Genre and Schooling: Looking Here and Back, Here and Forward

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Know and Tell (by David Bleich) and Worlds Apart (by Patrick Dias, et al.) both look at learning to write in formal schooling from two very different perspectives—perspectives that could be complementary in many ways. Both present important challenges to fundamental assumptions and deeply held institutional practices in the teaching of writing, and both deserve serious consideration. After all, schooling is about students’ future involvement in the lived experience of labor (whether in professional workplaces or in the increasingly professionalized organizations where labor citizenship is exercised), and the stabilized-for-now uses of writing that we call “genre” are central to both kinds of labor.

While Bleich looks mainly at where students have been in their lives, Dias and his coauthors look mainly at where students are going. Accordingly, Bleich looks at general education courses (specifically composition and literature, with one minor example from psychology), and then looks backward to the families, religions, and ethnic affiliations that students have come from. Dias and his coauthors look at upper-level undergraduate courses and internships in four professional programs, and then look forward to workplaces that students in those professional programs will enter. Neither book lays out specific teaching methods, but each presents general orientations toward teaching that might inform a range of pedagogical practices.

Both books use genre as a key theoretical category, treating it not in static formalist terms but in dynamic social terms as “choices of social participation” (in Bleich’s apt phrase) where people’s histories of language use intersect in complex mixed and blurred genres to mediate our interactions, to constantly reconstruct our identities (“memberships” in Bleich’s term), and to structure our lived experience through our discourse. But here the similarities end. Bleich treats genre as anything from an entire language to an unconscious turn of phrase. And he unfortunately ignores the large body of research on both writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the disciplines (WID) that is informed by the concept of genre as social action. He writes, “Even though there are many ‘writing across the disciplines’ projects, the fact that the subject of
writing makes no sense apart from society and lived experience has not been an issue of scholarly consideration."

In contrast, the sophisticated use of genre in *Worlds Apart* shows how far genre theory and qualitative research based on it have come in the large and growing literature on writing in the disciplines and professions, research that Bleich does not engage with (apart from three references in a footnote). The authors trace the intertextually linked systems of genres in classrooms and workplaces, drawing on that body of research and adding to it insights from Bakhtin and from cultural psychology in the Vygotskian tradition. Indeed, *Worlds Apart* is the seventh book in Erlbaum’s “Rhetoric, Knowledge, and Society” series, which has developed (along with many other North American, European, Australian, and Cuban researchers) the tradition begun by Carolyn Miller of studying writing in terms of genre as social action, drawing on the insights of Vygotskian cultural psychology, especially “activity theory.” I should note, however, that while it is true that Bleich does not add much to the discussion of genre as social action, he does at least introduce it in a new way into discussions of critical pedagogy, where its usefulness has not been much recognized due to the unfortunate identification of genre with older formalist theories and pedagogies.

In this review, I’ll first summarize the argument of each book and then return to a series of comparisons that I hope will illuminate the middle ground between them (and between composition research and WID research, an area that is too often unexamined).

Bleich is reacting to the alienation that many students and teachers feel in formal education: the sense that their courses are not relevant to their lives and do not engage with the worlds they inhabit. To overcome this alienation, he advocates encouraging students, first, to disclose publicly to the teacher and to the other students the “memberships” that make up their identities, and, then, to identify the genres through which those memberships are articulated and in part sustained. As he explains, “Disclosure and collaboration ask each member of a class to announce, sooner or later, the terms of membership in the class,” including such things as “memberships and interpersonal relationships marking one’s family, school, ethnic, gender history, one’s vocational and economic reasons for choosing courses, one’s clothing, eating, and traveling styles, one’s aspirations, fantasies, values, and plans. These announcements should appear regularly and ordinarily, and should continue at a pace comfortable to each individual’s level of involvement in the class.”
Bleich's first goal is student motivation: "If students are gratified when others remember their names now, it suggests that real, extended, and thorough recognition as part of the study process can be the basis for the motivation that is now in most cases provided only by the hope of becoming employed. Disclosure and collaboration teach students to make their work more a part of their identities, their identities more connected to others, and their vocations more palpably implicated in society and in other people's needs." But Bleich's goals in getting students to disclose their memberships go beyond "knowing where your students are coming from" or motivating their writing and learning. He believes that collaborative disclosure can indirectly address deep social problems—such as violence, racism, and sexism—by having a therapeutic effect on students. This therapy is at bottom Freudian: it assumes that by becoming aware of repressed feelings and making them public, students can heal personality problems that lead to social ills.

