STUDENT WRITING AS NEGOTIATION

Textual Movements in French High School Essays

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Abstract. This article develops out of a broader study of 250 texts which were produced by 11th-13th grade students from both the US and France and were collected over a five-year period. The students were asked to create argumentative texts in which they explored questions about social issues after having read various (full or excerpted pieces of) published texts on these issues. The texts produced by the students are analysed not as constellations of a stable set of linguistic-textual features, but as the result of a dynamic set of social and rhetorical negotiating moves in the discursive spaces of the school situation. The discussion explores a few of the interesting points of the tension between convention and creativity that have been located in six French students’ texts. Student writers use what ML Pratt calls “literate arts” to construct their texts. We can localise these arts in the identification and description of students’ movements of “reprise-modification” (François, 1998). This concept is a natural extension of Bakhtin’s dialogics, with each utterance acting as “a link in a chain.” Attention is directed to the identification of those textual movements with which students play with reproduction, reprise of the expected, but also proceed to the invention of the new, and modify the texts they encounter in the act of appropriating school discourse. The writer’s work between the common and the specific is part of the essential nature of school writing. As proposed, this analysis permits a better understanding of how average students’ texts interact with readings and with both cultural and educational commonplaces, working from the already-said and respecting – at least some but rarely all of – the limits of school expectations. This insight into students’ discursive activities subtly changes the way we read students’ work.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, Bakhtin dialogics, argumentative discourse, reprise-modification, literate arts, textual movement, negotiation, secondary school discourse, convention, style

1 INTRODUCTION

Discourse analysis has developed in the past few decades many interesting methodological frameworks for exploring the texts produced in different kinds of situations, including school situations. Part of the extensive work in this domain has been conducted in contrastive rhetoric; research in this field is concerned with capturing overall text differences between different cultures, identifying linguistic and textual features associated with specific genres, exploring reader expectations and discourse patterns, raising, through these topics, the possibility of linguistic relativity (see Connor, 1996, for a thorough overview of these questions). Text linguistics has of-
fered a “descriptive apparatus” (Connor, 1996: 12) for this kind of analysis, allowing for careful identification of certain features such as theme-rheme construction, use of connectors, deixis, various modes of enunciation, and so on.

Generally, and in spite of highly developed work by U.S. researchers including Berkenkotter, & Huckin (1988) and Swales (1990), such analysis has been largely marginalised in the field of composition (as this is known in the North American context). This is probably due to the fact that composition research and discourse analysis, though focusing on academic and school writing, tended to proceed along distinct and even parallel-running research lines, with little interaction noted between the two fields. This may be, partly, because discourse analysis – at least in its initial developments – has been mainly concerned with identifying and counting frequencies of specific textual features in order to describe patterns in text production and text reception. Indeed, this orientation has been criticised by composition theorists, such as Flynn (1995, cited in Charney, 1996) and Schilb (1990), for its failure to provide ways of understanding larger and complicated issues related to the ideological nature of text production and interpretation. Highly-publicised debates in the field targeted “whether empirical methods have any legitimate place in composition studies, and, if not, how we are to achieve intellectual authority without them” (Charney, 1996: 567).

Some lines of research in composition theory have focused on school writing as a form of initiation into the shared conventions, values, or ways of speaking of specific academic groups – in part, their genres (Bartholomae, 1985a; Bautier, 1995; Bizzell, 1992; Brice-Heath, 1983; Rose, 1989; Shaughnessy 1977; and of course preliminary traces in Bernstein, 1958 and Labov, 1978). Much of this research has indicated that students’ ignorance of or resistance to these shared conventions and world-ways constitute very interesting areas of inquiry indeed.

In recent years, discourse analysis has broadened its scope of inquiry to include a variety of approaches that illustrate how texts function in interaction with their social and cultural contexts. Perhaps the most valuable recent developments have been inspired by Bakhtin’s work on meaning-making. Bakhtin’s perspectives on language, genre, and the historicised meanings of utterances provide a richer and more comprehensive theoretical framework for thinking about the way texts function in a variety of social contexts. This framework enables us to look at texts – utterances, in Bakhtinian terms – not as collections of individual features but as complex and dynamic moments of interaction with other texts, in the largest sense. This perspective enables us to move towards understanding how a particular discourse, as the production and interpretation of culturally recognised and ideologically shaped representations of reality (Ivanič, 1998), functions in an intertextually constructed web of linguistic and discursive choices. When applied to the study of student writing, this perspective offers vitally important insights, for it allows us to locate and describe different moments of a text’s makeup.

Drawing from the Bakhtinian perspective, in this chapter, I offer a reading of a small set of French students’ texts. Situating the inquiry within the general field of

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1 Rare works such as the 2002 “Discourse Studies in Composition” collection, edited by Ellen Barton, & Gail Stygall, are beginning to explicitly bridge the gap.
S TUDENT WRITING AS N EGO T IAT ION

school discourse, this chapter undertakes a detailed analysis of some of the specific, concrete ways school discourse is instantiated in a few French lycée student texts. The way of reading and analysing students’ texts that is developed strives for metaconsciousness of the part of the analyst, who is conceptualised as a particular kind of reader (even more so when the analyst is also a teacher). Culler (1982) suggests that to interpret is to articulate an experience of reading. This does not mean that we cannot be systematic and rigorous in our reading. As Paltridge reminds us, both the production and the interpretation of texts are not individual performances but processes which themselves are informed by preceding events, performances, and interpretations (Paltridge, 1997: 11). In studying a text, researchers, as indeed all people, bring with them their own ways of seeing and recognising. I suggest that this should be included in our description (much as ethnographers have begun including this acknowledgement of the interpretative nature of their descriptive work). In this sense, I propose that my reading of the students’ texts be seen as a dialogic moment made up of multiple factors.

This chapter, therefore, seeks to provide a sampling of both systematic description and multi-layered contextual interpretation of students’ texts, which are seen as arising not out of the use of a stable set of linguistic-textual features but out of a dynamic set of social and rhetorical negotiating moves employed in the discursive spaces of the school universe. The analysis seeks to develop a principled way of exploring the traces of the various ways this group of student writers, much like other writers, manages intertextuality. The discussion illustrates how these students work with words, expressions, styles, and structures from a given prompt text, while creating a new text of their own.

2 BAKHTIN, DIALOGISM AND AUTONOMY IN FRENCH SCHOOL WRITING

Student writers are often depicted in French scholarship as working their way towards autonomy – in fact, this is presented as the goal to be achieved. A recent French conference sponsored by the Institut National de Recherches Pédagogiques (INRP) explicitly announced this as its theme: “ways to develop autonomy in student writers.” Leading French sociolinguist Elisabeth Bautier (1996) suggests that one of the major unsettling changes French students face as they make the transition into secondary education is the teachers’ expectation of student autonomy in study and writing skills. Other researchers, like Barré-deMiniac et al. (1993), suggest that student autonomy is one of the markers that differentiate successful students from those who struggle, even well before high school. This focus on autonomy is not a question of encouraging students to have a singular voice, to be individuals, or to benefit from group workshopping in individual ways, nor is it a focus on autonomy vis-à-vis the texts students read and write about. Rather, it is a focus on secondary students’ ability to produce texts independently, alone, in on-demand situations, without relying on peer review, group processes or even revision as part of the writing process.
This emphasis may be partly understood as arising out of the structure of the *Baccalauréat* exam. Students in France must pass this exam as autonomous writers in order to receive their secondary education diplomas and thus gain access to post-secondary studies. Once there, students will not be supported in their writing. I would like to claim, however, that no writer writes alone in the way imagined by the French demands. In fact, the writing valued by the French system enables us to see students’ ability to negotiate with context and with the voices represented in the texts students encounter in their reading, with the institutional requirements that shape aspects of language use in the texts they are writing, and with the generic expectations that influence their acts of making meaning. The claim I put forward, i.e. that student writing be seen as an act of negotiation, is not new; Bartholomae (1985a) and Bizzell (1992) were among the first to introduce and explore this negotiation in detail. The proposal I make that creativity and convention be conceptualised as forces working against each other in a text, prevails in current research as well. Ivanič (1998), for example, analyses academic writing through Fairclough’s notions of manifest intertextuality (i.e. actual signaled intertext), on one hand, and interdiscursivity, on the other (a notion which echoes conventions, styles, and genres from other texts).

Important work conducted in the French context (in the fields of educational science, genre theory and cognitive psychology) interrelates this perspective to student argumentative text writing (see, for example, Alain Boissinot’s *Les textes argumentatifs* or several publications from the *Institut National de Recherches Pédagogiques* press). In reviewing studies of student texts, Connor (1996) singles out many lines of work on argumentative discourse across cultures; within these are studies focusing on cross-cultural constructions of effective arguments and patterns for introducing and using sources. What interests me is neither a classification of “cultural” or other features in a set of texts, nor an explanation of the student-subject, i.e. the producer of the text and the processes involved in the construction of him/herself, but the text itself and what my interaction with it – a potentially reproducible interaction – allows other readers to see about the way the text in question works as both “written by” and “writing” the situation.

