

Discourse analysis

Disciplinary training and socialization interests me immensely. First, because the borders of disciplines somewhat align with other divisions in society. Students' choice of majors varies systematically with gender, race, and other characteristics (Bergerson, 2010; Galotti, 1999; Shahzad, Ahmed, and Ghaffar, 2013), and students' choice of majors affects their future occupations and income levels (Caviris, 2014; Hershbein and Kearney, 2014). How disciplinary training itself may serve as a process of social stratification is worth asking. But disciplines are not only a force shaping the social terrain; they stake out intellectual territories, what Andrew Abbott calls evolving and fuzzy "jurisdictions" (2000). This is the second reason disciplinary training matters. Disciplines are one arena where knowledge politics play out as the various fields compete over student recruitment, legitimacy of methods, freedom of inquiry and expression, funding, popular influence, and political clout. Knowledge is preserved, destroyed, produced, borrowed, ignored, etc. by disciplines and these actions have implications even for those of us who are not academics¹. Third, disciplinary socialization is interesting purely as a form of socialization, affecting one's identity, thoughts, belief, and conduct, and shaping how one participates in future social contexts (Schmidt, 2000). Numerous critical education scholars have pondered the power dynamics of education, hoping to reconfigure classrooms as spaces of democracy and liberation but arguing that, for the most part, they do not now serve these purposes (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1996). Since education can replicate and reinforce power relations *or* provide the means to challenge and change them, is interesting to ask whether disciplinary education is liberatory.

These are obviously very broad statements. My more specific interest in this course has been to look at disciplinary training from the vantage point of students, particularly undergraduate students. My sense of the literature I've reviewed is that undergraduates are not seen as critical participants in the disciplines; their role is to conform to the training process, diligently acquiring a certain disciplinary lens². Through graduate training, with further immersion in a disciplinary tradition and community, one gains standing to critique a discipline, but most people do not go this route. They leave school with only their undergraduate exposure to a field—that is, having encountered it only as a 'consumer' of its perspective, not a 'producer' of it. Implicitly, 'critical thinking' as a skill taught at the undergraduate level is restricted to thinking critically about other social contexts beyond the immediate one (the education process): any possible tension between teaching 'critical thinking' and imparting a distinct disciplinary perspective is ignored. To explore the question from this angle, I interviewed several undergraduate students who are pursuing degrees in multiple disciplines between which there are interesting contrasts (e.g., civil engineering and comparative literature). I expected that their border-crossing would demand a lot of effort on their part, and that their description of these efforts

¹ As put by John Maynard Keynes: "Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back".

² In her novel *Caleb's Crossing* (2011), Geraldine Brooks has one of her characters remark that "It galls me, when I catch a stray remark from the master, or between the older English pupils, to the effect that the Indians are uncommonly fortunate to be here. I have come to think it is a fault in us, to credit what we give in such a case, and never to consider what must be given up in order to receive it."

would give interesting insights into how students negotiate the process of acquiring discipline-specific knowledge and building (or not) a discipline-specific identity.

After speaking with multidisciplinary students in interviews, I was curious to see how different departments portrayed the disciplinary education process and the role of students within it. Towards this end, I chose to analyze statements of learning outcomes from the departments of Geography and Economics. Both departments identify learning objectives for their undergraduate majors—lists of skills, perspectives, attitudes, and subject knowledge that students may expect to develop while completing the major in question. These learning outcomes are easy to find. They are published on the departments' websites alongside other information intended for current and prospective undergraduates (such as admission requirements, major requirements, and tips for doing well in the major). There is no indication on the webpages of how the objectives were developed (for instance, whether they are informed by scholarship on learning, modeled on learning objectives at other schools, based on standards published by a professional body, synthesized from instructor contributions, etc.). There is also no indication of how or whether the learning objectives have a 'life' beyond the webpage. For example, there is no claim that the learning objectives align with employer expectations and graduate school admission standards, and no indication of how or whether instructors in the department must consult the learning outcomes when designing their classes. In short, as they are presented on the website, these texts come across as fairly standalone documents that are mainly for reference by students.

