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## Identity Papers

Bronwyn T Williams

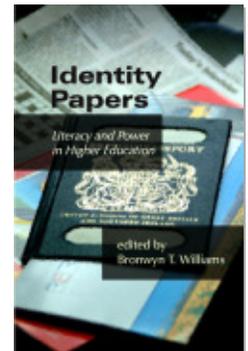
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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### *Literacy, Power, and the Shaping of Identity*

**Bronwyn T. Williams**

We've all seen them on college and university catalogues, brochures, posters, and viewbooks. They are the obligatory photographs of happy, attractive students in classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and fresh green lawns, reading and writing under the thoughtful and attentive guidance of their professors. Though the clothing and the faces may have transformed over the years—the photos are no longer only of white men, but now reflect a carefully chosen mix of race, culture, and sex—and today's students may be shown writing on computers rather than by hand, the message of such photos is remarkably unchanged. What these images imply about the identities of college students and literacy remains much as it did twenty or even forty years ago. The students look comfortable in their literacy practices, no one seems to be struggling, and the professors seem to be offering useful advice. The message seems clear: Come to this college and you will be welcomed into the community of scholarly readers and writers.

Yet for many arriving on college campuses, these images do not reflect reality. For both students, and for many teachers, there is a feeling of alienation, isolation, and frustration. They feel they do not fit the images or identities they have seen portrayed, and they feel their literacy practices are not what they should be even if they are not entirely sure why. Too often they blame themselves when the real conflict centers on questions of identity and institutional power.

As Donna Alvermann (2001) has noted, the goals and interests of educational institutions often create narrowly defined identities for us, whether as scholars, teachers, or students, that we feel compelled to accept to remain a part of the institution. Yet the literacy identities that are regarded as legitimate in the academy can often run counter to our other identities outside the classroom, leaving us feeling isolated and powerless. At such moments we must decide whether to accept the institutional and cultural definitions of ourselves, or to try to find some way to resist or negotiate a professional identity that allows us to live with ourselves while continuing to do the work we value.

The purpose of the book is to focus on how definitions of literacy in the academy, and the pedagogies that reinforce such definitions, influence and shape our identities as teachers, scholars, and students. The chapters reflect those moments in higher education when the dominant cultural and institutional definitions of our identities conflict with other identities, shaped by class, race, gender, sexual orientation, location, or other cultural factors. The strength of this book is that the writers are willing to explore that struggle, identify the sources of conflict, and discuss how they respond to such tensions in their scholarship, teaching, and administration. The authors, in their narratives, theory, and research also illustrate how writing helps them and their students compose alternative identities that may allow the connection of professional identities with internal desires and senses of self. The essays emphasize the necessity for reflection in considering how we negotiate the tensions between our personal and professional identities and then bring those to the classroom.

The essays in this book address key questions about how we compose identities in several important contexts. First, they emphasize how identity comes into play in terms of education and literacy and how institutional and cultural power is reinforced in the pedagogies and values of the writing classroom and writing profession. If we in Composition and Rhetoric are to teach writing and conduct research about writing we need to consider how institutional definitions of literacy shape the identities of ourselves and our students. Who, in the eyes of the institution, is a “reader” or a “writer”? What are the consequences of our definitions of these terms in the academy? How can we as teachers and administrators make definitions of literacy more flexible for student identities? How can we as scholars respond to the inevitable conflicts between the literacy goals and values of our institutions and profession and our identities outside of the academy? The chapters in this book raise and address such questions.

Also, understanding more about institutional definitions of literacy and identity and how students respond to them—how we did as students and how current students do—will make us better teachers. The chapters in the book make these conflicts more visible and suggest ways we might address them in and out of the classroom in pedagogy and research. A number of the essays draw in some way on the student experiences of the writer and the effect those had on the future faculty member, scholar, and teacher. The narratives remind us that our identities are more fluid and overlapping than we sometimes think and that

our student identities form the foundation for who we become as professionals. Several of the essays also address how we can engage students in similar kinds of critical reflection in writing that helps them explore their identities and how they negotiate and adapt them according to the influence and expectations of the dominant culture.

