

Developing Academic Thinking in the EFL Writing Classroom: A Rationale for General-academic Writing Assignments

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Abstract. With the evidence for disciplinary variation in academic discourse constantly growing, the idea of teaching core academic thinking in writing seems to have become increasingly problematic. The paper offers a rationale for two general-academic writing assignments, each focusing on teaching one fundamental aspect of what is defined as the intellectual stance underlying academic writing in general. The two aspects are problematizing and subject position. Problematizing and assuming a new subject position in the context of academic writing prove to be troublesome tasks for many entering college students. The assignments are designed to help students cope with these problems. They are based on a reactive approach rather than on modelling academic discourse, with the teacher helping students to reflect on their rendering of familiar experiences.

Keywords: writing instruction, academic discourse, problematizing, subject position.

[es] Desarrollando la competencia de razonamiento académico en la asignatura ILE: una argumentación a favor de aplicar la instrucción de la escritura académica general

Resumen. Ante el evidente y continuo crecimiento de la variación disciplinaria en el discurso académico, la noción de enseñar el pensamiento académico básico por escrito parece haberse vuelto cada vez más controvertida. Este artículo ofrece una justificación para dos tareas de escritura académica general, cada una de las cuales se centra en la enseñanza de un aspecto clave de lo que se define como la postura intelectual subyacente a la redacción académica en general: la problematización y la posición del sujeto. Problematizar y asumir una nueva posición del sujeto en el contexto de la escritura académica suelen ser tareas difíciles para muchos estudiantes cuando ingresan en la universidad. Las tareas asignadas, diseñadas para ayudar a los estudiantes a enfrentar estos problemas, se basan en un enfoque reactivo en lugar de modelar el discurso académico, mientras que el instructor ayuda a los estudiantes a reflexionar sobre su interpretación de experiencias familiares.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de la escritura, discurso académico, problematización, posición del sujeto.

Contents. 1. Introduction. 2. The problematic *general/core academic* approach. 3. Academic discourse: Problematizing and subject formation. 4. The assignments. 5. Conclusion.

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1. Introduction

Given the multiplicity of approaches to writing instruction, I begin by clarifying my standpoint. The present proposal for two general-academic writing assignments belongs in the tradition of teaching academic writing to non-native speakers of English which arose in the US after World War II as a result of the influx of international students into that country and is referred to as English as a second language (ESL) writing instruction (Silva 1990). From the late 1970s to the 90s, this ESL writing instruction was fundamentally reshaped under the influence of the process-oriented pedagogy developed for native speakers of English within composition and rhetoric studies in North America (Kroll 1990, Connors 1997), with the 1990s bringing in the era of post-process instruction (Atkinson 2003). Over time, this strand of ESL writing instruction has become internationalized and has had a significant impact on how writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) has been taught worldwide (Manchón & Matsuda 2016). The rationale for the two general-academic assignments proposed here is grounded in the composition studies and rhetoric tradition, not in the linguistics-based English for academic purposes (EAP) tradition of research on academic discourse and writing instruction. The EAP tradition has dominated the field since the 1990s with a focus on discipline-specific genre-based

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writing instruction. Recognizing the need for more general-academic writing instruction to support entering students in many tertiary-level educational contexts, advocates of the EAP approach have made proposals for teaching more transferrable knowledge about language, genre, and disciplinary variation (e.g. Gardner 2016, Monbec 2020). The present paper makes an alternative proposal for general-academic writing that may also be useful in providing general academic literacy support.

The proposed assignments have been designed for entering tertiary-level students who use English as the language of instruction. They are meant to help those students reflect on how they use language in *rendering their experience* (Elbow 1991) to foster their transition to academic discourse and culture. The assignments are *general-academic* in terms of reaching across academic disciplines and across student populations (the difference between EFL, ESL, and native students is irrelevant to their design). I have used the two assignments in an EFL context, with first-year university students of English Studies, a program with English as the language of instruction. The program is general-academic in the first two years. In the third year, students get to choose their discipline, namely, literature, cultural studies, translation studies, TESOL, or linguistics. The problem I faced in teaching introductory academic writing in this situation was captured for me by Elbow (1991), who shows the variety of discourse conventions followed by writers in English studies, presenting 10 different discourses used in the field—and his presentation is intended just to illustrate the point rather than be exhaustive. His conclusion is as follows:

I can't tell my students whether academic discourse in English means using lots of structural signposts or leaving them out, bringing in their feelings and personal reactions or leaving them out, [...] nor finally even what kinds of footnotes to use [...]. I can't tell them whether academic discourse means quantitative or qualitative research or philosophical reflection. In short, it's crazy to talk about academic discourse as one thing (1991: 139-140).

