

# Learning Participatory Practices in Graduate School: Some Perspectives-Taking by a Mainstream Educator

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## Introduction

Learning to “do” graduate school does not come naturally to most people. Even students who enter graduate school prepared to read and write a great deal (especially in the social sciences) may stumble at the depth and breadth of sociopolitical and interpersonal engagement required to move from the periphery of a community toward fuller membership (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Prior, 1998). In addition to finding that the many socially and politically grounded literacy-related activities are unfamiliar, U.S. mainstream students may also find that the relatively brief and superficial writing tasks they did as undergraduates (Foster, 2004) did not prepare them for the more extended research-based literacy activities in graduate school. Moreover, the more mature students, mainstream and non-mainstream alike, who come to graduate school with already well-established professional identities need to relearn what it means to be a student (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001). The result is that many students, native and non-native English speakers alike, may feel like fish out of water until they learn to play the serious academic literacy games in their local environments (Casanova, 2002).

This is not to say that mainstream or “center” (Canagarajah, 2002) graduate students will not enjoy some advantages. A primary advantage of course is that they are not struggling to read and write in a second language, except to the extent that we can refer to disciplinary jargon

and ways of using language as a kind of second language. A second advantage might be that they will probably not be surprised to find that their main activities in graduate school involve interactions with print and electronic text rather than with in-depth oral discourse, as is the case in some periphery communities (Canagarajah). Nevertheless, I am not the only mainstream<sup>1</sup> educator and former graduate student who wondered what the expectations were when I began graduate school, and who longed for more transparency in the journey from my status as novice to that of marginally participating member.

The classic case study of the acculturation of a mainstream graduate student is that of Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman's (1988, 1991) “Nate,” who turned out to be Ackerman himself, a white male American. According to the authors, Nate struggled mightily with his writing in his Ph.D. program in composition and rhetoric, finding himself confused about and resistant to shifting his persona from that of teacher (who could write and think well) to researcher (who did not know how to write and think according to disciplinary expectations). Certain features of his writing, however, such as decreased use of first person pronouns and increased sentence length and complexity, shifted over time and suggested to the authors that Nate was gradually learning to become a participating member of his disciplinary community. In a postscript to this study, Ackerman (1995) expands the interpretation of his experiences from the mainly text-based inferences of the earlier analyses to a more sociopolitical interpretation of what he went through. Reflecting on his entire experience, he was able to point out the dangers of the “interpretive leap from textual analysis to intellectual identity” (Ackerman, p. 145), particularly when the analysis consisted of just a few of the many papers he wrote. A more accurate interpretation would link his writing in part to sociopolitical survival strategies: “exercises in getting by” (p. 148) as he learned how to write for particular professors, each of whom demanded that he craft somewhat different intellectual identities even within the same program. He points out that the more uniform interpretation of a developing intellectual identity in the earlier accounts says more about the genre of the research report than it does about him as a developing scholar (p. 150). For my purposes in this chapter, it is

<sup>1</sup> Labels are always risky, but I don't know how to get around them. I use *mainstream* here to refer to myself as a middle class European-American whose L1 is English, recognizing full well that sometimes greater diversity can be found within this label than across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

sufficient to note that Nate was pushed, pulled, and stretched in his Ph.D. program in multiple ways, under the influence of many people. He was not socialized into a coherent intellectual community where genre conventions and thinking styles uniformly represented a discipline. He learned strategies for surviving in a hybrid intellectual environment that differed from the less formal more teacherly world he came from. What surprises some people in multicultural studies is that Nate, as a white native English-speaking male, faced the challenges he did. He was the prototypical mainstream student against whom minorities and second language speakers are often compared. The dichotomy suggests that mainstream students don't have literacy socialization problems in school and non-mainstream students do.

Like Nate, as a white middle class doctoral student, perhaps I too was not supposed to have had problems with the literacy practices in my doctoral program, but I (and others?) did. We found not all but many practices strange or at the very least unfamiliar. In this chapter, I first discuss literacy-related activities in graduate school as a form of participatory practice. I follow with examples of some of the challenges I faced learning to participate in the communities and cultures of my graduate school, and speculate about the extent to which the challenges are similar to or different from those faced by international and non-native English-speaking students. I conclude by returning to the theme of participatory practice as a way to expand a view of graduate-level academic literacy that encompasses mainstream and minority and native- and nonnative-English speakers alike.

