

1-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Nugent, Susan Monroe (1990) "One Woman's Ways of Knowing," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1192>

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One Woman's Ways of Knowing

Susan Monroe Nugent

I believe that working with students in a Writing Center setting provides us opportunities for insights that are not readily available to teachers in a classroom setting. These insights into the development of individual writers often have pedagogical implications for both settings. While recently reading *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), I could not help thinking of writers I work with in the Writing Center. I found myself constantly making marginal notes, recalling my own experiences as well as saying "Ahah! So that explains Jan (or Joan or Kathy, and sometimes John and Ken)'s behavior." I was tracing the development of my students, especially the women, thinking of their reactions to classes, and their work with me in a variety of situations.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule convincingly demonstrate that women have five basic ways of knowing. In this paper I will summarize these five ways, examining specifics further as I discuss one writer, Karen, tracing her change and growth within these stages of intellectual development. The five stages are Silence, Received Knowledge, Subjective Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, and Connected Knowledge. In their descriptions of these stages, the authors use "voice" as a metaphor for women's ways of knowing; women progress from having no voice to developing a strong voice. Starting with fear of responses to their words, women progress first to reliance upon authorities, then to viewing themselves as authorities. Later they search for procedures that will help them know, finally connecting their experiences with that of authorities, constructing their own world view.

Women's Ways of Knowing offers a new perspective on the intellectual development of our female student. However, as I thought of the development of my students in terms of this description, I sometimes found myself

disagreeing with the authors. While Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule suggest that women are either in one stage or another in terms of ways of knowing, my own students have shown me again and again that the context of learning affects their way of knowing. That is, their voices differ depending upon the situation, the relationship with others in the situation, and their previous experiences with that situation. In a classroom setting, the student may be at the stage of Received Knowledge, but in the Writing Center, the same person may be a Connected Knower. This phenomenon has implications for the pedagogy of a Writing Center.

Case studies of writers beginning with Janet Emig's work (1971) have revealed that the study of the development of one writer can provide insights into the intellectual growth of many students. Lil Brannon, in turn, has convincingly argued that we must share these "stories" of our students in order to demonstrate their progress, a progress that often is not in evidence in test and paper grades. This article is an attempt to tell the story of one writer's ways of knowing and coming to know. I will examine Karen's change and growth against the framework of the five ways of knowing described in *Women's Ways of Knowing*. As Director of the Writing Center, administering and assessing placement essays during freshman orientation, I first worked with Karen. Since that time, we have often met to discuss her writing in courses across the curriculum.

Karen: A Case Study

At age 25, Karen started college. After working as a waitress, she had assisted social workers in child care programs. Her college admissions essay, written at home, indicates that she believes in her own experiences; they are the motivation for her to leave her friends and family to attend college. In this essay, her subjective response to her experiences—to the place she lived, to the attitude of people there, to an environment with little hope of full-time employment—becomes her reason for pursuing college. This writing sample suggests that Karen is, as described by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, a Subjective Knower: she is one who validates information using her experiences and her observations of others. Her theme focuses on the concept of vision; her vision, "to serve practically as a social worker, preferably within the realm of a third world country," can only be reached, she believes, through a college education. In this writing sample, Karen has a strong voice expressing her goals clearly. What are the struggles a Subjective Knower will face in an academic environment?

The Stage of Silence

During orientation, Karen's insecurities began to emerge, becoming apparent to the readers of her placement essay. In this essay, an in-class

writing task designed to help the Writing Center and English Department place students in an appropriate level of freshman English, Karen wrote one paragraph followed by the comment “Waaa” with a frowning face drawn there. In her first attempt at academic work in eight years, Karen had been forced into Silence, the first way of knowing described by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule. Although much of the initial description of Silence does not apply to women in the academic world, I think one component of Silence can be seen in many young women at the college level. In fear of criticism, they do not speak. Women in this stage believe their words are the cause of such effects as ridicule, rejection, or failure. Because these women fear such effects, they remain silent. Discussing this essay later, Karen commented, “I felt out of control.” In fear of what we as teachers might say about her writing, Karen became Silent. Immediately after writing the essay, she stated to me, “I couldn’t think of what to say.” But more than that, because she was silent, we could not evaluate her or her writing. Silence was her best response. How can the academic world give Karen back her voice?