2. The Problematic *General/Core Academic* Approach

Arguing for the idea of a core academic vocabulary and why it is needed in English language education, Gardner & Davies (2014: 310) observe that “no one seems to dispute the fact that discipline-specific (technical) words are essential to academic understanding, but the value of identifying core academic words that provide useful coverage across a range of different academic disciplines has been questioned” (e.g. by Hyland & Tse 2007). A similar observation can be made about discipline-specific versus general-academic writing instruction. Discussions of writing instruction have been dominated by proponents of discipline-specific approaches advocating genre pedagogies. Thus, while teaching writing for specific academic purposes takes centre stage, the general-academic approach is likely to be discounted as an option. An example is Wingate and Tribble's (2012) proposal “for developing relevant writing support programs for students from all backgrounds at UK universities” (481). The authors recommend “discipline-specific, integrated writing instruction” (492) where teaching writing is embedded in teaching specific academic content. They state that the more writing instruction is “linked to the teaching of subject content, the greater is [its] potential to raise students' awareness of the discipline's communicative and social practices” (492). As they argue, “the production of texts in unfamiliar genres constitutes the first and foremost problem for the majority of students; therefore, for them the type of text they will have to produce is a good starting point for instruction” (489). They reject the more general approach suggested by Lillis and Scott (2007: 13), namely that of “exploring alternative ways of meaning making in academia [...] by considering the resources that (student) writers bring to the academy as legitimate tools for meaning making”. Wingate & Tribble (2012: 489) argue that such teaching “cannot be the basis for mainstream writing instruction”, even though “the issues mentioned by Lillis and Scott clearly need to be considered”. The assignments I propose offer a way to implement Lillis and Scott's (2007) suggestion for a more general-academic approach. The assignments should be seen as preliminary to teaching the discursive practices of a specific discipline, their aim being to teach students to reflect on their discourse in the context of the new demands posed by academic writing. The assignments may be a good starting point for academic writing instruction.

My intention is not to question the value of discipline-specific genre approaches. They are generally recognized for redressing a key deficiency in process pedagogy by providing learners with access to socially valued genres through an explicit focus on the linguistic resources needed to function in specific target contexts (Hyland 2003). Beginning with Hyon (1996), it has often been pointed out that it is the linguistics-based genre approaches, namely, EAP and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), that inform ESL/EFL writing instruction. As Hyland (2018: 2360) explains, these approaches focus on text rather than context, being “grounded in language and text structure” rather than “informed by social theories of context and community”. Their particular focus is on how socially situated writers make context-sensitive linguistic choices that allow them to achieve their purposes. Given this major concern of genre pedagogy, we may be inclined to agree with Beck & Jeffery's (2009: 228) statement that genre approaches “have made important strides in heightening students' awareness of audience and purpose but have paid less attention to the ways in which expectations for written performance in a school context are embedded in expectations for certain kinds of discipline-based thinking”. Taking the discipline-specific approach, Beck & Jeffery (2009) focus on the kind of thinking essential to academic understanding in the disciplines of history and literature and are not interested

in identifying any core academic thinking across a range of different academic disciplines. Like Wingate & Tribble (2012), they do not give the general-academic approach any consideration.

