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# A Writing Teacher Learns From His Students: The Symbiosis of Student-Centered Pedagogy and Teacher Research Methodology

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A WRITING TEACHER LEARNS FROM HIS STUDENTS:

THE SYMBIOSIS OF STUDENT-CENTERED PEDAGOGY

AND TEACHER RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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This teacher research study documents the attempts of a college writing teacher to use response-oriented, student-centered pedagogy as a means of providing practical learning experiences for his students while simultaneously providing a practical professional development opportunity for himself. In pursuit of this goal, the teacher promoted a dialogue with the students that sought to engender their sense of engagement in the class while simultaneously encouraging their criticism and analysis of the teacher's practice. By assuming the role of learner in the classroom, the teacher also sought to model the inquisitory behavior he expected of his students in their own self-reflective writings.

In order to preserve the primary function of the classroom–the students' education–the research methodology employed in this study included only those data collection tools that promoted students' learning opportunities. Student and teacher journals, student-teacher conferences, and student secretaries were utilized to gather information that promoted both students' educational opportunities as well as the teachers' understanding of the efficacy of his practice.

The results of this pedagogically-based research methodology were illuminating for the teacher, as he learned about the merits and shortcomings of his classroom practice from the perspectives of his students.  This provided the teacher a level of trustworthiness in his ultimate analysis of his teaching that would have been impossible to achieve had his source of critical analysis been from his perspective alone.  By welcoming his students' regular assessment of his practice, the teacher also supported the development of an interpersonally connected classroom community, which, in turn, made his student-centered writing workshop-style class more productive.

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THE SYMBIOSIS OF STUDENT-CENTERED TEACHING
AND TEACHER RESEARCH


"It's a very ancient saying,

but a true and honest thought,

that if you become a teacher,

by your pupils you'll be taught."

–Oscar Hammerstein II


"Anything you do,

let it come from you,

then it will be new.

Give us more to see."

–Stephen Sondheim


"The play was soup.  The audience–art."

–Jane Wagner


When I was a student teacher, I had my first experience with a disruptive

student, whom I quickly grew to resent.  I taught ninth grade history in tandem

with an experienced cooperative teacher, and though that semester provided

new experiences daily, my most salient lesson about teaching came out of an

impromptu classroom discussion.  My problem student seemed perpetually

focused on something other than the teacher standing at the front of the classroom. Not surprisingly, this resulted in daily disciplinary actions from my cooperative teacher, not to mention my own resentment of the student's disinterest in my efforts. One day, however, when my cooperative teacher was out, the students and I found ourselves in the midst of a frank discussion about education. My troublesome student, perhaps emboldened by the absence of the more authoritarian cooperative teacher, asked me why he had to come to school and participate in so much mundane and tedious work. He seemed to be asking a serious question, and his attitude seemed, likewise, legitimately inquisitive. I imagined my cooperative teacher responding dismissively, with something along the lines of, "Hey buddy. Don't bust my chops, and I won't bust yours." I was touched, however, by the sense that this student was finally taking me seriously enough to engage me in a serious dialogue, absent the more superficial rebelliousness I had come to expect from him. So I decided to step out of the safety of my otherwise authoritative position as teacher and accept his offer to exchange ideas. The discussion grew to include the rest of the class, for whom this issue was, likewise, relevant, and by the end, I had moved from my physical position standing in front of the blackboard to a seated position at a vacant student desk, participating in an open exchange of ideas and feelings. Though the specifics of the dialogue itself are lost to me now, I remember clearly the summary comment made by my otherwise troublesome student. He asked why we couldn't engage in real discussions like this one more often. He was bored and disconnected from what seemed to him the arbitrary lessons of the class.

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What he wanted was a real connection, something that didn't seem like a waste of time and effort. He wasn't concerned with jumping through hoops in order to earn a distant diploma, nor was he concerned with the spurious promise of a lifetime of security and material wealth that too often becomes the primary reason for going to school in the first place. These goals were too abstract and disconnected from his life. What he needed was a more personally meaningful reason to be there, a reason to see me as something other than an arbitrary and personally disconnected taskmaster. Our discussion that day gave him a sort of touchstone through which to see me as someone legitimately concerned with his boredom, not merely a distant authority figure condemning him for his disinterest in what must have seemed to him my arbitrary lessons. Of course, our discussion *did* take us off task, inasmuch as my lesson on The Russian Revolution was put on hold, but we had a bit of a revolution, ourselves, that day. The strides we made in developing a more mutually respectful classroom community made class more productive and easier to conduct when we got back to our studies. Ultimately, it was a productive compromise: losing a little time on task, but developing a more respectful working relationship. With a decade having passed and my interactions with this student long since ended, I am unable to qualitatively assess how his attitude towards me might have changed in the wake of this discussion; I can, however, say categorically that our discussion allowed me to see him in an infinitely more positive light.

I am older now than I was when I student-taught, with more classroom experiences under my belt, and more questions about best practice, as well. My

experience as a student teacher, however, has stuck with me. I learned the importance of pragmatism in the classroom that semester. I learned that students need to be part of a classroom community, free to share their opinions and interact with the subject matter on a personal level. This is at the heart of what I believe makes for productive teaching. In the study that follows, I have attempted to document my efforts to create one such community.

Central to the creation of the classroom in this study was the utilization of a student-centered pedagogy that put students at the center of their own learning and minimized the traditional, authoritative role many of them expected of me. When this happened, students discovered that writing could be personally relevant and pragmatically useful in their lives. This pedagogy provided me with structured opportunities to learn from my students about their goals as learners and writers, informing me of their needs, and improving my ability to address those needs.

Pedagogies that emphasize teacher-directed learning too frequently minimize the sense of responsibility students have for their own learning, leaving many with an understanding of education as an impersonal enterprise through which information is passed down from authoritarian teachers. Rather than promote critical thought, such classes send the message that students need only mimic their teachers and leave more personal responses to their studies outside the classroom. Such a view results in students seeing themselves as intellectual outsiders, leaving them unprepared to take a proactive role in the design and implementation of their educational experiences, both in the immediate class and

in their educational futures.  The opportunity for pragmatic application of classroom lessons is often lost on these students, for whom school becomes a series of arbitrary hoops they must jump through in their quest for diplomas.

While teaching from a student-centered pedagogy can engender personal connections between students and their studies, it also opens the door for learning that moves not only from teacher to student, but from student to teacher, as well.  By asking for my students' suggestions for and responses to the workings of our classroom, they become partners in the planning of classroom practice, and at the same time, I learn about my own pedagogical strengths and weaknesses. Learning from my students throughout the semester, as opposed to months later, as traditionally occurs via end-of-semester student evaluations, allows me the opportunity to make real-time adjustments to my pedagogy and better tailor the class to my current students' needs.  This interaction between teaching and professional growth provides a natural and pedagogically unobtrusive opportunity to refine teaching methods, symbiotically connecting professional responsibilities with professional development, resulting in important learning experiences for all members of the classroom, students and teacher alike.  This attempt to become students in our own classrooms is what teacher research is all about.

For all its merits, however, teacher research is often underappreciated as a means of developing pedagogical theory.  Focused as it is on the local, classroom outsiders too frequently fail to appreciate its transformative potential. As teacher researcher Edith Gioseffi relates, "I often had visitors come to the

classroom in my school (it's that type of school), and they would sit there and listen and smile, but they had no idea what was going on, no idea at all" (Wall, 2004, p. 289).  To an observer, particularly one accustomed to more traditional styles of research, the methodology of the teacher researcher might appear lax and sloppy–nonexistent even–unconcerned as it is with control groups and placebos.  How, then, might those of us who appreciate teacher research promote its merits to our colleagues?  I have found that by reading well-documented studies from practicing teacher researchers, my own appreciation and understanding of teacher research has grown.  This study represents my efforts to provide one such study to the canon of teacher research for the benefit of peers who would like to learn more about a college writing teacher's attempts to utilize this methodology in the context of his classroom.

In her appeal for deeper commitment for teacher research from educators, Goswami (1984, p. 357) calls for greater numbers of teacher research studies:

My own experience, working with more than a hundred teachers who prepared case studies of themselves as writers, leads me to speculate that systematic inquiry into and documentation of one's own ways of forming, thinking, and writing transform teaching practice.  We need many case studies of classroom teachers so as to document and characterize such changes.

Martin (1987, p. 27), likewise, recognizes both the breadth of data in teacher-research and the need for its proliferation within the academy:

The rich and voluminous data – detailed observations, interviews, transcripts of talk, journals, letters, reports of all kinds, etc.–need to be analyzed, edited, and written up with interpretive comments, and they need to be presented for discussion to all sorts of audiences.

The appeal for greater numbers of teacher-research studies is a call for greater self-reflection of a truly active nature, one that will provide greater insights as more and more teachers recognize the potential lessons they might learn in their own classrooms.

This study documents the responses of a college-level freshman writing class to the student-centered pedagogy I attempted to enact. During the semester, I found the following five tenets of student-centered teacher research most helpful in my conceptualization and implementation of this work:

- Pedagogical goals always supercede research goals.

- The symbiosis of pedagogy and research serves both and creates learning opportunities greater than either could alone.

- Student feedback and conferences work to promote both pedagogy and research.

- The principles of Freirean empowerment apply to both students and teachers in their respective attempts to learn.

- Students' interaction with subject matter should take precedence over their teachers' subjective interpretations.

Via utilization of these principles during the planning and implementation of my study, I learned lessons about the following:

- The development of comfort and creation of community

- The negotiation of pedagogy

- The development of pragmatic participation

- My own faulty analyses of the classroom

- The benefits and hindrances of small group work

- Students' responses to peer review activities

- Students' experiences providing feedback to their teachers

For my students, the opportunities for growth laid in the personal connections they had to the development of their own class and the work they chose to create in it.  For myself, growth came through my emerging understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of my pedagogy, as expressed to me directly by those who were best suited to voice an opinion: the students, themselves.

I owe much to the pedagogical theories of others.  Such paradigms prepared me for my first classroom experiences and continue to influence my practice.  Learning from theory, however, without serious thought to its immediate application is like learning to ride a bike from a manual, without the use of an actual bicycle.  Until we are on the bike–or in our own classrooms–theory alone falls short of its potential to enlighten.  What I have sought in this study is the development of my own voice as "a maker of knowledge" (North, 1987).  Such an identity did not come easily for me, however, as critical self-analysis during my teacher training always seemed to begin and end with an assessment of my attempts to implement the pedagogical theories of other more prominent educators.  What was missing was the recognition that as a working

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educator myself, my own experiences had much to say about pedagogy, too. Often, these stories gain an audience by the water cooler in the teachers' lounge, but are afforded little other professional credence. Teachers too often, then, internalize the message that they are merely the implementers of the ideas of wiser, more prominent colleagues (North).

