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"Whispers of Coming and Going": Lessons From Fannie

Anne DiPardo

As a man without hair, he did not identify the rhythm of three strands, the whispers of coming and going, of twisting and tying and blending, of catching and of letting go, of braiding.

—Michael Dorris, A Yellow Raft in Blue Water

We all negotiate among multiple identities, moving between public and private selves, living in a present shadowed by the past, encountering periods in which time and circumstance converge to realign or even restructure our images of who we are. As increasing numbers of non-Anglo students pass through the doors of our writing centers, such knowledge of our own shape-shifting can help us begin—if only begin—to understand the social and linguistic challenges which inform their struggles with writing. When moved to talk about the complexities of their new situation, they so often describe a more radically chameleonic process, of living in non-contiguous worlds, of navigating between competing identities, competing loyalties. “It’s like I have two cultures in me,” one such student remarked to me recently, “but I can’t choose.” Choice becomes a moot point as boundaries blur, as formerly distinct selves become organically enmeshed, indistinguishable threads in a dynamic whole (Bakhtin 275; Cintron 24; Fischer 196).

Often placed on the front lines of efforts to provide respectful, insightful attention to these students’ diverse struggles with academic discourse, writing tutors likewise occupy multiple roles, remaining learners even while...
emerging as teachers, perenially searching for a suitable social stance (Hawkins)—a stance existing somewhere along a continuum of detached toughness and warm empathy, and, which like all things ideal, can only be approximated, never definitively located. Even the strictly linguistic dimension of their task is rendered problematic by the continuing paucity of research on the writing of non-mainstream students (see Valdés; “Identifying Priorities”; “Language Issues”—a knowledge gap which likewise complicates our own efforts to provide effective tutor training and support. Over a decade has passed since Mina Shaughnessy eloquently advised basic writing teachers to become students of their students, to consider what Glynda Hull and Mike Rose (“Rethinking,” “Wooden Shack”) have more recently called the “logic and history” of literacy events that seem at first glance inscrutable and strange. In this age of burgeoning diversity, we’re still trying to meet that challenge, still struggling to encourage our tutors to appreciate its rich contours, to discover its hidden rigors, to wrestle with its endless vicissitudes.

This story is drawn from a semester-long study of a basic writing tutorial program at a west-coast university—a study which attempted to locate these tutor-led small groups within the larger contexts of a writing program and campus struggling to meet the instructional needs of non-Anglo students (see DiPardo, “Passport”). It is about one tutor and one student, both ethnic minorities at this overwhelmingly white, middle-class campus, both caught up in elusive dreams and uncertain beginnings. I tell their story not because it is either unusual or typical, but because it seems so richly revealing of the larger themes I noted again and again during my months of data collection—as unresolved tensions tugged continually at a fabric of institutional good intentions, and as tutors and students struggled, with ostensible good will and inexorable frustration, to make vital connection. I tell this story because I believe it has implications for all of us trying to be worthy students of our students, to make sense of our own responses to diversity, and to offer effective support to beginning educators entrusted to our mentorship.

“It, Like, Ruins Your Mind”: Fannie’s Educational History

Fannie was Navajo, and her dream was to one day teach in the reservation boarding schools she’d once so despised, to offer some of the intellectual, emotional, and linguistic support so sorely lacking in her own educational history. As a kindergartner, she had been sent to a school so far from her home that she could only visit family on weekends. Navajo was the only language spoken in her house, but at school all the teachers were Anglo, and only English was allowed. Fannie recalled that students had been punished for
speaking their native language—adding with a wry smile that they’d spoken Navajo anyway, when the teachers weren’t around. The elementary school curriculum had emphasized domestic skills—cooking, sewing, and, especially, personal hygiene. “Boarding school taught me to be a housemaid,” Fannie observed in one of her essays, “I was hardly taught how to read and write.” All her literacy instruction had been in English, and she’d never become literate in Navajo. Raised in a culture that valued peer collaboration (cf. Philips 391-3), Fannie had long ago grasped that Anglo classrooms were places where teachers assume center stage, where students are expected to perform individually: “No,” her grade-school teachers had said when Fannie turned to classmates for help, “I want to hear only from you.”