### **Literacy Activities as Participatory Practice**

When I refer to graduate-level academic literacy experiences as a form of participatory practice, I am drawing on Lave's (1993, 1996, 1997), Lave & Wenger) and Wenger's (1998) notion of learning as a person's evolving ability to participate in the defining and conventional practices of specialized communities, and on activity- and sociohistorical-oriented theories of literacy activities (Engeström, 1993, 1999; Prior, 1998; Russell, 1995, 1997). In literacy studies, this work shifts our focus as researchers and educators exclusively from written texts (how they are produced; their rhetorical and linguistic characteristics) to literacy-related issues such as extra-textual influences on writing (personal histories and exigencies),

social and political forces and alignments, material and spatial resources, and (from Lave and Wenger) the shifting patterns of participation in academic communities that signal novices' moves toward fuller membership as they interact with more experienced members and expand their repertoires of practices. Although it is true that many of these changing patterns of participation involve interaction with texts in the graduate school context, it is not the texts themselves that I am concerned with in this chapter, but the participatory practices that surround and are embedded in textual practices. Citation practices, for example, are usually considered textual conventions, which they are, but they are also deeply social (they connect authors to other authors) and political (they reveal an author's perception of status, prestige, and alliances within disciplinary communities). A second example is research reports, often studied draft by draft in composition research for textual features. Less often investigated are processes of learning to do research itself, and the many collaborative and social interactions that go into a final report, as Prior (1998) and others have shown (e.g., Blakeslee, 1997; Flowerdew, 2000). In short, looking at academic literacy as participatory practice involves looking at what people do, particularly in relationship to other community members, not just at what they write. The activities students become involved in and the alliances they forge while pursuing graduate degrees immerse students in a variety of practices within disciplinary communities heretofore unknown to them even if they are familiar with disciplinary subject matter.

My point is that most students, whatever the nationality, ethnic group, or social class, experience graduate school for the first time when they enter a program in their first year. Graduate school, especially at the doctoral level, is unlike previous schooling in many ways, and one does not need to be a stereotypical outsider to find the cultural and intellectual adjustment to graduate level literacy practices challenging. Situated between novice and expert, graduate students discover that they are moving into a world populated by people in competing camps, where people are driven by motives for intellectual prestige as well as knowledge construction, and where it matters who they align themselves with and how they go about forging these alliances. Distinguishing the academic community from other kinds of communities we all belong to is the fact that certain kinds of texts lie at the heart of what it means to participate in the community's sociopolitical activities and that texts come to be linked to members' identities.

## Participating in Multiple Advanced-Level Disciplinary Communities of Practice

Because I was in a school of education in the U.S., one that encouraged students to take a great deal of coursework in relevant social science disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and psychology, my classmates and I faced a situation similar to that of the undergraduate student described by Lucille McCarthy (1987): To some extent, we were strangers in strange lands. We dabbled in each area, taking just one or two graduate courses in each, without ever developing expertise in any beyond our evolving areas of concentration. Moreover, each of these disciplinary communities already had a cohesive core of graduate students and faculty who were working together and who knew each other well. As an outsider to those communities, I did not know how to relate to them at their levels, including not knowing clearly what their research goals and methods were, who the key players and readings were, or what the core concepts and language consisted of. One or two terms did not allow enough time for me to develop the familiarity they had. I sensed an undercurrent in some of those classes that “education students” couldn’t keep up with the insiders, and that we would be tolerated but not included. I recall sitting in a sociology class, an advanced linguistics class, and a small seminar in psychology (with a well-known professor) and feeling like a silent, intimidated observer. I did not fight this feeling, because I was in fact an outsider, there for a brief stay only. Within the school of education, however, multiple “programs” also existed, and within them subprograms. As part of the normal state of affairs in social sciences, the education faculty themselves differed in knowledge, commitment to various research methods, goals for research, and acknowledged diques of heroes and opponents. This diversity made for exciting intellectual exchanges among faculty and between faculty and students, but caused some of us to wonder whether we would ever find a disciplinary “home.”