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2 After a fairly unified curriculum for the first nine years of school, French students enter the lycée, the last three years of school and move towards tracks of education based on interests and aptitudes: technological/pre-professional, vocational, and general tracks. The last group of tracks offer students areas of concentration: literary and language, science and mathematics, and economics/social sciences are the most prevalent options. All of the technological, pre-professional, and general tracks lead to the Baccalauréat exam, a lengthy comprehensive exam which weights subject areas differently in the scoring depending on the student’s area of focus. Writing plays an omnipresent role in students’ experiences, from start to finish. Testing and assessment are largely done through written essays and oral presentations. Writing is included in every discipline. Writing ability along with broad cultural literacy are key to success on the Baccalauréat. Comprehensive information about the French educational system can be obtained from the Ministry of Education’s website and Maria Vasconcellos, *Le système éducatif*, Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1993.
2.1 Theoretical Notions

This chapter sets out to identify some of the features by which the negotiation process described above may be instantiated. I suggest that to do so, we need to integrate several theoretical and methodological perspectives developing out of work that is carried out in both discourse analysis and composition theory. The student texts considered here are read in terms of the dialogic elements they display; I emphasise their various forms of intertextuality, and integrate three terms: reprise-modification (François, 1998), literate arts (Pratt, 1990), and textual movements, in my attempt to describe and interpret these dialogic elements. These three concepts create a model which suggests that in analysing texts as products and in capturing the process of reading we need to bring out their essential dialogic nature.

Dialogics: A Bakhtinian line of research has extensive implications for shaping our understanding of school writing. The discussion builds on the premise that

[…] there can be neither a first nor a last meaning; [anything that can be understood] always exists among other meanings as a link in the chain of meaning, which in its totality is the only thing that can be real. In historical life this chain continues infinitely, and therefore each individual link in it is renewed again and again, as though it were being reborn. (Bakhtin, 1986: 146)

The language choices students make are historicised. What might be said is always already built on what has been said; the language, as Bakhtin argues,

has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents […]. All words have a “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, a day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life […]. Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated, overpopulated – with the intentions of others. (Bakhtin, 1981: 273-274)

As the student writer learns “to use discourses which already exist,” his/her text is constituted through “the unique way in which s/he draws on and combines” these discourses (Ivanič, 1998: 86). This process, we will see in the student examples, is often most affected by the immediate history of the text the student has just read.

Since writers select among a shared set of lexical, grammatical, and syntactic resources, the texts they produce are constituted by new uses of already-inhabited language. Theoretically, in outlining the various factors that limit the choices a writer has available in the process of constructing a text, we may distinguish one set of factors that are associated with convention (and include norms and practices, like the genre of the text, the cultural context within which the text is produced, the values of the discourse community [Ivanič, 1998: 41], the subject matter, or the linguistic features of a particular language), from another set encompassing those factors that allow for more play or individual freedom, capturing the stylistic or creative choices an individual writer makes within the limits of the situation. Bakhtin’s dialogics may, in fact, serve as the umbrella frame for both convention-driven choices and choices that resist, move beyond, unsettle or disrupt convention.
The notion of dialogism has been further developed by French linguist Frédéric François (1998) in his concept of \textit{reprise-modification} as the fundamental discursive movement at work in all forms of discourse. \textit{Reprise-modification} means, literally, re-taking-up-modifying. It is realised on the textual level, and can be revealed in all aspects of linguistic structure, from words to syntax to text structures. It can also be revealed in the slippery in-between spaces of text construction, the moments not always localised in one or another specific word, phrase, or genre. \textit{Reprise-modification} thus involves reproducing words, phrases, utterances, passages in a variety of ways that simultaneously modify them. This concept is a natural extension of Bakhtin’s dialogics, with each student utterance acting as “a link in a chain,” both built on the history-in-use of words and looking towards their reception by readers or speakers (Bakhtin, 1986).

Dialogism should not be seen as neutral or cooperative. M.L. Pratt (1990) uses the term \textit{literate arts} to describe dialogic moments which are, in fact, the site of contact and contest. She uses the example of a South American native’s letter about Spanish massacres and oppression, written and sent to King Philip of Spain hundreds of years ago but not read until the 20th century because the culture of the time could not accommodate the heterogeneous text supplied by the native. Using the frame of interaction between cultures as a “contact zone,” she suggests that successful literate interaction is almost always carried out in situations of unequal power and negotiation; the term of “literate arts” is used in reference to strategies for success.

A notion closely interrelated to dialogism is that of \textit{intertextuality}. As Paltridge (1997) points out, several literary theorists have been influential in developing the notion of intertextuality, including Foucault, Barthes, and Bloom, although he credits Kristeva with introducing this notion as Bakhtin’s challenge to static, homogeneous views of genre seen as independent of social and historic contexts. Many theorists have built upon this Bakhtinian frame to argue that genres are flexible expressions of shared group values and that utterances reflect accumulated meanings while creating new text (Hanks cited in Paltridge, 1997: 11).

The Bakhtinian frame described above provides us with a way of reading student texts that foregrounds values other than traditional originality. Bakhtin argues that utterances are double-voiced; he uses the term “ventriloquy” to express the power of dialogic overtones (cited in Ivančić, 1998: 48). Discursive movements like “copying” become necessary steps in text construction; the nature of the copying becomes quite interesting, and cultural differences in its value become apparent (Ivančić, 1998: 3-4). In fact, we can think about copying as one strategy along a continuum of strategies of reprise-modification: copying, quoting, paraphrasing, summarising, referring to, linking outward from a single word, indirectly suggesting, referring to through connection to a cultural commonplace, echoing through association, stylistic allure, or implied assumption, and so on. These have been presented in other studies (see Folman and Connor on originality of content conceptualisation, in this volume) as moving from less to more original, though this linear path may seem insufficient. The theoretical frame provided by Bakhtin and François indicates that any one of these strategies can be more or less “original.”
According to this entire dialogic perspective, then, written text production cannot be operationalised as the acquisition of the set of static conventions shaping meaning in texts but as a dynamic negotiation that involves the writer in the process of moving with and against given resources, adopting, bending, and diverting available textual patterns and resources to attain his/her communicative ends. This process is a factor in the evolution of convention itself; rather than showing a “smooth progression towards possession” of academic discourse, student texts show diverse forms of negotiation (Donahue, 2002: 68; Ivanič, 1998: 52). These forms are henceforth referred to as forms of “textual movements.” These movements are not seen as constituents of an inventory of strategic structuring steps (as Swales [1990] has suggested in his categories of text moves used in the introductory paragraphs of academic articles), but as ways of naming modes of discursive progression (not necessarily linear) in a text. Textual movements (also referred to as “literate arts” by M.L. Pratt) as dialogic moments can be subsumed under the general notion of reprises-modifications defined above. We localise the discursive arts in the identification and description of students’ movements of reprise-modification, textual movements which play with reproduction, reprise of the expected, invention of the new, and modification in the very act of appropriation. This chapter considers particular examples of reprises-modifications, ones related to working with a prompt text, but all of the other possible reprises are at the horizon of the discussion.

School expectations: Multiple factors, of course, influence the construction of a given text, such as genre expectations, language parameters, institutional norms and scholastic expectations, both stated and implied. Some of these influences are crucial to the discussion, in particular those related to the school situation as a discourse community. Given the utopic connotations Pratt (1990), Harris (1997) and others have suggested we tend to attach to the notion of community, certain clarifications are necessary. The notion of community is quite problematic; it implies relative homogeneity, a sense of belonging, implied standards of cooperation, shared goals and projects, shared conventions and world-views, a shared language and so on. In this view, texts are produced and interpreted against criteria defined and imposed by certain discourse communities, and student writers must adopt the valued practices and conventions of the community in order to be heard. The term “community” invites monolithic perspectives and images of a nurturing space with clear boundaries, welcoming initiation.

Most close looks at particular communities bring out as much difference as they do shared elements, however. While this metaphor offers a way to understand why students might express themselves in conventional ways, it does not account for the reasons student texts exploit these same conventions in various ways. In fact, students joining the school community are often not in the evoked situation at all. Pratt’s (1986b) term of “discursive spaces” might be preferable to that of “discourse communities,” precisely because it frees us from the apolitical innocence and apparent stability of “community” while allowing us to talk about at least temporary groups that student writers join in order to successfully navigate through their studies.
Students’ texts produced in a particular school situation, or class do share certain identifiable strategies for making meaning, but these texts are far from interchangeable. Their discourse is neither some part of full-blown academic discourse, nor just an immature version of that discourse, but constitutes its own genre. Learning this discourse means learning the activities and conventions associated with it, though not being wholly assimilated by them. Students’ texts offer us concrete traces of the negotiating acts of this “bridge” discourse, thus allowing us to capture, at least for a moment, the dynamic interaction between text and school as context.