Estranged from her family and deeply unhappy, during fifth grade Fannie had stayed for a time with an aunt and attended a nearby public school. The experience there was much better, she recalled, but there soon followed a series of personal and educational disruptions as she moved among various relatives’ homes and repeatedly switched schools. By the time she began high school, Fannie was wondering if the many friends and family members who’d dropped out had perhaps made the wiser choice. By her sophomore year, her grades had sunken “from A’s and B’s to D’s and F’s,” and she was “hanging out with the wrong crowd.” By mid-year, the school wrote her parents a letter indicating that she had stopped coming to class. When her family drove up to get her, it was generally assumed that Fannie’s educational career was over.

Against all odds, Fannie finished high school after all. At her maternal grandmother’s insistence, arrangements were made for Fannie to live with an aunt who had moved to a faraway west-coast town where the educational system was said to be much stronger. Her aunt’s community was almost entirely Anglo, however, and Fannie was initially self-conscious about her English: “I had an accent really bad,” she recalled, “I just couldn’t communicate.” But gradually, although homesick and sorely underprepared, she found that she was holding her own. Eventually, lured by the efforts of affirmative action recruiters, she took the unexpected step of enrolling in the nearby university. “I never thought I would ever graduate from high school,” Fannie wrote in one of her essays, adding proudly that “I’m now on my second semester in college as a freshman.” Her grandmother had died before witnessing either event, but Fannie spoke often of how pleased she would have been.1

Fannie was one of a handful of Native Americans on the campus, and the only Navajo. As a second-semester first-year student, she was still struggling
to find her way both academically and socially, still working to overcome the scars of her troubled educational history. As she explained after listening to an audiotape of a tutorial session, chief among these was a lingering reluctance to speak up in English, particularly in group settings:

Fannie: When, when, I'm talking ... I'm shy. Because I always think I always say something not right, with my English, you know. (Pauses, then speaks very softly.) It's hard, though. Like with my friends, I do that too. Because I'll be quiet—they'll say, "Fannie, you're quiet." Or if I meet someone, I, I don't do it, let them do it, I let that person do the talking.

A.D.: Do you wish you were more talkative?

Fannie: I wish! Well I am, when I go home. But when I come here, you know, I always think, English is my second language and I don't know that much, you know.

A.D.: So back home you're not a shy person?

Fannie: (laughing uproariously) No! (continues laughing).

I had a chance to glimpse Fannie's more audacious side later that semester, when she served as a campus tour guide to a group of students visiting from a distant Navajo high school. She was uncharacteristically feisty and vocal that week, a change strikingly evident on the tutorial audiotapes. Indeed, when I played back one of that week's sessions in a final interview, Fannie didn't recognize her own voice: "Who's that talking?" she asked at first. But even as she recalled her temporary elation, she described as well her gradual sense of loss:

Sometimes I just feel so happy when someone's here, you know, I feel happy? I just get that way. And then (pauses, begins to speak very softly), and then it just wears off. And then they're leaving—I think, oh, they're leaving, you know.

While Fannie described their week together as "a great experience," she was disturbed to find that even among themselves, the Navajo students were speaking English: "That bothered me a lot," she admitted, surmising that "they're like embarrassed ... to speak Navajo, because back home, speaking Navajo fluently all the time, that's like lower class." "If you don't know the language," Fannie wrote in one of her essays, "then you don't know who you are. . . . It's your identity . . . the language is very important." In striking contrast to these students who refused to learn the tribal language, Fannie's grandparents had never learned to speak English: "They were really into their
culture, and tradition, and all of that,” she explained, “but now we’re not that way anymore, hardly, and it’s like we’re losing it, you know.” Fannie hoped to attend a program at Navajo Community College where she could learn to read and write her native language, knowledge she could then pass on to her own students.

Fannie pointed to the high drop-out rate among young Navajos as the primary reason for her people’s poverty, and spoke often of the need to encourage students to finish high school and go on to college. And yet, worried as she was about the growing loss of native language and tradition, Fannie also expressed concerns about the Anglicizing effects of schooling. Education is essential, she explained, but young Navajos must also understand its dangers:

I mean like, sometimes if you get really educated, we don’t really want that. Because then, it like ruins your mind, and you use it, to like betray your people, too. . . That’s what’s happening a lot now.

By her own example, Fannie hoped to one day show her students that it is possible to be both bilingual and bicultural, that one can benefit from exposure to mainstream ways without surrendering one’s own identity:

If you know the white culture over here, and then you know your own culture, you can make a good living with that. . . when I go home, you know, I know Navajo, and I know English too. They say you can get a good job with that.