In Bleich's advanced seminar on writing (called "Telling the Truth"), for example, one goal of the course was to "invite class members to 'tell the truth' and explore the ways our language use conventions help us to conceal 'true' things from ourselves and others." Bleich contends that the atmosphere was "finally safe" for students to "be themselves." Genres of disclosure encouraged class discussion of "unconscious masculine psychology: how the allegedly normal masculine identity presupposes violence, misogyny, and homophobia, all connected with one another but not acknowledgeable as values associated with this identity." He concludes, "Male heterosexual violence results from repression—and perhaps from conscious suppression—of one's feelings of tenderness or vulnerability, as in the case of Mr. B [one male student]. This tender feeling, in turn, is related to homoerotic feeling: tenderness is felt by and toward both sexes, as when parents and siblings have the same kind of tender feelings toward family members of either sex."

The teaching of writing, Bleich assumes, is like "care or nurturing," and he wants this sense of nurturing and care to extend throughout students' undergraduate years; he considers it "fundamental" to their learning that they "find work that they love, and work situations that are just and generous." The teacher becomes a kind of therapist/mother, guiding the students toward healing through personal revelations; teaching, then, becomes a kind of reparenting. Bleich then asks teachers to show students what he sees as the dangerous political implications of some unconsciously repressed or consciously suppressed aspects of their
personalities. These personality difficulties he associates with military, corporate, and bureaucratic interests that, he argues, support racism, sexism, and violence.

Bleich is candid about some of the dangers of this method, and he discloses much about himself as a teacher in the process. In the “Telling the Truth” course, he repeatedly got into shouting matches with some of the six male students, some of whom were political conservatives, while the two women in the class were “reserved, reluctant to chime in, sometimes raising their hands to speak but tending to stay silent while the men’s shouting, including my own, proceeded.” In a later ethnographic account of the class, prepared as their final project, the women expressed frustration with the males’ domination of class discussion. “Probably too many times,” Bleich discloses, “I was part of the problem.”

Bleich finds in these confrontations evidence of “unconscious genres” of language use to be examined. At Bleich’s prompting for disclosures of memberships, the men wrote about their sexual histories, tangled family relationships, toilet flushing habits, and so on. He finds that “here, in a public place, private feelings and insight about a ‘frontier’ issue in social change have been rearticulated, changing the meanings, slightly, of received terms in order to express Mr. B’s [one student’s] changing knowledge of self in society.”

In a literature course on Jewish identity (attended by twelve women and one man), one of the Jewish women, Ms. X, offended some of the others when she disclosed that if she were a rabbi (which she had disclosed she aspired to be) she would not marry a Jew to a non-Jew, though she would marry lesbian couples. One of the offended students started to cry, and the others defended her against Ms. X. Apparently, “Ms. X’s important views could not become an active part of the classroom attention, and did not for the rest of the semester” because she did not disclose to the class “the sources of her own show of certainty.” In the same course a year later, the only Catholic (one of two Christians) ran out of the classroom in tears when some of the Jewish students were offended by her perceived lack of sensitivity to the historical plight of the Jews and criticized her. Bleich asks, “Did the discomfort we all felt teach us enough to justify it?” He answers, “In this case, probably so.” In analyzing the Catholic student’s “expectable stereotypes” of Jews, he expresses understanding of her, saying she was “unaware of the Catholic Church’s history of opposition to Jews.” In such situations, class members “tried to enlighten one another with materials that spoke to each person’s zones of ignorance.” In addition to these class discussions,
Bleich held private conferences with all students in order to "dissolve the gang effect that brought us to the brink of failure." This class, he says, learned things that "might otherwise have remained an examination-friendly formulation rather than a difficult human experience." He feels that the other classes also gained from the sometimes painful experience (Bleich usually calls it "discomfort") of discussing deep personal views.

Under the kindly—or even tough-love—reparenting of a sensitive teacher, where an atmosphere of trust has been carefully created and maintained, students may indeed work out personality issues that may in turn make them better citizens. But should such therapy be a goal of university courses—much less all university courses, as Bleich proposes? And if it should be, how does a teacher deal ethically with the unequal power relationships in the classroom?

Bleich acknowledges the objection raised by Susan Swartzlander and her coauthors in "The Ethics of Requiring Students to Write About Their Personal Lives" that some students fear "the adverse judgement of the teacher if they did not disclose," and that it encourages "the perception that students must 'deal with' their emotional problems in their writing or that they will succeed in courses if they can write about their dramatic personal experiences." Bleich's most substantive response is to warn teachers to be sensitive to potential problems and to create an atmosphere of trust. But how does one do that? How does one learn to do that—particularly teaching assistants? And what does one do when it fails, wholly or partially? Bleich does not say. Rather, he denies that power is an issue in disclosure classrooms; only "authority" and "responsibility," which he distinguishes from power, are issues.