Critical self-analysis can also seem a daunting proposition due to the myriad responsibilities we already juggle as full-time teachers. One of the principle tenets of this study, then, is the relative ease of incorporating self-reflective data collection into a student-centered, response-oriented class. Not only does such a pedagogical orientation aid the students' growth, but the teacher, likewise, becomes a student, perpetually learning to be a better teacher.

Failing to recognize our prerogative as knowledge makers, of course, minimizes the profession, but interestingly enough, it also mirrors the failure of so many of our students to recognize their own prerogatives as knowledge makers in our classes. So many of our students, like so many of us, have bought into their role as educational automatons, receiving information and spitting it back out again, with little thought to the way such knowledge interacts with them personally. As I have attempted to promote my students' use of more critical thought during this study, I have also attempted to utilize more critical self-analysis, myself–the end result being a classroom where both students and teacher identify as learners.

CHAPTER 2

STUDENT-CENTERED PRACTICE


Friere in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Paulo Friere energized 20<sup>th</sup> Century academia and inspired legions of

educators by illustrating the complementary relationship between student-

centered lessons and academic success.  Friere's study participants were South

Americans from the peasant class, a people conditioned to top-down

ministrations from those in positions of societal superiority.  Friere recognized

that the educational opportunities provided to these students were dictated by

"distant bureaucracies without regard for local interests, resources, or needs"

(Elsasser & John-Steiner, 1977, p. 362).  Due to this disconnect between

educational administration and students, Friere's subjects suffered from

boredom, frustration, and apathy, the logical results of an arbitrary pedagogy,

disconnected from the reality of their lives.  In response to a pedagogy that

emphasized their needs, however, Friere's literacy students responded with

interest and enthusiasm (Friere, 2000).  When such pragmatic classroom

experiences were absent though, the peasants in Friere's studies responded,

instead, with silence and indifference.

The peasants in Friere's studies were an oppressed people who had

learned to expect personally arbitrary dictates from disconnected authority

figures.  Freire understood, however, that such apathy, if addressed, could be

changed to empowerment by enacting a liberatory pedagogy as "a response to

the experiences, desires, and needs of oppressed people" (Fay, 1975, quoted in Lather, 1986, p. 268).  The key to liberating the disenfranchised through education, according to Freire (2000), is finding personal connections between students and their subject matter.  This point is central to Friere's pedagogy and its practicality is as relevant today in North American classrooms as it was over a half century ago in Chile.

Like Friere's peasants, many American high school graduates are products of a system of education that too often fails to elicit their participation in meaningful and pragmatic ways.  A top-down style of education in which an authoritarian teacher disseminates information for students to memorize is the primary educational experience of many students when they enter college. Freire (2000) refers to this pedagogy as *banking*, indicating the storehouse of knowledge teachers possess, from which students are expected to draw their learning experiences.

The problem with banking is that, by failing to engage them in the design of their educational activities, it minimizes students' opportunities to make personal connections with their studies.  Too often, then, the response of teachers to their students' lack of enthusiasm is that students should want to learn simply in order to get a passing grade or because the teacher thinks the information is important.  This view, however, is a hollow and abstract motivation, too disconnected from the here and now.  By contrast, allowing students to draw from personal interests in the design of curricula engenders a personal connection with the classroom that gives education a meaning deeper than

merely that of a stepping stone en route to a diploma. Recognizing the importance of the pragmatic is crucial in education that seeks to engender critical and creative thought, and likewise, in students' application of pedagogical lessons to their lives outside the classroom. For Friere's students, who were otherwise politically voiceless, this was manifest in the opportunity to participate in the politics that directed their lives.

Those students of ours who fail to understand the relationship that education has to their lives, like the participants in Friere's studies, find education frustrating, leading to academic apathy. To exacerbate this problem, these students are often blamed for their own disinterest and made to feel incapable of academic pursuits. Too often, we educators fail to encourage our students' personal interactions with our disciplines, and then, ironically, act surprised when our students naturally fail to develop an interest in our classes.

## A Student-Centered Classroom

A negative view of education is created by the repetition of classes that fail to engage our students' potential for personal connections with our disciplines. As Elsasser and John-Steiner (1977, p. 357) write, "Educators and social scientists fail to consider that oppressed peoples have developed their stances toward dominant social groups in response to particular historical experiences." Participants in Freire's studies developed their apathy from experiences in a strictly authoritarian and hierarchical society. American students, likewise, learn to respond apathetically when their primary, secondary, and higher educational

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experiences are dominated by teacher-centered pedagogy.  How many secondary students do not even make it to college after learning that their personal interests are incongruent with the educational norms established by their schools?  Our students naturally become disinterested in the classroom when they learn that the key to academic success relies largely upon mimicking their teachers and accepting that their own ideas regarding their classes are, at best, inferior to those of their authoritarian teachers, and at worst, unwelcome–safest left unsaid.

Some students, of course, thrive in teacher-centered classes and find comfort in them.  This statement is not, however, to imply that such educational experiences are actually empowering–merely that students who learn to mimic their teachers succeed in a teacher-centered educational system that rewards such mimicry.  And while a product-oriented understanding of education may be congruent with success in many classrooms, the pedagogical goal of developing their voices too often shrinks under our students' larger priority of simply passing out of our classes.  As Boomer (1987, p.8) writes, "Even those students who succeed may be alienated from knowledge if they have not learnt how to 'own' their own investigations; if they still believe, at heart, that knowledge resides *elsewhere.*"

Using a liberatory pedagogy that calls into question our authoritarian teacher-centered tradition might, indeed, create discomfort in students who enjoy a history of academic success in banking-style classrooms, but as Blitz and Hurlbert (1991) point out, such discomfort can be broadening.  In a student-

centered classroom, those students who merely want to mimic their teachers are challenged to grow individually and develop their own voices, while students who experience discomfort in teacher-centered classrooms get the freedom to step out from under their authoritarian classroom experiences, allowing opportunities for both the traditionally successful and the traditionally disenfranchised.

Teaching in this manner "causes, perhaps requires, an uncomfortable state of mind – for students *and* teachers.  One source of the discomfort is in the attempts and failures of educators to acknowledge their own situation in the culture that we should encourage students and colleagues to resist" (Blitz & Hurlbert, 1991, p. 43).  Even recognizing the need for resistance, however, can be difficult, since the acceptance of authoritarian domination in education, as van Dijk (1993, p. 255) writes, is the very goal of such domination:

> Many more or less subtle forms of dominance seem to be so persistent
> that they seem natural until they begin to be challenged, as was/is the
> case for male dominance over women, White over Black, rich over
> poor….The minds of the dominated can be influenced in such a way that
> they accept dominance, and act in the interest of the powerful out of their
> own free will.

Teachers are in an extremely conducive position to dominate their students, and the more frequent the domination, the more conditioned our students become to being dominated.  As van Dijk (1993, p. 254) writes, "Dominance may be enacted and reproduced by subtle, routine, everyday forms of text and talk that appear

'natural' and quite 'acceptable'." Such dominance can be manifest in common classroom experiences like hand raising and assigned seating.

By requiring students to raise their hands before being given permission to speak by the teacher, the teacher establishes control in the classroom by establishing control of discourse. *Access* to discourse, likewise, decreases domination. van Dijk (1993, p. 257) writes, "[t]he management of discourse access represents one of the crucial social dimensions of dominance, that is, who is allowed to say/write/hear/read what to/from whom, where, when and how." Who gets to talk in class reflects who has power, and the person who controls talk has the greatest power.

The expression of power in the classroom can also be manifested in traditional linear grid pattern seating assignments, with the teacher sitting at the front of the room, clearly differentiated from the students in physicality, and, more subtly, in regards to power. By sitting among the students in a student-centered circle and opening up the discussion to whomever desires to speak, whenever they desire to speak, the teacher can resist these subtle uses of disenfranchising power. Circle-pattern seating and free access to discourse, however, are just two examples of student-centered pedagogical methodology.

Implementing a truly empowering class requires more than mere lip service and more than a rearrangement of the seating chart. As Hasbrook (2002) writes, liberatory pedagogy is disingenuous when it fails to recognize and counteract the inherent oppressiveness of the teacher's position. Embracing

such showy signs of liberatory pedagogy as circle-patterned seating assignments while maintaining an authoritative attitude is hardly empowering.

Creating a Liberatory Classroom

Apathy toward education is a problem best addressed in a radical move away from banking-style classrooms since such sites are complicitous in the problem of student apathy in the first place.  As McDermott (1977, p. 210) writes, "Unidirectional approaches cannot cure relational problems.  To reorder our relations with problem (students), we must first deal with the relations that have already been established."  These problematic relations are perpetuated by the disenfranchising influence of teacher-centered learning, making empowerment more likely to occur only after the disempowering authoritarian pedagogy, itself, is replaced by a more student-centered approach.  As Elsasser and John-Steiner (1977, p. 357) write, "[t]rue communication demands equality between speakers, and this often requires an alteration in current social relationships."  In order for teachers to enable the empowerment of their students, teachers must first recognize the debilitating effects of wielding too much power, themselves.  Recognition of this tenet, however, is only the first step.  Libratory intentions without accompanying actions, as Hasbrook (2002) writes, are mere verbalism, along the lines of innocuous cocktail party small talk.  It sounds good, but ultimately carries little weight.

One key way to empower our students occurs when we share our authority by opening two-way channels of communication via reciprocal dialogue.

Elsasser and John-Steiner (1977, p. 363) write, "When teachers and learners are partners in dialogue, a different conception of the processes of knowledge acquisition emerges".  When students view their teacher as a dialogic partner, the traditional classroom power differential is adjusted, and student empowerment is enabled.  To this end, Nancie Atwell (1982, p. 85) writes:

> We (should) stop focusing on presenting a lesson and evaluating its results and start observing our students in the process of learning, listening to what they can tell us, and responding as they need us.  As a result, a different relationship between teacher and student emerges.  The teacher-centered classroom becomes a community of…learners in which teachers and students are partners in inquiry.

Such activity welcomes students into a classroom with "real-life" applications, a classroom that belongs not only to the teacher, but to the students, as well.  Without authentic and regular two-way communication, though, the classroom remains teacher-centered, with classwork focused on the teacher's perspective.