The idea of core academic thinking brings to mind Elbow's (1991: 140) warning that "it's crazy to talk about academic discourse as one thing", and by *academic discourse* he meant both formal conventions and a way of thinking. However, for all the variation in academic discourse, Elbow (1991: 140) insisted on "talking about academic discourse in the singular" and on teaching "academic writing in general". The general-academic writing assignments I propose here owe a lot to Elbow's (1991), Harris' (1989), and Berlin's (2003) discussions of academic discourse community and writing instruction. These authors, and a few others whose ideas are brought up in this discussion, belong in the discipline of composition and rhetoric studies in North America, a field generally claimed to have had less impact on ESL/EFL post-process writing instruction than the linguistics-based genre approaches of EAP and SFL (Hyland 2003, Johns 2002, Russell et al. 2009). In this sense, the present proposals are not mainstream. To use Hyland's (2018: 2360) words again, the assignments are not "grounded in [EAP analysis of] language and text structure" but in an identification of core academic thinking "informed by social theories of context and community". Fundamental to them is the poststructuralist concept of *subject formation* (e.g. Berlin 2003: 65-66), as distinct from the notion of *authorial stance* grounded in linguistic analysis (e.g. Hyland & Jiang 2016).

3. Academic Discourse: Problematizing and Subject Formation

Academic discourse is understood here as the discourse used by academics to carry out the knowledge-making and knowledge-proliferating mission of the academic community. The fact that academic discourse makes use of the standard language and that it follows specific yet variable formal conventions is not a primary teaching concern in the introductory academic writing assignments to be proposed here. The primary concern is with academic discourse as involving the fundamental ability to think academically, defined by the metacognitive ability to think about how we think, which is fundamental to the knowledge-making mission and leads to methodological, epistemological and ideological awareness. Such critical reflection is not unique to the academic discourse community but is an attribute of a more general intellectual stance (Elbow 1991). As Chafe (1994: 10) explains, human thinking involves "the interpretation of particular experiences in terms of imagined schemas". In this sense, he points out, there is no difference between *folk belief* and *scientific understanding*, with all ways of thinking being grounded in our participation in a culture and its imagined schemas. Academic thinking is distinct from most other ways of thinking because it involves critical reflection in the sense of "a more self-conscious, more systematic approach" (1994: 10) to the interpretation of observations (i.e. to knowledge-making), which comes with increasing methodological, epistemological and ideological awareness in connection to the "imagined schemas" (called *theories* in the academic world). What follows here is an elaboration of these points.

Genre approaches focus on teaching how to make context-dependent language choices in writing and the teaching relies on modelling academic discourse for students. Accordingly, disciplinary variation in academic discourse makes discipline-specific rather than general-academic writing instruction the more viable option (but see Monbec 2020 for a general-academic proposal). Since research has provided evidence of disciplinary variation as well as change over time (e.g. Hyland & Jiang 2016) in terms of not only linguistic features and genres but also study skills and academic practices (e.g. Wingate 2006, Street & Lea 1998), discipline-specific instruction becomes the obvious choice while attempts at teaching general-academic discourse seem largely misguided; however, not necessarily when we think of academic discourse in terms of an underlying intellectual stance, a way of thinking which—to use Chafe's (1994: 10) words again— involves "a more self-conscious, more systematic approach" than most other ways of thinking. This academic-intellectual stance follows from the knowledge-making mission of the academic community and essentially involves an awareness, if not a deeper understanding, of the knowledge-making process, which is tied to the development of methodological, epistemological and ultimately ideological awareness as well (Berlin 2003).

Elbow (1991) tried to define general academic discourse by referring to its underlying intellectual stance as characterized by (a) making explicit claims, (b) giving reasons, (c) presenting evidence, and (d) setting an argument in an ongoing debate by using references. All these points refer to methodological awareness, which is not separate from the awareness of a specific set of epistemological assumptions that our methodology follows from. For academics then, but not for entering undergraduate students, academic discourse can be defined in terms of an intellectual stance which involves methodological, epistemological, and ideological awareness, which together constitute the ability to reflect critically. There is a multiplicity of methodologies driven by different epistemologies and different ideologies, which results in a multiplicity of academic discourses. Elbow (1991) admits that defining academic discourse generally in terms of such an underlying intellectual stance makes it indistinguishable in this respect from the broader category of intellectual discourse, which amounts to admitting the fact that the academy has no monopoly on knowledge-making in society. The important difference between academic versus intellectual discourse is that academics address very narrow audiences by using specialized language and specialized channels of communication, while intellectuals (who may very well be academics) address large audiences by using the mass media and a language more accessible to the general public. While genre-based teaching of academic writing is grounded in the linguistic analysis of the specialized language of different academic communities, the proposed teaching of the general academic-intellectual stance defined as a self-conscious approach to meaning-making, but at the most rudimentary level

deemed accessible to entering students, is grounded in the view of meaning-making as a rhetorical act and draws on the North American tradition of composition and rhetoric studies.

