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## **Journeying through Paralysis to Praxis: Teaching Professional Writing with Bourdieu and Williams<sup>1</sup>**

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*"...we have a positive obligation to work hard to tend the culture which is particular to our circumstances and should not try to fabricate universal systems." (Robbins summarizing Pierre Bourdieu's work, p.180)*

### **A True Story**

AS WE TACKLED TECHNICAL EDITING, I told my students the following story, a story intended to illustrate the problem of focusing on minor matters at the expense of larger issues of sense and organization, but a story that also illustrates the problematic role of many professional communicators.

Several years ago, a department chair in environmental studies asked me to ghostwrite a proposal. He handed me a large file of disjointed notes and explained that a prestigious committee could not get its act together and write the proposal. Yet the document was clearly important—a new interdisciplinary initiative for an environmental research centre.

After much research in related journals and consultations with various experts, I rewrote the proposal. The revision entailed creating a specific audience, cutting irrelevant detail, adding new information, restructuring the document, finding an appropriate voice, and constructing metaphors that captured the vision of its supposed writers—many of the techniques, skills and abilities that I also want my students to have.

The chair sent copies around for comments to the other committee members while I waited for the praise that I fully anticipated. The reaction? Only one committee member responded in writing with the observation that the organization was better but that he found too many split infinitives!

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a very much revised version of a paper presented at the Conference of the Canadian Association of Teachers of Technical Writing in Ottawa, 1993.

After a few months of further deliberations and negotiations, the document with few substantive revisions was sent off for submission to the appropriate committee and for publication in the campus press. However, as a ghost writer, I was paid my money, and my name never appeared on the document—the fate, of course, of many technical writers. The sense of loss I experienced remains with me still.

My students' reaction to this story was interesting. They laughed in sympathetic response. But they also wanted to know what split infinitives really were and how they could avoid them.

### **Journeying through Paralysis**

In this paper I want to explore two sets of problems that this story reveals, problems that can paralyse instructors of technical and professional writing. The two types of problems emerge from questions about the nature of “content” itself in professional writing courses and about the nature of education itself. I want to propose that, as instructors of professional and technical writing, we need to work through, each in our own way, the kinds of questions these problems raise in order to develop a sense of *praxis* in our pedagogy. Reflecting the insights of Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Williams, I am characterizing *praxis* as a two-step methodology: 1. Knowing why we do things the way we do, that is, as instructors exercising theoretically-informed choices; and 2. Reflecting on the consequences of our choices for both our students and for our discipline. The following paper details one journey through these questions and attempts to enact Bourdieu's methodology of reflexive praxis.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to the external reviewers who noted in their comments not only minor infelicities but also the digressive nature of this paper. It was thanks to their comments that I found the central metaphor of the piece—that of the “journey” through difficult, reflexive questions. After some consideration, I have decided not to include a “map” of this exploration in the body of the piece because a journey ought to take the reader through some unexpected realms. However, for careful readers of endnotes I post the following guideposts. The first section asks questions about the nature of content or *techné* in professional writing courses. This section questions our collective beliefs about style—especially beliefs about plain language, a deeply ideological set of linguistic practices. The second section asks questions about the nature of teaching and especially questions about the teaching of language practices. The third section provides an account of *praxis*. This section attempts to enact the realization that teaching our students to ask reflexive questions and to both note and resist rigid *techné* represents a justifiable form of *praxis* for teachers of professional communication.

## Content—What Do We Teach?

The anecdote that begins this paper illustrates a central difficulty in courses and programs dedicated to teaching technical and professional writing. We seem to offer our students “technai” or practical advice and skills, and yet I contend that this claim is inherently problematic.

