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Validating Cultural Difference in the Writing Center

Greg Lyons

One challenge for college composition teachers is to help both experienced and novice writers learn to use academic discourse to develop critical awareness—not only about academic readings, but also about their own schooling, socioeconomic opportunities, and political commitments. In teaching writing, we do not merely transmit an instrumental skill; rather, we inevitably reinforce, to some extent, the ideology of institutional discourses. I would assert, however, that we should value students' alternative ways of thinking and communicating and not, in our gatekeeping roles, deny their personal histories or cultural identities. In the writing center, where many non-traditional students come for individualized assistance, tutors must first act as reassuring and accepting listeners. But, in my view, the most ambitious goal of writing centers is to validate cultural differences while helping students who feel alienated to develop a critical consciousness toward their own place in the university and the wider mainstream culture. Thus, tutors must make special efforts to help students formulate arguments when they question their own learning, when they grapple with problems of confidence and authority in order to test their own viewpoints against those of majority opinion or accepted institutional beliefs.

In the past decade, composition theorists have tried to reveal the ideology of writing instruction especially through critiques of collaborative learning and postmodern rhetoric. In particular, John Trimbur has reflected on the issue of student differences, criticizing Kenneth Bruffee's "expert-novice
model of teaching and learning” because it assumes that students must accommodate to the educational institution as an unquestionable authority. Likewise, Linda Brodkey has challenged the view that educational discourse is truly “open” and non-discriminatory. Moreover, Brodkey suggests that educators should collaborate with non-mainstream students in resisting the discursive roles defined by institutional education. These recent insights from Trimbur and Brodkey challenge writing center directors to rethink their tutor-training practices in order to help students explore differences and validate alternative perspectives within educational discourse.

The writing center clients considered here include those marginalized by ethnicity, race, gender, sexual preference, age, class, and occupational history—indeed, all those non-traditional students who have been among the first generation in their families to pursue the promises of higher education. I suggest that administrators, teachers, and tutors extend the definition of “minority” students to include any of those who, for a given writing assignment, feel themselves out of the mainstream of tradition, opinion, or belief. Therefore, the liberatory pedagogical viewpoint I wish to encourage may be applied with a broad range of writing center clients.

Utopian Consensus, Postmodern Rhetoric, and Cultural Difference

Tutor-training programs are generally designed to develop interpersonal skills and writing conference pedagogies, though they often also advocate cultural sensitivity toward non-traditional learners and the empowerment of students as agents of personal and social change. In order to encourage cross-cultural awareness and liberatory learning in the writing center, I suggest that directors should revise tutor-training programs in order to incorporate the recent insights of Trimbur and Brodkey who call for a self-reflective learning process that exploits differing viewpoints in order to challenge institutional discourses. Drawing from social theory to support their criticisms of education, both Trimbur and Brodkey help writing center personnel not only to re-think the epistemology of collaborative pedagogy, but also to reconsider tutorial practices in terms of institutions, economics, material production, gender, class, race, and interpersonal relations—that is, in terms of the ideologies in conflict within interacting communities.

In “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning,” Trimbur takes Bruffee to task for prompting a non-problematic view of consensus as the negotiation of knowledge within expert discourse communities—a view that “neutralizes the critical and transformative project of collaborative learning, depoliticizes it, and reduces it to an acculturative technique” (612).
The danger here, Trimbur suggests, is that Bruffee's social constructionist pedagogy neglects the forces of society that determine at least three parameters of learning: what topics and behaviors are taught in schools—indeed, what is worth knowing; how knowledge is produced; and who can contribute to this production. Like Greg Myers, Trimbur warns that collaborative classrooms can enforce conformity, that consensus can encourage repression by adopting authoritative standards as "natural" rather than as socially determined.

To replace Bruffee's expert-novice model of collaborative learning, Trimbur proposes a "utopian" view of consensus that encourages students to discover, explore, and negotiate their differences rather than to accommodate their viewpoints to larger, more authoritative discourse communities. The goal of this revised notion of consensus is not agreement among students or between students and their teacher but the achievement of "reciprocity and the mutual recognition of the participants and their differences" (614). For Trimbur, this view of consensus represents "the desire of humans to live and work together with differences" (615), rather than an attempt to banish controversies through conformity, resolution, or stasis. Ideally, students would thereby learn to accept and appreciate differences in a spirit of justice.

