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BEYOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE WRITING INSTRUCTION: THE NEED FOR LITERACY PEDAGOGY

Abstract

The situation we have found ourselves in after 1989 has all the signs of a literacy crisis. As academic teachers, we find the academic literacy skills of many of our students below our expectations. Yet, we must not exclude such students, but admit them and find new ways to educate them, taking example from American institutions of higher education which faced a similar literacy crisis in the 1970s. We must provide literacy instruction for those students who lack the traditionally expected literacy skills. My point is that tertiary-level students in Poland should be offered such assistance as long as our goal is university education not only for the elite. For our democracy to thrive, its foundations need to be broadened, which means increasing the number of citizens with critical thinking/literacy skills. By organizing conferences like this one, we can build bridgeheads from which to launch not just writing instruction but literacy instruction in our tertiary education. The key point is understanding what is involved in the transition from being a teacher of the standard academic language to being a teacher of literacy.

1. Introduction

My paper has been inspired by a statement from a Polish university professor which was publicized in connection with the report in the media that 81 percent of secondary school students passed the 2009 secondary school exit exams (so-called *matura*). The professor claimed that since passing the secondary school exit exam amounts to gaining entrance to a tertiary-level school, no more than about 50 to 60 percent of high-school students in our country should pass the *matura* exam. This view, which is not at all that uncommon among Polish academic teachers, presents a very undemocratic view of tertiary-level education, with professors in effect concerned about excluding outsiders rather than about admitting and educating them. Such a view is obviously detrimental to our democracy, our social development, and our economic interests.

2. Literacy instruction: the traditional approach

Access to academic knowledge is rooted in access to academic discourse. Access to academic discourse is provided by teaching academic literacy. Bizzell (1987: 131) explains *academic literacy* very simply as “the form of literacy preferred in school” which “entails the ability to use [the standard language] and think academically.” The institutional process of socialization into the academic discourse community starts in the elementary school. A look at our Polish educational tradition can tell us best what we understand by literacy. In our country, explicit teaching of literacy is in fact restricted to the elementary school, which points to the very basic abilities connected with using written language, as reflected in the common meaning of the Polish term for literacy – *piśmienność*. Thus, by being literate we mean the ability to read and write at an elementary level. Further development of our reading and writing abilities, which indeed means development of meaning-making and interpreting skills resulting in the academic thinking skills, is commonly believed to take place spontaneously and in a natural way by learning content in different subject courses in later education. Accordingly, there is really no literacy instruction which is designed as such beyond the teaching of basic literacy in elementary school. At the tertiary level, academic literacy is expected but never explicitly defined and taught.

In accordance with this traditional approach to literacy instruction, tertiary-level education in a natural way must exclude all those students who have not developed adequate cognitive skills related to the academically required uses of the standard language (both written and oral). We see the problem as nothing but cognitive and individual. Accordingly, we tend to think we must cull those students who are cognitively not up to the academic task. Recently, a university professor in an internet edition of the national daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* complained (like many of us do) that so many first-year university students cannot write even a few coherent sentences. In the article, there was no mention of any need for a new teaching approach, or for a new theory to inform our teaching. Actually, the text implies there is no need for any new approach on the part of the academia as what is required from the university student is taken to be self-evident, just cognitive ability supported by enough diligence.

3. A literacy crisis

Sociology of knowledge (e.g. Simmel, 1950) tells us that every cognitive problem is grounded in a social reality and that the cognitive and the social are

predicated on one another and indeed specify each other. Taking the social context into consideration, Bizzell (1982: 193) made the following observation about the problem American college and university teachers faced back in the 1970s:

[We] treated all differences between students simply as a matter of innate and individual abilities. The students' (...) various social circumstances were ignored. (...) [However], students from different social classes come to school with different abilities to deal with academic discourse: middle-class students are better suited by their socialization in language use to deal with academic discourse's relative formality and abstraction than working-class students are. (...)

