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# ¿Como Se Dice Discipline? Do High Schools and Colleges Speak the Same Language?

Jacob S. Blumner

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While planning the first Michigan WAC Conference, "The High School-College Connection," I quickly discovered that describing the conference and designing the advertising for it would be much more difficult than we had planned. Though involved with public schools my whole life, first as a student and then as a teacher, I never realized how different the language used in high schools was from that used in colleges. So, when designing advertising for the conference, in the limited space of an 8 1/2 x 14 sheet, my co-chairs and I debated the use of words like "teacher" or "professor" and "subject" or "discipline." Each can mean something different, depending on the context, and can have different connotations. Even for this article, I find myself struggling to pick the best word or phrase to convey my meaning to a varied audience.

After a conference planning meeting, I considered the implications of our struggle. We used the word "teachers" instead of "faculty" because we believed it would be more inclusive for high school teachers. Using the word "faculty" or "professors" seemed like it might be directed toward college teachers and not high school teachers, thus reducing enrollments of high school teachers. From our discussions, I thought of many terms specifically centered around writing that could cause confusion if misunderstood, such as essay, term paper, report, proposal, thesis, and revision. With the question raised of what vocabulary is best to use and a conference coming, how would our word choices affect the conference? Greater still, how do those language choices affect high school - college communication and student articulation?

When I began investigating why there might be language difference, I remembered studying language registers in an undergraduate linguistics class. More specifically, I was interested in a speaker's choice of vocabulary and grammar. Upon review of my yellowed notes and a quick trip to the library, though, I realized a speaker adjusts her register depending upon three variables: 1) tenor, who is taking part; 2) field, what is the nature of interaction; and 3) mode, the role language plays (Halliday 12). So it appeared that the decision to

use the word teacher or faculty was more involved than simply a random act or convenience. Why would university *professors* and *instructors* choose not to call themselves *teachers*, even though they often refer to what they do as *teach*? Conversely, why would high school *teachers* choose not to call themselves *professors* or *instructors*? I think beginning with a name is a good place to start. If high school and university instructors (I'm choosing to use the term instructor for expediency.) begin by calling themselves different names, then it would seem that they define themselves in different ways. Shakespeare asked, "What's in a name? that which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet" (*Romeo II, ii, 43*). We, as instructors, can ask ourselves if we are in fact all roses. To do that, we should look at the three variables listed above.

## Tenor: Who is Taking Part?

High school English instructors earn a bachelor degree or minor in English from a college while taking methods courses designed to teach teaching. In Michigan, education students also need a minor that they may teach (and frequently do) once in a school. They spend a tremendous amount of time in a classroom before earning a teaching certificate.

Once in the classroom, the typical instructor teaches five courses with at least twenty-five students in each, but frequently classes with thirty to thirty-five students must be taught. Instructors seldom share a classroom, and that room is often also their office. This allows them to create permanent structures that facilitate learning, like files accessible to students or classroom libraries for reading and research. Working with students is the teachers' main interaction during the day, five days a week, for as long as an academic year, if not more. Those students deal with all of the joys and problems of adolescence, they are working their way into adulthood. Teachers, then, must deal with the joys and problems as well.

College instructors seldom receive the methods training their high school counterparts get. In fact, most college English teachers receive little or

no pedagogical training. Instead, they spend more time within the discipline (or subject) of English, earning at least a masters degree. Now, tenure-track instructors almost universally earn doctorates. Once in a full-time position, instructors typically do not teach more than four courses. Courses meet either two or three days a week, not five as in high school. Courses in a semester are approximately 15 weeks, with only 40 contact hours. Writing class size is limited to 25 students, though literature courses vary widely depending upon the course and school. Classrooms are shared by many instructors, and instructors have offices outside the classroom. Changes in the students are taking place as well. Most are legal adults, and many move out of the house into dormitories, apartments and Greek housing. Students are exploring the world of adulthood, and they expect to be treated like "adults." And, most instructors expect them to act like "adults."

