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The Problem Problem and Other Oddities of Academic Discourse

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Abstract
Habits of thinking and writing that are so familiar to academics that we hardly recognize them often seem counter-intuitive to high school and college students. These habits include the search for hidden meanings in texts and experience generally, the inclination to be contentious and to foment controversy, the tendency to make seemingly obvious assumptions explicit and the general obsession with searching for problems where often there do not seem to be any. The most productive way for teachers to help students cope with these unfamiliar academic habits is to identify these habits in class, inviting students to discuss them and even air their doubts about them.

Keywords: academic discourse, argument, debate, hidden meaning, interpretation, oppositional, problem, problematize, teaching, writing

As teachers we often proceed as if the rationale of our most basic academic practices is understood and shared by our students, even when we get plenty of signs to the contrary. We take for granted, for example, that reflecting in a self-conscious way about experience - 'intellectualizing' - is something our students naturally see the point of and want to learn to do better. If they do not, after all, why are they in school? Yet we cannot help noticing that many students are skeptical about the value of such intellectualizing. In fact, when students do poorly at academic tasks, the reasons often have less to do with their lack of ability than with their reluctance to become the introspective type of person who relishes and excels at such tasks.

Aversion to the apparent pretentiousness of intellectual ways of communicating is often central to this reluctance. In The Unschooled Mind, Howard Gardner observes that the problems students have in comprehending texts are
often magnified by their ‘insensitivity . . . to the vocabulary of argument – “contend”, “hypothesize”, “refute”, “contradict” . . .’ (Gardner, 1991: 1).

Gardner is right about the connection between poor reading comprehension and students’ lack of a ‘vocabulary of argument’. The problem, however, often lies not in the students’ insensitivity to this vocabulary but their disinclination to acquire it. In some high schools students risk ostracism if they use expressions like ‘hypothesize’ or ‘I contend’. As the saying goes, nobody likes a smartass.

Hillel Crandus, a teacher of eleventh-grade English, asked his class to write short papers (which Crandus shared with me) expressing how they felt about analysis, especially the kind of close interpretative reading of texts that is the staple of literature courses. One student, call her Karen, wrote as follows:

Personally, I don’t like analyzing everything that happens to me. Some of it would be a big waste of time. I sometimes find myself analyzing dreams that I’ve had, but it’s usually pretty pointless. To me a lot of things happen for a very obvious reason that does not need a lot of discussion or insight.

Another stated flatly that ‘The only thing that overanalyzing leads to is boredom’.

In my experience, the distaste Karen feels for ‘analyzing everything that happens’ to you, and the belief that some things ‘happen for a very obvious reason’ which needs no further inquiry, do not necessarily disappear once students move on to college, though by that age students have often learned to become more guarded about betraying such views in the presence of their teachers. As a University of Chicago undergraduate put it, “academic” type people take life too seriously and don’t let themselves read for enjoyment. There’s more to life than intellect . . . you can read for fun’. A UIC freshman told his composition instructor, ‘I don’t want to dig deeper into the meaning of something. What I say is what I mean’. Whenever I have polled students on the question, many say they have a problem with academia’s tendency to turn everything it touches into grist for the analytic mill, almost as if there were a deliberate attempt to spoil everybody’s fun.

In this article, I look at some standard academic intellectual practices that seem second nature to many teachers (and A students), but come across to many students as bizarre, counter-intuitive, or downright nonsensical. These perceptions of the absurd nature of intellectual practices underlie the stereotypes of egghead, nerd, sissy, snob, braniac, know-it-all, brown-noser, control freak, ideologue, manipulative propagandist. These characterizations are rooted in misperceptions of the life of the mind, but they are not likely to be dispelled unless they are flushed out into the open and discussed with students.
Nothing better exemplifies the apparently counter-intuitive nature of intellectual practices than their obsession with what often appear to be bogus 'problems'. Academic assignments ask students not only to become aggressive know-it-alls, but to cultivate problems to an extent that seems perverse or bizarre. I call this syndrome the 'problem problem'.

