Deliberate false provisions: The use and usefulness of models in learning academic writing

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Abstract

Although models have been a mainstay of academic writing pedagogy for centuries, a recurrent critique has been that they control or limit student writing and misrepresent the affairs they claim to model. These insufficiencies notwithstanding, models are ubiquitous in the ordinary, practical world, and their usefulness to novices can easily go unnoticed by experts. Influenced by ethnomethodology, this study follows the plight of English language learners in an academic writing class as they struggle to follow instructions for writing their first essay. Findings suggest that for them a model essay provided relief from the vague terms and occult objects of what was for them a cultural curriculum. The model offered students something they could do to turn in an assignment on time. Models, however, work by displaying basic principles. They forfeit some things in order to make others vivid, and it is to this sparseness that they owe their pedagogical value. Students who understood the model as a right answer rather than a case, were led astray, and they then had to confront the betrayal. Ultimately, discovering the insufficiencies of the model was important to the students’ development of competent academic writing.

In preparation for writing their first summary in an English as a Second Language (ESL) composition class, my undergraduate students were asked to write the main idea of an article we had read. To me it seemed a fairly straightforward task, but some of their work was puzzling and seemed to suggest that they had not understood the article. Yet I was sure they had—we had frequently discussed the main idea in class. I wondered how they had made sense of the task. Perhaps they were challenged by what Bartholomae and Petrosky (1996) call the difference between reading and doing something with reading. They may have been unfamiliar with what the assignment was asking them to do with their reading. When I asked them about it, a group of students told me that they had looked in the textbook index for term main idea, and had been directed to a passage entitled, “Where in the essay is the main idea found?” Under it was this message:

The main idea is usually found near the beginning of the essay, generally at the end of the last paragraph of the introduction. If not there, it probably is in the conclusion. Sometimes it is in both places. Occasionally, though, the main point, or thesis, appears in the center after the writer has spent much effort building up to it (Pula, Edwards, & Dermott, 2001, p. 5.)

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So the passage implies that main ideas are a matter of location. Students looked in the recommended places and decided that whatever was there must be the main idea. Most offerings did not represent the main idea of the text, but their efforts were sensible ways to come to terms with the assignment.

In the writing classroom, it is generally agreed that learners begin a writing assignment by drawing on what they already know from their prior experience to plan a course of action (Connor & Carrell, 1993; Flower, 1989). We can assume that experienced and inexperienced writers differ in how they understand their assignments, and by extension, teachers often perceive tasks differently from their students (Basham, Ray, & Whalley, 1993; Bizzell, 1982; Flower, 1990; Hamp-Lyons, 1997; Lillis, 1999). And evidence suggests that cultural expectations and experiences with texts exert the most influence on learners (Connor & Carrell, 1993; Kaplan, 1987; Spack, 1990). Implicit to these assumptions is the belief that students approach an assignment with a task in mind, that they do what they do because of it, and the more novel the task, the more problematic what they have in mind might be. Sometimes, however, an assignment is simply too unfamiliar for students to have much of a course of action in mind. What then?

A Korean student in an American graduate school admits that she looked up the phrase “article response” on Google when she was asked to write one in a course (Son, 2007). When writing a summary of a news article, one of my Somali students added his own details to his summary because, he explained, he wanted to make the story better. Some evidence suggests that first language topic knowledge (Friedlander, 1990) and writing convention habits (Kubota, 1998) influence L2 writing. Some students do not use even potentially helpful L1 writing knowledge and struggle through a very literal reading of their L2 instructions (Lee, 2008; Lillis, 1999; Macbeth, 2006). Others, with the optimism of mathematicians, search for “the right answer.” This seems to be the case for my English language learners (ELLs) mentioned earlier. They wanted to find something that told them exactly what to do.

In the ESL Composition Program at the large American university where I teach, strategies like these are common among students at the intermediate level.1 Here is where students who may never have written about their readings are introduced to the culture and practice of academic writing.2 The intermediate level is the site of sincere, often frantic negotiation with one’s instructions. For students unfamiliar with writing “text-responsive prose” (Leki & Carson, 1997), assignments are puzzling and frustrating (Bizzell, 1982; Currie, 1998; Lillis, 1999). Of course they all have transferable competencies (Leki, 1995)—most were very good students in their home cultures—but here they encounter a daunting new field of objects, purposes, and expectations. Those with some cultural familiarity will learn more quickly than those who do not, but Casanave (2002) reminds us that no one is born a native speaker of academic English. So how do we proceed?

Much academic writing instruction includes examples of the genre students are learning. These sample texts serve to “model rhetorical elements, principles, and patterns” (Rosa & Eschholz, 2007, p. v) either by including a description of parts (thesis statement, claim, support, refutation, introduction, conclusion) or by having students discern these on their own. Despite the constructionalist position against portraying academic writing conventions this way, as a stable set of normative skills (Hyland, 2002), and despite the care taken to portray composing as a literacy practice responsive to context, for the instruction of novices, our curricula unavoidably rely upon, promise, and, even if obliquely, point to stable objects and relations. The following study examines why this might be so.

My students seemed to care a great deal more about following model texts than they did about communicating their own ideas. I began to take interest in what they did in order to complete a writing assignment. For them, the coherence of writing models—what they are seeing, what they are being told—is itself a matter of practical inquiry and analysis. This study follows some of my intermediate-level composition ELLs as they worked to

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1 Newly arrived undergraduate ELLs take a writing placement test, and depending on their familiarity with academic writing, either exempt the program or place into beginning, intermediate, or advanced composition. The beginning level is a grammar review. The intermediate level serves students who have never written texts based on their reading or cited sources to support their views. The advanced level focuses on longer readings and a research project. The placement exam and courses exist as a long-ago response to faculty impatience with students’ second language literacy development, and more recently, to the growth of plagiarism cases across American universities (Redden, 2007).

