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"They Say/I Say" -Teaching Thinking

James Rhem, Executive Editor

Anyone who has graded a group of freshman or sophomore or even higher level college essays and been startled by the contrast between the evidence of learning (or lack of it) on the page and his sense of students' being far more intelligent and capable than their writing indicates will welcome the insights—not just into teaching writing, but also into teaching critical thinking and into educational reform—contained in *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. The tiny pocket-sized book by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein-Graff runs to only 164 pages, but it cuts immediately to the heart of the tools of discourse at the center of a solid college education.

The book offers templates, common rhetorical patterns, rather than writing rules. Here's an example from Chapter One's section called "Templates for Introducing and Ongoing Debate":

"When it comes to the topic of _____, most of us will readily agree that _____. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of _____. Whereas some are convinced that _____, others maintain that _____."

Conversational Argument

The templates reflect an underlying belief that all argumentative writing essentially boils down to a conversation, an agreement or disagreement with something someone else has said. Thus, good writing reflects at least two voices in dialogue, the "they say" and "I say" of the book's title. As Cathy Birkenstein has been known to say, she regards getting students to "enter a conversation" as "the cat's meow" in academic learning.

Birkenstein—now co-director with her husband Gerald of the Upper Division Writing Programs at the University of Illinois-Chicago—came up with the idea of templates as a means of demystifying and clarifying public argument for students. In a way, the templates offer practical, tool-like codifications of Gerald's suggestions to students in the epilogue to *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (Yale, 2004), suggestions which begin by telling students to "Enter a conversation just as you do in real life." Because of its brevity, clarity and practical focus, *They Say/ I Say* has been praised as "the Strunk and White of academic writing" and sold over 70,000 copies in its first year. Since its introduction in 2006, the book has been embraced by schools all over North America.

While improved writing stands as the most obvious positive artifact of the book's influence, its greater value surely lies in the influence it has on students' thinking. By putting the common tools with which argumentative essays are written into students' hands and showing them simply how these function and what they do, the book guides students into thinking clearly and critically in a direct and immediate way.

Beyond the Tangles

As Gerald Graff put it in a lively joint interview with Cathy Birkenstein and the *Forum*:

"[This approach] helps students get beyond the trappings, the conventions that often get them entangled, and really lets them get to their thinking. Students often get so tangled up trying to figure out what language to use to quote somebody, for example. So we just give them that: 'as so and so says ...' So they get on to the real job of sorting out their thinking.

"'On the one hand, _____; on the other hand, _____,' which you mentioned, is a very important example of a useful template, because how can you contrast two positions if you don't have that tool? You can do it, but it's a lot harder."

Cathy Birkenstein elaborated:

"Some of these things seem so natural that you wouldn't think they'd need to be pointed out, but experience shows that people at *all* levels need a lot of coaching to stay on track. Even among high-powered academics the number of misfires and mistakes that occur in conversation and in their scholarly writing is incredible. Let me just give you some examples of the kinds of mistakes that occur repeatedly even among professors:

"The first is that we don't listen to each other. We respond to things we imagine each other said. You see this all the time in the debates that erupt on listservs, for example. We don't summarize each other when we respond to each other. Or we create a straw man and then we respond to the straw man."

Gerald interjected: "It's bad writing, too, the failure to indicate upfront whether someone is agreeing, disagreeing, or both, so that you get these debates that then ensue when in fact nobody's really on the same page."

Cathy continued: "Perhaps the central mistake academics make is not necessarily in conversation, but in their scholarship (lectures, articles, books), and it involves failing to answer what, in one of the chapter titles of our book, we call the "So What?" and "Who Cares?" questions. Although the best academics always answer these questions in the opening, framing material of their writing and lectures, many academics go on and on without ever explaining what we take to be perhaps the *most* important thing: namely, what is at stake in their argument, and why it matters, which for us is usually done by identifying who (or what school of thought) believes otherwise, who holds a contrary position, and why.

"In other words, one major mistake academics make is that they picture their goal as one of making a claim and supporting it with evidence—of being safe and insulated and uncontroversial. When academics enliven us and make us really think, it's often because they not only know a lot of information and have a lot of knowledge, but also because they see their goal as one of framing debates, conflicts, and issues, and then as taking strong positions within those debates."

Gerald: "Many writing books basically tell you to figure out what your thesis is and then defend it. But our approach is to always think about what can be said against you and use that, use your critics, as your launching pad for making your own argument. It creates a much more interesting essay because it's at least two voices instead of just one."