The school genre studied in this paper is an essay which is defined via a specific set of parameters in the French classroom. It is essentially interpreted as a response to an excerpt taken from a respected author. Dozens of assignments collected during the study from French classrooms, descriptions of successful essays in privately-published student help books and textbooks, and official descriptions of student essays in government-produced curricular materials all call for essays with a brief introduction, a development in a thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure, use of examples from literary, historical, and current events sources but not from personal experience, a generalised voice, which makes an argument in the sense of a logical discussion of the various points and counterpoints of an issue, and a conclusion-synthesis, which establishes the student’s stance on the issue presented – again, without personifying that stance. The essay should be concise, detailed, well reasoned and clearly formatted; it should show the student’s “culture générale” (cultural literacy) and control over language, syntax, and grammar.

3 DATA AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Describing the Methodological Framework

The work detailed in this chapter has developed out of a descriptive analytic study of 250 student texts and a sub-study of 40 of these texts, from the US and France, collected during a five-year period. The students were in 11th-13th grade, responding to questions about social issues after having read a published text, texts, or an extracted piece of a text related to these issues.

If, in light of the discussion in the previous section, text construction and reception are best conceptualised as dialogic and heterogeneous, based on context, reader interpretation, and layers of meaning, the methodology to be used for describing and analysing these students’ texts must match this complex openness. “One of the aims of the conversation analyst,” Paltridge points out, “is to avoid a priori assumptions about analytical categories and to look for phenomena which regularly and systematically occurs in the data” (Paltridge, 1997: 14). Halliday (cited in Paltridge, 1997: 3) suggests that “selective analysis,” choosing and developing data for the purpose at hand, is effective. The larger studies I have done have favoured offering a comprehensive multi-layered perspective that combines both quantitative and qualitative analysis; for the purposes of this shorter discussion I restrict the analysis to certain
features of *reprise-modification* that exemplify the work going on between the student text and the prompt text.

The focus is directed on exploring the methods students employ for “appropriating” a discourse, i.e. taking full ownership, integrating oneself into the discourse through a sort of acculturation (see Bartholomae, 1985a; Bautier, 1995; Bizzell, 1992; Harris, 1997). The term selected, however, *reprise-modification*, is presented as a more useful, all-encompassing term, with less baggage attached to it and less implied agency than that of “appropriation.” It allows us to see that student writers are truly both creating and being created by the words, phrases, styles, patterns they use to write, as has been suggested by Ivanić and others.

The methodological framework developed for this interpretive analysis is grounded in functional linguistics, literary criticism, and composition theory but combines them in ways no one of them would develop alone.

Systemic functional linguistics as represented by Halliday (see for a discussion Ivanić, 1998: 39-40) offers tools for capturing the situational and cultural-historical contexts of meaning-making in order to emphasise that meaning is not an individual choice. Paltridge (1997) points out that in the examination of any written text, meaning is grounded in the contexts of culture and situation. The sociolinguistic perspective offers ways by which we may link the text findings to larger social issues and explore specific features of intertextuality; from the sociolinguistic perspective I employ the notion that language is a means of expressing social identity (for a further analysis on this, see Ivanić, 1998) and that genre users are working with an overall communicative “budget,” which may include routinised models of socially relevant communication and social stocks of knowledge that vary from individual to individual (Paltridge, 1997: 21).

Several perspectives from literary critics have provided complementary strands of theoretical thought, one capturing the way genres work within various discourse communities (such as those of school-based discourse community) (see, for example, Genette, 2002) and the other exploring how analysts might read such a discourse (see Culler, 1982; Eco, 1989; Jauss, 1978; Starobinski, 1970). From this perspective we can learn how a reader who is a teacher might rethink his/her relationship with student writing, becoming, at least provisionally, another kind of reader.

Developments in composition theory have allowed us to consider issues concerning students’ process of initiation into school-based writing. Specifically, the social constructionist perspective provides very valuable insights. Though this perspective has questioned the concept of a unified self and emphasised the social influences that create each identity, it has not paid sufficient attention to the fact that the individual still does, must, exist – some real thing must be the site of the social influences. Various notions have been proposed by researchers. Goffman uses the notion of the “performer” (Ivanić, 1998: 22). François (2002) describes the biological “sac de peau” (skin-enclosed being) (personal communication). In order to keep both the social emphasis and the reality of individuals in play, I prefer to focus upon the

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3 I am well aware of the ongoing debates about the constructed self, biological bases for language development, nature/nurture and so on. What I am positing is a necessary and intricate relationship between the social and the biological.
various textual movements between the more social and the more individual, between the more convention-tied and the more creative choices made by a writer. However, I would argue that we can not clearly identify particular textual features as belonging to one category or the other.

3.2 Locating Dialogic Elements in Students’ Texts

In the larger study conducted, the overall set of features recorded included word choice, construction of subject positions with first, second and third person in the singular/plural and with passive voice, integration of other voices (paraphrase, quote, definition, etc.), local and global coherence devices (deixis, explicit connectives, built-in shared assumptions, larger organisational patterns), argument strategies (examples, natural logic, assertions, placement of thesis), and so on. These features were chosen during an initial holistic reading of all of the texts. The quantitative study identified potential patterns of text function and construction but left unanswered many questions about the interrelationship of linguistic choices, context, subject matter and structure. A subsequent close reading of a subgroup of the essays enabled an account of multiple factors occurring and influencing each other (and thus the reading of each essay) simultaneously. The categories presented here are specifically those which help us locate dialogic features in terms of a writer’s response to another text (in this case to a prompt text) but potentially to other texts students encounter; that is, a few of the integrated features of what students take, modify, and reproduce à leur compte from both the text read and the dynamic context. These categories, however, fit into and are supported by larger overall patterns of various indicators which tend to move together to create certain effects.

What is most important in this particular analytic-interpretive approach is that:

• the interpretation offered is not a statement about “the” way to consider each text but one way of reading student texts among others;
• this way (represented partially here) includes a re-synthesis of the various individual textual components broken out by the analysis – this has been one of the greatest handicaps to some versions of discourse analysis in the past, such as text studies focusing on an isolated coherence device or on a single pronoun’s presence or absence in a student’s text.

The specific categories considered for this chapter include:

• reprise word-for-word,
• reprise through paraphrase,
• reprise of assignment language,
• reprise of stylistic allure or atmosphere,
• reprise of political perspective,
• reprise through use of examples, and
• reprise through use of commonplaces

“Commonplace” is used here in the rhetorical sense, to name the ready-made molds into which arguments, thoughts, experiences are often poured (François, 1998). They may be the cognitive commonplaces of concepts or the linguistic commonplaces of utterances, both authorised by an institution or a culture as pre-articulated
ways of apprehending or expressing common experiences (Bartholomae, 1985a: 17). The essence of a culture, the collective memory of that culture as described by Paltridge (1997: 20), is generally reflected in its commonplaces, its highly distilled versions of common wisdoms; students who end their texts with neat statements about education as the solution to all of our problems or who reflect on how an experience has changed their lives by describing the pre-self and the post-self of the experience are using these commonplaces, unexamined or naturalised ready-made ways of seeing and explaining experience; these allow members of a culture both to express experiences and understandings in a shared way and to come to understand their own experiences as, in fact, shared, not unique. Commonplaces are sometimes close to clichés and stereotypes, expressions along a continuum of possibilities for processing ideas, beliefs and lived moments.

4 STUDENT TEXTS IN THEIR CONTEXT

The texts analysed in this chapter were written in the late 1990’s in French classrooms, by students preparing to take the French portion of the Baccalauréat exam. The students worked on a particular kind of essay, an étude d’un texte argumentatif (study of an argumentative text), which was introduced in 1996 and already modified in the French national program by 2001. The essay was designed to offer students the opportunity to work on the production of an “argumentative” text; this task required that students respond (through a series of short answers) to the perspective outlined in the prompt text, and then produce a written essay developing, critiquing, or extending the argument in some way. In the study under examination, the essays read by the students were excerpts from larger works, La vérité en marche by Emile Zola and Les yeux ouverts by Marguerite Yourcenar (a translated paragraph from Yourcenar and from Zola is provided in Appendix 1, to give the sense and flavour of each author’s style). Each excerpt was approximately 700 words long, a full single-spaced page of text.