2 The notion of an academic discourse community is controversial. I do not mean to imply that there is a cohesive set of stable, generalizable conventions that are shared by all members; however, American universities, despite the differences in their disciplines and discourse variety, are predominantly text-oriented (Brodkey, 1987), and there are a number of goals and preferences that unify academic writers. For example, Linton, Madigan, and Johnson (1994, p. 66) identify several common characteristics of academic writing across genres: “conventions of structure that control the flow of argument; conventions of reference that establish standard ways of addressing the work of other scholars, and conventions of language that reflect characteristic choices of syntax and diction” (cited in Johns, 2003, p. 207, along with her own more extensive list of characteristics).
understand their first essay assignment. In the course of their work, I observed how they used model texts and what doing so revealed about models-in-use. This study hopes to extend the conversation in the field by drawing attention to the unavoidably normative nature of instruction for novices and the role it plays in academic writing development.

The place of models in academic writing

Models in writing instruction have survived for centuries (Corbett, 1965; Covino, 1988) and criticism of them for nearly as long. The most common complaint about the most common writing model in English—the five-paragraph essay—is that it induces formulaic, empty writing. This model features an introduction paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion paragraph. Hjortshoj (2001) argues that the notion of an introduction, body, and conclusion “represents some valid observations about the structure and development of almost every kind of writing [one will] read and produce in college” (p. 41). He argues that the five-paragraph essay is not meant to stand on behalf of actual practices but rather is meant to provide basic principles of essay organization in an effort to prepare students for a greater truth about academic essays, which is: “A good essay is a vehicle for thought that moves from a clear point of departure, in a certain direction, toward a destination” (p. 45). The greater truth may seem entirely agreeable, but it is hardly instructive. This is because directions, destinations, and points of departure (let alone clear ones) are determined by their use in the academic writing context, a context that novices are just beginning to discover. Instead, beginners are offered a lesser truth:

The introduction should take the shape of a funnel, beginning with a broad statement of the topic and narrowing to a thesis statement at the end. This statement lists the subtopics, or “points,” of the following paragraphs, and the body of the essay raises these points in order. The final paragraph should begin somewhat narrowly, perhaps as a reiteration of the thesis, and broaden in the form of an inverted funnel to some kind of conclusion (Hjortshoj, 2001, p. 36.)

Placed side by side, there is no contest between the greater and the lesser truth as to which is more followable for novices, cultural ambiguities notwithstanding. By this I mean, which one affords a course of action, produces a paper to hand in. The five-paragraph essay has persisted because it is followable, and for many teachers, gradable. The transition from the five-paragraph essay to writing a well-developed analytic essay, however, is less documented.

Recurring complaints about models are that they control or inhibit students’ identities as writers, misrepresent the processes of writing, and do not easily transfer to other writing tasks (Connors, 1981; Elbow, 1973; Johns, 1995; Leki, 1995; Murray, 1985; Shih, 1986; Silva, 1999; Spack, 1988). The biggest critics feel that models represent genres and writing styles too narrowly, and as a result stifle student voice and potential by imposing style and form and predisposing students to particular ideas about content and style (Elbow, 1994, 1998, 1999; Moffett, 1982; Murray, 1985; Perl, 1999; Smagorinski, 1998; Swales, 1997). Some argue that enforcing the rigid conventions of the academy may have serious consequences for access and diversity, particularly with respect to over-valuing what Leki (2003) refers to as “English Department genres” (e.g., argument and personal essays), and requiring entrance exams that are based on narrow criteria, and under-valuing non-mainstream cultural and literacy practices (Ferdman, Weber, & Ramirez, 1994; Harklau, 2000; Raimes, 1991; Rose, 1998; Valdés, 1991).

Others contend that academic writing is too varied across disciplines to be pinned down by a set of common features (Leki, 2007). For some, academic writing cannot exist. For example, Spack (1998) says one of the major problems of teaching students to become better academic writers is that “we have not yet satisfactorily determined, despite numerous surveys, what academic writing is” (p. 85). Her point is echoed by Elbow (1998): “The fact is that we can’t teach academic discourse because there’s no such thing to teach” (p. 148). Their central argument is that academic writing is too broad, stretching across too many discourse communities within the university, to be captured and taught as a generic set of practices. Heap (2000), however, points out that attempts to specify precise parameters of any social practice are doomed to be incomplete, but this doesn’t call into question the existence of the practice. Hjortshoj’s (2001) argument about clear writing and destinations, despite the variety of ways to do it, seems to point to the existence of academic writing cultural practices that are regular and recognizable to academic community members (see also Brandt, 1990; Brodkey, 1987; Casanave, 1995; Fox, 1991; Johns, 1997; Lillis, 1999; Petraglia, 1995). Problems of definition and appropriateness notwithstanding,
academic conventions are routinely taught and learned (Bartholomae, 1985; Hjortshoj, 2001). The question is how.

Genre studies

How much specificity is necessary to illustrate a concept and equip novice writers with transferable knowledge without constraining, hybridizing, or misrepresenting the social practice? In terms of writing instruction, the question has been taken up with fervor by those who are involved in genre-based approaches to discipline-specific graduate writing preparation (e.g., Bazerman & Prior, 2008; Casanave, 1995, 2002; Hyland, 2002, 2004; Johns, 1997, 2002, 2003; Prior, 1995, 1998; Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 2004). Genre-based instruction advocates the explicit study of text types with the belief that the analysis of sample texts can uncover the features or rules for writing in specific disciplines as well as the contexts and functions they serve for discourse communities. Hyland (2004) refers to genre analysis as a “visible pedagogy” (p. 8) because students participate in cycles that begin with modeling, then presumably move toward independent construction. Casanave (2004) points out that if formal features of texts in various disciplines could be identified, it would argue for a pedagogy that values “explicitness over exploration and discovery” (p. 82). A contrasting view of the textual focus, according to her, is the contextual (situated) view that focuses on the engagement of people in discourse communities, whereby genre is learned by participating in the activities of the target community. This view corresponds to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of situated learning. This view has been taken up by Casanave (1995, 2002), Johns (2002), Prior (1998), and Tardy (2006), who emphasize the complexity and interactive nature of acquiring academic discourse, and the crucial play of context. What students do to complete their assignments is always done in response to their participation in those contexts. Hyland (2004) and Casanave (2004) both draw attention to the debate between an explicit curriculum of formal genre features (Hyland advocates students finding these themselves) and true in situ immersion in disciplinary practices with a mentor.