Clearer Arguments

The Graffs report their students' writing has improved considerably using this approach— "but we're biased," Cathy laughed. Gerald

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Editor's Note:

It's interesting and often pleasing how related ideas seem to come together and generate an unexpected, but creative dialogue. For example, at the start of an interview on WBGH, **the Graffs** (**Cathy and Gerald**), whose book *They Say/ I Say* spurred this issue's front page feature, talk about how a golf pro who gave them six pieces of advice about improving a swing proved less useful than one who concentrated on a single aspect. (You can augment your reading of the story in this issue by listening to that interview online at http://forum.wgbh.org/wgbh/forum.php?lecture_id=3270, by the way.) Ironically, then, **Marilla Svinick**i's AD REM . . . in this issue addresses the same topic: how much feedback is too much?

The Graffs' book explores this issue in a very aggressively practical way. Gerald, current president of the Modern Language Association, has a long history of stirring things up in academe by frankly suggesting in various polite ways that too often campuses create unrealities removed from the real world of debate and controversy where new ideas and applications of old ideas and information meet their most vital tests. The little book on using templates (which in turn longtime readers of the *Forum* may see as something like Ed Nuhfer's "fractals") as tools for achieving immediate clarity and direction in academic (that is to say, argumentative) writing offers a way to begin to dispense with some inherited nonsense and help students actually learn useful modes of thinking and expression.

It's often difficult to sort out how we think from how we feel about things. Clear writing always helps. Indeed, my wise partner once said that I have always written better than I live. There's more opportunity to think and feel things through on a blank page than in a living moment. I bring this thinking/feeling dyad up again because this issue of the *Forum* continues the exploration of the affective domain begun in our last issue. **Cathy Manduca** and **Jeff Johnston** introduce a technique for assisting faculty explore some concrete situations in which what I have called "the affective field" figures importantly in the success or failure of the teaching and learning likely to occur in that environment. Manduca and Johnston offer "dilemmas," similar to case studies, that faculty will recognize as all too familiar opportunities for success or failure in their teaching.

Ed Nuhfer presents part two of his DEVELOPER'S DIARY on the place of affect in the very foundation of a seed (or fractal generator) from which healthy teaching, departments, and colleges must grow. The implications of taking affect seriously as an unsegregatable part of the way we see and act on and in our world seem staggering. The latest research into how our brains operate indicates we have no choice now but to accept our feelings as honestly as we pursue all the reasons behind them. Perhaps the ancient Hebrews had it right—in 'lev,' the word usually translated as "heart," there is a deep unity in mind, conscience, heart, and will. The dance of understanding these matters seems endless. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (for which I have deep respect) holds that all feelings begin with thoughts. It's hard to imagine a thought like "I wish I were dead" coming from reason/thought and rather easy to see it coming from suffering/feeling. I wonder if the matter may not be something like the old question of chickens and eggs and which came first. In some contexts (breakfast) it makes sense to think first of one. In others (lunch and supper), it often makes more sense to first regard the other. In no context can one fully understand one without some knowledge of both.

—James Rhem

continued: "[Their writing is] much better organized. They produce essays that have summary up front and generate a thesis from the summary of somebody else so another immediate effect is that students are at least trying to get outside of their own immediate prejudices and biases. Within that, there's still a lot of work to do.

"I think where the book works best is in giving students a clear idea of what they are trying to do and a better idea of what they should do than they've had, and it also helps teachers that way. The objective becomes a lot clearer. It gives people a very clear plan.

"The templates aren't a strait-jacket; they can always work variations on them."

Indeed, the Graffs don't impose the templates without discussion. Just as the templates fundamentally give the tactics for debate, the Graffs debate the usefulness and ethics of using templates with students. "It's opened up an interesting way to talk about plagiarism," said Gerald. Students ponder whether using this given language constitutes plagiarism and come to clarify the difference between common moves in thinking and argument and original thought and expression—the difference between plagiarism and paradigm.

"In some ways the templates are deeply superficial," said Cathy. "They're not really about whether [students] use a phrase like 'on the one hand or the other' or 'however' (which may get at the same thing), it's really about deep structural thinking at the bottom of the language."

Gerald: "When you look at students in the school yard or the cafeteria, they can argue quiet well, but when they get into academia, they somehow think that school is about something else. Part of the big challenge is getting them to see that academia is about doing what they already know how to do but doing it in an academic way and not to let some of the static of academia get in the way of their making an argument.