Since its very remote beginnings, rhetoric, as a discipline and its offshoots—composition programs and business and technical writing programs—have promised their adherents “technai”. According to George Kennedy (1980), technai describes the pragmatic handbook tradition which formalized effective techniques of public discourse (oratory) in ancient Athens. He suggests that this tradition “shows how to present a subject efficiently and successfully but makes no attempt to judge the morality of the speaker or his (sic) effect on an audience” (p.16). At the heart of rhetoric and professional writing, then, is a promise—that we will teach our students techniques, forms, and practices—the things they need to become better communicators and thus more likely to achieve upward mobility. These skills and abilities can range from linguistic skills (plain language techniques) to the genres (reports and memos) characteristic of traditional programs to the high tech programs described by Patricia Sullivan and James Porter (1993), programs which ought to include undergraduate courses in publications management, writing for the computer industry, technical and business writing, desktop publishing, document design, hypermedia, style and editing, electronic publishing, research methods and resources, information retrieval, usability, and oral communication (p.410).

A course or program, however, which promises *only* technai presumes specific attitudes towards language, students, teaching, the workplace and values—attitudes which we might want to question.

Most importantly, the skills-based model presumes a “transmission” model of communication and language. As Jennifer Slack, David Miller and Jeffrey Doak (1993) observe, the transmission model, based on the work of Shannon and Weaver, views communication as the transmission of messages. Meaning in this model is the encoding and decoding of messages. Within this communication paradigm the instructor’s role is to teach the students how to become skillful encoders (as Slack et al. note the role of decoding is virtually ignored as the model presumes that if the message is correctly encoded, it will be correctly decoded). But, as many researchers observe, this attitude to communication has important implications for the nature of communication and the role of writers.

The model presumes that language and thought are separate. The message or thought seems to have a facticity and/or reality separate from language. In this model the writer's role is to locate the meaning and then convey it through language. Virtually all of poststructuralist thought denies the logic of this assumption: the signifier does not align with the signified; language is ambiguous and multiple; meaning is a constant struggle of negotiation. However, these valuable insights are stripped out of this model. The transmission model, in fact, stands behind current reductive attitudes to plain language. Some plain language advocates presume, for example, that meaning can remain the same if the language differs.

Yet in his study of government documents, Norman Fairclough (1989) observed that "easification" or the inclusion of "relatively simple sentences, non-technical vocabulary, and many properties of layout" was accompanied by "manipulation of relations and of subjects, by synthetic personalization" (p.221). In other words, in these simplified documents citizens were turned into "consumers" of government services, a radically different subject position than that constructed in the original documents. Vijay Bhatia (1993) in his study of legislative genres notes that "a very important implication of text simplification is that...the resulting text tends either to obscure or even lose the generic integrity of the original, which in some cases, can result in the total loss of generic identity of the text" (p.207).

I want to make it clear that I am not opposed in principle to plain language, but I am opposed to teaching it as simple technai. Translating documents from one register to another does have both linguistic and social consequences. For example, some current research suggests that literacy rates are bifurcating, that a small group of multi-literate individuals are emerging at the same time as literacy abilities are declining relatively for a much larger group of people (Stuckey 1991). Is plain language adding to this trend? In some organizations technical writers use plain language techniques to create templates which dictate syntax, diction, organizational structure, and information levels. These templates are directed towards various levels of employees in the organizations. It is entirely possible that employees are frozen into these levels and prevented from acquiring the high level literacy skills that they need for advancement.

Furthermore, the role of the writer/student in the transmission model is also questionable. As much current research in professional and technical writing observes, this model turns writers into "robots" (Slack et al., p.31) and even causes usability problems for organizations that bring technical writers late into the production process. Writers in these organizations are expected to

turn existing products or systems into linguistic entities. Yet the engineers or inventors tend to forget the very process whereby the product or system was created (especially the conceptual language that is developed as a new product is constructed). The product becomes "normalized" for them, and the writers have the daunting task of trying to dig out how the system actually works (and, of course, in the process of digging out this information, writers often seem foolish to the engineers or inventors for whom the new product or service is self-evident). Much of the current concerns (Cilengir, 1992) around professionalism in the Society of Technical Communication (STC) stem from this reductive role that some of their members are required to endure.