The partnership engendered by reciprocal dialogue is perhaps best realized when students understand their right to disagree with their teacher.  Black (1998, p. 159) asks, "What would happen if students learned to challenge assumptions?  To offer a conversational gambit?  To answer questions with questions?  To draw attention to power structures and challenge them?"  Bleich (1988) writes that dissemination of teacherly authority occurs when students are enabled to speak their minds, particularly when such expression leads to disagreements with the teacher.  The right to disagree is, indeed, important if a

free and honest exchange of ideas is a pedagogical goal.  By eliciting students'
critiques of classroom practice, whether positive or negative, teachers promote
the development of a healthy critical voice, particularly as expressed toward
those of whom they should be most critical both in and outside the classroom,
their authority figures.  Since, as van Dijk (p. 256) writes, "most 'ordinary'
people…have more or less passive access to…teachers", the act of generating
discourse in class and with the teacher indicates empowerment via self-
identification as an original thinker.

Relinquishing our traditional authority in the classroom can certainly be a
frightening challenge for teachers since it necessitates an openness that can
create feelings of vulnerability, particularly when facing down a class full of
students conditioned to expect (and respect) a stoic authoritarian teacher.  As
Ray (1992, p. 183) writes, however, "a willingness to question assumptions,
challenge beliefs, and initiate change in the classroom" is necessary in enacting
a liberatory and empowering pedagogy, even when such actions threaten
teachers' own authority and pedagogical comfort zones.

Though minimizing teacher authority is of paramount importance to
liberatory education, it does not imply a total abdication of authority, either.
Indeed, since the teacher is institutionally responsible for developing curricula
and applying grades to students, such an abdication would be disingenuous.
Likewise, abdicating authority so that another classroom participant can assume
and abuse it is certainly not in the best interests of our students, either.

Teachers in a liberatory, student-centered classroom must walk a fine line, then, between overusing their authority and failing to recognize it.

CHAPTER 3

TEACHER AS RESEARCHER


Learning from our Students

In conjunction with the growth of their students, student-centered teachers also have the opportunity to grow within their classes.  By engaging with their students in honest and even critical dialogue, teachers create an opportunity to learn about themselves via the responses of their students.  Tinberg (1991, p. 40) notes, "Until writing teachers see things from the inside out, until we experience the process firsthand, we stand little chance of becoming keen observers of the classroom".  Seeing our classrooms from the perspectives of our students illustrates whether or not our liberatory intentions are successfully understood by the students, themselves.  Students' input, therefore, is invaluable to successful implementation of the pedagogy and provides teachers an opportunity to become learners in their own classes.

According to Lather (1986, p. 263), communicative reciprocity, "a mutual negotiation of meaning and power," is the key to creating a classroom where teachers and students alike are learners.  By sharing personal ideas with and eliciting feedback from their students, teachers communicate a desire to disseminate authority among *all* members of the classroom community, and through this process, move in status from stranger to partner in inquiry, allowing for an easier exchange of information among members of that community (Lather, 1986).  As Ray (1992) writes, the key to learning from our students is our

willingness to relinquish control.  Such reciprocity, then, makes the students

partners in the development and testing of the pedagogy that is supposed to be

empowering for them in the first place (Fay, 1977).

Research, as Boomer (1987, p. 9) writes, "is simply institutionalized and

formalized thinking.  It is doing self-consciously what comes naturally."  What,

though, is *teacher* research?  According to Henson (2001, p. 4), teacher research

is a "process by which teachers themselves critically examine their classrooms,

develop and implement educational interventions, and evaluate the effectiveness

of those interventions."  Bingham, Parker, Finney, Riley, and Rakes (2006, p.

682) define teacher research as "a vehicle for promoting meaningful teacher

reflection, developing teaching knowledge and expertise, and contributing to the

creation of a professional learning community in (the) school."   Good teacher

research, Ray (1992, p. 183) writes, "requires a willingness to question

assumptions, challenge beliefs, and initiate change in the classroom."  In

describing the teacher researchers in their study, Girod and Pardales (2001, p. 5)

write, "Through thoughtful analysis our participants imagined improvements in

their practice and engaged in the process of inquiry centered on problems and

questions grounded in what they valued most."  Ray (1992, p. 175) further

describes the successful teacher researcher as "an open-minded, inquiring

teacher who sees the classroom as an egalitarian community in which he or she

is but one of many learners."

Girod, Pardales, and Cervetti (2002, p. 14) stress the pragmatic nature of

teacher research in that it is:

1) "inquiry that teachers find more useful to everyday practice,"

2) "structured inquiry that is sensible, respectful, and useful to them as educators."

Mohr et. al. (2004, p. 23) stress the interactive nature of teacher research, describing it as "inquiry that is intentional, systematic, public, voluntary, ethical, and contextual." Teacher researchers, likewise, "strive to define, articulate, and elucidate the (classroom) context as a whole, to reveal the assumptions at work within the context, and to uncover the connections as well as tensions among elements of that context" (Mohr et. al., 2004, p. 25). Fleischer and Fox (2004, p. 259), too, focus on the personal nature of teacher research:

> Practitioner inquiry–done well–captures the essence of…classroom experiences: Students are recognized as individuals whose very selves are informed by the complexity of their multiple and diverse backgrounds and experiences; teachers are seen as contributing players in the intricate dance of the teaching/learning moment.

At its core, then, teacher research develops from real experiences in the classroom, recognizes the importance of human interaction, and seeks to discover practical solutions to pedagogical challenges.

Teacher research is still a relatively new academic movement, gaining significant momentum only within the last two decades (Wall, 2004; Bingham et. al., 2006). As the new kid on the methodological block, therefore, it has a lot to prove, particularly to those traditionalist skeptics, uncomfortable with a potential shake up of the more quantitative status quo.

Traditional educational research, though, *is* problematic and teacher research offers a reprieve.

> Studies which rely on (a traditional) approach, those that strip away context so that there is a single variable between control groups and experimental groups, those that try to create broad strokes about how students learn and how teachers teach, are by definition incapable of capturing what is essential to those of us concerned about the human complexity that is inherent in the learners in our classrooms. (Fleischer & Fox, 2004, p. 259)

To the teacher-researcher, the complexity of human interaction is central to the question of understanding the workings of the classroom. As Girod, Pardales, and Cervetti (2002, p. 3) explain it, teacher research exists within a "framework of care". And care for our students is, after all, why we seek to refine our classroom practice in the first place.

While its merits may be a compelling reason for pursuing teacher research, the implications of *not* using teacher research methodology when studying pedagogy are also meritorious. We teachers minimize ourselves when we routinely defer to theorists in trying to explain our classroom experiences. In doing so, the profession loses much insight and understanding that cannot be replicated by classroom outsiders (North, 1987).

> Teachers need not wait for inquiries to be initiated by others. They can ask the questions that arise from their own classrooms, can make their own records, collect their own data, and modify their teaching in

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accordance with what they find.  So much is there at hand.  (Martin, 1987,

p. 23)

The primary problem with our sole reliance upon theorists, and our reticence to

identify as theorists ourselves is that theory only paints a portion of the picture of

what it means to be a teacher.  Theory is, of course, fundamental in the training

and development of teachers.  Indeed, without theory, my own initial teacher

training, as well as my later understanding of both student-centered pedagogy

and teacher research, would never have developed.  Theory, however, must be

considered within the specific contexts which differentiate each classroom from

all others.  Without such a praxis, theory is merely implicit.  Addressing the

shortcomings of such a unilateral approach to education research, Girod,

Pardales, and Cervetti (2002, p. 6) write:

In our own experiences as teachers, education research is characterized

as over technical, distant from the realities and experiences of day to day

practice, and not particularly helpful in its conclusions.  Too often

education research is viewed as the province of professional researchers

acting toward distant goals such as theory development (and) knowledge

production.

Similarly, Bingham at. al. (2006, p. 683), in their study of teacher researchers,

describe the responses of their participant teachers to the concept of research:

Prior to the (teacher research) training, the teachers' exposure to research

had taken place primarily through educational research courses offered at

the master's-degree level.  The assumptions and procedures of what

came to be called 'capital-R' research were etched in their memories.

Many were intimidated and could not see how this type of research could

apply to their own situations.  The teachers' anxiety, however, gradually

diminished as they began to see that they could investigate questions that

were important in their local school settings.  As one teacher noted with

relief, "I've learned that this can be an individual project related to my kids

in my classes.  Whew!  Before today I was apprehensive and

overwhelmed because I thought I'd have to undertake a massive

schoolwide project, using all those 'big-R' research techniques."

This sentiment cuts to the heart of teachers' disenfranchisement from the act of

developing theory.  Like Friere's peasants, who failed to see the use of studies

that were disconnected from the lives they led, teachers discredit theory that fails

to reflect a realistic view of their own classroom experiences.  Without analysis of

our own experiences, theoretical reliance is like reading a *Cliff's Notes* study

guide rather than the actual novel it interprets.  The theories presented in such a

study guide might certainly be helpful to the reader, but, ideally, should be

consulted as supplementary support material, allowing for a more personally

meaningful and engaging learning experience to occur within the context of the

primary source material.  As teachers interested in solving classroom problems,

our primary source material should be our experience doing the work of teaching,

and our reliance on the pedagogical theories propounded by others should

supplement our own experiences, not supercede them.

Teachers are fundamentally pragmatic and want solutions or helpful ways

to conceive of their working contexts. Problems exist in schools or other

educative settings, and teachers work toward solutions everyday–most

commonly without the aid of education research. (Girod, Pardales, &

Cervetti, 2002, p. 7)

We teachers need to recognize the inherent worth of our own pedagogical

theories, based as they are upon our own classroom experiences and firmly

defend our communal prerogative as theorists.


## The Empowerment of the Knowledge Maker

Teacher research proceeds from the premise that our identities as teacher

and researcher are inseparable. As Ray (1992, p. 174) writes:

Teacher research challenges the conventional belief in the separation

between researchers (those who make knowledge) and teachers (those

who consume and disseminate it), (making for) an emancipation

proclamation that results in new ownership --- teachers' *own* research into

their *own* problems that results in modification of their *own* behaviors and

theories.

Such an emancipation is doubly important since the control of classroom theory

by classroom outsiders is disempowering to teachers. As Tinberg (1991, p. 39)

writes:

When an individual's experience of a thing is co-opted by theoreticians or

those who profess to be experts, a kind of deprivation, a loss of

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sovereignty, occurs. We in composition need to reconsider the

meaningfulness of the local and the particular.

