

What is Academic Discourse?

— Rob McCormack

This article was written for the “Emerging Genres” unit in Stage 4 of the Advanced Diploma of Teacher Education, Batchelor College. The article itself is written as an emergent re-working of academic writing in the hope that it can thereby disclose a different, less dogmatic and less colonizing understanding of western academic discourse, one that is more attuned to the both-ways mission of Batchelor College.

Thank you for asking me to speak about what academic discourse is in the tradition of western culture. I hope what I have to say will help you to understand the world of western culture and in the process help you to reach deeper into your own culture.

Notice how this is written to be read aloud. Most academic writing is not written to be read out loud.

Robyn asked to first give a definition of ‘academic discourse’. The very first thing I must say is that although I will try to say what I think academic discourse is, there is no such thing as academic discourse in the sense that everyone could agree on what it is and what its definition is. To say what something is, is to say what our interpretation of that thing is. My definition will be my interpretation of academic discourse.

In Western academic discourse, only elders are allowed to talk about personal things like how old they are or what happened to them when they were young.

But things are even worse. To give my interpretation is to also interpret myself because I am also a product of academic discourse. In defining academic discourse I am defining myself. Western culture is my culture. It is what has made me who I am. Even further, I am still finding myself, still becoming myself. The more I explore my culture the more I expand myself and make myself, the more I become myself. The more I become a self. But like your culture, my culture is very big and very old. Although I am 52, I feel as though I am just beginning to understand my culture and myself. In fact I am always feeling this. The older I get the more I am amazed at how strange my culture is, and how I am just on the verge of understanding it. Constantly I feel that if I could just think a little bit harder, just listen harder, just concentrate harder, just let my mind go more, then I could finally understand my self, my world and my culture.

So, am I an elder? Or am I being cheeky and breaking the rules?

To ask What is ...? is to ask for a **definition**. These definitions are called **tautologies**. They don't tell us anything new to help us to understand what something is.

One of the things I have spent much of my life living, reading, writing, discussing, dreaming and thinking about is academic discourse. **What is academic discourse?** To state the obvious we could say that academic discourse is the discourse of academics, or the discourse of the academy. Academic discourse is the sort of talk, the sort of reading and writing done by academics. But this is a bit like saying that western culture is the culture of the west or that Aboriginal culture is the culture of Aboriginal people. Although true, they don't help very much.

Here I **reframe the question** so we can approach an answer.

Let's go into this a bit further. If academic discourse is the way that academics communicate with one another, what they talk about, write about, read about, the question we have to ask is: **what do they talk read and write about?** Is there anything distinctive about the things academics talk about?

This Heading states my position on academic discourse

Academic discourse as handing on traditions

Looking at an example is a good way to explore what something is.

Let's look at a bit of academic discourse so we keep in mind what we are trying to figure out. Here is a bit of an article that I am reading at the moment:

There are two sorts of quotes: short quotes and long quotes.

Short quotes are less than 3 lines long and have quote marks at beginning and end.

Long quotes are indented and do not have any quote marks.

This is a long quote.

We use quotes to call on the words of authorities and elders to show we are in line with them.

Here is the bibliographic details for this quote.

Tradition is not a set of customs, neither is it "the dead generations (weighing) like a nightmare on the brain of the living". It is the liquid in which the totality of interpretations are suspended. We may achieve some self-reflection by understanding the self to be an interpretive dialogue with the past. There is no metaphysical structure to support tradition; it has no teleology and lacks the benevolent guidance of Hegelian *Geist*. The account of tradition owes much to Gadamer's (Heideggerian) reading of Aristotle. *Phronesis* reveals the ontological structure of understanding. In applying the prejudices of the past to the requirements of action in the present we disclose both the hermeneutical structure of understanding and the sense in which we are irredeemably part of tradition. In applying the tradition we both sustain it and carry it forward.