The Stage of Received Knowledge

Subsequently, Karen enrolled in LINK, our summer program for students who feel unprepared for college work. There she took two courses, participated in a program similar to Outward Bound to develop her self-concept, received tutoring in math, and made many friends. In Introduction to Political Science, one of her two summer courses, a research paper was assigned. Karen chose a topic that interested her, apartheid. At this time, she asked for little help. Learning to use the computer for writing, Karen struggled over one sentence at a time until each was exactly the way she wanted. Sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, she labored over this five-page paper, stringing together her research, which she had neatly xeroxed in its entirety. Coming to the Writing Center, she wanted help with the word processors, but not writing. Although I attempted to intervene in her writing process, hoping to help Karen find a more efficient approach to writing, she did not want my advice. Karen would not use freewriting; she couldn’t see how those ideas related to her research. In retrospect, I understand why Karen didn’t respond to my suggestions. She was trying to find a voice accepted by her classroom professor.

Her movement from the stage of Silence to the stage of Received Knowledge is major growth. That is, in six weeks, Karen moved to the next way of knowing, learning how to give back received information to her teachers. Her step into the Received Knowledge stage brought with it the characteristics of that period: she did exactly what she perceived her professor wanted. She wrote mechanically correct sentences, quoting the words of others frequently and accurately. The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* des-

cribe this stage as one in which women look to authorities for the correct answer. Women at this stage of development do not have their own voice, but rather repeat what an authority tells them. Along with this, a woman's self-image is dependent upon how the authority views her. If she receives an A, then she is an A person; if she receives an F, then she is an F person. Karen had moved into this stage.

Karen perceived that her professor wanted five pages, no more, no less, of perfectly edited writing. She believed he wanted her to quote extensively from other authorities on her topic, so she did. Since her knowledge of apartheid and South Africa came only from what she read, she voiced no opinions on the subject. Why would anyone want to read what she thought? Although I suggested that she might examine both sides of the issue, coming to her own conclusion, she did not see a reason for such synthesis. For her research paper, Karen received an A. Her self-image improved; she believed she was well on her way to succeeding in college.

During her freshman year following the LINK program, Karen took four courses each semester. Seven of those courses could be called "Received Knowledge Courses." That is, these courses teach and then test students on how well they read books and listen to lectures. Tests are often multiple choice or short answer. The student is not asked to think critically or extensively, to take risks, or to consider alternatives. Instead, simple recall is required. Two authorities exist for the student who is in the Received Knowledge stage: the professor and the text. As long as the student recalls both and questions neither, she will succeed. Karen succeeded.

The other course Karen took during freshman year was English Composition. Her teacher stressed a process approach to writing, encouraging students to use heuristic activities and engaging them in peer critique groups. Karen began stopping by the Writing Center about once a week, not to ask us to look at her writing, but rather to tell us what she was doing and to have us reassure her that she was on the right track. Although she fretted about the composition course, she began to get A's on her papers. When the professor assigned a research paper suggesting a highly structured form, the Rogerian Approach (Young, Becker, and Pike), Karen decided to rewrite her paper on apartheid. Because her teacher wanted students to find the pros and cons of a subject and then come to her own conclusion, the focus of Karen's summer school paper changed. She addressed the issue of economic sanctions, concluding that the U.S. should continue to trade with South Africa. Once again, she relied upon quoting and paraphrasing for most of this paper. Although the teacher had provided students with procedures for a process approach to writing, Karen returned to a form-dominated approach for her paper, not using heuristic procedures nor researching beyond the necessary source requirements. Her success with her initial

product approach on her first research paper reinforced her perception of how to write a paper. The English teacher's concern for process could not compete with all Karen's product-oriented successes to date.

