

## answer

Food, shelter, fire, water. (But not in that order; try and guess what comes first.)

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## the Student as student

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I would like to begin this analysis considering the way in which the student is imagined in both rhetoric and composition literature of both the early and late twentieth-century. I'm interested, in particular, in understanding the assumptions and expectations of the 'student' that underwrite discussions of student preparedness in academic discourse. This discussion has centered primarily on how to interpolate the student into the discursive practices of the university, but the understanding of what it is to be a Student—the assumptions that underlie this figuration—is less apparent. I hope that this preliminary discussion will lead us to understand the privileging of professionalization in our students—particularly why situated student writing is increasingly prized in composition and rhetoric programs and in the university in general. Also, I hope that the consideration of the 'Student' will lead us to question some of our practices in the classroom and to understand how certain practices may frustrate the construction of the student as 'Student.'

### ideological backdrops

In much of the existing literature, the 'student' is defined very narrowly between two almost opposing conceptions: that of the barbarian, and that of the victim. An excerpt from a brief article in *College English* entitled "Sex Voci Student" (1970) showcases this divide quite vividly. Here, a rather bitter student objects to what he experiences as the inevitable depersonalization of the writing process in the college classroom, stating:

"Writing is a personal experience, and the teacher of writing needs to be more personal. He shouldn't come into the class in his briefcase. Students know when a briefcase comes walking in" (293).

This student's ungrammatical but clever use of synecdoche to conjure the 'teacher' launches a strong objection to the depersonalization of writing that he sees as subsisting within the figure of the professor/briefcase. The briefcase is both teacher and product that the student is expected to produce: depersonalized (objective) academic writing. To accomplish this goal, the student must be, in a sense, briefcased—professionalized in the sense of appropriateness of discourse, tone, methodology: his more barbarous writing instincts must be civilized. The briefcase in this passage is also a figure of deception; while the writing teacher at first may seem to encourage the personal, perhaps in the diagnostic which asks, what's your vision of creativity, (see, for example, Bartholomae's prompt in *Inventing the University*) we very well know that the student later will be damned for just such personalization—for not engaging in the objective formal discourse which is the desirable outcome for most freshman comp classes. This particular student seems already to know 'the game'—to know that the personal is to be stripped away even if at first it seems to be encouraged.

Writing in 1939, some thirty years earlier, the writer of the following passage may be considered "the teacher/briefcase" that the above student had in mind—one who disparages the student's own discourse and understands the task of teaching writing to be a task of civilizing 'the barbarians':

A student comes to college with pitifully meager intellectual equipment. He has almost no knowledge and very few ideas. And what happens? He is given a course in speech or public speaking before he has anything to talk about and a course in English composition before he has anything to write about. In 1911 we have an even less thinly veiled articulation of the student as barbarian.

Writing in *Compulsory Composition in Colleges* Thomas Lounsbury discusses freshman composition as the bulwark of the civilizing mission—its compulsoriness a necessary step in the 'cultivation of taste begotten of familiarity with the great masterpieces of our literature.' Lest the barbaric nature of the student be lost on the reader, Lounsbury leaves no doubt describing students as 'crude,' 'thoughtless and indifferent,' and, of course, 'immature.'

As rhetoric and composition scholarship matured, the student was no longer bullied so much as his or her work was. Judgments about students and their abilities were subsumed into evaluations of work and the cognitive processes that underlay unsatisfactory student writing. Thus we have Melanie Kill asserting that students are handicapped both by their (subject) positions and their particular academic setting:

If we understand the academic writing of first year students to be largely delimited both by these students' positions within the university and by the materials and assignments provided to them, this formulation seems to describe their situation quite well. To participate successfully in the academic and intellectual communities to which they are presumably pursuing entrance, they must write in genres and thus assume subject positions for which they might not yet understand the motivations or possibilities.

Such misunderstanding, in Kill's words, eventually leads to a situation where

even when immediate circumstances may seem clearly to solicit a certain form of rhetorical response, it is sometimes a different, even incompatible form that comes, through stubborn habituation, to rhetorical expression. (Kill 225-226)

Of course, Kill is trying to negotiate the very difficult task of interpolation that we have discussed earlier. She is dissecting the obstacles to such interpolation of the student as Student by focusing on her writers' various subject positions, the demands of discourse, and so on. In fact, David Bartholomae admits in the title of his famous article students *Inventing the University*—that to some degree, academic prose is a performance, but a performance that few teachers acknowledge as such.