The Yourcenar text was a short piece taken from a series of interviews with the author. The subject of the excerpt is solitude. The interviewer, Mathieu Galey, asks Yourcenar whether she feels alone, even when surrounded by others, in the way great writers often do. Yourcenar’s response is first an affirmation of the solitude we all feel, solitude when we are born, when we die, at work, in sickness. She counters this with the assertion that she feels no more alone than other human beings, although she is physically alone at certain points of the day – early in the morning, late at night, as she works on ideas…Yourcenar follows this with a development of the many ways in which she is not alone. She points to being visited frequently, sharing her everyday life with her daily contacts (housekeeper, grocer, gardener, village children) and reaching out to other circles, friends with shared tastes and concerns. Yourcenar’s final point is that those who welcome others are rarely alone, and that class and culture do not count in these relationships, that humans are constantly overcoming the effects of class. Yourcenar’s rhetorical strategies include parallel cumulative syntax, rhetorical questions, concrete examples used to evoke abstract commentaries, images used to connect to conceptual claims. The Yourcenar essay
question asked students to consider whether in our day and age, the effects of social
class and culture can be easily overcome.

The Zola text is an excerpt from one of Zola’s exhortative pieces, a direct call for
the youth of his generation to move towards a just society. He calls this the “great
need” or “great duty” of the next generation. The piece is written in 1901 and is spe-
cifically designed to reach out at the start of a new era. In a play back and forth be-
tween the older generation and the younger generation, with a lexical chain of
equivalencies for age and youth, past and future, ends and beginnings, Zola details
the work that has been accomplished (science, generosity, productivity, honour in
battles for justice and free speech and thought) and outlines the struggles to face
ahead (a greater freedom, a stronger justice, tolerance, truth, and humanity). He uses
layer upon layer of rhetorical strategy: repetitions of syntax and phrasing, direct ad-
dress with the informal “tu,” strong patterns of contrast between good and evil in
point-counterpoint, the imperative, sentences that shame the listener (we will only be
ready to die if we know you will carry on; aren’t you ashamed that we (older ones)
are more impassioned than you about what should be your great need?), imaginary
dialogue that puts words in the mouth of the reader/listener, and connections to
shared experiences with this intended recipient. The essay in response to Zola was to
describe the “great need” or the “great call” awaiting the current generation, devel-
oping and carefully organising the essential aspects.

4.1 An Introductory Example

Before launching into the interpretation of the six texts studied here, I would like to
describe one of the texts in order to establish the stylistic flavour of this particular
kind of French high school essay. This is not to suggest that all texts produced are
similar nor that this text is “representative” (which it is not) but rather to give a
sense of the work involved in these particular school artifacts. A full translation of
this text, as well as a sample of a student’s Zola response, is offered in Appendix 2.

Text 1 (#77)\(^4\) Christine D. / Travail d’Ecriture (all grammatical errors are left intact)

Alors que certaines personnes, comme M. Yourcenar dans “La solitude pour être
utile”, pense que “La classe (…) ne compte pas; la culture au fond très peu”, d’autres ne
tolèrent pas les différences et s’enferment dans leur univers. De nos jours, y a-t-il eu une
evolution des esprits pour réellement dépasser ces distinctions entre individus? C’est ce
à quoi je répondrai personnellement après avoir développer mon argumentation.

Premièrement, le temps passe et les nouvelles générations délaisent de plus en plus
leur culture. Ainsi, les structures sociales, les manifestations religieuses ou intellectuel-
les qui définissent différents groupes tendent à se mêler, se confondre pour occuper
une place discrète dans les relations avec les autres. Mais ceci n’est pas spécifique à
l’année 1996. Déjà avec le « melting pot » américain, le mélange de différentes civilisa-
tions se mettaient en place.

De même, les esprits évoluent. On accorde moins d’importance à la classe sociale des
personnes qui nous entourent. Notamment à l’école les élèves ne sympathisent pas

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\(^4\) All numbers in parentheses refer to the numbers assigned in the larger study of 250+ stu-
dent essays.
qu’avec d’autres élèves issus d’un même environnement culturel et social. Au moment de la récréation, les plus jeunes se préoccupent plutôt de savoir lequel lance la balle le plus fort ou laquelle saute le mieux à l’élastique.

Cependant, la sensation d’insécurité dans laquelle se trouve certaines personnes les place dans une peur irrésonnée de l’inconnu. Alors elles ne souhaitent avoir des relations qu’avec des personnes de même éducation. Ainsi, les français dévisageraient un écossais s’il portait un kilt et se promenait dans les rues de la ville.

Par ailleurs, à travers l’acquisition de biens et de services, les individus expriment avant tout un besoin d’identification sociale. Par exemple, une personne achète une grosse voiture et par là même affiche un « rang social élevé », par conséquent, certains voisins sont intimidés et les relations entre-eux deviennent donc très réduites.

Parfois, les distinctions sont involontaires. En effet, quelques rares cas, des études récentes sur le choix du conjoint ont démontré que l’homogamie (c’est-à-dire un mariage avec une personne ayant des caractéristiques socio-économiques semblables) est dominante aujourd’hui. Aussi 77% des agriculteurs se marient entre agriculteur.

Malheureusement donc, volontaire ou pas, même en 1996, les différences de classe et de culture sont difficilement dépassées. Cependant avec l’évolution de la société, on peut espérer que dans quelques années, ces dissemblances n’existeront plus.

This student essay comes from the Lycée Julliot de la Morandière, Granville, académie de Caen. This lycée is a large, comprehensive public school, including college preparatory, pre-professional and vocational-technical programs. About 80% of the students pass the Baccalauréat exam annually.

The school’s population is fairly representative of various socio-economic groups and most of the students are interested in pursuing higher education. In particular, the vocational-technical program represents a real possibility for improving students’ socio-economic status; children of working-class families can move to higher status as technicians or in middle management. The student writer of this essay was in the vocational-technical program, in her penultimate year of studies. At the end of this year, she would face the French essay portion of the Baccalauréat exam.

The explicitly scholastic nature of the essay is already obvious from the title, “Travail d’Ecriture” (Writing Work). The essay is handwritten, which is the norm for French school work, often even in university-level studies. The essay’s format clearly delimits the introduction, body, pivot-sentence between the two parts of the body, and conclusion with double spaces.

The essay’s introduction is comprised of three sentences. The first presents an outline of the pro-con type: “Yourcenar thinks... but others think...” This announcement is followed by an explicit reprise of the assignment’s language and finally by a statement by the student, je répondrai personnellement (I will personally speak to this). This statement, while atypical, does establish the presence of the student. And yet, it does not provide the student’s actual perspective, the “thesis” as American teachers might call it. It only suggests that such a perspective will eventually be given.

The essay’s overall A/B structure after the introduction is divided into two parts: the presentation of the student’s interpretation of Yourcenar’s ideas (newer generations let go of their cultures and people are evolving) and the presentation of poten-
tial (“others””) opposition to her ideas (some still have unreasonable fears of the unknown, need social identification, homogamy is still prevalent today).

After the introductory sentence in each part, underlined in the text above, ideas are developed through a series of the assertions mentioned above, followed by generalised cultural, historic, or statistical examples: religions are mixing, children in the schoolyards play together regardless of class membership, people buy fancy cars to show their affiliation, a large percentage of agricultural workers still marry among themselves, and so on. The A/B structure is supported by frequent explicit connectors, in particular time frame connectors such as premièrement; avant tout (first, first of all) and contrastive connectors such as alors que; mais; cependant (while, but, however).

The relationship between the Yourcenar text and the student’s essay is one which was fairly typical of the French students’ essays in the larger study. Once the point of the essay, the general focus, is established, the content of the prompt text itself often becomes far less relevant. In this example, in fact, Yourcenar’s text is no longer directly mentioned at all. The elements discussed in the essay might have originated from thinking about the prompt text, but the text itself is no longer the focus of the student’s work.

In addition, in this particular example, the assignment does not relate directly to Yourcenar’s actual main theme of solitude. The issues of “class” and “culture” appear only briefly at the end of her short excerpt. The prompt text thus becomes a literal point of departure.

Although observing the classroom situation of production was not part of this study, the texts offer clues about what was covered in class or in other related readings. For example, the student here cites the infrequency of intermarriages between agricultural workers and other social classes, a specific example used in several of the students’ essays in this group and not likely to have been spontaneously generated by so many students.

The concluding paragraph, in traditional French school style, presents the “thesis” in an even-handed way: on the one hand, class and cultural differences are difficult to overcome, but, on the other hand, as society evolves one can hope… This kind of balanced perspective (as opposed to a forceful thesis) is quite typical of French student essays.

