"LET YOURSELF SHINE": LOOKING *AT* AND *THROUGH* STUDENTS' INVENTION OF ETHOS

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As a number of scholars have noted recently, the last quarter of the twentieth century was marked in Composition and Rhetoric by a general shift away from writing instruction at the sentence level (e.g. Bartholomae, 2005; Butler 2008, 2010; Connors; MacDonald). In accomplishing, describing, and defending this shift, scholars frequently have focused on the relative importance of texts' function in larger communicative webs, versus texts' surface features; this contrast has most often been expressed in binaries, such as substance/style, process/product, higher-order/lower-order, and global/local. Examples of this kind of binary opposition appear in many of the landmark texts of our field. For instance, an often-quoted statement from Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's 1963 *Research in Written Composition* warns that "the teaching of *formal grammar* has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in *actual composition*, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (37-38, emphasis added). The 1974 "Students' Right to Their Own Language" suggests, "If we can convince our students that *spelling, punctuation, and usage* are less important than *content*, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write" (Committee 8, emphasis added). And in her influential 1982 essay, "Responding to Student Writing," Nancy Sommers argues that too often, "instead of reading and responding to the *meaning* of a text, we correct our students' *writing*" (154, emphasis added). While none of these foundational texts denies the

importance of sentence-level issues entirely, each advocates reading student texts primarily for the ideas with which students are struggling, and each suggests that we can do harm to student writers when we ask them to attach too much importance to specific language or when we do so too early.

Richard Lanham has developed a usefully capacious matrix for visualizing these kinds of oppositions in our approach to language. He advocates seeing not so much an *opposition* as a *tension* between looking "*at*" a text (i.e. paying attention to the form and manner in which ideas are expressed), and looking "*through*" a text (i.e. seeking the meaning of a text with minimal attention to the way in which the text is expressed). I like Lanham's terms because they not only encapsulate many of the binaries our field has used to describe our approach to language, but also imply that when we look *through*, we may not be looking sufficiently *at*, and vice versa.

These terms are especially useful when thinking about how our attitude toward style and substance relates to our field's desire to affirm students' right to their own language and their own ideas. Each of the three statements I quote above is informed by the basic belief that student writers deserve our respect and our very best efforts to help them develop into writers who are capable of affecting and effecting the world in which they live. I ask here, though, are we serving students' interests and can we respect their language when our priority is always on the so-called substance of their writing? In this article, I report evidence that students are committed to their own words to a far greater degree than scholarship in our field indicates; I argue that in averting our eyes from writing that seems naïve or lacking in style in order to concentrate on the so-called "substance" of the writing, we may be both disrespecting our students' sense of identity as well as leaving them ill-prepared as writers in college and beyond.

"Let yourself shine"

The injunction to "let yourself shine" comes from a former student of mine, Mike, whom I interviewed as part of research on students' personal investment in academic writing.[1] I chose to

interview Mike and the other members of his class because I wanted to understand their personal investment in the different kinds of writing assignments I'd given them (ranging from arguments based on personal experience to arguments based on library and original research). When I began the interview project, I expected to learn about what had led to students' choices of topics, about how it felt to be writing about library research as compared to personal experience, and about how students furthered their personal interests through academic research—and I did learn about those things. However, I also came to see ways in which students had been looking both *through* and *at* their writing in complex ways that I had not been prepared to see when I was their professor.

In explaining to me that writers "should let [themselves] shine through a little bit at times," Mike was stating his belief that writers should demonstrate personal investment in their writing, a statement that was consistent with what we'd talked about in our class, as well as with my sense of what Mike does as a writer. I was surprised, then, that the statements in Mike's class essays that he identified as most boldly asserting his sense of self were the ones that I as a reader found least interesting and distinctive. Like Mike's statement to me about the need to "let yourself shine through," the passages he saw as most reflective of his identity were passages that offered what I saw as clichéd language, like his claim in one paper that "When everyone is pointing a finger, the problem gets forgotten."

