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Bringing "Abnormal" Discourse into the Classroom

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Assuming student discourse is prone to error, teachers have long implemented rules that ensure 'safe' discourse, particularly in composition instruction. My fifth grade teacher taught me to place a comma in a sentence whenever I take a breath rather than teaching me the language of comma rules. To my dismay, many of my first-year composition students raise their hands in agreement that they too have been taught to place a comma wherever their lungs suggest. These students learn to call independent clauses a complete sentence, and to them an ellipsis is merely "dot, dot, dot." In an attempt to reach students, some teachers are using this student-driven discourse instead of bringing students into the discourse of the subject itself. The results are students who cannot effectively engage in academic discourse in their own writing. Peer collaboration can mend student discourse if they are encouraged to participate in contextual learning and confront the restrictions of discourse students have faced throughout their writing instruction. Such restrictions have sought to create "normal," safe discourse at the risk of abandoning contextual learning. I met with these issues years ago as a writing tutor when I learned how to empower student writers by engaging them in purposeful, "abnormal" discourse about their writing. Today, as an instructor of English, I practice the very same methods I used as a writing tutor each time I conduct one-one-one writing conferences. Essentially, I am still tutoring my students, even as a university composition instructor.

In "The Order of Discourse," Michel Foucault describes society's rejection of the discourse of the "madman," whose wisdom and discourse is different than ours. The madman's language is dangerous because he does not adhere to society's conventions, perhaps because he does not understand them. Therefore, his discourse is ignored or trivialized—not unlike the discourse of the first year composition student who stands in the doorway to Kenneth Burke's parlor, awaiting an invitation to join the conversation buzzing among academics in the field. Students entering college tend to create their own academic wall, one not meant for scaling ivory towers, but for filtering information they deem useless. This wall has been built brick by brick on foundations laid in grade school where students must remain quiet while the teacher provides knowledge. This knowledge is wrought with restrictions imposed by the teacher in an effort to control student discourse and circumvent "dangerous" discourse, which in a writing class may be poor writing habits. Students abide by these because, as Foucault's will to truth explains, they desire to only engage in "true" discourse that will create true knowledge—the precise, correct answer— and will ignore discourse that they perceive will not. This is a common belief among students who feel that their instructor is the only source of knowledge and so they reject the value of peer reviews. To overcome this fear of contextual learning, teachers, tutors, and students must develop an academic discourse shared through collaboration.

I don't mean that students are madmen, but there are similarities between the boundaries they and Foucault's madmen face. Foucault writes that the "discourse of the madman was taken for mere noise, and he was only symbolically allowed to speak" (1461-62). He goes on to assert that society has stifled discourse as a knowledge-making event ever since Plato declared the existence of an absolute Truth and the need for language to communicate it. If this is the

case, then the madman's speech is heard, but disregarded because it is assumed that he is ignorant of knowledge-making discourse and cannot produce absolute Truth. It is this will to truth that causes society to assign limitations to language that will censure the dangers, the uncontrollable modes of discourse that could result in "ponderous, formidable materiality" (1461). Similarly, first year composition students are entering a new academic discourse that they are not attuned to; therefore, they are believed to be (and believe themselves to be) *unqualified* to speak on the subject. As a result, peer reviews may produce only positive responses lacking depth or analysis. It is possible, however, to improve student discourse through the kind of collaborative learning that typically takes place in a writing center.

Many students resist the idea that collaboration creates knowledge, but instructors and tutors of writing often find that collaboration produces academic conversation conducive to making knowledge. Collaboration allows us to address these issues, discuss our thoughts, and learn from the experiences and ideas of others. Foucault believes that the restrictions of discourse are perpetuated through education and the ways in which students acquire and use knowledge: "this will to truth, like the other systems of exclusion, rests on institutional support; it is both reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices…But it is also renewed, no doubt more profoundly, by the way in which knowledge is put to work (1463). Traditional classrooms are hierarchical; the teacher gives knowledge and the students accept it. Students then produce work that reflects that knowledge. This is the difference between absolute knowing (knowledge obtained from the instructor) and contextual knowing (knowledge that is socially constructed).[1] Learning is a process; one that ends with contextual thinking. Throughout their education, students will become less dependent on their teacher's knowledge, instead learning how to

analyze and integrate the knowledge of their peers in preparation for their academic discourse community.

It is here that we find a need to direct the discourse without controlling or restricting it. If there is only consensus among a group of students, then they are not creating new knowledge. In other words, without direction students are merely creating "normal discourse" and maintaining knowledge (Bruffee 407). Kenneth Bruffee, who supports collaborative learning, asks, "How can student peers, who are not themselves members of the knowledge communities they hope to enter, help other students to enter those communities?" (405). The answer, as Bruffee himself states, is a peer tutor—a person who is knowledgeable of the conventions of discourse, but is able to communicate with the student on a less authoritative level. The conversation between a student writer and a tutor creates "abnormal discourse," which is necessary for producing new knowledge (407). In other words, "normal discourse" abides by societal language restrictions wherein students will not advance their discourse in fear of breaking one of these rules. For example, a student engaging in "normal discourse" would avoid using a semicolon because he was told by his teacher that semicolons are too difficult for novice writers to use correctly and should be avoided altogether. His peer reviewer would not correct this during the review because she too was told of the complicated nature of the semicolon. However, his writing tutor, with whom he gets ample one-on-one attention, will be able to explain to him how to use a semicolon correctly and provide him some guided practice, thus engaging him in knowledge-making "abnormal discourse" that does not abide by the kinds of language restrictions that Foucault described.