5 FORMS OF REPRISE-MODIFICATION

The sample analysed above contains examples of some of the features that are frequently found in French student writing, some more specific to this particular assignment, and others related to the individual student’s response. Our sense of the shared (the conventional) and the individual (the creative) is generally sharpened when we look at groups of essays in response to a prompt; the generic limits on the text and the elements of individual “style” are easier to draw out.

The two groups of texts presented here, taken from the larger sample, do their work in multiple ways, but I will look primarily at how they draw certain features, information, and other textual, linguistic, and stylistic elements from the prompt
texts they read. All of them are built with the most essential textual movement of **reprise-modification**, which takes multiple forms, from simple reprise of the actual language the student is using (here, French) to complex reprises of cultural thought patterns or intimate genre structures.

The very nature of the two questions posed in the assignments studied, “speak for your generation” (in response to Zola) or “speak about overcoming the effects of class and culture in this day and age” (in response to Yourcenar), invites a response built on commonplaces and other reprises. All six essays instantiate what Bartholomae (1985a) might call “approximations” of academic discourse. In “Inventing the University,” Bartholomae suggests that students often must begin their integration into university discourse, their appropriation of it, by simply repeating the words of the text in front of them, slowly moving from that “mouthing” to a recreation of their own text. But he argues that what students produce in this evolutionary process is an approximation of academic discourse, a semblance which moves slowly towards a “true” habitation of the discourse. I would argue two points here to nuance this perspective: (1) average students’ texts, rather than approximations of some future-expert discourse, are legitimate moments of a “bridge” discourse, moments of negotiation, always temporary, always a use of the available that adopts, chooses, rejects, transforms in order to communicate within the situation at hand which is itself a provisional situation and not a long-term integration into an academic universe, and (2) this progressive (but not linear) evolution occurs in all of our integrations into new discursive situations. This is the way intertextuality works. Every textual movement identified here is one version or another, along a continuum, of the dialogic movements to which readers and interpreters respond: dialogic in that they are versions of re-using, re-inventing each word, phrase, and utterance put into play. Each movement identified is not closer to convention or further from it; each utterance can be more or less original in its own right, depending on its use rather than its nature.

In the texts described, the movements in question are: heavily influenced by the language of the assignment, built on cultural commonplaces frequently circulated in the media, the students’ daily circles, and school settings, and supported by examples based largely in literary and socio-historical contexts. They use occasional personalised examples transformed into generalised ones, overall structures organised along present vs. past binary lines, and build on (assumed) shared values and perspectives, sometimes in ways that seem to recreate stereotypes.

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5 “Average” is used here in descriptive ways, as opposed to statistical ways -- to indicate that we are looking at student texts that are not far outside of the norm, neither outstanding nor judged as problematic by readers who are teachers. This means that the student texts studied had received a grade of B-C or, in France, 9-13/20, and were collected from classes of students in schools which equally fell in the national norm for middle-ground schools, neither elite nor troubled.
5.1 Reprise-Modification of the Language of the Assignment

The introductory paragraph in each of the essays presented here is invariably tied to the wording of the assignment, along the lines of, for example, “We can ask ourselves, then, whether in this day and age it is possible to overcome the effects of class and culture,” in response to the assignment described above, “consider whether in our day and age, the effects of social class and culture can be easily overcome.” These explicit reprises place the texts squarely in the domain of school writing and ensure the student writer’s place in the conversation that the assignment proposes.

5.2 Reprise-Modification of the Prompt Text’s Theses

The Yourcenar texts show reprise-modification of Yourcenar’s politics (as well as the politics and values, upper-middle-class, of the educational system). The arguments tend towards compromise, a middle-of-the-road “let’s all get along” message represented by an articulation of the “good” (read, liberal-humanist) point of view, the kind of message educators tend to favour. One student says “If the differences of class and culture have softened over the years, with the relaxing of social and cultural barriers and the fact that individuals are getting closer, we still note that, to a fair degree, important differences subsist and unfortunately the class system remains in place” (Text 2: #52). There is some shared confusion across texts about culture-as-ethnic group vs. culture-as-arts and aesthetics, although on the whole the texts portray fairly common versions of class and culture: class represented through economic stratification, culture represented through differences in nationality or ethnic group.

The students writing in response to Zola congratulate the previous generation, as does Zola, and criticise war as does Zola. The concluding paragraph in all six essays tends towards a doubtful commentary on the practicality of the proposed solutions, in particular because of weak human nature. One essay says, for example, “The problems of lack of solidarity, intolerance, and racism are due to a lack of knowledge about others and a lack of maturity among people which prevents them from overcoming their frustrations…” (Text 6: #104).

Texts also reproduce and modify the fairly liberal-humanist values of anti-discrimination, social welfare, and education. The arguments tend more towards social critique and cast doubt on human nature’s ability to pull off change. The great needs identified are in no way surprising, at least not to this reader. They seem quite part of l’air du temps, the news, current events, “les discours qui courent” (current hot topics), perhaps even other classes the students share. But for the student writer discovering these concepts, they may well, of course, be new. The interesting factor in reprise-modification is that we never quite know the degree to which the reprises are simply mouthing as opposed to taking on for oneself the perspective (content) or the phrasing (ways of expressing) in question, even when the reprise is word-forward.
5.3 Reprise-Modification of the Atmosphere of the Prompt Text

Some of the texts operate with a kind of intellectual-affective reprise-modification, constructing a dialogue with the prompt author by recognising the value of the author’s perspective in the same gentle way that the prompt text appeared to respectfully present a balanced perspective. Yourcenar is presented first by giving her credit for being a thoughtful, intelligent, or caring individual: “On the subject of solitude, the author opened up the theme of the relationships she maintains with people around her and declared that she gave ‘only modest attention to class and culture’” (Text 2: #52). Only then are the counterpoints presented, as if to imply that Yourcenar might be a better person than the rest of us: “But we wonder whether today it is easy to overcome barriers of class and culture or whether there are barriers between different social milieux” (Text 2: #52).

This affective reprise only goes so far, however. The three texts did not reproduce Yourcenar’s use of the first person, for example. She often presents herself directly, as in: “I have many friends in the village; the people I employ, and without whom I would have trouble maintaining my large property which is after all fairly isolated, and lacking the time and the physical energy needed to maintain the yard and house, are friends.” The French school norm to avoid first-person, narrative, self-reflective writing appears to override Yourcenar’s influence in personalising the arguments. Yourcenar talks of herself, the students do not even though they are technically invited to. These students, in 11th grade (the students writing about Zola were in 12th) and not in the elite track of French secondary studies, may be relatively more convention-tied.

5.4 Reprise-Modification of the Prompt Text’s Stylistic Allure

We can trace specific stylistic features of the prompt texts in the students’ texts. From Yourcenar’s style, students borrow, take on and appropriate a tone of reasonableness and the assignment’s allure of compromise. One student, for example, says “In addition, through the acquisition of goods and services, individuals express above all a need for social identification” (Text 1: #77). The word “need” suggests that the writer feels the individuals in question might be justified, and the term “social identification” is positive in its implication that groups of disparate individuals can seek out inclusion. In another example, the writer says “Sometimes, the distinctions (class-based) are involuntary” (Text 1: #77). The use of the word involuntary is connected to a sense of understanding and recognition of social factors beyond the individual’s control. The assignment suggests that Yourcenar allows only a modest role for the effects of class and culture, and queries whether we can easily rise above these differences; the student in text 1 is equally moderate in her perspective, suggesting that “unfortunately, voluntary or not, even in 1996, class and culture differences are difficult to overcome. However with the evolution of society, we can hope that in a few years, these dissimilarities will no longer exist.” In addition, the student voice of the archi-spectator, historicised and reasonable, dominates this essay. The student claims that her description of cultural problems is “not specific to 1996” and...
that the American melting pot model is a good example. She thus demonstrates a
reasonable perspective, recognising historicised features of the discussion at hand.

Some texts work with a series of auto-reprises in the variant definitions of cul-
ture: culture appears as social structure, as religious or intellectual groups, as civili-
zation, as ethnic groups, and as social environment – all variants on a theme, subtly
building the overall notion. In text 2, the notion is built through repeated terms like
“open” and “closed,” the repeated binary of social progress and improvement tem-
pered by frustration at the continued and evolving ways discrimination occurs:
“Even though culture (in the sense of arts and cultivation) has been opened up only
recently to all social classes, it still stays more privileged for members of the upper
class. In this way, this culture stays open to everyone but the lower classes only get
a glimpse” (Text 2: #52). At the same time, the student’s text coheres with a quite
typical present-past binary, which is a frequently used academic structure. In other
eras, the student says, social class limited people’s options. Now, things are impro-
ving. However, the remaining problems are becoming worse. Society may evolve, she
argues, but individuals do not, and the bourgeois still innovate (her term) new met-
ods of exclusion. This binary thread parallels the binary Yourcenar constructs as she
weaves back and forth between recognition of solitude and counterpoint develop-
ment of ways in which she is never alone.