Certainly the similarities are great between teaching English in high school and in college. Both primarily deal with directing students to learn to use language more effectively in their lives. The apparent differences in training could pose more subtle problems. Neither the high school nor the college teacher fully understands what the other does. The line of communication to relay what each does in the classroom has two tenuous connections. The first is the students moving into the university. Students tell their college teachers what they did in high school, but their information isn't necessarily the most reliable or informed. In one of my first-year writing courses, a good student, Don, from a Flint school said, "I didn't write a word in high school. I only filled in the bubbles." I know where he went to school and one of the teachers he had, and I know he wrote essays in her class. I won't speculate why Don's memory failed, but it isn't an uncommon occurrence.

New teachers provide a second avenue of communication when they leave the university and enter the public school system. But new teachers pose similar problems as students from high school do. They only move information one direction (from college to high school), and in the university they are students, not teachers, so they are unaware of the nuances of college teaching. One of my education classes told me how easy my job was because I only taught three courses, so I only needed to be at school nine hours a week. They were shocked when I broke down my 50-70 hour week for them, and still they didn't fully understand what I do. So when they become teachers, they are ill-prepared to explain what instructors do in the university on a daily basis.

Both of these lines of communication travel

in one direction, and neither brings the experience and education to effect change. So, since high school and university instructors start from different places, unknown to the other, the communication and language gap inevitably begins with the job description.

### **Field: What is Happening?**

As I look at my bookshelf, I see *In the Middle* by Nancie Atwell, *The Art of Teaching Writing* by Lucy McCormick Calkins, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* by Donald Graves, and *Learning by Teaching* by Donald Murray. All of these books address teaching students as individuals and helping students explore their own ideas. They are books helpful with self-discovery, often addressing adolescent issues. James Berlin, in his article entitled "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," would classify all of these texts as essentially expressionist, and the purpose of such a classroom approach "is to get rid of what is untrue to the private vision of the writer, what is, in a word, inauthentic" (561). In essence, much of the writing students do in high school English classes is directed toward self-expression, including journals, poetry, or personal essays, or even literary analyses. Even student testing, like the MEAP, bases questions on expressionist theory by asking students to respond with their opinion. Linda Flower classified this as writer-based prose (21), and Stephen Tchudi later refined it to "workaday writing" in which students personalize knowledge (20). And high school is, and should be, about personalizing knowledge. I have my advanced composition students write a literacy autobiography, and inevitably one third of my students include school experiences in which they wrote poetry to work out personal problems.

Also on my bookshelf are Michel Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's *The Rhetorical Tradition*, and James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality*. These texts influence the way college writing classes are structured. So what does the stereotypical college English course look like? Students begin with first-year composition courses, and they typically start with expressionist-styled writing assignments. Instructors ask students to write narratives or reflect on their past. Soon, though, the focus shifts more toward external texts and ideas. Students must move from personal workaday writing to writing that focuses on the "communication process - writer (speaker), audience, reality, language" (562). Berlin calls this approach New Rhetoric, and claims its major tenant is that "New Rhetoric denies that truth is discoverable in sense impression since this data must always be interpreted—structured and organized—

— in order to have meaning” (562). So in the college teaching style that students encounter, the personal experience as a primary source of meaning becomes devalued in the classroom for more “academic” sources like journal articles, books, and course readings. And, as students progress through the English major, writing requirements continue to move from writing that incorporates personal experience to writing that nearly excludes personal experience. In fact, Doron, a student in my advanced composition course, sighed that he was finally able to write “his own stuff” (personal experience) in essays for my course.

### **Mode: What Part Does Language Play?**

Language plays a varied role in high school and college. Instructors in both use speech to convey ideas to students, as lecture, mini-lesson, or individual conference. They both use written assignments and read and respond to student writing. They both write for administrative purposes, and they both interact with colleagues. So what difference do we see?