Back home, Fannie’s extended family was watching her progress with warm pride, happily anticipating the day when she would return to the reservation to teach. When Fannie went back for a visit over spring break, she was surprised to find that they’d already built her a house: “They sure give me a lot of attention, that’s for sure,” she remarked with a smile. Many hadn’t seen Fannie for some time, and they were struck by the change:

Everybody still, kind of picture me, still, um, the girl from the past. The one who quit school—and they didn’t think of me going to college at all. And they were surprised, they were really surprised. And they were like proud of me too. . . ‘cause none of their family is going to college.

One delighted aunt, however, was the mother of a son who was also attending a west-coast college:

She says, “I’m so happy! I can’t wait to tell him, that you’re going to college too! You stick in there, Fannie, now don’t goof!” I’m like, “I’ll try not to!”
"I Always Write Bad Essays": Fannie’s Struggles With Writing

On the first day of class, Fannie’s basic writing teacher handed out a questionnaire that probed students’ perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses as writers. In response to the question, “What do you think is good about your writing?” Fannie wrote, “I still don’t know what is good about my writing”; in response to “What do you think is bad about your writing?” she responded, “Everything.”

Fannie acknowledged that her early literacy education had been neither respectful of her heritage nor sensitive to the kinds of challenges she would face in the educational mainstream. She explained in an interview that her first instruction in essay writing had come at the eleventh hour, during her senior year of high school: “I never got the technique, I guess, of writing good essays,” she explained, “I always write bad essays.” While she named her “sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation” as significant weaknesses, she also added that “I have a lot to say, but I can’t put it on paper . . . it’s like I can’t find the vocabulary.” Fannie described this enduring block in an in-class essay she wrote during the first week of class:

From my experience in writing essays were not the greatest. There were times my mind would be blank on thinking what I should write about.

In high school, I learned how to write an essay during my senior year. I learned a lot from my teacher but there was still something missing about my essays. I knew I was still having problems with my essay organization.

Now, I’m attending a university and having the same problems in writing essays. The university put me in basic writing, which is for students who did not pass the placement test. Of course, I did not pass it. Taking basic writing has helped me a lot on writing essays. There were times I had problems on what to write about.

There was one essay I had problems in writing because I could not express my feelings on a paper. My topic was on Mixed Emotions. I knew how I felt in my mind but I could not find the words or expressing my emotions.

Writing essays from my mind on to the paper is difficult for me. From this experience, I need to learn to write what I think on to a paper and expand my essays.
“Yes,” her instructor wrote at the bottom of the page, “even within this essay—which is good—you need to provide specific detail, not just general statements.” But what did Fannie’s teacher find “good” about this essay—or was this opening praise only intended to soften the criticism that followed? Fannie had noted in an interview that she panicked when asked to produce something within 45 minutes: “I just write anything,” she’d observed, “but your mind goes blank, too.” Still, while this assignment may not have been the most appropriate way to assess the ability of a student like Fannie, both she and her instructor felt it reflected her essential weakness—that is, an inability to develop her ideas in adequate detail.

At the end of the semester, her basic writing teacher confided that Fannie had just barely passed the course, and would no doubt face a considerable struggle in first-year composition. Although Fannie also worried about the next semester’s challenge, she felt that her basic writing course had provided valuable opportunities. “I improved a lot,” she said in a final interview, “I think I did—I know I did. ‘Cause now I can know what I’m trying to say, and in an afternoon, get down to that topic.” One of her later essays, entitled “Home,” bears witness to Fannie’s assertion:

The day is starting out a good day. The air smells fresh as if it just rained. The sky is full with clouds, forming to rain. From the triangle mountain, the land has such a great view. Below I see hills overlapping and I see six houses few feet from each other. One of them I live in. I can also see other houses miles apart.

It is so peaceful and beautiful. I can hear birds perching and dogs barking echoes from long distance. I can not tell from which direction. Towards north I see eight horses grazing and towards east I hear sheep crying for their young ones. There are so many things going on at the same time.

It is beginning to get dark and breezy. It is about to rain. Small drops of rain are falling. It feels good, relieving the heat. The rain is increasing and thundering at the same time. Now I am soaked, I have the chills. The clouds is moving on and clearing the sky. It is close to late afternoon. The sun is shining and drying me off. The view of the land is more beautiful and looks greener. Like a refreshment.