(Lawn, Chris 1996 "Adventures in Self-Understanding: Gadamer, Oakeshott and the Question of Education", Chris, *The Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, Vol 27, No 3, Oct, pp. 267-277)

Here I am saying a bit more about some of the western elders mentioned in this quote

What is this paragraph about? Let me say right now that you will not be able to understand most of this paragraph. Most of it is about things you have not heard about, things that are outside your experience. It is referring to other theorists and what they have said—to **Karl Marx** who wrote the quote about the dead generations weighing on the present, to **Hegel** and his views about *Geist* or *Spirit*, which is the innate desire of humans to enter into a dialogue with the strange, the foreign, the different.

It refers to **Aristotle's** account of *phronesis* which Aristotle wrote 2400 years ago, or to be more accurate, which his students wrote down as Aristotle dictated it to them. Although it was lost for 1000 years, it was rediscovered in the 12th century again thanks to the Arabs who kept it safe, and we can read it in *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 6. And finally, it refers to **Gadamer's** reading of Aristotle and the way his reading of Aristotle was learnt by attending **Heidegger's** lectures on Aristotle in 1921 in Germany.

So even though you still don't understand what this paragraph is about, already we can see that it draws on a tradition of other writings. **Academic writing sees itself as part of a tradition, a tradition of writings.** The writer of this paragraph locates himself as continuing a tradition 2500 years old, a tradition of thinking and writing about what earlier writers have written and said about things, things like what tradition is.

Here I am **paraphrasing** or **summarising** what the quote says.

This means I am **interpreting** it, not just **repeating** it.

Because, of course, that is what this paragraph is about. It is about what a tradition is. It says, in the first sentence, that tradition is not just the weight of the past, of our elders, of old customs holding us back or down. No! Tradition, it says in the second sentence, is the sea we live in. It is not just behind us or dragging us back. It shapes our present and our future. It is all around us. And, as the last sentence point out, in acting in the present, because we carry the tradition within us or rather it carries us within it, we both sustain it and carry it forward; we both protect and renew the traditions that have formed us. By dealing with the present we bring our tradition into the present.

You are bringing your traditions into this room now. I am bringing *my* traditions into the room now. The writer of this paragraph has brought *his* traditions into *his* writings. By reading him we are bringing *his* traditions into this room.

Here I have gone back to that personal voice, to emphasize that academic discourse is making tradition our own.

His traditions are my traditions. I have had to learn that they are mine. At 52 I am still learning to read Aristotle, to read Gadamer, to read Heidegger and I will never be able to understand Hegel. So I am still learning my tradition, learning to become at one with my tradition, with who I am. Sadly I will never succeed because even now I know I am too old to begin understanding Hegel. So, I will never fully come to know who I am, to know where I come from.

This is a **sub-heading**

Reading academic discourse

Here I spell out what reading academic discourse is from my point of view.

When you read this paragraph or listen to me, to my academic discourse, you have to listen for things that strike you, things that strike a chord with you. Things that make you think “That is about me. That is also about my tradition. I can understand that. that helps me understand myself better. That helps me become myself. That makes sense to me”.

Reading academic discourse is not 'learning new facts'. It is 'listening to our traditions'.

Western elders like Aristotle and Hegel wanted to write for all human beings. They wanted everyone to be able to find themselves and understand themselves better by reading what they had written. But only you the reader/listener can decide this. Only you can decide if what this paragraph says about tradition and how it forms us makes sense for YOU too. So you have to listen for things that strike a discord, things that don't sound right.

Here is where I emphasis my view of academic discourse.

Western academic discourse is an invitation to you to enter into a 2500 year old discussion about things like what this tradition is and how it shapes us. Western academic discourse is an invitation for you to learn how to join this 2500 year old collection of writing and ideas and to add your voice and opinion to it. Western academic discourse is an invitation for you to discover that tradition within you and let it form you so you can be its voice now and for the future. So you can renew it and tune it into the present and into your own situation. So you can make it relevant to the current situation and its challenges.