Intertextuality and erasure: What kinds of knowledge do these majors offer?

There are twenty-one economics learning objectives (ELOs) divided into three sections: "Personal Applications and Skills", "Professional Applications", and "Fundamental Knowledge". This organizational schema is meaningful by itself, in that it echoes a public/private divide that has been extensively critiqued by feminist scholars (e.g. England, 2008; Nakano-Glenn, 2010; White, 2000) and an academia/professional divide that can be critiqued for the way it constructs *academia* as a place of unfettered intellectual pursuit and *professional labor* as a skillset to be deployed in accordance with managerial decisions (e.g. Schmidt, 2000; this construction minimizes the labor conditions and intellectual constraints of the university while naturalizing limits on the political and intellectual agency of professionals). Moreover, portraying these three spheres as separate is a non-relational approach that conceals the operation of power in society (because power is a relationship; you cannot see it in isolation). Contrast this with the twenty-two geography learning objectives (GLOs), organized into "UW Geography Learning Objectives" and "General, social science concepts and skills". The division here is 'our discipline' versus 'more general knowledge (also useful for our discipline)'. This is not a strict division. In fact, it acknowledges a larger community of social science within which geography exists, and by noting an overlap of skillsets, it suggests that students have choices about where they will apply their knowledge. Not only does this ascribe agency to geography students (who may choose where to use their knowledge), it reveals a general attitude of openness to collaboration, border-crossing, knowledge-sharing and repurposing.

Beyond indicating places where their disciplinary knowledge may be used, these two texts construct different visions of what kind of knowledge exists and what kind of knowledge matters. That is, there are important epistemic assumptions which can be identified. Many GLOs are articulated in

relational language that evokes connection, interaction, process, and positionality³, connoting a social world that is dynamic and not fully knowable (that is, partially knowable from many situated perspectives). The social world is not reducible to simple rules and therefore not amenable to prediction. This is a humble epistemic stance that contrasts strongly with the one taken in the ELOs. The epistemic message in ELOs is much closer to dominant social messages about science. In this text, scientific knowledge is more concrete, conclusive, and impersonal; the social world is more easily parsed⁴. There is *one* nod to positionality that is somewhat jarring in context, because it is so incongruous with the rest of the text. It reads as either someone's hard-fought victory or someone else's afterthought: "Understand that one's social or economic position may influence one's view of economic policies."

Discipline: What should good students do?

All of the ELOs categorized as "Fundamental Knowledge" begin with a single verb: "Understand and be able to use basic economic terminology." "Understand what causes economic activity to fluctuate over time." There are ten items, all using this verb (see Appendix for some rudimentary visualizations). "Understanding" is a relatively passive word to describe a learner: it implies the existence of external knowledge which the student must internalize (reminiscent of Freire's "banking method" of education, 2000, p. 72). This is perhaps clearer when put in contrast with the GLOs, which use a number of highly active verbs to characterize the successful geography student (see Appendix). Interestingly, when the verb "understand" appears in the GLOs, it is associated with precisely this: external knowledge that the student has little room to modify. For example, geography students should "understand" "nominal/ordinal/ interval ratio measurement levels"; "environmental impacts"; "statistically significant"; etc.

Power: How should students relate to the discipline?

Both texts mention a disciplinary perspective: "a geographic perspective" and "an economic way of thinking". Both texts give some indication of what defines these perspectives. A geographer thinks in terms of "context, scale, [and] spatial distribution"; an economist knows "a conceptual framework for thinking about and analyzing the economic problem of choice and scarcity". Again there are interesting differences. The elements of a geographic perspective can be rewritten as questions to pose to oneself: what is the relevant context for this process? at what scales should I consider a process? how does this process vary in space? An economic perspective contains both a way of seeing problems (in terms of choice and scarcity: not neutral concepts) and an explanatory framework⁵. In some sense, the economic perspective is a way of phrasing questions so that they may be answered in the (covertly) value-laden terms of economics.