Across from the mountain I am sitting is a mountain but then a plateau that stretches with no ending. From the side looks like a
mountain but it is a long plateau. There are stores and more houses on top of the plateau.

My clothes are now dry and it is getting late. I hear my sister and my brother calling me that dinner is ready. It was beautiful day. I miss home.

"Good description," her instructor wrote on this essay, "I can really 'see' this scene." But meanwhile, she remained concerned about Fannie's lack of sophistication: "Try to use longer, more complex sentences," she added, "avoid short, choppy ones." Overwhelmed by the demands of composing and lacking strategies for working on this perceived weakness, Fannie took little away from such feedback aside from the impression that her writing remained inadequate.

Although Fannie was making important strides, she needed lots of patient, insightful support if she were to overcome her lack of experience with writing and formidable block. Only beginning to feel a bit more confident in writing about personal experience, she anticipated a struggle with the expository assignments that awaited her:

She's having us write from our experience. It'll be different if it's like in English 101, you know how the teacher tells you to write like this and that, and I find that one very hard, cause I see my other friends' papers and it's hard. I don't know if I can handle that class.

Fannie was trying to forge a sense of connection to class assignments—she wrote, for instance, about her Native American heritage, her dream of becoming a teacher, and about how her cultural background had shaped her concern for the environment. But meanwhile, as her instructor assessed Fannie's progress in an end-of-term evaluation, the focus returned to lingering weaknesses: "needs to expand ideas w/ examples/description/explanation," the comments read, not specifying how or why or to whom. Somehow, Fannie had to fill in the gaps in her teacher's advice—and for the more individualized support she so sorely needed, she looked to the tutorials.

"Are You Learnin' Anything From Me?": The Tutorials

Morgan, Fannie's African American tutor, would soon be student teaching in a local high school, and she approached her work with basic writers as a trial run, a valuable opportunity to practice the various instructional strategies she'd heard about in workshops and seminars. Having grown up in the predominantly Anglo, middle-class community that surrounded the campus, Morgan met the criticisms of more politically involved
ethnic students with dogged insistence: “I’m first and foremost a member of the human race,” she often said, going on to describe her firm determination to work with students of all ethnicities, to help them see that success in the mainstream need not be regarded as cultural betrayal. During the term that I followed her—her second semester of tutoring and the first time she’d worked with non-Anglo students—this enthusiasm would be sorely tested, this ambition tempered by encounters with unforeseen obstacles.

Morgan’s work with Fannie was a case in point. Although she had initially welcomed the challenge of drawing Fannie out, of helping this shy young woman overcome her apparent lack of self-confidence, by semester’s end Morgan’s initial compassion had been nearly overwhelmed by a sense of frustration. In an end-of-term interview, she confessed that one impression remained uppermost: “I just remember her sitting there,” Morgan recalled, “and talking to her, and it’s like, ‘well I don’t know, I don’t know’... Fannie just has so many doubts, and she’s such a hesitant person, she’s so withdrawn, and mellow, and quiet... A lot of times, she’d just say, ‘well I don’t know what I’m supposed to write... Well I don’t like this, I don’t like my writing.’”

Although Fannie seldom had much to say, her words were often rich in untapped meaning. Early in the term, for instance, when Morgan asked why she was in college, Fannie searched unsuccessfully for words that would convey her strong but somewhat conflicted feelings:

Fannie: Well... (long pause)... it’s hard...

Morgan: You wanna teach like, preschool? Well, as a person who wants to teach, what do you want outta your students?

Fannie: To get around in America you have to have education... (unclear).

Morgan: And what about if a student chose not to be educated—would that be ok?

Fannie: If that’s what he wants...

At this point Morgan gave up and turned to the next student, missing the vital subtext—how Fannie’s goal of becoming a teacher was enmeshed in her strong sense of connection to her people, how her belief that one needs an education “to get around” in the mainstream was tempered by insight into why some choose a different path. To understand Fannie’s stance towards schooling, Morgan needed to grasp that she felt both this commitment and this ambivalence; but as was so often the case, Fannie’s meager hints went unheeded.
A few weeks into the semester, Morgan labored one morning to move Fannie past her apparent block on a descriptive essay. Fannie said only that she was going to try to describe her grandmother, and Morgan began by asking a series of questions—about her grandmother’s voice, her presence, her laugh, whatever came to Fannie’s mind. Her questions greeted by long silences, Morgan admitted her gathering frustration: “Are you learnin’ anything from me?” she asked. Morgan’s voice sounded cordial and even a bit playful, but she was clearly concerned that Fannie didn’t seem to be meeting her halfway. In the weeks that followed, Morgan would repeatedly adjust her approach, continually searching for a way to break through, “to spark something,” as she often put it.