Over the last decade, (...) more and more students have come to college while at a very elementary stage of their initiation into the academic discourse community; that is, more and more students have come who cannot easily produce written standard English, who cannot sustain an argument in an essay, who cannot adopt the relatively objective persona academics prefer, and so on. When such students began to be the majority in most college writing classrooms, what could be treated as self-evident quickly became problematic.

We may need some broader context to better understand Bizzell's observations. The Cold War crisis prompted the American Congress to provide money for educational reforms on an unprecedented scale. In response to the 1961 appeal from the National Council of Teachers of English, which argued for the relevance of teaching the ability to think, write, and read (i.e., the relevance of literacy) to national interest, there was money targeted specifically for research on reading and writing. Following the educational reforms of the 1960s and particularly the introduction of free admissions at American universities, there was a growing number of lower-class, minority, and ESL students at all institutions of higher education. The overall increase in the number of students was accompanied by a drop in an average student's academic skills. Teachers frequently found the literacy skills of their students far below their expectations. This is the situation Bizzell is talking about. This new situation called for a new pedagogy and so became a catalyst for new research on reading and writing processes and instruction (North, 1987).

As Flower (1994: 10) has observed, situations like the one presented here are "not brought on by a decline in skills but a dramatic rise in our expectations." What she means is that what teachers perceive as a drop in their students' literacy skills must be seen in the broad social context as an increase in our literacy expectations with reference to new social groups or classes. We refer to such situations as *literacy crises*. In fact, we are not dealing here with a crisis in

the sense of decreasing literacy skills in society. Instead, we are dealing with a process of progressive democratization of society which involves the opening of institutions of higher education for social groups that have so far been excluded from them. The word *crisis* should be used here then rather with reference to the institutional structures of higher education which cannot offer a new type of education to the new type of students in the developing democracy, namely, to those students who do not meet the traditional literacy standards.

We can see some analogy between our current situation in Polish tertiary-level education and that in the United States in the 1970s. Since the fall of the communist system in 1989, together with the onset of democratization processes in our society, we have witnessed the steadily growing demand for education, which is a sign of the growing awareness of the new importance of education in the developing post-communist economy. This new demand for education has been quickly met by the numerous mostly private schools that have been established in the last two decades, most of them at the tertiary level. This increasing demand for tertiary level education is clearly visible in the statistics: In 1990, it was only 13 percent of young people aged 19 to 24 who continued their education. In 2004, it was 47.8 percent. Now, we can expect the number to be much higher, considering the fact the total number of people in the age range between 19 and 24 has dropped in our country so that this year all tertiary-level schools could admit one hundred thousand students more than there are secondary school graduates.

In this situation, culling additional 20 to 30 percent of secondary school students on their final exit exams appears to be a tremendous waste of human resources--an action which must be seen as detrimental to our economic interest, and I do not mean just us, that is, academic teachers, but the development of our country's economy. Most importantly, however, such an action would be a blow to the development of our new democracy, conserving social inequality in access to higher education. This situation has all the signs of a literacy crisis. Thus, heeding Flower's (1994) remarks, we should see the situation as a crisis in our tertiary-level education which cannot offer a new type of education to the new type of students in our developing democracy. We should see that further development of our democracy lies in our hands. As academic teachers, we must provide support programs for those students whose literacy skills are below our traditional expectations. We must not exclude, but admit and find new ways to educate, taking example from American institutions of higher education in the 1970s.

4. Building bridgeheads

By now, you may have started wondering how what I am talking about is relevant at a conference on foreign language writing. As I said, our educational system represents the narrow, traditional understanding of literacy as the basic ability to read and write, with explicit literacy instruction being limited to the elementary school. Later development of the taught basic literacy skills is believed to take place spontaneously and naturally. In this respect, we seem to follow a learning-by-doing pedagogy, which is obviously not any kind of immersion program designed with literacy education in mind. Any literacy learning problems that appear are seen as the result of students' individual (possibly innate) abilities. For students who thus cannot develop the required academic skills, there is no place in tertiary-level education. Such an educational approach ignores the social factors that Bizzell (1982: 193) has pointed to, observing that "students from different social classes come to school with different abilities to deal with academic discourse" (an observation confirmed by research, e.g., the seminal publication by Heath, 1983). Most vitally, as I have been pointing out here, such an educational approach perpetuates social injustice and is detrimental to the development of democracy because it indeed bars some social groups from equal access to higher education and in effect puts limits on the number of critically thinking citizens.