From the perspective of Berlin's (2003) social-epistemic rhetoric, the producer of academic discourse can be viewed as the subject of a rhetorical act who not only engages in specific linguistic behaviour, or specific *signifying practices* but is constituted through her/his engagement in such practices. Thus, from the social-epistemic perspective, it becomes possible to see and define academic discourse in terms of the kind of *subject formation* it entails. From the definition of academic discourse in terms of an intellectual stance/critical awareness and from the fact that this is the discourse used by the academic community for functions related to the knowledge-making and knowledge-proliferating mission of that community, it follows that academic discursive practice involves acting out the social role of a knowledge-maker, described by Graff (1999: 140) as "the role of self-conscious intellectualizer and contentious argument-maker".

The fact that discourse communities are indistinct and overlapping does not preclude their being more or less distant from one another (Harris 1989). Graff (1999) points to the considerable gap separating the academic/intellectual culture and discourse, which is more central to the teacher community, from the mass/pop culture and discourse, which is more central to the student community. He observes that "academic-intellectual literacy promises power" that students can recognize as "a prerequisite for vocational success in the emerging global information society" (140). However, they see it as coming "at the cost of a personal makeover that may not look attractive" to them (140). In view of Berlin's (2003) explication of the self as multiple and conflicted because constituted by multiple and conflicted discourses, this "personal makeover" Graff (1999) is talking about is to be understood in terms of developing a new type of discursive practice associated with a new kind of social role (i.e. a new subject position). From the social-epistemic point of view, the personal makeover should not be viewed as threatening to the self. However, it may be perceived as such if the self is perceived the way humans typically tend to see themselves, namely as continuous and unified rather than fragmented and made up of various subject positions. The argument behind the present proposal is that students can be helped to adopt the new subject position associated with their transition to academic discourse by reflecting on the discursive practices tied to their default role as students in the academic context. Awareness of how their social role is tied to a discursive practice (i.e. is reflected in their language) can help them modify their language in order to develop a new discursive practice consistent with the new subject formation required in an academic assignment. Thanks to this aware shift to a new subject position, students can experience the satisfaction of seeing themselves capable of dealing successfully with a new task.

Graff (1999: 140) discusses the reasons why students "feel deep reservations" about assuming the role of self-conscious knowledge-maker, which is central to the academic community and inherent to academic discourse. One of the reasons is the fact that the academic discourse community values problem/conflict awareness which is related to the practice of *problematizing* aimed at defamiliarizes the obvious/ordinary. Graff (1999: 141) points out that to non-academics, uninitiated students included, the academic preoccupation with problems and problematizing appears strange, "at best mysterious and at worst perverse", as he puts it. Calling it students' "problem problem" (1999: 141), he explains that, as experienced by students,

problems often have a seemingly pre-given quality [...]. The conventions of the academy, however, encourage us to invent new problems that nobody has heretofore been aware of [...], [which] will appear perverse or silly if you believe there are already enough problems in the world without anyone inventing new ones (Graff 1999: 142).

Graff observes that students often feel deep ambivalence toward academic culture, their admiration for it being mixed with resentment. One reason for their resentment against the academic community and its discourse, according to Graff (1999: 141), is that the argumentative rhetorical posture of the academic knowledge-maker seems to turn academics into arrogant "know-it-alls" who have the right to tell others how to think and act. For students adopting this attitude means, as Graff (1999: 141) puts it, "turning oneself into a snob and a nerd, quite possibly alienating oneself from one's friends, relatives, and romantic partners. As the saying goes, nobody likes a smart ass". However, the main reason for the discomfort students feel about taking on the new social role of knowledge-maker seems to be that they lack the sense of authority that the role requires. As Bartholomae (1985: 162) has argued, student writers' "initial progress will be marked by their abilities to take on the role of prestige, by their abilities to establish authority". Discussing this point, Ivancic (1997: 88) points out that

a writer, when writing with the discourses of a community, takes on the identity of a member of that community. In the case of writing within the university, that is the identity of a person with authority. This is a crucial insight, because the one thing that characterizes most of the writers I worked with was a sense of *inferiority*, a lack of confidence in themselves, a sense of powerlessness, a view of themselves as people without knowledge, and hence without authority [...] an uncertainty as to whether they had the right to be members of the academic community at all.

