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## Review: Teaching with Your Mouth Shut

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**Donald L. Finkel, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*.  
Portsmouth, NH; Heinemann Boynton/Cook, 2000.**

*Reviewed by Cindy Johanek*

I had my doubts when I first saw *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*. Do we really need yet another text that vilifies traditional educational practices and calls for more (more, more) student power in teaching/tutoring situations? Haven't we received that message yet?

Peter Elbow's foreword, however, compelled me to keep reading, and like Elbow, I became intrigued by "Finkel's own writing—admiring a quiet power I found difficult to describe. . . . It's a quiet voice, and yet I hear a resonance" (xii). This quiet power is a message itself, one that writing centers should find validating, inspiring, and practical.

Indeed, writing center folks are already familiar with "teaching with your mouth shut." The collaborative models we embrace already minimize our reliance on what Donald Finkel describes as that archetypal activity so ingrained in educational culture: Telling. Finkel presents instead a kind of pedagogy that writing centers embraced decades ago, consulting and listening strategies that maintain the student writer's power over the text and the situation—by asking questions for writers to explore, by inviting the writer's opinions, by letting the text itself have a voice.

Finkel admits that Telling is sometimes necessary, of course, such as when a friend does not know the way to your house (2) or, in general, whenever we need information that someone else has. Those who staff writing centers understand this, too, and we sometimes dispense information via Telling (face-to-face, in handouts, on web sites). We also know, however, what Finkel describes in this book: Teaching with our mouths shut is a much finer and more difficult art.

While Finkel is not addressing a writing center audience specifically here, we should find his premise compatible with what we already value as a community: "good teaching must be conceived in terms of learning," not in terms of the teacher's performance (8). More valuable for tutor training or courses in pedagogy, however, are the specific issues Finkel addresses in *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*.

Finkel challenges us, for example, to hold ourselves to the "five-year standard" and asks directly, "Thinking back over your whole life, what were the two or three most significant learning experiences you ever

had?” (6). My own students, who read this book in an undergraduate Composition Theory and Pedagogy course, spent some time freewriting their responses to this question (as did I). We were all surprised (though shouldn’t have been, I suppose) that we remembered best the “lessons” we learned not about subjects, but about character, motivation, being good human beings: lessons we learned from watching (not listening to) our teachers and coaches *outside* the classroom, lessons they often taught us with their mouths shut.

Writing centers are naturally suited for this kind of out-of-class learning *and* for producing *lasting* learning of writing-as-a-subject. Outside the classroom and away from the traditional Telling still found in many classrooms, writing center activity is already more likely to be, simply, more memorable—especially for writers working with peer consultants. For peer consultants grappling with the seemingly dichotomous tension inherent in their roles (both as “peers” and as “consultants” or “tutors”), Finkel addresses, too, the issue of authority for those of us trying to teach/tutor with our mouths shut.

For Finkel, teachers and tutors will always have a natural authority that comes from experience and institutional position. We don’t give up that authority and shouldn’t apologize for its presence. Finkel makes an important distinction, however, between authority and another element we do give up when we teach with our mouths shut: power. Finkel notes that we often confuse authority and power and that we should recognize the difference:

Authority is something that is appealed to. It is typically grounded in the past or in some transcendent realm (e.g., Heaven). It comes from “beyond.” Power, on the other hand, is grounded in present realities (guns or grades, for example). (121)

In Writing Center sessions, tutors can direct the general shape of a conference (maintaining authority) without dictating what a student does within those boundaries (relinquishing power). Further, the authority of a Writing Center’s philosophy (or mission statement) and students’ understanding of what goes on there will already create expectations based on that authority. But the specific dialogues that occur in writing centers are driven by student power, made possible by the authority of the writing center and its staff: “Authority can be exercised. It allows ‘the people’ to exercise power to govern themselves” (122).

With specific workshop ideas, writing prompts, and activities, Finkel fills out these democratic ideals with practical advice and opportunities for reflection and application. Through exercises and writing assignments offered in the Appendix, readers are invited to reflect on arguments and anecdotes shared throughout the book, and teachers could easily use or adapt such activities to tutor training in staff meetings or in any course on pedagogy or composition theory. Setting up this Appendix, Finkel, in his concluding chapter, reflects on his own dilemma of writing/telling about teaching with your mouth shut and insists that readers take on the appropriate burden of learning:

You will only learn from a reading experience if you take the considerable time needed to reflect on it and construct its meaning for yourself. That is a step you must take on your own. I cannot do it for you. All I can do is make a suggestion or two and provide a tool for reflection. (161)

In this practical voice, Finkel offers writing centers compelling inquiry that we should find useful as a tutor training text and as a challenge to ourselves as classroom teachers and writing center directors. After all, Finkel aims to avoid too much Telling of his own and attempts, quite successfully, to engage his readers in the inherently democratic inquiry that “demands relinquishing faith in Authority to deliver to truth” (115). Such Freirian problem-posing provides excellent food for thought in writing centers as we attempt to make real the democratic aims of new (and, in writing centers, old) pedagogies.

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