Karen's ways of writing reflect her ways of knowing. Not ready for Procedural Knowledge, she returned to Received Knowledge to fulfill this major assignment. Here, Karen is much like other women described by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule. A woman must first come to believe in her own voice before she can use procedures to gain knowledge. At this point, Karen did not trust her own voice, but rather turned to the voice of authorities to write her papers. Her reliance upon authorities suggests that she still believes in finding the one definitive answer. Karen didn't see the worth of procedures such as heuristics because they do not provide one answer.

Further still, procedures such as heuristics assume that a writer usually has some experiential knowledge about her subject. The first characteristic of an effective heuristic, according to Young, Becker, and Pike is that it can help the writer retrieve information already known about the subject. But Karen has been rewarded for recalling what authorities say, not for thinking for herself. Her lack of trust in her own knowledge makes any heuristic an ineffective tool. She cannot see the value in retrieving the information she knows because academia up to this time has never suggested this information is valuable. Students like Karen who are at the Received Knowledge stage of intellectual development resist procedures. They view procedures such as freewriting, heuristics, and peer critiquing as busy work, only completing them to please the teacher. They discover no value in them and see no reason to accept them.

At the end of her freshman year, Karen was planted firmly in the stage of Received Knowledge. Her professors had nurtured this stage of intellectual development through the types of tests given. But Karen was beginning to be aware that she might run into problems academically. She put off taking math courses requiring Procedural Knowledge and began to select courses in which she believed she would succeed. Instead of going to summer school as she had originally planned, she worked full time at the Child Development Center, a job related to her major in child development. What will be a reason for Karen to grow further?

Subjective Knowledge: The Beginnings

In an informal conversation, Karen asked me what I'd recently read that I enjoyed. I gave her my copy of *Women's Ways of Knowing* to read. As soon as she finished it, she let me know. We briefly discussed the book, with Karen expressing several reasons she disagreed with the authors. She said she

recognized herself within the book but that she wasn't at any one stage in her development. Instead, she cited times she was at each level of development. This conversation was organic. That is, as we talked, outside the classroom, away from the Writing Center, Karen had a voice. She was beyond the stage of Received Knowledge. She was willing to risk saying that she disagreed with these authors even though I had recommended that she read the book. Karen was taking risks; she was trying out her ideas, arguing with what the authority said and using her experiences as proof. In terms of *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Karen was well into Subjective Knowledge, the stage in which women believe and value what their own experiences tell them. When this occurs, women move away from Received Knowledge. In fact, they often totally reject the value of Received Knowledge using their own experiences as validation of their beliefs. If Karen were well into this stage of intellectual development outside the classroom, when would she move into this stage within the academic setting?

At the beginning of her sophomore year, Karen was honored for her academic achievements; she was named one of the four outstanding freshmen at Keene State College. But because Karen was moving into the stage of Subjective Knowledge, the award did not mean as much to her as it would have the previous year. In fact, Karen was angry. She wanted time for herself, something she had not previously given herself. Her schedule was a study-class-eat-sleep routine with no time for socialization. When her best friend went to Las Vegas Night with the one man on campus she found interesting, Karen's struggle to break away from Received Knowledge to move into Subjective Knowledge came to a boiling point. She said she rehearsed speeches for the awards ceremony, telling some of her professors she remembered nothing from their courses. But these speeches were never given.

Silence Revisited

Instead, Karen called home telling her father that she didn't have time to do her paper for Children's Literature, that she was spending all her time studying, and that the KSC Library had nothing on her topic, gypsies. She had decided not to complete the assignment. Karen's father convinced her to meet with me as Director of the Writing Center to discuss the paper. We scheduled two sessions: one for discussing research strategies for writing the paper and one for helping her design a realistic study schedule.