### Participating in Conversations

The term *conversation* is now commonly used to describe the activity of participating in the oral and written textual practices of specialized communities. Some time ago, Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman (1988)

described “Nate’s” initiation into his disciplinary community (described earlier) as one of learning the “conventions and conversations” of that community, by which they meant written, genre-specific conventions in Nate’s writings and readings. I wish to expand that earlier focus on written discourse conventions to include the oral interactions that graduate students have in classes, seminars, meetings with advisors, and consultations with classmates and colleagues, even though many of these oral interactions emerge from written texts. I also wish specifically to include the “conversations” that writers have with readers: Graduate students need to learn that when they read, they are being “spoken to” by real people and need therefore to respond thoughtfully and critically rather than just absorb information from so-called experts. They also need to learn that when they write for professors or for publication, they are communicating with readers who have various levels of knowledge and prestige and therefore need to situate themselves appropriately, in politically sensitive ways, within these already established communities (Hyland, 2000). Learning to participate in a field’s conversations thus involves not only learning specialized ways of using language, but also learning something about who the key players in the conversation are and what the relations are among experienced members and others at various stages of expertise. In this section, I discuss some of the linguistic challenges that I faced as a mainstream graduate student, and ways I tried to disguise my ignorance.

### Learning the Lingo

The specialized language of any field reflects the field’s main concepts and abstractions, research methods, and ways of interpreting events and, by extension, ways of constructing knowledge. In classes outside the school of education—those one-shot introductions to the social sciences that feed into educational knowledge—I did not have enough time in most cases to learn specialized ways of using language well enough to be able to participate deeply in conversations of any kind. Even within the school of education, I had numerous experiences of trying to read academic educational literature in English and not understanding what I was reading. In classes and seminars and in my writing, I therefore had to use avoidance strategies to get by. Like many others, I was often afraid to confess my lack of understanding to teachers or more advanced graduate students. What was the problem?

First, meanings of common words used in specialized ways were not necessarily transparent.

theory  
text  
discourse  
X "shapes" Y  
joint construction of meaning  
parallel processing  
distributed learning  
learning vs. acquisition  
subject position vs. identity  
variable (as noun)  
correlation  
significant

In some ways, this kind of language may have been more difficult for first language speakers than for second language speakers, given the persistent connections we made of individual common words with their everyday connotations.

Second, new terminology was used by professors and in published literature as if everyone knew what the terms meant:

hermeneutic  
phenomenology  
schemata  
instantiation  
reflexivity  
intersubjectivity

In classes my first year, I don't recall anyone publicly confessing ignorance to a professor or asking for explanations, except me, once. I tended not to be very intimidated by my professors, perhaps because I felt quite distant from them, and because seeing them up close made me realize that they had flaws and imperfections and that they did not know everything. And some of them were not much older than I. So in one class my first year, I was the only student to raise my hand to ask a famous professor what a term meant. However, when I did not understand his explanation, I did not pursue the matter. After that class, another student

approached me (white middle class) to thank me for asking the question. Discovering in my first year that I was not alone in not understanding some of the lingo felt quite liberating.

However, perhaps because of my boldness in asking a question about a key word that I had presumed everyone else knew, this professor thought I was ready for public interaction with him. He later tried to engage me in one-on-one discussion in front of the entire class as a way to pull ideas out of me and help me develop literate thinking. I had seen him do this with others. I flushed, went blank, and he never called on me again.

Third, I found some readings nearly impossible to comprehend. In particular, I suspected that common educational phenomena and experiences (what I think were common experiences) were described in ways that were designed to obfuscate and to elevate the personae of the authors. From a more recent example, but displaying my point:

Analysis of the sequence of activity across the morning showed that the teacher initiated community with an event (a period of concerted activity) in which students were afforded an opportunity to begin establishing their positions at a table group and to begin shaping local identities within this developing collective. . . . (Putney, Green, Dixon, Durán, & Yeager, 2000, p. 106)

After some years of immersion in this kind of discourse, I still find it frustrating but it no longer seems extraordinary. Professors and advanced graduate students have lost their sense of the strangeness of this way of communicating. What I don't know is the extent to which others come to understand this kind of language, or choose to cover up their ignorance through silence or through avoidance (i.e., not reading certain materials).

During my early graduate school years, I wondered if other students who remained silent understood everything, or if they too were hesitant to parade their ignorance in public. I tried to figure out who was contributing to open class discussion and who was not, and inevitably just a handful of students participated. Contrary to the stereotype that was widespread about middle class American students' ease at critical thinking and active class participation, the vast majority of these students, and the majority of international students as well, sat silently through their classes, partly because the language was simply not accessible or embodied yet.

