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The Polarities of Context in the Writing Center Conference

by Joseph Janangelo

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Conferences with one's own students are always influenced by personal context. They differ from first-time tutorial encounters in that teachers have "personal knowledge" of their student writers' strengths and weaknesses—where they are with a piece of writing and where our experience tells us they need to be in order to succeed in the academic community. But the degree to which this personal knowledge helps facilitate a writer's growth depends on how we use it. It is the things we say and do with writers we "know" that make dialogue happen and authority work.

Last spring, Eric was a student of mine in a freshman writing workshop course at New York University. Drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicide attempts figured prominently in his conversation. He would often miss class and wait at my office, saying that he could not share his writing with other students because it was too revealing. "Protection" was one of his key words. When I suggested the social value of the class, he would sigh and confess his alienation.

Eric is a philosophy major. He is also very tall and tends to sit on the desk and chain smoke while talking. As a result, he seemed to be lecturing to me. Afraid to upset his unstable equilibrium, I adopted a spectator role to witness his performance.

One conference centered on a personal essay that Eric wrote as a disjointed drama. It was about an anonymous actor on stage who was being humiliated by a voice from the director's booth because he could not read the script. It was never clear which voice stood for Eric—the actor's or the booth's. I found this ambiguous text very

provocative. It made me think of Brecht and Pirandello. My training as a literary critic fueled this over-interpretation. Because Eric was a philosophy major, I projected sophistication into his text. I wrongly assumed he was consciously writing from a modernist framework. My misreading changed Eric's text and dominated our entire interaction.

In conference, Eric began with my reading error. Conversation became an excuse for him to babble on about always being misunderstood. He portrayed himself as a victim of lifelong miscommunication. As Eric kept talking, I kept listening—hoping for a revelation of meaning at the end of each tirade. Yet there could be no revelation because Eric's words were really never heard. I had become so involved in my own transaction with his essay, I could not respond to it critically. My reading was ruined by the context I had allowed to inform it—namely, my predilection for works which do not tend toward clarity and my fear of upsetting Eric, who also does not tend toward clarity.

Chaos ensued as we looked less at what Eric had said than at all the possibilities we could make out of what he had said. Through it all, the writer (trying to defend his meaning against my interpretation) insisted on the perfection of his text. He was fighting for a grade—insisting that I give him an “A” because “the ambiguity was intentional” and all “purely based on self-protection.” We each wanted something different from the text. Eric was as resolute about preserving its ambiguity as I was about deciphering it. Our conversation thus became a conflict between competing voices.

This haggling over the “right” reading of Eric's text testifies to what David Bartholomae calls the ego-centrism “of a student [and in this case a tutor] who could not read beyond his own identity themes” (107). Feeling defensive, Eric transmitted my discourse back to me: “You said something awhile ago about whether we actually exist in the same universe? Or are we completely different and happen to be bumping into each other along the way?” Eric could reproduce my words because he had heard them before.

He was repeating my comment on an earlier paper to celebrate the miscommunication between reader and writer.

It was not so much *that* the writer chose to repeat my words as *what* he chose that caught me off guard. The original context of

Joseph Janangelo

my remark was a response to Eric's review of an Ingmar Bergman film about a feuding family. (The "we" I referred to was not Eric and me, but the characters in the film.) By inserting my words into our conference—saying that his intent was merely to "confuse" his reader, Eric insisted I accept his textual ambiguity as a philosophically informed rhetorical stance—something Winston Weathers might call a "grammar of style." Eric was tapping into my fondness for ambiguity and manipulating me through the selective recall of my own words.

Our words crossed, yet not in genuine dialogue. This clash of authority between a reader who wanted to understand and a writer who did not want to be understood precluded communication. All we did was cancel each other out and lock ourselves into the impasse of our own language systems. For the rest of the term, Eric found attention (and even stature) in withdrawing from class to compose his ambiguous scenes of alienation. I was busy misreading his essays—assigning great import to each word written by the student that I had cast as either a modernist writer or a suicidal philosopher.

Our conference degenerated into Eric's telling me lengthy stories about his encounters with strangers. His last one spoke to our situation:

... and the guy says, "Tell us a little bit about yourself." And I'm trying. But he doesn't want to hear it. One, there's the hypocrisy of the one who asks. Two, what they were really looking for? Misunderstanding. What does this person want? To this day, I'm not really sure.

We never did transcend our separate agendas. I still wanted elaboration. Eric still needed "protection." We remained competing voices in a failed conversation.

If personal context made my conferences with Eric a failure, my conversation with Lynn (one of my students during the previous semester) shows that context can also play a creative role in student-teacher conferences. Lynn is from Korea. She is a part-time business major and a full-time waitress. She is also extremely rigorous about her studies. In class, I remember her being very concerned about both her writing and her grades.

Lynn came into the conference with a specific question. She wanted to know whether she might include her personal opinions

in a science essay about ginseng. This question triggered certain alarms in my brain. The semester before, Lynn had mentioned her dislike of scientific discourse—it seemed boring and difficult. In her course evaluation, she said she enjoyed everything except the science readings, which were “too technical.” The moment she said the word science I remembered that it held certain negative meanings for her.

