

*The Secret Language of Art Education:
Academic Language and Lacanian Discourse Theory*

Beth Thomas
State University of New York New Paltz
thomasb@newpaltz.edu

School is where you go to learn a secret language but they don't tell you that it's there. You have to figure it out on your own. It's like an initiation into a secret club.

- Maya, 8th grade student, reported by Melanie Hundley (n.d.)

For several decades education reform in the United States has been deeply connected to policies that require increasingly greater amounts of data driving broad decisions regulating student learning and teachers' performances (Taubman, 2009). These policies have led to a persistent focus on transparency and accountability, manifesting as information on students and teachers characterized by standardization, quantification, competition and large-scale comparison data (Koyama & Kania, 2014). A recent example of this is the edTPA, a teacher certification assessment currently being used by 539 U.S. teacher preparation programs in 34 states and the District of Columbia to assess and report on new teachers' abilities effectively teach all students (edtpa.aacte.org). The edTPA is a portfolio assessment requiring the submission of evidence of teaching ability in the form of lesson plans, video of instruction, instructional materials, student work samples, and commentary all of which explain the teaching candidates' decisions, actions, and impacts on students and their learning. Candidates for teacher certification are evaluated on planning, instructing, assessing student learning, analyzing teaching, and their ability to support students' use of academic language. Although academic language as a specific construct has been a topic in general education for several decades, its presence in art education literature is scarce. Despite the lack of information about, or theorization and critique of academic language in the visual arts, its status as a technical requirement in art teaching has come about as a result of the implementation of the edTPA.

Academic language is sometimes referred to as the language of schooling (Schleppelgrell, 2001); the term refers to the oral and written language that students are expected to use in academic settings to engage with the content of a discipline in meaningful ways within school and for the future. Academic language is highly formalized, decontextualized, and associated with language functions such as hypothesizing, evaluating, inferring, generalizing, predicting and classifying (Gibbons, 1991), although disciplines put varying degrees of emphasis on different language functions dependent upon the conceptual demands of the discipline. The edTPA assesses all teacher certification candidates' abilities to support students' learning and use of vocabulary, language functions, syntax, and discourse structures that are needed for the academic use of English. Typical characteristics of academic language include the use of an authoritative voice, lexical density, metadiscursive markers, and the imposition of a consistent, distant third-person perspective (Snow and Uccelli, 2009). The edTPA for visual art evaluates art teacher candidates' abilities to support students' learning to use English to write and talk about art in a way that conforms to notions of what academic English is and should be. In this instance, what academic language 'is' in visual art is determined not by artists, artistic communities of practice, or through theorizing art education, but by the writers, trainers of evaluators, and evaluators of the edTPA.

Since the 1970s a great deal of attention in American education has been paid to the importance of language across the curriculum not only because of the role of language in cognitive, conceptual, and social development, but also because the numbers of students whose first language is not English in classrooms in the United States has been steadily growing. Non-English speaking students can develop high conversational abilities in English within about two years, but it often takes between five and ten years for them to catch up academically with their first-language peers unless the language acquisition progress can be accelerated (Cummins, 1996). This is because conversational language and academic language differ in terms of vocabularies, structures, and discursive conventions. English Learners are not the only group of students who need language support in school; children from homes where non-standard English is spoken, as well as students from less affluent homes often need extra support to develop reading and writing skills at the level of their more

affluent peers (Gee, 2008), and many students, regardless of economic status, struggle with reading and writing.

Academic language researchers emphasize that “the development of a deep conceptual understanding of discipline-specific concepts is tied to participation in the particularistic discourse practices of disciplinary communities [...and] different disciplines have their own accepted norms for what constitutes a good argument during discourse” (Bailey, 2007, p. 15). Conscious attention to academic language is intended to redress historic patterns of discrimination based on teachers’ misrecognition of the actual knowledge students possess when the language students use differs from expectations within academic settings (Cummins, 1996; 2000). It is also intended to help all students develop depth of understanding of conventionalized forms of communication in academic settings, providing students with linguistic access to bodies of knowledge needed for academic success in the form of school grades, and participation in the practices of a discursive academic or professional community beyond the P-12 grades.