One reason why students often resist the academic fixation with problems is suggested by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb and Joseph Williams in their valuable primer on academic writing, The Craft of Research. Booth et al. discuss the difficulties inexperienced students have with the conventions used to set up the problems that form the starting point of most expository essays (Booth et al., 1995: 59–63). Yet the difficulties students have in constructing a problem that launches an essay stem not only from their unfamiliarity with the conventions of problem posing, but from deeper uncertainties about the 'problematizing' role itself.

Booth et al. do not mention these uncertainties, but they provide a clue to them when they distinguish between problems that are recognized to be such and those that are not (Booth et al., 1995: 48–60). Problems of the first kind, such as earning a living, finding a mate, curing heart disease, preventing air pollution or eliminating poverty and homelessness come to us with a seemingly pre-given quality. These problems are already so widely acknowledged that writers can take them up without having to make an argument for seeing them as problems, though there are situations in which they might have to (e.g. addressing an audience of social Darwinists on poverty). Many of the problems with which academics deal, however, lack this pre-given quality, as for example when they concern the meanings of words, abstract concepts and texts or the actions of people long dead. In such cases, where we cannot assume that others will see the problem we are taking up as a problem, we have to work to 'sell' them on its reality and importance. Academics not only cultivate problems that are not recognized as such, they like to invent problems that most people are not aware of or look for new ways to describe already recognized problems.

In this penchant for problematizing, academic research scholars resemble avant-garde artists who 'defamiliarize' previously familiar subjects, using 'alienation effects' to make what seems obvious and unproblematic look strange. However, despite the lip service given to Socrates' maxim that the unexamined life is not worth living, searching out new problems can seem profoundly counter-intuitive: are there not already enough problems out there without our straining to invent new ones? From a certain common sense point of view, academic cultivation of problems looks manufactured, perverse and silly, so much
so that academic problem- posers tend to resemble the dotty scientists on the island of Laputa in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, who grapple earnestly with the problem of how to turn excrement back into its original food.

A good example of the perceived absurdity of many of the problems addressed by academics is reported by Vivian Gornick in her memoir, *Fierce Attachments*, in which Gornick describes how her immersion in the intellectual life as a student at New York's City College alienated her from her mother in the Bronx. Gornick relates how her sentences:

... got longer within a month of [her] first classes. Longer, more complicated, formed by words whose meaning she did not know, ... It made [her mother] crazy ... 'What are you talking about?' she would shout at me. 'What are you talking about? Speak English, please! We all understand English in this house. Speak it.' (Gornick, 1987: 108)

When Gornick tried to explain to her mother the book she was reading, 'A comparative history of the idea of love over the last three hundred years', her mother would have none of it: “That's ridiculous”, she said slowly. “Love is love. It's the same everywhere, all the time. What's to compare?” (Gornick, 1987: 109)

The academic faith in the singular virtue of finding problems in subjects - love in Gornick's case - generally thought to be unproblematic seems especially bizarre and forced when the problems have to do with the meanings of texts. That below their apparent surface, texts harbor deep meanings that cry out for interpretation, analysis and debate is one of those assumptions that seems so normal once we are socialized into academia that we forget how counter-intuitive it can be. In fact, this assumption has probably never been comprehensible, much less convincing, to much of the general population. (A certain college Dean is said to have wondered aloud why entire departments are needed to study the books he has no problem reading on the train to work every day.) We might make an exception in the case of scriptural texts, whose meanings have been picked apart and debated for so many centuries that the practice does not seem odd - except to Unitarians and other sects that see even scriptural interpretation and theological debate as misconceived.

In their written responses, many of Crandus' eleventh graders confess that most classroom analysis of texts and interpretations seems tedious and pointless, an infinite regress that goes nowhere. As one student, Elaina, put it, 'a student will make a comment that, maybe to me, seems straightforward, yet we still seem to dig deeper into just what that comment meant'. Karen, the student whose reservations I quoted above toward 'analyzing everything that happens to me', wrote as follows about a class discussion of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*:

... it seems to me that we analyzed things that didn't seem to have much to analyze. For instance, the fire episode in the beginning of the book. In my opinion, Richard started
the fire out of curiosity and boredom. The discussion we had in class got into things like it symbolizes his imagination or internal impulses, or even how he feels about his racial impression. I’m not saying that these aren’t good ideas, but I think it’s making something out of nothing . . .

