

Being An Ally **Helen Fox**

Here is my dilemma. I have been put in charge of a program at my university that will expand our services to graduate students who have trouble with writing. In fact, I proposed this project. The precipitating incident was an African American student who came to me for help because she was about to fail out of her Ph.D. program. Her papers were unfocused, her professors told her. She rambled. She introduced all sorts of irrelevant ideas. Did she really understand the reading? That, too, had been questioned. Maybe she had never learned to read and write properly. Maybe she wasn't up to graduate level work. She was crying as she told me what her professors had intimidated, but she was angry, too, and I considered that a good sign.

She had come back to school after working for years in the corporate world. Oh yes, writing had been part of her job. No one there had suggested she didn't know how to write. So I asked her if she could write an executive summary of one of her rambling research papers. She'd try that, she said. It came back in near-perfect form: a crisp, focused, one-page report. None of her professors had suggested any link between writing for business and writing for graduate school. I doubt if they knew she had written high-level documents as part of her job. After I assured her – no, guaranteed her – that she would not fail her comprehensive examinations if she came in regularly, we started through her papers. I would be the interested listener and she would translate, sentence by sentence, from her tangled phrases into no-nonsense business prose, with frequent asides to fill me in on details she had left out. “Write that down!” I would say. “That's interesting. Why didn't you put that in?”

It's not that graduate students like these have “trouble with writing,” I realized. Here they are in a high stress situation where they are faced with new intellectual demands, new social relationships with professors and advisers, and extremely high expectations of themselves. And compounding this, very few of their professors give them a clear idea of the forms and structures their new audiences expect, or provide practice in building up from shorter, low-stakes papers to the kinds of writing they need to do for their examinations and longer projects. So when their writing falls apart, their worst fears about themselves are confirmed, and this only reinforces societal notions of incompetence about people of color, about women, about second language writers, about people from working class backgrounds, about people who were raised speaking a language or dialect or regional or class or cultural variation of the language of power – that is, just about everybody who has been “invited” into the university in the past hundred years.

Anyway, at the end of the semester, after her committee was satisfied with her “new” writing skills, this student sent me a friend who was in even more trouble than she was. The friend had been doing doctoral research for years in South Africa, and she, too, was about to fail because her writing had become confused and stilted as she struggled with the forms and language of academic discourse. But as she described the complexity of her project with the passion and insight of our best professors, I could just see it -- another great mind missing from the academy because nobody had the time or interest or faith in her as an intellectual to help her work her material into academic prose. So I got mad, too, and I proposed this graduate writing project, and by now we've started all kinds

of initiatives: more one-on-one tutoring; a workshop series, a summer dissertation laboratory for writers whose progress has been slow, a website with links to writing resources all over the nation.

But the more I work on this project, the more nervous I get. Because what I'm finding, as if it were news to me, is that what graduate students need to learn is the language and values of the academy, its styles and structures, its vocabularies and uses of voice, its relationships with authorities, its attitudes toward evidence, its beliefs about what is worthy of being discussed and what is not. And that is exactly what this book has been questioning. What passes for "good academic writing" is socially and culturally constructed by scholars who are both narrow in their vision and exclusionary about their club. And the terms of membership in this club are, of course, those of acculturation; to join, one must discard perfectly reasonable ways of thinking and communicating and, in the process, learn to disparage those ways, and pity those who cling to them. As Chris Schroeder says, academic discourses are "the sanctioned versions of literacy – not only certain ways of writing and reading but also, through these practices, versions of who to be and how to see the world (2001, 6). So why am I spending my time helping students gain access to a profession that, to put it mildly, does not have their best interests at heart?

Second part of my dilemma: the obvious. Students want access, even if it isn't in their best interests or defined in their terms. So what kind of an ally would I be if I declined to help them achieve their academic and professional goals? After all, I have a place in the academy -- a place, by the way, where I can choose to write in the "alternative," personal, story-telling way I prefer at least some of the time. I can also write a dry, "objective," grant that has a good chance of being funded. I can write an op-ed piece critiquing the educational priorities at my school. I can even write a book proposal that convinces an editor that alternative discourses make sense. Should I give up the responsibility of teaching my students the rules because I don't approve of the game – a game I can play just fine?