Moreover, in Bleich's reading of his students' writing, he assumes that their disclosures are genuine, or if they are not that he can read their "unconscious disclosures" to get at the "truth." But another reading suggests that students were often giving the powerful teacher what he wanted: the language use genre of brown-nosing, as students often term it. Here is one male student's comment on the paper of another white male student, his friend and collaborator, who, as part of the "Telling the Truth" course, had disclosed his racist trash talk in a football game: "It indicated the constant reminder of the unconscious racism that plagues our society. Although he said these words in the heat of battle, it was his way of gaining the upper hand on his black opponent. This could easily have been done without answering with a racial comment. He could have said, 'You overweight piece of shit. I'm goin' to knock you so hard you're
not goin’ to know what hit you. You slow motherfucker.” Of course, Bleich finds in this passage unconscious genres of sexism (“motherfucker”). But one wonders if these men are playing with the teacher who engaged in shouting matches with them, giving him some of what he wants (moral fervor, political correctness, quasi-Freudian analysis), while baiting him at the same time: giving him the racism point but adding deliberately violent and sexist language to show what they “could” have done. Was the classroom head-butting subtly extended to the writing, but masked to avoid directly confronting the teacher in the genre that “counts” for a grade?

The fact of brown-nosing suggests the limits of Bleich’s pedagogy of “disclosure” and the ethical dangers it masks. Bleich hints at a way out of the difficulty when he recounts the case of a ninth-grade student, a female African American in a class he helped teach as part of a collaborative group of seven teachers. She had the courage to challenge the representations of race the teachers brought into class, which she found insulting. Bleich responds that teachers need “to collaborate with each other to disclose their own languages and memberships in order to produce a self-perpetuating level of collaboration that then students could trust.” Teachers sharing their perspectives may indeed provide students with some protection from the excesses of teachers who, in the name of acting in the students’ best interests, would consciously or unconsciously coerce students into representing themselves in ways they find demeaning and insulting or simply wrong. Clearly, Bleich is asking important questions for all teachers to ask, whether or not his assumptions are valid for all, or his approach useful for all, as he asserts.

Dias and his coauthors, however, ask a very different question from what Bleich asks: “What are the relationships between writing as it is elicited in the university and writing as it is generated in the workplace?” They want to know ultimately how writing in formal schooling prepares (and doesn’t prepare) students for writing in their workplace beyond formal schooling. For six years, they investigated the role of writing in four university courses or degree programs in professional fields, as well as the writing in four workplaces that students from those courses and programs enter: public administration courses and a Canadian federal government institution (the central bank), management courses and businesses in which students from the courses did internships or co-ops, architecture courses and a firm of architects, social work courses and a social work agency attached to a large hospital. The North American tradition of genre theory and the growing tradition of Vygotskian activity
theory (including distributed cognition and situated learning) provide powerful lenses for seeing a new relation between formal schooling and labor beyond school.

Their basic conclusion is that the systems of activity and the social motives of writing in formal education are fundamentally different from those in workplaces; consequently, university writing can prepare students for workplace writing only in very limited—though significant—ways. The social motives of university writing are learning (what they call epistemic) and sorting (assessment). Students are writing to learn and to demonstrate learning in a system of activity organized for those social motives. The researchers found that tasks are deliberately simplified to accomplish learning and assessment. In this "encapsulated reality" of the classroom, students wrote for one audience, the teacher, even when they and the teacher pretended they were writing for the "real world," as in case studies. The social motives of workplace writing, by contrast, are far more complex because there are varied and often competing ideologies, though the motive of the highest status group in the organization influences all other motives. Audiences are multiple and extend over time; their competing ideologies shape writing and its multiple uses in subtle but pervasive ways, down to the tiniest stylistic decisions. (Of course, the individual motives, identities, and ideologies of classrooms and workplaces can be equally complex and varied.)

In the chapter on new hospital social workers learning to write, for example, we see the complex power negotiation of the contested genre of the medical chart. Doctors, nurses, social workers, accountants, insurance companies, and perhaps lawyers use the same chart, but each with his or her own social motives. The social workers themselves use their contribution to the chart with a range of often contradictory motives: to think through their care; to communicate with a range of other caregivers to ensure continuity; and to be accountable for their work to administrators, insurance companies, and patients. New social workers must learn to negotiate the multiple motives and ideologies in their texts through participating in the activity system, gradually moving toward fuller and less attenuated legitimate participation (here the work of Jean Lave on situated cognition is crucial). "Although it might well be possible and even desirable to show students copies of workplace texts," they conclude, "and to have practitioners talk to students about their participation in those texts, the lived experience of texts is impossible outside of their enactment." According to the authors, "local knowledge" of the ideological complexity is "precisely what was lacking" in the students' initial
writing—and what took a long period of legitimate peripheral participation to learn.