Another reason I do not like [to] analyze, though this might sound arrogant, is because it is not important to me. I don’t care what the fire in Black Boy symbolizes. It doesn’t really make [any] difference to me. To some people, it does make a difference, and that’s fine with me. But I don’t really see how this helps me out in my life, the past, the present, or the future. It could end up helping me a lot, you never really know. I know it will help me out in college English classes.

Karen suspects that the symbolism attributed to works like Black Boy is simply not there in the text – in any case, she can’t see it. Just as for her ‘a lot of things happen for a very obvious reason that does not need a lot of discussion or insight’, whatever a text means is apparent on the surface and therefore not in need of analysis. But even if deeper meanings are indeed present in the text, Karen adds, she does not care. On the other hand, she acknowledges that such things do matter to some people and might someday to her, if only to help her get through college English courses.

Another student, Eileen, complains:

. . . that during our classroom discussions, we tend to pick and pick at every single aspect of a paragraph until there is nothing left. I don’t even remember half the time what the discussion started off about . . . . That is why I think that when we have our classroom discussions, they not to be so in depth . . . . In my past, I have never really enjoyed reading, so that I am sure may be a factor in this. But I still feel that I am not alone on this one. Many students have agreed with me on my thoughts. In one paper a student described our classroom discussions as,’ . . . beating a dead horse . . . ‘. I think that we have a great class that is a lot of fun, but sometimes, things just get way too deep for me.

A fourth student, Laura, who objects to being forced to analyze, writes that ‘I have talked to some students that I know feel this way. They dislike the thought of being forced to pick apart why things went a certain way. One, they don’t see the point, two, they sometimes have no clue what’s going on, and three, they could care less why it happened’.

From Elaina, Karen, Eileen and Laura’s common sense perspective, asking what texts mean is superfluous since texts are self-interpreting. Either they mean what they say or they are obscure, but either way there is little point trying to decode them. It is tempting to ascribe these beliefs to adolescent naivete, but their view is probably shared by most adults in our culture. Indeed, the belief that texts and other things speak for themselves and therefore do not require interpretation has deep roots in Western philosophy (as Jacques Derrida shows in a commentary on Plato’s Phaedrus, a dialogue in which Plato indicts writing for undermining the self-evident meaning that he thinks is
made immune to misunderstanding by face-to-face oral communication (Derrida, 1981: 102–112)). From this Platonic point of view, the meaning of a text, say, on the nature of love is simply whatever the text itself says. To find out what Plato has to say about love, you read the text. It follows that to make a problem out of what the text means, as teachers do in discussing the text in class, is to make a mountain out of a molehill. After all, if the author had really intended the hidden meaning ascribed to him by one or another interpreter, why did he not come out and say it? In short, what's the big deal?

The problem is deepened by uncertainties about intention, a concept that has itself been elaborately debated by aestheticians and philosophers of language. Jay, another of Crandus' eleventh graders, finds classroom analysis of textual intentions 'not interesting':

Like when we are asked to think about the way an author would respond to our responses, how are we supposed to know? As far as I know most of us are not close personal friends with any of the authors we have read so far. So why would we know what the author would think?

Laura writes, when asked why something happens the way it does in a text, 'I would have trouble analyzing why it happened because I wasn't there, I have never personally talked to the author . . .'. A tenth grader at another school expressed a view similar to that of Jay and Laura in a symposium on Shakespeare's The Tempest when I asked her if she thought Shakespeare shared the preference she had expressed for Caliban over Prospero: 'I wouldn't know', she replied, 'I never met the man'. As these students see it, either a text's intention is obvious on the face of it or it is not. If it is not, we can phone the author and ask what his or her intention was, but if the author is dead or otherwise unavailable, there is nothing much to be done. So again, where's the problem?