Finally, as a graduate student I was often urged to think about my “professional identity” and how I would form it during graduate school. I know I was not alone in feeling sometimes troubled or mystified by what this meant and the feeling that it meant I must give something up about my identity to become a professional in the academy. This book helps articulate these issues and I hope will help graduate students consider how they want to approach such tensions, where to compromise, to resist, and what it will mean for them to compose new professional identities in writing. The narratives about literacy that are reproduced in higher education have a substantial impact on how we construct our identities in our professional lives. The chapters in this book reflect how our identities as scholars, professionals, teachers, and students are shaped by the goals and power of these dominant cultural institutions. The writers integrate narrative, theory, research, and pedagogy in ways that illustrate the need for flexibility in intellectual writing about identity and culture.

## LITERACY AND INSTITUTIONS

Recent scholarship in New Literacy Studies has challenged the idea of literacy as an autonomous set of skills and has argued instead that concepts of literacy are always contextual and shaped by cultural expectations and goals. As Brian Street (2001) maintains, such an approach argues that

[L]iteracy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. (7)

Reading and writing in any context, then, is not simply a matter of decoding symbols, but is always inextricable from cultural forces in the context in which the act takes place. Those cultural forces make literacy a powerful element of the dominant ideology of a culture. Though there are multiple literacy practices in different domains of life, the literacy practices that are valued in a culture are based not on an objective concept of utility, but on how such practices reinforce and reproduce dominant cultural norms and power relationships.

Schools at every level are, of course, key institutions in maintaining and reproducing such hierarchies of cultural power. David Barton and Mary Hamilton (1998) argue that dominant literacy practices supported in education “can be seen as a part of whole discourse formations, institutionalized configurations of power and knowledge, which are embodied in social relationships” (10). Such a model of culturally constructed literacies challenges the narrative often embraced by writing teachers that literacy skills will inevitably enable students outside of the dominant culture to become empowered individuals able to change their circumstances. Just as possible is that the writing classroom will “do just the opposite, to embed pupils deeply in the ideology and social control of the teacher’s social class and deliberately prevent them from arriving at a detached and critical appraisal of their own situation” (Street 1995, 79). Lynn Bloom (1996) has made a similar argument in identifying composition as a “middle-class enterprise” that devalues certain literacy practices that students engage in outside the classroom while emphasizing the importance of practices and texts that reinforce middle-class values such as decorum, moderation, order, cleanliness, and delayed gratification. Whether the focus of composition course is classical rhetoric or critical pedagogy, students often find that their previous literacy practices, and the identities they supported, are dismissed or ignored and that their work must conform to not just a set of skills, but a set of cultural expectations. Those who enter the academy from backgrounds that are not middle class, white, male, heterosexual, often find that adopting the culturally constructed literacies that dominate higher education challenges important identities that have shaped their lives. Though the students shown in college recruitment photos may seem to have just picked up a book and started to read and interpret the material effortlessly and with smiles on their faces, in fact they can do so only when they have decoded and adapted to identities that fit dominant cultures expectations and values.

#### IDENTITIES AND PERFORMANCE

At the same time that definitions of literacy have become more complex and situated in cultural contexts, conceptions of identity have undergone similar transformations. Increasingly identity, as opposed to an internal somewhat stable sense of “self,” has been recognized as a construction, influenced by culture and ideology and changeable depending on the social context. Indeed the concept of “performing” identity, depending on the context, has influenced much of the discussion on the issue

in recent years. The idea of performance emphasizes that, rather than having a single stable identity that I present to the rest of the world, my sense of identity is external and socially contingent. Depending on the social context I find myself in and the social script I believe I should follow, I negotiate and adjust my identity. Sometimes these constructions of identity are conscious and calculated, other times they are so deeply learned that they seem spontaneous and natural. When I enter a classroom I am conscious of constructing my identity for my performance as a teacher. And I am certain that my students are engaged in identity construction of their own to fit the classroom context. When I am talking to a friend I believe I am being “myself” but if I am honest I know that I perform different identities for different friends, not always being the same identity for my friends from childhood as I am for the people I met last year. Consequently I have not a single identity, but multiple shifting identities, determined by culture and context, and sometimes in conflict with one another.