This kind of memory-enhanced speech act is something Roman Jakobson calls a point of “contact” between speakers—a background of understanding that allows them to enter into communication (353). I would argue that our shared history during the previous semester supplied that “contact.” Having heard the text, I was able to surmise the writer’s thoughts and to address their embedded meaning—Lynn’s fear of this genre of discourse. My personal knowledge of what Lynn thought when she read the word “science” allowed me to hear her. It was our shared history that gave me opportunities for response.

I dealt with the writer’s anxiety by mentioning our past experiences with scientific discourse. I asked Lynn to consider the subjective passages in the science essays we had read in class. She quickly remembered that the discoverers “did get involved” in their discoveries. I then asked her to tell me about her personal experiences with ginseng—what led her to choose this topic. She responded with lively reminiscences from her childhood in Korea and began to feel that her memories and opinions were worth telling.

Our previous conversations had created an environment of easy intimacy and common referentiality. The conference-room became a playful space where we could be anecdotal with Lynn telling me about her mother’s absolute trust in ginseng and how Lynn had to educate her about “the facts” of human biology. We could also be silly, as Lynn told me ginseng was “like chicken soup, only we’re not Jewish!” We even digressed to talk about soap operas—the subject of one of her papers for me. Nostalgia and play became incentives for writing, as Lynn relaxed and realized that she was capable of writing scientific discourse. Because I talked to Lynn like a peer, our conference was a real conversation. Unlike my exchange with Eric, this conversation did not mask a power struggle. Authority seemed to be shared; the writer was willing to listen, and the reader wanted

Joseph Janangelo

nothing from the text but to see it emerge.

I was “membershiping” (Melnick 10)—talking about my own experiences with scientific discourse, trying to diffuse my authority so that I could shift roles from the tutor with all the answers to a person with some experience of the genre. This made Lynn an equal in the conversation. Early on, I mentioned Michael Polanyi’s book, *Personal Knowledge*, to illustrate my point about subjectivity in science. I shared my sources with her (rather than assuming that she knew them, as with Eric) because I wanted her to learn from them. I was sharing what I had learned through reading, rather than telling her what a teacher “knew” about scientific discourse. Because I read her text as unfinished (rather than a masterpiece to be understood), I felt I could be natural and take an active role in the conversation. Because I knew the writer would not break down under criticism, I felt free to share my response and probe for dissonance.

My questions were genuine but sometimes misguided. I asked if ginseng could be smoked. Lynn laughed at what she called my “western consciousness” and said, “No, it’s not that kind of weed!” Here, our similar personal yet different cultural reference systems provided further ground for inquiry. That I could understand only part of Lynn’s meaning actually helped her writing. In explaining my cultural errors to me, the writer was projecting her personal associations into new interpretive relations. This combination of cultures (East and West) helped her make connections to the larger world.

By the end of our conference, something of Lynn’s original meaning remained intact (she said she had included her personal insights in her first draft), and it was joined to something larger. As Lynn began to feel secure about including her observations in her paper, she became more honest about taking credit for her ideas: “I mean, a lot of this is my own insights. I’m just not saying that it is.”

Context provided the key to confidence as the writer took responsibility for her words. Remembrance of texts past encouraged Lynn to believe that she was capable of succeeding at this type of discourse. I reminded her that she had done it before, in her final paper for me. Dialogue thus took the form of a pep talk. I was assuring the writer of her present ability on the basis of her past performances.

Lynn seemed to believe me—winning her struggle against this genre of discourse in a moment of self-discovery:

I know sometimes it's just ... there's just like one word in something that'll just trigger off . . . like you become intimidated by it you know? In this case, a science essay. The word science! You go, "Oh no!" It's like when I see radicals in math, I think I can't do it.

As it turned out, Lynn could do it very well. She returned a week later to show me the A she received on her essay, "The Legend of Ginseng."

At the end of our conference, Lynn said it was better to talk to me about her writing than to her sister. She said we kept "the professional distance." Looking back, the word "distance" seems inappropriate. If this conference was successful, it was because almost every strategy was drawn from our shared history—personal knowledge of each other's dislikes and fears—all of which led to an understanding between two people who were willing to share authority so that they could have a conversation.

My conferences with Eric and Lynn dramatize the polarities of context. Meaning can be submerged in the throes of a "too personal" personal encounter or it can flourish under conditions of trust and understanding. Whatever the case, because a writing conference involves individuals who have different personalities and backgrounds, there can be no neutrality in human exchange. The moment one's word encounters that of another, it immediately becomes subject to a myriad of new associations. How could it be otherwise? For, as Heidegger states,

We—the people—are a dialogue.... Now, what does "dialogue" mean? Apparently the speaking with each other about something. In the course of this, the speaking mediates a coming together. (qtd. in Jakobson, *Verbal Art* 140)

And who knows what can happen then? Sometimes the speaking mediates a coming apart. But whatever the case, we do need to acknowledge the fact that to be "professional" does not necessarily mean to be "distant" and that when two people who know each other begin to talk about a piece of writing, there is much more going on than just plain talk.

Joseph Janangelo

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