The Zola texts show a strong reprise-modification of the stylistic patterns of
Zola’s speech (the tone, syntax, urgency, rhetorical strategies including heavy use of
the imperative, exhortation, and repetition for emphasis – all of the stylistic aspects
described earlier). In response to Zola, students put into play several kinds of stylist-
ic reprise, while there is essentially no reprise of specific content (themes, argu-
ments, ideas). The terms representing big abstract notions are repeated often, in par-
cular the words “violence,” “racism,” and “intolerance;” parallel sentence struc-
tures emphasise the rhythm, such as in this passage:

“It is true that our society knows great uneasiness due to a forgotten element. The for-
gotten great value of tolerance. […] We can find the remedies. […] In particular for the
eamples close to home, like homeless people that we ignore out of “habit,” or in front
of whom we look away in shame. Well, be shameful! But do not stay indifferent. Dare
to look at the problem in order to find in our hearts the solution. Do not turn away from
the more distant examples, either, like the war in Bosnia which flows from incompre-
hension among peoples. Be honest with ourselves and get interested. Stop closing our-
selves behind our pride…” (Text 4: #101)

The “osons…soyons…cessons…” (dare…be…stop…) or “…un oubli. L’oubli…”
(…a forgotten element. The forgotten…) are powerful syntactic structures that re-
semble those seen in Zola’s text. The rhetorical question-answer format is frequently
repeated as well: “Do you believe this massacre would have happened? Of course
not!” or “How many conflicts are the result of this misunderstanding […]? All!”
These various rhetorical strategies appear throughout Zola’s text, an oratory piece
with ringing syntactic force.
5.5 Reprise-Modification of Structure

Texts do their work by shadowing the underlying structure of prompt texts—the organisation, the order of information, the pattern of concrete examples used to construct supported versions of abstract concepts. Text 6, for example, picks up on the structure of Zola’s piece in particularly strong ways. For example, the assignment did not ask for solutions, only an articulation of the generation’s great needs. But Zola provides solutions in his text—rise up, get involved, pursue justice, remember your fathers’ pain—and so does this student: “Each individual’s attitude must change. For example in the combat against extreme poverty carried out by Albert Jacquart,” or “It is through informing people and raising their awareness that we can banish intolerance.” He also introduces these connections with explicit parallels, such as “Zola says...” “and so we, youth of today, also must...”

Text 2 presents the notion of class in a series of variant implied definitions, much the same way that Yourcenar implicitly develops the notions of solitude and interdependence. Yourcenar builds her definitions on the assumption that “alone” is equivalent to “without others’ physical presence” and offers various examples of the few times she is actually alone and the many times she is not: the delivery man stops for a glass of wine, the friends with shared interests call. This use of concrete examples to build a sense of the notion of “not alone” is the approach the student writer uses in text 2 to build the notion of “class” when, for example, he describes parents preventing their children from attending dances with other children of a different class.

5.6 Reprise-Modification through Commonplaces

Texts appear to be crafted in step with the already-said and the to-be-said of larger social debates. The proposed solutions are commonplaces, the primary one being a liberal-good citizen worldview in which education is the ready-hand solution for our problems (“education is the solution” or “youth will show us the way”). In particular, the kernel notion that intolerance will be overcome by education and open-mindedness, clearly a perspective both Yourcenar and Zola would support, reappears as a central guiding mold for students’ thoughts. One student suggests that men are at their worst when they choose to remain ignorant; another argues that lack of knowledge about the other leads to intolerance and racism.

The texts rely equally heavily on doxic values: democracy, equality, antiviolence. The central themes of liberty, justice, humanitarianism underlie all three Zola essays. Text 4 points out that charity begins at home; Text 6 points to the importance of change starting from within. Again, the subject matter and the question invite these commonplaces. And they are for students, for us all, the place to start, a culturally available way of talking about the subject at hand. We would perhaps be harder put to design assignments for students that do not call on these available forms, forms students inhabit for as long as they need them in their academic apprenticeship.
5.7 Reprise—Modification through Examples

The texts are constructed with strategies that allow student writers to reproduce-modify the personal by speaking “around” personal experiences without actually telling their own stories. Several examples fall into the category of “suspiciously non-personal,” as in the student who talks with rancour about how some bourgeois families invite only closed, elite circles of students to their dance parties. Others are clearly local experiences: games at recess as the great social equaliser among young, still-innocent children, encounters between the Parisian elitist and the resident of public housing, or possession of material goods as an indicator of wealth—the big car, the nice house.

Traditional academic examples are offered as well. Some are socio-historic, such as marriage statistics, shared metaphors such as the “melting pot” image, etc. Others are literary, series of references to famous figures or authors making statements that support the student’s claims: “The stupidity of mankind resides in his willingness to remain ignorant, and according to Einstein, ‘two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity, although about the universe, I’m still not absolutely sure’” (Text 4: #101), or “Tolstoi affirmed that ‘wealth is a crime because it assures the dominance of those who have others those who do not.’”

Only one student offers an explicitly “local” example, citing lines from the popular rap group “Assassins,” although even this reference is not made personally (as in, “I hear in the words from this song…”); instead, he says “This is what brought ‘Assassins’ to show their discontent in one of their most piercing songs, ‘the African is my brother, the Muslim and the Jew I respect their prayers’” (Text 6: #104).

5.8 The Unstated, the Implied

As in much published writing, including the two pieces represented here, students build their responses at least partly on unstated assumptions. Text 1, for example, constructs its argument based on the non-explicit themes of the innocence of children, of education as potentially removing innocence, of innocence as robbed by capitalism. Culture in this essay is ethnic, in fact it is the equivalent of ethnocentrism, although this equivalence is again only implied. The assignment is implicated in this result, as culture is presented by the assignment itself as an obstacle to overcome.

In the negotiations students carry out, none argues completely outside of the realm of the expected. No one makes the case, for example, that the poor have a culture or that cultural difference isn’t something to “overcome.”

One essay is built on the assumption that we don’t want war, we don’t want intolerance (Text 4: #101), since the text calls for banishing intolerance and discusses the sad results of war; another sets up a very subtle reference to the “veil” we need to remove because it obstructs our view; cultural references to veils are a flashpoint in French culture for larger issues of immigration and racial tension (Text 5: #102). These subtle references create a real sense of assumed shared values with readers.

Of course, shared assumptions can lead to stereotype as well. The student author of Text 6 demonstrates one of the ways in which this can happen when he describes
the cause of juvenile delinquency, linking working parents' absence to the inevitable lack of authority figures in children's lives, leading them inevitably to search for alternate authority figures in local drug dealers.

6 INTERPRETING MOVEMENTS, LOCATING THE RESISTANCE

Any reading of student work (or of any other texts) is first and foremost an act of interpretation, however rigorous or analytic this interpretation might be. In light of this, therefore, it is clear that my aim is not to propose the "correct" understanding of the movements described above, nor a rigid classification, but to suggest a possible way of exploring these – a reading which will help us see how these various explicit moves instantiate elements of both the common or conventionally constructed set of thoughts, expressions, utterances and the new, the individually creative uses of these shared elements. Even more crucially, the focus was directed to identifying some aspects of each student writer’s play between these two forces. I call this play “style” in the tradition of François (2002) and Starobinski (1970). We might also call it “voice,” which is neither the deep, true voice of the expressivist self nor the fragmented voice of the socially constructed self, but a slippery voice-as-style located in the student writer’s work as s/he moves across and between the shared and the specific. This focus on the play, through reprise-modification, with language and discourse permits a better understanding of how average students interact with readings and with both cultural and educational commonplaces, working from the already-said and respecting (at least some but rarely all of) the limits of textual expectations.

Available research has suggested that the negotiations student texts carry out represent students’ “postures;” both the limits imposed and the individual freedom allowed to student writers have been discussed in terms of how students create their identities as a writer or construct school-based selves (see Bautier, & Rochex, 1997; Ivanič, 1998). Student texts thus represent discursive positions or provisional postures adopted by or assigned to student writers: the “writerly” or the “integrative” posture are among those described by Bautier, & Bucheton (1997), as are the “positivist” or “cooperative” posture described by Ivanic (1998). Several postures may be taken up in a single text.

While Ivanič, Bautier, & Bucheton emphasise the role of the student writer as negotiating an identity, here we have seen the text itself as a site within which we can observe the traces of this negotiation process. No closed inventory of any of these postures is posited, since these postures may recombine and shift constantly.6 Student writers in particular both desire and resist the central discourses they are acquiring, working with shared convention as they have taken it and it has taken them, partly because they are in the relatively narrow position of needing to learn the rules operating in a discourse that they have not necessarily chosen to acquire.