Other problems also attend the skills-based, transmission model. The model assumes that skills, genres, and conventions are normative and fixed. For example, many of our professional writing texts presume that the adjectives "accurate, brief and clear" describe technical writing and then provide lots of exercises to remove padded prose caused by "there" and "it" constructions as well as passive constructions. Yet studies of professional and technical communication reveal that actual writing practices are multiple, varied and highly contextual.

In his study regarding the existential "there", the anticipatory "it", and nominalizations, Thomas Huckin (1994) discovered that expert writers in various organizational contexts constantly use these devices strategically in their discourse. Quoting Brown and Herndl, Huckin notes that:

In our view of things, ostensible core conventions, or 'good writing,' go the way of standard dialects in sociolinguistics: the conventions shift and change, to be replaced by other conventions, all dictated by contextual criteria. What is 'good' is what meets the complex needs of the language culture (p.11).

In her study of genres, Aviva Freedman (1993) points out that genres are a profoundly contextual phenomenon and that the direct teaching of generic features is probably impossible. As I keep on warning my students, what counts or is perceived as a report or memo will differ radically from organization to organization. The world of discourse is in constant flux and for me to claim that I know what constitutes the skills, genres, and conventions of professional writing is hubris indeed.

Most importantly, however, the transmission model assumes that skills, genres and conventions are value-neutral. This belief has two consequences: it prevents writers/students from perceiving their own implication in the values or ideologies that their texts and organizations advocate; and it prevents technical and professional writing teachers from acknowledging the ideology of expediency that lies behind much of the technai of technical and professional communication. As Slack et al point out, the transmission model renders the technical writer powerless (p.18). The injunction to be accurate and clear entails the assumption that the writers have no responsibility for the meaning of the documents—only for their accurate communication. So writers are deprived of legitimate opportunities to identify and revise the beliefs and values present in documents. Often their only option is to resist tactically the kinds of language or documents they are required to write. In this context Michel de Certeau (1984) notes that those in power can use strategies to contribute to the ongoing reproduction of their organizations and discourse, but those without power must resort to tactics, the seizing of momentary opportunities to disrupt or influence texts, decisions, and organizational structures.

Finally, the assumption that skills, genres and conventions are value-neutral can lead to a certain kind of ethical blindness on the part of technical and professional writing instructors. In fact, from Raymond Williams' (1980) perspective, technai constitute a set of hegemonic practices. When Williams, reflecting the insights of Antonio Gramsci, uses the term "hegemony", he is describing, as he says, not "mere opinion or mere manipulation" (p.38); rather he is describing "common sense" or "a central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values which are not merely abstract but which are organized and lived" (p.38). Hegemony or common sense constitutes a saturating set of interacting values and practices through which we constantly construct the social worlds we inhabit. As Williams makes clear, too, hegemony or common sense is constituted as much by what is not believed or done as by what is believed and practised.

Much current research (Blyler, 1994; Katz, 1992; Katz, 1993; Sauer, 1993) is exploring the ideology or common sense of technical and professional discourses. Steven Katz (1992), for example, explores the connection between the "ethos of expediency" (p.257) and the characteristic style and organization of a technical memo requesting an upgrading of the vans used in the early Nazi program of exterminating the Jews. Katz' analysis is a chilling reminder that we cannot divorce skills from content, language from meaning. It is also a chilling reminder that the rhetoric of objectivity and scientism lies behind

much technical and professional communication.

As instructors we cannot simply teach technai. I am not saying that we should not teach the skills and abilities that research tells us that our students need, but this technai, in fact, can only be taught if it is constantly challenged and showed to be temporary, value-laden, evolving structures that writers and readers are constantly constructing and deconstructing. Furthermore, we should be doing much more than teaching technai—the already formulated. We should, in fact, be advocating that students learn to figure out and critically evaluate the technai that functions at their workplaces.

The problems associated with teaching only technai should be evident. Such limited teaching does not prepare our students for change; it advocates a reduced and passive role for workplace writers; teaching techniques that focus on form or style at the expense of content are ethically naïve at best and impossible anyway (can one really teach writing about nothing?). Finally, as Freedman (1993) observes, all writing is profoundly contextual, and in our classrooms we cannot replicate the multiple contexts of the workplace.