As I conducted other interviews with my former students, I learned that Mike wasn't alone in his assessment of the kinds of moments in writing that were most personal. All of the students I interviewed had written what I considered to be powerful and well focused papers whose content entwined personal and academic concerns; however, the things that students identified as most meaningful and memorable about their work were often what seemed to me to be naively overconfident maxims and, alternatively, bland generalizations—in short, the sentence-level elements that, to me, marked their writing as the writing of first-

year students who were attempting to greater and lesser degrees to invent the university in their writing. As an instructor, I chose to look *through* rather than *at* these kinds of statements because I wanted to prioritize students' ideas and their developing senses of self. Upon further reflection, I have come to understand these students' phrasing of academic claims as offering opportunities for self-expression—opportunities that were as meaningful to these students as was their work with the subject matter. As a teacher, I chose by and large to avert my eyes from what I saw as inexpert stylistic choices, but in so doing, I missed opportunities for helping students make more informed choices about the complete range of ways in which they were inventing ethos through both the style and the substance of their work.

Inventing Ethos, Inventing the University

In understanding the disconnect between how my students and I each perceived the work of expressing personally meaningful ideas in an academic setting, it is helpful to consider the distinction between "situated" versus "invented" ethos that Jacqueline Royster explains.[2] Situated ethos is an effect of power relations between rhetors and audiences. When a rhetor is marginalized through power relations that precede the rhetorical situation, he or she is situationally at a disadvantage in engaging with the audience. Such rhetors "come to a rhetorical task with a reputation, that is, with a situated ethos more often than not deeply compromised" (Royster 65).

In contrast to situated ethos, invented ethos is the ethos that rhetors actively construct in their writing. In constructing invented ethos, rhetors draw upon their prior knowledge of themselves, their communities, and their audiences in an attempt to present themselves as the kind of people whose ideas are worthy of the audience's consideration and adoption. All rhetors must invent ethos because although situated ethos is always already present in the rhetorical situation before the rhetor writes, the ethos of the writing itself is a new creation, one that can either

improve or further compromise the impressions established through situated ethos.

In much of the scholarly work on students as novice writers since the early 1970s, students' situated ethos has been seen as putting them at a disadvantage in making arguments to their more powerful composition instructors. Students are new to college writing, and, as they "invent the university," the expectation is that they will learn but will also make missteps along the way that mark them as outsiders to the academic community they are expected to join. In his frequently anthologized essay, David Bartholomae writes that the kinds of missteps students make in ending essays with clichéd "Lesson[s] on Life" ("Inventing" 63) or with inexpert mimicry of academic language serve as evidence of students' having "entered the discourse [of the university] without successfully approximating it" ("Inventing" 64).

In recent decades, we have tended to see student identity negotiation and resistance as taking place on a large scale, in terms of ideologies and explicitly articulated community affiliations. As Russel Durst notes in the introduction to his study of conflict and student resistance in composition classrooms, "most of the recent discussions of what has been called 'the social turn' in composition studies say very little about the teaching of writing in the more traditional sense of examining ways in which one might develop, think through, and structure an argument or interpretation" (5). Durst identifies what he calls students' "'twin resistance'" to composition courses' "twin purposes of teaching writing and teaching political concern": Durst writes that students "resist *politically*" to the "liberal ideology" they feel "they are being force-fed," and they "resist *intellectually*" to what they see as "unnecessarily abstruse essays" that they are asked to read and write" (128). In keeping with our emphasis on looking *through* more than looking *at* student writing, our field has focused on political resistance to a much greater degree than on intellectual resistance.

Because our eye is on these big-picture issues, it is easy to assume that, when students make missteps at the sentence level,

these missteps are evidence of inexpert mimicry of academic language (situated ethos), rather than conscious rhetorical choices (invented ethos). Even in some of the recent arguments for renewed attention to style, there is an implicit assumption that student writers will not attend carefully to their sentences without coaching: T.R. Johnson, for instance, advocates teaching students stylistic devices so that they can write reflectively, rather than, in the words of one of his students, "just putting down whatever" (358).

Based on my interviews with my former students, though, I propose that what appear to be the markers of the situated ethos of novice writers may not always be reflections of students' inability to imagine the discourse the university expects of them but may be, rather, indications of their active negotiation of and resistance to academic claims through the use of invented ethos. My interviews reveal students' concerted efforts both to retain what I saw as clichéd formulations of ideas, as well as to temper and subdue what I saw as appropriately strong and innovative formulations of ideas. While it is possible to interpret my students' handling of assertions as their ineffective attempts to invent the university, I believe it is more accurate to see them as attempts to invent ethos with a sense of personal integrity. Just as students may assert their beliefs and cultural affiliations through political resistance—for instance, writing a paper arguing against race-based affirmative action in college admission—so too may they assert their beliefs and affiliations through intellectual resistance.