The first change—to a tougher, more demanding stance—was clearly signalled as the group brainstormed ideas for their next essays. Instead of waiting for Fannie to jump into the discussion, Morgan called upon her: “Ok, your turn in the hot seat,” she announced. When Fannie noted that her essay would be about her home in Arizona, Morgan demanded to know “why it would be of possible interest to us.” The ensuing exchange shed little light on the subject:

Fannie: Because it’s my home!
Morgan: That’s not good enough . . . that’s telling me nothing.
Fannie: I was raised there.
Morgan: What’s so special about it?
Fannie: (exasperated sigh) I don’t know what’s so special about it . . .
Morgan: So why do you want to write about it, then?

Morgan’s final question still unanswered, she eventually gave up and moved to another student. Again, a wealth of valuable information remained tacit; Morgan wouldn’t learn for several weeks that Fannie had grown up on a reservation, and she’d understood nothing at all about her profound bond with this other world.

Two months into the semester, Morgan had an opportunity to attend the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and it was there that some of her early training crystallized into a more definite plan of action, her early doubts subsumed by a new sense of authoritative expertise. Morgan thought a great deal about her work with Fannie as she attended numerous sessions on peer tutoring and a half-day workshop on collaborative learning. She returned to campus infused with a clear sense of direction: the solution, Morgan had concluded, was to assume an even more low-profile approach, speaking only to ask open-ended
questions or to paraphrase Fannie’s statements, steadfastly avoiding the temptation to fill silences with her own ideas and asides. As she anticipated her next encounter with Fannie, she couldn’t wait to try out this more emphatic version of what had been called—in conference sessions and her earlier training—a “collaborative” or “non-directive” stance.

Still struggling to produce an already past-due essay on “values,” Fannie arrived at their first post-CCCCC tutorial hour with only preliminary ideas, and nothing in writing. Remembering the advice of Conference participants, Morgan began by trying to nudge her towards a focus, repeatedly denying that she knew more than Fannie about how to approach the piece:

Morgan: What would you say your basic theme is? And sometimes if you keep that in mind, then you can always, you know, keep that as a focus for what you’re writing. And the reason I say that is ‘cause when you say, “well living happily wasn’t…”

Fannie: (pause) . . . Well, America was a beautiful country, well, but it isn’t beautiful anymore.

Morgan: Um hm. Not as beautiful.

Fannie: So I should just say, America was a beautiful country?

Morgan: Yeah. But I dunno—what do you think your overall theme is, that you’re saying?

Fannie: (long pause). . . . I’m really, I’m just talking about America.

Morgan: America? So America as . . . ?

Fannie: (pause) . . . Um . . . (pause)

Morgan: Land of free, uh, land of natural resources? As, um, a place where there’s a conflict, I mean, there, if you can narrow that, “America.” What is it specifically, and think about what you’ve written, in the rest. Know what I mean?

Fannie: (pause) . . . The riches of America, or the country? I don’t know . . .

Morgan: I think you do. I’m not saying there’s any right answer, but I, I’m—for me, the reason I’m saying this, is I see this emerging as, you know, (pause) where you’re really having a hard time with dealing with the exploitation that you see, of America, you know, you think that. And you’re using two groups to really illustrate, specifically, how two different attitudes toward, um the richness and beauty of America, two different, um, ways people have to approach this land. Does that, does
this make any sense? Or am I just putting words in your mouth? I don’t want to do that. I mean that’s what I see emerge in your paper. But I could be way off base.

Fannie: I think I know what you’re trying to say. And I can kind of relate it at times to what I’m trying to say.

Morgan: You know, I mean, this is like the theme I’m picking up… (pause) I think you know, you’ve got some real, you know, environmental issues here. I think you’re a closet environmentalist here. Which are real true, know what I mean. (pause) And when you talk about pollution, and waste, and, um, those types of things. So I mean, if you’re looking at a theme of your paper, what could you pick out, of something of your underlying theme.