Even more disturbing -- I actually enjoy writing in Strunk & White style. I memorized that book years ago when I had aspirations to write for the newspapers. And to be frank, I have noticed in myself a compulsion to indoctrinate others in its rules for good writing. "Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract." "Vigorous writing is concise." "Different from – not different than." My peer tutors will tell you that I send back their papers again and again, ungraded, save for the dreaded "RW" – rewrite – if they say something half-hearted, or imprecise, or only vaguely intellectual. I want my students to care about the sounds and meanings of words. I want them to notice the beat of a sentence, its power on a reader's attention. I want them to learn the fears and prejudices of their readers and speak to them, manipulate them, pander to them. I want them to become sorcerers, with occult knowledge of all the taboos, charms, and ritual combinations, the exquisite poisons and their antidotes: these words transform the reader's mental landscape, while these cannot. As witchcraft, writing is high art. And as a witch, I am bound to teach the spells to those who show promise. Though mastering the spells of one sort does not preclude learning of those that work their magic on readers in other contexts, other countries, other time periods, other languages...

Which brings me to a third complication. Learning to write for readers who hold different cultural assumptions and expectations can be broadening, even transformative, but it not an easy thing, as international students will tell us. Cultural ways of knowing and communicating are so basic to our conception of ourselves, learned so early and internalized so thoroughly that we hardly consider them cultural at all, but rather “smart thinking,” “effective communication,” “good writing,” or just – “normal.” Being told that your writing is “not analytical enough” or “too descriptive,” or “hard to read” by professors who take Strunk and White maxims for good writing as universal, can be confusing and disheartening. So the answer is, teach the teachers, right? That’s what this book is about. Let’s all learn those different communication styles and incorporate them into our classroom assignments, and eventually, into a more truly global curriculum. Ha. Easier said than done.

To explain this part of my dilemma, I’d like to go back to my book, *Listening to the World* (1994), where I categorize (in a nice, academically analytical way) three fundamental differences in the ways east and west approach oral and written communication and the thinking that lies behind them. First, a preference for indirect forms of discourse vs. a preference for straightforwardness and specificity; second, promoting the goals of the group vs. those of the individual; and third, valuing ancient knowledge and wisdom vs. valuing novelty and the peculiar kind of creativity that comes from the idea of an independent mind, a mind that is its own agent, its own authority. In fact, I argue that these differences characterize not only the east-west dichotomy so dear to Kipling (and so problematic to postmodernists), but also, the split between those touched most strongly by the western tradition (whatever country, or class or subculture they live in) and those who make up the rest of the world -- the "world majority."

The easiest of these differences to recognize is a preference, on the part of the world majority, for subtle or discursive communication that puts the responsibility for interpretation and understanding on the audience, rather than on the speaker or writer. Many composition teachers and ESL instructors have noticed the results of these cultural values in writing of students from other countries and language backgrounds: the senior from Brazil, effortlessly bilingual, who writes elegantly about issues that seem totally extraneous to her problem statement; the Japanese freshman who starts each paragraph with abstract, general comments that lead gradually up to her point, with the expectation that the reader will not mind waiting patiently for the meaning to come into focus, and then beginning again, slowly, with other general abstractions before getting to the gist of the next paragraph, and so on. Or the Chinese American sophomore, writing about his father's profession as a traditional healer, who tries to convince us of the credibility of eastern medicine not by giving reasons, but by simply listing the names and categories and functions of various herbs, letting us come to the conclusion that such a pharmacology must have a history as distinguished and complex as the western and thus, have similar value and effectiveness. These are not writing styles per se, but tendencies to display learning and intelligence in a way that is sophisticated and interesting and sensitive to particular audience expectations. For regardless of what they have learned about English language and style in their ESL classes, students brought up to value subtlety or to give sensitive and thorough attention to context feel it is only natural to spare the reader the boredom of a plodding text with its step-by-step logic, its frequent

and obvious signposting, its words chosen more for their precision than for their power of suggestion.

