AFTERWARDS

RADICAL UTOPIAN VISION

> Come look and let me wonder.
> Someone. So many. The sounds of footsteps, horses and cars.
> Come look and let me wonder. And I stand on my roof
> echoing the bird's song and the world says: Do not sleep.
> Do not sleep now that you have housed your longing
> within the pain of words.
> ~From "Heartsong," by Khaled Mattawa

After claiming readers' attention for so long, I ask indulgence of some final thoughts. Throughout this discussion I have been arguing for both teaching academic writing in the accepted American style, and for using many other media and kinds of writing to do it. But suppose we let go of the idea that we had to maintain that style, defending it against the assaults of popular culture and the cultures of other countries? There are good reasons to question our loyalty. In the following pages I offer not proof, but signs that have lead me to consider these more radical possibilities. It may be that as our communities, including the academy, become more global, we need to think not just about revising our classroom practice, but about a more substantial reform of the academy itself. Perhaps we can someday create a community of scholars that coheres out of a mutual appreciation of difference, rather than enforced similarity.

Utilitarian Roots of Western Academic Discourse

As Archbishop Sprat tells us at the start of Chapter One, good writing is characterized by "shortness" and "Mathematical plainness;" more than three hundred years later, writing teachers talk about good prose being lean, spare, or clear, and advise students to be parsimonious with words, to avoid "clutter." These are fine characteristics to aim for, if the goal is to prepare students for participation in a Western capitalist system, and to perpetuate that system. Most writing teachers would not agree that this is their purpose, yet they teach in away that serves this purpose because this definition of good writing is

historically bound up with those goals. Consider this excerpt from the syllabus used in a large university writing program:

> **Exploratory draft**. The goal here is to open up your thinking, to explore possibilities, and to get down lots of writing that you can go on to work with. Don't be concerned with organization or how the draft will work for readers. You can try out different approaches--even in the same paper.
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> **Mid-process draft**. Now is the time to try to pull things together and figure out a strong coherent line of thinking and a coherent shape. Now is the time to try to clarify your purpose and start thinking about the needs of readers. You'll be adding, cutting, and reorganizing. But even a mid-process draft can benefit from remaining still a bit unsettled--from having a bit too much in it--so that when you do your concluding revision, you will still have some choice of direction or emphasis.

As an essay develops, students are to "pull things together and figure out a strong coherent line of thinking and a coherent shape." These spatial metaphors suggest Western preferences, and are coupled with more explicit instructions in writing handbooks and reinforced by individual teachers' response to student writing. Further, though a teacher may have the goal of valuing a multiplicity of discursive practices, most teachers also try to prepare students to manage the discourse of the academy, which is tightly bound up with the Utilitarian discourse system.

The term "discourse" is used in a variety of ways in the academy. In one sense, it can refer to the specific rules of communication within a discipline, and suggests matters of grammar and syntax. In this sense, there would be little agreement over what constitutes proper "academic discourse;" every field has a different idea. However, "discourse " is also used more broadly to represent the way language is used in a social context, and maybe expanded to describe a whole system of communication. In their study of intercultural communication, Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon define a discourse system as follows:

1. Members will hold a common ideological position and recognize a set of extra-discourse features which define them as a group *(ideology)*.
2. Socialization is accomplished primarily through these preferred forms of discourse *(socialization)*.
3. A set of preferred forms of discourse serves as banners or symbols of membership and identity *(forms of discourse)*.

4. Face relationships are prescribed for discourse among members or between members and outsiders *(face systems)* (98).

About the rules of this broader system of discourse, there is implicit agreement within the academy that closely parallels beliefs of Western capitalist culture. Some evidence of this agreement is easily visible in the documented rules of discourse we teach to students.

Scollon and Wang Scollon argue that most textbooks or handbooks on communication promote a style in which information is "conveyed as clearly, briefly, directly, and sincerely as possible," and that this style reflects a Utilitarian ideology that arose during the Seventeenth Century Enlightenment(94, 99). They are not the first to make this claim; back in 1973, Richard Lanham argued vigorously in *Style: An Anti-Textbook* that clear, explicit prose is a cultural construct rather than a universal good, and so other forms of prose can be equally valuable, depending on circumstances. More recently, scholars in non-Western countries, in particular China, have been looking with increasing skepticism at the universal truth-claims implied in many Western discussions of discourse, both oral and written. I have referred to many of these in my own work; unfortunately, many others have not yet been translated to English, and American scholars have been slow to respond with their own research. As recently as June 2001, Ringo Ma has argued that

...Communication has to be studied in the cultural context in which it occurs. Otherwise, answers to the "what" and "how" questions can be distorted, while the "why" question is simply ignored.