Teacher research, then, is as practical for the teacher-researcher as student-

directed lessons are for students. Whereas students learn best when presented

with personally relevant lessons, so, too, teacher researchers learn best by

studying their own local classrooms. Whether the subject matter is composition

or pedagogy, both modes of development are contingent upon the personal

connection between the learner and the subject matter. Indeed, my own interest

in teacher research developed out of having witnessed the empowering effect

student-centered pedagogy has had for my students.

Addressing the potential empowerment of localized and self-initiated

inquiry, Berthoff (1987, p. 29) writes:

Educational research is nothing to our purpose, unless we formulate the

questions; if the procedures by which answers are sought are not dialectic

and dialogic, that is to say, if the question and the answers are not

continually reformulated by those who are working in the classroom,

educational research is pointless.

This is the primary reason why teacher educators today must have significant

classroom experience to find employment and must maintain their connection to

the classroom in order to keep it (M. Williamson, personal communication,

October 16, 2006). Such requirements, however, do not extend to all

educational researchers. Berthoff's argument in favor of self-study has

implications on both a macro and a micro level. Broadly speaking, research into

teaching is most relevant when it is performed by teachers.  On a more local

level, though, educational mandates that stipulate best practice are less

meaningful when generated by educational administrators rather than the actual

teachers who alone have the ability to temper theory with real-world applications.

Berthoff (p. 34) warns that unless theory, practice, and evaluation work together,

"practice gets gimmicky and theory becomes dogmatic and evaluation remains in

the hands of the Board of Education."  In order for teachers to have power over

their own practice, they need to reflect critically on that practice, and the theory

that drives it.  In other words, they need to be creators of knowledge via "self-

reflection, shared and lifelong learning, decision making based on data,

heightened expertise, and pride in helping to create a body of craft knowledge"

(Bingham et al., 2006, p. 682).  Otherwise, as North (1987) writes, teachers

remain merely practitioners of someone else's knowledge, whether that person is

a local administrator or a distant theorist.  By engaging in the creation of

knowledge, teachers gain the ability to put theory development in the classroom,

where it belongs (Ray, 1992).


<div align="center">The Pragmatism of Teacher Research</div>

Teacher research is unapologetically pragmatic, not only in its ability to

address the very real issues we each face in our own individual classrooms, but

also in its potential to make our classrooms more vital and engaging, for

ourselves *as well as* for our students.  On a basic level, as Cindy Myers says in

her interview with Betty Bailey, "Just to stand up there and teach and not to do

the classroom research makes the classroom seem boring" (Goswami, 1987, p. 3). Jones (1987, p. 61) pursues this idea further:

> When you do anything that's pretty much the same every year, then no matter how good your intentions are, no matter how good a teacher you are, there's a certain amount of stagnation that creeps in. I think that doing research, regardless of the project, having a new focus to what I'm doing, did a tremendous lot to ward off burnout. For me, the teacher research has done a good bit – I think I'd have to stay at it to get 'booster shots' – to ward off boredom, or contentment, or whatever it is.

Odell (1987. P. 158) similarly proclaims the merits of teacher research:

> As we continue to do research, we continue to grow. We continue to learn. Our work cannot become stale, because we are continually redefining it. And this process of continual redefinition and renewal helps us retain the enthusiasm and commitment that brought us into this profession in the first place.

Pragmatism is central to teacher research, as it is to student-centered learning. Both activities provide opportunities for empowerment and engagement in the classroom for teachers and students.

Martin (1987, p.24) writes, "The strength of classroom inquiry is that it anchors change in observation and experiment." Thus, the benefits of teacher-research are in the opportunities it creates for praxis, Friere's pragmatic connection between theory and its practical, real-life application. Lather (1986, p. 263) writes, "For researchers with emancipatory aspirations, doing empirical

research offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that the research process encourages people to change by encouraging self-reflections and a deeper understanding of their particular situations." When teachers see themselves as researchers, they have the opportunity to not only learn about the merits and shortcomings of their pedagogies, but also to apply these newly discovered realizations to their teaching, providing a very real test of their developing theory–praxis in action.

Teacher-researchers have the means to not only talk the talk of the empowering potential of self-reflective writing, but walk the walk, as well. When teachers become students in their own classrooms, they get to model for the class the type of self-directed learning they would like to see from their students. As Boomer (1987, p. 5) writes, "I submit that it is a relatively rare teacher who can teach (students) how to be researchers because it is a relatively rare teacher who *is* a self-conscious researcher." Teacher-research, then, is an excellent teaching aid in classrooms where self-critique on the part of the students is elicited. Goswami (1984, p. 354), likewise, notes, "Most of us who teach writing want very much for our students to be able to reflect upon themselves as writers: our chances of achieving that goal are much enhanced if we have gone through the process ourselves." In their study of teacher researchers, Bingham et. al. (2006, p. 685) quote Pamela, a study participant, regarding her classroom-based research: "The kids knew we were doing a research project that entailed their doing their project, and we all learned together about the value of research." When I, myself, model for my students my study of something as personally

important as my own teaching, my status in the classroom adjusts and I become not only the teacher, but a fellow learner, as well. After all, if I, the teacher, fail to recognize my inherent worth as a knowledge maker, I can hardly expect a better self-image from my students.

Heath (1983), likewise, notes that the empowerment that accompanies reciprocal learning between students and teachers often manifests itself not only by the teacher becoming a student, but by the students becoming researchers. Though many students are challenged by the prospect of developing their own personally relevant writing topics, Tinberg (1989, p. 82) notes that "in using ethnography, teachers send a clear message to students that their communities are worthy of study even in, of all places, the classroom." When students get to actively experience this lesson as participants in a teacher's study, they learn first hand about locating topics of inquiry locally.

Sharing Knowledge via Teacher Lore

Key to encouraging both student-centered methods of teaching writing and teacher research is the promotion of teacher lore, which North (1987, p. 22) defines as, "the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which practitioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught." Downing, Harkin, and Sosnoski (1994, p. 17) offer a slightly more utilitarian definition: "Lore is a group of stories about teaching practices that 'work' at solving local and contingent teaching problems." Lore is the result of teachers realizing their potential as makers of knowledge, and it attains credibility because

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it is knowledge coming from within our own community–*for* teachers on the front lines, *from* teachers on the front lines.

> Faced with oppressive and demanding situations, teachers invent tactics to alleviate some of the oppression and pain their students experience, and, when these are successful, they enter the lore of teaching practices. Such pedagogical innovations are born out of self-reflection and self-criticism.  (Downing, Harkin, & Sosnoski, 1994, p. 15)

Without the activity of sharing one's theory with other teachers, lore loses its transformative power (Odell 1987).  Unfortunately, as Boomer (1987, p. 6) writes, teachers too often fail to recognize the inherent worth of their pedagogical theories:

> Unlike the scientist, the writer, and the mathematician, they tend not to be *deliberate* and *self-conscious* applied scientists or artists.  If they were, then school staff rooms would be alive with "theories" and the intercollegial hum of reflection on, and surmise about, the ongoing work in the "laboratories".

Ironically, though, the classroom time demanded of full-time teachers provides them with myriad opportunities to develop theory, but little time to devote to publishing them.  As we teachers understand the merits of lore, however, and support its development via regular interaction with fellow teachers, we stand to learn much about teaching, regardless of our full-time status in the classroom.

The Inherent Credibility of Teacher Research

Classroom research comes more naturally to the teacher, as an active participant in the classroom, than it does for researchers from outside the classroom community since, as Goswami (1984) writes, teachers have an authority in writing about education that outsiders cannot claim.  According to Lather (1986, p. 356), this authority derives from their ability to "observe closely, over long periods of time, with special insights and knowledge", which, likewise, allow them to "know their classrooms and students in ways that outsiders cannot."

> To teach, teachers must generate hypotheses about how best to teach the next concept, how best to provide materials, how best to control, how best to arrange and order the syllabus, and so on.  They are to this extent action researchers in teaching.  This is where they have knowledge beyond that of any outside student of education.  (Boomer, 1987, p.6)

The best way for a classroom researcher to conduct inquiry is to engage thoroughly in the activities of the classroom, and the best way to be a participant in a dynamic classroom, if not as a student, is as a teacher.

> (We) have a responsibility to be actors, thoroughly, in the classroom scene.  That means, in part, writing with our students and immersing ourselves in the very activities that we set in motion in the classroom. Why is this important?  I believe that the difficulty that many teachers have in understanding why some things in class work and others don't, of merging the local detail of classroom practice with overarching theory,

begins with an inability to see–to really see–from the inside out.  In the

dialogic relationship between theory and practice, one cannot achieve the

first without thoroughly and genuinely engaging in the second.  That

means getting one's hands dirty.  (Tinberg, 1991, p.40)

A researcher from outside the classroom community, even a participant-

observer, will never really attain the status of the teacher in a classroom, and,

thus, will fail to experience the breadth of connections that the teacher shares

with the students.

The chief characteristic of this kind of data is that the documentation

(descriptions and records) are made by people who were present at the

time, and who can, therefore, describe experience as it was lived.

Firsthand accounts differ in important ways from reports made by people

who were not there, or were not part of the community. (Martin, 1987, p.

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The difference between the practitioner and the non-practitioner lies in the

practitioner's opportunities for site specific applications of theory–praxis, in other

words.  This same reasoning can be applied to a comparison of student

responses to pedagogy and faculty-observer evaluations.  Active, long-term

participation in a community provides members with insights that are impossible

for single-class observers to achieve.  This assertion does not question the

potential benefits of evaluations from those outside the classroom community; it

merely seeks to stress the myriad benefits of eliciting student responses to our

classes throughout the semester.  While faculty observations are typically made

early in the semester, giving the teacher an opportunity to adjust unsuccessful pedagogies, student critiques are gathered at the end of the semester and read only after the class is completed. While this may still provide a learning opportunity for teachers, the opportunity to adjust pedagogy in a specific context is lost. The timing of such assessments affords no opportunity for the teacher to adjust questionable pedagogy during the *current* semester to facilitate the *current* students' learning.