There are many good reasons for our field's choice to prioritize looking *through* language and I believe we should continue to do so; however, I believe that spending time looking *at* and devoting in-class time to students' phrasing of academic claims, in particular, offers a valuable way to respond to, rather than to overlook, students' intellectual resistance. Claims are essential to any kind of academic writing, and talking about the ways in which we formulate claims offers an important opportunity for seeing and engaging with students' invention of ethos.

Negotiating the Personal in Academic Claims

Although claims are the most basic, most essential components of academic arguments, writing them well requires considerable rhetorical acumen. Standard handbook advice about claims includes advice about both the importance of a claim being arguable and about the arguability of a claim being dependent on the specific audience to which it is addressed.[3] Despite this advice, major claims, supporting claims, and even the simple declarative sentences that necessarily appear throughout arguments are difficult to formulate—even for professional academics. I'm sure that all of us, who have confidently offered the standard advice to our students, have also struggled in our own writing with questions of whether our claims are really arguable, whether a reasonable person would really agree (or even be interested), and whether our phrasing is really "assertive" or if it is instead "too aggressive" or "too passive" (Hacker et al., 67).

My student Mike was especially articulate about the difficulties of writing claims; he was concerned with accommodating not only what he called "good writing" but also his sense of personal integrity. He was—as many first-year students are—conscious of the risk of being too personal in academic writing; Mike explained that he is part of "the behaviorist revolution" and thus believes that explicit references to personal experience are inappropriate in academic papers. However, he also commented several times in our interview about the need to be personally engaged in any piece of writing, explaining that "personal experience drives what I end up saying."

Mike explained that the places in his writing that are most personal are ones that are least likely to stand up to standard writing advice:

Julie: Are there particular pieces of the paper that feel really personally important to you?

Mike: Probably just all the parts that actually seem like they're not as polished [that] don't go with the flow as well? Honestly, like some of the parts that

might actually be more suspect for- as far as good writing? Because, I really let sort of my emotion in this problem get through in a few places [with] just very stern, plain language.

(Mike pauses to look through the paper.)

Mike: Okay like "While everyone is busy pointing their finger at someone else before someone can point a finger back at them, the problem gets forgotten." I mean, it's not—that's a pretty simple sentence, maybe even a little bit of a run-on. But despite those problems, it is very easily understood, and it clearly kind of shows my opinion on it.

Mike went on to explain the difficulties of balancing between the need to express himself and the need to avoid being too emotional:

> I feel like a lot of times in writing . . . , the more emotion you show your reader, the less credible you become in the reader's mind. But to a <u>point</u>. Obviously if you have no emotion or character or ethos or anything like that throughout your paper, the reader will just go, "Well. You're just regurgitating facts," or "They're just summarizing," or, you know, "They're not writing." 'Cause there's nothing of them in the paper, but you wanna keep your emotions in check somewhat, so I- I felt like it was important to show simply kind of where I was coming from on this.

Mike's self-awareness as a writer is very clear, even in his description of how he formulated the statement that "While everyone is busy pointing their finger at someone else before someone can point a finger back at them, the problem gets forgotten," a statement that was not the major claim of his argument but that appeared in various forms in his paper about the importance of reforming what Tannen calls "the argument

culture" in American media. His description of what is suspect about his statement demonstrates his awareness of errors like run-on sentences, as well as the importance of "ethos"—not only from a textbook standpoint but also from a personal standpoint. Mike clearly has been paying attention to the terminology and standards to which he has been exposed during his years of writing instruction, but he also has his own sense of what he prefers as a reader and as a writer.