Although *Worlds Apart* documents in rigorous detail the profound differences between writing in formal schooling and writing in complex organizations, the study nevertheless finds many points of contact: “Schools by the very nature of the epistemic demands they make on language may effectively promote general language development,” such as syntactic and lexical sophistication, continuous text and transitions, rhetorical flexibility in moving from writing in one discipline to another, and the stylistic flexibility that comes with it.

We can now see some fundamental similarities between the two books and begin to chart the crucial middle ground between students’ past and future memberships. *Worlds Apart*’s call to promote general language development is similar to Bleich’s insistence that schooling teach students genre awareness and extend their resources for using it; and like the authors of *Worlds Apart*, he sees this as a process of engagement with texts that realizes social processes and social motives (though Dias and his colleagues investigate those processes and motives over a long period of time from a range of perspectives and sites).

Accordingly, collaboration is a key element in both books as well, and both advocate collaborative pedagogies. Bleich rightly argues that classrooms must be places where people can confront their differences, even if there is discomfort, and he is equally correct that there is no one technique for guaranteeing successful collaboration or the “absence of conflict and discomfort.” There is, however, a large body of research on collaborative group process that gives us a tool kit of techniques to try—research that has not made its way into Bleich’s work or into composition discussions in general. The authors of *Worlds Apart* also espouse collaboration, but collaboration structured with an eye to the ways students will need to collaborate in the complex organizations most will enter. They conclude, “If as we argue, writing is a by-product of other activities, a means for getting something else done, we ought to consider how we might engage students in activities that commit them to write as a necessary means—but only as a means not an end. If there is one major, obvious-seeming way in which educational courses might prepare people better for the demands of writing at work, it is through constituting the class as a working group with some degree of complexity, continuity, and interdependency of joint activity.” In a sense, this is what Bleich advocates as well, the classroom as a kind of sheltered site of labor where students and teacher come together to do the work of learning...
collaboratively, but he conceives goals of learning in much more personal terms and its effects in broad civic terms (ignoring the fact that most written civic discourse is written to or by professionals). In the middle, unexamined, lie the specialized disciplines and professions with their complex organizations mediated through writing that Dias and his coauthors describe and analyze.

Both books adopt an explicitly critical perspective, focusing on the role of writing in power relations. Bleich lodges a wholesale indictment of the structures of formal schooling as a reflection of unjust social relations, and he argues that rethrowing in university courses can resist those structures, however indirectly. The Dias group has a much more nuanced critique that asks practical questions about how and under what circumstances students and young employees can gain the authority and power to make meaningful critiques and to move toward specific action through their writing within institutions. In the stories of novices and interns engaging with old-timers, we see how deeply ideologies have been naturalized in institutions (whether commercial or nonprofit), how crucial yet difficult it is for newcomers to learn to make changes in the lived experience of people in organizations, and how professionalization comes at a cost of self-identity, even where the professions are dedicated to ameliorating violence, discrimination, and injustice. Critique is cheap; change is costly—though both are necessary. They ask, in telling terms, what will be necessary to prepare students for the practice of change? Clearly, they answer, students should be prepared for workplaces where the ideologies in play come with power stakes. In a sense, Bleich’s approach does this by making the classroom a site of negotiation of identities—though his claims that classrooms can be made immune to institutional power as a kind of “safe zone” seem exaggerated.

In this sense, both books contain major critiques of assessment practices in higher education, where institutional power is most directly visible. Bleich repeats the now-familiar indictments of “military, corporate, and bureaucratic interests in testing and grading,” and advocates doing away with all grades except two (pass/fail), and adding discursive evaluation (often of portfolios). There is much merit to this suggestion. Several universities—public and private, large and small—have successfully used pass/fail discursive evaluations (although Bleich does not mention these). But Bleich never gets to the gritty details of institutionalizing such a system (details that recently brought faculty at California State University in Santa Cruz to the brink of giving up their almost thirty-year tradition of discursive pass/fail evaluation). Military, corporate, and
bureaucratic interests are perfectly capable of using discursive evaluation. Indeed, it increases bureaucracy, as two-page transcripts become sixty-page dossiers (filed in far larger and more time-consuming bureau files, available for deeper surveillance of students—and teachers). And sorting continues with discursive evaluation, as it must in any complex society, including an ideal Marxist state (not everyone who wants to can or should become a surgeon, a pilot, a social worker, a professor). The more probing analysis in Worlds Apart points to the fundamental contradiction in formal education between the social motives of learning and sorting (whether into two grades or five), a contradiction that pass/fail discursive evaluation may moderate in important ways but not alleviate. The teacher can become more of a coach—or surrogate mother—than a judge and jury, but in the end, who will decide who can and will do specialized work, and when and how? General education and humanities courses do not have to answer this question directly (though answer it they must, even in a pass/fail discursive system), but professional programs—which most college students will eventually enter—do have to. Composition and general education have not dealt much with the question of articulation with professional programs, particularly in terms of grading. Here old prejudices against specialization must be overcome to find a dialogue and a way forward, for most students will exert their ethical and civic duties as professionals, or at least in relation to professionals.