Within educational systems the discursive properties of academic language are determined by the generally accepted instructional and specialized academic lexicons that allow students to become fully proficient in the academic setting (Bailey, 2007) with the implicit assumption that such proficiency allows students access to communities of practice beyond the academic setting in the workplace or in college. With that said, expectations for academic language use in classrooms are largely determined by teachers (Gibbons, 2006). An art teacher’s engagement with, beliefs about, and values concerning art as it relates to the discursive potentials of language will, in large part, be a function of her or his socialized experiences as an artist, teacher, and student and will have great impact on her or his students’ developing inquiries into and understanding of relationships between art and the world.

Pre-service art educators whose entry into the teaching profession is regulated by the edTPA are guided in their understandings of the relationship between language and art engagement by the requirements of the edTPA itself. The edTPA articulates that teacher candidates specify the academic language supports for students built into lesson plans and that they assess students’ learning of academic language in relation to the central focus of a lesson. Teacher candidates specify one language

function that is essential for the visual arts learning embedded in a lesson plan they have written along with vocabulary and syntactic or discursive structures associated with that language function. They also provide evidence of the students' use of the specified language forms in developing art understandings through work samples, video, or audio of students' classroom language use. Although the edTPA does not require candidates to demonstrate student learning in relation to any one specific language function, six language functions are suggested within the assessment as particularly appropriate to learning in the visual arts. These include *analyze*, *compare/contrast*, *critique*, *describe*, *interpret*, and *question*. With this the edTPA takes on an educative function for teacher candidates by naming particular language functions its writers have determined are particularly useful for understanding and participating in meaningful art discourse.

Upon first glance it seems that consciously attending to academic language in any disciplinary area will benefit students who are English Learners and speakers of non-standard English when they are learning to communicate the conventional content of a discipline which, in turn, should be advantageous with regard to having access to success in school in terms of current standards and practices of accountability. However, the approach to academic language present in the edTPA seems to be one in which language use is understood as a tool or skill to be mastered rather than an emergence phenomenon related to local communicative contexts. This perspective on language use reduces teachers' and students' abilities to conceptualize language as a complex ability that continually develops in relationship to the practices and communities one engages in (Schaunessey. 1986). The focus seems to be on learning the forms of art writing one might use, for example, to write a critical review of artworks, but this approach can lead to "imitation and parody [rather than] invention and discovery" (Bartholomae in Zamel, 1986, p. 188) and a number of researchers have recognized teaching for conventionalized academic language as disenfranchising or oppressive (Bizzell, 1988; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1986).

As part of both education discourse and the regulatory apparatus governing new teachers' entry to the profession, academic language as it manifests in the edTPA produces ambivalent conditions under which, through language, students and teachers come into relationship with knowledge. Given academic language's focus on both

expressive and receptive language skills and their use in discipline-specific discourse, in this case that of art education, Lacan's theory of discourse provides a particularly relevant framework through which to explore the ambivalence created by academic language as it is constructed within and by the edTPA as well as to consider possibilities for academic language in visual arts education in terms of knowledge and difference.

Lacanian discourse theory

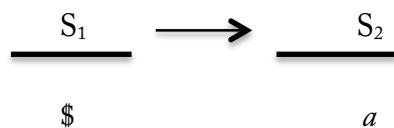
In *The other side of psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan (2007) articulated a theory of discourse that provides an especially powerful set of concepts through which to consider academic language. Lacan specifies discourse as a social link, or specifically, a link between one who produces and one who receives a message, set within social frameworks structured by power and desire. Lacan's formulations demonstrate that, in addition to acts of speech involving production (agent) and reception (an other), each act is underwritten by a truth, and produces a byproduct or loss that cannot be recuperated or accounted for by the agent. The possibilities schematic structure of discourse, according to Lacan, is as follows:



Factors on the left side of the schema are related to the production of speech, while those on the right side are related to reception. The upper tier of the schema designates the conscious, overt aspects of discourse where the agent is the dominant factor, while the other, as the receiver, is the factor acted upon by the agent. The bottom tier represents repressed or excluded aspects of discourse that are not consciously available. The bottom left position is occupied by the factor that is the "driving force in the discursive machine" (Wajcman, 2003, ¶ 17), the unconscious truth of the agent's speech that supports and "constitutes the condition of its possibility, but is repressed by it" (Bracher, 1994, p. 109). The bottom right position is held by the factor that is produced, excluded, or repressed as a result of the other's interpellation by the dominant factor of the discourse.