Of course, we can find writing or reading courses in our tertiary-level schools, but—what is very telling—such instruction is restricted to foreign language departments. Also this conference on writing locates itself within foreign language instruction. This practice suggests that in this country our understanding of teaching writing is reduced to teaching the language skills involved in it. Indeed, things have already changed in our country. By now, at least foreign language teachers have become familiar at least with the slogan *Teach the Process*, which marked the so-called *process revolution* in writing instruction. The process revolution, which took place in English L1 writing instruction in the 1970s, has transformed ESL and EFL writing instruction since the 1980s. Thanks to the process movement in EFL writing instruction, English teachers in our country are becoming more aware that there is more to writing than the linguistic skills: There are the *composing skills* that need to be taught. In this respect, at least the multiple draft assignment and so the focus on revision have become common elements of the EFL writing classroom. However, in our country there is no tradition of composition instruction (cf. Reichelt, 2005). In our language and culture, the term *composing* is not used with reference to writing, that is, in the sense of creating texts. Composition courses in this sense have been offered by Harvard University for over 125 years. It has now become

a standard practice at American universities and colleges (a practice which is spreading throughout the English-speaking world) that incoming students are required to take a freshman composition course whose goal is to assist them in developing their literacy skills, which is seen as crucial for more successful academic work. My point is that tertiary-level students in Poland should be offered such assistance, as long as our goal is university education not only for the elite. For our democracy to thrive, its foundations need to be broadened, which means increasing the number of citizens with critical thinking skills. The process revolution in the 1970s in the United States was made possible not only by the educational reforms of the 1960s but first of all by the presence of a critical mass of composition professionals, both teachers and researchers. By organizing conferences like this one, we can build bridgeheads from which to launch not just writing but literacy instruction in our tertiary education.

5. Becoming literacy teachers

Since the 1970s, thanks to the work of innumerable researchers and scholars like, most notably, Patricia Bizzell (e.g., 1992) or James Berlin (e.g., 2003), American teachers of English L1 composition have gradually stopped thinking about themselves as academic gatekeepers and guardians of the standard language, doing the dirty work of keeping out all those who cannot read, write, and think academically so that professors of academic subjects would not complain. The turning point in this process is the transition from being a teacher of the standard academic language to being a teacher of literacy. As teachers of the standard language, we choose to think of ourselves as ideologically and politically neutral, but we are in fact guardians of the status quo. As the quote from Bizzell (1982) points out, we ignore how our students' cognitive problems are rooted in social issues. As critical discourse analysis tells us, we cannot think of ourselves as neutral when forcing one kind of discourse on our students. When we start to think of ourselves as teachers of literacy, we reach this critical awareness of language which allows us, as Berlin (2003) explains, to become agents for social change, aware of how the future of society and democracy lies in our hands.

Maybe a word of explanation is due about us as those complaining teachers who look for others to blame for the literacy crisis. As I said, as for developing our students' literacy skills beyond the elementary level, in our country we seem to believe in the learning-by-doing pedagogy. Composition research (e.g., Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1994) has indicated that practicing writing is crucial to the development of our thinking skills, as writing fixes our thoughts and

makes it possible (or at least easier) to subject our thinking to critical scrutiny and revision. However, even if we do believe in learning by doing, which would mean that the best way to teach our students to write is to have them write, this belief does not seem to carry over beyond the writing courses, which in fact are offered only in foreign language departments and so traditionally have focused on language rather than composing. As I said, there is no tradition of composition instruction in our country, and our students actually do very little writing throughout their secondary and tertiary-level education, also for the practical reasons that classrooms are overpopulated and teachers are overworked. As Ivanic (1997) has observed, “the roles of spoken and written discourse vary considerably from culture to culture, the written playing a bigger role in academic institutions in the U.S. and the U.K., the oral in academic institutions of many other European countries” (80). Thus, university courses in our country typically do not have the final (end-of-semester) paper requirement (which is a standard practice in American education, for example), but our bachelor’s and master’s programs do have the final written thesis requirement. Then, we should not be surprised when our students cannot really write and plagiarize so often. The truth is that our students are hardly given a chance to practice writing academic discourse, which is crucial in developing their academic literacy skills.

