

College: What Language Is Spoken Here?

When he was a college freshman, Mike Rose, who is now Associate Director of Writing Programs at UCLA, found himself overwhelmed by the writing, reading and listening he needed to do for his courses. He struggled to understand and use what is often called "the language of the academy":

People are taking notes and you are taking notes. You are taking notes on a lecture you don't understand. You get a phrase, a sentence, then the next loses you. It's as though you're hearing a conversation in a crowd or from another room--out of phase, muted. The man on the stage concludes his lecture and everyone rustles and you close your notebook and prepare to leave. You feel a little strange. Maybe tomorrow this stuff will clear up. Maybe by tomorrow this will be easier. . . .

You may be wondering how to handle all of the language tasks you face in college and why college is so much tougher than high school was. Here's what Mike Rose has to say about students' expectations of and struggles with college-level courses:

It is not unusual for students to come to the university with conceptualizations of disciplines that are out of sync with academic reality. [A] lot of entering freshmen assume that sociology is something akin to social work, an applied study of social problems rather than an attempt to abstract a theory about social interaction and organization. Likewise, some think psychology will be a discussion of human motivation and counseling, what it is that makes people do what they do--and some coverage of ways to change what they do. It comes as a surprise that their textbook has only one chapter on personality and psychotherapy--and a half dozen pages on Freud. The rest is animal studies, computer models of thought, lots of neurophysiology. . . . This dissonance between the academy's and the students' definitions of disciplines makes it hard for students to get their bearings with material: to know what's important, to see how the pieces fit together, to follow an argument, to have a sense of what can be passed over lightly. . . .

The discourse of academics is marked by terms and expressions that represent an elaborate set of shared concepts and orientations: alienation, authoritarian personality, the social construction of the self, determinism, hegemony, . . . and so on. This language weaves through so many lectures and textbooks, is integral to so many learned discussions, that it's easy to forget what a foreign language it can be. Freshmen are often puzzled by the talk they hear in their classrooms, but what's important to note here is that problem is not simply one of limited vocabulary. . . . Take, for example, *authoritarian personality*. The average university freshman will know what *personality* means and can figure out *authoritarian*; the difficulty will come from a lack of familiarity with the conceptual resonances that *authoritarian personality* has acquired in the discussions of sociologists and psychologists and political scientists.

How does this passage relate to your college experience? Which courses have met your expectations? Which haven't? What "language" has been the hardest to learn? What helps you learn the language of the different disciplines you're studying?