Academic writing as a sensitizing concept

Social theorist Blumer (1970) describes the classic social concepts (e.g., customs, culture, institutions, social structure, attitude, intelligence, personality) as sensitizing concepts. He uses the term to differentiate the concepts of the social world, which derives its order from meaning, from those of the natural scientific world, which derives its order from molecular coherence. The latter he called definitive concepts because the organization of the natural scientific world rests on common distinguishing characteristics, which permit clear determination of what is and is not included in the concept. In other words, these concepts “discriminate cleanly their empirical instances” (p. 54). Definitive concepts present themselves in fixed benchmarks, which can be isolated and replicated by scientific procedures and thus owe their order to precise parameters. The social world, however, because it derives its essential order from meaning (Schutz, 1962), cannot offer formal definitions, fixed benchmarks, or clean distinctions. Rather, according to Blumer, it offers itself in distinctive expressions, which imply rather than definitively point to instances. These context-bound instances give “a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. . . [and] merely suggest directions along which to look” (p. 58). According to Blumer, sensitizing concepts rest on a general sense of what is relevant. And relevance is bound to the social arrangements shared by a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Because these social arrangements not only vary according to context but are ever-shifting, we can best understand them by looking at how individuals do them in real life, or as Blumer suggests:

Careful scrutinizing of our concepts forces one to recognize that they rest on vague sense and not on precise specifications of attributes. We see this in our common experience in explaining concepts to our students or outsiders. Formal definitions are of little use. Instead, if we are good teachers we seek to give the sense of the concept by the use of a few apt illustrations (pp. 54–55.)

As a social practice, and thus a sensitizing concept, academic writing is filled with cultural reckonings, judgments of goodness of fit, and figure-ground relations. These arrangements are tied to contexts, tasks, and purposes that are neither fixed nor stable, yet regular and recognizable to experienced writers. Often beginning level writing instruction offers these arrangements as though they are regular and recognizable, as though they are stable objects organized in a
homogenous field, and this appears to be the heart of the ambivalence regarding models for writing, that academic writing begins as a definitive rather than as a sensitizing concept.

Novice instruction

That apprentices to social practices begin with “definitive” or normative basics is a commonplace. Whether this means sewing on buttons for beginning tailors (Lave & Wenger, 1991), repetition of basic positions in ballet (see Flower’s [1990] analogy to academic writing), or building footstools for beginning furniture makers (Hjortshoj, 2001), examples of rudimentary steps toward learning social practices are ubiquitous in our lives. Five-paragraph essays and similar templates appear to be the footstools for beginning academic writers.

Naturally, the usefulness of any pedagogy depends on what the learner has eyes to see. Much of what teachers hope will be visible to novices, however, may be hindered by what we, the experienced, cannot see. According to sociologist/philosopher Schutz (1976), a mark of membership in any community of practice is the invisibility, the taken-for-granted-ness, of the knowledge systems and cultural assumptions that ground participation. These are generally tacit, routinely unspoken, and for that reason, when they involve practices that are quite distant from those with which one is familiar, they require serious interpretive work. According to Schutz, this taken-for-granted cultural understanding that for members is simply “thinking as usual” becomes for newcomers an assembly of “objects of thinking” that places in question “nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to members of the approached group” (p. 96). Academic writing conventions are fraught with such tacit, deeply cultural knowledge (Fox, 1991; Macbeth, 2006). For newcomers who do not share in the larger cultural histories that ground the objects and arrangements of the “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991)3 they hope to join, learning them requires exposure and practice, both of which involve endless interpretive tasks. Hyland (2002) argues that novice writers “do not lack generic skills, the ya res i m p l i ce x p e c t a ti o n s ’ ’ (p. 60). The cultural curriculum for novice academic writers is summed up nicely by Weinstein (2001), a 28-year veteran composition teacher and founder of the writing center at Harvard University, who says about teaching writing:

I, too, fear the mechanistic, the “steps” that bypass what is natural and elicits the robotic. However, merely to tell students to “think”—without breaking thinking into steps—leaves them blank-eyed. Even though, if I shout, “Think!” I am referring to an activity that comes quite naturally to them, they do not see that that is what I mean by think. (p. 14)

The usefulness of models

As instructional devices, models are primordial. It is hard to imagine a dental school without its big plastic tooth, health classes without a CPR dummy, or today’s higher tech computer simulations for anatomy. This ubiquity says something about their useful and unavoidable contributions to learning. They have been the constant companion of all manner of formal pedagogies, and the reason is linked to how they are organized and how they are used.

In their discussion of mock-ups (models designed to represent a real object), ethnomethodologists Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) argue that the insufficiencies of a model—the very distortions of reality that make them models instead of the real thing—are precisely what make them pedagogically significant. They make the following important observations about mock-ups. First, they are designed with “deliberate false provisions” (p. 95). They are not meant to be exact replicas because if they were, their pedagogical value would be severely limited. They use the example of a plastic auto engine, which looks very much like an actual engine, but of course it isn’t. It is plastic and uses no fuel, exhibits no combustion, is devoid of physics altogether. Its parts are visible in ways they would not be in an actual engine, and because of this, it is able to instruct in the skeletal structure of an engine. The instructional benefits are a

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3 Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation describes settings wherein novices are in the company of competent practitioners who are doing what they (the novices) are attempting to learn how to do. By their account, learning in the ordinary world traditionally involves watching first from the periphery then gradually becoming a participant through the incremental development of skills and competence. Lave and Wenger later clarify this view: “Viewing learning as legitimate peripheral participation means that learning is not merely a condition for membership, but is itself an evolving form of membership” (p. 147).
tradeoff with insufficiencies; one can learn how pistons work, but one has to turn the flywheel by hand. This, they explain, is the goodness of the model in this case. It renders visible the invisible.

Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) stress that there must be certain shared understandings about the insufficiencies. A user must know the limits of the model. He or she must know that the model has intentional insufficiencies, so it has limited applicability to the actual object that it is mocking-up. In other words, it must be understood as a guide for coming to terms with the actual affairs and not be confused with the actual affairs. This is not to say that nothing about the mock-up will be consistent with the actual affairs; however, learners are required to make judgments about what is and what is not relevant to actual situations. A final condition for a mock-up is that its insufficiencies cannot be a cause for complaint, and when they are discovered, these insufficiencies should not be viewed as something to go back and correct in the mock-up.

For the students in my intermediate second language writing composition course, the real curriculum involves learning the limits of models, grasping their insufficiencies. Furthermore, they will need to learn the limits of the writing assignments produced in the composition class as they move on to write in their content area courses. The following study examines the initial glimpse of insufficiencies and how students learned to reckon with them.

The study

The study focuses on cases from a class of 19 undergraduate English language learners in their first quarter of college in an Intermediate-level ESL Composition course. Coming from China, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Somalia, and South Korea, most of the students had arrived just days before classes began. For the majority, it was their first time away from home and their first experience abroad.

I was the teacher of the course and the researcher of the study in the role of what Erickson (1986) calls an observant participant. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) provide a succinct summary of such a role: “a native inhabitant of the research site—not a participant observer over a bounded period of time but a permanent and observant participant who knows the research context in its richest sense” (p. 59). I had taught the course 12 times before this one and had 20 years of experience teaching college-level ESL. The class met Monday through Friday for 48 minutes during a 10-week academic quarter.

Drawn from a larger study in which materials were collected for the entire 10-week quarter, this study looks primarily at the first essay assignment, which was the focus of 12 consecutive 48-minute class sessions; these were recorded on a video camera, which was turned on before the class assembled, and turned off after all the students left. The camera was placed in a corner of the room from where the students, teacher, and chalkboard were visible. These provided a record of what had transpired in each class session. After students wrote a first draft of their essays, I met with each one individually for approximately 30 minutes to discuss their papers. Each of these sessions was audiotaped and used for analysis of student questions and comments about their work. I accessed relevant video and audiotapes when analyzing student work. In addition, field notes, which I had taken after each class session, also informed my analysis.

My analysis of the materials draws on several conceptual resources. The first is naturalistic inquiry. Characterized by the primacy of interpretation for order and meaning, the interpretive program referred to by Erickson (1986) as “naturalistic” is based on an anti-foundational worldview that understands meaningful worlds as multiple, socially constructed, and holistic, and already in place before any professional methodology steps onto the scene. In this sense, naturalistic inquiry studies public worlds of action.

A second conceptual resource concerns how naturalistic researchers encounter worlds that are already meaningful for their inhabitants (Blumer, 1970; Geertz, 1973; Schutz, 1962), and how meaning making is itself an analytic exercise. As Garfinkel (1967) advises, the natives are the first analysts on the scene. Their sense-making is methodic; it has its methodic base in the practical actions, competence, displays, and recognitions they bring to their tasks. The analytic task of my students was to make sense of their instruction in writing an essay; it was my task as the researcher to build a faithful description of their first analyses. The methods I am interested in, then, are the “members’ methods” of everyday life (Garfinkel, 1967).

For the first stage of analysis, I created a detailed log of video tapes to serve as a table of contents for classroom events, for example, “discussion of article 1,” “introduction to reporting verbs,” and so forth. I then examined the students’ first drafts of the first essay assignment for perspicuous cases, which is to say, I was alert to how students made sense of the assignment and its specifications (appropriate thesis statement, adequate organization and support,
and paraphrasing or quoting sources). Materials were analyzed in recursive stages (Erickson & Schultz, 1981) as topics presented themselves and themes were pursued. My immediate focus was on what students produced as an essay. I began without preconceived topics; I let the students’ work raise these for me. I took particular interest in their difficulties and how these showed their sense-making of writing an essay. These difficulties—for example, a misguided thesis statement, or inadequate support for a point—I pursued by reviewing conference audio-tapes, relevant video tapes, and the student’s other work, which included homework assignments, a revision of the first assignment, and in some cases, later work on essays throughout the quarter. Often one student’s difficulty led me to examine how other students had handled the same situation. Similarities in their struggles were reexamined as “cases,” by which I mean instances that are particularly vivid in what they might reveal about struggles and sensible courses of action by novices who are doing their best to interpret their instructions on an assignment.

The assignment

The course is based on a reading-to-write approach (e.g., Hirvela, 2004). Students read a variety of published materials from magazines, web sites, textbooks, journals, newspapers, and books. Class discussions focus on content first, then turn to students’ ideas and opinions about what they’ve read. This is followed by the study of several sample essays (on different topics) in the course packet, one teacher-generated and two student-generated essays, each of which models how different writers approached a comparison and contrast essay of two texts. Another sample essay we examine is a template of rhetorical moves common to the comparison and contrast essay. I call it a “skeleton model text.” It illustrates some basic instructional objects, such as thesis statement, support, citation conventions, and so forth (Illustration 1). The skeleton is not, nor intends to be, a well-developed essay; its content is sparse (the introduction is only three sentences) with minimal development of supporting points. It is meant to relieve students of content in order to enhance the visibility of organization and terms-in-use. It serves more as a glossary of terms.

For their first essay assignment in the course, students are asked to write an essay discussing the differences and similarities in two articles. They progress through multiple drafts, which they discuss in teacher–student conferences.