Notice how I emphasise my view by starting three sentences in the same way: **Western academic discourse is an invitation to you...**

Here I go back to that cheeky voice.

As you can tell, I feel that this is what I am doing and this is what I am trying to do more and more the older I get. I am trying to help my traditions to survive and renew them. I am addressing my discourse to you to invite you to find yourself and your tradition in my interpretation of what academic discourse as a tradition of interpretation.

This is a Heading

Academic discourse as research for new knowledge

This Section states another position which is the view that academic discourse is about getting new knowledge. I disagree with this view.

But let's not forget what I said at the beginning, that this is only **my** interpretation of academic discourse. There are **other interpretations** of what academic discourse is, and these other interpretations have more power and influence these days than my interpretation. In fact I feel I might be fighting a losing battle. My interpretation of academic discourse, academic discourse the way I want it to be, is out of favour and getting trampled by an interpretation of academic discourse that doesn't care about tradition. *According to this view* of academic discourse, academic discourse is a way of discovering what reality is really like by doing research on it. *According to this view*, academic discourse is not a matter of reflecting on what our tradition hands down to us and making it make sense in the present (which is what I think), rather, it is a matter of trying to forget what is handed down to us and trying to find out how things work. *According to this view*, tradition just tells us a lot of lies. Academic discourse is discourse getting away from the rubbish of tradition. Academic discourse, *on this view*, is always modern, always new, always finding out new and better things.

Notice how I have to preface each statement of the other position with "According to this view". Otherwise you might think that I agreed with it.

But I don't believe this view. Here I am saying what others believe. I said what I believe before.

Another Sub-Heading

Comparing the two views

Here I summarise the two views into short names so they are easier to talk about.

This view or version of academic discourse is a search for the truth, for certainty, by looking for ideas that everyone has to accept. So we can distinguish my interpretation of academic discourse from this one, let's call my sort of academic discourse, **academic discourse for self-understanding** and let's call this other sort of academic discourse, the sort we are just beginning to look at, **academic discourse for scientific knowledge**.

Here I am **comparing** and **contrasting** the two views.

In my view academic discourse should be the way we let our traditions speak strong again by reflecting on them. *According to the other view* academic discourse should be focused on developing knowledge through research and science. *My view* thinks that academic discourse should help us to understand ourselves better by providing a situation where we try to give voice to our view of things, a view that comes to us from our tradition. *The other view* is not concerned with understanding, but with knowledge, with scientific knowledge. *This other view* wants to know how things work so they can be controlled.

Notice how each sentence is about only one view.

And then the next sentence is about the other view.

Another Sub-Heading

Academic reading as conversation

Here I go back to my own position and spell out some more on what reading is from my point of view.

My view thinks that we are all made up of two sides, of the situation we are in now and have to decide what to do, and the traditions that have produced us. **Academic discourse is the conversation between these two sides**, between these two voices—the voice of the past, the voice of the present, the voice of the ideal situation and the voice of this situation. Academic discourse is making sense of ourselves and our situation and what to think or do by recalling what our tradition has to say. Academic discourse on my version is sitting down and listening to the elders and what they have to say and interpreting what they say so that it addresses where we are now. My elders are Aristotle and Hegel and Gadamer and Heidegger. I sit down with them by reading them. Reading means listening to what someone has to say. Academic reading means listening to what our elders have to say the only way we can because, of course, lived long ago. So we have to listen to what they say by interpreting the texts that carry what they say to new generations. In a literate culture, one with writing, this is often in written texts as well in stories, songs, ceremonies, customs, paintings, festivals. In western culture most knowledge was handed on through preaching, songs and pictures in stained-glass windows in churches and in the design of buildings. But literate cultures can also use written texts as things where they can learn, listen and reflect on their traditions.

Here I am describing the connection between academic discourse and literacy.

So, academic discourse in Western culture tends to focus around written texts. It is the discourse, the talk, around these text.