6 These kinds of discursive postures need to be clearly distinguished from existential positions, the lived positions that students and other human beings inhabit. There may well be crossover between the two but not necessarily; among other things, language is not the only way to construct an identity.
From the analysis presented in the previous section, it becomes clear that students in constructing their texts are influenced at multiple levels by the prompt texts they read. This is, of course, what the literacy contract of a working text is all about – entering the academy, entering the literate world – entering the conversation, the already-said, the to-be-said. It is interesting to see, however, the ways by which average texts bend and divert the imposed or suggested frames and arguments. Some such patterns are outlined below:

- All of the six texts use the literate art Pratt (1990) would call “transculturation”: taking part of what a dominant culture claims but using it to different ends. Text 3 weaves in Yourcenar’s perspective respectfully, but then develops opposition to her: “Yourcenar says…”, “…she reasons well…”, But “Others (we) say…”, and “Yourcenar is right for herself but not for ‘us’.” She succeeds where others – almost an implied “real” people, everyday people like the student – can’t. This is a subtle rejection of Yourcenar that retains just the right amount of respect.

- Five of the six texts function by using what Pratt would call the “literate art of mediation” for subject matter that can’t normally be expressed in the school situation. The students writing in response to Yourcenar may not feel free to critique bourgeois values. The school situation, an implicit locale for reproducing bourgeois values, is not the first place to be making a case for communism or for pure capitalism, for example. No student text resists Yourcenar with passion, questioning, for example, her claim that her maid is as important to her as her sister…The texts present an expression of unusual awareness of the role of schools in questions of the reproduction of class and bourgeois cultural values, as when one text suggests that the lower class tries to internalise the norms and the values of the middle class through schooling that copies this milieu today, in order to educate children. Another text links the upper class with a more complete “culture” in the sense of cultivation. These are concepts a student could choose to talk about as a student, as the recipient of such social engineering, but it would be difficult. Yourcenar’s text allows students to indirectly comment on the situation.

- Texts offer subtle shifts in emphasis, extending the argument presented in the prompt text. Text 5 steps further than Zola by claiming that we must preserve the values established by the previous generation (as says Zola) but we must go further, intensify our efforts. This subtle shift is a mild critique and a creative introduction of a newer perspective. Text 4 frequently explicitly works at integration into the academic conversation through auto-reformulations. The writer adds, for example, clarifying notes (“racism, that is”) and parenthetic appositives (“They (the fathers)...”). This phenomenon is relatively rare in student writing, although academic authors permit themselves such asides and reconsiderations without hesitation.

- Texts are constructed with multiple responses when only one is called for. Text 6 retranslates “grande besogne” into “social problems,” by lumping them all under the rubric “environmental problems.” “These are all forms of environment,” the student says, “a term which is not limited to air, water and space but regroups lots of other criteria – social, cultural, communicative, religious...” This approach cleverly allows for the essay to develop multiple points. In addi-
tion, they are not the types of “great needs” evoked by Zola. While he remains resolutely abstract and largely positive, calling for youth to pursue justice and democracy, this student and the two others discussing Zola identify specific problems and call for resolution of those problems. The examples are almost always from current situations or local issues – ghetto housing, drug dealing, immigration, children inadequately supervised – although again no personal experiences or examples appear.

7 CONCLUSION

This paper set out to illustrate through the description of various movements of reprise-modification, or various literate arts, that texts and even students’ texts are, in fact, constructed partly with the already-said and partly with the new; community-shaped expectations are not rejected, but neither are they bought into wholly. Texts do their work through the process of negotiating patterns, forms and values that are generally institutionally accepted, although quite often not specifically identified or applauded by teachers. Students are not being “taught” explicitly much of what they are picking up on: the cultural commonplaces, the stylistic reprises, the unstated assumptions. These effects are perhaps the most interesting ones to us as we think about teaching students to write.

Succinctly, by tracking these discursive arts – localised in reprises-modifications in a small corpus, the following tendencies were noted:

- texts do show traces of interaction with, influence by, more than just the “ideas” of the prompt texts the student authors read;
- community expectations and norms about content, structure, argument support can override the influences of the texts students encounter in their readings;
- cultural and educational commonplaces are both a way of expressing ideas about a theme but also a possible strategy of resistance;
- the individual interpretation/appropriation of words, expressions, structures can be the interaction that bends and diverts expectations and negotiates a place for a student’s text to be heard.

These descriptions help us understand students’ texts in a wider perspective as an act of negotiation. By identifying some of the ways in which the student writer’s text produces meaning, we are led to developing a broader picture of school discourse, seen as a dynamic point of encounters between various elements: student-situation-history-context-language-institution.

This insight into students’ discursive activities can change the way student work is read, with long-term effects. A Bakhtinian-informed dialogic perspective suggests, for example, that commonplaces are a necessary place to start, even to be. Writers work along a continuum, moving back and forth among the most obvious of reprises (i.e., the quote) to the most unstated (the commonplace). In between, writers might reprise-modify through paraphrase, example, or definition. Elements like stylistic allure or rhetorical echo are another axis of this continuum.
Inhabiting the thoughts of others, a necessary element for discourse construction, means cohabiting with the writer’s own thoughts – an “other” who can even be oneself at another point in time. One of the problems with the expressivist position has been just this: it implies that writers can inhabit themselves first so that they are then more able to inhabit the ideas of others. But the “self – others” frontier is, as we can see from the student texts explored here, not clearly demarcated. There is no real way to tell what a student actually believes in his/her essay. We get the feeling that some are more sincere because their examples seem local or their passion seems real. But is it just that, a feeling? Would different readers get a different feeling? What rhetoric is at work? This is partly why the analysis presented here has focused on the texts themselves and not the student writers, who can not be directly deduced from their texts.

That said, the perceived influence of text and situation on the students’ writing, described above, and their presentation of “self” – “perspective,” suggests that it would be interesting to use the analytic method described here to follow students themselves, developmentally for example. We could follow a group of students over time, as Nancy Sommers has done with students at Harvard, to see whether they develop a (roughly) consistent perspective or are in fact as flexible as these preliminary (isolated) results suggest. We could compare different social groups longitudinally and try to identify when various student writers pick up different negotiating strategies, whether some strategies seem to consistently appear before others, and what seems to encourage their acquisition. We could continue the cultural analysis begun by this study, expanding the corpus.

In any case, the students’ texts produced and analysed in this chapter show a fairly successful simultaneous sharing and striking out, a way of negotiating between commonality and individuality, a way of performing the ongoing tension between the two, creating the negotiation which is students’ “bridge” discourse. The proposed receptive-interpretative way of reading these texts foregrounds such negotiations and opens the door to collaboration between discourse analysis and composition theory.

Acknowledgement: Some of the ideas and data discussed in this chapter have been referred to in previous works by this author, including:
STUDENT WRITING AS NEGOTIATION


APPENDIX 1

TRANSLATION OF A PARAGRAPH FROM ZOLA AND YOURCENAR:

Emile Zola:

Oh youth, youth! I beg you, dream of the great need which awaits you. You are the future worker, you will throw down the foundations of this next century, which, we believe firmly, will resolve the problems of truth and equity, posed by the century now coming to a close. We, the old, the older ones, we leave you the formidable weight of what we have searched for, many contradictions and obscurities perhaps, but surely the most impassioned effort any century has ever made towards enlightenment, the most honest and well-founded documents, the very foundations of this vast edifice which is science that you must continue to build for your honor and your happiness (in French, honneur et bonheur). And we ask you no more than to be even more generous, even more free-spirited, to surpass us by your love for everyday life, by your efforts put fully into your work, this fecundity of men and earth which will finally know how to make a harvest of joy overflow, under a shining sun. And we will fraternally give up our place for you, happy to disappear and to rest from our completed labor, in the happy sleep of death, if we know that you will continue and that you will carry out our dreams.

Marguerite Yourcenar:

I don’t see the writer as more solitary than others. Look at my house: there is a continual coming-and-going of people, as if the house were breathing. It is only in rare periods that I feel alone, and even then, not completely. I am alone at work, if being surrounded by ideas or beings born from one’s mind is being alone; I am alone in the morning, very early, when I watch the sunrise from my window or from the terrace; alone in the evening when I close the door to the house while I look at the stars. Which means that in fact I am never alone.

But in everyday life, again, we depend on other beings and they depend on us. I have many friends in the village; the people I employ, and without whom I would have trouble maintaining my large property which is after all fairly isolated, and lacking the time and the physical energy needed to maintain the yard and house, are friends; otherwise they wouldn’t be here.