Four factors rotate through these four positions. They include the divided subject (\$), who is positioned in terms of knowledge (S₂) through its master signifiers (S₁), and the *plus-de-jouir* (a) or excess that is both produced by and left out of the subject's knowledge as part of its signified articulation. The rotation of the elements through the schematic positioning provides insights into the effects of speech on the subject at the junctures between the subject, knowledge, truth and otherness. The positions of the four elements within the schema above create four discourses: the discourse of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst, concerned, respectively, with governing, educating, protesting, and revolutionizing (Bracher, 1994). Each describes a different possibility for the subject's relationship to the symbolic order as it is enacted through discourse, with different potentials for the subject to be created as traumatized by or liberated from hegemonizing self-beliefs.

The master's discourse



Within the master's discourse, particular values and ideals are presented as absolute and self-evident truth, or truth that needs no justification other than the fact that it is asserted by authority. The agent in the master's discourse is the master signifier (S₁). The master signifier, alone, means nothing; it only comes to represent meaning in relation to other signifiers (S₂), but in doing so it aligns the body of signifiers along its own axis, establishing and extending its power (Bracher, 2006). The hidden, repressed truth of the S₁ is the split subject (\$), or the master's (unacknowledged) lack; what is excluded is the *plus-de-jouir*, or the subject's desires (a).

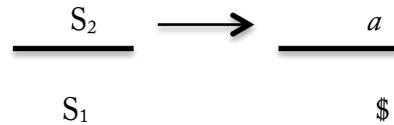
Pedagogically, a master's discourse is unconcerned with student voice or understanding; students' unconscious desires are repressed and excluded, while reproduction of the master's knowledge, as evidence of the master's exercise of power, is demanded. A pedagogic master's discourse is concerned with power maintenance, control and the valorization of ideals and values embodied in particular ideas, artists, artworks, or the teacher him or herself (Bracher, 2006). It seeks to create identities in

the form of values that are determined by master signifiers and which respond to the fact of authority. Academic language as a masters discourse in art education prescribes particular content as the “correct” content for art learning because of tradition, specifies language forms for writing or talking about art as the proper forms out of habit or conformity, or adheres to rigidly prescribed content without concern for why the content matters.

In the case of academic language in art education, “correct” usage would seem, currently, to be determined by the hidden group of writers and evaluators of the edTPA. By participating in, identifying with, and reproducing a master’s discourse, students become recognizable as “good” students who understand how to produce what the teacher, as proxy for the master, wants to hear, thereby reinforcing the master’s authority. As subjects, students are determined by the master signifiers of the discourse and the body of knowledge, including values, actions, and ways of being, prescribed by them. The subject’s desires (*a*) are fundamentally segregated from any subjective lack in the master; the signifying process, as determined by the master, is in complete control.

The unexamined claim that conventionalized academic language proficiency is required to participate fully in a knowledge community or community of practice illustrates Lacan’s proposition that the structure of the master’s discourse “provides the matrix of speech in general. Along with the right to speak, it establishes the ‘social link’ of speech in the form of [linguistic] mastery...the discourse *of the master* stands for the commanding dimension of language” (Wajcman, 2003, ¶ 26, emphasis in original). In other words, the message that, through academic language, all learners will have access to the benefits in U.S. culture through *correct language use in academic settings* is both an acknowledgement and an assertion of the requirements of communication *as defined by the dominant culture*. What is hidden is authority’s lack of ability to account for or acknowledge difference in “correct” ways to use language, and in particular language about art.