### Covering Up Ignorance

I believe that many of my graduate school peers were as insecure as I, and we thus sought ways to cover up our ignorance when we had trouble understanding particularly dense readings. A turning point came when suddenly we could begin using a term or concept with understanding instead of silence or pretense (see the case of Richard in Casanave, 1990). Confessions about this lack of understanding could be made to a trusted classmate, and in my case it paid off to find someone (another middle class white woman) who suffered this particular affliction. It helped that we both had a sense of humor and could laugh at ourselves (with some pain) for not understanding our native language. I didn't belong to a study group of any kind, let alone one that contained more experienced graduate students, so my occasional meetings with this classmate were all I had. Even though it was a bit like the blind leading the blind, I learned that I was not alone in trying to pretend that I knew what was going on. I was also not alone in finding it impossible to read everything in a course packet thoroughly, with the result that I often felt I knew very little about everything, even if readings were comprehensible.

Then, in small seminar classes in which I could not easily escape participating, I developed a strategy that prevented my broader ignorance from being discovered—reading abstracts and (if present) methods sections thoroughly and then identifying one or two points in a reading that I would volunteer to ask a substantive question about or to critique before I was called on. I learned that finding flaws in research was an expected activity, and that most flaws could be located in methods sections. This worked as a strategy to cover up a larger sense of incompetence I had, but prevented me from learning more quickly how to interpret what I was reading and how to apply what I was supposedly learning to my own projects.

I don't think I am unique in having been a mainstream graduate student who found it challenging to learn to participate in the scholarly conversations of the academy, who felt silenced in certain classes, and who developed strategies to cover up ignorance. Dichotomous characterizations of the linguistic and text-related challenges facing mainstream and non-mainstream students can go too far if they suggest that mainstream students working in their first languages fit right in from the beginning. Some may, but I and many of my classmates did not.

### **Learning to Participate in a Field's Sociopolitical Networks**

With many years of hindsight and having become a professor myself, I now view the lives and work of my graduate school professors in ways that I did not when I was under their tutelage. Their job, as I saw it then, was to select readings, devise and deliver a course plan, involve some students in busy-work aspects of their own (the professors') research projects, and guide students through the doctoral hurdles. I did not ask some of the questions I now consider basic to understanding graduate school socialization: What networks of colleagues do my professors belong to, both on and off campus? Who are their heroes and opponents? For whom are they heroes or opponents? To what extent do they know the members of their network personally as opposed to knowing them via published texts or electronic communication? What can the citation practices in their own writing tell us about these alliances? According to what vision of themselves are they, and have they been, shaping their public identities as scholars? What were their own trajectories of participation like, and how did their own identities as authoritative participants in their communities evolve? What kinds of competition and collaboration exist for them in the power-infused academic world? How do all these factors influence the ways they introduce students to networks of participatory practice within their subfields? In this section, I ponder two of these questions, one on citation practices and the other on professor-student relationships in classes and on projects.

#### Citation Practices

In the social sciences, successful writing in graduate school and later in professional life depends partly on how writers situate their work within existing bodies of work. In writing classes, students learn the formal conventions of citing others—how to do within-text citations, what style to use for these citations or for footnotes, the proper form for a reference list or bibliography (including the differences between the two). These formalities are relatively easy to teach and to learn. In my case, I copied a style from the main journal in the field of TESOL for most of my graduate school papers. Books are also now available

that introduce graduate students to the formalities of scholarly citation practices (e.g., Swales & Peak, 1994, 2000).

However, when I was a doctoral student, the rationale for citation practices was not made explicit, so I was not sure who to cite, when to cite, and importantly, which authors to cite together or not to cite at all. Looking at published readings for traces of an author's decision-making processes was no help here: Published writing ordinarily covers up all traces of how a paper was written (Casanave & Vandrick, 2003; Geisler, 1994). In a paper I had to write on reading, for example, I looked for sources, any sources, on reading, and tended to present them as A said this, B said that: I was not able to see or sense who the competing camps were in the contested field of reading research. It was never suggested to me that when scholars read articles and books, they often turn first to reference lists to get a sense of the networks authors situate themselves within. Neither was I made aware of the various subtle ways that a writer can refer to the work of others to signal approval, allegiance, qualified approval, disapproval, or outright dismissal and thus contribute to the construction of knowledge (Hyland, 1999, 2000). Such techniques are not merely textual, but sociopolitical in that they help define a writer's identity and location in relation to others within power-sensitive academic fields. However, even if my classmates and I had been made aware of the sociopolitical side of citation practices, we could not easily have used this awareness to our advantage. There was no time. Until a critical foundation of knowledge builds in a student's repertoire of readings and professional associations, there is no way to use this knowledge skillfully. Mainstream and non-mainstream graduate students alike face this challenge together, and it is in fact an area in which second language speakers can excel (see Matsuda, 2003).