The ways in which we perform identities only seem natural, however, when we are confident of our understanding of the cultural context we are inhabiting. Tensions emerge when we cannot read the cultural context or construct an identity that fits the expectations of others. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1994) notes that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (394). It is the narratives of the dominant culture that are most often accepted and reproduced as the only relevant narratives. Most people within a culture position their identities within those dominant narratives, and as such are able to perceive identity as singular and stable, as the person you are in the culture that surrounds you. In U.S. culture this seemed a comfortable and rational perspective to a middle-to-upper-class, white, Western, heterosexual, male; but was more problematic and troubling if the identities you wanted to construct did not fit comfortably within the dominant culture’s narratives. We all position ourselves within the narratives of the past as a way of constructing and “performing” identities. Yet if the dominant culture rejects or dismisses narratives by “others,” those individuals are left feeling as if their identities are misunderstood, devalued, or ignored.

In recent years marginalized groups have succeeded in questioning which cultural narratives should be privileged. Such questioning has included critiques of the concept of stable, unified “truth” and the credibility of the institutions, structures, and processes, such as religion, science, education, and politics, that defined “truth.” Through

the questioning of such concepts and institutions there has also been a growing conversation about how we construct and perform our identities and what role different social structures and cultural forces play in those processes. We have all heard discussions about the influence on our identities of cultural aspects such as gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, location, age, ethnicity, profession, and education. Although some of these discussions have devolved into crude identity politics from both right and left, there are important issues involved in thinking carefully, and without hyperbole or inflammatory language, about how such cultural forces influence our identities and how we can use such issues as important lenses through which to consider who we are and when and why.

The ways in which we read others, how they read us, and how we try to communicate our identities in different cultural contexts are particularly important in the context of literacy. Writing is a deliberate construction and expression of identity on a page (or today, often on a screen). Even if we try not to reveal anything personal in our writing, we are taking on a particular identity, that of the detached, scientific observer—or to put it another way, the white male in the lab coat—in our attempted voicelessness. The way we arrange words, choose to disclose or not, assume our audience, construct our sense of credibility through language are all inextricably bound up with issues of identity (Williams 2003). What James Gee (1990) says about Discourse is also appropriate to questions of literacy in that we use language in such situations as “a sort of ‘identity kit’ which comes with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize”(142). And if we misread or misjudge, if we get the discourse and literacy conventions wrong as reader or writer, we risk more than misinterpreting the meaning, we also misread identities. Such concerns are directly related to both our work as teachers and researchers in and out of the classroom as well as the work our students do when they enter our classes. Issues of identity influence our work in teaching writing; our decision is whether we acknowledge such influences and what we do to address them in our work.

#### **IDENTITY IN COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC**

Exploring the definitions of literacy and identity, of who is literate, and what writing counts as creating a literate identity in higher education, are central to the concerns of the field of Composition and Rhetoric. And in recent years in Composition and Rhetoric there has been a

resurgence of interest in how identities are performed in writing by scholars (Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar 1993; Bleich and Holdstein 2001), teachers (Bishop 1997; Tobin 1993), and students (Newkirk 1997). These writers, though accepting that there may not be a single authentic “self” in a given piece of writing, maintain that it is important to acknowledge and examine the identities a writer does present through language. Whether the writing is personal narrative or cultural critique, the argument of these and other writers has been that when a writer writes, an identity is performed and it is important to consider the possibilities and effects of such performances. These works have challenged and enlarged our understanding of identities and writing beyond the well-known cultural critique about the “authentic” self. Included in these challenges are the ways in which contemporary critical theory and identity politics have complicated and enriched our thinking about composing identities. The authors in this volume build on these previous works by now examining issues of identity in the context of the literacy expectations of institutions of higher education.

The question today, then, is not whether identity and the cultural and institutional forces that shape it influence what we write and how we teach, but how it does so. And from this question arise others:

- What identities are we expected to perform in writing and how do those interact or conflict with the identities we perform in other parts of our lives? Which of us are able to display our identities in writing? Which of these displays have the necessary cultural capital to be valued in academic fields and possibly beyond?
- How does the cultural maelstrom of forces such as class, gender, sexual orientation, location, and race influence who we perceive ourselves to be and how we confront them when we compose in writing? How do teachers and institutions that represent and reproduce the dominant culture respond to other identities performed in writing?
- What narratives and positions are available to us as writers and how do they shape our identities on the page? Has the display of identity in writing in fact become an expected rhetorical move that has made personal stories or revelations mere commodities to be consumed by the dominant culture in forms that reproduce that culture?
- And how, when we bring our pedagogies into the writing classroom do we encounter the same forces and experiences in our

students? Has the overt display of the writer's identity become, in fact, a move that can limit discussion rather than engage it? Can we respond to the personal in a critical manner? Is that our only available response as teachers?