### **Practice—How do We Teach? Or Should We Teach at All?**

A serious consideration of content in professional and technical writing programs could lead to a sense of paralysis. And a thoughtful exploration of the nature of schooling and of language—especially as dealt with in Pierre Bourdieu's research—could intensify that paralysis. However, I contend that such an exploration is necessary in order to develop a deeper sense of praxis regarding both what and how we teach our students.

In many ways, it is hazardous to engage Bourdieu's work. It is difficult, demanding and dynamic. Over a forty year career, Bourdieu endeavoured unrelentingly to link his evolving theories of education, language, and research practice with actual research studies. A constant dialectic exists between his insights into social life and his research studies. Consequently, his theories are dynamic and contextual, embedded within specific research situations. Consequently, too, his theories are difficult for other researchers to appropriate—a situation which Bourdieu himself attempted to create, as he was well aware of how his insights could be reduced and systematized once separated from their empirical base<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, perhaps one of the only ways to glimpse Bourdieu's thought on any issue is to provide a kind of retrospective overview tracing its evolution

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(always remembering that by decontextualizing the issue one is inevitably stripping Bourdieu's theory of much of its explanatory power).

Bourdieu's work on education began early in his career. In his earliest work, a series of ethnographic studies on the Algerian war, Bourdieu became preoccupied with the role of education in revolutionary situations. He believed that in this situation a whole people needed "to invent for itself a system of behavioural models" and for that "new pedagogical techniques must be discovered at the same time as instruction must be given a new content" (Robbins [1991] quoting Bourdieu, p.23). In fact, at this time Bourdieu held a somewhat utopian view of education and the possibility that it could radically transform society. He observed:

...in a revolutionary situation, the educator must day by day create the content and form of his (sic)<sup>4</sup> teaching activity...and his advanced training must primarily offer him the means of operating this continuous creativity. The appropriate form of educational action, in its ideal form, is precisely to raise and transform...in short to refuse to perform arbitrarily exercises defined abstractly for abstract studies. (Robbins quoting Bourdieu, p.27).

During the 1950s and well into the 1970s Bourdieu radically re-thought this perspective, a re-thinking derived from an intensive series of studies on the French educational system. Bourdieu came to see that his original position was fundamentally naive (the educational system is incapable of radically transforming a society) and unreflective. The notion of "raising and transforming", for example, presumes that the educator's perspective is ontologically superior to that of the student. This perspective fails to include Bourdieu's later sense of reflexivity—an awareness that instructors embody a particular "habitus" or inclination for strategic action that might or might not be the same as their students, but is certainly not ontologically better.

In fact, Bourdieu's major works on education (1977; 1979), completed with Jean-Claude Passeron, were heavily critiqued by radical educators such as Henry Giroux (1983) who in one instance (1985) characterized Bourdieu's insights as the "discourse of despair" (p.xi). On first reading, especially during the heady days of radical educational reform, it is easy to see why Bourdieu's work provoked such a reception. Based on his survey research into their

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu and his commentators often use generic masculine pronouns. So I apologize on this occasion and ask readers to extend this apology to the remaining quotations.



students' beliefs and attitudes, his qualitative observations of classroom interaction and textual analyses of marking practices, Bourdieu and his co-researchers concluded in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1990, originally published in 1977) that "All pedagogic action (PA) is, objectively, symbolic violence in so far as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power"(p.5). As Bourdieu makes clear, symbolic violence is a specific social phenomenon. He indicates in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992) that "symbolic violence, to put it as tersely and simply as possible, is the *violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity*" (original emphasis, p.167).

Furthermore, this violence or power to construct meaning, to impose a "cultural arbitrary," is "misrecognized" by the dominated. It is not perceived as power or violence but as the natural "order of things" (1992, p.168):<sup>5</sup> For instance, my total acceptance of the ghostwriting scenario is a good example of the workings of symbolic violence—especially since I was a female graduate student whereas the supposed "real" writers were male academics.