The university discourse



The university discourse is closely connected to the master's discourse; Lacan (2007) states that the precise function of the university discourse is to elucidate the master's discourse. It does this by replacing brute authority with rational establishmentarianism: it controls the network of signifiers, establishing the linguistic conditions through which individuals' fashion a sense of identity. Knowledge (S_2) in the place of agency addresses the unformed subject in an attempt to incorporate the subject. The university discourse "produces knowledge as the ultimate object of desire (a) over and against any question of the subject ($\$$)" (Lacan, 1982, p. 161). In other words, there is no place for the desires of the subject, or the individual's unconscious, subjective knowledge within the university discourse. The university discourse is remarkably powerful in that it establishes a knowledge system that leaves no room for subjects to act in any way other than to use the signifiers made available to them by the system to continually reproduce the system. The place of hidden truth in the university discourse is held by S_1 , the master signifier. Despite the appearance of objective, neutral knowledge, the power of the university discourse, which is to elucidate the master's discourse (Lacan, 2007), naturalizes the master's power through rationality rather than brute force.

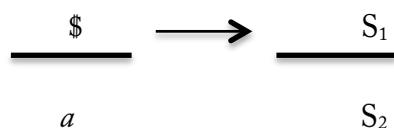
Educationally, the university discourse emerges in a number of ways. One is under the condition of ideal teachers serving knowledge, and viewing their function as "initiating students into the discourse of their particular discipline or into academic discourse in general, a process that they see as empowering students" (Bracher, 2006, p. 89). This empowerment comes through the acquisition and use of cultural codes of power enacted in classrooms and reflective of the rules of the dominant culture; explicit instruction in the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier (Delpit, 1995). Initiating students and teachers into the academic language of art via the edTPA accomplishes this in two ways: by providing students with access to the discursive forms necessary to achieve recognition as "good students" in the art

classroom, and disciplining new teachers into the discursive forms required to be recognized as “good art teachers” by the regulatory system.

Bracher (2006) points out that, while mastering the discursive conventions of a field of knowledge can produce agency and significance in the classroom, it may “actually produce little agency and significance in life beyond the classroom” (p. 90) when the performance of the discourse does little to address human needs or solve problems, or when acquisition is valuable primarily because its social currency gives individuals access into a kind of academic “social club” (Bracher, 2006; Graff, 1992). Students are created as subjects who are either ‘educated’ or ‘uneducated’ based on competence in the discourse as revealed by their ability to reproduce knowledge as prescribed by the system, judged through seemingly objective, neutral -often- standardized - tests.

The university and master’s discourses are closely related discourses of control and authority. They both allow particular kinds of inclusion and recognition for subjects, but often at the price of acquiescence to the already-known and damage to individuals’ capacities to either critically examine subjective positions offered within the discourse or embrace aspects of their identities that exist outside of the dominant discourse. Any kind of ‘success’ is defined solely on the terms of the dominant discourse, and any action outside those bounds as both aberrant and a failure on the part of the individual.

The hysteric’s discourse

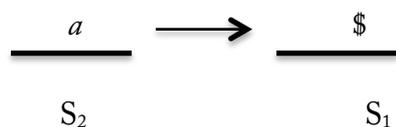


Authoritarian discourses can be disrupted pedagogically by the insertion of discursive modes that shift master signifiers away from the positions of truth and power, allowing for different kinds of knowledge to be produced and different possibilities for the subject to put desire to work. In other words, discourses that interfere with institutional rhetoric and maintain the primacy of the subjective make it possible for linguistic and discursive difference to be recognized, valued, and examined within

educational spaces. The hysterics discourse begins with the contradictions between conscious and unconscious knowledge and “the self-contradictory nature of desire itself” (Fink, 1995, p. 133). It recognizes that the master signifiers of dominant discourses do not and cannot account for his or her actuality; its goal is to resist authoritative discourses by calling out the master, and demanding it account for itself through the production of serious knowledge (Fink, 1995). Despite this, the subject remains in solidarity with the master signifier “by emphasizing what there is of the master...[that] she evades in her capacity as object of her desire” (Lacan, 2007, p. 94). In other words, when an identity is structured in relation to master signifiers, even as a denial of what they cannot account for, the master signifier is still a relevant factor in the construction of identity.

Pedagogically, hysterical discourses include “anti-productive elements” (Wolfe, 2010, p. 157) that expose dominant discourses and the ways they impose identity-bearing signifiers on identity construction. They help students find language through which to recognize and name their own and others’ identity components that exist outside of those prescribed by authoritarian or establishment discourses. In an art classroom this might include talking about subjects that are often taboo in education but about which art can create insight into subaltern identities, such as LGBT issues, social injustice, racism, sexuality, and economic disparity in contemporary society. In other words, a hysterical discourse challenges academic language to expand and account for difference and to recognize previously disallowed signifiers to enter into constellations by which to align (self)knowledge.