Now if this tendency toward indirectness were the extent of the cultural differences, we might not have too much trouble imagining that the U.S. university could eventually move out if its narrow idea of good writing and good thinking if pressed to do so by the likes of the authors in this volume. Building on the kinds of indirection the university has long considered "normal" -- poetry and fiction, for example, and perhaps incorporating some of the abstractness and discursiveness of other western cultural styles such as those of, say, French philosophy, and perhaps encouraging the more unapologetically fragmented postmodern argument that is now becoming visible, even mainstream, in the writing of English and American Culture and Women's Studies faculty, we might be able to enlarge the academy's vision and make students who value indirection feel more at home -- at least in some university departments, some of the time.

But traditions of indirection are based on deeper assumptions about how society should work that seem directly at odds with those of many U.S. university instructors, especially the most progressive among us. And that makes introducing these alternative forms in the U.S. university a little more tricky. For if we wanted to transcend the boundary between western and world majority communication and thinking styles, we would have to agree -- or more than agree, I think -- we'd have to be *convinced* that maintaining group solidarity or harmony is more important than being yourself, that tradition is more meaningful than history, that aesthetic or spiritual order, created out of an unspoken, or perhaps "felt" dialogue between subject and object, is more valuable than rational order that provides a framework for objective analysis; and that the students' role is to thoroughly internalize what others have done rather than to critically question their own assumptions or the words of their teachers and texts.¹

Let's look at some of these styles and the values that lie behind them. If you come from a society that in general, promotes group solidarity or harmony over self-expression or self-actualization, you have learned very early to pay close attention to others' unexpressed thoughts and feelings. Because you "know" what others are experiencing, you don't need to put everything into words. And because you expect others to pay attention to your own unexpressed thoughts and feelings, you assign more responsibility for miscommunication to the reader or listener.² In a group oriented society, questions about personal identity -- who you really are or what you are becoming, what your true voice sounds like or whether you can make your mark on the world before you retire -- all of these are less important than your feelings of belonging and connectedness and agreement with what everyone in your group thinks, and does, and aspires to.³ Thus when you write, you are not so concerned about whose ideas are whose. Intellectual property isn't much of an issue to you. The idea of plagiarism may seem curiously illogical. Your goal in communication is expressing what "we" think, rather than what you as an individual might really think. But your primary goal isn't what many U.S. educators would call "effective communication" at all, but rather effective listening and interpretation. Sometimes you are listening to nature. Sometimes you are listening to a painting, or an arrangement of stones, or an elder, a teacher, a public figure. Often, just as in any culture, you are listening to people tell their stories. These narratives might be incredibly rich and complex, but they also might leave out details that in the

U.S. university context are considered essential. You are supposed to hint and imply, and your audience is supposed to "get it." And in your culture, they *can* get it, both because they have been brought up to attend to the unspoken, and because they have agreed to agree with you.

In most of the world's cultures, tradition is a more meaningful interpretive context than history. In a fascinating, difficult book called *Thinking Through Confucius* (1987), David Hall and Roger Ames attempt to interpret central problems in western philosophy by using Confucian categories of experience. These categories, the authors claim, have been misinterpreted in the past because of translation difficulties, not only in finding English words that describe the Chinese experience, but also in understanding that experience well enough to communicate it at all. The authors' idea that tradition, rather than history is the interpretive context for both Chinese philosophy and Chinese cultural experience can be applied more widely, I believe, to any culture that sees itself as more rooted in "traditional" than "enlightenment" values (although those terms are problematic in so many maddening, yet interesting ways).