In *Distinctions* (1984) Bourdieu makes it clear that educational institutes are not involved in the work of radical social transformation. We, as instructors, are implicated almost by necessity in the imposition of the cultural arbitrary, a common sense, if you will, that is virtually invisible to us, and yet a common sense that works to exclude disadvantaged groups. As Bourdieu observes:

The educational system, an institutionalizing classifier ... with its cleavages by 'level' corresponding to social strata and its divisions into specialities and disciplines which reflect social divisions ad infinitum, such as the opposition between theory and practice ... transforms social classifications into academic classifications, with

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<sup>5</sup> The paradigm case for this work of naturalization is gender relations. Bourdieu observes: "... male order is so deeply grounded as to need no justification: it imposes itself as self-evident, universal (man, vir, is this particular being which experiences himself as universal, who holds a monopoly over the human, homo). It tends to be taken for granted by virtue of the quasi-perfect and immediate agreement which obtains between, on the one hand, social structures such as those expressed in the social organization of space and time and in the sexual division of labor, and on the other, cognitive structures inscribed in bodies and minds. In effect, the dominated, that is women, apply to every object of the (natural and social) world and in particular to the relation of domination in which they are ensnared as well as to the persons through which this relation realizes itself, unthought schemata of thought which are the product of the embodiment of this relation of power ... and which therefore lead them to construct this relation from the standpoint of the dominant, i.e., as natural" (1992, 171).

every appearance of neutrality, and establishes hierarchies which are not experienced as ... partial and one-sided, but as total hierarchies, grounded in nature so that social value comes to be identified with 'personal' value, scholastic dignities with human dignity...

Misrecognition of the social determinants of the educational career—and therefore of the social trajectory it helps to determine—gives the educational certificate the value of a natural right and makes the educational system one of the fundamental agencies of the maintenance of social order. (p.387)

To a large extent, then, schooling simply reproduces the structures of power that already exist in any society.

For those of us who came into teaching, especially the teaching of writing, with high expectations of changing our students' lives—Bourdieu's insights are disturbing. They seem to suggest a determinism—that schooling does not lead to upper mobility and that, more importantly, it is not an agent for social transformation.

His insights are even more disturbing when extended into the domain of language teaching. In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991) Bourdieu provides a thorough analysis of the workings of language in the daily construction of our social lives. Like many current language analysts, Bourdieu begins by opposing the Chomskian notion of 'competence.' As John Thompson observes in his introduction to this study, for Bourdieu, "The kind of competence that actual speakers possess is not a capacity to generate an unlimited sequence of grammatically well formed sentences but rather a capacity to produce expressions *á propos*" (p.7).

The concept of "*á propos*" brings us to the heart of Bourdieu's project. For a speaker/writer to produce discourse that is "*á propos*" she must have experienced the appropriate "habitus" and have acquired the linguistic capital to adjust her discourse to the distinctive linguistic field she is encountering. As Bourdieu explains in his own metaphoric terms:

The form and content of a discourse depend on the relation between a habitus (which is itself the product of sanctions on a market with a given level of tension) and a market defined by a level of tensions which is more or less heightened, hence by the severity of the

sanctions it inflicts on those who pay insufficient attention to 'correctness' and to the 'imposition of form' which formal usage presupposes (79).

Throughout much of his career, Bourdieu explored this notion of "habitus". Thompson quoting Bourdieu explains:

The habitus is a set of *dispositions* which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously coordinated or governed by any rule...Dispositions are acquired through a gradual process of *inculcation*...the dispositions produced thereby are also *structured* in the sense that they unavoidably reflect the social condition within which they were acquired" (p.12).

