves as good writers strikes me as a phenomenon best addressed not as a consequence of false consciousness, but as one of the consequences of modern schooling, as what happens to students in the classroom, the classroom that Keith Hoskin, the Foucauldian educational historian, argues originated in the early modern period and exists still as the site where writing, examining, and grading are inextricably linked via the conflation of disciplinarity and pedagogy. This is the site where each of us, good students and good teachers alike, learn to assume personal responsibility for our failure to learn or teach writing, and the classroom will remain the site of individual and collective failure of intelligence, will, application, so as long as we persist in reading ourselves and others at the expense of writing ourselves and others out of that place.

Works Cited