APPENDIX 2

TRANSLATION OF THE STUDENT TEXT SAMPLES:

Text 1: #77 Writing Work  Christine D.
While some people, like Marguerite Yourcenar in Solitude in order to be useful, think that “Class does not count, culture counts very little,” others do not tolerate difference and close themselves into their universe. In this day and age, is there an evolution in people’s thinking that will really allow us to overcome these distinctions between individuals? This is what I will respond to personally after having developed my argument.

First of all, time passes and new generations leave their culture more and more. Thus, social structures, religious and intellectual manifestations that define different groups tend to mix and become one and so occupy a more discreet place in relationships with others. But this is not specific to 1996. Already with the American “melting pot” the mix of different civilizations was happening.

In the same way, people’s minds evolve. We assign less importance to the social class of those around us. In particular at school students don’t get together with only other children from the same cultural and social environment. At recess, the youngest children are more preoccupied with who throws the ball the farthest or jumps rope best.

However, the feeling of insecurity in which some people find themselves puts them in a state of unreasonable fear of the unknown. So they just want to have relationships with people with the same education. So, the French would look askance at a Scotsman walking around the streets of Paris in a kilt.

In addition, through the acquisition of goods and services, individuals express above all a need for social identification. For example, a person buys a big car and by doing so, shows off a “high social level,” consequently certain neighbors are intimidated and the relations between them are thus very limited.

Sometimes, the distinctions are involuntary. Except for a few rare cases, recent studies about choosing a mate have shown that homogamy (that is, a marriage with someone with similar socio-economic characteristics) is dominant today. And so 77% of agricultural workers marry in their own group.

Unfortunately, then, voluntary or not, even in 1996, the differences in class and culture are difficult to overcome. However with the evolution of society, we can hope that in a few years, these differences won’t exist any more.

Text # 4: #101, Writing work Aude B.

Our generation is the inheritor of the legacy of our ancestors who, by their experiences, arrived at great values. We must fight to preserve them. This contract is our “great duty.” It is the same one as our ancestors, except that our duty is to intensify it, as forgetting certain values is the cause of many of our society’s evils.

It is true that our society knows great uneasiness due to a forgotten element. The forgotten great value of tolerance. Unfortunately, it is not yet universal because the capacity to tolerate is not innate in humans. Our parents were aware of this, so much so that they ceaselessly fought to acquire the foundations of a coexistence among humans, so different and yet united. How many wars occurred? How many conflicts are the result of this misunderstanding of the other? All! The second world war is a sad example. An unprecedented example of intolerance and incomprehension which brought about the exclusion of an entire race.

Indeed, intolerance inevitably brings on exclusion of a man, a social class, a race, an ethnic group. But let us not allow ourselves to hide behind fatalism. Each of us can take away a stone from the wall of exclusion. Given that talking about this scourge is a way of recognizing its presence, we can find the remedies. In particular for the examples close to home, like homeless people we ignore out of “habit,” or from whom we look away in shame. Well: be shameful! But do not stay indifferent. Dare to look at the problem in order to find in our hearts the solutions. Do not turn away from the more distant examples, either, like the ethnic war in Bosnia which flows from incomprehension among peoples. Be honest with ourselves and get interested. Stop closing ourselves behind our pride. As Flaubert says, “the height of pride is to disdain oneself” and indeed, indifference and pride push us to disdain others. We end by forgetting respect.

This respect is the foundation of tolerance. We must know how to respect each person’s ideas. We must respect what people, and in particular youth, believe. Because in a society where everything is unstable, where we can no longer find our reference points, faith in an idea gives hope and will. Of course, there are always false prophets who exploit the absence of reference points in order to lie to young people. They hide behind false values that eclipse the older ones. This is the way dictatorships are founded.
However, there is a remedy: communication allows us to annihilate these falsehoods but also to understand each other's motivations. This communication is translated by a kind of intellectual charity. And as Clémenceau tells us, "There is much to say against charity. The most serious reproach is that it is not practiced." In addition, intellectual charity is an exchange of knowledge that allows us to understand better.

Given that intolerance is linked to incomprehension, we have the responsibility to learn. Knowledge and culture give us the keys to understanding. Instruction enriches us and helps us to accept behaviors or ideas that are not our own. Do you believe that if the Colombos had bothered to study the Indians, this massacre would have happened? Of course not! The stupidity of man resides in the fact that he is willing to remain ignorant, and according to Einstein, "Two things are infinite: the Universe and human stupidity; but as far as the Universe is concerned, I have not yet acquired absolute certainty." This stupidity and this ignorance are found as well in the example of colonizers who, wanting to impose their culture, ended up bringing about the detriment and impoverishment of the colonized's culture. It is by this detriment that, once again, false prophets and dictators were able to exploit the situation.

Tolérance est la fondation d'une société équilibrée. Elle est obtenue par respect pour les autres et compréhension. Ceux qui ne se laissent pas prendre les motivations de chacun. Cette communication se traduit par une sorte de charité intellectuelle. Il est par cette détournement que, une fois de plus, fausses prophètes et dictateurs sont capables d'exploiter la situation.

Given that intolerance is linked to incomprehension, we have the responsibility to learn. Knowledge and culture give us the keys to understanding. Instruction enriches us and helps us to accept behaviors or ideas that are not our own. Do you believe that if the Colombos had bothered to study the Indians, this massacre would have happened? Of course not! The stupidity of man resides in the fact that he is willing to remain ignorant, and according to Einstein, “Two things are infinite: the Universe and human stupidity; but as far as the Universe is concerned, I have not yet acquired absolute certainty.” This stupidity and this ignorance are found as well in the example of colonizers who, wanting to impose their culture, ended up bringing about the detriment and impoverishment of the colonized’s culture. It is by this detriment that, once again, false prophets and dictators were able to exploit the situation.

Tolerance is the foundation of a balanced society. It is obtained by respect for others and understanding of others. Even more, it is up to us, inheritors of a heavy past, to learn and to communicate so that we can accept our neighbors’ differences. But we must prove ourselves worthy of our heritage. Only I am afraid that in order to accomplish this task, we will have to hold out against huge faults. And is that really within the reach of human nature?

Aude B., 101, Travail d’Ecriture

Notre génération est l’héritière du legs de nos ancêtres qui, par leurs expériences ont aboutit à des grandes valeurs. Nous devons lutter afin de les préserver. Ce contrat est notre “grande besogne”. Il reste le même que nos ancêtres, seulement, notre devoir est de l’intensifier car l’oubli de certaines valeurs est la cause de bien des maux de notre société.

Il est vrai que notre société connaît un grand malaise dû à un oubli. L’oublie d’une grande valeur qu’est la tolérance. Malheureusement, elle n’est pas encore universelle car la faculté de tolérer n’est pas innée chez l’homme. Nos parents en ont pris conscience, si bien qu’ils n’ont cessé de mener un combat pour acquérir les bases d’une coexistence entre êtres humains différents et pourtant unis. Combien de guerre ont eu lieu? Combien de conflits résultent de l’incompréhension de l’autre? Tous! La seconde guerre mondiale en est un triste exemple. Un exemple inouï d’intolérance et d’incompréhension qui ont mené à l’exclusion de tout un peuple.

En effet, l’intolérance entraîne inévitablement l’exclusion d’un homme, d’une classe sociale, d’une race, ou d’une ethnie. Mais ne nous cachons pas derrière la fatalité. Chacun de nous peut ôter une pierre du mur de l’exclusion. Etant donné que l’intolérance est liée à l’incompréhension, nous avons la tâche de nous instruire. Instruction enrichis et nous aide à accepter des comportements ou des idées qui ne sont pas les nôtres. Croyez-vous que si les Colombos...
avaient daigné étudier les Indiens, un tel massacre aurait eu lieu? Bien sûr que non! La bêtise de l'homme réside en ce qu'il se plaint de rester ignorant, et d'après Einstein: "Deux choses sont infinies: l'Univers et la bêtise humaine; mais en ce qui concerne l'Univers, je n'en ai pas encore acquis la certitude absolue." Cette bêtise et cette ignorance se retrouvent aussi dans l'exemple des colonisateurs qui, en voulant imposer leur culture, ont abouti au détriment et à l'appauvrissement culturel de peuple colonisé. C'est par ce détriment, que de nouveau, des faux prophètes et des dictateurs, ont pu profiter de la situation.

La tolérance est le fondement d'une société équilibrée. Elle s'obtient par le respect et la compréhension de l'autre. En outre, c'est à nous, les héritiers d'un lourd passé de nous instruire et de communiquer afin d'accepter les différences de nos voisins. Encore faut-il se montrer digne de notre héritage. Seulement, j'ai peur que pour accomplir cette tâche, il faille braver de gros défauts. Et cela est-il à la portée de la nature humaine?