The two texts we read and discussed were on human cloning. One author (Macklin, 2002) was in favor of cloning, and the other (Annas, 2001) was opposed. We spent a week discussing these. We referred to the course materials packet and the textbook chapter, “What is an Essay?” (Pula et al., 2001). Students studied examples of support from the textbook (e.g., examples, statistics, quotations) and in the sample essays and skeleton. They were then given four days, which included a weekend, to write a first draft of the assignment, which was to be approximately three typed, double-spaced pages.

![Illustration 1](image)

Plate 1. The model essay illustrates the parts of an introduction.
Student sense-making: the first essay

The first lesson in academic essay writing began before students put fingers to keyboard: Not all similarities and differences are appropriate for a formal essay. When I opened the class discussion on the similarities and differences between the two cloning texts, students were surprisingly unforthcoming. They began with a collection of uncontestable assumptions: “This one is shorter,” “They are written in the same color ink,” and so forth. These may have been the obvious answers to them in advance of knowing what precise discriminations I was seeking. I nodded in mild agreement to these responses, but did not write them on the board because none of them were promising for discussion points in an essay. My more focused question, “How is Macklin’s opinion on cloning different from Annas’?” was met with silence. I sensed their struggle to discern what I wanted, so I tried a different tactic. I organized them into groups and assigned each group a point of comparison, such as topic, author’s thesis, author’s purpose, intended audience, and style. Their task was to decide whether the articles were similar or different in terms of the assigned point and to explain their opinion. I circulated to each group to check their progress. The group assigned “style,” noted that one article used more question marks. When I asked them about the significance of this, they were silent. I explained the term “rhetorical question,” and told them why authors might like to ask their readers questions. The group listened carefully, but no one took notes. Later, when they presented their work to the rest of the class, they simply said that one article had more questions than the other and did not explain what this indicated about style. I was surprised that they had not used the information I had given them. This, of course, would be one of many instances in which I would be forced to challenge my assumptions about “explicit” instructions, “vivid” examples, “solutions” to problems, or what constitutes “valuable” or “useful” information to my students.

In the group assigned “intended audience,” one student exclaimed, “How can we know this?” They knew one article was excerpted from the American Bar Association Journal, and we had discussed in class the journal’s importance to lawyers, judges, and law students, but here they interpreted the question as who would be permitted to read it, or who could potentially read it. When I asked the group what sort of people would read this journal, they laughed as though to say it was a question for a fortune-teller. One student shrugged and said, “Anyone.” The second article was published in U.S. News & World Report, and when I asked them how this publication differed from the law journal, one student said these sources were similar rather than different because “both are very difficult to read.” In an ensuing discussion, students spoke of their difficulty reading English language news magazines, in particular Time and Newsweek. Given that as ELLs they considered both sources very difficult, it was unlikely that they could recognize that one source was professional and the other was for a more general public. This also constrained what they were able to detect about the differences in style in the articles, and thus the unintended good sense of the first reply, “How can we know this?” The operative logic of the reply is socio-logic.

The students seemed to conclude that determining intended audience or author’s purpose entailed guessing; their next task was to find the limits of guesswork. In their essays, one student wrote: “Both articles have the same age audience who are reading their article.” And another wrote: “Both articles are published in 2002, which is surely for today’s reader, not for readers 20 years ago.”

When I examined the first draft of their essays, I discovered that many students had taken up the skeleton as a model: a prescription for writing their essay. As a result, their work was no more an essay than the skeleton had been. I was interested in what had motivated their choice and their understanding of the assignment.

In their discussion of novice learning, ethnomethodologists Amerine and Bilmes (1988) argue that having a sense for the projected outcome is necessary in order to read relevant meaning into assignments, lessons, and discussion topics. In order to have chosen discussable points, my students would have to have been familiar already with the responsibilities of an essay writer. This may explain why the skeleton was an alluring template. It promised that if one wrote this way, a comparison/contrast essay would result. Despite the fact that in class I emphasized that the skeleton was not an essay but simply an illustration of parts, its promise was perhaps irresistible. Unfortunately, it was a false promise. Students who relied on the skeleton were led astray. They discovered in our conferences that it had certain false provisions.

The first false provision: the introduction to an essay

In class, students said they considered the introduction the most difficult part of writing an essay because they did not know what to write other than their thesis statements. The textbook warns that the introduction “can either attract
attention so that the reader continues to read or cause the reader to lose interest and stop, so it requires care and attention” (Pula et al., 2001, p. 39). In class we had looked at possible ways to begin: anecdotes, definitions, quotations, historical background, description, narration of a personal incident or shared experience, or a series of questions. We had examined the introductions of the sample essays, but when they turned to their own writing, many of the students followed the skeleton’s introduction with formulaic precision, even keeping the same number, type, and order. For example, the skeleton’s first sentence was:

**Many people around the world believe that education is vital for their future success.**

Some students adapted this by changing its topic, *education*, to their own, *human cloning*. For example: (Phrases borrowed from the model are highlighted)

**Many people around the world** have been heard about human cloning.

The skeleton’s second sentence introduced the comparison/contrast element as follows:

**In the United States some Americans think a liberal arts education is a good choice, but others do not find a liberal arts education particularly useful.**

Again some students’ second sentences shared elements of their “model,” the skeleton: (Borrowed phrases are highlighted)

**In the United States some** people agree with human cloning, **but others do not**.

The grammatical structure and vocabulary of the skeleton appear to figure strongly into its perceived usefulness. This is one of the ways students demonstrated an understanding of the model. These model sentences sound exactly like the prompts on the TOEFL essays that these students may have had exposure to already.

The third sentence of the model provided the authors’ names and article titles, and this, too, was closely reproduced by the students. Unfortunately, punctuation and citation conventions such as quotation marks, underlining, and commas, which *can* be copied and successfully transferred, did not receive the same consideration as other elements. It is possible that facing a barrage of textual features and content, the smallness of punctuation points camouflages their importance. The meanings carried by these tiny marks at this point are hardly obvious, and understandably a low priority for the students.