A comparison between the U.S. and Chinese Cultures should be made based not only on persuasion strategies identified in the U.S. Society, but also those recognized in the Chinese culture (276).

In order to understand our current cultural context, we need to look back at the historical roots of academic communication in the Utilitarian philosophy of the European Enlightenment.

A Primer in Utilitarian Thought

A thorough discussion of Utilitarianism and its effect on modern society requires a book of its own, but considering a few seminal concepts will suffice for this discussion. To begin with, during the seventeenth century the conception of a human being shifted from the idea that people were defined by their place in social and spiritual systems, to a notion that each person is an isolated rational being that chooses to follow the laws of society.

Indeed, the original meaning of the word "individual" is "cannot be divided," referring to one whose very existence was defined by the group. How different that is from current notions in which we are each believed to have a unique voice springing from a private and unique identity. Modern composition classrooms, with their emphasis on voice and original, critical thinking, often cause great difficulty for students who experience their own existence in a more interdependent way and who don't necessarily see a clear distinction between their "own" identity and that of their family, or other group with which they affiliate[1].

Jeremy Bentham coined the term "Utilitarianism" to describe his philosophy that defined goodness in terms of utility. According to this system, utility is anything that produces benefit, advantages, or happiness or prevents the reverse. This basic definition leads to the principle that the best course of action or the best system is that which leads to the greatest happiness for the most people. At the same time under this system, happiness was linked to freedom of expression and economic freedom. Freedom of expression allowed creativity and invention to flourish, which led to wealth, another necessary component of happiness as understood at the time. The equation can be logically rewritten to say that in a free society the most creative people will naturally produce wealth, and those who produce the most wealth for the most people will also produce the most happiness, thus being of the greatest social value. Scollon and Wang Scollon point out that under this system, creativity and productivity are assigned a monetary value; thus we see how efficiency can be taken as naturally good (103).

All of this may seem far removed from the principles of academic discourse until we consider the origins of the modern university. The scientific theories and the philosophies of the Enlightenment were developed primarily in the British Royal Society and its European counterparts. Participants in these societies introduced, debated and either accepted or rejected ideas that were communicated by means of scientific papers, a format that later expanded into many other fields (Goonatilake 36). This organizational structure is still visible today at any academic conference. Utilitarian principles also show themselves in what we require of those who wish to join the system. Then, as now, belief in the importance of technological and scientific literacy for success reinforced the idea that formal, uniform education would bring the most opportunities for happiness to the most

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1 Vai Ramaranathan and Dwight Atkinson provide a thorough discussion of how Western notions of individualism affect L2 students in writing classrooms in their article "Individualism, Academic Writing, and ESL Writers.

people, because it transmitted the necessary information efficiently and consistently, or so educators believed at the time. In America, extensive formal training is required for nearly every high-status job. In America, education teaches people to be productive members of society, and this is true in the academy as well as more generally. Thus, to succeed and be happy, we must be productive and we learn through education to be productive. If we wish to produce knowledge, formal education has become the only acceptable method of entering the conversation of the academy, and indeed, most other Western discourse systems as well. Placing such a high value on formal education conversely devalues other forms of learning, so that less formal methods that do not in the end confer some sort of recognized certificate or degree, are regarded as less valid. This devaluation handicaps those raised in cultures that do not follow the Western model, or those gifted in ways not typically recognized and certified in Western schools. Success in the a Western educational system requires mastery of the Utilitarian discourse system which, while containing a wide range of genres and forms, is generally marked by the following six characteristics, as summarized by Scollon and Wang Scollon (107):

1. anti-rhetorical
2. positivist-empirical
3. deductive
4. individualistic
5. egalitarian
6. public (institutionally sanctioned)