The analyst’s discourse



While the discourse of the hysteric interrupts authoritative discourses through questioning and the demand for recognition, the analyst’s discourse interferes with dominant discourses by beginning with the subject’s desires (*a*), supported by the truth of her or his unconscious knowledge (*S*₂). Analytic discourse asks the individual

to recognize that her own discourse is not fully within her control, but rather involves a process of accepting and allowing recognition in terms of master signifiers that create knowledge of oneself in relation to others. Analytic discourse entails an ethic of listening for the underlying truth of a message rather than its overt content, and in this way it is oppositional to authoritarian discourses, where overt content is reified and absolutized.

Analytic discourses enacted pedagogically are motivated by the desire for absolute difference, or the development of identities that are fundamentally and absolutely different based on “those capacities and qualities in the [student] that remain undeveloped, repressed, or disowned because they are ‘absolutely different’ from the [student’s] dominant, socially sanctioned identity components” (Bracher, 2006, p. 101). The goal is not for students to embrace any particular set of identity components, but rather to become aware of the contributions of their signifying affiliations to ways they identify and are identified by others, to examine repressed aspects of their identities, and critically consider how the world is presented to them and the ways they situate themselves within the world.

This type of pedagogy actively works to empower students’ exposure of oppressive and dictatorial aspects of discursive structures, including academic language. In art education, analytic discursive structures that enable students to “reconstruct their world in new ways and rearticulate their future[s] in unimagined and perhaps unimaginable ways” (Grossberg in Bracher, 2006, p. 103), creating a new condition of knowledge which exists *beyond* the art educator’s understanding of the functioning of art language as it already exists. In other words, in enacting an analytic pedagogy, the art educator has no knowledge to give the student other than analytic knowledge, which is only of value as a used knowledge, “used in each case differently, according to the singularity of the case” (Felman, 1997, p. 28).

Discussion

Analysis of academic language using Lacanian discourse theory reveals it as an ambivalent construct. Given that resistance pedagogies actively work to unseat dominant discourses, and edTPAs visual art academic language seems to epitomize conventions of dominant discursive patterns in educational settings, it is tempting to

identify the authoritarianism that is structurally apparent in academic language as damaging to students and disruptive pedagogies as key to unseating tendencies in academic discourse practices that contribute to broader social oppression. However, as noted above, there are advantages to making the demands and requirements of academic language visible to students who have historically been subjected to disenfranchising and discriminatory practices inherent in linguistically exclusionary education discourses. Lacan's assertion that master signifiers define the readability of a discourse makes it clear that without an understanding of how to understand what schools discursively expect, students cannot hope to satisfy the demands of an educational system that radically impacts their social positions. An unfortunate part of this for students and teachers in the U.S. is their being pushed to use the "language of schooling" to the potential exclusion of language that is reflective of classroom experience resonating with the individual's lived history and existence within communities beyond those recognized by established academic structures.

Instrumental education talk in the U.S. persistently refers to the economic use-value of education in terms of 'college and career readiness' and the 'cradle to career pipeline.' Academic language is overtly positioned as key to educational access, yet acquisition of academic language skill in and of itself does not make students recognizable within the dominant discourse. While scores on tests, which are increasingly standardized and translate into identities such as "good student," "learning disabled," "presidential scholar," "college bound," and "failure," do make students recognizable on the terms of that discourse and position them accordingly within the dominant social structure, language is not the only structure that creates barriers or access to social and cultural entry, and students' acquisition of academic language does not and cannot reconfigure other critical aspects of dominant discourses that systematically exclude increasingly greater numbers of people in the U.S. and around the globe from equity and well-being.