Utilizing unofficial student responses throughout the semester is a powerful means of learning our pedagogical strengths and weaknesses. Creating a classroom, though, where critical evaluation from students is encouraged requires a willingness on the part of the teacher to step back from the safety of the traditional role of classroom authority figure (Ray, 1992). Though certainly a daunting proposition, this can be made easier by learning from the experiences of fellow teachers–the actual practitioners of theory–as they attempt and document their own teacher-research studies. As Martin (1987, p. 21) writes, "Classroom teachers have been the hewers of wood and drawers of water in education, and it will take time for them to learn that it is they who are in the best position to initiate inquiries into learning and to gain the confidence to develop this potential." This study seeks to support our collective identification as developers of theory by adding another story to our growing number of teacher research studies. To this end, these first three chapters have presented the theoretical framework for my inquiry. In chapters 4, 5 and 6, I will share the methodologies employed in collecting and analyzing my data.

CHAPTER 4

DEVELOPING MY IDENTITY AS A TEACHER RESEARCHER

Prior to attempting my own self-studies, I was encouraged by Bishop's

(1999) writings on ethnography, in which she advocates a method of educational

research that is as unobtrusive as possible, taking place entirely within the

context of the class being studied. Though Bishop (1999) impressed me with her

arguments in favor of researchers as permanent members of their research

site/classroom communities, I was skeptical of my peers accepting my joint role

as teacher and researcher. I felt compelled to reject the legitimacy of my own

personal learning experiences as a teacher in deference to those of the

published composition scholars I held in such high esteem. Ironically, I found in

myself the same self-minimizing behavior that so often troubles me when I

witness it in my students–the subjugation of their own creative thoughts in the

classroom in deference to those of their teachers.

A self-minimizing orientation is typical, Goswami (1984) writes, as

teachers too often subjugate themselves to better-known educational theorists

and refuse to consider their own educational theories as valid. *I* certainly worried

that as a mere unpublished teacher, myself, others would belittle my desire to

identify as a knowledge maker, and not merely as a practitioner of someone

else's knowledge. I expected to be labeled a self-aggrandizing academic social

climber, unwilling to accept my place on academia's food chain, which, as North

(1987) describes, is glorifying to theorists but condescending to the rank and file

teachers on the front lines.  As Downing, Harkin, & Sosnoski (1994), likewise, write, blind ambition to theory minimizes teachers by excluding them from the academic club of knowledge makers, thereby widening the gap between published educational theorists and the larger population of full-time teachers. The inferiority teachers feel as knowledge makers severely minimizes the profession's potential for growth by failing to capitalize on the unique position we occupy as those best suited to conduct educational research.

The most difficult aspect of designing my own teacher research study was dismantling my self-identification as a "mere" practitioner, constantly beholden to my academic betters.  Though my feelings of inadequacy as a knowledge maker were troubling, the ability to better empathize with the teacher-induced academic self-doubt that plagues so many of my own students made the experience cathartic, providing me a touchstone through which I was better able to understand my students' academic insecurities.  To this end, I recognized the inherent similarities between my students' reticence to take a more active role in my classes and the pressure I felt to discount my own classroom observations in favor of theory espoused by more prominent academics.

My traditionalist skepticism of the legitimacy of self-study was a psychological hurdle I have had to overcome, but as I continued to read the works of teachers who had conducted studies in their own classrooms, I became more and more comfortable in that role.  One study that was particularly helpful in developing a positive view of self-study was Haridopolos' 1997 dissertation, Critical Pedagogy in a Freshman Composition Class.  I was excited to see the

similarities between the research methods Haridopolos used to collect data from his students and my own student-centered pedagogy, and I was invigorated to read about a fellow Ph.D. student's positive experiences with self-study in collecting data for his own dissertation.  Seeing my pedagogical methods performed in Haridopolos' study gave me confidence that the study of my *own* class could provide trustworthy tools for dissertation research, as well.

Developing an identity as a teacher-researcher begins with learning about the successful teacher research experiences of others, but develops more fully as we conduct teacher research studies of our own.  As a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, the worth of teacher research becomes more evident as we engage in it more completely.  As Ray (1992, p. 185) writes, teacher research builds confidence in teachers as they understand "the practical sources of their own knowledge".  The activity of teacher research provides an opportunity for teachers to identify as knowledge makers, and such identification gives credibility to the activity, itself.  By undertaking such inquiry, we strengthen our resolve to pursue it further.

Personal Experience as Pilot Study

In order to describe my study, I need to begin by describing my classroom experiences, which is apropos since teacher research studies are, by nature, grounded in real-world experiences.  Indeed, my own interest in this area of scholarship developed only after I experienced the positive results of student-

centered pedagogy in my own classrooms–well before I had any inkling of actually undertaking and documenting a formal study.

I began teaching after completing a Masters Degree in Secondary Education.  My experience in graduate school provided me with a solid foundation upon which to begin my work as a teacher.  I was to learn, though, that, important as they are, the pedagogical theories I studied in graduate school were only the first step in my teacher training.  Once I actually *began* my work as a teacher, my education, likewise, resumed.

My first job was at a public high school where I taught for three years. Though my administrative evaluations and responses from students were very encouraging, I taught a state- and district-prescribed curriculum that elicited little participation from my students in terms of its development.  While I believed strongly in the importance of mutual trust and respect in the classroom, I was troubled by my inability to engage students who were simply disinterested in the unilateral, top-down style of education I was enacting.  During these three years, I also taught writing and literature courses at a private college.  Though I was not contracted to enact any particular pedagogy in these other classes, my only experiences in education had been in a traditional, authoritarian style, so again, my students were duly tested on material that I assigned, and again I realized that my students' opportunities for authentic involvement in the class were overshadowed by my authoritarian control.

A few years later, when I began work on my Ph.D., I was exposed to an

abundance of student-centered theorists, whose work suggested pedagogies through which my most disenfranchised students might find practical reasons to apply themselves in my classes.  Blitz and Hurlbert's book Letters for the Living (1998) was instrumental in my understanding of the possibilities of a student-centered, liberatory pedagogy.  Through this book, with its admonition for students to write about what they are "burning to tell the world", I developed a better understanding of how powerful school could be for students when they are asked to apply their own real-world issues to the work of the classroom.  Blitz and Hurlbert showed that students could write about very sensitive and personal topics in class, topics that could make an otherwise personally irrelevant class meaningful.  Letters for the Living also modeled teacher research as a method of professional development, a revolutionary idea that inspired me with feelings of personal empowerment.  I began to understand that I, an unpublished teacher, could actually identify as a theorist and not merely a follower of other, more prominent theorists.

From my appreciation of the work of Blitz and Hurlbert, I followed my interest in liberatory pedagogy to the work of Friere.  Two years into my Ph.D. program, when I was granted a position as a Teaching Associate (or T.A.) the works of Hurlbert, Blitz and Friere were instrumental in developing my courses. During my first year as a T.A., I taught three sections of a standard first-year writing class.  In these classes, I used daily dialogic journals to communicate interpersonally with my students and elicit their responses to classroom activities. We wrote and shared these journals because I wanted my students to see

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themselves not only as receptors of knowledge, but as creators of it, as well. I believed that by soliciting and acting upon their input, I would help to engage them in the class and allow them to see it as something more meaningful than yet another academic hoop through which they were expected to jump. While this started out as a means of eliciting student participation, it turned out to be as much an aid to me as it was to them. Through these reciprocal exchanges, I received an endless stream of helpful information directly from my students, allowing me to better understand their responses to the class, and, thus, alter my lesson plans to better meet their needs. The fact that I was learning from my students on a daily basis allowed for immediate application of my developing knowledge. We shared dialogic journals and had three 20-30 minute private student-teacher conferences over the course of the semester. In these written and verbal dialogues, I asked students to share their responses and concerns regarding our class. I tried to respond honestly in these exchanges and attempted to use the experience to minimize my role as authority figure, sharing with my students the development of pedagogical activities.

From my incorporation of reciprocal, dialogic journals and private conferences, I began to search out further opportunities to elicit student participation in meaningful ways, leading to my solicitation of classroom volunteers to take notes during large group discussions. Following each class, I journaled about class participation in the discussion, and, on the following day, met with the student volunteer to compare notes and discuss our different views of the class. This had the two-fold benefit of making me aware of analyses that

might not have occurred to me, while furthering my goal of sharing authority by letting the various volunteers know that I sincerely valued their opinions.  My current study has grown directly out of my interest in these pilot experiences.

Maxwell (1996, p. 45) writes that pilot studies have the potential to develop *interpretation*, "an understanding of the meaning that…phenomena and events have for the actors who are involved in them, and the perspectives that inform their actions."  My prior experiences studying my students' responses to my student-centered pedagogical efforts have provided *me* with a sense of interpretation.  I have sought to formalize that understanding in my dissertation in order to share it with a wider audience.

A Method of Teaching Writing in a Student-Centered Manner

Rather than assign students topics for writing, I ask my students to write about something that fills them with a deep emotion, a "Pow-Bang" experience as King (2000) puts it.  I hope that my students, through studious reflection of their own personally relevant topics, might leave my class with a deeper understanding of these issues, and, in the process, understand the powerful potential of writing as a means of developing their thoughts and expressing them to others.  My goal is not to force transgressive political action, but to engender political thought.  Political action is meaningful only when it is self-motivated, growing out of self-determination, not teacher-directed coercion.  Friere's concept of praxis, the connection between abstract thought and physical action, cannot be imposed, but must be engendered in an atmosphere that allows transgressive

political thought to develop naturally.  The primary directive in my writing

assignments is that the students be sincerely interested in their topics.  Good

writing comes from a pragmatic inspiration to write, and that comes from within

the writer.

Drawing upon students' feelings, interests, and opinions can, of course, be

a challenge pedagogically.  Some students, numbed by years of subverting their

passions in the classroom, simply claim to have no particular interests worth

writing about.  Oral discussion is a means by which teachers can overcome this

obstacle, and help students to develop their interests.  Once ideas are expressed

verbally, they can be informally written down, with the ultimate goal of creating a

formal text (Vygotsky,1978).  Such activities provide the learner with

opportunities to "gain an appreciation of both the difficulties and the advantages

of expressing their thoughts through the written word" (Elsasser & John-Steiner,

1977, p. 365).  Blitz & Hurlbert (1991, p.5) exemplify the way this process can

play out:

> The two of us tell our students that remarks, even just the *sounds* people
>
> make – groans, laughter, "mmmhmms," which they might feel are stupid or
>
> are interruptions in the lesson plan – will work to make someone else think
>
> and say something meaningful in response.  And we point out that getting
>
> dialogue started is a difficult and valuable – perhaps a loving – thing for
>
> anyone to do.