If what authors intend does not seem a genuine problem, then making a problem of unintended psychological or social meanings in texts seems all the more patently a waste of time. A college teacher reports the following exchange between a freshman student and her on Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. The teacher, hoping to get her class to see the contradictory treatment of racial injustice in the novel, called attention to the apparent discrepancy between the novel's satire on slavery and racism and the many passages in which the slave Jim is made a comic butt of Huck and Tom Sawyer's pranks. One student, however, offered an explanation of the discrepancy that seemed more plausible to him than the presence of cultural contradictions:

Teacher: So what do you all make of the apparent contradiction here?
Student: Hey, maybe Twain was having a bad day. Or maybe he just didn't care.
T: How's that?
S: I mean, maybe he was just lazy, or he had to make a deadline?
The teacher retorted that even if we assume Mark Twain was lazy, indifferent, or in a hurry, that would not explain why these qualities expressed themselves in the racially coded way they did rather than in some other way. She realized, however, that her response was not convincing her student and many of his classmates. They resisted entertaining the kind of richly symptomatic reading that she, as a good intellectual, was angling for, one in which textual anomalies betray deeper and more interesting problems.

The instructor reflected that she had not prepared the class for looking at contradictions in texts, or even mentioned the topic. She also reflected that it had only been in graduate school that she had discovered that texts might be all the more interesting and even valuable for the contradictions they contained. In both her high school and college courses she had been taught that great works of art are unified and had learned to write papers that discovered the principle of unity in the work’s themes, language, or symbolism. If there were contradictions in a work, it presumably could not be of the first rank. In her future classes, she resolved to introduce the issue of textual contradictions and discuss it with students rather than expect them to know in advance that they were supposed to be alert to them.

If it seems dubious to make a problem out of the meanings even of canonical writers like Shakespeare, Plato and Twain, it can only seem more dubious make a problem of the meanings of popular romances, films and television programs, not to mention events like the O.J. Simpson trial. Teachers have long complained about students who, when asked to interpret popular culture, respond with the comment, ‘But it’s just a movie.’ At the symposium I just mentioned on The Tempest, some college as well as high-school students rolled their eyes conspicuously when a college student started to unpack the assumptions about gender roles in an episode of the television series Home Improvement. The students were willing to grant the possibility of hidden depths in Shakespeare, but in a television sitcom – give me a break!

Again, such doubts about intellectual over-reading would not be so pervasive among students if they were not widely shared by educated adults. The view that popular culture productions either have no meaning or none that is worth discussing is pervasive among academics as well as journalists, who periodically issue derisive editorials whenever an academic is caught attributing gender attitudes, say, to a Madonna performance or an episode of Friends. To be sure, the subtle allegories academic critics claim to find in popular or high culture do sometimes stretch the reasonable limits of credibility. In my view, however, analysts of popular culture are right that such works influence our beliefs and behavior all the more powerfully because they come imbedded in seemingly innocuous ‘mere’ entertainment that is not thought worthy of close scrutiny. There is a difference, in short, between legitimate critical skepticism
toward over-the-top symbolic readings that fail to justify themselves with reasons and evidence and the anti-intellectual dismissal of any reading that challenges the received understanding of a text or event. That said, however, it is important that teachers not dismiss students’ skeptical doubts about the academic obsession with the problem of hidden meanings. Unless those doubts are respected and fairly aired and discussed, students will feel they have no choice but to play along with an interpretative game whose validity they do not believe in.

When this happens, students repress their anxiety and alienation and some end up resorting to ‘Cliffs Notes’, or increasingly nowadays to the Internet. In his recent book, The Crafty Reader, Robert Scholes quotes a sampling of Internet postings by desperate students who have been asked to produce accounts of what something in a text means:

1. Subject: Huck Finn’s symbolism of the river.
   I am writing a paper on the symbolism of the Mississippi River in Huck Finn. How is the river a symbolic mother to Huck? I need examples from the book too. Please help fast.
2. Subject: Oedipus Rex – Irony
   I need help finding Irony in Oedipus Rex. There’s supposedly a lot in there but I’ve been assigned Scene II and there’s only so much.
3. Subject: symbolism: gardens
   What do gardens symbolize? are there any sexual innuendos? anything one could dig up on the symbolism of gardens? (Scholes, 2000: 24)

What is striking here is that the writers of these posts clearly see interpretation as an occult process rather than one that might be mastered by learning disciplined reading and thinking. As they see it, rivers and gardens have some fixed but secret meaning that you either get or do not; if you are one of those who does not, you can only get on the Web and try to find one of those who does.

