

## Writing in the Disciplines

Writing in the Disciplines is the research study of specialized literate forms and practices within academic disciplines. The kinds of texts read and written by members of disciplines, the manner and situation in which such texts are read and written, and the ways in which they carry out disciplinary projects characteristically set disciplinary writing apart from other forms of writing. Moreover, disciplines differ from one another in their writing practices, and local circumstances influence how these texts appear and how they are used in individual cases. Historically, disciplines have developed specialized vocabularies, conventions, styles, genres, criteria of judgment, uses for texts, intertextual systems, as well as forums such as conferences and journals. These writing practices, furthermore are embedded within the social institutions, organizations, and relationships that comprise disciplinary communities. An understanding of the varied kinds of literate practices and artifacts that are part of disciplinary life and the variables that influence these practices help us understand how disciplines produce knowledge and provide guidance for the teaching and learning of such writing.

Although disciplinary writing may often be dismissed as esoteric, arcane, jargon-ridden and irrelevant to ordinary life, it is a crucial mechanism for generating knowledge that is powerfully influential in contemporary society, and thus needs to be understood on its own terms before any critique is made of it on political, philosophical, or stylistic grounds. Further, for students entering into disciplinary practices, any knowledge we can gain about disciplinary literacy will provide both practical support for their socialization into disciplines and reflexive, critical understanding of the practices they are starting to engage in.

Writing in the Disciplines is related to, but not the same as Writing Across the Curriculum. Because the literate experiences that are part of the college curriculum are frequently related directly and indirectly to disciplinary literate practices, Writing in the Disciplines can provide helpful clues about how writing may be supported throughout the undergraduate curriculum; nonetheless, educational institutions, organization of curriculum, the variety of student goals, and other educational priorities make undergraduate writing distinct from the writing produced by professionals in the disciplines. Much of the writing demands of graduate education, however, may be viewed as apprenticeship to disciplinary practices.

Because academic disciplines are highly structured social formations, readily available to researchers, Writing in the Disciplines is a major research site for the wider study of how literate practices are socially located and institutionally organized, and provides many of the cases for the understanding of Discourse Community and other literate social formations. Thus it is at the forefront of socially-oriented rhetorical research and theory.

### **Research Themes**

Study of writing in the disciplines has been produced by scholars of varying interests. Language oriented scholars have tended to study the genres, conventions, styles, and registers of disciplinary writing. More sociologically oriented scholars have studied how these features of language are related to the emerging social projects and social structures

of disciplines. Philosophically oriented scholars have looked at the implications of the writing for the character of knowledge generated by the disciplines. Practitioners in various disciplines have critically reflected on the assumptions and contradictions built into disciplinary literacy practices. Educationally oriented scholars have looked at how students and new professionals become socialized into disciplinary practices. Finally, a few scholars have attempted to synthesize an understanding of how disciplines operate as intertextual and practical communicative systems.

Research on **writing in the social sciences** has been largely carried out by social scientists themselves reflecting on the practices by which they themselves generate knowledge. There has been concern to look behind the official rhetorics of various disciplines both to understand assumptions and to see how more wide-ranging rhetorical work is carried on covertly. In anthropology the self-examination has particularly focused on the genre of ethnography, to reveal the embedded political power and social dominations and to reformulate knowledge production in more satisfactory ways. Elsewhere the concern has been to examine whether the kinds of constraints placed upon disciplinary discourses have been warranted and to open up the possibilities of new literate practices, extending the kinds of knowledge that may be appropriately developed. Particularly, the official, institutionalized discursive practices in economics and psychology have been criticized as obscuring the full range of issues and arguments with which the disciplines are engaged. In sociology there has been much experimentation in the presentation of research to raise to consciousness the role of discourse in the formulation of knowledge.

Research on **scientific writing** has been largely carried out by people in rhetoric and social studies of science. A primary aim of this research has been to understand how the authoritative appearing claims of science studies have been rhetorically achieved, both in individual cases and as part of an institutional, systemic development within the rise of modern science. The ethnographic extension of this research is to see how literate practices and texts enter into the larger set of practices and institutions that comprise the scientific enterprise. Current forms of scientific writing have been studied along with their history, as well as the individual and negotiative practices that shape what appears of scientific knowledge. The role of citation and other intertextual practices has also been studied to understand how knowledge becomes evaluated, integrated and maintained across the multiple texts of the discipline as well as to see how social structure is related to the production of knowledge. Much attention has also been given to the way science is transmitted to the public, through popularization, educational texts, and policy related documents. Finally also studied are the literate practices of disciplines that have direct impact on all our lives, such as medicine, psychiatry and law.

**Writing in the humanities** has a long tradition of rhetorical critique particularly within historical and literary studies, but there is little systematic study of general disciplinary practices or the organization of humanities disciplines around their writing practices. A few recent studies, however, have pointed toward the rhetorical tasks of maintaining cultural and fostering particular tastes and values. Comparisons with the literate practices of the sciences and social sciences have pointed out how individual perception is rhetorically asserted in contrast to the development of an integrated professional literature engaged in structured debates over shared questions.

Studies of socialization of students into a variety of disciplines have examined how students learn the forms of disciplinary communication, how they adapt themselves and their interests to those forms, what difficulties and special tasks they must face in the process, and what the consequences are for their personal cognition, disciplinary relations, and sense of identity. The styles of communication students bring with them are deeply embedded in their prior experiences, communal relations, and belief systems; integration into disciplinary discourses calls forth different relations to others and to objects of study, with major impact on students experiences, beliefs, and thinking processes.

While the study of disciplinary writing has made visible the limitations and particularity of disciplinary communications, and while study of socialization into disciplinary practices has shown how experience and consciousness are remade in the course of participating in new discursive systems, these same studies have shown how these literate practices were the result of motivated choices of individuals attempting to carry out novel knowledge-making projects. Moreover, they have shown how student participation in disciplinary literacy is motivated by personal concerns. Nonetheless, controversy remains as to whether disciplinary practices are prison houses of the mind, forged by entrenched power, or they are opportunities for creative and individual participation in the communal project of creating socially influential knowledge. In part the resolution of this crucial issue may be in the recognition of how individuals can come to understand disciplinary discourses deeply enough so that they can use those discourses to address problems they consider pressing and important. The less people understand about how disciplinary communication works, the more likely they are to be ruled by practices and demands they have little control over.

### **Implications and Uses**

Studies of disciplinary writing have advanced our theoretical knowledge of how genres shape communication and create similarity among different communication situations; how writing is organized within communication networks, institutions of communication, and systems of interrelated genres; and how the organization of writing practices influences many aspects of social structure and life.

Uses for continuing study of writing in disciplines include a deepening understanding of the organization of higher education, research institutions and professions; an increasing ability of disciplines and professions to think effectively about their own literate practices; a sharpened focus in the teaching of writing in the secondary and tertiary levels; a strengthening of Writing Across the Curriculum pedagogy; and an improving tool for education studies to examine their own production and use of knowledge.

For further reading:

Bazerman, Charles and Paradis, James (Eds). (1991). *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Myers, Greg. (1991) *Writing Biology*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Nelson, John, Megill, Allen, and McCloskey, Donald (Eds). (1987). *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press