The nature of the language used, the syntax, and the audience differ. High school teachers deal with a less mature student body, as described before; therefore, their interaction with students dictates language and subject choices because students are minors, school districts have strict guidelines, and testing is so closely tied to funding. Language is based in a power structure with the teacher inevitably serving as the evaluator and student as the evaluated. As one of my students pointed out recently when we were discussing audience, she said half-jokingly, “You’re the audience. You grade it.” I knew there was truth to her comment. I could only hope she strives to consider audience in broader terms. Instructors operate from a knowledge base far greater than their students, and language use guides learning in the course. For example, if an instructor were to offer a mini-lesson on developing a claim or thesis, the language would be informative, expository, and typically direct.

The language used by high school teachers among administrators and colleagues typically centers on programmatic and pedagogical concerns. Language use in these situations will vary greatly (perhaps a topic for another article), but it is not bound by the student/instructor constraint. So it can span informal hallway conversations made up of verbal fragments to formal proposals and memos to administrators and school board members. Increasingly, high school teachers are presenting and publishing their ideas professionally. That work takes on still more language conventions that balance between theoretical discussions and those conversations in the halls.

Language use for university instructors in the classroom is similar to those of their high school counterparts. Though language use is not bound by the same restrictions, instructors still operate as evaluators and experts in the class, thus instructors choose vocabulary and sentence structures designed to inform and direct in as clear and simple a manner as the subject dictates. Outside the classroom, the language communities university instructors participate in do not differ much from high school teachers. They talk in office halls in cryptic language designed for expediency and disguise from student ears. In service and administrative capacities, instructors write memos and reports and grants. The language here varies dramatically from informal email calling meetings and then canceling them (replete with typos and no capital letters) to formal grants asking for several thousand dollars in which sentence structure is scrutinized so the writer can work a tremendous amount of information into a small space. University instructors direct more attention to publishing, and the language here varies depending upon the publication. Generally, college instructors rely more heavily on secondary sources and less on anecdotal evidence.

### **The High School - College Connection**

With the differences described above in tenor, field, and mode, it should not be surprising that communication between high school and college instructors is strained or nonexistent. They are each trained differently, deal with a different student body and administrative structure, and draw from different bodies of literature. And though we may use much the same vocabulary, like thesis or narrative, we define those words differently based upon our students, social contexts, and professional practices. Clifford Geertz, describing language as signs and symbols, claims, “meaning is use, or more carefully, arises from use” (118). So, meaning derives from how we use language, and high school and college instructors use language differently. A thesis in high school almost exclusively means a sentence or two that defines the subject of an essay. That line blurs in college because a thesis can be that, or a paper written for a master’s degree or specific bachelor’s programs. The honors program at UM-Flint asks students to write a thesis, and I hear them talking about it in the halls.

So, it is important to begin looking at the mode, or the role language plays, in the connection between high school and college teachers. I see that as an avenue to improve communication, so each better understands the tenor and field of the other, so students coming to college or graduating from education programs aren’t the primary sources of information. The student method seems ineffective

to me. I think it's dangerous to continue to assume communication is clear because we speak the same language and have similar vocabulary. Geertz also calls for "seeking the roots of form . . . in the construction and deconstruction of symbolic systems as individuals and groups of individuals try to make some sense of the profusion of things that happen to them" (119). And these symbolic systems shape how we view the world. For example, I see discipline as a very different term for both high school and university instructors. For high school instructors, discipline involves class management and is something administered to students who misbehave, something instructors don't like to have to do. University instructors seldom need to use discipline as defined above. For college instructors, discipline is their area of study; high school instructors usually call this a subject. Why have English teachers at different levels chosen to define the same words differently? How do these symbols help us define our experiences in our profession, in and out of the classroom? How does this affect communication between high school and university instructors? When high school and college instructors attend the same conferences or workshops, or meet in the neighborhood market, and they talk about teaching and school, I believe meaning is lost in translation. I will never fully understand what high school teachers do unless I teach there for years, and I believe the same is true for high school teachers of teaching college. But, I do think we can make valuable connections. Let us look at how the language affects us. For me, when I was working on *including* as many teachers as I could in the Michigan Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, my language choices were exclusive. I wonder how many others I've excluded?

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