Some of course would argue that this kind of student desperation only demonstrates that it has been a serious mistake to put the interpretation of hidden meaning at the center of the academic Humanities, since such interpretation turns texts into crossword-puzzles and trivializes reading. To me, however, these student postings demonstrate not the folly of asking students to search for deep meanings in texts, but the failure to give students the help they need to conduct that search well and with a sense of how and why it can be useful. As Scholes comments, “These students are crying for help” (2000: 25). Students who run to the web to find out what gardens and rivers symbolize have no other recourse when their teachers treat such questions as self-evident and not in need of explanation. The practice of searching out and inventing ‘problems’, whether posed by texts or other objects of study, needs
For many students, academia's fixation on seemingly superfluous problems seems linked with another off-putting trait, its relentless negativism and oppositionality. In *Errors and Expectations*, her classic book on the problems of basic writing students, Mina Shaughnessy touches on this trait in describing the problems novice writers have when they are 'expected to make “new” or arguable statements and then develop a case for them ...' (Shaughnessy, 1977: 240). To make 'a case' for yourself, to make statements that are 'arguable', you must be oppositional and defensive, if not cantankerous. Indeed, the value academia places on making 'arguable' statements can seem, not only needlessly embattled, but flatly illogical. Why would any sane person go out of his or her way to say things that are 'arguable'? Just as common sense suggests that it is foolish to invent problems that did not previously exist, it also suggests that the point of writing and speaking should be to make statements that nobody is likely to argue with, that provoking disagreement is a sign that the writer has failed. A sound essay, according to this seemingly common sense way of thinking, would consist of uncontroversially true statements. In fact, this way of thinking persists in some disciplines, where knowledge is seen not as a conversation or debate but an accumulation of positivist truths, a sort of pyramid of discrete facts built up brick by isolated brick.

As often, however, common sense is wrong, which explains why we do not find many essays with titles like 'Human beings have elbows', 'Breathing is possible', 'Washington is the nation's capital', though all these propositions are perfectly true. As Booth et al. pointed out, 'readers think a claim significant to the degree that it is contestable' (1995: 95) or, in Shaughnessy's term, 'arguable'. Precisely because nobody disputes them, uncontroversially true statements by definition are inarguable and therefore not worth making, at least not as an essay's main thesis. The reason why official prose sounds notoriously banal is that it goes out of its way to be uncontroversial. A college of education mission statement I have seen declares that 'We are committed to preparing individuals to become outstanding teachers, who understand and teach students in thoughtful, caring, and intelligent ways'. The college here takes a courageous stand against those who would prepare teachers to be thoughtless, uncaring, and unintelligent.

Paradoxically, claims that are arguable and solicit disagreement are a sign of an argument's viability, not its failure. A completely uncontroversial proposition does not even qualify as an 'argument' – we would never say, 'the man
argued that Washington, DC, is the nation’s capital. Unless this paradox is pointed out, however, many students will labor under the misapprehension that the goal of an essay is to string together a series of uncontroversially true statements. A student who turns in such an essay will – and should – draw an instructor’s comment of ‘So?’ or ‘Who disputes it?’.

On the other hand, imagine a student, chastened by such comments, trying to do as he or she is told. Instead of making an uncontroversial and therefore negligible claim, our student goes to the other extreme and offers a claim that is outrageously controversial. Now the instructor’s response shifts from ‘Who disputes it?’ to ‘Surely not’ or ‘What’s your evidence for that?’. Clearly, formulating a tenable point is a tightrope act in which students have to court controversy, but only as much as they can anticipate and deal with. Here is why finding a makeable ‘point’, as Shaughnessy pointed out (1977: 241), can be harder than it looks.