The proposed general-academic assignments are based on the definition of academic discourse in terms of the general academic-intellectual stance explained above as the self-conscious approach to knowledge-making, and aim

to directly address the problem of how to teach an intellectual stance that involves taking on the new social role of knowledge-maker, which students may feel ambivalent about, and that explicitly requires authority, which students lack.

In my search for a solution to this problem, I turn to Harris (1989). He presents a view of the discourse community which emphasizes conflict rather than consensus and sees the discourse practices and conventions of a community as unstable because resulting from changing relations of power in that community. Such a view makes Harris (1989: 17) argue against “the notion that our students should necessarily be working towards the mastery of some particular, well-defined sort of discourse”. Instead, he makes the point that teaching writing should be about raising students’ awareness of their own discourse:

our goal as teachers need not be to initiate our students into the values and practices of some new community but to offer them the chance to reflect critically on those discourses--of home, school, work, the media, and the like--to which they already belong (Harris 1989: 19).

In the general-academic writing assignments presented in section 4, the tool of critical reflection which is used to make student writers aware of their meaning making is the notion of the rhetorical situation with its components of the subject, audience, and purpose of the rhetorical act. As was indicated earlier, the assignments should be seen as preliminary to teaching the discursive practices of a particular discipline. Their goal is to help students meet the two fundamental demands posed by academic discourse and discussed above as particularly troublesome for entering college students, namely, problematizing and taking on the role of authority. These key aspects of academic discourse, as we will shortly see, both involve awareness of one’s position as the subject of a rhetorical act and are subsumed under what Chafe (1994) and Graff (1999) refer to as the self-conscious stance of the academic knowledge-maker.

4. The Assignments

This section discusses two general-academic writing assignments, illustrating some key points with examples from papers written by first-year students of English Studies (see Introduction). The students are non-native speakers of English, and the excerpts are not edited. In order to teach a critical intellectual stance by raising students’ awareness of their functioning within multiple discourses which are tied to the different social roles they take on, each of the discussed assignments foregrounds one key attribute of the intellectual stance claimed to underlie academic discourse. The two attributes are problematizing/conflict awareness and the subject position of a self-conscious knowledge-maker (playing the role of authority). Thus, teaching general/core academic discourse is taken to mean teaching problem/conflict awareness and the kind of subject position this awareness entails, which is done by focusing students’ attention on and helping them analyze their own discursive practices used in conceptualizing their school-related experiences. The first assignment to be discussed (Appendix A) is designed to explicitly teach conflict awareness by defamiliarizing the ordinary and obvious, or problematizing what is taken for granted. It foregrounds negotiation of conflicting interests in a problem situation. To teach such awareness, it offers students critical reflection on their own discursive practices associated with their default social role as students which is part and parcel of their school-related sociocultural experience. The second assignment (Appendix B) is designed to teach students to construct the position of the subject of a rhetorical act by asking them to play the role of authority, which is meant to help students with their transition to the new academic role of self-conscious problematizer and knowledge-transformer. In this case, the major problem students face is overcoming the discomfort they feel about taking on the new role of authority.

The ultimate purpose of the assignment on conflict awareness (Appendix A) is to change students’ perception of problems as simply pre-existing out there in the real world and being objectively given to them in their experience. Students start by giving an oral presentation of a problem they have experienced at school, a presentation that is next written up as their first draft. Focusing on and analyzing this initial draft, which is mostly *pre-rhetorical* in the sense of being based on their more *implicit construction* of the sociocultural context, students work toward an *explicitly constructed* rhetorical situation where they become fully aware of their own role and the roles of others involved in the situation, and so of the power relations and the often-conflicting interests of various participants. The solution they can present to their problem is indeed part and parcel of the way they look at and define the problem, which is dependent on their awareness (or lack thereof) of various conflicting interests and the ability to negotiate them. Importantly, students will first have to conceptualize/verbalize their sociocultural experience. Next, with the help of their teacher and peers, they will look at any problematic language they have used to render that experience. As examples 1-3 below demonstrate, when presented with the task of defining and explaining a problem encountered at school, students typically start by engaging largely in context-insensitive *knowledge telling* (Scardamalia & Bereiter 1987), saying what they perceive as obvious, rather than context-sensitive *knowledge transforming* which involves defamiliarizing the obvious, that is, problematizing. In other words, their initial construction of conceptual content is in large measure dependent on their implicit understanding of the immediate context of situation with insufficient awareness of their own default role as students in relation to other participants. Such an implicitly constructed imme-