Alongside these questions, however, there are also new explorations of the creative and critical potential of how we create and communicate identity through writing. Such work, as this book illustrates, does allow for the possibility of bringing into sharp relief the gaps and chasms that often separate our senses of self from the professional identities we must perform as scholars and students. This requires that we engage our personal writing, our lived experiences, with our theoretical inquiries, and bring all of them together in our work with students. We must, as many have said but fewer have accomplished, turn from the false binaries that pit the personal against the academic and instead "continue to refigure our notions of voice and autobiography, separate the notion of authenticity from writing about the self (or at least as the exclusive property of writing about the self), separate writing about the self from hierarchical notions of genres" (Villanueva in Brandt et al. 2001, 52).

At the same time we also have to reconsider how our intellectual theorizing about identity and the performance of self often falls short of capturing the daily human consequences of the identities through which we engage the world. We can talk all we want about multiple selves, but that doesn't stop people from often engaging in particular readings of our identities, or in our responses to those readings. Keith Gilyard (2000), for example, writes that his lived experience as an African American male cannot adequately be addressed through the kind of academic postmodernism that "often gets stuck in passive relativism, just a classroom full of perceived instability. It's useful to complicate notions of identity, but primary identities operate powerfully in the world and have to be productively engaged" (270). Recent work in Composition and Rhetoric has examined particular cultural aspects of identity such as race (Gilyard 1999), gender (Jarratt and Worsham 1998), class (Shepard, McMillan, and Tate 1998), or sexual orientation (Malinowitz 1995), or on aspects of our professional lives such as scholarship (Bleich and Holdstein 2001), administration (George 1994), or teaching (Mayberry 1996). This book draws from the important work done in such books to offer a more integrated perspective of these various cultural forces. Though the chapters in this book often address issues of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, the book is not an

attempt at an exhaustive exploration of any single factor of identity, instead focusing on institutional impositions of identity and literacy and how teachers, scholars, and students respond to such situations.

### THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The book is organized into three sections that are broadly chronological in the experiences of people entering and working as reading and writing teachers and scholars in institutions of higher education.

In the first section, *Institutions and Struggles for Identity*, the chapters draw on experiences of coming to the academy as a student or young scholar or administrator, and having one's identity challenged by the institutional goals and identities that one is expected to adopt. The essays in this section focus on how institutions of higher education construct identities of Composition and Rhetoric professionals as faculty and administrators and how the authors resist or negotiate these identities.

James Zebroski in "Social Class as Discourse: The Construction of Subjectivities in English" examines how issues of social class influence our collective and individual identities when working-class students enter colleges and universities and are faced with often conflicting definitions of identity and literacy. These same issues have shaped the field of Composition and Rhetoric and he proposes how we might alter our responses as composition teachers. Patricia Harkin's chapter also focuses on how institutional structures of higher education have shaped the field of Composition and Rhetoric. Her essay "Excellence is the Name of the (Ideological) Game" discusses how the arrival of Composition and Rhetoric as a recognized field in an academic world increasingly influenced by market models of competition influences our sense of identity as professors and teachers.

The other chapters in the first section explore the tensions among faculty when our different identities in and out of the academy collide and conflict. Shannon Carter's chapter "The Feminist WPA Project: Fear and Possibility in the Feminist 'Home'" explores the ambivalence she experienced when her identities as a tenure-track faculty member, writing program administrator, and feminist scholar created tensions for her and for those with whom she worked. She both raises questions and provides possible answers for how writing program administrators can negotiate their multiple identities with the different groups, including those with less institutional power.

Tara Pauliny's essay "When 'Ms. Mentor' Misses the Mark: Literacy and Lesbian Identity in the Academy" explores the unexpected tensions

and challenges of identity performance facing scholars as they move from the role of graduate students to faculty members. She specifically addresses how sexuality is often constructed by the academy as an essential, but often ignored, component of identity. She argues that the experiences of lesbian and gay academics remain invisible in the advice literature for new faculty, but require a particular set of negotiations and performances for students, faculty, and scholars.