Hall and Ames remind us that the central concept of history is the idea of agency. Historical figures act, and historians and philosophers interpret their acts by determining causes and meanings of events. Their task, and the task of the student of history, is to break down the stream of life into pieces, assign value to each of these pieces, shuffle them around, and fit them into an analytical grid or framework that will help make meaning of the chaos of events. In contrast, societies where tradition is more central are not as concerned with what caused this or that event in the past, or who invented this or that custom or came up with a particular idea. Even Confucius himself, the authors suggest, may not be an historical figure at all, but a composite, a "corporate" person who is continually being seen in a new way by virtue of the participation of later thinkers in the ongoing transmission of cultural values" (Hall and Ames, 24). Since the purpose of tradition is to "maintain institutional and cultural continuity with a minimum of conscious intervention," (22) the task of the student is to "become aware," (44) to appropriate and embody one's cultural tradition, to memorize, and internalize, and finally, when one becomes a scholar, to elaborate and refine and articulate human values in order to preserve them, to transmit them to the next generation.

Thus, when students who come from world majority cultures are perplexed or frustrated at the insistence of U.S. instructors that they dissect their personal experience and make explicit meaning of it, that they come up with their own thesis to analyze a piece of literature, or that they apply a psychological theory or historical framework to particular events, we can understand, perhaps, how uncomfortable our progressive teaching can make them feel. But if, in an attempt to introduce alternative discourses into the U.S. university, we would say, "All right, let's value the inherent feeling of rightness of ritual rather than being so concerned about causes; let's internalize group norms and stop making such a fuss about being individuals; let's get away from this cult of creative problem solving, and get into feeling and sensing the rightness of our cultural heritage". . . well, here we would be deep in the layers of a logical dilemma, unless we were really ready to go out on a limb and put aside strict logic, and say that things can be understood or valued in seemingly opposite ways simultaneously, which, I learned was possible – even "normal" -- in India, where I myself became perplexed and frustrated as a young science teacher, many years ago, not yet having examined my own cultural assumptions.

Of course assumptions can be stronger or weaker, and they can change, gradually, as one begins to understand a new cultural context. Since universities and even high schools abroad are based to some extent on western models, world majority students come with a general idea of the assumptions and expectations of U.S. professors. But because assumptions about knowledge and communication style are so deeply embedded in human ways of thinking, major difficulties still arise.

A Thai student once came to me for help on his statement of purpose for a Ph.D. program in architecture. He wanted to research contemporary Thai architectural theory, which, he told me, has never been written down, nor is it mentioned in lectures or professional conversations. But it is there, he believes, inherent in the buildings themselves, and in the minds of architects whom he planned to interview about how they conceptualized and designed their particular work. Their thinking has been influenced by architectural "theory" of the past -- similarly unwritten and unspoken, but possibly referred to obliquely in ancient documents, which he planned to research.

I love this idea, that theory can be embedded in buildings, that it can be deduced from indirect references in ancient texts and in the subtle, discursive, or highly contextualized speech of interview subjects, and that one might use these hints and essences as "evidence" that the theory is there. But because U.S. academic assumptions are individualist, because they assume the rightness of explicit communication, solid evidence, and theory that is based on principles, or general laws, I was quite sure this student would have trouble with his dissertation committee. For the process he had in mind was holistic, empathetic, and appreciative, requiring much skill in creative interpretation. And the knowledge to be gained would not be entirely separate from the texts or the buildings or the people who designed them, and thus would be resistant to demands for clarity and critical analysis.

It's not that there are no examples in western culture of such ways of thinking and communicating. Quakers, (invoking my own religious affiliation here), have a way of determining "the sense of the Meeting" that resonates with the process the Thai architecture student wanted to employ in his Ph.D. research. In a Quaker Meeting for Business (which is called "Meeting for Worship for Business"), Friends have a chance to speak their feelings and ideas about a matter to be decided with no interruptions, no requirements to follow the previous point or stick exactly to the subject. After everyone has had the opportunity to speak their mind -- though no one is required to do so -- the Clerk determines, for the record, what the group as a whole has decided, that is, "the sense of the Meeting," not by tallying yeas and nays, as in Robert's Rules of Order, and not exactly by consensus, either, but by a felt sense of how the body as a whole is responding to the question at hand. It takes practice, concentration, empathy, attention, and something more, perhaps, something English has no adequate vocabulary to describe, to feel the sense of the 'corporate body' made up of the many opinionated and highly individualistic people Quakers are known to be. Even with its individualistic overlay, finding the sense of the Meeting is a collectivist process; it's more of a back and forth sensing, a felt dialogue, than it is a tallying or an analysis. It is a beautiful, meaningful interaction. But if you or I were to become expert in this practice and then try to introduce it into the university as a new variety of data collection, if we were to claim that we "know" how people think without asking them explicitly, or without having something we could call clear evidence, we would have trouble with the Sociology