Fannie: (pause) . . . The resources, I guess?

Morgan: Well I mean, I don’t want you to say, I want you to say, don’t say “I guess,” is that what you’re talkin’ about?

Fannie: Yeah.

Morgan: “Yeah?” I mean, it’s your paper.

Fannie: I know, I want to talk about the land. . . .

Morgan: Ok. So you want to talk about the land, and the beauty of the land. . .

Fannie: Um hm.

Morgan: . . . and then, um, and then also your topic for your, um, to spark your paper . . . what values, and morals, right? That’s where you based off to write about America, and the land, you know. Maybe you can write some of these things down, as we’re talking, as focussing things, you know. So you want to talk about the land, and then it’s like, what do you want to say about the land?

What did Fannie “want to say about the land”? Whatever it was, one begins to wonder if it was perhaps lost in her tutor’s inadvertent appropriation of these meanings—this despite Morgan’s ostensible effort to simply elicit and reflect Fannie’s thoughts. While Fannie may well have been struggling to articulate meanings which eluded clear expression in English, as Morgan worked to move her towards greater specificity, it became apparent that she was assuming the paper would express commonplace environmental concerns:
Fannie: I’ll say, the country was, um, (pause), more like, I can’t say perfect, I mean was, the tree was green, you know, I mean, um, it was clean. (long pause.) I can’t find the words for it.

Morgan: In a natural state? Um, un-, polluted, um, untouched, um, let me think, tryin’ to get a . . .

Fannie: I mean everybody, I mean the Indians too, they didn’t wear that (pointing to Morgan’s clothes), they only wore buffalo clothing, you know for their clothing, they didn’t wear like . . . these, you know, cotton, and all that, they were so . . .

Morgan: Naturalistic.

Fannie: Yeah. “Naturalistic,” I don’t know if I’m gonna use that word . . . I wanna say, I wanna give a picture of the way the land was, before, you know what I’m, what I’m tryin’ to say?

The Navajos’ connection to the land is legendary—a spiritual nexus, many would maintain, that goes far beyond mainstream notions of what it means to be concerned about the environment. However, later in this session, Morgan observed that Fannie was writing about concerns that worry lots of people—citing recent publicity about the greenhouse effect, the hole in the ozone layer, and the growing interest in recycling. She then brought the session to a close by paraphrasing what she saw as the meat of the discussion and asking, “Is that something that you were tryin’ to say, too?” Fannie replied, “Probably. I mean, I can’t find the words for it, but you’re finding the words for me.” Morgan’s rejoinder had been, “I’m just sparkin’, I’m just sparkin’ what you already have there, what you’re sayin’. I mean I’m tryin’ to tell you what I hear you sayin’.”

Morgan laughed as, in an end-of-term interview, she listened again to Fannie’s final comment: “I didn’t want to find the words for her,” she mused; “I wanted to show her how she could find ‘em for herself.” Still, she admitted, the directive impulse had been hard to resist: “I wanted to just give her ideas,” Morgan observed, adding that although Fannie had some good things to say, “I wanted her to be able to articulate her ideas on a little higher level.” Although it was obvious to Morgan that the ideas in Fannie’s paper were of “deep-seated emotional concern,” she also saw her as stuck in arid generalities: “I don’t know, it’s just such a beautiful country,” Morgan echoed as she reviewed the audiotape. While Morgan emphasized that she “didn’t wanna write the paper for her,” she allowed that “it’s difficult—it’s really hard to want to take the bull by the horns and say, ‘don’t you see it this way?’” On the one hand, Morgan noted that she’d often asked Fannie what she was
getting out of a session, “cause sometimes I’ll think I’m getting through and I’m explaining something really good, and then they won’t catch it”; on the other hand, Morgan emphasized again and again that she didn’t want to “give away” her own thoughts.

Although Morgan often did an almost heroic job of waiting out Fannie’s lingering silences and deflecting appeals to her authority, she never really surrendered control; somehow, the message always came across that Morgan knew more than Fannie about the ideas at hand, and that if she would, she could simply turn over pre-packaged understandings. While her frustration was certainly understandable, I often had the sense that Morgan was insufficiently curious about Fannie’s thoughts—insufficiently curious about how Fannie’s understandings might have differed from her own, about how they had been shaped by Fannie’s background and cultural orientation, or about what she stood to learn from them.