### Faculty-Student Relationships

A number of scholars in language education have written about faculty-student interactions in graduate school, particularly in areas of research, writing, and dissertation preparation (e.g., Belcher, 1994; Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Prior, 1994, 1998). These interactions happen in classes, particularly in small seminars, in counseling and advising sessions, and in research group meetings. If my experience was in any way typical, they range from tight, "hand-holding" apprenticeships to little mentoring of any kind. A faculty member with a large number of

advisees working on her own research projects as co-researchers and co-authors would be able to induct students rather quickly into a specific academic community of practice and acquaint them explicitly with the key players, research methods, goals, and values of the community. A faculty member who spent little time on campus and who used graduate students as assistants on her own single-authored publications, on the other hand, might not conceptualize the faculty-student relationship as one of apprenticeship into her own community of practice, but as one of guidance into students' own areas of interest. I had experiences with both kinds of faculty members.

In the first case, I had a very difficult time in an educational sociology class trying to figure out what my role was both in the class and in relation to the jargon, research methods, goals, and values. The faculty member was well known for having tightly controlled relationships with her multicultural graduate student advisees, for co-authoring with them, and for getting them through their Ph.D. dissertations relatively quickly by having them work on her large ongoing projects. I felt at loose ends early in my program, and was seeking an advisor. However, after my first course with this faculty member, I found myself chafing. Everyone else seemed to use language, concepts, and research methods that I didn't understand or believe in, such as the need to turn human qualities into numbers ("variables") so that they could be examined statistically. The style of the many readings we had to do, mostly correlational studies, struck me sometimes as parodies of themselves in their denseness and pomposity, and, additionally, I was not able to critically evaluate the research methods except to reach the point where I could say that not everything in sociology should be turned into a number. Moreover, the professor relied a great deal on group work, and I didn't know how to participate effectively in a group that consisted of people who already knew each other and the professor well and who spoke insider jargon, nor did I know how to contribute to a group report for a final term paper. I ended out writing almost nothing, that job being left to a competent Korean student who was one of the professor's advisees.

In the other case, I found that I was able to wrestle with ideas and research methods more suitable to my personality and beliefs with an advisor who was less controlling and who put up with my resistant stances to much of what I was reading about theory and research. She rarely published with students, nor did she encourage me or others working with her to publish and become involved professionally before we graduated. Do the dissertation first, then begin your professional life,



was the message (one that I disagreed with at the time and continue to find misguided). I was pretty much on my own to pick and choose from different sources and from other faculty members' areas of expertise, which led both to greater freedom and to greater fragmentation of acculturation than I would have had with the former professor. Indeed I felt much less specialized when I ended my doctoral program than when I began. But I also felt opened, broadened, and enriched. The real struggle came at dissertation time, when I was on my own, with few models and no supporting research cohort that was working on similar issues. I did manage to get lengthy feedback from my advisor and others on my committee on different parts of the dissertation, and finally was able to put it all together, by dint of tenacity rather than expertise or intelligence. But many times in the dissertation years (yes, years) I wondered if I might have been better off under the thumb of a "do-it-my-way" advisor, but never regretted my choice.<sup>2</sup> And it was my choice. In understanding that I had this choice, that I was allowed to flail and flounder, I may have had an advantage over non-mainstream or second language students who did not perceive choices in their graduate education. International students on a strict timeline and funded by home governments may in fact not have had these choices, or may not have known that at most U.S. universities it is possible to change advisors if one is miserable with the one assigned. But even with a successful dissertation experience, I and the students I knew had only begun to learn the participatory literacy practices of their fields, however clearly or vaguely those fields were defined. In this respect, my international and non-mainstream colleagues and I shared the challenges that were awaiting us after graduation.

### Final Thoughts

Without wishing to underestimate the very real differences between mainstream graduate students and their international or minority counterparts, I wish to highlight here some of the challenges that face all of them in their journey from the peripheries toward the centers of their fields. Students who may feel isolated and out of place in this journey are not alone. The exceptions—the students who really do seem to have everything figured out from the beginning—do not prove the rule. Many

<sup>2</sup> For more dissertation stories, see the edited collection by Welch, Lattrell, Moore, and Carter-Tod (2002) on student and faculty dissertation experiences in the field of composition and rhetoric.

of us in the mainstream hide our feelings of insecurity, incompetence, and displacement through silence and pretense, occasional or persistent.