³ Some of that language: "variability", "interaction", "intertwined", "relationships", "inequality", prefixes of "cross-" and "trans-", "different and competing", "audience", "inter-play", "holistic", "groups", "citizenship (local and global)", and "differences".

⁴ There are many instances of "understand how" and "understand that", conveying the impression that definite and authoritative explanations exist. There are verbs that construct the economic student as an authoritative knower and the economy as something fairly straightforward to "forecast" and "explain".

⁵ This 'framework', not named in the text, consists of assuming rationality and maximizing behavior by agents.

While the Geography department hopes students will learn to “describe the assumptions underlying the components of a geographic perspective”, the Economics department wants students to “develop ... [this] conceptual framework”, promising that it has “applications that go beyond our courses and helps students understand the problems and challenges faced by all individuals and organizations, from families to governments”. Much more so than in geography, economics students are being offered answers that are valid at multiple scales and in multiple places. Both economics and geography students are expected to embrace distinctly disciplinary ways of seeing the world, but the quality of that embrace differs and the ‘ways of seeing’ likewise differ. It seems that geography students are being invited to critically interact with disciplinary assumptions, while economics students are to take economic assumptions as a fixed quantity; moreover, geography students are being asked to see the world in a more sensitive, perceptive fashion while economics students are being offered a universal explanatory logic. The implicit power relations here are interesting. They pertain first to student/teacher and second to researcher/society power dynamics. Geography students are being offered a more inquisitive, active student role which entails a weakening of traditional instructor and disciplinary authority. Geography students are learning to see knowledge-production as a matter of power with social consequences, and to question the social origins and effects of their own knowledge. Economics students, meanwhile, are offered a more traditional student role that requires submission to instructor and disciplinary authority, with the end reward of wielding that authoritative knowledge themselves.

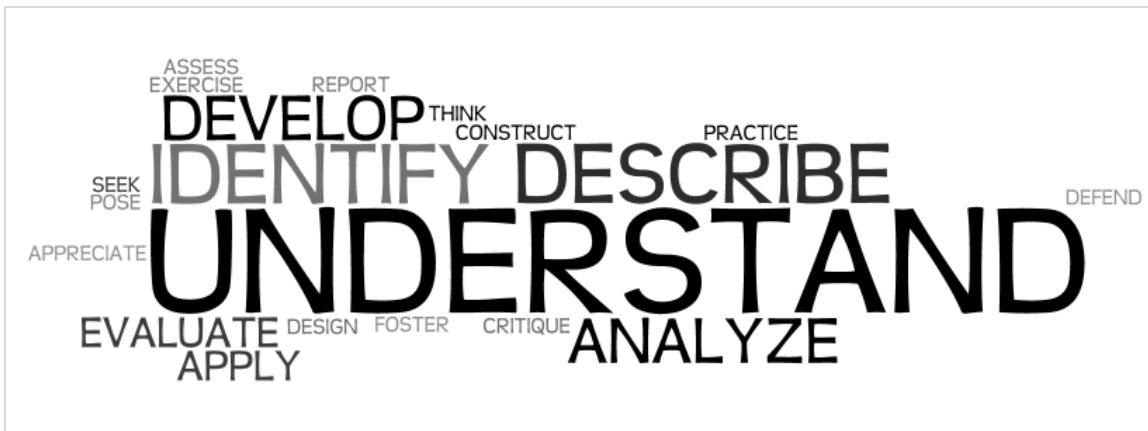
APPENDIX: Learning verbs

Proportional visualization of the verbs used in Economics department learning outcomes and Geography department learning outcomes. Essentially identical word forms have been combined (e.g. “understand” and “understanding”). Words used more often are larger.

Fig. 1: Economics department learning outcomes



Fig. 2: Geography department learning outcomes



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