Academic discourse as self-interpretation or self-understanding is the talk we engage in as we interpret, translate, discuss and argue about what an ancestral text says to us. Academic reading is not something we do silently and alone. It is something we do together. We are only truly reading when we start saying what the text means to us. Only when we start talking back to the text are we doing real academic reading. Of course we must listen to the text but the more we listen the more we must try to say what it is saying, the more we have to interpret it, the more we have to talk and write about it ourselves.

The ancestral texts of western tradition are mostly written.

Here I connect academic discourse and the practices of reading together in class and discussing our **responses, interpretations and criticisms** of what we have read.

So, in western culture for me, academic discourse means the talking and writing we do in trying to understand our cultures and who we are. **What we are doing now in this room is academic discourse** especially when you start asking me what I meant when I said certain things, or when you start agreeing or disagreeing with me or when you start interpreting what I have said from your own situation, from your situation as someone learned up in different cultures, different traditions and different languages from me. When you start talking back to me so that we can discuss how much we are the same and how much we are different, so that I can realise more deeply that I am limited by my own traditions, so you can help me see that my understanding of things has been one-sided or too shallow, or too simplistic, so that you can help me and I can help you move to a deeper understanding of ourselves and one another, a more both-ways understanding. This talk in which we explore our different

interpretations of things and listen to one another trying to say what our interpretations are—this is what the west has always called Reason. But that is a story for another time. We will have to sit down again some time and listen to the story of Reason and listen to the different interpretations of it.

Another Heading

Here I bring in another position which is opposed to both my position and to other position brought in before.

This position does not like academic discourse at all. Notice how I have to signal that it is not my position again by beginning each sentence with: *They think...*

Rejecting academic discourse because it is not practical

Many people these days think that academic discourse is a waste of time. *They think* that sitting down and listening to what our elders have to say is a luxury that we are too busy, that there are too many things to do. *They think* we have not got time to sit around giving voice to the texts of our traditions. *These people think* that listening to the past, caring about culture and tradition is a waste of time. *They think* we should be fixing things up, trying to make things work, trying to change things so that there is less suffering, less pain, more money, and we can all live a better life. *For these people*, academic discourse is a waste of time, something purely academic, something that has got no connection with actually doing things. *For them*, academic discourse is just all theory, and theory is a waste of time; according to them, what we need is practice. *For these people*, culture is something you might be able to make some money out of or it might be something we indulge in for entertainment and to make the time pass pleasantly. But it is not something we should waste time on. It is not serious work. *These people say* they are practical and down-to-earth. They don't need to think about things or if they do they keep their thoughts to themselves. Culture should be kept to the weekend. During the week we should be practical and try to make things work better. *According to these people*, my sort of academic discourse went out of fashion 400 years ago and should just be forgotten.

Another Sub-Heading

Here is my reply to that position.

But in my opinion academic discourse is practical. Where I disagree with these so-called practical people is that **in my opinion it is listening to our culture that makes us better people**. This is how we make things better. By making *ourselves* better, not by making better procedures or systems. My view is that we will not make things better by forgetting who we are. We do have to make things better, but we also have to remember who we are. Remembering means listening to our tradition. Listening to our tradition means letting it talk to us and helping it to find a new voice that speaks to us and to others around us. Remembering who we are means finding new ways of saying who we are and what we think. Remembering is not just mouthing old things; real remembering is re-making those old things, making them sing again, making them relevant again, making them speak out strong again.

Here is my **Conclusion** where I bring my discourse back to us in the classroom today and where I **summarise** my position.

This is what I think academic discourse should be. What do you think? Thank you for listening to me. Now it's your turn to interpret me, to pick bits out and say what they say to YOU, to show me where I have misunderstood even myself and who I am, let alone you. So, now let's actually do some academic discourse by talking and listening to one another and listening to our traditions renew themselves in us as we find new ways of saying and making them real for us. Because as I said and surely you haven't forgotten already: **academic discourse**

is an invitation to us to make our cultures strong by finding ways for them speak to and for and through us right here now.

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