The use of such discussion prompts in the classroom promotes the creation of a

legitimate community, actively interacting with one another rather than sitting

passively.  Such a group dynamic exemplifies the student-centered goal of promoting students' active engagement with their subject matter.

Applying Vygotsky's theories to their own classroom, Elsasser and John-Steiner (1977, p. 367) document their use of verbal discussion as a means of pre-writing:

> Each assignment came preceded by a discussion of several topics: what is or is not shared knowledge; the information needs of the intended audience; the peculiarities of the writer's experience; and the linguistic prejudices of the projected audience.  Group discussion of these facts helps learners make their thoughts explicit.  It also produces an understanding of the sources of thoughts and the ways in which thoughts change in the process of critical examination and analysis.

Such discussions apply the pre-writing lessons of traditionalist classrooms, but do so in a natural manner of communication with others, which is, after all, the ultimate goal of writing.  These discussions also serve to enlighten writers to issues they might not otherwise have considered, but which *have* occurred to their classmates.  Such experience is broadening, modeling for the writer not only the diversity of the audience, but also the breadth of ideas that exist outside of one's own consciousness.

Elsasser and John-Steiner (1977, p. 367) continue their examination of the liberatory classroom to extend the merits of oral discussion to peer review of completed drafts:

Through a process of oral discussion in which ideas are continually

broadened and fleshed out, constant attention to the types of elaboration

required for an unknown other are emphasized.  Immediate feedback from

both the instructor and the students' peers indicated the success or failure

of the written effort.

Activities like oral communication, which engender personal investment in the

class, can lead to the production of actual writing, the same goal of more

traditionalist banking-style, teacher-centered composition classes.  Recognition

of audience and whether or not a link was established between the writer and the

intended audience is, indeed, as important to the liberatory classroom as with a

more traditional classroom.  With bilateral oral communication, however, students

benefit from providing their opinions to others, while taking an active role in the

class and learning in a very straight-forward manner whether or not their ideas

were successfully expressed in their own writings.

While most writings in my class are entirely student-designed, I do take a

teacherly prerogative to prompt certain writings on particular topics that relate to

my goal of student empowerment.  In order to share power with my students, I

prompt regular journals from them regarding their opinions on the development of

our class.  These journals are heuristic, as according to Odell (1987), they help

students begin thinking about and making meaning out of our class.  A similar

prompt asks students to examine their educational histories.  As van Dijk (1993,

p. 259) writes, if teachers "are able to persuade or otherwise influence their

audiences, we also want to know which discursive structures and strategies are

involved in that process." Prompts regarding students' prior educational experiences can teach us about our students' opinions regarding pedagogical methods they have experienced in classes prior to our own. Though such a topic is clearly teacher-directed and of less interest to some students than others, it is still a topic *all* students can relate to simply by their shared identities *as* students. By initiating such a dialogue, I am able to instigate a discussion of how their educational histories affect their appreciation, or lack thereof, of a class that attempts to minimize teacher authority, thereby prompting self-reflective consideration of their roles as students.

In conjunction with writing, I also utilize a student-centered reading activity in my classes. Since I recognize the need to encourage reading in conjunction with writing as a means of becoming a better writer, I require my students to read books over the course of the semester. I do not, however, assign the books, myself. Instead, these readings come entirely from the students. Each student recommends at least one favorite book and provides a synopsis of it to the class. A list is compiled and students choose books to read from the list. They read these books in tandem with others who have chosen the same one, and share their opinions with both their group members and myself via journals and small group discussions. Ideally, this exemplifies for the students the experience of reading in a group, sharing ideas, and negotiating meaning. If students become disinterested in their books, they are free to stop reading, choose another book, and join another group. This activity allows me to apply my professional

knowledge of composition education in a student-centered context, where students make the choices.

## Questions that Prompted my Study

As Odell (1987, p.137) writes, "The best research question is the one that arises from an area in which we are interested and with which we have experience." My particular experience with the class I worked with in this study, however, was nonexistent prior to the start of the semester. Since this study is student-centered at its core, the development of questions prior to the commencement of the semester was a somewhat artificial gesture. As one class is always different from another, so, too, are the questions that organically arise among different communities of students, leaving the teacher unable to question what she or he has not yet experienced. However, based upon my experiences with previous classes and understanding the traditional requirement of dissertation researchers to formulate specific questions prior to commencement of inquiry, I developed the following questions prior to the start of the semester:

- How do my students respond to our student-centered college writing class?

- Given their experiences in secondary school, responding to assigned writers' topics and avoiding sensitive issues, how comfortable are the students when asked to choose their own writing topics based upon issues of personal relevance and importance?

- How do the students respond when I, their teacher, share personally relevant and important issues and how does this affect their feelings about both the class and me?

- Given their prior experiences of authoritarian hierarchies in education, how do the students respond to my attempts to minimize my role as authority figure in the classroom?

Questions with far more specificity developed after class began, with daily interactions prompting inquiry. Giving precedence to the questions posed above, however, as opposed to questions that arose organically via later interactions with my students, would have failed to recognize the practical nature of this study and positioned my research goals ahead of my students' educational interests.

As the semester developed, I recorded the following questions in my research journal and pursued them with my students:

- How (can I) prompt discussion from non-talkers?

- Are (quiet, non-participatory students) more comfortable in small groups, as opposed to large groups? Do they participate more in small groups?

- Non-coerced participation develops through a genuine interest in the subject matter. Journaling choices, likewise, elicit genuine interest in these writings. How do non-participatory students respond alternately to (teacher-) directed prompts and (student-) chosen writings in discussions? How do they respond to directed readings? Is it fair to grade students upon participation in discussions of directed readings

considering that particular readings will elicit more personal responses from some students and less from others?

- It would be good to document my initial impressions of students and compare them with the depth of understanding I later experienced due to getting to know them through their writings. (What changes occurred in my own analyses of the students based upon their responses to my journal prompts?)

- How can I cultivate reader-response comfort in class?

- Why do both the students who are experienced in student-centeredness as well as the students who are new to it appreciate this particular class? For those with experience, how much experience have they had with (student-centered classes)?

- Have students had reader-response experience? What was it like? How did it work successfully? How did it fail?

- Is it a choice of subject matter that enthuses the students or the subject matter, itself? When I suggest a prompt, why do students choose to write to it when they could just write one from their own interests?

The latter collection of questions, having developed organically over the course of the semester, felt more authentic to me and certainly more directly related to the class, itself. Pre-developed questions can certainly provide a point from which to commence a study, but teacher-researchers need to be willing to adjust and revise their questions as truly relevant questions arise.

CHAPTER 5

LOGISTICS OF MY STUDY


Quick and easy answers to educational challenges are not readily found in teacher research because the classroom is a complex site, converging as it does the myriad personalities of all of its participants.

Whereas much of the media and many legislators today seem concerned with Research writ large–research that they believe can tell us definitively how students learn to read and write–we teachers are concerned with a more pervasive and, we would argue, vital kind of research, that which can capture the stories of our students, stories that we know will not only help us understand how to work with the students we have right in front of us right now, but also how to make sense of those multiple stories in a larger context. For those of us who are teacher researchers, it's the immediacy, the complexity, the humanity that matter. And teacher research, as we well know, is more than just teachers telling stories. It is intentional, systematic, and capable of creating both theoretical knowledge and systemic change. (Fleischer & Fox, 2004, p. 259)

Teacher research, hodge-podge as it may look to the uninitiated, requires careful planning and implementation. What follows in this chapter reflects the "intentional" and "systematic" methodology I employed in the design of my study.

Grounded Theory and Recursive Analysis

This study is an emergent design involving constant review, comparison, and revision of various data, which provides a confluence between my regular self-analytical work in the classroom and my work as a self-analytical researcher. Through this process, I have tried to develop grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), defined by Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 4) as an explanation of "what is happening in terms of those involved in the situation…based on exchanges in which interviewees can talk back, clarify, and explain their points". I recognize that without consulting my students in the evaluation of my strengths and weaknesses, my self-analysis will fall short of its potential to enlighten. Indeed, my students' responses to my pedagogy are what give my study any weight it might have.

As I began to collect more and more data, cycling through it provided an opportunity to test assumptions and recognize changes in both my students and myself. Maxwell (1996, p. 77) points out, "The experienced qualitative researcher begins data analysis immediately after finishing the first interview or observation and continues to analyze the data as long as he or she is working on the research". Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 242), likewise, note, "Data analysis must begin with the very first data collection, in order to facilitate the emergent design, grounding of theory, and emergent structure of later data collection phases". Immediate data analysis allowed me to use the grounded theory I developed to inform subsequent data collection over the course of the semester and, thereby, discover recurrent themes.

In order to locate thematic categories by which to analyze and chart data, I used Strauss' (1987) method of breaking individual data down into their myriad themes. The themes I expected to find at commencement of the study were:

- students' comfort in class

- students' experiences in writing classes

- students' expectations of the class

- students' enjoyment of class

- students' opinions of the productivity of the class

I discovered themes and categories within my data through reiterative study via reading, writing, and conferencing (Strauss, 1987; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Macrorie, 1987). The process began when I collected students' responses and began to record themes. As common themes began to emerge, I returned to earlier responses to check that I did not miss any such themes earlier in the semester, before they began to emerge en masse. Odell (1987, p.157) provides a framework by which to pursue such an inquiry:

As we continue to observe students, patterns will begin to emerge, and we can test and refine our understanding of those patterns if, as we observe each new discussion, we ask such questions as these: What is going on in *this* discussion? Is there anything that contradicts the generalizations I am beginning to form? Do I need to modify these generalizations? Do I need yet another category to account for as much data as possible?

For myself, the process basically worked in the following manner:

1) collection of data

2) analysis of data: drawing themes from the data

3) collection of data

4) analysis of data: testing old themes and drawing new themes

5) continuous repetition throughout the study

The themes that emerged from this methodology affected the course of the class and, subsequently, the development of future responses.


## Trustworthiness

A student-centered classroom is a reflection of the subjectivities of its members. My research is, likewise, a study of these many subjectivities, including my own. My most prominent subjective bias reflects my identity as a teacher: I believe my class to be productive for my students. As such, I would like them to understand my pedagogy and participate supportively with one another and myself in its development. I am certainly biased in my opinion that my pedagogy is productive and beneficial to my students, but I am also aware that my students come to my pedagogy from a different perspective. Understanding my students' responses to the pedagogy I enact is the nature of this study. As a teacher, there is much to learn from such self-inquiry. As a researcher, however, wishing to share this experience with the larger academic community, the trustworthiness of my data naturally comes into question.