In addition to issues related to broad economic and societal injustice, academic language is also implicated in issues related to individual freedom. As demonstrated above, acquiescence to dominant discourses can force students to either deny aspects of themselves and others that do not align with the master signifiers of the discourse or risk disenfranchisement. Any dominant linguistic system that denies recognition of

individuals' identity-bearing signifiers and discursive forms can cause identity damage. This is not limited to the vocabularies available, but also to linguistic resources with which to identify, and syntactic structures that create the world in varying ways (Gee, 2008). When linguistic choices are limited to conventionalized elements and forms, the potentials for students to enact resistant readings of discursive forms are severely restricted. Additionally, opportunities for teachers to recognize students' knowledge and help students "revaluate what is valuable to be known and where our knowing comes from" (Wolfe, 2010, p. 161) may not be possible. Considered in this way, academic language has the clear potential to work against students and teachers experiencing education as a condition of possibility rather than a condition of the reproduction of the already known.

Concluding thoughts

This writing is not intended to imply that teachers should not attend to academic language in art education, but rather to point out inherent ambiguities regarding academic language that raise issues in terms of visual art education and art-teacher preparation. It exposes the need for pre-service teachers to gain experience with pedagogies that support students in hearing, acquiring, critiquing, and choosing ways to use language, academic and otherwise, that further their individual and community goals. It also points to the need to be mindful of ways students' understandings of language supports their modes of engagement with art and whether those engagements work against or support the experience of art education as a condition of possibility or a condition of reproduction of the already known.

References

- Bailey, A. (2007). *The language demands of school: Putting academic English to the test*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bartholomae, D. (1986). Inventing the university. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 5, 4-23.
- Bizzell, P. (1988). Arguing about literacy. *College English*, 50, 141-153.
- Bracher, M. (2006). *Radical pedagogy: Identity, generativity, and social transformation*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bracher, M. (1994). On the psychological and social functions of language: Lacan's theory of four discourses. In M. Bracher, M. Alcorn, R. Corthell, and F. Massardier-Kenney (Eds.), *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject structure and society*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Ontario CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Tonowanda NY: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children*. New York NY: New Press.
- Felman, S. (1997). Teaching terminable and interminable. In S. Todd (Ed.), *Learning desire: Perspectives on pedagogy, culture and the unsaid*. New York NY and London UK: Routledge.
- Fink, B. (1995). *The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gee, J. (2008). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. New York NY and London UK: Taylor and Francis.
- Gibbons, P. (2006). *Bridging discourses in the ESL Classroom: Students, teachers and researchers*. New York NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Graff, G. (1992). *Beyond the culture wars*. New York NY: Norton.
- Grossberg, L. (1994). Introduction: Bringin' it all back home – Pedagogy and cultural studies. In H. Giroux and P. McLaren (Eds.), *Between borders: Pedagogy and the politics of cultural studies*, pp. 1-25. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hundley, M. (n.d.) Academic language and edTPA™. Stanford CA: Stanford Center for Access, Learning and Equity.

http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/PDFs/edTPA_AcademicLanguage_NY_12_1_2_12.pdf

- Koyama, J. and Kania, B. (2014). When transparency obscures: The political specter of accountability. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 12(1), 143-169.
- Lacan, J. (2007). *The other side of psychoanalysis: The seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII*. R. Grigg, (Trans.). New York NY and London UK: Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1982). *Feminine sexuality*. J. Mitchell and J. Rose (Eds.), J. Rose (Trans.). New York, NY and London UK: Norton.
- Schaunesey, M. (1998). Diving in: An introduction to basic writing. In V. Zamel and R. Spark (Eds.), *Negotiating academic literacies*, pp. 1-8. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Schleppegrell, M. (2001). Linguistic features of the language of schooling. *Linguistics and Education*, 12(4), 431-459.
- Sommers, N. (1992). Between the drafts. *College Composition and Communication*, 43, 23-31.
- Taubman, P. (2009). *Teaching by numbers: Deconstructing the discourse of standards and accountability in education*. New York NY and London UK: Routledge.
- Wajcman, G. (2003) The hysteric's discourse. *The Symptom* (4).
<http://www.lacan.com/hystericdiscf.htm>
- Wolfe, P. (2010). Understanding critical literacy through Lacan's four orders of discourse model. *Pedagogies: An international Journal*, 5(2), 153-166.
- Zamel, V. (1986). Questioning academic discourse. In V. Zamel and R. Spack (Eds.), *Negotiating academic literacies: Teaching and learning across languages and cultures*, pp 187-197. Mahwah NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.