When asked about Fannie’s block, a weary Morgan wrote it off to her cultural background:

You know, I would have to say it’s cultural; I’d have to say it’s her you know, Native American background and growing up on a reservation . . . maybe . . . she’s more sensitive to male-female roles, and the female role being quiet.

On a number of occasions Morgan had speculated that Navajo women are taught to be subservient, a perception that contrasted rather strikingly with Fannie’s assertion that she wasn’t at all shy or quiet back home. Hoping to challenge Morgan’s accustomed view of Fannie as bashful and retiring, in a final interview I played back one of their sessions from the week that a group of Navajo students were visiting the campus. Fannie was uncharacteristically vocal and even aggressive that morning, talking in a loud voice, repeatedly seizing and holding the floor:

Fannie: You know what my essay’s on? Different environments. Um, I’m talking, I’m not gonna talk about my relationship between my brothers, it’s so boring, so I’m just gonna talk about both being raised, like my youngest brother being raised on the reservation, and the other being raised over here, and they both have very different, um, um, (Morgan starts to say something, but Fannie cuts her off and continues) characteristics or somethin’ like that. You know, like their personalities, you know.

Morgan: Um. That’s good. (Morgan starts to say something more, but Fannie keeps going.)
Fannie: It’s funny, I’m cutting, I was totally mean to my brother here. (Morgan laughs.) Because, I called, I said that he’s a wimp, you know, and my brother, my little brother’s being raised on the reservation, is like, is like taught to be a man, he’s brave and all that.

Luis (a student in the group): That’s being a man?!

Fannie: And . . .

Luis: That’s not being a man, I don’t find.

Fannie: (her voice raised) I’m sorry—but that’s how I wrote, Ok?! That’s your opinion, I mean, and it’s . . .

Luis: I think a man is sensitive, caring, and lov—

Fannie: (cutting him off) No, no . . .

Luis: . . . and able to express his feelings. I don’t think that if you can go kill someone, that makes you a man.

Fannie: I mean . . .

Luis: That’s just my opinion (gets up and walks away for a moment).

Fannie: (watching Luis wander off) Dickhead.

Morgan listened with a widening smile to the rest of this session, obviously pleased with Fannie’s sometimes combative manner and unflagging insistence that attention be directed back to her. “Ha! Fannie’s so much more forceful,” Morgan exclaimed, “And just more in control of what she wants, and what she needs.” When asked what she thought might have accounted for this temporary change, Morgan sidestepped the influence of the visiting students:

I would love to think that I made her feel safe that way. And that I really um, showed her that she had, you know, by my interactions with her, that she really had every right to be strong-willed and forceful and have her opinions and you know, say what she felt that she needed to say, and that she didn’t have to be quiet, you know. People always tell me that I influence people that way. You know? (laughs). “You’ve been hangin’ around with Morgan too much!”

Hungry for feedback that she’d influenced Fannie in a positive way, Morgan grasped this possible evidence with obvious pleasure. Fannie was not a student who offered many positive signals, and it was perhaps essential to
Morgan’s professional self-esteem that she find them wherever she could. In this credit-taking there was, however, a larger irony: if only she’d been encouraged to push a little farther in her own thinking, perhaps she would have found herself assisting more often in such moments of blossoming.

Conclusion: Students as Teachers, Teachers as Students

When Morgan returned from the CCCC with a vision of “collaboration” that cast it as a set of techniques rather than a new way to think about teaching and learning, the insights of panelists and workshop leaders devolved into a fossilized creed, a shield against more fundamental concerns. Morgan had somehow missed the importance of continually adjusting her approach in the light of the understandings students make available, of allowing their feedback to shape her reflections upon her own role. At semester’s end, she still didn’t know that Fannie was a non-native speaker of English; she didn’t know the dimensions of Fannie’s inexperience with academic writing, nor did she know the reasons behind Fannie’s formidable block.