Expert players of the game of public discourse know that the easiest way to set yourself up to make a tenable point is to contest a point somebody else has made or, even better, has taken for granted. Such experts have acquired an inventory of formulaic templates for this kind of contestation. In Lives on the Boundary, Mike Rose cites fellow compositionist David Bartholomae’s suggestion that, ‘when stuck, student writers should try the following “machine”: “While most readers of ______ have said ______, a close and careful reading shows that _______”’ (Rose, 1989: 189). According to a walker’s guide to the city of Chicago, freshmen at the University of Chicago are given the following advice: ‘If someone asserts it, deny it; if someone denies it, assert it’.

Rose observes that this reflexive negativity ‘perfectly expresses the ethos of the university’, though ‘university professors have for so long been socialized into this critical stance, that they do not realize how unsettling it can be to students who do not share their unusual background’ (1989: 189). Rose is right, but it also needs to be added that some professors find this ethos as ‘unsettling’ as students do and perhaps for that reason fail to call students’ attention to it. As students go from teacher to teacher and subject to subject, they often receive confusingly mixed signals about the value of controversy: Mr B the physicist regards it as a distraction from the uncontroversial truths of science, whereas for Ms J the chemist the clash and warfare of competing hypotheses is at the center of science; Mr R the embattled moralist philosopher and Ms C the feminist political scientist love to stir up debate and they reward contentious students, but Ms A the feminist art historian regards debate as an unfortunate expression of macho agonism.

To the confusion created by these mixed messages add the fact that what counts as a wildly controversial statement in one course or discipline may be
seen as uncontroversial or old hat in another. As a consequence, students are often left unsure whether controversy is to be courted or avoided, and since their teachers' different views of controversy are screened from one another in courses that do not communicate, the question is rarely posed in an overt way. No wonder, then, that students get no clear view of how controversial it is acceptable to be or of how to be controversial in an acceptable way, and that many end up opting for docility and not making waves.

That many academics are nervous or ambivalent about the fact that academia rewards an oppositional stance helps explain why they often keep the secret to themselves, leaving the high achieving students to discover it on their own. Whereas the high achievers intuit the conventional templates of contemplation and contravention ('While most think X, I argue Y ...') from their reading, the rest will not acquire them unless such templates are explicitly supplied. When this does not happen, students are forced to play the academic game with one hand tied behind their backs.

persuasion as aggression

When the academic penchant for problematizing, negativity and oppositionality goes unexplained, the intellectual energy expended on academic tasks tends naturally to look like mere aggression rather than reasonable behavior. There is thus a connection between the impenetrability of academic practices and the association of intellectualism with bullying and other unattractive personal qualities, especially those that involve persuasion. To argue persuasively, you have to have an axe to grind; to want others to do something they are not already doing, if only to think differently than they do about something. Such an attitude will at best seem presumptuous and at worst arrogant and coercive.

In her autobiography A Life in School, Jane Tompkins gives a vivid description of how it feels to be this sort of person, so bursting with the passion to persuade that it hurts:

There are situations that set going in me an electric current that has to discharge itself in words. I sit in meetings, and before I know it, I've spoken passionately, sure there's some point that has to be made, which no one can see but me. If the meeting lasts long enough, I have to speak twice, three times. It's got nothing to do with the topic, or very little; the dynamic is almost physical. If I don't talk I'll explode. . . . When talking is being, and being is being listened to, not talking drains your life away. (Tompkins, 1996: 65)

Though Tompkins waxes lyrically in passages like this one about the passion for argument, she fears that such a passion may have more to do with showing off, exerting control and gratifying her ego than with a commitment to truth. If even a first-class rhetorician like Tompkins feels uneasy about her persuasive abilities, it is not surprising if students shy away from cultivating theirs.
For many students, the very word ‘argument’ (like ‘criticism’) conjures up an image not of spirited conversational give and take, but of acrimonious warfare in which competitors revile each other and make enemies yet rarely end up changing each other’s minds. Disputes end up producing winners and losers, stirring up bad feelings or a stalemate that frustrates all parties; either way they are useless except for stirring up bad blood.