Mike explained that although his statement about finger pointing seemed less strong from a writing standpoint, it wasn't for lack of revision—or lack of attempts at revision:

> Mike: I remember looking at those sentences and trying to figure out ways I could revise them, and actually spending a lot of time going, "Okay. Move this here, move this here." And then ending up with it back in the same way it was! (laughs)
>
> Julie: (laughs) Yeah.
>
> Mike: I actually worked so- worked hard on, essentially, nothing. But, in the end, sort of realizing, you know? This is kind of how I want it. I guess, bottom line for me—on both of these papers and everything else—is kind of integrity? And sort of I was willing to admit to myself, "Okay, this is really how I want it?" And this might not be the best example of writing, but regardless of what grade I get? I feel like I should have this this way . . . It's kind of like [I] respect a person who gets a B+ on a paper and really does it the way they want to do it, more than the person who gets an A and does it the way the professor wants it.

Mike's comments demonstrate that he is aware of the risks of what he calls "stern, plain language" (or that Bartholomae might call "Lesson[s] on Life"), but he chooses nonetheless to risk a

lower grade (a B+!) to maintain a sense of personal integrity in the way that he has phrased his beliefs.

Importantly, Mike describes the risks of confronting "the way the professor wants it" in terms of the style of writing or "intellectual resistance," rather than in terms of substance or "political resistance." Although we have tended in Composition Studies to see conflict between students and instructors in terms of large, abstract concepts like religious and political beliefs or social hierarchy, Mike identifies these conflicts playing out at the sentence level in the phrasing of a supporting claim.

Clichés, Claims, and Collective Wisdom

Although Mike spent considerable time and attention on his decision to write about "finger pointing," from reading his paper, it is all too easy to see his eventual choice as a simple matter of ineffective word choice. Handbooks typically discuss clichéd phrases in the section on style or word choice, and few handbooks have index entries for the more elaborated clichés we know as maxims. But clichés like the ones Mike uses in his writing deserve more attention and should be considered in tandem with claims, both in how we teach about claims and in how we teach and interpret ethos in writing.

A number of journal articles written over the past forty years demonstrate both our frustration with cliché and our awareness of the complex reasons why clichéd language shows up in student writing.[4] As Gary Olson chronicles in his 1982 *College English* article on cliché, the pervasive attitude expressed in handbooks is that writers who use clichés want to "avoid both thinking and being original" (190). But clichéd phrases frequently have the power of collective wisdom that students are exploring and considering on their own while in college, often away from family and hometown friends.[5]

Aristotle—perhaps still our best-known theorist of ethos—offers a rich and surprisingly current articulation of the ways in which ethos, claims, and communal wisdom are linked. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle explains that "A maxim is an assertion"

(2.21.2), often a conclusion of an enthymeme. Like authors of modern handbooks do, Aristotle recognizes that maxims are not fresh, but he is more generous in his treatment of them, advising that "one should even use trite and common maxims if they are useful; for because they are common, they seem true, as though everyone agreed" (2.21.11). For Aristotle, maxims bear clear relation to the rhetor's invented ethos, for "if the maxims are morally good, they make the speaker seem to have a good character" (2.21.16). However, as Aristotle explains, what Royster would call "situated ethos" can limit a rhetor's ability to use maxims: "Speaking in maxims is appropriate to those older in years and on subjects of which one is experienced, since to speak maxims is unseemly for one too young, as is storytelling; and on matters in which one is inexperienced it is silly and shows lack of education. There is an adequate sign of this: country folk are most inclined to strike maxims and readily show themselves off" (2.21.9).

Aristotle's advice about the use of maxims is more complex than our contemporary handbook advice. Although it is easy to see maxims as being simply trite, they do offer versions of common wisdom, wisdom that isn't necessarily incompatible with academic discourse. Aristotle's observation about who is qualified to use maxims is a useful piece of advice, too, especially when coupled with the distinction between situated and invented ethos. Sometimes the problem with a student's use of cliché is not so much the cliché itself as it is that the student does not have the situated ethos of one who is qualified by age or experience to use such language: student writers come to a rhetorical situation with a "reputation" that restricts the range of rhetorical possibilities for making claims. In contrast, published academic writing often includes claims phrased in clichéd and folksy language (Robert Connors, for one, was famous for using—and playing with—such language), but published academic writers have a wider range of options because, unlike first-year students, they do not have a reputation in the scholarly community for holding unexamined beliefs.