I have chosen to frame the traditional and objective question of validity instead as a question of trustworthiness, a term more congruent with my non-traditional and admittedly subjective study, as the very nature of the classroom

as a group of individual subjectivities precludes the possibility of describing a single objective reality.  As Geertz (1973, p.36) explains, in a study involving thick description, "we are creating a reading, an interpretation…This is not objectivism or the only way to truthfully see something.  Interpretation is key." Without objectivity, though, framing my study in terms of the traditional concept of *validity* is problematic.  Trustworthiness is a concept that relates better to the inherently subjective, post-positivist nature of teacher research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

> Teacher researchers challenge a number of assumptions underlying the traditional (positivist) paradigm in education: that research should be objective, controlled, and decontextualized; that the researcher should be distanced and uninvolved; that research is always theory-driven and must be generalizable in order to perpetuate theory building; and that knowledge and truth exist in the world and are found through research.  In direct contrast to the assumptions underlying the positivist paradigm are the assumptions underlying teacher research: that researchers are active participants in this context; that research should be conducted primarily to inform and improve practice as well as to advance theory; that some research can profitably focus on the detailed and the particular --- on one classroom, even one student --- in the search for insights into specific learning environments; and that knowledge and truth in education are not so much found through objective inquiry as socially constructed through

collaboration among students, teachers, and researchers. (Ray, 1992, p. 175)

Teacher research, as a post-positivist paradigm, recognizes objectivity in research as a specious concept. My own opinions are only part of a much more complex interpretation of the workings of the classroom. And as a teacher researcher, I recognize that my opinions are reflective of my biases, particularly as a teacher, inherently incapable of assuming the responses my students might have, situated as they are in a different position of power within the educational establishment. Key to understanding the responses of my students, then, is the activity of compiling thick description, the creation of interpretations of events from the thickly compiled data of myriad sources (Geertz, 1973).

My expectation is that trustworthiness develops from the thick description I compile via:

- triangulation of my four methods of data collection
- cyclical analysis of my data
- the variety of my data
- the variety of the myriad subjective perspectives of all members of the classroom community, including myself.

Triangulation of my data occurs as I analyze the cyclical data collected from each data collection method against the data from the other three. As I triangulate my journals, the journals of my students, the reports from student-secretaries, and the data collected from individual conferences, I infer themes, which I, in turn, attempt to confirm through further cyclical data gathering and analysis.

Brodkey (1987) writes that key to triangulation is the participation of multiple informants throughout a study.  By incorporating the observations of my 25 students regarding classroom activities, variant viewpoints are made available for comparison and triangulation achieved.  Member checks, defined by Lincoln and Guba (1989) as the regular solicitation of research subjects' responses to an emerging theory, also provide a means by which I attain triangulation, as I correct or verify my own early opinions regarding my students (Comstock, 1982; Lather, 1986).  Maxwell (1996, p. 94) calls this "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning of what they say and the perspective they have on what is going on."  This dialogic reciprocity is a regular part of my pedagogy and, thus, benefited my research while occurring naturally in my class.

Teacher Lore and Narrative Research

Teacher research grows out of the practical need of teachers to refine their practice.  It is research at the grass roots level, occurring in our classrooms– the front lines of education.  Likewise, the *expression* of teacher research necessitates a practical approach, as well.  An ideal lecture hall for teacher research stories might be the teachers' lounge, during lunch or at the end of the day.  Such places are a breeding ground for teacher lore and practical narratives steeped in real-world experiences.

Classroom inquiry is, by nature, unpredictable, rife with difficulty in trying to understand all the "subtle assumptions and slippery assertions enacted in the

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daily exchange of information" (Trimmer, 1997, p. xii).  A solution to the

unpredictability of socially constructed knowledge, according to Ray (1992), is

the use of narratives in teacher research.  While Trimmer (p. xii) recognizes

narration's "partiality of knowledge," he finds merit in the useful knowledge it

produces in its goal to be accessible to many, not merely those who actually

enjoy a more traditionally academic style of writing.  "For many practitioner

researchers, there is a need for a strong narrative voice to place themselves and

the story of their question into the research, to put the human face on research,

and to tell the tales of this work in ways that feel lived and present rather than

detached and distant" (Fecho, 2003, p. 287).

North (1987) writes that lore, likewise, should be framed in practical and

functional terms in order to maximize its effect.  As Rankin (1990, p. 19) writes,

"Lore is usually formulated in a narrative logic: I did this in my classroom.  Then,

as a result, my students did that."  North (1987, p. 29) expresses a similar idea in

regards to identity development, both for oneself, as well as for the outside

community: "When I do these things in this way, I declare myself a practitioner."

Such anecdotes are key to the strength of lore and strongly support the use of

narratives in its development.

> In its most potent form, lore exists as a set of anecdotes implying tactics or
> strategies.  These anecdotes exist in their richest form as stories about
> human interactions.  By configuring them, lore achieves theoretical force.
> (Downing, Harkin, & Sosnoski, 1994, p. 16)

Considering the traditionally positivist orientation of research, however, it comes as little surprise that for many, configuring anecdotes into narratives is a far cry from providing them with credibility.

> Even when teaching anecdotes appear in journals dedicated to composition or rhetoric, they are often dismissed as mere gossip of no theoretical value.  In our view, however, the anecdotal character of lore is what gives it its theoretical value.  (Rankin, 1990, p. 19)

Such dismissal of lore is indicative of the positivist bias expressed so often by teacher-researchers.  We teachers need to assert our identities as knowledge makers, and lore, manifested via narrative research, has great potential to help us do just that.


Benefits and Hindrances of Audio and Video Recorded Data

During the planning of this study, my concern over pedagogically arbitrary research methods exemplified itself in the question of whether to record my classes and private conferences.  van Dijk (1993) makes a compelling argument for the audio and video recording of data as a means of compiling a more detailed socio-linguistic analysis, but I was also aware of the potential discomfort a recording device might create during class discussions in which students' personal opinions are solicited.  The question of taping classes, therefore, could not be answered by me alone, but only after a jointly made decision by the classroom community.  This does not imply a consensus opinion, however.  My concern over student comfort is not relegated merely to those in the majority, but

to each student, individually.  If one student felt inhibited and withdrew from class discussions, that would be one student too many.

I decided to put the question of taping class discussions before the class, itself, and should *any* student reply that she or he would be inhibited or uncomfortable being taped, that would be reason enough not to do so.  To do otherwise would minimize the student or students who prefer not to be taped.  By seeking the students' opinions regarding this topic and acting upon our communal decision, I was able to model for them my sincere desire to protect their interests and share decision-making power in our classroom community.

Taping private conferences was handled in much the same manner.  Like taping class discussions, individual conferences were taped only if the student consented and did not indicate any loss of comfort or candor from the intrusion of the tape recorder.  During the conferences, the students were given access to the tape recorder and were told to control it at will.  If students became uncomfortable with the recording, they were able to stop the machine; this occurred twice during my data collection due to the sensitive nature of those particular discussions.

One last concern regarding taping relates to my desire to create a truly practical study of realistic value to average teachers–those educators on the front lines, teaching full time, day in, day out.  The self-inquiry I model here is an activity I hope to be of benefit to all teachers, after all, not merely those undertaking dissertation research.  In utilizing tapes, however, I recognize the risk of alienating my fellow teachers, who could justifiably question the act of

taping their own classes and conferences due to the overwhelming time required to transcribe such documents.  In Bingham et. al.'s study of teacher researchers, the authors reported that many of their teacher-subjects lacked the requisite time to implement research projects (2006).  The average teacher, for whom this study is intended, is probably not engaged in dissertation research, but *is* likely concerned with the development of better pedagogy.  Suggesting unrealistic and particularly time-consuming methods of inquiry runs the risk of alienating the audience for whom this study is intended.  What's more, there is a plethora of reliable data available within the actual work of a student-response oriented classroom; introducing pedagogically arbitrary methods of data collection is simply unnecessary (Martin, 1987).  A better use of our time would be the regular repetition of note taking and journaling during and following classes and conferences, as well as the thoughtful consideration of our students' verbal and written comments.  Conducting teacher research is a formidable challenge, as North (1987) writes, particularly when the methods of data collection are incongruent with our student-centered classrooms and the significant time constraints of a full-time teacher.  Likewise, the potential for professional growth, as presented in this study, is not reliant upon transcribed conversations, but upon methods much more congruent with the normal demands of teaching, organically defined within the context of an actual, working classroom.  The following chapter illustrates the pedagogical tools that doubled as data collection methods in my study.

CHAPTER 6

DATA COLLECTION METHODS


My methods of data collection for this study were the same pedagogical

tools I experimented with and honed in my five earlier freshman writing classes

over the prior three semesters.  From the early planning of this study through the

completion of the data collection, my foremost priority was the education of my

students, which always took precedence over any research goals of my own.  As

the premise of this study attests, however, student-centered writing and teacher

research can be symbiotically related so that pedagogy serves the learning

opportunities of both students and teacher.  Therefore, nothing pedagogically

arbitrary occurred during the semester; in order to safeguard my students'

interests, I did not include any research tools that would serve only my research

and not my students' educational objectives, as well.

Much of my research methodology is similar to that which Haridopolos

used in his 1997 teacher-research dissertation at New York University.  Since

both he and I attempt a student-centered pedagogy, his research methods, which

also worked concurrently as pedagogical tools, served as examples for those in

my study.  In explaining the connection between pedagogy and methodology,

Haridopolos (1997, p. 8) writes:

> The very activities the…teacher promotes in the writing class—a heuristic
>
> and collaborative orientation to writing and reading where students' voices
>
> are central—are the very activities which enable the teacher-researcher 'to

get at' students' interpretive constructs.  In this way, teaching and research are one.

My own pedagogical take on Haridopolos' student-centered "heuristic and collaborative orientation to writing and reading" involves:

- prompting journal entries regarding students' responses to class and their educational histories,

- holding large and small group class discussions, during which I take detailed notes,

- soliciting class secretaries to take detailed notes during class discussions and meeting with them afterwards to share our opinions of what transpired,

- conferencing individually with each student,

- using self-analysis of their roles as students to prompt more formal writing about their student identities.

These pedagogical activities are methods of teaching writing through which my students learn the empowering potential of writing, and which, as tools of data collection for my own inquiries, provide thick data from which I, too, learn much about my practice.

