

*I went to see the doctor of philosophy
With a poster of Rasputin and a beard down to his knee.
He never did marry, or see a “B” grade movie,
He graded my performance; he said he could see through me,
I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind,
Got my paper, and I was free.*

Closer to Fine – The Indigo Girls

I have faced the type of professor described above, and as a teacher of composition, my goal is to insure that I avoid personality pitfalls and “draw students in” rather than repel or intimidate them. This is especially vital for students of color who daily face culturally hegemonic discourses (Gramsci) that work against them constantly, quietly, and effectively. Also, because I have found that many students who are members of the dominant (White European American) discourse are also unaware of the damaging nature of this discourse or sometimes, that they even use it, I present alternative discourses to students and allow them to draw their own conclusions.

My goal in teaching composition is a desire to bring others into the conversation described in Ken Burke’s metaphor of the parlor. Burke wrote:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance.

Burke’s metaphor is heartening because he acknowledges several truths often overlooked in the modern academy. The most important of these may be that we are only here for a time. This refusal to acknowledge our own mortality is a societal problem that causes us to devalue our own lives and the lives and experiences of others. Additionally, Burke reminds us that we cannot *know* every aspect of the discussion and that we have the right to enter the discussion. I wish to teach composition to equip students to master their own writing styles, enter the discussion, voice their opinions, and make positive changes in their lives and educational experiences. For students who are unaware of the existence of a “dominant discourse,” learning of alternative discourses can be enlightening. For students who are members of marginalized segments of the population, the ability to enter the conversation with their own opinions is empowering.

My teaching conception is based on a bit of wisdom given to my father by my grandfather; “*You can learn something from everyone.*” I believe that I can learn something from everyone, including students. Since writing is constructed with language, it is a topic that can be taught and learned collaboratively. I design assignments that require students to work collaboratively, revealing their common experiences. I also encourage students to work collaboratively with me, treating these sessions like tutoring sessions that might take place in

university writing centers. Because of my experience as a writing center tutor, I feel comfortable with the casual, relaxed nature of this style of collaboration. This casual, conversational method often relaxes students and assures them that I accept them and their writing, am concerned with their educational success, and that I want to empower them to enter the conversation. I firmly believe “that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language” (CCC 1974) and have often tutored students who chose to use their particular English in their essays. In doing so, I have advised students to use “standard English” (herein defined as White European American vernacular English). In some cases, this was as simple as advising them to avoid using contractions such as *can't* or *don't*, while in other situations I advised students to refrain from using terms considered correct in their personal vernacular such as *they* (to infer *their*) to insure that their voices are heard.

According to me, the purpose of composition courses is to enable and teach students to write in “standard English,” the style typically acceptable in the modern academy. However, I expose students to styles that are not typical of mainstream, academic writing (like Victor Villanueva’s *Bootstraps*) to encourage them to write in alternative styles (i.e. personal narrative, poetry/lyrics within the essay etc.). I wish to help students reach their own critical consciousness and arm them with the skills to use their writing to examine and disarticulate discourses that oppress them.

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