In writing centers, adopting this model of consensus allows the potential for tutors and students to collaborate in what Habermas calls an "ideal speech situation," a conversation "that distributes symmetrically the opportunity to speak, to initiate discourse, to question, to give reasons, to do all those other things necessary to justify knowledge socially" (Trimbur 612). Moreover, the practice of utopian consensus suggests that the tutor should discourage students from merely mimicking their teachers' authoritative voices when writing critical responses to readings, literary interpretations, or research article reviews. Instead, students should try to question academic readings or institutional explanations from the perspective of their own social positions, values, and identities. Further, the tutor can help students examine how the language of privileged or expert discourse communities might be used to express power relations and to manipulate others.

In order to help students analyze and resist the power of institutional discourses, writing center directors and tutors would do well to understand Linda Brodkey's argument for a postmodern rhetoric. Like Myers and Trimbur, Brodkey points out that since discourse is inevitably a social construct, a student text is inevitably a way of presenting and situating a self in a social setting. Drawing on Foucault's notion of discourse, Brodkey acknowledges that subjectivity is created by language and ideology, and is
"vulnerable to the extent that individuals do not or will not identify themselves as the subjects (i.e. the effects) of a discourse" (126). Thus, in a given conversation, message, personal letter, or school assignment, any student (or tutor or teacher) has a limited range of appropriate ways of presenting herself—a range of "subject positions" from which to choose—since these discursive roles are already shaped, to some extent, by such social factors as gender, class, differing status, and the context of communication between participants.

The documents that inform Brodkey's argument are a series of letters exchanged between middle-class teachers enrolled in her graduate seminar and working-class students enrolled in an Adult Basic Education course. In these letters, Brodkey observes that the teachers consistently represented themselves as professionals concerned with "internal conflicts," while they refused to acknowledge their correspondents' working-class subjectivity, which was consistently expressed in terms of "conflicts with an external material reality" (130). According to Brodkey, the teachers regularly excluded considerations of class and failed to achieve reciprocity as true communicative partners due to a perspective on education shared by many teachers in the U.S., "a view that insists that the classroom is a separate world of its own, in which teachers and students relate to one another undistracted by the classism, racism, and sexism that rage outside the classroom" (139). In effect, the teachers' use of and training in educational discourse limited their admission of certain topics into the conversation and eventually alienated their student correspondents. With these examples, Brodkey is warning all teachers that educational discourse may inhibit or even "close" the conversation since such institutional discourse represents a "rhetorical practice in which the privileges of one subject—to tell stories or decide what the topic is—materially diminish the rights of other subjects" (140).

To carry this warning into the writing center, directors and tutors must take special care to mitigate, even subvert, the institutional authority that comes with our positions. We must be careful in suggesting changes in essay content lest we limit what students intend to say in their own writing. In fact, tutors should encourage students to find language to express alternative subjectivities that question or challenge the roles determined by the traditional disciplinary discourses of academia. At best, teachers and tutors might join students in resisting the categories of thought and behavior that are pre-established in privileged discourses, even though it is difficult to recognize one's own language as a specialized way of thinking. The following case study suggests how such resistance is possible.
Cultural Difference in the Writing Center

In my second year as director of the writing center at Idaho State University, I tried to apply and to guide tutors in applying Trimbur’s and Brodkey’s theoretical perspectives in practical ways. For example, in the fall of 1989 I regularly tutored a Korean American student who had difficulties expressing her own strongly felt cultural perspectives within a reasoned evaluation of her reading and writing. Through several tutoring sessions, I tried to help her find—within her very personal viewpoint—a critical perspective from which to judge and to articulate the issues embedded in her course readings. Besides the objective assessment of these issues, the crux of her writing problem seemed to be her development of a subjectivity that both accounted for her personal experience and assumed the discursive authority to criticize. Unwilling to preempt this self-growth, I nonetheless attempted to guide her revisions past the pitfalls of hasty generalization, argumentum ad hominem, and other logical fallacies. In addition, by discussing her difficulties and progress with the five other tutors who assisted this student, I attempted to share perspectives, to assess our effectiveness, and to direct some tutors toward cultural awareness and the process of utopian consensus.