Literacy pedagogy and the very definition of literacy have been hotly contested issues, at least since the publication of Hirsch’s (1982) “Cultural literacy,” with new information technologies driving the debate in the last two decades. Literacy instruction obviously cannot exist in separation from language instruction, but language is only its starting point (cf. Kern, 2000). Literacy-oriented teaching shifts away from linguistic concerns towards metacognitive and reflective dimensions of meaning making. As Kasper (2000: 105) observes, becoming literate “involves more than learning how to use language effectively; rather, the process amplifies and changes both the cognitive and the linguistic functioning of the individual in society.” Using Berlin’s (2003) words, literacy pedagogy can be said to involve “studying the operation of signifying practices within their economic and political frames” (89). Although Berlin uses this phrase with reference to his epistemic rhetoric, this characterization is general enough to capture also the new views of literacy in the electronic age, for example, the influential proposal by The New London Group (1996), calling for “a much broader view of literacy than portrayed by traditional language-based approaches” (1996: 60). The members of The New London Group argue that new literacy skills are needed in view of the multiplicity of communications channels in the electronic age. Literacy thus implies not only linguistic competence but also competencies in the other semiotic systems which are

required in composing a multimodal electronic text (with its multimodal patterns of meaning involving linguistic meaning, visual meaning, audio meaning, gestural meaning, and spatial meaning). The new computer-based literacies become a necessity in modern society because of its local (linguistic and cultural) diversity which is accompanied by global interconnectedness, as the members of the New London Group argue in their 1996 manifesto.

I think we should use not only the process revolution, which is slowly but surely taking place in our EFL writing instruction, but also the internet revolution to promote literacy instruction in tertiary-level education in our country. To achieve this goal, we can use the more obvious need to teach computer literacy, yet in the broad sense, where teaching computer literacy is not reduced to teaching its purely technical aspects such as keyboarding skills and software operating skills. The internet revolution gives us a chance to start teaching literacy as a set of metacognitive skills that manifest themselves across the different languages (and other semiotic systems) that we can use, which is a point I would like to explain in the remainder of this paper. Today we can come across arguments for the teaching of multiliteracies in the context of computer-assisted foreign language instruction, which would be justified by the fact that we need to learn to function in the multilingual reality of the European Union. However, behind this kind of reasoning, there may still lie the traditional language-based understanding of literacy, namely, that our students are obviously already “literate” in their L1 and now we are adding literacy in L2 along with useful computer skills. But what teaching literacy essentially entails is developing our students’ meaning-making skills. The term *multiliteracy* additionally implies broadening the meaning-making potential to include the non-linguistic semiotic systems mentioned above. The internet naturally exposes our students to the multiplicity of discourses in the modern world, which should help raise their awareness of this kind of language diversity and lead to reflection on how language is used, that is, to an analysis of our signifying practices. As I already said, literacy-oriented teaching shifts away from purely linguistic concerns toward metacognitive dimensions of meaning making.

Teaching foreign language skills with the use of computer technology does not amount to teaching multiliteracy, of course. The crucial distinction to be made in this context is the one between linguistic skills and metalinguistic or metacognitive ones. It is the development of the latter skills that constitutes the objective of literacy pedagogy. Research on composing processes, most notably, Scardamalia and Bereiter’s (1987) explanation of the nature of *knowledge transforming* skills in writing, has certainly contributed to our better understanding of what developing literacy skills is about. In the traditional and most narrow understanding, literacy instruction amounts to teaching how to