Another potential point of contact lies in the curriculum. Bleich advocates what he calls "the contingent curriculum"—contingent primarily on the particular histories of the students in the course, much less contingent on their future involvement in the powerful social practices called professions, toward which most students are heading. This is another luxury that general education courses have. The Dias book advocates a curriculum that is contingent primarily on the students' chosen future involvements but has little to say about the students' past and present involvement outside of formal education. Again, it is important for the two approaches to speak to each other, precisely because citizenship is exercised by and with professionals—journalists, labor organizers, public relations specialists, full-time organizers of environmental groups, government officials, and so on. We do not live in a town-meeting type of democracy, and curricula must reflect the complex activity systems that students will enter and transform in ways large and small, good and bad.

In terms of research methods, both are collaborative, though Worlds
Apart much more so than *Know and Tell*. Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Paré collaborated over many years, and the voices of the teachers, students, and professionals they worked with in their study are heard. Indeed, they employed participant validation, in which participants were asked to review the researchers' representations of them. Bleich taught collaboratively with a group of ninth-grade teachers, but they did not author the chapter, and their voices are not explicitly heard. It would be interesting to know what the other teachers and the students in this and Bleich's own classes had to say about his representation of their personal histories, politics, and sexuality; it would be interesting to know if their perspectives were represented.

Finally, both books frame their arguments in terms of writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines (WAC/WID). By advocating that all university courses orient toward student membership, disclosure, and genre, Bleich poses the same challenge to WAC/WID as to general composition and literature courses: how to include students' past and present involvement in our attempts to increase students' confidence and awareness of language. This is a worthy goal, but the challenge is qualitatively different (and even more difficult to meet) in specialized courses leading to professional work because teachers must be responsible to the students' futures in powerful organizations. Bleich does not address this responsibility or refer to research on students' development of professional identity and discourses in the professions. By contrast, Dias and his coauthors challenge WAC/WID to examine the limits of learning to write in higher education, and they emphasize the role of writing to learn. They suggest that students can learn the genres of writing required beyond formal schooling only in a very limited and formalized sense because writing is so very embedded in the activity systems and lived experience of people in organizations. But writing in higher education can be an important aid to learning concepts and developing a general linguistic fluency and critical awareness, they argue.

These books mark an unfortunate divide in research traditions between composition studies, which has primarily focused on general composition and general education courses, and the study of writing in the disciplines (WID) and professions (professional and technical communication), which has focused on upper-level courses and workplaces. It is a shame that these two research traditions do not engage in dialogue more than they do now. Bleich cites fewer than a handful of studies in the WAC/WID tradition. The Dias group cites much more work from the composition tradition, as well as much WAC research on undergraduates in
general education courses. But there is still little dialogue between the
two traditions.

This lack of communication reflects a general gap. The field of
composition studies has not thought in very specific terms about its
effects on students in the world of work, including the work of social
change and political activism, which also involves writing in complex
organizations mediated by interlocking systems of dynamic genres,
written mainly by professionals. Organizational cultures are as “multi”
and as powerful as the multi-cultures of nations, regions, and ethnicities.
Composition studies has—perhaps too lightly—assumed that its
pedagogies (whether instrumental or critical) have positive effects on
students’ futures, that the particular forms of collaboration and language
analysis it has evolved and is evolving can make a difference in the lived
experience of people in complex organizations. Similarly, while WID
and workplace studies have in the last ten years done significant work on
issues of identity, agency, and affect, such work has had little effect on
composition studies. Teachers and researchers in both traditions need to
know much more about how students make the transition from general to
specialized education, and about how both kinds of education affect (and
don’t affect) students’ future involvement in the lived experience of
labor—including the stabilized-for-now uses of writing we call genre.
And to that end, only dialogue can keep the two traditions from them-
selves being worlds apart.

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Works Cited

