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Disciplinary Epistemology and Academic Discourse

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Members of a disciplinary community share deep-seated epistemological assumptions. These assumptions underlie and motivate disciplinary practices, including discursive practices. Given such epistemological connections, researchers of scholarly writing are interested in uncovering systematic disciplinary variations in academic discourse, and newcomers to a discipline (i.e., students) need to appreciate and master such discursal variations if they hope to be accepted into their disciplinary community. In this presentation, I start by outlining, in broad terms, the relationship between disciplinarity and academic discourse. Drawing on Basil Bernstein's work on knowledge structures in disciplinary inquiry and Karl Maton's realist sociology of knowledge making, I discuss how dominant knowledge-knower structures (i.e., epistemological orientations) found in different disciplines may shape the rhetorical and discourse strategies deployed by members of these disciplines in academic communication. I then present selective findings of my own studies on cross-disciplinary differences in academic discourse and rhetorical practices and relate these findings to discipline-specific knowledge-making practices. By way of conclusion, I discuss pedagogical implications for English for academic purposes (EAP) and English for specific purposes (ESP) instruction that follow from the findings of these studies and propose pedagogical strategies for socializing students into the academic discourse of their chosen disciplines.

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