Karen's call home telling her father the paper was worth only 20% of her grade and that she therefore wasn't going to write it suggests that Karen has returned to the stage of Silence. In exploring the reasons for her decision not to write the assignment, I discovered that Karen had received a D on her first

test in this class, an in-class essay exam requiring her to synthesize much information. Asked by this professor to think for herself, pulling together all sorts of information, Karen had floundered. She, in her Received Knowledge stage, was now a D person. Not being able to face the consequences of her own words again, she returned to Silence.

Subjective Knowledge

At an informal meeting, in a less threatening environment, Karen was able to regain a voice. She participated in our Children's Literature Festival (I am assistant director of the festival) hearing a number of speakers including Anthony Browne, M.E. Kerr, and Paul Zelinsky. At the festival, she worked at a number of jobs: she helped run the book sale, she ran errands, she hosted speakers. Over lunch, we talked about the topics she was considering for her paper as well as about the speakers. Her initial decision was to write about gypsies in children's literature. As we talked about Anthony Browne's and Paul Zelinsky's works, she commented on the many images of a stepmother found in children's literature. We laughed over one drawing of a stepmother with the background window shadows becoming a witch's hat over her head. That discussion planted a seed for a topic for her paper. Karen had responded subjectively to the work of an artist. Her own response had value for her. Starting there, she decided to explore the images of stepmothers in children's literature.

Connected Knowledge: At the Writing Center

At our first meeting in the library, it was clear that Karen was struggling in her intellectual development. Pulled between the security of Received Knowledge and her Subjective Response to an artist's work, she returned to the former. Her expectations of sources within the library were indicative of this struggle. Her problem was not knowing what sources to turn to (the librarians had done their job well), but rather she believed that she should find an article, better yet a book, entitled "Images of Stepmothers in Children's Literature." She was hunting for the answer given by an authority. Not finding that one article, she believed Keene State College Library didn't have enough information; consequently, she would have to travel to a university library. Karen thought of research as hunting for information until she found what an authority had written about her subject. This assumption became the focus of our work that day. Together we looked at indices including possible connections between her topic and that of the materials available. For example, when CIJE listed an article on stepmothers in adolescent literature, we discussed how that might be relevant to her paper. Karen began to realize that such an article might provide her with a

way of classifying stepmothers although it would not provide information on children's literature. After making this connection, she referred to her instructor's comments about Bruno Bettelheim's work. She thought she might be able to examine the stepmother as a legitimate way of releasing anger at a mother. Karen was synthesizing information, from her previous experiences with children's literature, from class discussions, and from library sources. Moving into the stage of Connected Knowledge, she had a voice; ideas for this paper were coming quickly as she thought about possible ways she could connect research with her topic. Her personal experiences and her reading experiences, both provided her with a feeling that she had something to say about this topic. Could she sustain this belief in her paper using her own voice?

Received Knowledge Versus Subjective Knowledge

Our time-management session was not as encouraging. When Karen described her study-class-work week, I was stunned. Here was a student who *did* study all the time. We discussed effective versus ineffective times to study during the day and evening, also examining how she approached reading and writing. Although I made suggestions about using her time more efficiently, she didn't grasp the primary problem—she was burning out. She said that maybe she'd complete the two-year program, not the four, in child development. She questioned how anyone could take five courses a semester. When I suggested she take an hour a day for exercise and quit studying by 9 p.m., she said, "My grades will drop. What will my teachers think of me?"

A believer in metacognition, I decided that addressing this issue directly might stimulate growth. At the end of this session, I asked Karen what type of knower she was if we were to use Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's classifications. Karen had obviously thought about this issue and responded that, since she was angry, she must be a Subjective Knower. As we talked about her response, she began to consider alternative approaches to studying in terms of the various stages of development. She recognized that she often responded at the stage of Received Knowledge.

Karen tried the various strategies I suggested. Was I the authority to whom she was now responding? I think not. Karen had become angry at college. Here was the motivation for change. She reported back that her studying took less time, that she no longer studied after 9 p.m., and that she was trying to play squash regularly. Karen's subjective response pushed her into Subjective Knowledge. Where does she go from here?