diate context of situation resulting in their awareness of the situation as objectively imposed on the writer is the exact opposite of an explicitly constructed rhetorical situation which leads to knowledge transforming and involves aware attention to one's role in the situation concerning the specific goals to be achieved.

One problem picked by students given the conflict awareness assignment was the opening hours of the English Department library. In their initial drafts, the student writers typically vented their displeasure and frustration with the situation as they perceived it, blaming others, from librarians to department authorities, using language which alienated and often offended the others. Here are some examples:

(1) Surely, on Fridays the opening hours of the library are just what they should be the whole week long, but nobody cares that on Friday students are simply not there. We spend weekends at home. Even if we stayed to visit this 'Temple of Knowledge', it would be extremely difficult because on weekends it is occupied by hordes of extramural students!

(2) Without bringing about any changes, the library will lose its value for students. They have already started to feel discouraged and angry. Besides, such a library does not encourage any prospective students of English to choose our university as a place where they would like to study. Because how to study if nobody is willing to help!

Another telling example comes from a paper dealing with a different problem, namely, the small number of computers available for use by students in the department library. We can also see here that the writer pays little attention to other participants in the situation and to any conflicting interests, thus preparing no room for negotiation.

(3) Having in mind how many students need to use a computer and comparing it with two computers situated in the department library for the use by students seems ridiculous. Computers give access to information that is useful for students in their preparation for classes. If students cannot use the computer, they lose a lot of time looking for the necessary information in the books. It is really a waste of time.

The confrontational and at times, even offensive language is plain to see in these excerpts. Such use of language is tied to the fact that there is virtually no consideration given to other participants in the situation and to any possible counter-arguments they might present. The problem presentations are clearly one-sided, excluding points of view other than that of the student community. Accordingly, the writers show no critical awareness of their role as students in this situation in relation to the roles of other participants—the administrators, librarians, teachers, and extramural students. The recognition that there are different participants in different roles is fundamental to the recognition that there are likely to be conflicts of interest as well as specific power relations binding the group together. The assignment thus requires students to place their knowledge-making within hierarchical social relations. To present a viable solution to a presented problem, the writer must achieve the critical awareness of the particular interests of the different participants and of the relations of power between them in order to weigh the possibly conflicting interests. Without such critical awareness, negotiation is not possible. Unheeding of their own position in relation to others, writers may be not only unable to accurately recognize those with authority to implement a solution but they may also suggest solutions which are hardly acceptable to the other parties involved. Their solutions follow from the one-sided presentation of the problem from the position of the student community. Bringing to student writers' attention the confrontational and often offensive nature of their language helps them to see the multifaceted conflict rather than only their side of the problem. Such conflict awareness constitutes the exigence leading to composing as negotiated construction. The rhetorical approach to writing that focuses on conflict awareness and negotiation brings power relations under our constant re-evaluation. According to Berlin (2003), this is what makes his social-epistemic rhetoric a mainstay of democracy. For him, the aim of writing instruction is developing students' ability to think critically by raising their awareness of their own discourse practices. Thus, teaching writing means analyzing discursive practices and negotiating conflicts embedded in them. The assignment instantiates Bizzell's (1990: 671) general advice that knowledge produced in solution to conflicts should be "conducive to the common good" and writing teachers "must help [their] students... to engage in a rhetorical process that can collectively generate [such] trustworthy knowledge".