segment continuous speech into discrete (phonemic) categories and, based on this, teaching the letter-to-sound correspondences. Even this narrow view of literacy instruction demonstrates that literacy is essentially a metalinguistic skill and so a metacognitive skill that involves analysis of our own cognitive processes (cf. Olson, 1991). Literacy is thus a continuum ranging from the ability to segment continuous speech through knowledge transforming skills at the other extreme. In this continuum, the linguistic blends with the metalinguistic and metacognitive. As research involving illiterate native speakers has shown (e.g., the research by Scholes and Willis, 1991), it is not that just by being a native speaker “you can segment [speech]... because you know [the language],” as linguistics textbooks like the popular one by Fromkin and Rodman (1988: 32) tell us. Such linguistic knowledge as phonemic awareness requires metacognitive awareness and comes with literacy instruction which builds on and develops our linguistic competence, and which ultimately is to help us become more aware and competent makers of meaning (using semiotic systems other than language as well). Literacy pedagogy thus becomes an essential part of critical education, aiming to develop our students’ ability to construct and evaluate knowledge, which means developing their capacity for analytic, synthetic, abstract, logical, and ultimately critical thinking, and thus aiming to turn them into critically aware language users and thinkers.

6. The critical dimension

As I notice above, literacy instruction cannot exist in separation from language instruction, yet literacy-oriented instruction shifts away from merely linguistic toward metacognitive concerns in meaning making. Becoming literate is not just about generating conceptual content with good control of language (and other semiotic resources) but rather about understanding what factors are responsible for generating appropriate content and so taking greater control of the meaning-making process. Teaching such advanced literacy skills apparently requires explicit instruction and engaging students in analyzing discourse, starting with the logic of argument building, then broadening such analysis to include all kinds of rhetorical concerns on which argumentative logic depends, and ending with ideological concerns, which eventually leads to an understanding that language is never a neutral and objective instrument of description but is socially situated and so defined by a value system that emanates from each use of language in a way that is typically transparent to the user.

Let me elaborate on this last point, concerning ideology, taking the case of academic discourse and academic literacy as an example. Earlier, following

Bizzell, I said that academic literacy involves the ability to *think academically*. Elbow (1991) seems to have succeeded in giving a general definition of academic discourse not by referring to any formal conventions (which are so variable even within one academic discipline) but by referring to an intellectual stance, which pretty much explains academic literacy/thinking. This intellectual stance, according to Elbow (1991), is characterized by (1) making explicit claims, (2) giving reasons, (3) presenting evidence, and (4) setting the argument in an ongoing debate by using references. Still, the differences in formal and stylistic conventions which distinguish different academic discourses should not be brushed aside as superficial because (very much like the conventions of research design) they may arise from different epistemologies. For example, we are all familiar with the traditional admonition to avoid the first person singular pronoun *I* in academic writing. It follows from what Elbow (1991) calls *the convention of explicitness* of academic discourse, which calls for reasons and evidence and for avoidance of personal opinions and feelings, reflecting the need to step outside one's own narrow vision. This convention of impersonality shows a bias toward objectivity. Like many in the academic community today (following, e.g., Polanyi, 1962), Elbow (1991) resists this bias claiming that it is by acknowledging our situatedness and personal interest that we indeed invite enlargement of our vision. By pretending to be objective and disinterested, we in fact invite a smallness of vision, failing to locate our interest in a larger picture and so mistaking our local view for the larger view. Our social, political, and ideological situatedness is exactly what we as academics have had problems acknowledging and being explicit about. As Elbow points out, academic discourse "tries to peel away from messages the evidence of how these messages are situated as the centre of personal, political, or cultural interest" (1991: 141). Resisting the bias toward objectivity, as an academic teacher, I must acknowledge then that my argument for admitting more students is obviously in the economic interest of academic teachers, but it also serves the best interests of the whole country as it forces us to start teaching literacy, as I am trying to argue.