When I talked with another student from Mike's class, Amber, about where she was expressing something that was especially important to her personally, she told me that it was where she wrote about the importance of "do[ing] your best," explaining, "I really wanted to maybe give that maxim new light in a different way." Rather than using the maxim uncritically, she was trying to play with it a bit. Later in the interview, she lamented,

> I feel like people use cliché phrases a lot, and I don't think you really realize all the time that you're saying them? But especially in [my home town] I thought that a lot more. I think people here [in college] articulate their feelings [. . .] in their own words a lot more? Whereas where [my home town] is very sheltered, we all have the same sort of experience, more or less. I graduated with people I went to kindergarten with; it all becomes jumbled into this whole body of words that we all have adopted.

Although Amber readily articulates the handbook stance toward cliché (we don't always notice when we use them, they're not in our own words, and they can have more power if they're subtly rephrased), she also recognizes that what some might call cliché is part of who she is, and part of her affiliation with her hometown community. When I asked her whether she tends to use those kinds of phrases in her writing in college, she reflected elegiacally,

> Amber: I think so. I don't know. I feel really different. I feel like my writing has changed in subtle ways that I don't really understand since I came to college. I felt like I was a better writer in high school.
>
> Julie: Hmm.
>
> Amber: I don't know if that's just because my professors praised me more? I liked my papers better in high school? . . . It was in your explanation and in your logic that merit was found, and not necessarily in

> just what you were saying? I like that. Cause it gives you some of that freedom. Where I feel like even though a lot of my professors tell me that that is what it's about, it's really not. It's really about regurgitating the right details.

Amber's sense of loss in college might be chalked up, in part, to her transition to a more challenging and competitive academic environment, where she was praised less than she had been in high school. But she seems to be also yearning for the freedom to form and explain her thoughts in the ways that feel right to her: She wants to be judged not just for "what [she is] saying" but rather for "[her] explanation," and she feels hampered by what she sees as professors' uncritical rejection of her use of maxims.

Like Mike, Amber conceptualizes the problem of personal integrity in her writing in terms of style or the *at*ness of writing rather than the substance or *through*ness. And, like Mike's, her impulse to resist classroom culture is at least as "intellectual" as it is "political." Both students' reflections about cliché indicate that the inclusion of this kind of language in their writing is not—as it might appear—the result of being unaware that such language is not the language of the academy or inability to think of alternative possibilities (although there is some of this). This inclusion is, rather (or also) a conscious choice, an example of invented ethos.

Formulating claims in clichéd language is one way that a student's efforts to invent ethos may be misread—and that may also express subtle resistance to the aims of the academy. But my interviews also illuminated an opposing strategy for inventing ethos: offering careful generalizations rather than the pointed, original claims valued most in the academy.

Two of the students I interviewed—perhaps importantly, both women—explained to me that they dislike "harsh" or "blunt" language and attempt to remove this kind of language by, in Amber's words "polish[ing], polish[ing], polish[ing], polish[ing], polish[ing]." In some cases, that meant a tempered version of clichéd language. Kara, for instance, revised the title of one essay

from the commanding "Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover" to the more cautious "You Can't Always Judge a Book by Its Cover." Or Amber, who worries that in her rough drafts, she "tend[s to] be really forthright" and to be "rough," "raw," and "cutthroat." She explained to me that she "sweeten[ed]" her initial claim that "No Child [Left Behind] sounds too good to be true," rephrasing it to "It may be that No Child sounds too good to be true." Both Amber's and Kara's revisions are examples of invented ethos, but unlike Mike's, their revisions soften rather than reinforce clichéd language.

When I asked Amber about why she avoids a cutthroat tone, she chalked it up to personal preference for writing that is "quite critical [. . .] but that says it in a way that is easy to digest." Kara made a very similar comment about avoiding harshness in her writing, explaining that she feels it is important not to phrase her claims in a judgmental or confrontational manner.

In Kara's first draft of her researched argument analyzing the effect of Barbie as an icon of possibility and promise for girls, Kara introduced her argument with the claim that "Even though there have been many criticisms of Barbie and her effect on girls, she actually represents the ultimate female: talented, brilliant, hardworking, self-sufficient, and beautiful." I praised her draft and pushed her to articulate her argument even more strongly, writing, "You bring in a nice range of sources here and have really chosen some excellent quotations to show others' varied responses to Barbie. . . . Keep working on fleshing out your response to counterclaims . . . What do you think?"