In a nutshell, the challenge is not just one of becoming proficient in the English language or learning strategies for efficient reading and the conventions for writing research papers. These things can be taught in preparatory classes. It is one of learning what it means to participate fully, not superficially, in an academic community of practice.<sup>3</sup> Patterns of and possibilities for participation cannot be taught in preparatory classes because they are locally contingent, including the specifics of reading and writing (e.g., Casanave, 1995; and, more broadly, the specifics of adaptation to social and cultural life in graduate school—Myles and Cheng [2003]). But awareness of them not only could be taught, but discussed and reflected upon throughout a graduate student's journey. It is with this hope in mind that I conclude this chapter.

### Incomplete Acculturation

I finished my Ph.D., including a long qualitative dissertation, without showing much outward evidence that I had struggled, or that I had felt out of place in graduate study. In fact, I took enormous pleasure in the life of a graduate student in spite of the insecurities and frustrations. But from the 15-year perspective I now have, I see that even my final opus, the dissertation, was a pretense at recognizing and situating myself comfortably within a community of practice. I had no choice. I simply had not participated for enough years within any coherent communities to feel that I really knew something of their literatures, their issues, their key players. Mainstream or minority, first or second language speaker, most of us end our graduate study still residing on the distant periphery of our future communities of practice. Recognizing this fact at the time could help students develop a vision of their futures as academics (assuming this is what many Ph.D. graduates intend to become) that fundamentally includes a life of further study. As is often preached at graduation ceremonies, completing a degree represents a beginning not an end.

<sup>3</sup> See Prior's (1998) discussion of passing, procedural, and deep participation in graduate education, pp. 100–103; Prior's case study of two non-native students in an M.A. program revealed that it is not one's non-nativeness that can inhibit a student's academic acculturation, but the depth of his or her participation (Prior, 1998, Ch. 4).

### Continuing to Learn to Participate

As an academic interested in continuing to read, write, and publish, and who now knows some of the people personally in my subfield (which I guess I would call second language writing and language teacher education), I rarely struggle the way I used to in trying to situate my work, my voice, within an active community of second language educators. The tables are now turned. I teach and advise graduate students, and try to help them find their way into a community of practice—to recognize who is who, to build a body of background knowledge, to meet people in person whenever possible. I talk with them about the issues I have discussed in this paper, and I share with them my efforts at reading and writing, both of which continue to be difficult for me even though I am more confident in my “community membership.” At the same time, I find it impossible to keep up with the explosion of knowledge in language education. To be honest, because I cannot find time even to read the journals I receive at home let alone to peruse the growing body of Internet and other print sources, and because at any one conference I can attend only a handful of sessions relative to what is available, I wonder if I have any idea as to what is going on. Is knowledge really growing? Or are more scholars simply juggling what we already know? Whatever the reality, I seem less confident at making assertions now than ever before. My written work tends to be full of more and more questions. I suppose in the coming years this frustration could lead either to dropping out altogether or to continued efforts at figuring out how to participate. The journey doesn’t have to end.

### Speaking Openly

Finally, I am finding that the worst mistake to make, from graduate school on, has been to cover up insecurity with pretense or silence. In graduate school, I hesitated to confess my ignorance to anyone but a close friend. What if I had spoken more openly with professors? (I did not have the language or the awareness at that time to speak about academic literacy as a form of participatory practice, but if I had?) My ignorance would not have gone away, but my sense of incompetence might have. I might have learned that I was on a normal trajectory of participation, one that would last a lifetime. What if conference presenters and authors of

scholarly articles spoke and wrote with less pomposity and certainty, with more openness about their own (hidden) insecurities, and more about what they don’t, rather than do, know? And if some speakers and writers really do believe they know everything there is to know in their communities of practice, how can we find the courage to speak out and refute this arrogance in ways that will not damage us politically? (Or is this a case where silence really is the best solution?) Whatever the answers are to such questions, it seems clear that open discussion and reflection on participatory practices in academic communities of practice can only serve to bring people together: mainstream students, non-mainstream and second language students, and their faculty. Open and ongoing reflection among these variously located newcomers and old-timers in an academic community of practice can make the hard work of learning to participate more transparent, and thus more tolerable, less stressful, and more driven by a vision of a professional life after graduation.

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I never imagined myself in a Ph.D. program, let alone at Stanford University, until I actually got my acceptance letter. I was the first in my family to do this. In spite of difficulties, these were perhaps the best 6 and 1/2 years of my life. As an older student in my 40s, I relished the chance to study as part of my “job.” I persisted because I knew that after graduating I wanted to work at the university level and that the Ph.D. would help me reach this goal. Which it did. My greatest joy now comes from inspiring other struggling doctoral students to forge ahead.

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