department and the Political Science department, not to mention the economics people and the geologists, and the biostatisticians, and so on. Like it or not, the U.S. university is still based on a powerful, but at the same time, extremely narrow conception of thinking and communicating that has made possible all sorts of scientific explorations and ideas and inventions. But imagine its potential to understand and value and dignify all of human experience if it were only aware of the cultural assumptions, the rigid rules of logic, the dismissal of the spiritual, and the fear of the unfamiliar, the unacknowledged uses of power that limit its imagination...

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Well, okay, that's all very nice. But if I want to be an ally, I have to be more than wistful. I have to figure out what I'm going to do with my dilemma. If I want to be an ally, I do have to teach my craft rigorously, both because students want to learn it, and because like all cultural forms, it is powerful and pleasing if practiced well. Strunk and White style (and its cousins, the academic discourse family) can be useful, even beautiful, to those who have been trained to appreciate its logic, its spare use of words, its almost mathematical precision. The problem is that its proponents tend to ignore or disparage almost everything else. Evidence. Ways of being and knowing the world. Logical, reasonable, expectations of readers and listeners: slow down, listen, work harder at deciphering the meaning. Or wait until you are more sophisticated, more learned, and the meaning will come to you. Listen to the emotion, to the story, without objecting that what happened to the author's grandmother may not be generalizable – for isn't it possible that Grandmother is not a person at all, but a metaphor?

I need to teach students these things. All students. It's not enough to teach second language students, under-prepared students, graduate students who have been abandoned by their dissertation committees. I also need to teach mainstream students, English majors, future English teachers who have never imagined that they, too, speak with an accent, or that their idea of good writing is influenced by their culture (since they believe they have no culture), or that African American Vernacular English is a rule-governed dialect or even a language in its own right. I need to seek out students at our "world class" university who have never met a international student on campus, or who try to avoid Asian-looking instructors, believing that their speech will be unintelligible. I need to recruit students to my classes who have interacted with the rest of the world only from the deck of a cruise ship, or through the purchase of cocaine on a certain forbidden city street, or who wear the colorful artifacts of native cultures and a hip, ethnic haircut guaranteed to shock their mom, all the while declaring themselves world citizens, colorblind. And I've got to remember to stop putting these students down, because they need me as an ally too, maybe more than anyone.

I've got to continue to question myself, shake up my own certainties. Believing as I do that cultural differences are real and significant, I need to pay more attention to the ways that those boundaries are blurred and changing. I need to remind myself and my students of the ways that cultural learning is complicated by gender, religion, education, family, class, life experiences, personality – not to mention global capitalism, world trade agreements, transnational border crossings, the explosion of information on the Internet. I need to remember, as Native American author Carl Urion says, that "(a)ny global

generalization about the separate traditions of (discourse) has to be formulated cautiously, because both traditions are complex. Apparent appositions, maybe even contradictions, are inherent in both traditions...(B)road characterizations can be either instructive and explanatory, or they can be reductionist and simplistic” (1999,7). I need to preface my discussions of cultural difference with the reminder that there are many ways to be black, many ways to be Chinese, or Israeli, or Mexican-American.

I need to listen for intriguing questions to bring into my classrooms. Here are some from Shondel Nero, a native of Guyana, Montreal, and New York, and a professor of TESOL who specializes in teaching Caribbean Creole English speakers: “What do we mean by a “native speaker” of English? Is nativeness linguistic or political? On what basis do we determine nativeness, and who gets to make that determination? Furthermore, what do we mean by “English”? Given the globalization of English, can any one country or culture claim exclusive ownership of the language?”⁴

These should be the questions for discussion in graduate seminars, faculty development sessions, and undergraduate writing classes, alongside and equal to the standard discussions of voice, style, authority, teaching strategies, assignments, evaluation of standard academic discourse and writing across the curriculum. Here is another quote for discussion from linguist Rosina Lippi-Green (1997, 63-24):