Although Kara made substantial revisions throughout her paper in subsequent drafts, her first draft was in many ways the most forcefully worded. In her polished draft, that early sentence was revised into these two sentences: "Due to overwhelming critiques of Barbie over the years, she has been misrepresented. Despite the degradations of her character, Barbie has become the most successful toy ever created and her positive effect on girls is remarkable." Although the message is essentially the same, the style is much less bold and confident; gone is the articulation of

what Barbie "actually represents" and gone is the use of *accumulatio*. When I asked Kara why she had made those revisions, particularly the removal of the claim about Barbie being the "ultimate female," Kara replied,

Kara: Because it was too harsh. It was like, too, in your face. I don't know. That's just what I kind of thought.

Julie: . . . Well, why do you think it's too harsh? How did you learn that that kind of thing is too harsh?

Kara: I don't know. It was just, like, if I was on the other side, then I wouldn't want someone to say that. You know, like, that's just kind of what I thought. And I couldn't really say, like, "the ultimate female," like "ultimate female" to who? . . . It just seemed, it was too, just, bold.

Julie: . . . Is it a stylistic thing, or is it more of a conceptual thing?

Kara: It was more of a, like a stylistic thing that I took it out. But, I agree with it. I think she [Barbie] is- I think the way they make her isn't- I don't know, isn't supposed to be a bad thing, so, I don't think that she is all those things, but maybe not, I don't need to point that out.

Kara's comments, like Mike's, demonstrate the importance of personal integrity. While I, the professor and grader, was praising Kara for her bold claims—even asking her for more—these kinds of claims felt "too harsh" to her. Although Kara agreed with the substance of these claims, she was thinking about how she'd feel if she were "on the other side" and were confronted with that kind of phrasing. Rather than betray her allegiance to herself and to her imagined readers, she chose to soften her claim, going from what *A Writer's Reference* might call a "confident" claim to a claim that is "too passive."

It would be easy to read Kara's polished draft as simply the work of a student writer who has not mastered academic discourse and cannot imagine her way into writing her claims more confidently, but Kara's initial draft demonstrates that she can, in fact, write more boldly. The problem for her is not just in the difficulties of imagining academic discourse, but also in choosing to imagine herself as part of a community who would want to sound like that. Like the students about whom Durst writes, she is resisting intellectually.

Later moving away from what she felt to be controversial ground in her Barbie paper, Kara chose in her final paper to write about the impact of brand name merchandising on high school students' identities, explaining, "It's really important to me, about people not judging other people . . . is just something that I think is important, rather than, you know, women's rights. . . . It's just, more important to me, rather than defending Barbie." She chose to frame her analysis in terms of "not judging a book by its cover"—rather than in more abstruse terms of "branding," or Bourdieu's notion of taste, or Veblen's conspicuous consumption. Kara's framing of the issue might signal that she hadn't yet learned enough to employ the critical stances and theoretical language that have clout in the university. In talking with her, however, I believe her choice signals that she has tried on, but ultimately rejected, the invented ethos of someone who might want to use those kinds of critical stances.

Conclusions

Although we evaluate student writing mainly in terms of how well it measures up to our expectations, we must remember that it must also measure up to students' expectations, as they look both *through* and *at* their writing. Students are not just hard-working novitiates in the academy, whose deviations from what we consider good writing are the result of their situated ethos; they also write for themselves—even in writing that we have assigned. As Amber explained to me, "I write about . . . very real things, at least to me. And I think I'm just, very honest. I feel a lot

of personal responsibility." Amber may be an exceptionally earnest student, but Mike's and Kara's comments indicate to me that she is not alone. My students' writing was important to them, and their struggles over how to phrase their hard-earned claims were part of their work to invent ethos—an ethos not only designed to appeal to the audience but also to have integrity for themselves as writers.

Although I did not intend in my interviews to explore students' uses of clichéd language or to examine their approaches to phrasing claims, the interviews demonstrated to me that in their invention of ethos, students' grappling with the style or *at*ness of academic claims was as important to them as was the content or *through*ness. I'm embarrassed now that I missed that when I was their professor. Following the trend in composition pedagogy and the implicit messages of handbooks, I had not foregrounded comments at the sentence level, let alone on clichéd language; I had felt that, to use a cliché myself, I had bigger fish to fry. Instead, I spent considerable time helping students develop arguable claims and encouraging them to follow through on and develop their personal interests. It didn't occur to me to devote valuable class time to talking about clichés in tandem with claims or to consider how important the phrasing of claims might be to my students.