Excerpt 3 above provides a revealing illustration of the clash between academic and student cultures (see section 3). The example shows that the Internet has very much become part of the mass/student culture, which views the traditional way of looking for information in books as "really a waste of time". Because of the considerable gap between teachers' academic and students' pop culture, a subject position which is an instantiation of the academic role of knowledge-maker is not in the uninitiated students' repertoire of readily available social roles and, as example 3 corroborates, is likely to be in conflict with their perception and preferred presentation of self. In view of *subject fragmentation*, that is, the claim that there is no such thing as a stable and unified self which is independent of the rhetorical act, Berlin (2003) observes that great care must be taken in constructing a subject position in writing and in teaching students the way this is done.

The second assignment (Appendix B) addresses the issue of subject formation in teaching academic writing. The assignment asks students to take on the new role of a person with authority and is designed to help them experience the consequences it has for their meaning making. It asks students to write an anti-cheating policy statement addressing the students of their department. Importantly, their task is not to address their *fellow-students* but *students*, which means that they cannot speak as students addressing other students, in this way implicitly assuming their default

role in the academic community, the role they are most accustomed to playing in that context. Actually, the task of drafting a policy statement dealing with the problem of cheating in the academy requires student writers to put themselves in a position of authority. This subject position, which has to be explicitly constructed as part of the rhetorical situation, is in clear conflict with their customary role as students, which will be automatically evoked by the school context, that is, implicitly constructed with insufficient conscious awareness on their part. It may be expected that, because of this conflict, students will feel reluctant to take on the role of policy-maker needed for the purposes of this assignment. In fact, as I found out in my teaching, students given this task had less difficulty discussing reasons for condemning cheating, even though they occasionally tried to justify student cheating. The more difficult part was facing up to the very task of deciding appropriate penalties for student cheating, an action that implies authority as a necessary condition. Telling examples from student papers are statements such as *Offenders should be punished* or *punishment should be severe*. These examples show student writers stopping short of stating what particular punishment *will be* rather than *should be* meted out for what particular offense. In one case, a student who throughout his paper consistently defended cheating had actually been caught cheating on a previous assignment. This case indicates that teaching students to explicitly construct a subject position as part of the rhetorical situation is key to constructing a relevant argument, preventing personal experience and emotions from adversely influencing the construction of conceptual content in writing. This assignment on subject formation can bring to students' awareness the fact that a rhetorical situation (which includes an aware subject position) is not what is objectively imposed on the writer but rather has to be consciously constructed by a writer trying to meet the constraints of an assignment, which are rhetorical constraints that call for knowledge to be transformed, and not to be reproduced from the default subject position.

The need for this kind of assignment to bring to students' awareness the importance of constructing a subject position in writing is attested by the persistence of the problem students experience with stating the penalties for cheating, a problem which continued into the second draft of the paper for many students taking the course. Teacher intervention at the stage of group conferences may be needed to draw students' attention to language indicative of their default role as students: For lack of authority, students can only say that *offenders should be punished* or that *punishment should be severe*. Awareness of such language helps students understand what it means to take on the new role of policy-maker (deciding what punishment is right) rather than play the default role of a student. Once students assume the new role, revising the content and consistently adjusting the language of the paper becomes much easier for them. They become more conscious users of their linguistic resources who make meanings that are consistent with an explicitly constructed subject position and rhetorical situation. As Fairclough (1995: 227) claims, "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".

Teaching students to construct a subject position is linked to the claim that there is no stable and unified self that is independent of the rhetorical act. It means that by teaching students to construct rhetorical situations, we teach them to construct their own selves, that is, adopt new social roles that are coherent with the constructed rhetorical situations. Becoming aware knowledge-makers, students become aware that the knowledge they produce not only has an effect on others and changes the world but also changes them, preparing them to take on new roles and to take co-responsibility for the reality they shape through negotiation with others (Berlin 2003).