Continuing the Process of Growth

Subsequent discussions of Karen's paper have been interesting. Knowing her current instructor is a stickler for APA Stylesheet, she asked him how to write a bibliographical entry for Grimm's fairy tale retold by one person and edited by another (a Received Knowledge question). He could not tell her. So she asked us at the Writing Center. We were not sure either. Her authorities did not have the answer.

Karen also wanted to make sure she followed the directions of her English composition handbook that said writing a research paper required the following steps: "Gather Information," "Fill out Notecards," "Incorporate Notecards into Paper," "Fill in Transitions." But her newly found voice interfered with this approach. The authority's way did not meet her needs.

Karen's interest in her subject brought her back to me to discuss her ideas about stepmothers. She initiated discussion about critical thinking, about bibliotherapy, about Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, a book read for a previous course. Karen began to consider Fromm's types of love in terms of the roles stepmothers play in literature. She was learning to relate materials, to take ideas from one source and to apply them in another situation. In conferences with me, she practiced her voice, making connections between many topics and the images of stepmothers in children's literature. In brief ten-minute discussions, she would voice an opinion and check out my reaction. I gave positive feedback and asked questions. At the Writing Center, Karen was well on her way to becoming a Connected Knower.

Also, Karen was developing procedures that worked for her. She realized that the English handbook didn't always allow room for her viewpoint or her oral rehearsals of ideas. She struggled with variations of outlines, learning that her original outline constricted her. While she wouldn't use the Writing Center term "mapping," she certainly practiced it as she tried to construct relationships among subjects. Writing started to become a tool for learning. Instead of a product-oriented approach, she was using procedures for a process approach to writing. As she wrote and talked, she discovered new relationships among her ideas. Initially, she believed that children's literature could provide children the opportunity to think critically about stepmothers and that the literature provided them bibliotherapy. These ideas were coordinated in her mind. As she grappled with this idea, writing, talking, she discovered that critical thinking was the larger concept. In her mind, these ideas were no longer equal. Bibliotherapy became only one approach to helping develop critical thinking. Karen started making real revisions to her writing, both in terms of the content and structure of her paper. But all this was accomplished within the environment of the Writing Center.

As she worked on her final drafts to be submitted to her instructor, Karen expressed concern. She didn't have sources to back up these connections she had made. When I asked, "Did you incorporate the ideas you've talked about with me?" she said she couldn't say what she wanted to. She didn't think she could include these original ideas. "They're just fabrications," she said. Because no authority had said this, she believed her professor would think she had fabricated these connections. She hunted for quotes to support her synthesized ideas. Karen was caught between playing it safe and taking risks, between Received Knowledge and Connected Knowledge. So far, college had rewarded her for Received Knowledge: she received A's, she was on the dean's list, she was one of four outstanding freshmen. What reward is there for taking risks? Why should she change?

The Beginnings of Connected Knowledge

When I asked for a copy of her stepmother paper, Karen readily gave me her computer disk. From our discussions, I knew that she had the potential to produce an excellent paper for this class, synthesizing information from readings and experiences, but I wanted to know what happened in the paper. When she gave me the copy, Karen was quite excited, saying, "You know, I really began to enjoy writing this. Suddenly I didn't care so much what my professor thought. I liked what I was saying." Does a subjective response lead to growth?

I do not know what Karen's professor will say about this paper. But from my perspective, her writing has improved immensely. Intellectually, she has tackled a topic worth the struggle. However, as Shaughnessy warned, when learning new concepts, students do not perform as well on other aspects of the writing. In this paper, Karen has presented new ways of looking at stepmothers in children's literature. The ideas are hers, connecting readings from previous classes, research, experiences, class discussions, and subjective responses. Unlike so many papers that I feel I have read a hundred times because a hundred writers have tackled the same topic in the same way, I found Karen was giving me insights into the role of stepmothers. This was a paper I wanted to read because the writer provided me a fresh perspective on the issue.