Students who regarded the skeleton as an acceptable model for an essay, and as such would bring them success if they imitated it, were soon disappointed to learn this wasn’t so. First, its introduction was inadequate. The textbook and I had implored them to attract the reader’s attention, to use one of the recommended techniques. The skeleton’s opening sentences, however, used none of these, and for good reason. Had its introduction been elaborate or interesting, it might have distracted students from its structural purpose. Certainly students needed to figure out what constitutes “interesting” in academic writing, just as they had learned what counted as an essay-worthy similarity and difference. This notion will certainly vary later in their academic writing lives according to context and rank (e.g., first-year student versus graduate student in a discipline).

In individual conferences I asked them about their attempts at “interesting.” Those who had followed the skeleton readily admitted that their introductions were not interesting; however, when faced with a clear and followable example (the skeleton) versus the interpretive work required of the textbook’s recommendation for anecdotes, statistics, historical background, and so forth, they opted for the most accessible.

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4 The simple, clear sentences in the skeleton may have been recognizable from TOEFL prompts and practice essays for some students. If this is the case, it is understandable why, despite class instruction on introductions, students seized what was familiar to them and what had served them well. The drawback of using such a template, however, is that it will eventually break down. It is common in our program’s placement tests to see the formula, “Nowadays everyone is concerned about x. Some people are in favor of x, but others are opposed to x.” One of my students recently attempted to use this formula in a response essay on Mt. Everest: “Nowadays everyone is concerned about Mt. Everest. Some people are in favor of Mt. Everest, but others think it is not a good thing.”

5 What constitutes “adequate” is a judgment call, and it is my responsibility as the most experienced academic writer of our group to make this call. Further, I subscribe to Casanave’s (2004) view that “stable and unambiguous characterizations of good writing” (p. 67) are not necessary to help students improve the quality of their writing (see also Leki, 1995); rather, teachers need to have flexible criteria that are linked to contexts and goals, and “who the students are, why they are writing, what they are writing, and whom they are writing for” (p. 67).
In our conferences, we discussed the notion of interesting, or, building reader interest. The students indicated that the textbook was not just suggesting anecdotes, statistics, or historical backgrounds, but *interesting* ones, which still put them in a bind. One student wondered how statistics could provide an engaging introduction, pointing out that the textbook example was not. One student who had borrowed from the skeleton, told me that of the textbook’s suggestions, only anecdote and personal incident appealed to her, but she humorously pointed out that she had no personal experience with cloning. In exploring what she did know about the topic, a movie reference surfaced, and she decided to use it.

First draft: (Borrowing from skeleton is highlighted)

Many people around the world believe that cloning is vital issue in the world.

Second draft:

Ever see *Multiplicity*, starring Michael Keaton? I did, and that is my first impression of cloning. Multiplying your own self with so many errors! The movie was suppose to be funny, but come to think if it really happened in the real world, now it won’t be as funny as the movie will it?

In my discussion with her, I concluded that her hesitancy in using her own judgment in writing an introduction was her uncertainty about what was a permissible interpretation of “interesting.” She decided that she couldn’t trust her own judgment, so she chose to imitate the skeleton because it was the easiest to imitate. Throughout the quarter, as she learned to take the risks by offering her own judgments, she made progress moving from the security of the skeleton toward independent construction. This also proved to be true for most of the students.

The second false provision: the thesis connection

Perhaps nowhere is having a sense for the projected outcome more obvious than in thesis statements. Students need to have some understanding of what an essay is in order to craft this hook on which so much of the essay hangs. The content of the essay hangs on the promises made in the thesis statement, but if one has never written an essay, it is difficult for some students to see its work in the sample essays and texts they read. Again, it seems that the skeleton provided them some relief.

For newcomers to academic writing, the curriculum involves a paradox whereby they are required to know already to some extent what they are attempting to learn how to do as a condition of making sense of their instruction in how to do it (Amerine & Bilmes, 1988; Bartholomae, 1985). For students, the paradox is practical rather than philosophical: The instructions for their assignments do not mean much when explained without a referent, yet a referent cannot be produced without them. Managing the paradox begins with actions that the students can do (Amerine & Bilmes, 1988; Macbeth, 2006). The paradox is a commonplace in novice instruction.

The skeleton’s thesis statement was an adequate template for a thesis statement for a comparison and contrast:

[both authors] express their opinion about college education, particularly the liberal arts. However, they have different views about it and different styles in presenting them.

In their own thesis statements, many students retained the same points of comparison and contrast, and even kept the same order as the skeleton. They appear to have taken these terms as a literal template of key words. In this, they were showing an understanding of the skeleton in the form of an unintended structure. For example: (Phrases borrowed from the model text are highlighted)

[both authors] express their opinion about human cloning. **However, they have different views and presenting styles.**

Another example:

[both authors] express their opinion about human cloning. But **they have different views about** human cloning **and style.**

Some of these students may have detected a specific order and followed it. They may have perceived this as a safe route. For others borrowing could have been simply a recognizable task from their previous educational experiences (Currie, 1998).
Students who imitated the skeleton without taking stock of what it was saying, however, found themselves locked into defending similarities and differences that ran contrary to their own views. For instance, the skeleton’s thesis statement focused on the differences in the styles of the two articles. In the class discussion of the cloning articles, however, students identified only similarities in style. Nevertheless, several students adhered to the skeleton’s thesis point about differences. In their own body paragraphs, however, they discovered they did not have anything to say. One student solved the problem by simply skipping the necessary body paragraph on this point. Another solved the problem by ignoring the thesis and including a body paragraph that discussed similarities instead of differences. Some students were able to find some differences, but they were weak (e.g., length and place of publication) and didn’t lend themselves to much elaboration. In class discussion, a similarity that students had agreed upon was that both articles were difficult for them to read, and this difficulty tended to obscure finer distinctions that could have made a case for stylistic differences.

