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CCCC's paper- WAC discussion group

Paroled From the Palace of Distraction: Cultural Codes in the Comp. Classroom

John Gage, responding to a student essay in Coles and Vopat's What Makes Writing Good, opens his commentary with this telling remark, "Give me the student who is willing to write as if it really mattered that an idea be said and said well"¹. While I am admittedly de-contextualizing Gage's remark and I think maybe we all can relate to the sentiment, I see this as a problematic way to approach 1st year composition instruction. If we have such clear conception of how our students should perform when they arrive in our classes, do not our students have similar expectations? This paper looks at the gap that exists between what skills students learn in high school writing courses and what skills will ensure their success in college. I suggest that the WAC initiative could do much to remedy this problem by foregrounding diversity and actively demystifying the university setting.

Our students arrive in our classrooms with several sets of established values and ideas unique to their own discourse communities. These values, or codes as I am calling them belong to varying and ever-changing communities that may be familial, religious, cultural, linguistic, or social. Students also arrive with a pre-established and heavily cemented notion of what college is supposed to be like (difficult, fun), how to interact with teachers (at a distance), what to expect from coursework (it's totally different than high school). All too often however, as with ourselves when we attempt to pre-define who our students are and where they come from, they get it all wrong. But when we get it wrong we alienate one or two students, for them it may have consequences that can disastrously affect their potential success as scholars.

This paper is primarily concerned with two things, both of which have relevance to this writing across communities discussion. First, how can we as composition instructors engage, dismantle, demystify the cultural codes present in the classroom that inhibit our student's abilities to attain agency over their writing? Second, how and where do these codes get established? In high school, students learn to write to satisfy an exam requirement or a standardized test- while this may not be what their instructors intend, it seems to be what gets communicated- so, audience and outcome are very clearly defined. University teachers, on the other hand, value the "right" things- agency, complexity, voice, originality- but they only value these things on their own terms and by their own preconceived standards. Essentially, our discourse community overpowers theirs and intimidates it into submission. I stress the distinction between ours and theirs, because all too often this is the manner in which the teacher-student relationship is viewed. This paper begs the question how can we alter this subject positioning in our classrooms?

The notion of cultural codes has a number of varying interpretations. For this talk I am defining cultural codes as standards set for a given discourse community in a given time and place. This definition comes from John Bean's *Engaging Ideas*, in which Bean suggests the importance of cultural codes to critical reading; specifically in regards to given discourses where "an author assumes that readers have a certain background knowledge" (141). But these codes are prevalent in all forms of discourse, not only writing, and can be dangerous when this assumed knowledge is not based in reality. The student's pre-determined notion of what college is/does may best be observed by addressing its component parts- the university itself, the classroom, the author, and the text. At each

level of this coded discourse, I think writing across communities provides an active response and solution.

New students in university composition classrooms quickly discover that there is a tension between what we think they should know and what they think we expect of them. What I mean is that our standards for what skills a “good” student should have and what they’re actually learning do not always reconcile. Too often we allow ourselves to perpetuate elitist façade, or ivory tower, in which the university as a pinnacle of learning overshadows the university as a tool, a resource, and a place for individual growth. Into this monolith of vagaries, our students come armed with a shopping list for what will be expected of them in college. The guidelines for The College Board’s AP English Literature classⁱⁱ suggests some skills valued in the college writing: “1) Wide-ranging vocabulary used with denotative accuracy and connotative resourcefulness; 2) A variety of sentence structures, including appropriate use of subordinate and coordinate constructions; 3) A logical organization, enhanced by specific techniques of coherence such as repetition, transitions, and emphasis; 4) A balance of generalization with specific illustrative detail”.ⁱⁱⁱ The list was of course written by college professors, so it makes sense to us. But are these the skills we really value? And where does the individual student fit in?

In the composition classroom, further misconceptions are revealed. In high school, students are often evaluated on their ability to format responses and perform on standardized tests. But, we want our college students to think freely, to exercise discursive agency, and to find an authorial voice. The problem of course is that we want these things on our own terms and not with any deep consideration of what skills our

students already possess. Composition classrooms become battlegrounds where instructors and students struggle for discursive power. The result, of course, is that the students check out from day one. The WAC model challenges this tradition by encouraging students to embrace/foster their pre-existing skills, while championing a model for teachers as advocates who can welcome new students into what Dr. Kells calls an “intellectual life cycle.”^{iv}

Students further grapple with notions of what an author or writer should do. In high school, the focus remains on literature and literary analysis, so authors are people like Shakespeare or Hemingway. It is not surprising that a student would want to remain at a distance from such company. Upon arriving in first year writing courses, the focus shifts to social/political discourse and students are expected to spontaneously produce text filled with authority, agency, and all that stuff. The WAC program, with its cross-disciplinary emphasis and genre-based discourse will ease students into the sort of discursive agency we expect. By fostering agency in their own spheres of influence and interest, students are inspired to write beyond their teacher’s grade book and into an active world where great literature is not the only standard for successful writing.

In this sense, the texts they produce will position students as active participants in social/cultural discussions. Their writing can then move from passivity (designed for comprehension alone) to an outcome based initiative, in which agency, audience, effectiveness, and a meta-discourse about their own writing work in concert to inspire and mediate the transition from high school to college writing. We will not then be gifted with the students who write well as though it mattered, those students will offer themselves.

ⁱ Gage, John. What Makes Writing Good. Ed. William E. Coles and James Vopat. Lexington, Mass: Heath and Co. 1985. pg. 100

ⁱⁱ The College Board. *English Literature AP Guidelines*. 2006. < http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/sub_englit.html?englit> March 20, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. pgs. 140-141

^{iv} Kells, Michelle Hall. "Writing Across Communities: Diversity, Deliberation, and the Discursive Possibilities of WAC." CCCC 2006.