Even as Morgan labored to promote “collaborative” moments—making an ostensible effort to “talk less,” to “sit back more,” to enact an instructional mode that would seem more culturally appropriate—Fannie remembered a lifetime of classroom misadventure, and hung back, reluctant. Morgan needed to know something about this history, but she also needed to understand that much else was fluid and alive, that a revised sense of self was emerging from the dynamic interaction of Fannie’s past and present. Emboldened by a few treasured days in the company of fellow Navajos, Fannie had momentarily stepped into a new stance, one that departed markedly from her accustomed behavior on reservation and campus alike; but if her confidence recalled an earlier self, her playful combativeness was, as Fannie observed in listening to the tape, a new and still-strange manifestation of something also oddly familiar, something left over from long ago.

Rather than frequent urgings to “talk less,” perhaps what Morgan most needed was advice to listen more—for the clues students like Fannie would provide, for those moments when she might best shed her teacherly persona and become once again a learner. More than specific instructional strategies, Morgan needed the conceptual grounding that would allow her to understand that authentically collaborative learning is predicated upon fine-grained insight into individual students—of the nature of their Vygotskian “zones of proximal development,” and, by association, of the sorts of instructional “scaffolding” most appropriate to their changing needs (Bruner;
Langer and Applebee). So, too, did Morgan need to be encouraged toward the yet-elusive understanding that such learning is never unilateral, inevitably entailing a reciprocal influence, reciprocal advances in understanding (Dyson). As she struggled to come to terms with her own ethnic ambivalence, to defend herself against a vociferous chorus proclaiming her “not black enough,” Morgan had reason to take heart in Fannie’s dramatic and rather trying process of transition. Had she thought to ask, Morgan would no doubt have been fascinated by Fannie’s descriptions of this other cultural and linguistic context, with its very different perspectives on education in particular and the world in general (John; Locust). Most of all, perhaps, she would have been interested to know that Fannie was learning to inhabit both arenas, and in so doing, enacting a negotiation of admirable complexity—a negotiation different in degree, perhaps, but certainly not in kind, from Morgan’s own.

Having tutored only one semester previously, Morgan was understandably eager to abandon her lingering doubts about her effectiveness, eager for a surefooted sense that she was providing something worthwhile. Her idealism and good intentions were everywhere apparent—in her lengthy meditations on her work, in her eager enthusiasm at the CCCC, in her persistent efforts to try out new approaches, and in the reassurance she extended to me when I confessed that I’d be writing some fairly negative things about her vexed attempts to reach Fannie. Morgan had been offered relatively little by way of preparation and support: beyond a sprinkling of workshops and an occasional alliance with more experienced tutors, she was left largely on her own—alone with the substantial challenges and opportunities that students like Fannie presented, alone to deal with her frustration and occasional feelings of failure as best she could. Like all beginning educators, Morgan needed abundant support, instruction, and modeling if she were to learn to reflect critically upon her work, to question her assumptions about students like Fannie, to allow herself, even at this fledgling stage in her career, to become a reflective and therefore vulnerable practitioner. This is not to suggest that Morgan should have pried into hidden corners of Fannie’s past, insisting that she reveal information about her background before she felt ready to do so; only that Morgan be respectfully curious, ever attentive to whatever clues Fannie might have been willing to offer, ever poised to revise old understandings in the light of fresh evidence.

Those of us who work with linguistic minority students—and that’s fast becoming us all—must appreciate the evolving dimensions of our task, realizing that we have to reach further than ever if we’re to do our jobs well. Regardless of our crowded schedules and shrinking budgets, we must also
think realistically about the sorts of guidance new tutors and teachers need if they are to confront these rigors effectively, guiding them towards practical strategies informed by understandings from theory and research, and offering compelling reminders of the need to monitor one’s ethnocentric biases and faulty assumptions. Most of all, we must serve as models of reflective practice—perenially inquisitive and self-critical, even as we find occasion both to bless and curse the discovery that becoming students of students means becoming students of ourselves as well.

Notes

1 “Fannie” was the actual name of this student’s maternal grandmother. We decided to use it as her pseudonym to honor this lasting influence.

2 Morgan’s assumption is also contradicted by published accounts of life among the Navajo, which from early on have emphasized the prestige and power of female members of the tribe. Gladys Reichard, an anthropologist who lived among the Navajos in the 1920s, reported that “the Navajo woman enjoys great economic and social prestige as the head of the house and clan and as the manager of economic affairs, and she is not excluded from religious ritual or from attaining political honors” (55). Navajo women often own substantial property, and children retain the surname of the matrilineal clan; the status accorded women is further reflected in the depictions of female deities in Navajo myths (Terrell 57; 255).

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