Several students did not notice that the skeleton’s body paragraphs took up the same points that were offered in its thesis statement. The connection between a thesis statement and body paragraphs had been discussed in class, with a diagram graphically highlighting the connection. As well, students had identified thesis points and body paragraph topics in the sample essays. It is difficult to imagine what sense the students made of such illustrations. Perhaps, again, without perceiving the relevance of the information to their upcoming assignment, the points may have passed unnoticed.

Some students proposed topics in their thesis statements that were never again mentioned in their essays. For example, one student proposed to discuss differences in opinion, and similarities in style and topic. His body paragraphs, however, focused on audience, author’s purpose, and the organizational structure of the articles. He explained to me in tutorial that he felt it would be repetitive to discuss the same information in the body as mentioned in the thesis statement. For the sake of his audience, he wanted to offer them something more. In isolation, his observations were thoughtful. I appreciate that he had made a decision to disattend the skeleton and other essays. To make the judgment of repetitiveness, he obviously caught the thesis–body paragraph connection, but he decided against it. He was ultimately acting on the assumption that sample essays are cases and thus are not to be used literally. Unfortunately, this particular convention—thesis/body paragraph connection—was not optional. When this became a topic for conferences, he understood the samples and skeletal model text in a novel way.

These difficulties were easily cleared up in our conference discussions, and student revisions of their thesis statements were much more successful.

One student had borrowed from the skeleton’s thesis statement for crafting his own, and recycled it for his second comparison/contrast essay. With two successes to his credit, he got all the way to the third essay before he was betrayed by the skeleton. Unfortunately, the third essay assignment was not a comparison/contrast essay, but rather a synthesis/response, in which students were expected to discuss their personal reactions to their readings.

Skeleton thesis:

[both] authors express their opinion about college education, particularly the liberal arts; however, they have different views about it and different styles in presenting them.

His thesis for his first comparison/contrast essay: (Borrowed phrases highlighted)

Both authors expressed differences in opinion on cloning; however, they have different views about it and different styles.

His recycling effort for his synthesis–response essay:

Both Levenson and Reinert expressed differences in their opinion about obedience; however, they have different views about it and different styles.

His third essay required personal response, but his thesis does not indicate this. He had chosen to keep his successful template for a thesis despite class sessions about personal response and the sample essays we’d discussed. In conference he said he knew that this thesis did not have personal response, but he believed that was okay because it was a good thesis. We discussed “personal response” in the context of his work. He seemed to focus on the appearance of personal pronouns in the personal response thesis. Revising, then, became a matter of
including personal pronouns, and I suspect he believed the more the better. He included four personal pronouns in revised thesis statement:

I found the article by Levenson and the article by Reinert both interesting subject because they both affected me personally by difference to my personal experiences and I disagree with their view of obedience.

Although there is more to the personal response than this, it was enough to help him craft a more appropriate thesis. This perhaps enabled him to concern himself less with structure and more with ideas. His thesis statement showed an admirable departure from his previous reliance on a formula and proposed issues that were much more closely tied to having something significant to say about the texts:

Both articles are talking about obedience, and there is a similarity, which is different from my experience, and difference between Levenson’s obedience and Leong’s obedience, and relationship between Leong and his father and Jesus and God. From my point of view, obedience is socially constructed.

As a thesis statement, this is full of promises, and his body paragraphs lived up to these promises at least organizationally. Ultimately the thesis was perhaps too ambitious for a 3–4-page paper; each topic warranted a lengthier discussion than he undertook. He told me he had learned the concept of social construction from his sociology course. He was proud of his ideas, but coming up with them seemed to have exhausted him. He didn’t have much to say about them in terms of explanation or support. Still, he had shown that the skeleton was best used as a springboard, and he tested possibilities of how far to spring from the comfortable structure of the skeleton into the terrain of his own ideas. Such departures, critical for learning the curriculum of judgments, require taking such risks, and often these risks are misunderstood as failure to see the instruction’s objects. Students must figure out how far one may stray from the rules while still producing something recognizably like it. This is, in fact, the singular most important lesson of the course.

The third false provision: structure

The textbook’s presentation of an essay as an assembly of parts, and the skeleton’s vivid display of how these parts could be assembled in a linear structure, together implied that writing an essay is a task involving concrete objects and locationals: These parts go here. Students took the advice seriously. Some with the strongest grammatical skills were among those who most confidently saw in the skeleton a diagram. It would appear then, that grammatical insecurity may not have been the reason some students adhered so closely to the skeleton as a model. In many cases students could not see its substance—what the piece was talking about—but they could see its organization. They could see diagrammatically. This enabled them to cobble together a very essay-looking object, but without benefit of judgment about the goodness of the fit (Illustration 2). One student crafted a body paragraph that looked very much like the skeleton’s. She used a quotation to support her claim that one author has a friendlier style than the other:

Macklin has a soft and friendly style. She mentions about “spare parts” p. 166) in explaining who is going to use human cloning.

There is much in the sentence that is unavailable to a reader. It is not clear how Macklin’s mention of “spare parts” is evidence of “soft and friendly,” or even what Macklin means by “spare parts.” The student knew her claim needed to be supported, and she sensibly took from the skeleton that support meant including a quotation. Others similarly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support using a quotation</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Sorkin thinks this way because his liberal arts teacher at Syracuse University made him repeat the course, and the impact was great. He says, &quot;It was the single most significant event that has occurred in my evolution as a playwright&quot; (B2).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Plate 2. [(Illustration 2)] The model essay illustrates support for a body paragraph point.
made a point about a similarity or difference and a statement meant as evidence and left the reader to make something of it. For example, one student offered the following as a complete body paragraph in his essay:

The intended audience is different. Macklin’s article appears in *U.S. News & World Report*, and Annas’ article appears in *American Bar Association Journal*.