5. Conclusion

To carry out the knowledge-making mission of the academic community, academics use academic discourse, which is an instantiation of academic thinking defined by the metacognitive ability to think about thinking. Accordingly, the intellectual stance underlying academic discourse is identified as the stance of a *self-conscious* knowledge-maker (Chafe 1994, Graff 1999). As humans, we continuously make meaning/knowledge, but what makes one instance of knowledge-making different from another is the degree of the producer's awareness of the meaning-making process in different contexts. Although we commonly talk about *constructing* meaning/knowledge, Minsky (1986: 288) cautions against such thinking, saying that we do not "manufacture thoughts the way factories make cars" because thoughts are "processes that change themselves—and this means we cannot separate such processes from the products they produce". Minsky defines cognitive processes as *self-modifying* rather than *representational* ones, pointing out that the idea of self-modifying cognitive processes is so groundbreaking that "we cannot yet trust our commonsense judgment about such matters" (1986: 288). The idea of self-modifying and self-organizing processes, he says, has significant consequences for the concept of meaning. A relevant distinction introduced into the field of composition studies is the one between *knowledge-telling* and *knowledge-transforming* (Scardamalia & Bereiter 1987), a distinction whose gravity Minsky's remarks can help us appreciate. The distinction is grounded in the writer's awareness of rhetorical concerns in meaning making. Our attempts at rendering our experience often present us as knowledge-tellers (falling back on cognitive routines in familiar contexts) rather than knowledge-transformers. It is worth noting that such attempts can offer us opportunities for critical reflection in the sense of defamiliarizing the obvious (problematizing) and becoming aware of our subject position, which turns our meaning making into the rhetorical act of knowledge-transforming. Problematizing and awareness of one's subject position are here taken to define the self-conscious stance in academic knowledge-making. The construct of *the rhetorical situation* (Young 2001) provides us with a tool to teach this self-conscious stance.

The proposed general-academic assignments rest on four cornerstones recovered from the North American tradition of composition and rhetoric studies and composition instruction. First, Elbow (1991: 137) stresses that as writing teachers, we should “recognize the value of rendering experience” because discourse that renders experience yields insight into our thinking. Second, Harris (1989: 17) claims that our goal as writing teachers need not be to teach students “some particular, well-defined sort of discourse” but rather “offer them the chance to reflect critically on those discourses... to which they already belong” (1989: 19). Third, as Berlin (2003: 88) states, “the subject, or producer, of discourse is a construction [...] established through the devices of signifying practices. This means that great care must be taken in [...] constructing the subject position [...] and] in teaching students the way this is accomplished”. Fourth, teaching writing means teaching how to address the fundamental rhetorical concerns in meaning making pertaining to the rhetorical situation and including the purpose, audience, and subject of the rhetorical act (Scardamalia & Bereiter 1987).

The presented assignments teach students to reflect on their own discourse to help them meet two closely related demands of academic writing that present particular problems for entering college students, namely explicit construction of one’s subject position and problematizing. Problematizing as defamiliarizing the obvious is linked to reaching awareness of one’s default subject position, which is what the proposed assignments teach to foster students’ transition to academic discourse and culture. Teaching awareness of meaning making, the assignments provide general academic literacy support and are preliminary to teaching the discursive practices of a specific discipline.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Assignment 1: Teaching Conflict Awareness

Identify a problem that you have encountered at school, a problem that requires a specific action or policy change. Propose a solution to this problem, present an argument in favor of this solution, and address the argument to an appropriate audience, that is, whoever is in a position to implement the suggested solution.

Audience: Questions to be taken into consideration.

- 1) What is the proper audience for this paper? In other words, who can act to implement my solution or change the policy I question?
- 2) What do my readers already know?
- 3) What do they still need to know?
- 4) What arguments will persuade my readers to take me seriously?

Problem: The strategy to follow in analyzing the problem.

- 1) Define the problem.
- 2) Explain why the problem is a problem.
- 3) Enumerate the goals to be served by a good solution.
- 4) If possible, rank the goals according to priority.
- 5) Outline specific solutions to the problem, that is, set down various procedures for attaining the goals enumerated earlier.
- 6) Predict what each procedure aimed at solving the problem will lead to.
- 7) Weigh the predictions in order to determine which procedure will achieve the goals given the highest priority.
- 8) Evaluate the procedure that seems best suited to reaching the most important goals; in other words, appraise what appears to be the best solution.

Appendix B

Assignment 2: Taking a Subject Position

Draft a university anti-cheating policy. It is to be a formal statement addressed to the students. You should observe the standards of formal prose: Your arguments should be well-balanced appealing first of all to reason rather than emotions. You should maintain a neutral and objective tone throughout your paper.

Points to Consider:

- 1) Types of cheating: What counts as cheating?
- 2) Why is cheating wrong?
- 3) What are appropriate penalties for cheating?