The chapters in the second section, *Identity in the Composition Classroom*, focus on how cultural and institutional goals pattern and shape the literacy identities of teachers and students and the tensions that can arise when such patterns conflict with other identities they bring into the classroom from their lives outside the academy. The chapters also offer pedagogical strategies for how to acknowledge, address, and particularly reshape identity through narrative and reflection.

Mary Hallet considers the cultural and academic perceptions of nontraditional female students. Her chapter “She Toiled for a Living: Writing Lives and Identities of Older Female Students” explores the positions of older female students in the academy and how their identities are often devalued by traditional colleges and universities. She offers an approach to writing assignments that help them find ways to construct identities in the classroom that allow them to flourish as students and writers. William Carpenter and Bianca Falbo, on the other hand, discuss the struggle with identity the successful writers often confront when moving from high school to college. In “Literacy, Identity, and the ‘Successful’ Student Writer” they demonstrate how helping such students reflect explicitly on their identities as writers allows them to engage in more nuanced considerations of how such identities are constructed and influenced by cultural norms and institutions.

The final two chapters in this section reveal how working with students’ narratives about literacy opens opportunities to help them understand more clearly the challenges of constructing identities in literacy situations where they consider themselves outsiders. Janet Alsup’s “Speaking from the Borderlands: Exploring Narratives of Teacher Identity” focuses on preservice teachers and the variety of discourse genres they engaged in as they confronted, struggled with, and eventually negotiated their entrance into the professional discourse community of high school teachers. James R. Ottery in “‘Who Are *They* and What Do They Have to Do with What I want to Be?’ The Writing of Multicultural Identity and College Success Stories for First-Year Writers” discusses how students

from outside the dominant culture can use their literacy narratives to understand more clearly how writing is shaped by cultural forces and different possibilities for response. Ottery discusses how his own identity as a person outside the dominant culture influences his work with students in multicultural settings.

What happens to Composition and Rhetoric scholars when they take their professional identities outside of the academy is the focus of the third section, *Our Identities Outside the Institutional Walls*. Once we have formed professional identities, what happens when they come into contact and conflict with the world outside the classroom? If the first two sections focus on the identities we bring to the academy and the tensions that can emerge, this final section is concerned with what happens when the professional identities we have developed and become comfortable with over the years must engage and adapt with the expectations of others in the larger world.

Robert Brooke in “Migratory and Regional Identity” examines physical location as an important influence on conceptions of identity and literacy. He argues that traditional academic literacies seem to assume “a placeless, migratory self” that can conflict with local identities of those outside of the academy.

How students’ representation of their identities in writing is shaped by forces outside of the classroom is the concern of the next two chapters. Sally Chandler focuses her chapter on the ways in which writing teachers shape what students perceive as the possible identities they can adopt in writing. In “Some Trouble with Discourses: What Conflicts Between Subjects and Ethnographers Tell Us About What Students Don’t/Won’t/Can’t Say” she uses scholarship about conflicts over ethnographic representation to look at similar relationships between students and writing teachers in terms of power, academic discourses, and authority and how students’ representations of identity are shaped by their teachers’ responses. Lynn Worsham’s “Composing (Identity) in a Posttraumatic Age” focuses on how events outside of the writing classroom, in particular the events of September 11 and its aftermath, influence the formation of identity in a “posttraumatic culture.” Such a response to this cultural shift has implications for how we teach and respond to students’ representations of traumatized experience.

Min-Zhan Lu, in her concluding chapter, draws together and responds to the ideas and themes raised in the previous essays. She notes in the volume a common effort to explore the ways that the standardized

literacy practices in higher education act as material constraints on how students and teachers go about their work, including their senses of identity and their relations with others and the world.

In terms of how we write, and how we teach and respond to student writing, this book argues for an engagement with issues of identity, rather than treating student writing and our work as if identity could be hidden in the “academic” cloak of a pseudodisembodied objectivity. Instead, taking our cue from the authors in this book, we should work with students to reflect on the identities we all bring to the academy from our lives outside and to understand where those identities connect or conflict with the literate identities recognized by the institution. As scholars, teachers, administrators, and students, we must approach the teaching of writing in ways that recognizes the multiple and overlapping nature of both literacy and identity. It is only then that we can explore the most fulfilling and creative possibilities for composing our identities.

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