The following student used a string of examples quoted from the article as supporting evidence:

One difference between these two articles is style. For example, “extreme and improbable hypotheticals” (p. 164), “a difference in kind, not in degree” (p. 164.)

Students can easily grasp from the model text that support usually takes the form of a quotation or paraphrase, but how these actually support a claim is sometimes a little beyond them.

While the promise of the skeleton is to make visible instructional objects like thesis statements, support, and so forth, one can’t really see these if one can’t see what the author is doing with them, their actual functions in the arrangement and their reflexive relationship with the rest of an essay.

As the quarter progressed students had a tendency to use their successes as templates for their next assignments, and they once again had to confront false promises. But they appeared to grasp the problems more quickly and were more able to make changes independently. Thus they embarked on the journey toward understanding that different tasks call for different thesis statements, all of which do the same “kind” of work. The task and question for them was: what kind of work is it?

The work of models

Model texts, skeletal or otherwise, do offer the promise that if one follows them an ideal outcome will result. Leki (1995) found in her case studies of university-level English language learners that looking for such models and examples was a common coping strategy used by the students to survive the writing demands of their disciplinary courses. At first I was surprised and dismayed that students had chosen the skeleton as a template, but after following their efforts carefully, I discovered that for the most insecure writers, the skeleton was the most visible set of instruction on how to write an essay, and ultimately it offered a surface to which further instruction could cling, a context that gave significance to ways of writing. Their further instruction seemed to make more sense when it took place in the context of their own work.

Academic writing may begin as a definitive rather than as a sensitizing concept perhaps because for novices unfamiliar with the tasks, the guidelines or “directions along which way to look” (Blumer, 1970), or even our best illustrations, are too vague. While the skeleton’s “visible parts” guaranteed students something to hand in for the assignment, its pedagogical effectiveness was achieved through certain “false provisions” (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970). The objects of instruction in the particulars of my class—thesis statement, topic sentence, support, and so forth—were portrayed in the skeleton as stable and rule-governed. This was the false provision that promised and premised the skeleton’s instructional effectiveness—its followability—and the students took the promise seriously. Academic writing is an indefinite terrain, but for some the skeleton made it slightly less so. Novices confronted a field of slippery objects, distinctions, and relations, and the model text provided a foundation for further instruction. They needed this bit of traction, and if such models seem ubiquitous in formal writing instruction (and elsewhere), it may be because eventually they afford this traction.

My intent has not been to promote the use of the essay as an access key to academic writing. I have found that in some cases, asking students to see in a text an unfamiliar form (regardless of what kind of text), and asking them to write in an unfamiliar form is asking much. In such cases, students may have to begin with the most rigid model and work away from it.

The shortcoming of such models or sample texts may well be their strongest recommendation to novices. They offer formal, generic representations of social practices that are far from generic or formally structured. They convey these practices not only as formal and structured, but stable, reliable, and vividly so. Yet other tasks and occasions will defeat the model’s assurances, as the students later discover. These “false provisions” have something to do with the familiar critique of models as a curricular design. The criticisms are longstanding and foreshorten our interest in and appreciation for the work models do. In light of the materials presented here, we can see how the model text achieved what a pedagogy for novices must achieve: it must be vivid, evident, stable, and show its “parts.” But it achieves this accessibility for novices through the false representation of the social practices and conventions it represents.
For newcomers who do not share in the larger cultural histories that ground the objects and arrangements of the community of practice they hope to join, learning them requires exposure and practice, both of which involve endless interpretive tasks. It appears that the model text provided a first reckoning of academic writing underwritten by the unavoidable insufficiencies of models and definitions. My students then had to discover and confront those shortcomings of the formal curriculum and learn to make the judgments academic writing requires. In doing so, they began to grasp gradually the difference between learning academic conventions through a formal curriculum and learning them through experience and participation.

By Lave’s (1990) account, whenever a pedagogy for novices is devoted to specifying procedures rather than providing opportunities for practice, the “specification of practice...is bound to result in the teaching of a misanalysis of practice” (p. 324), and indeed it did. Formal curricula tend to misrepresent social practices and how they are achieved and thus result in hybrid practices that may be recognizable or sensible only in the classroom in which they are taught (see also Bizzell, 1999). Lave calls these “syncretic” (p. 324) practices and says they “will not in fact reproduce ‘good’ practice” (p. 324). While many of my students’ first essays were very essay-like in appearance, they did not in fact represent good practice. This was not simply because the students were novices to the task. It was also that they had taken the model text quite seriously, including its false provisions. But perhaps their “syncretic” practices can become “‘good’ practices” as students discover the insufficiencies of the models.

For those who already know how to write conventional essays, there are something like “procedures,” or at least we can speak of our writing that way. What the model, template, or sample essay cannot disclose, much less teach, however, is that whatever procedures the crafting of a well-shaped essay may display, they are procedures of a peculiar kind. Rather than being reliably stable, iterable, or rule-governed, the work of writing an essay and constructing and organizing its familiar objects entails deeply cultural judgments, and judgments are always bound to context. These judgments-in-context organize tasks, and the models that we find in our textbooks and practice are obliged to be silent about the contexts that organize them. This is another feature of their “false provisions.”

In order to begin to develop the kind of judgments and recognition of objects in their various forms that competent writers produce, students need contact and focused time with a competent practitioner engaged in doing it. In this classroom, I am the experienced practitioner who represents the “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29) they are attempting to join. The conference is the site where they become in some sense active participants in the academic community as “both member of a community and agent of activity” (p. 122).

In conferences students gain a different kind of access to their formal curriculum of models, sample texts, and tasks. It is here where the false provisions begin to be disclosed, which in turn leads to the kind of understanding necessary for making appropriate writing judgments. It may be that discovering the insufficiencies of the formal curriculum is quite central to the pedagogy of the course, and that this too is central to the model’s place within it.

References