The concept describes the socio-cognitive process wherein we all acquire our practical logic, our problem-solving strategies, and our linguistic capacities. Habitus, a product of prior and on-going social experiences (especially institutional or group experiences—the family, the school, organizations) creates an individual social potential or social trajectory. Loic J.D. Wacquant (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) describes the relationship between habitus and practical logic as, "The 'practical sense' *precognizes*; it reads in the present state the possible states with which the field is pregnant. For in habitus, the past, the present and the future intersect and interpenetrate one another. Habitus may be understood as virtual 'sedimented situations' (Mallin 1979:p.12) lodged inside the body that wait to be reactivated" (p.23). For Bourdieu, habitus, especially linguistic habitus, prepares individuals for more or fewer opportunities as they encounter distinctive fields or linguistic markets (such as disciplines or specific organizations).

### **Another True Story**

During a lecture several years ago in a course on business writing, I tried to illustrate the importance of developing and maintaining good relations with the three levels that one encounters in any organization: those who rank you; those who are your peers; and those whom you are obliged to direct. After class, a serious, intense, severely dressed young woman asked me to explain in detail how to address and interact with her superiors and peers at her

workplace, a prestigious public relations organization. She explained that she was alienating those she worked with. As I listened to her speak and watched her mannerisms, I could well imagine her difficulties—her aggressive way of speaking and her intense and demanding need for exact and explicit information made me increasingly nervous. But as I listened, sympathized and offered inadequate advice about “taking it easy”, I realized that I had no way of explaining the linguistic, diplomatic and politeness strategies that are my mechanisms for political survival in my own organizational context. Rhetorical notions of “kairos”—or knowing when to make the appropriate argument—do not make sense to a person whose habitus has not prepared them with the linguistic and cultural capital that they need to even recognize situations requiring strategy and diplomacy. As a product of an upper middle class family and a private education, the “mannered” habitus that I had acquired would probably enable me to fit into this student’s workplace—as far as human relations are concerned. But I could not explain to her how I would go about “fitting in.”

This incident, together with a reading of Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways With Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (1983), brought home to me Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” and its implications for teachers of writing. Heath’s ten year ethnographic study of the language using ways of two lower class communities (one white, one black) in the southern United States documents the constructing and maintaining of divergent kinds of habitus and the tragic consequences for these language users when their children encounter the different, middle class, linguistic habitus built into schooling. As both Bourdieu and Heath point out, middle class ways of using language are just different, not ontologically better. Yet schools and organizations make their linguistic practices seem “normal” or just “common sense”, the way “we do things around here.”

The implications of Bourdieu’s insights into language and schooling are important for teachers of technical and professional communication. As Bourdieu explains, each group or field is in the constant process of attempting to distinguish itself from other groups and thus acquire more symbolic power and a better position vis-a-vis other groups and fields. Those already in dominant positions will attempt to reproduce and thus maintain their advantageous positions. Language, particularly that aspect of language called “style”, is deeply implicated in this process of distinction. Bourdieu observes that “style...exists only in relation to agents endowed with schemes of perception and appreciation that enable them to constitute it as a set of systematic differences...” (1991, p.39).

Furthermore, this process of differentiation or style-production is deeply implicated in the reproduction of symbolic power. Bourdieu notes:

This production of instruments of production, such as rhetorical devices, genres, legitimate styles and manners and, more generally, all the formulations destined to be 'authoritative' and to be cited as examples of 'good usage' confers on those who engage in it a power over language and thereby over the ordinary users of language as well as over their capital (1991, p.58).

As he notes, too, this process of reproducing symbolic power and consequently symbolic violence is part and parcel of the trend towards professionalization or field-making. In speaking of the continuing dispossession of dominated groups, he observes:

The fact remains that this dispossession is inseparable from the existence of a body of professionals, objectively invested with the monopoly of the legitimated use of the legitimate language, who produce for their own use a special language predisposed to fulfil, *as a by-product*, a social function of distinctions in the relations between classes and in the struggles they wage on the terrain of language (1991, p.59).

Two properties characterize this constant process of constructing the linguistic excellence characteristic of professions or fields—distinction and correctness. Of course, what counts as distinct or new and what counts as "correct" is specific to certain fields, constantly changing and often hidden to outsiders.