Anti-rhetorical: this stance is based on the idea that good writing should be transparent and free of tricks or devices, but few, if any, writing teachers would entertain this idea. But, when it comes to teaching students "what they need for writing in college classes," most teachers take all but the first point as essentials. Positivist-empirical: we push students to step away from their experiences and to write from a critical distance and to analyze ideas logically—their arguments must above "make sense to us". Individualistic: we encourage them to speak only for themselves as individuals unless they offer evidence in the institutionally sanctioned manner, and we push them to say something based uniquely in their own thoughts while repeating a familiar idea is at best criticized as cliched. Egalitarian:while we recognized the presence of power relations in the academy and in society, our goal is to make all relations as egalitarian as possible, assuming that this is

preferable to any form of hierarchy. Doing this, we inadvertently can create the perception of a power differential, because if we assume an egalitarian stance towards students (or others) who use a deferential or hierarchical system, we may be seen as dominating[2]. Conversely, we may perceive a member of a deferential or hierarchical system as passive or submissive, instead of claiming their own distinctive voice as we like to encourage. Further, as discussed in Chapter Two, efforts to be deferential can also affect organization structure, leading teachers to charge students with "beating around the bush." Public: finally, while we all promote free speech and individual expression, most of the writing produced in our classes is considered public discourse, and as such must actually follow many guidelines. We don't tend to look kindly on students who adopt a tone not considered proper for academic work, such as overly sentimental, didactic, or impassioned—characteristics considered entirely appropriate even in academic discourse in some other cultures (Li, Fox). Most college writing teachers recognize the above assumptions and behaviors—they are hard to shake off, even when we consciously try. Even the most open-minded teacher reflects and reinforces the values of American culture in a way that tends to devalue or exclude other ways of experiencing the world, and if we want to change this we may have to make ore radical and perhaps unpopular changes.

Words and Reality

Of course writing teachers hold a wide variety of pedagogical beliefs, but some beliefs are quite widespread and reflect cultural values rather than any universal truth about writing or thinking. Many writing teachers believe that a plain, straightforward style of writing is best and is also the outward sign of inwardly clear thinking. Therefore, they assume that students whose work appears to be overly complicated or tangled are not thinking clearly. This assumption is flawed in two ways. First, the belief that an unskilled performance in one domain, writing, always signals unskilled performance in thinking is based on the belief in a universal intelligence that may be expressed with equal ease in any domain. As mentioned in Chapter Three, this view was popularized by Alfred Binet and his I.Q. Test—that ironically began as an effort to eliminate class and cultural biases from intelligence testing. This view gained strength when it was promoted by Dr. David

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2 Consider, are students really allowed to ignore are suggestions? Are they allowed to write what they like, rather than what we assign? Inviting them to call us by our first names and using green rather than red pen does not negate the real power we all exercise over students.

Wechsler, who in 1939 defined intelligence as "the global capacity of a person to act purposefully, to think rationally, and to deal effectively with his/her environment." Wechsler was a seminal thinker in this area who went on to create the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scales (WAIS) and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) which are still used today (Plucker). A universal view of intelligence assumes it is something determined by biology and only differs in the amount with which each person is born. If we all posses the same kind of intelligence which can be identified with a test, then the same educational process should work equally well for all, and success depends only on individual levels of intelligence. As I hope I have demonstrated in this study, a universal view of intelligence is not supported by scientific evidence, and hinders our teaching.

So, in addition to the problems attached to defining intelligence as a universal quality, holding up plain linear writing as described by Sprat and reiterated ever since as an ideal, reveals a Western bias. This bias has been aggravated by another belief handed down from the Enlightenment, that is Cartesian dualism, the separation of mind and body. Until relatively recently, intelligence was thought to be determined entirely by biology, and that it was not influenced by culture, though certainly certain pernicious and erroneous theories have suggested race as a determining factor. A Western bias has been recognized at least since 1972 when Robert Kaplan published his article, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education" (Kaplan 1), and has been repeatedly questioned by an increasing number of scholars, to this day. While Kaplan's claims are now seen as over-simplified, his recognition of difference led to many further studies that found a more complex, but definite pattern of cultural variation in the way ideas are arranged in writing. Many scholars, some discussed here, have identified the cultural bias in American definitions of good writing.