Abnormal discourse may be met with doubt unless a tutor, or teacher, appeals to the student as someone who is invested in that student's writing and understanding of writing. Their collaboration is truly a partnership where the goal is to instill confidence in the writer so that he or she can progress from absolute knowing to contextual knowing and responsibly handle the restrictions of discourse that hinder student writing. I've observed many instructors and professors who only conference with students after a paper has already been graded. This conference attempts to explain the grade to the writer, and may even provide the opportunity for revision. But this is not a true collaborative effort since the instructor has already decided what is wrong with the paper. Tutors assist a student before the paper is submitted for a grade, and so too should instructors intervene while the writing is still in its adolescence.

College students are in the midst of transitioning from absolute to contextual knowing, a process educators can facilitate by encouraging students to make their own decisions as writers and be confident about those decisions. The will to truth is a result of the traditional classroom hierarchy. It gives students the false idea that they and their peers have little knowledge to contribute to the class. They also lack the confidence to believe that they can compose and evaluate good writing, yet they depend upon the instructor's evaluation of their ideas. It seems that the will to truth is the biggest obstacle to overcome since we can not thoroughly teach students if they are more concerned with knowing *of* than knowing *about*. By questioning the will to truth and encouraging students to do the same, educators can relieve them of this dependency. Most students are satisfied to revise a paper when the errors have been corrected for them, but when an instructor takes on the role of tutor—intervening before the paper is

submitted and engaging the student in a discourse about writing as two members of the same discourse community—then students can no longer impulsively conform to simplistic rules.

If we can resolve the restrictions of discourse through the partnership created between a tutor and a student, then why not do the same in the classroom? Collaboration in the classroom takes the form of discussion groups, peer responses and conferences with the instructor. There are obvious benefits to collaborative learning and the discourse it creates, so how can educators elicit this type of discourse from students?

A tutor is successful in reaching a student because of the equality, respect, and trust that they share. Irene Lurkis Clark, who advocates active collaboration, writes,

True collaborators respond to one another honestly and do not withhold information from one another about trivial aspects of a paper…the more information withheld from a student and the more a tutor refrains from presenting information he knows, the more he is acting like a traditional teacher and the less likely it is that true collaboration will occur. After all, only teachers, not colleagues, ask questions to which they already know the answers. (95)

Clark describes the role of the tutor as someone who is expected to teach (and create abnormal discourse) as a part of the collaboration within the writing center. She doubts that this partnership can exist between a teacher and student, but I believe that it is possible for teachers to construct a learning environment where equality, respect and trust exist. This is a task that many tutors-turned-teachers have assumed. Their classrooms tend to value expressive writing, close interaction with the students, and peer discussion and response groups. Most importantly, the course moves at the students' speed. A tutor-turned-teacher may be likely to ask: "Why did you place a comma there?" rather than "Does a comma go there?" The former question opens

up a dialogue on the student's knowledge of comma rules without assuming the teacher knows the answer. I find that students eagerly discuss what they have learned as they attempt to engage in a discourse about how one makes knowledge. This brings them to the realization that knowledge is contextual and that it may be time to tear down that academic wall.

This is where we really part from the traditional classroom hierarchy. Rather than being a source of knowledge, the composition instructor is more of a resource on writing. Expressive writing values the unique views and experiences of each individual, giving students the opportunity to share their knowledge. Students also benefit from close interaction with their instructor, which includes constant feedback about their writing and lessons covering issues of concern to students. Imposing rules that mirror the restrictions of discourse reflects a lack of trust and equality, so instructors need to avoid hastily discussing grammar and other writing matters. By creating a partnership, the instructor learns more about the students and can tailor the lessons to their needs in much the same way that a tutee leads a tutorial session. When the instructor moves at the students' pace, then they feel like equal members of the discourse community. Likewise, when we teach them the conventions and vocabulary of this particular discourse community, then they are better equipped to create new knowledge as a group rather than engaging in normal discourse.

The traditional classroom has ingrained students with the belief that instructors are the only source of knowledge. Students are eager to learn and they've developed their own towers to protect their knowledge and values about writing; unfortunately, their misconceptions are the result of impulsive rules designed to prevent dangerous discourse, but instead serve to disempower student discourse. This produces students who are afraid to make changes to their

writing style and process when they enter the university, as was the case with one of my own students who insisted he had been taught to never use semicolons since they were difficult to apply. The restrictions of discourse underestimate those who participate in it, so, like writing tutors, writing instructors must take the time to explain to students the conventions of writing, encourage them to use this knowledge when faced with writing quandaries, and instill in them the confidence to think contextually.

NOTES

[1]Described in Baxter Magolda's Epistemological Reflection Model

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