We do not, cannot under our laws, ask people to change the color of their skin, their religion, their gender, but we regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world. ‘You may have dark skin,’ we tell them, ‘but you must not sound Black.’ ‘You can wear a yarmulke if it is important to you as a Jew, but lose the accent.’ ‘Maybe you come from the Ukraine, but can’t you speak real English?’ ‘If you didn’t sound so cornpone, people would take you seriously.’ ‘You’re the best salesperson we’ve got, but must you sound gay on the phone?’

And to throw into the mix, are thoughts from activist-academic Frances Aparicio (1998). Celebrating multiculturalism is problematic, she asserts, when white privilege is unquestioned. At the same time bilingual education programs for families whose native language is Spanish are being dismantled by well-financed media campaigns, middle class Anglos increasingly send their children to Spanish immersion programs in order to add to their educational experiences and “foster positive self-esteem, heightened social status, professional enhancement, and economic gain” (10). Meanwhile, native Spanish speakers “are silenced for speaking Spanish, for not speaking English, for speaking only English, for mixing both, for not owning either lengua” (16). Latino college students who want to learn or improve their Spanish are derided by other students as taking “easy classes,” and are humiliated in class when their Spanish is not “pure” – in other words, mixed with English. “...Latino/as who carry a Hispanic last name yet need to be taught basic Spanish, usually by non-native speakers, experience contradictory feelings about their cultural identity and authority. While they may feel empowered reclaiming the “lost” language of their heritage and of their past identity – a language that was once who I was – feelings of infantilization, cultural betrayal, inauthenticity, and public humiliation surface during the process of learning” (ibid.).

I need to look at the assumptions behind the questions I ask, the comments I make, the advice I give. And I need to ask you to do the same:

“Should we teach them ...?” (*Paternalism stands tall and kindly behind this question. Or maternalism, reflective, deeply concerned: Should we teach them academic discourse at all? Should we teach them in their own dialects? Should we allow both? Should we? Should we?*)

“How should we teach them...?” (*The inevitability of acculturation lurking behind this ordinary, everyday question.*)

“Their ways of knowing are different and wonderful.” (*So it is reported on the travel channel.*)

“Which is better, our way or their way?” (*Dualism is bad, remember? Complexity is good.*)

The simple truth – or is it simple-mindedness? - in the mantra:
“Western=direct; Eastern=indirect”.

“They may have trouble with western forms of analysis.” (*True, but can't you hear the history of racism and colonialism reverberate in that statement?*)

Why do we have to choose between individualism and collectivism, critical thinking and harmony, direction and indirection? Why not both-and, or sometimes one and sometimes another? (*Why not create a cafeteria of cultural values?*)

The colorblind, powerblind, cultureblind assumptions in: “We’re all humans with the same abilities, dreams and desires, and thus the same interests in expressing ourselves clearly and concisely, with correct citations and in Standard English.”

The power play masked in intellectualism: “There are no cultural boundaries in this postmodern world since all cultures are so fluid and dynamic, boundaries so permeable --so can we really talk about culture anymore at all? (“...the postmodern fascination with the exchange of cultural property and with completely deracinated identity can seem for many people of color less like emancipation and more like intensified alienation”) (Fusco, 1995, 27).

Notes

1. See Haixia Wang's piece in this volume for a thorough and knowledgeable explanation of the differences between Chinese and U.S. cultural assumptions.

2. See work on individualism and collectivism such as Singelis, T.M. and W. J. Brown (March, 1995). "Culture, Self, and Collectivist Communication." *Human Communication Research*, 21 (3): 354-89; Triandis, H.C., Bontempo, R., Villareal, M.J., Asai, M. and N. Lucca. (1988) "Individualism and Collectivism: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Self-Group Relations." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 54 (2), 323-38.

3. See, for example, Hord, F.L. and J.S. Lee (Eds.) (1995) *I Am Because We Are: Readings In Black Philosophy*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

4. Personal Communication

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