### **What to Do, What to Do?**

It seems to me that Bourdieu's insights and his implicit critique of the hegemony implied in teaching professional and technical writing as simple technai presents us with truly a double bind. As teachers we are implicated in reproducing a social system built on exclusions, and as teachers of professional and technical writing we are implicated in teaching our students how to reproduce linguistic structures of symbolic power.

Reading Bourdieu is indeed both a humbling and non-North American experience. As a North American educator trained into a belief in the

transformative effect of education, I have found Bourdieu's unflinching gaze into the problematic of transformation difficult to accept. He even problematizes the notions of resistance and submission, for, as he observes, "Resistance can be alienating and submission can be liberating. Such is the paradox of the dominated and there is no way out of it" (Wacquant quoting Bourdieu, 1992, p.24). Is a person, for example, who works to efface their social origins by changing their accent, their physical deportment, etc., resisting or submitting?

### **Arriving at Praxis**

In fact, what I have learned from Bourdieu is both the extraordinary difficulty of the enterprise of teaching, especially of language teaching and a related ethic or a way out of paralysis.

On several occasions, Bourdieu talks about valid versus invalid kinds of intellectual enterprises. For example, he talks about two different kinds of readings (and I would add readers and writers): the clinical and the cynical. Clinical readings "treat the products of science as instruments for a self-understanding shorn of self-complacency" (1992, p.211), while cynical readings "consist in seeking in the analysis of social mechanisms tools for adjusting one's behaviour in the social world ... or to guide one's strategies in the academic field" (p.211). In effect, clinical readings represent Bourdieu's own reflective methodology, a methodology which I believe we can activate to a certain extent in our classrooms through our own practice. Bourdieu designed his method for sociologists but in my view (a view which I have attempted to enact in this paper), his method can be enacted in numerous fields. His method of "social praxeology" (Wacquant, 1992, p.11) consists of three steps:

First, we push aside mundane representations to construct the objective structures (spaces of **positions**), the distribution of socially efficient resources that define the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations. Second, we reintroduce the immediate, lived experience of agents in order to explicate the categories of perception and appreciation" (Wacquant p.11). Third we exercise " 'applied rationalism' to contest the facts which have been conquered and constructed (Robbins p.78).

The first step entails, for example, asking fundamental questions such as "What beliefs and practices constitute common sense or ideology in a particular

context?" It means acknowledging that social agents cannot always see the forms that symbolic violence take in a particular context. It means searching for the particular genres and conventions that construct social realities in organizations and asking what those genres and conventions say about that organization. It means acknowledging that style is a profoundly contingent and contextual phenomena. "The way we say things around here" seems "natural" to insiders, but "unnatural" or arbitrary to outsiders. The second step involves acknowledging the practical logic or problem solving techniques that social agents employ in different fields. These strategies represent the range of possible reactions that agents possess. Of course, depending on the alignment of an individual's habitus with the field and depending on the nature of the field itself vis-a-vis other fields, more or less strategies (and more or less strategies of dominance) will be available both to individual agents and to the field itself.

The final step involves acknowledging that the clinical reader/researcher is in the process of producing a constructed explanation and is himself/herself part of a field and the result of a habitus. This step acknowledges that the researcher has a stake and is "interested" and that the results of a study are a constructed explanation that reflects the researcher's position and field. So results can be rigorous but never "True." Explanations or results have implications: they do affect fields. But they must always be considered contingent and reflecting certain "interests" or perspectives.

### **Specific Examples of Praxis: Or What I tried to Do**

One practical application involved a journalism assignment in which students conducted a month long study comparing newspaper coverage by both tabloids (*Toronto Sun*, for example) and more traditional papers (*The Globe and Mail*, for example) on specific political events, incidents of violence, or gender issues. This kind of study reveals the basic technai shared by newspapers: organizational structures such as the inverted pyramid structure of news articles versus the more climatic structure of focus pieces; and stylistic characteristics such as passive constructions used to avoid assigning blame or to hide agency. Students find this kind of advice useful.