This tendency to equate persuasion with aggression is especially rife among students who grow up in liberal pluralist environments, where ‘Live and let live’ is a ruling maxim and ‘whatever’ the popular mantra. As students often put it, ‘You have your opinions, I have mine, so what’s the point of either of us trying to persuade each other? We are all individuals, and nobody has the right to tell anybody else what to do or think’. There seems little value in becoming the pushy type of person solicited by academic writing assignments, which seem to rest on the arrogant premise that other people should think the way you do or that you have the right to generalize about or speak for others.

On the other hand, students from more traditional backgrounds often share their liberal classmates’ dim view of persuasion. To Christian fundamentalists, the surrounding secularized society may seem too far gone to be open to persuasion. From a fundamentalist viewpoint, moreover, the culture of persuasion and argument seems in league with a Godless secular humanism that views moral issues as endlessly subject to debate. Whether from secular or religious backgrounds, then, American students are often trained to regard persuasion as at best a waste of time and at worst asking for trouble.

Finally, we have little incentive to improve our persuasive skills if we are not confident that our arguments might conceivably have some effect on the world. Today’s students’ lack of faith in the power of persuasion reflects the waning of the ideal of democratic participation that centuries ago led educators to place rhetorical and argumentative training at the center of the school and college curriculum. Underlying the centrality of this training was a classical conception of public citizenship that has come to seem unreal as the small town has given way to urban massification and as the ideal of the citizen has been displaced by that of the consumer. If even successful adults find it hard to imagine themselves influencing public policy through their rhetorical and argumentative skills, students find it all the harder to visualize themselves in such public roles.

The standard freshman theme assignment that asks students to take a stand on public issues like homelessness, poverty or abortion rests on the increasingly hollow pretense that what we think and say about such issues can actually make a difference. Given the notoriously widespread cynicism about the chances that our opinions (or votes) will influence public policy, it is hardly surprising if students are fatalistic too. These doubts about the payoff of
persuasion underlie much of the student relativism that has been so widely deplored for half a century now. When students say that value judgments are merely matters of subjective opinion, what looks like philosophical relativism may actually be an inability to imagine a situation in which one's opinions and arguments might have consequences.

The emergence of the Internet, the electronic town meeting and talk-back radio hold out some promise that this cynical fatalism can be reversed. We may also be witnessing a revival of student idealism and activism, qualities which may never have completely disappeared. The same student who claims at one moment that all beliefs are subjective can often be found a moment later arguing passionately for a cause. Adolescent cynicism and fatalism often mask uncertainty, as if students were challenging their elders to talk them out of it. Again these are important issues to be raised in class.

**elaborated codes**

Another counter-intuitive feature of academic intellectual discourse is its seemingly superfluous degree of self-explanation and elaboration, by contrast with casual conversation. Shaughnessy observes that conversation accustoms students to feeling 'free to express opinions without a display of evidence or [to] recount experiences without explaining what they “mean”'. Students so trained, according to Shaughnessy, tend to assume that 'the reader understands what is going on in the writer's mind and needs therefore no introductions or transitions or explanations' (1977: 14). Instructors' comments like 'needs further explanation', or 'what's the context here?' seem simply obtuse, for the explanation and the context seem obvious and self-evident to the student. Novice writers often have trouble generating much quantity of text, since to unpack and elaborate on their points would make them feel they are laboring the obvious.

Shaughnessy's point is reinforced by the work of British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein, who argues that expository writing and other forms of public communication comprise an 'elaborated code', in which assumptions and arguments are explicitly unpacked for anonymous audiences who cannot be assumed to already know them, in contrast to the 'restricted code' of conversation between intimates, where many things can go without saying. According to Bernstein, elaborated codes characterize the more abstract and distanced interactions of middle class and professional life, whereas restricted codes are characteristic of the face-to-face communication of working-class culture (Bernstein, 1975: 93 ff.). Shirley Brice Heath cites Bernstein in her comparative analysis of working- and middle-class cultures in *Ways With Words*, showing how restricted codes prevent working class students from entering the

Linguists such as William Labov and Rosina Lippi-Green have challenged Bernstein’s distinction, especially his overly neat identification of working-class culture with restricted codes, when the same codes can often be found in middle-class culture as well (Lippi-Green, 1997: 111–12). Labov rightly points out that what Bernstein regards as the superior elaborated code of middle-class communication may simply be ‘turgid, redundant, bombastic, and empty’ (Labov, 1972: 208). Though these criticisms may point up a blind spot in Bernstein’s view, his distinction between restricted and elaborated codes seems to shed useful light on many problems students have with public discourse.