Originally, Kim came to the writing center with questions about writing chapter summaries of Ruth Benedict’s anthropology text, Patterns of Culture, for her sophomore-level Critical Reading and Writing course. (Actually, summary writing was a routine problem for many writing center clients.) To help her, tutors reviewed her extensive notes; guided her in locating the main ideas, describing principles concisely, and selecting appropriate examples; and taught her the skills of outlining and using paragraph transitions. This process seemed to present a technical problem for Kim, but with practice her summaries became more complete, yet concise. It was clear, too, that she achieved a secondary course goal in writing these summaries—to become familiar with an anthropological perspective on social interactions. Nevertheless, these assignments presented no ideological conflict for her. They did not impinge on her identity as a Korean American or on the difference she felt in that identity.

A more difficult problem arose when Kim had to write a critical review of John Krich’s “Culture Crash,” an article on psychological counseling services for Southeast Asian boat people. In his introduction, Krich surveys the prejudices some Americans feel toward Asians “as grasping parasites and overachieving threats” (24); then, he goes on to outline the challenge these immigrants represent to counselors from mainstream American culture. Kim’s initial difficulty with the article was that she ascribed these prejudices
to Krich. In fact, she overlooked Krich’s critical distance on the counseling problem, which he views as “a fresh opportunity to re-examine the underpinnings of our therapeutic society and the assumptions of Western psychiatry” (26). Like many mainstream students, Kim lacked sufficient critical reading skills and misread the author’s intention. However, unlike many mainstream students, Kim felt a personal identification with the minority people in her reading. Thus, because Kim reacted so strongly to the racial prejudices mentioned in the article, she found it difficult to disentangle her personal feelings from her critique of the author’s advice.

For this assignment, my tutor-training program provided an adequate framework for understanding and empathizing with Kim’s cultural and cognitive difficulties. However, neither our anthology of readings nor our training discussions had made explicit a perspective or a practical strategy to help tutors channel a student’s feelings into rationalizing a culturally based criticism and, thereby, revising her essay. As I worked with Kim on this assignment, I developed such a strategy by applying Trimbur and Brodkey’s collaborative articulation of difference.

In our first conference, Kim and I discussed her own perceptions of the problem and of the author’s views. I pointed out an effective strategy in any article review—first to find and discuss points of agreement and then to present her own argument against points of disagreement. After re-reading the article’s introduction carefully, Kim was able to recognize that the author was actually criticizing ethnocentric prejudice and stating that such prejudice was, indeed, a problem for counselors in helping Southeast Asians who suffered traumatic social, economic, and cultural dislocation. After we reviewed and discussed the rest of her first draft in the writing center, I pointed out that Kim’s effective perspective on the article was her criticism of Western medicine and psychology in general, which, according to the author, could presume to assist these refugees. In fact, drawing from the article, Kim argued persuasively that the boat people’s own cultures do offer traditional means of treating psychological problems, while at the same time rejecting the revelation of feelings for therapeutic examination in counseling sessions. As she pointed out, most of these refugees, though psychologically traumatized, were more concerned with working toward economic success in their adopted country than with purging the negative emotions arising from experiences of hardship and family tragedy in Southeast Asia.

In our second conference on this assignment, we examined Kim’s revised draft of her article review. In this draft, she was more fair in summarizing the viewpoint of the author before she criticized it:
Krich believes it's necessary for the therapist to incorporate both American and Asian cultural beliefs to ease the refugees into the American society. . . . Krich makes some valid points by suggesting that the American therapists need to understand the Asian cultures before trying to treat these people to overcome their depression and culture shock.