But from Bourdieu and William's perspective we also need to challenge these "common sense" forms for the beliefs systems they articulate. A study of stylistic agency (both Roger Fowler in *Language in the News* and Norman Fairclough in *Language and Power* provide good models for this type of analysis), in fact, reveals that legitimate agency and thus power for *The Globe*

*and Mail* resides in government and legal authorities whereas the *Toronto Sun* often challenges remote sources of authority (especially any authority seen as “left wing”) and legitimates local authorities. The papers also differ in their “styles”—as students soon discover—with the *Toronto Sun* allowing colourful, “oral”, heavily ornate language and syntax while, even in its editorial pages, *The Globe and Mail* uses formal diction and syntax<sup>6</sup>.

One of the surprising results of such a study for students, however, is the realization that both papers—although radically different in style and appearance—often share the same values. For example, we discovered that both the *Globe* and *Sun* share a deep suspicion of female politicians. And both are right-wing in their orientation—a surprising finding for many students.

Another follow-up assignment for the project that also captured Bourdieu’s perspective was to ask students to write an editorial in imitation or parody of an editorial style and then justify their stylistic choices. Of course, embedded in the assignment was the necessity to identify and work with the “common sense” beliefs or ideology of various newspapers.

Wherever possible, too, I attempt to contextualize my courses. For example, I teach report writing. As should be evident by now I even have trouble conceiving of a contentless, acontextual form called the report. As I told my students in our first class, readers in every organization or university course that require a report will have in mind a different set of discursive practices, and it will be the writer’s job to figure out those practices. So I have turned the course into a research project in which we examine the discursive practices of various organizations. Working closely with the Office of Research at the University of Waterloo, we wrote an interview protocol and a consent form. Students gathered samples of their target organization’s public documents for content and discourse analysis and interviewed the writers and readers of these documents. So two levels of context were at work here. One context was, of course, the organizations the students are investigating; another context was the class itself which was involved in a “real” research project.

This importation of research skills into an undergraduate course also reflects another aspect of my reading of Williams and Bourdieu. To a large extent, discursive practices, genres, for example, are far more complex than current technai suggests. For this reason whenever possible I attempt to develop assignments which require original data gathering so that students can examine

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<sup>6</sup> One of the most interesting findings for students in the study was the realization that the *Sun* is, in fact, far more “literary” and poetic than the *Globe*.



real documents that they can trace to actual organizations. At the same time I frequently ask students to theorize about these documents and their own writing practices. It is important for students to theorize about practice, to provide a rationale for stylistic choices. After all, as Williams (1983) suggests in *Keywords*, practice is only habitual action. As a teacher I advocate praxis, that thoughtful reflexive moment when one stops and considers the implications of stylistic choices, and when one considers what “common sense” means in an actual communicative situation.

### **A Journey through Paralysis to Praxis**

In conclusion, reading Williams and Bourdieu has forced me to realize the provisional and problematic nature of technai. As a discipline and profession we sometimes appear to have the answers. And yet I don't believe we do. In fact, it is possible that even thinking that one knows what good writing is or what constitutes current practice prevents one from noticing the constant motion of discursive practices and their ideological implications. But my students often want to know what the answer is—exactly what is a split infinitive and how do writers cope with them?

In response, I put on the board the following new commonplace: “Their mission is to *boldly* go where no one has gone before.” We then discuss the fact that removing the split infinitive “to boldly go” does not improve this sentence at all. And I also point out that the commonplace used to read: “Their mission is to boldly go where no *man* has gone before.” We then discuss what a writer could do when faced with unenlightened editors. At one level, our practical logic dictated creating a search command to locate all split infinitives in a document so that the writer could decide whether to move the offending adverb or whether to defend the usage. At another level, too, we discussed the implications of ghostwriting and what such practices mean for both organizations and writers. Many organizations are beginning to acknowledge the teams of writers who create their documentation. Our practical, collective logic dictated that we, too, were going to try to advocate such practices in our own organizations—including the university in which I work and write.

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