But if we're honest about it, there is a none-too-distinct line between maxims and "confident" claims, as well as between carefully nonconfrontational generalizations and the subtleness of claims that "reveal . . . [a] current understanding of the truth about a subject or . . . propose the best solution available for solving a problem" (Hacker, 37). We all write some things that are trite, and we all hedge a bit sometimes in making claims; the trick is to do so in a way that the ethos we invent through our claims enhances, rather than further compromises the position we have through our situated ethos.

My students knew they were taking risks when they phrased claims in ways that were, in Mike's words, "more suspect . . . as far as good writing," but I don't think that they knew why,

specifically, those phrasings were suspect. For Mike, I think the risk was perceived as being more of a grammatical issue, but for Amber it was perceived as being more strongly connected to articulations of communal values not respected in the academy. In class, we had talked about ways to frame strong academic arguments, but our level of focus had been more abstract than it should have been, given the importance of the phrasing of claims.

Ironically, our field's tendency to focus almost exclusively on what we have seen as higher-order concerns may be enabling students in composition classes (as in my class) to become accustomed to phrasing claims in ways that don't have much clout in the academy. But that practice will likely not serve them well in classes where instructors (like Amber's) feel fewer qualms about writing simply "cliché" in the margins. I would not want our field to turn its back on its recent history of reading student texts sympathetically and thinking holistically about writing, but looking *through* writing too much does not necessarily serve students well.

In looking *at* language and helping our students make more informed choices about style, we can and should talk in first-year composition classes about Aristotle's advice about maxims. We can and should examine several different ways of phrasing the same content to clarify, for students, what the academy values in academic claims—and all of the reasons why. Students might still choose to "let [themselves] shine through," but they would be better equipped to do so in a way that demonstrates their active invention of ethos. With this training in looking *through* and *at* language, students will be better able to write with the discourse and content that feels right to them, but without alienating (or irritating) their audiences.

Notes

[1] All student names in this essay are pseudonyms that I chose. These students are typical of the student population at the university where I teach, in that all of them are white and were of traditional college age. They were members of an unusually small and tightly knit first-year writing and rhetoric class I taught in the spring of their first year, on the topic of Print Literacy and Popular Culture. I conducted an hour-long interview with each of these students nearly a year later during the following spring semester.

[2] Although Crowley and Hawhee coined these terms, Royster develops the terms in the sense I describe here.

[3] For instance, *A Writer's Reference*, which I assigned in my class and which its publisher advertises as "the most widely adopted handbook in the country" ("Compare Books"), offers this advice in the Fifth Edition about "constructing reasonable arguments":

> In writing an argument, you take a stand on a debatable issue [about which] reasonable people may disagree. [. . .] When you construct a *reasonable* argument, your goal is not simply to win or to have the last word. Your aim is to reveal your current understanding of the truth about a subject or to propose the best solution available for solving a problem—without being needlessly combative. (37)

The next section goes on to advise examination of and research into the "social and intellectual" contexts of the issue. This advice—with which I agree—depicts academic claims as being precise but also contingent: an academic claim is a claim that may be said to involve truth, but only in the sense that it is the "current understanding" or the "best solution available" at a particular moment, in a particular context. The matter of how to phrase an academic claim is further complicated by cultural differences, as the recently released Sixth Edition of *A Writer's Reference* goes on to explain: "Some cultures value writers who argue with force and express their superiority. Other cultures value writers who argue subtly or indirectly, often with an apology. Academic audiences in the United States will expect your writing to be assertive and confident—neither aggressive nor passive" (67).

[4] In addition to Olson, see especially Freedman, Skorczewski, and Suhor.

[5] As Dawn Skorczewski argues in "'Everybody Has Their Own Ideas': Responding to Cliché in Student Writing," clichés can be read as instances of students "wrestling to make sense of what they read" in class, but in terms that are more familiar to them (25). Skorczewski advocates examining our own clichéd responses to student clichés.

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