Moreover, Kim clearly assumed an authoritative voice in rejecting Krich's recommendation that mental health workers in the U.S. adapt their intervention techniques to other cultures. Calling on her own strongly felt ethnic identity of difference, she was unwilling to accept mainstream institutional solutions. Instead, she argued that American counselors should not interfere in the refugees' lives:

We as the Western Civilization have put labels on the refugees saying they are depressed and going through “post-traumatic stress disorder” when they really want to be accepted for who they are and what they believe in. . . . I think Krich misses this valid point about these Asian people that some of them do not want help and they feel that the American people are interfering in their social beliefs.

Speaking as a champion for the social beliefs of Asian minorities, Kim marshals the authority of Krich's published words to describe some admirable strengths of the Asian cultures: “the emphasis on hard work and discipline . . . , trust in neighbors, gratitude for the smallest gesture, and patience with hardship” (53). Taking the refugees' part, she argues against traditional melting-pot notions of cultural assimilation:

By understanding the Asian refugees and respecting their differences, we as Americans could learn a broader understanding of what psychologically healthy people are, but we must first be able to respect and incorporate their lifestyles with ours and not require them to do all the changing. [emphasis mine]

Kim's proposal for achieving cultural integration is radical, to say the least, for it assumes an unprecedented form of cultural conversation that actually resembles Trimbur's utopian consensus in responding to the need for reciprocity and mutual recognition.

Admittedly, Kim's commonsense insight that immigrants need a job more than a counselor may be shared by mainstream students. However, to reach this mundane conclusion, first she had to struggle with her anger over the racism directed at boat people, with whom she empathized, and then she had to represent herself as their spokesperson, a native of the East and yet a
citizen of the West. Though she identifies herself with the dominant culture by using first person plural pronouns—"we as Americans"—Kim still criticizes American therapists for their exploitation of power over their clients: "Their form of psychological help makes the refugees submit to the social pressures of the United States, which the Asian people are unwilling to do." Unlike most mainstream middle-class students, Kim as a Korean American was attempting to construct, through the discourse of social reform, an alternative subjectivity that challenged the discourse of Western psychiatry and the racist ideology of American culture.

Still, in our second conference about her article review, Kim was troubled about her revision. Though her own viewpoint was now strongly stated and supported, Kim was concerned that her essay ranged too far from the original source. In particular, she worried that her conclusion got off topic by presenting historical examples of institutionalized racism against American Indians, Blacks, and Japanese Americans; and by insisting that the U.S. must accept other cultures, such as "the large Spanish population here in the west." But as her tutor, I tried to reassure Kim that these examples developed a social context that seemed justified by her argument, which was supported not only by her own perspective as a Korean American, but also by the anthropological perspective implicit in her instructor's choice of course readings, *Patterns of Culture*. I pointed out that her highly charged emotional reaction to the article allowed a starting point to criticize the author's proposal fairly. That is, I encouraged Kim to respond candidly from the perspective of her difference, which stimulated a valid critique of Krich's position. In the writing center, then, she was able to discover and to verbalize her major complaint against Krich: he proposed that the mainstream American health care system could adapt to these Asian immigrant cultures in order to assist their people, though that assistance was clearly a form of repression in Kim's view. Likewise, through her revising process, Kim was able to construct her own identity as a culturally threatened racial minority, as an outraged citizen, and as a social reformer.

It is true that Kim's critical review of "Culture Crash" was not a complete success. In parts of her revised essay, she still conflated some of her objections to Krich with his own admissions that American culture does not respect minority differences. Indeed, her instructor commented on her essay, "The source agrees with much you say, yet you criticize it pretty directly." But we must acknowledge the subtle complexity of what Kim is trying to learn: not only how to assume a critical stance on a cross-cultural experience, but also how to manipulate the language of academic discourse while feeling still an outsider in the educational institution. In this context and from my viewpoint through several tutoring sessions, I witnessed significant progress
in Kim's summary writing skills, in her critical reading ability, and in her assumption of authority as a writer.