To begin with, the senses have not been conceived of as reliable sources of information in Western thought for some time. In general, non-verbal thinking has been perceived as an immature or unsophisticated mode of thought. But our contemporary experience with computer technology has taught us that use of the wide array of graphical options now enabled by computers is no more a gimmick than the stylization of plain text. Nor does it signal a less rigorous approach to composition, or presage the extinction of writing as a means of communication. At the same time, we are also confronted with statements from scientists who are recognized internationally as important and intelligent

thinkers. Roger Penrose and Stephen Hawking, two renowned physicists, have both discussed the difficulty in talking or writing about physics. Penrose observes:

> Almost all my mathematical thinking is done visually and in terms of non-verbal concepts, although the thoughts are quite often accompanied by inane and almost useless verbal commentary, such as 'that thing goes with that thing and that thing goes with that thing'....Often the reason there is that there are simply no words available to express the concepts that are required. In fact I often calculate using specially designed diagrams...(549).

There are no words to describe things such as sub-atomic particles or the conditions around a black hole in any real way. Equations are more accurate, but many cannot efficiently encompass the huge strings of calculations needed to describe these phenomena to a physical reality. Hawking describes his own attitude toward equations:

> --I don't care much for equations myself. This is partly because it is difficult for me to write them down but mainly because I don't have an intuitive feeling for equations. Instead, I think in pictorial terms...(35).

I have to wonder how much we might be missing in our writing class and in the academy generally, when we insist on certain forma of discourse. I raised this question with another friend from China, Ge Xingan, with whom I am enjoying a language exchange. According to Xingan, scholars in China don't merely translate their papers into English when they publish them here, but completely rewrite them, because the way a paper is written to be accepted in the Chinese academy is quite different than what is required in America. We talked about what some of the differences were and agreed that this method of translation as complete revision actually deprives Western readers of an important aspect of the scholars' or students' thinking. When we read a paper that has been rewritten to suit the Western or American academy, we may get the ideas, but we lose they way that writer thought about them and understood them If we truly value individuality, should we not value the individual ways each person thinks? For the sake of our students and our own as well, we must reconsider what we may be missing, what richness and complexity, and insight, by recognizing such a narrow range of discourse as correct for scholarly communication.

But what is my radical solution for this difficult situation? In the Conclusion, I suggest some changes we can make in the classroom, and those are fine as stop-gaps while

we work on a more substantive revision. I think that in oder to address this problem at the root, we have to start not in the undergraduate classroom, but with our colleagues and our teachers in training, that is, our graduate students. Most composition teachers are significantly overworked, especially those working as adjuncts, lecturers, or in some other ghetto-ized role, and asking for even more work and research is not reasonable. Instead, we can bring MI Theory, intercultural communication, and non-Western rhetorics into graduate classes and to professional workshops. Making study of these topics part of our regular work rather than unpaid add-ons will ensure they are treated as important parts of our professional discourse. It's all very well for us to say that other cultures have important rhetorical traditions, but if we only teach the western version to our graduate students, what message do they really get? Further, the narrow vision I address in this research could not have lasted so long if those of us who are aware of work in other disciplines went beyond the occassional conference paper or article, and organized workshops in which to teach other scholars about this material, or even started online discussions in highly visible locations such as LinguaMoo, rather than talking primarily among ourselves. Of course all of these strategies for inclusion still involve substantial work, but we must start somewhere. Saying we value other ways of knowing and writing means little if we aren't also willing to act, and even sweat a little, to give those other ways a place in the academy.

To allay any lingering fears that I depreciate or wish to discard language I'll end my soap-box stand with a passage I wrote some years ago about the relation of language to reality:

> Considering the idea that the world finds its true existence through our perception, I realize that language has not lost its magic. Rather, its power is complex, relying not on the words themselves, but on the work of those who use them when they read and write. Without the writer to experience the world and the language, and the reader to work the spell (as it were) in reverse, the world would hardly exist at all.
> (from "The Power of *Logos*" wich is a section of my personal website, *Darkmede)*

Make no mistake; words are magic. But many other media carry their own magic as well, and all the different ways of using all these media can be rigorous and insightful and enlightening and we should embrace them all.