The logical, rhetorical, and ideological concerns in teaching literacy all fit in the category of teaching critical thinking and so contribute to what is called *critical literacy*. However, the qualifier *critical* is used particularly with reference to ideological concerns. Then, critical literacy means awareness that any text is persuasive in the sense that discourse is the arena of political and ideological struggle, in accordance with the social constructionist epistemology that has informed critical pedagogy. Here we have come to a point that has long been recognized as a serious obstacle to incorporating literacy instruction in EFL/ESL courses (see Santos, 1992). The absence of any serious interest in

literacy pedagogy on the part of foreign language instructors (even in the case of the most advanced learners) must be attributed to the fact that dealing with literacy in any sense which is broader than the carefully restricted traditional sense (i.e., basic reading and writing skills in the standard language) unavoidably leads us to deal with ideological and political issues (cf. Berlin, 2003; Pennycook, 2001).

It was Santos (1992) who first drew ESL and EFL writing teachers' attention to the fundamental contrast between the utilitarian and pragmatic tradition of teaching ESL/EFL composition (as exemplified by, e.g., Horowitz, 1986b; Johns, 1997), and the tradition of composition instruction that has developed since the 1960s in teaching English to native speakers and which has come to define itself in ideological terms (e.g., Berlin, 1988; Bizzell, 1992). While L1 composition takes a critical view of academic literacy practices as the product of specific power relations and consequently as inherently ideological, L2 composition favours an uncritical view that excludes ideology. Swales (1990: 9) explains that the "specific reason for this exclusion is that the [L2] approach... rests on a pragmatic concern to help people, both native and non-native speakers, to develop their academic communicative competence." Riley (1996) warns however that a fundamental problem with the data-driven descriptive approach of linguistics and applied linguistics is that without paying due attention to the epistemic function of discourse in society, linguists (like Swales in the above quote) may have misunderstood such key constructs as communicative competence. This criticism is corroborated by the above-quoted research involving illiterates, showing the contribution of literacy to linguistic competence, a contribution which has not been appreciated by linguists. We may begin to wonder then how adequate Swales's (1990) conception of academic communicative competence is when so devoid of the ideological perspective.

As I said, while L1 composition overwhelmingly prefers to see itself ideologically, L2 composition decidedly sees itself pragmatically. Since ESL/EFL composition has remained virtually untouched by issues of ideology and the critical view of discourse practices as embedded in specific power relations, it seems understandable that the pragmatic needs-oriented approach has dominated ESL/EFL writing instruction and accusations of a return to prescriptivism have occasionally been levelled at its proponents (but see, e.g., Benesch, 2001). However, there appear to be good reasons why ESL/EFL composition should stay away from ideology and critical pedagogy. Santos (1992) points to the international context of L2 instruction as a major reason. It would be neither diplomatic nor politically wise for L2 teachers to make their instruction explicitly ideological.

Santos (1992) gives other reasons for the split on ideology between L1 and L2 composition. Because of its institutional history in the U.S., English L1 composition has always remained under the influence of critical literary theories from which it took over the basic anti-positivist and social constructionist epistemological assumptions. On the other hand, because of its institutional moorings as part of L2 instruction, L2 composition has identified itself with applied linguistics. Till now linguistics and applied linguistics have in the main been steadfast adherents of positivist epistemology, with their methodology strongly biased toward achieving objectivity (but see, e.g., Fairclough, 1995; Pennycook, 2001). Positivist science with its standards of objectivity is opposed to ideology, understood as false consciousness. Accordingly, as Santos (1992: 9) states, “pursuing political goals and/or changing students’ socio-political consciousness is not on the ESL writing agenda.” Taking this narrowly pragmatic approach characteristic of L2 instruction, Horowitz (1986a: 143) asks, “who are we to try to change the value structures of our students?” There is however no education that does not attempt to have an effect on the value systems of students. In contrast to Horowitz (1986a), who represents the pragmatic mainstream of L2 composition, Bizzell (1990: 671) takes an explicitly ideological position on the goals of L1 composition instruction:

We must help our students, and our fellow citizens, to engage in a rhetorical process that can collectively generate trustworthy knowledge and beliefs conducive to the common good – knowledge and beliefs to displace the repressive ideologies an unjust social order would inscribe.