It is also true that, in retrospect, there were comments I might have made on this essay to help Kim understand that her argument might be framed as an attack against discourses of power, in particular the bureaucratic discourse of social service agencies and the professional discourse of psychiatric counselors. I might have more effectively enacted Trimburs utopian consensus by collaborating with Kim in a critique of "the relations of power in the formation of expert judgment" (613). Thus, together we might have explored and Kim might have more explicitly delineated the power differential she indeed recognized: that counselors enforce specific psycho-social solutions on the victims of post-traumatic stress disorder, while those victims (non-citizens, non-fluent-English speakers, racial minorities, displaced persons) possess no reciprocal authority either to define their own problems or propose alternative solutions in ways that Western-trained counselors can understand. Likewise, in our conferences I might have been more explicit in helping Kim realize that her struggle to find a fair perspective on a social problem was also a struggle to construct her own identity. But if I did not do so then, reflecting on missed opportunities for higher awareness has been a learning process for me and for the tutors I trained.

In any case, in the writing center Kim did learn a method for focusing her own emotional reactions into a valid critique, and she was able to adapt this method to other writing projects. In her final essay for Critical Reading and Writing, Kim began by summarizing an article on urban sprawl and then applied this description to a criticism of Pocatello, her home town. Here, she was at first uncomfortable in expressing what she felt was an unpopular opinion and in presenting personal examples. In her view, most of her peers in college and her neighbors in town approved of new construction as a sign of progress and community pride. On the other hand, she felt that recent building projects in commercial districts contributed to visual clutter and ignored a more conservationist option of remodelling existing structures in the dying downtown area. Furthermore, in her essay she argued, more broadly, that an urban landscape reveals the thinking of its inhabitants. Expressing her own alienation and discontent with where she lived, her thesis was that many citizens' desires for the new—cars, homes, offices, stores, shopping malls—in fact reveal a superficial value system concerned with appearances rather than substance. Obviously, in such an essay, Kim had to submit her own strongly held biases to the rational processes of argument, example, concession, and compromise. With her tutors, she had to defend her viewpoint with good reasons, not with feelings. In fact, her tutors—despite their own politics about the issues of urban sprawl and materialism
in Pocatello—played devil’s advocate in order to justly represent opposing mainstream viewpoints that Kim had to analyze and negotiate. Thus, her tutors helped her to discover the differences and similarities between her and her fellow students or hometown neighbors. Though one tutor commented that Kim’s logic needed “more fine tuning,” she was motivated to transform her own emotional response to a community problem into an argument for a responsible policy. By first realizing and articulating her own difference in respect to popular community opinion, Kim could frame that difference as a responsible proposal in the community’s interest.

What I believe Kim came to realize, as a student in Critical Reading and Writing, is that her own self-definition of cultural and social difference allows a valid critical perspective on dominant social beliefs. Rather than doubting her own responses as merely individualistic and relativistic, she learned to respect and to articulate her perspective of difference as an ethical evaluation. Moreover, in the process of practicing utopian consensus with her tutors, Kim perhaps discovered that her writing and conversations provided a means to construct an alternative subjectivity that embodied her minority viewpoints in opposition to the mainstream culture. Admittedly, in the midst of re-reading her revisions, checking for transitions, organization, and logical coherence, Kim and I and her other tutors were rarely aware of ourselves as vulnerable, “the subjects of a discourse,” as Brodkey suggests educators and students could be. Nonetheless, we were all aware that, in order to say what she had to say, Kim worked through feelings of anger, frustration, insecurity, and alienation. Her tutors provided not only acceptance and support for these responses, but also the challenges and questions of knowledgeable peers listening for the logic of academic discourse.

Cultural Difference and Educational Discourse

There is a larger lesson here for any tutor or teacher working with students who identify their own ethnicity, race, sex, class, or age group as a minority in the mainstream of college students or American culture at large. Unlike some critics of Bruffee’s collaborative learning, I do not mean to celebrate “expressive individualism” (Bellah et al.), the very American ideology that individual effort and originality can be autonomous from larger social forces and commitments. In fact, like Trimbur, I reject the solution of Bruffee’s critics who, fearing “group think,” value the romantic authority of the individual voice. Rather, validating cultural difference is a way to give minority students a cultural voice and a critical method in the process of utopian consensus.
As Myers suggests, teachers (and tutors) should “create consciousness of struggle” rather than the consensus that breeds conformity. Because we work within and through institutions and share responsibility for their repressive effects, teachers and tutors must help students challenge the social and discursive systems that determine the options of their education. As Brodkey suggests, teachers should foster a collaborative “resistance inside educational discourse” that encourages students to use writing to represent their own alternative subjectivities realized through their experiences of difference.