On the other side of the divide, we find student as victim. In this conception, the academy is represented as a pedagogical ogre, disparaging and eventually destroying the student's unique 'native' voice. Min-Zhan Lu's article entitled *An Essay on the Work of Composition: Composing English against the Order of Fast Capitalism* is one of the clearest discussions of this conception that I have found. Lu closely reads a sign for a 'money collecting toilet' (what we would conventionally call a public toilet) in China as a way of understanding student writing as both emanating from and voicing a particular world view that must not be ignored. She argues that composition teachers and departments must treat writing as 'matters of design' and embrace 'linguistic imperfection' as evidence of the unique voice of the student writer. Discussing the Chinese sign, Lu hypothesizes that this unusual translation of 'public toilet' is not a result of linguistic naiveté, but rather contains within it ideological motivations (political, social, personal)—what she calls 'dissonances'—that deflect the writer's work and world-view. In privileging these dissonances, Lu implicitly applauds the Chinese writer's refusal to conform and perform; Lu argues passionately that composition teachers should similarly embrace this refusal—by so doing, instructors would free the victimized student and 'build a world warmed by responsive and responsible uses of language. By all. For all' (45).

## the professional voice

These two constructions of the student necessarily provide two different versions of acceptable academic writing; implicit in the student as barbarian formulation is the notion that academic prose is alien to the student—something that must be acquired through 'habituation', i.e. repetition and rote. Lu's essay, on the contrary, defetishizes academic prose and calls for us to respect the student's own situationally inflected voice. Anything else is necessarily a form of colonization. Yet, the very structure and tone of Lu's own essay would seem to argue against just this position—in order for the sign 'money collecting toilet' to be understood in all of its cultural richness, it must be translated or decoded, and this decoding proceeds through the rigor of academic inquiry and manifests itself in academic prose. Lu's essay, while asserting students' rights not to perform, necessarily performs in order to do so.

In fact, all of the essays considered implicitly posit academic prose as a performance. Even the student who objects to the briefcase knows that what is contained within it are the metaphorical nets, hoops, and whips that will compel a particular kind of academic performance. Yet, there is considerable hesitancy in recognizing academic prose as a performance in the classroom: diagnostics and first essays in composition, for example, routinely ask students to personalize the writing experience. Students are required to write about how they feel about writing, or discuss their most important academic experiences, and so on. This demand for personalization places both the student and the teacher in a pedagogical quandary. What, for example, is the appropriate response to the personal in an academic context, and how can the student succeed in mastering academic prose via the personal? Discussing a personal-essay prompt which she now must grade/evaluate, Kill remarks:

[O]ne of the larger pedagogical aims of this prompt is to blur the divide between personal motivations for writing and those for academic writing, as I don't think this division makes for interesting thinking or interested students. In opening with the invitation for students to tell me about their backgrounds, it is my intention to address them as people with lives beyond the classroom. . . . In this way, my intention was to have student explore the relationships between writing they do outside the classroom and the writing that they will be doing for this class is, in effect, a challenge to the division between personal identity and student/academic identity. (224)

Predictably, Kill's prompt was to "tell me a little about your background. I am interested in who you are in general, but also more specifically, what kinds of writing you do and have done" (Kill 223). Again, the motivation behind such prompts is, I would argue, born of a hesitancy to create the student as Student too precipitously and as such to alienate the student from his or her own "voice."

Yet, the fallacy of this approach becomes readily apparent if we recognize that ac-

ademic discourse is predicated upon the obliteration of the personal. It is for this reason that the writing of students who are defined by a profession—who are habituated in a distinct discourse—is necessarily prized.

To turn to my own experience with teaching professional (nursing) students, I immediately noticed the discrepancy in competence when these students were confronted with an assignment that asked them to enter the realm of the personal. When prompted by queries that allowed them to showcase their expertise, their writing was wonderfully briefcased—it contained within it the tone, method and confidence that characterize effective academic prose; however, when essay prompts delved into the personal, this academic prose disintegrated. Without the appropriate situational academic context, the nursing students retreated to the safety of a conversational rather than academic tone. The following examples should clearly showcase this difference. Manuel, a 28-year-old student, was a full-time triage nurse at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. He usually came to class in his “scrubs,” running from the subway to the classroom, usually breathless upon his arrival. One “low-stakes” assignment early on in the semester asked him to discuss the “theory” behind triage—what criteria, in other words, are used to determine patients that should be examined immediately and patients that can safely be seen later. Manuel provided a rather banal response to this question in his first response to this assignment. In a half-page, he simply cited the usual dictionary definition of triage. Triage is, he writes, quoting from (most likely) Merriam-Webster, “a process for sorting injured people into groups based on their need for or likely benefit from immediate medical treatment. Triage is used on the battlefield, at disaster sites, and in hospital emergency rooms when limited medical resources must be allocated.” In order to prompt him to think more about the humanitarian impact of triage and to wrestle (figuratively) the dictionary/medical textbooks away from him, I asked him to consider a situation where he was forced to make a difficult choice, a situation that involved the negotiation of human needs with the need to ensure that “triage” rules were being followed. As a non-native-speaker, Manuel was at first hesitant to let go of the comfortable rhetoric of medical textbooks and dictionaries that would allow him to pad his answers with quotations—to write, in other words, a quotation-quilt rather than a paper. But, when he turned to this question, he obviously found that—to some degree—he was in his element. After all, as a triage nurse he deals with this particular issue almost every day. Because of this experiential and discursive familiarity, he was able to write a fuller and more sophisticated response, even though some syntactical issues remained for reasons I will discuss later:

When you take your place at your station, emotions need to be checked at the door. This isn't easy since we don't just lose our identities as “fathers, brothers, sons or uncles” when we get to work. But, when you are attacked with a mother who is hysterical because her son is having a manageable asthma attack requiring a simple nebulizer treatment as opposed to a possibility of head trauma (whether it is a potentially life-threatening subdural hematoma or just a mild concussion) you must be remembering the principles of triage. The mother might be really scared, and the head trauma patient might be quiet, but you are the one who knows which needs the immediate attention of the doctor, and which should wait.

In Manuel's first sentence we find the insertion of his particular discourse community. He uses a colloquial expression (“emotions need to be checked at the door”) that he most likely heard in triage-nurse training. Also, his prose becomes markedly mature when considering the hypothetical needs of an asthma patient and a head trauma patient. This enables him to make the kind of judgment call that both define triage as a practice and his practice as a triage nurse. His parenthetical use of medical jargon—“whether it is a potentially life-threatening subdural hematoma or just a mild concussion”—also firmly inserts/interpolates him with a particular discourse community in which he feels comfortable. Where Manuel trips up—where his syntax becomes somewhat confused—are precisely those places where the personal intrudes and prevents his use of medically-informed or experientially-informed discourse: “But when you are attacked by a mother who is hysterical because her son...” I asked Manuel if he was ever really “attacked” in the usual sense of the word, and he replied, “No, only with words, but it is very difficult.” This initial phrase “[b]ut when you are attacked” thus indicates the difficulty of negotiating the personal and the professional both in the hospital setting and in writing. In fact, the sentence as a whole might be seen as a linguistic “symptom” of the discourse-conflict between the personal and the professional. The personal here is written in the hurried style of one who is anxious to move beyond it. It stumbles over itself in an attempt to reach the more reassuring shoals of medical discourse: “having a manageable asthma attack requiring a simple nebulizer treatment.” Once Manuel is able to reach this shoal, his writing becomes sophisticated once again. Able to draw from his years of medical training, he becomes, in this moment, a master—rather than a subject—of his own writing.

We may see a similar disjunction—between the personal and the professional—in the writing of another student, Jacqueline. Writing about the social causes of HIV/AIDS, Jacqueline, a 43-year-old registered nurse had this to say:

Homelessness is an often overlooked cause of HIV/AIDS. Because of the complications of drug addiction and lack of consistent medical care, the homeless are left untested, and if infected, undertreated. Thus, many homeless persons are not diagnosed with HIV/AIDS until hospitalized with a full-blown infection such as PCP, CMV retinitis, or invasive thrush. By this time, their T-cell counts are at a point where anti-retroviral therapies are of little use.

Having practiced nursing for ten years, Jacqueline was easily able to adopt the confident tone of a medical professional. Her thinking process also reflected this training—moving from social etiology to medical consequences with a logic and ease rarely seen in undergraduate writing. However, when asked to reflect on her own reasons for becoming a nurse, Jacqueline's tone and approach were quite different.

I don't know when I decided to become a nurse. Maybe because my grandmother was so ill all the time and my mother didn't much know how to care for her. Also, I knew that nurses make good money and that there's always employment prospects.

In this passage, Jacqueline flits uneasily from one reason to another. We are left wondering whether her decision to become a nurse was financial or personal. Even if both were the reasons, neither rationale is clearly explained or articulated. The tone also is alarmingly conversational in character. Jacqueline seems to have forgotten her reader and has retreated into her own ruminations—which have spilled out onto the page. She is obviously uncomfortable in this discursive arena—one understandably unfamiliar to her as a medical professional. Yet in a composition class, this writing would be held up as proof of incompetence precisely because the student as Student imagined in these classes is one who can manage multiple discursive arenas effectively—the personal narrative, the persuasive essay, literary criticism, social critique, research, and so on. Jacqueline's example, however, begs the following questions with which I will end my discussion: is the student as Student attainable or even an appropriate goal? Is the personal disabling or enabling in enabling the production of the Student? Or is habituation, rote and modeling and the consequent pedagogical rejection of nativist arguments, the way forward? And, finally, do we need to rethink our conception of the student and the consequently the methods of interpolation within academic discourse?

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# antigone's noir

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