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Classroom Performances

> In short, in all public performances, from shaking hands to conducting
> a symphony, we selectively reveal ourselves in order to match an
> idealized sense of who we should be. . . . Our competence as social
> beings comes, in large measure, . . . from successfully internalizing
> [these] idealized models. . . . The task for students, then, is not one of
> revelation but of construction. How to create a self that works, that will
> be taken seriously. (Newkirk, 1997, pp. 4-6)

Newkirk's comments come in the process of his efforts to understand what it means to engage in personal writing, an inquiry that led him to wonder, "What if we viewed 'being personal' not as some natural 'free' representation of self, but as a complex cultural performance?" (p. *xii*). Using Goffman's (1959) performance theory as a way to reconsider how to read student writing, Newkirk reviews Goffman's premise that

The key element of a socially competent performance is the ability to maintain a situation definition consistent with that of the audience. In these cases "honest" can cue a mutually agreed-upon type of performance. If definitions conflict, or if the situation appears ill-defined . . . student writing can seem off the mark. (p. 7)

Goffman's (1959) views of situational competence anticipate Nystrand's (1986) notion of reciprocity, itself derived from Schutz (1967), who asserted that it is "assumed that the sector of the world taken for granted by me is also taken for granted by you, [and] even more, that it is taken for granted by 'Us'" (p. 12; cited, in Nystrand, p. 13). What becomes important, then, are the joint expectations that communicants have for one another. Just as Goffman believed that one's communicative competence is based on one's congruence with an audience's assumptions, expectations, and standards, Nystrand argues that good writing is writing that is *in tune* with particular readers' sense of what is appropriate and exemplary. As Newkirk notes, students don't spontaneously produce writing judged as good by teachers. Rather, they do so by engaging in a complex cultural act that requires what he calls a performance of self in which they create a persona that will be taken seriously in the context of the classroom.

What matters in being a good

student, then, is not some innate set of skills and dispositions but rather the understanding of whom, what, when, where, and how to perform in particular situations. As McCarthey (1998) argues, students bring many subjectivities to classrooms and those that emerge are often the consequence of the environments that teachers create for them. If teachers limit the contextual arrangements in which students may perform, they also potentially limit their views of students, often essentializing their views so that students become characterized according to a static set of traits. Teachers, then, typically set the ground rules (Durst, 1999) for what kinds of performances are acceptable and imaginable in a classroom.

From this perspective a classroom is a contact zone (Pratt, 1991) in which different sets of values, ways of knowing, degrees of knowledge, expectations for participation, and so on must coexist. The articles in this issue of *RTE* are all concerned with how teachers and students manage the fragilities of negotiating this contact.

Karen Gallas considers the role of imagination in teaching and learning, a study stimulated by the way in which Denzel, one of her students, puzzled her because of his difficulties with academic work in her second grade class. For much of the year, Gallas believed that Denzel could not deeply engage with most of the texts read in class, particularly those read aloud, to advance his own learning. She believed that he lacked the imagination to project himself into these texts for a vivid reading experience. Late in the year, however, she observed Denzel playing on the playground where he announced to her that he was "running like Jell-O," an event that led her to understand that he was quite capable of making imaginative projections. But he had not yet imagined a way to make this kind of projection in relation to reading: The joy and competence that characterized his play did not characterize his literate activity. And Denzel was not alone. Other students, perhaps due to a cultural distance or to expectations for what appropriate school activity is, did not take up her invitations to bring their imaginative work into the public sphere of the classroom. Gallas explores her efforts to structure her classroom in such a way that students could tap the power of their imagination in service of what she calls authoring: the development of a literate identity and the achievement of control over the structures of a discipline through embedded activity. Gallas illustrates the ways in which the conflicts and disjunctures of contact zones may be reduced in order to allow for a greater variety of performances to be recognized by both her and her students as germane and available in their classroom literacy experiences.

Hannah Ashley studies four working-class college students who had had success as writers throughout their school careers. Yet the reciprocity they achieved was the result of a pragmatic sense of "gaming," of "tricking" teachers by writing what the teachers expected. The students were capable of producing what Goffman (1959) calls a

socially competent performance by learning both the conventions of the discourse expected and the content and ideology that teachers wanted to read about. But the games they played were different from those of Gallas's students. The dramatic play of Gallas's students was consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) view that "Ordinarily a child experiences subordination to rules in the renunciation of something he wants, but [in play] subordination to a rule and renunciation of action on immediate impulse are the means to maximum pleasure" (p. 99). Ashley's case study students, on the other hand, did not experience this pleasure; they regarded their games as insincere. They were able to adopt a persona, to play a role, that resulted in positive evaluations of their work. Yet in doing so they left other personas behind, those that they inhabited in other realms of their lives. In order to include those other subjectivities into their writing, they needed to be subversive by disguising them as academically coded discourse. Ashley's study shows that reciprocity can be somewhat of an illusion, leading students to invent personas for the purpose of academic success and learning mainly how to perform according to expectations.

Stuart Greene studies a first-year history of science class in a university. Greene points out that discipline-based, writing-intensive courses proceed from an assumption of the need for *authenticity*, that is, from an assumption that because writing is shaped by its sociocultural context, it can only effectively be taught in that context. Greene examines what happens when students are asked to produce writing in a discipline when they do not fully understand the shared assumptions of that discipline. Unlike the students in Ashley's study who were skilled at playing the game of school, the students in Greene's study were uncertain about the more specific role of historian of science they were being asked to play. In effect, they were being asked to play a game when they didn't know the rules. Moreover, their previous success in playing the game of school led them to misapply knowledge gained in other school contexts. Greene questions whether immersion in a discipline is sufficient for students to gain an articulated understanding of the expectations of that disciple. He questions whether "authentic" activity can maintain its authenticity when it is at odds with students' pragmatic understandings of what they need to be successful in school.

These provocative studies add much to the discussion of how to conceive of classrooms that are faithful to disciplinary knowledge and conventions yet enable students to perform a sense of self that meets their own notion of authenticity. We see this tension as central to any gathering of people who must work together over time. From our perspective as teachers, we see these studies offering possibilities for making the contact of a contact zone more productive. If students cannot imagine themselves practicing literacy as we do, then perhaps we should imagine a different way to construct our classroom. If playing the game of school

leads to parody and resistance, then perhaps we should imagine new ways in which students may engage in academic activity. If students' goals for learning to read and to write clash with ours, then perhaps we ought to imagine new ways to bridge the gap between what we want for them and what they want for themselves. We do not expect pluralistic classrooms to become peaceable kingdoms where the lions lie with the lambs. We do see, however, prospects for them to become more dynamic in the ways in which all participants negotiate and jointly construct the possibilities for who students might be.

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