For example, the concept of restricted code helps account for students’ difficulties with the convention of summarizing other’s views before responding to them or of anticipating and formulating possible objections to one’s arguments, conventions that can seem pedantic and affected. I stumbled on this problem in the project to which I referred earlier that involved teaching Shakespeare’s The Tempest to college and high-school students. I noticed that though the eleventh graders in the project often stated their views very forcefully, they almost never mentioned, much less summarized, the opposing views of classmates or teachers, even when they were responding directly to those views. Asked to write email posts in which they took sides in the play’s conflict between Caliban and Prospero, here is how two students, Dorothy and Chris, responded:

Dorothy: We believe that Prospero’s actions [against Caliban] were justified because Caliban attempted to rape Prospero’s daughter. Caliban feels absolutely no remorse for attempting to ‘violate the honor’ of Miranda. When Caliban was confronted by Prospero, he says, ‘O ho, O ho! Would’t have been done!’

Chris: Prospero is an evil, manipulative, racist, slaver, a murderer, a liar, and a tyrant. Caliban is an innocent, a victim of Prospero’s cruel manipulations . . .

Dorothy and Chris express themselves with passion and force and they have read the text with admirable closeness, but since they make no mention of what those who oppose them say or might say, they sound as if they are merely making counter assertions rather than engaging others in debate. They state their ideas in a vacuum rather than grapple with ones that are different from theirs.

Dorothy and Chris may be used to the restricted code of conversation, in which the physical presence of interlocutors relieves them of the need to summarize their views. Since in conversation their classmates are present to them and surely know what they have just said, why bother to summarize them? As for their teacher’s views, it would seem even more superfluous, if
not presumptuous, to restate them, since if anyone knows what he or she thinks it is your teacher. Nobody has told Dorothy and Chris that in the more distanced conditions of writing (and of rigorous oral argumentation), we often need to summarize others (even when they are physically present) in order to make sure we are on the same page, to establish the common ground necessary for advancing the discussion.

Theorists of psychological development like the influential William Perry might see the self-centered quality of Dorothy and Chris’s thinking as a reflection of the developmental stage typical of 12-year-old minds (Perry, 1970). This kind of developmental theory can readily become a self-fulfilling prophecy, however. Dorothy and Chris may fail to restate opposing views not because they have yet to reach the developmental stage for recognizing opposing views, but because nobody has ever suggested to them that they need to make such restatements, why they need to do it, and how they could do it. Even at their ages they can probably do better, but we will not find out unless they are challenged to do so and given help.

Conclusion

In this article I have summarized some of the main features of academic discourse that seem odd or counter-intuitive when left unexplained. I believe the best way of dealing with these apparent oddities is not to avoid them, but to build classroom discussions and writing assignments around the questions they pose and to let students debate these questions. What is the point of looking for hidden meanings in everything we read? Why must we have a ‘point’ all the time? How do you know if the meanings a reader ascribes to a text are really there or not, and how can you debate the issue? Do works of entertainment have hidden meanings as the acknowledged classics do? Why summarize and restate other people’s views even when those people are present? Does academia reward or punish students who are aggressively argumentative? Is it in fact arrogant to try to persuade others that you are right? Is debate about ideas a form of warfare or a way of getting beyond warfare? Do you want to intellectualize or not and why or why not? These are all challenging questions that are central to education, yet they have been allowed to fall into the cracks between courses and disciplines.

Whatever side students come down on over these questions—and students will divide on them as much as most of us do—opening these questions for discussion has the educationally desirable effect of positioning students as anthropologists—intellectual analysts—of their own academic lives. Even if some students end up rejecting academic roles, they at least may discover that their rejection will be more powerfully expressed if they draw on the resources
of academic discourse to formulate it. This tactic may not eliminate student anti-intellectualism, but it can give it a more intellectual cast, and for teachers this is more than half the battle.

references


biographical note

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