In adopting academic discourse as the institutionally licensed language, most college students must transform the original ways of thinking, knowing, and expressing that they learned in their home cultures. Compared to traditional students from middle-class white families, however, minority or non-traditional students run a greater risk of altering, or even losing, their personal and cultural identities in accommodating to the discourse patterns of academia (Scollon and Scollon 37). Educators should understand that some of these students’ problems may arise from ideological conflicts between interacting communities—between those of home and school, certainly—but also among those multiple unfamiliar communities of other students. Trimburs collaborative pedagogy of consensus offers alienated students a means of recognizing this conflict and of negotiating with others to discover, through conversation and through their writing, a meaning that originates from their strongly felt perceptions as outsiders.

Such a view of consensus, using language for both self-expression and knowledge of the world, can help learners earn a liberating awareness of their own education. In the words of Paulo Freire, literacy learning must be “associated with the right of self-expression and world expression, of creating and re-creating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society’s historical process” (163). Validating cultural difference by practicing utopian consensus in the writing center and in the classroom can stimulate democratic participation in the making of knowledge and can contribute to Freire’s liberatory goal for education.

However, I do not mean to suggest that either writing center tutors or composition teachers should indoctrinate students in political correctness. At Idaho State, as at many other colleges and universities, non-traditional students may indeed hold very traditional religious, political, and social values. Therefore, more liberal teachers and tutors—even those committed to education as a means of social transformation—must openly encourage students to express dissenting viewpoints, “to live and work together with differences” (Trimbur 615). As Gerald Graff warns, “no educational
proposal is worth much that has no strategy for disagreement" (64). In addition, we should recall Brodkey's cautions about the ideological bias of educational discourse. The generally liberal, professional class of college teachers is often "too eager to confuse an 'open' classroom with an open society" (Tuman 49). In short, teachers and tutors should keep a realistic perspective on our own social impact; at the same time, we must collaborate with our students in a self-conscious critique of the powers and ideologies of discourse.

Notes

1As director of the Idaho State writing center from 1988 to 1990, I designed a training program in which tutors studied journal articles on these specific topics: assisting students who felt hostility or insecurity toward educational institutions (Clark); psychological barriers to acquiring a second language or dialect (Meyer and Smith); differing cultural world views (Bizzell); collaborating in the creation of knowledge (Bruffee); and the political role of writing centers in promoting the liberatory learning that Paulo Freire advocates (Warnock and Warnock). In the training sessions, tutors were encouraged to acknowledge the power of educational discourse to allow, to limit, and to change perceptions, while also accepting their own central role in reproducing the culture of higher education. Thus, tutors were taught to consider individualized instruction and academic discourse as social practices related to economic and political processes.

2As an example, Trimbur offers a revision of the traditional discourse in literature classrooms. Practicing utopian consensus, students might analyze how the institution of literary interpretation reinforces the authority of professional readers and neglects the problem of "where the differences they experience as readers come from" (614). Likewise, students might consider how their own experiences of reading for pleasure may help to constitute their sense of identity, especially as works from popular culture represent the differences of race, class and gender. Thus, students can learn to argue for the value of the popular writing they enjoy in terms of its social and personal meaning to them. This example of utopian consensus in practice resembles Gerald Graff's curricular model for "putting highbrow and lowbrow traditions back into the dialogical relation in which they have actually existed in our cultural history" (54). Like Trimbur, Graff suggests that our teaching should "sharpen conflicts and bring them out into the open" (64).

3Of course, this replication of expert models may be the students' goal in traditional teacher-centered pedagogies and an inherent temptation in
every course where students try to "play the game" (even a collaborative
game) to get the grade. I am suggesting that tutors, while acknowledging
students' anxieties about grades and evaluation, ask tough, honest questions
not only about a writer's argument, examples, and persuasive techniques, but
also about his or her prejudices, commitments, and ethos.

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