The ultimate goal of literacy pedagogy is educating an independently thinking citizen who can critically assess any value system and make informed conscious decisions. The chances of democracy prospering are dim without a critical mass of well-educated citizens capable of critical thinking. The aim of literacy instruction is developing students’ ability to think critically by raising their awareness of their own discourse practices. Fairclough (1995), a pioneer in critical linguistics, argues that “there is an intimate relationship between the development of people’s critical awareness of language and the development of their own language capabilities and practices” (227). Suggestions concerning specific ways to develop such critical awareness of discourse practices in an academic composition/literacy class are what we need today.

If ideology in the sense of attention to the social mechanisms of knowledge-making is removed from literacy pedagogy, then it becomes easily reduced to prescribing the conventions of dominant discursive practices as if they were natural, static, and universally accepted throughout a community. Berlin (2003:

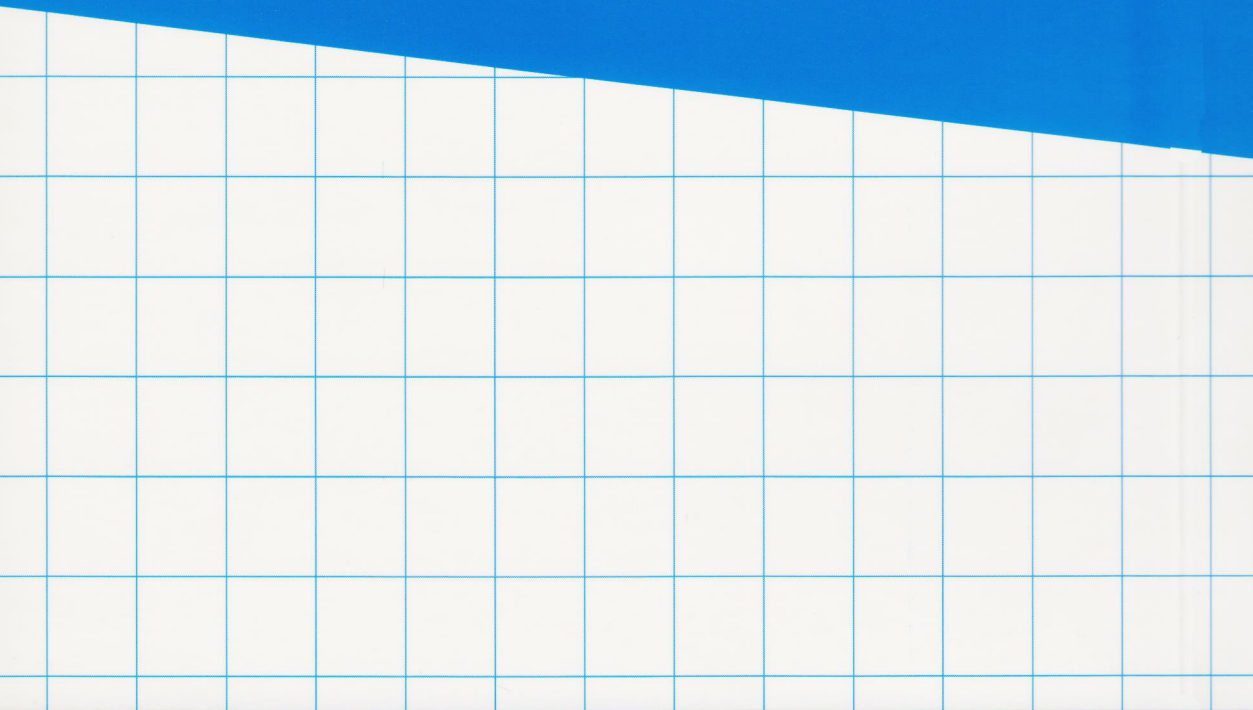
89) explains social signifying practices as always ideological and sees the goal of literacy pedagogy not as helping people “to express themselves more accurately and clearly” but rather as helping them “to make their positions prevail in the conflicts of politics.” As a composition person making this argument for admitting more students and offering literacy courses for them in our tertiary-level schools, I’d like to see my position prevail over the exclusive vision of higher education.

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