Karen's paper starts awkwardly with a three-sentence attempt at a thesis. Although her analysis is insightful, mechanical problems throughout the paper slow down the reader. Early in the paper, Karen breaks from her usual formal writing style to include her subjective responses. Her frequent use of the perpendicular pronoun "I" is indicative of her attempt to voice what she knows. This "I" is not the mark of immaturity on the part of the writer but rather an indication of growth. Her use of "I" is an external marker for her

internally growing confidence. That is, each time Karen uses "I" she is voicing her opinion, something she has never done in an academic setting before. The ending of her paper is highly emotional as she returns to her belief that stepmothers depicted in literature are representative of all humanity. Her paper concludes, "She [the stepmother] has failed in love, but so have we."

Implications for the Writing Center: Working with Students and Faculty

Awareness of a woman's present way of knowing can help Writing Center staff develop an effective pedagogy for the student. Pedagogy at the Writing Center can challenge writers to attempt other ways of knowing. Specifically, the Writing Center can help the student writer.

1. Hear many voices. The student at the Received Knowledge or Subjective Knowledge stage of intellectual development needs the opportunity to hear multiperspectives on her readings, her writing, and her ideas. Collaborative work at the Writing Center provides students the opportunity to hear other opinions, to listen to other ideas, and to consider the validity of authorities.

2. Develop her own voice. Through elucidating inquiry, Writing Center staff can provide ample opportunity for the student to practice use of her own voice in a non-threatening context. Questions can be designed to lead the student into the next stage of knowing. For example, a Received Knower can be introduced to questions from subjective criticism (i.e., how do you feel about this subject? What do you associate this with in your own life?).

3. Address underlying assumptions concerning writing. As a Received Knower, Karen believed research was hunting for the definitive answer. Until this assumption is reconsidered, rejected, and replaced, it will interfere with her development as a writer.

4. Consider her own readiness for growth. Part of the metacognitive work we do with our students in the Writing Center should include analysis of intellectual development. As a writer becomes aware of her stage of cognitive development, she can begin to exert much more control of her own growth.

5. Channel subjective responses into intellectual growth. At the Writing Center, we hear the anger, frustration, and emotional responses of students because the Writing Center context allows students the freedom to voice their emotions. Sometimes it is difficult not to respond in embarrassment or defensiveness. However, we need to work at encouraging students to use

their subjective responses to develop their voices both in and out of the classroom.

6. Recognize the value of procedures in writing. Again, metacognitive activities can be used to demonstrate ways that procedures such as prewriting activities and peer critiquing promote learning and how they change writing.

7. Build in time for revisiting previous ways of knowing. As the writer develops intellectually, she also needs the security of prior stages of development. Our activities should be designed to provide students time for revisiting ways of knowing, consequently building justified writer confidence that will endure.

Besides these seven implications for working with students, the greatest implication of this study, I believe, is for writing center staff working with faculty. Writing center staff should discuss the intellectual development of writers with faculty. Together we ought to consider the writing they require of their students. Faculty need to examine the courses they teach as well as the course of study for their majors. What types of writing are required? How do introductory courses test knowledge? What stages of intellectual development are rewarded? How might faculty sequence writing assignments, and, in turn, sequence courses to foster intellectual development? The writing center can offer the support as well as the knowledge necessary for individual faculty to reconsider their objectives, their assignments, and their evaluation of writing. Such faculty awareness should become a major goal of the writing center.

The writing center can provide a context for student movement into a more intellectually mature way of knowing. At the writing center, students can take risks without fear of grades. We need to encourage risk taking, to tolerate the accompanying developmental problems, and to lead students to alternative and productive ways of knowing. We can provide an environment that both supports and challenges student intellectual growth and at the same time helps faculty understand the problems inherent in such growth.

Note:

Karen received a B for her research paper on stepmothers in children's literature with a note saying how much the professor had learned from the paper. Other students receiving B's had less organized thinking, but their papers were free of syntactic problems. The final question is how do we grade intellectual growth?

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