## Dialogic, Reciprocal Journaling

My data collection methods initially developed from my classroom use of dialogic journals. Typically, I ask my students questions related to their educational histories, as well as questions drawn out of the actual activities with

which we are engaged.  Topics might include problems they are having in class, recommendations for changes, favorite or tedious prior educational experiences, and specific critiques of and personal connections to our classroom activities. Primary to this activity, though, is the need for personally relevant writing topics. Students are never forced, therefore, to write on a teacher-chosen topic, but are always free to journal about any topic with which they wish to engage.  I respond to every journal in order to verify that I have understood them correctly and extend discussions when it seems natural to do so.

Prompting students to write about their prior educational experiences is beneficial for both the students and myself.  They have the opportunity to step out of the role of recipient of education and assume the role of critic of education, which, as Bleich (1988) writes, is empowering in itself.  Such writings help me, as well, by illustrating teaching methods the students either appreciate or dislike, thereby allowing me to better adapt my pedagogy to the students, making more efficient use of class time.

By asking my students to respond to our class activities via journal entries, my goal is to express my interest in eliciting their participation in the development of the class.  As the students understand their role in this process, I am better able to minimize the authoritarian pressure they might otherwise expect from me.

Private Conferences

Private conferences provide another opportunity to learn from my students, albeit in a more personal setting.  Since these conferences are a

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requirement set forth by my university, the students in my study were not asked to attend any pedagogically arbitrary data collection sessions.  This kept with my goal of utilizing only legitimate pedagogy to collect data.

I use these conferences to address issues that students raise in their journals, as well as any other concerns they choose to bring up.  Like the dialogic journals, conferencing provides me an opportunity to share authority with the students and illustrates for students my desire to make the class more successful by taking into account their responses.

In recognition of van Dijk's (1993, p.260) concern that teachers enact their power via conferences by controlling "the occasion, time, place, setting and the presence or absence of participants," I try to share my power when I have the opportunity.  Though I provide the students with a list of possible times for conferences on particular days, I also tell them that should none of my times fit their schedules, we can negotiate a time that is mutually convenient.

In an effort to extend my pedagogical goals of promoting empowerment via self-directed learning experiences, I ask the students to set the agenda for the conferences.  Since conference topics derive from the actual activities of class, students are instrumental in developing potential topics of discussion. Topics might include students' feelings about our class in general, their opinions about the books they choose to read in small groups, and their experiences writing their short stories, personal narratives, and other papers we complete during the semester.  Prior to the conferences, I ask the students to journal

regarding potential conference topics, and these serve as springboards for our private discussions.

Conferences are documented in journal entries by both my students and myself and are later compared as a follow-up analysis of the conference. Following conferences, I ask students to answer Black's (1998, p.166) post-conference questions, to better understand their responses to the conferences:

- What was the most helpful comment (if any) that I gave you?

- What did you enjoy most?

- Were there times when you were lost, confused, angry, frustrated or surprised, or particularly pleased?  Please provide me with as much detail as you can about these moments.

- What can I do in the future to help construct a better conference? What can you do?

- Do we need to set up another conference?

These, I analyze along with my own conference notes to better understand, as Black writes, what my students are actually saying and whether I am actually hearing it.  Lather (1986) notes that subsequent conferences are necessary as a means of probing more deeply into students' initial responses, so when further clarification of the students' conference journals is necessary, I do so in later journals or conferences.

Student Secretaries

During large group discussions, I elicit student-secretaries to document the responses of the members of the class.  After the class, I journal regarding my impression of what transpired during the discussion.  Then, on the following day, the secretary and I conference for 30 minutes to exchange ideas regarding the class and to allow me to clarify the secretary's notes.  This provides me the opportunity to express to the secretaries that their opinions regarding the class are valid and important to me.  I, likewise, gain a better understanding of the class session, as I see it from a student's perspective.  Each 30 minute post-discussion conference satisfies half of the university's private conference requirement, allowing for a data collection method that exists symbiotically within my pedagogical plans and which expects nothing more from my students than would be expected of them in any other freshman writing class.


Recursive, Cycled Journals

To provide recursive analysis of my data throughout the semester, I kept a daily journal of observations, in which I wrote my impressions of each class immediately after it ended.  The journal entries were also helpful in providing a juxtaposition to the reflective journals of my students, allowing me to compare and relate my reflections alongside those of my students.  These journal entries, pedagogically useful as a means of better understanding the dynamics of my class, were equally useful as research memos.  Becker (1986) writes that, for the researcher, memos are personal documents, written solely for one's own use.

The informal nature of memos makes them an easy and hassle-free means of documenting ideas throughout the data collection process, providing the opportunity for regular, systematic reflection and self-critique (Mills, 1959; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Maxwell (1992, p.78) writes that memos "not only capture but facilitate analytic thinking, stimulating analytic insights." Without memos, potential research ideas might get forgotten, but with them, ideas can be developed. Memos are also retrievable, so ideas that develop temporally can be traced back to their sources later on. They are an extremely user-friendly method of balancing the emergent development of theory with our significant pedagogical responsibilities in the classroom.

In Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of this document, I attempted to lay the theoretical foundation for my study. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I have sought to describe the methodology I utilized in my data collection and analysis. The remaining text, which follows, grows out of the theoretical and methodological groundwork already presented, seeking real-life learning experiences in a real-world setting. What I have sought in the entirety of this study, in other words, is praxis: the utilization of theory towards personally relevant growth.

CHAPTER 7

WELCOME TO OUR CLASS


In Jane Wagner's play, *The Search for Signs of Inteligent* [sic] *Life in the Universe,* a group of extra-terrestrials visit Earth to learn about what makes humans tick.  In their education, they are introduced to, among other things, a can of Campbell's tomato soup and the Andy Warhol painting of Campbell's tomato soup; they have trouble differentiating between the two.  Later, they take in a play.  Though they love the experience, they miss the play itself.  Instead, their attention is focused on the audience.  The responses of a group of people coming together in a community simply blows them away.  When asked later to describe their theatrical experience, they reply, "The play was soup.  The audience–art."

My study, like Wagner's ETs, recognizes the transformative potential in the collective responses of a community of people.  Though my students are in a classroom and not a theatre, the sentiment is the same.  What comes from me in the classroom is really just soup; how it is received by the community of learners, however, is art.

As my study draws heavily from the responses of my students, it reads, perhaps, rather voyeuristically.  You, the reader, will be a fly on the wall of my first-year writing class, learning, as I have, from my students on various days throughout the 25 class sessions that made up our semester.  The days I have

chosen to discuss are included here due to their confluence with the progressive

stages of development I witnessed in my students.  Those stages include:

- The development of comfort and creation of community

- The negotiation of pedagogy

- The development of pragmatic participation

I have also analyzed student data in regards to:

- Deconstructing my own faulty analyses

- The benefits and hindrances of small group work

- Student analyses of the class

- Student responses to peer review activities

- Students' experiences providing feedback to their teachers

Perhaps the element of this study that most excites me is the point that all

the data have been compiled from the normal workings of a student-centered

writing class.  There is so much for us to learn when we open ourselves up to the

lessons of our students, and for the student-centered teacher, these lessons are

there for the taking.

While the utilization of volunteer student secretaries, private conferences

with each student, and my own research journal served as data collection

methods for this study, far and away the most useful data were the journals my

students wrote every day.  For this daily assignment, I always had at least one

potential topic in mind, developed from questions that arose naturally via class

discussions and writings.  Since I wanted to eschew the inclusion of activities that

might have seemed personally arbitrary to my students, I always allowed them to

compose journal entries on any topic of their choice.  As it was, however, more often than not, the students expressed appreciation at having their responses solicited and chose to share with me their opinions of the questions I posed.

Much of the analysis in this study is from the students.  It is their analyses, after all, that I, their teacher, seek to understand.   My student-centered orientation precludes me from making hasty judgments about the workings of the classroom, particularly as I do not believe that my opinions are inherently any more important that those of my students.  In fact, as a writing teacher who values peer response, I come to my students' responses to pedagogy with the respect of a writer seeking criticism from his peers.  So on behalf of my students and myself, welcome to our class.

CHAPTER 8

DECOSTRUCTING MY OWN FAULTY ANALYSES


*Author's Note: Much of the data compiled here comes from informal journals my*

*students and I wrote in class.  These are not "finished" pieces of writing and*

*therefore contain grammatical error and a certain clumsiness of expression.  I*

*have preserved them here in their original condition in order to maintain their*

*authenticity.  In places where I am concerned that grammatical error might*

*impede understanding, I have added the notation [sic].*


Perhaps the single most important reason to study student responses to

class is the opportunity such activity affords to debunk our own faulty

assumptions.  As a student-centered teacher, I recognize the inherent

shortcomings of the teacher's traditional role as sole leader of the class.  For one

thing, it is incredibly easy to misread signs and situations in the classroom, and

doing so can have devastating results on the development of a trusting and

productive community of learners.  Soliciting student input, therefore, is very

important when making judgments about classroom experiences.

One example of correcting my own misperceptions occurred early on with

Herbie.  From my daily class journal of Day 2:

During a Writing Center workshop, I had to ask Herbie to stop talking with

Tom when another student had the floor.  Though I empathize with

anyone who isn't inspired to take part in a somewhat arbitrary workshop, I

had to insist that these guys behave respectfully toward another student. I

went up to them and told Herbie to pay attention since another student

was talking. They both became quiet.

Since this was only our second day, I was developing early impressions of my

students, and my impression of Herbie at this point was not good. When I asked

him to pay attention during class, he gave me a belligerent look. I feared then

that he might be a student with whom I would have daily altercations.

By the sixth class session, however, I experienced a different side of

Herbie. On that day, we engaged in a large group discussion regarding our

earliest vivid memories. This discussion was part of a writing assignment meant

to illustrate the importance of finding personally relevant topics for writing. From

my daily class journal of Day 6:

I was really glad to have had so much participation today. I was also glad

to have had Herbie take such a vibrant role in the class. I had had to ask

him to be quiet during our writing center workshop on day two, and he had

given me a look that seemed confrontational at the time. Of course,

neither of us knew one another then. After class today, Herbie came up to

my desk and jokingly made a comment about his wild and crazy life. This

bit of casual chat really said to me that he was in league with me now, and

that he felt very comfortable and respected me.

When we had that chat after class on Day 6, I thought to myself, "I have nothing

to worry about with this student any longer." Teachers are often faced with the

quandary of balancing classroom management and discipline against the

development of congenial relationships.  After Day 2, I was at a crossroads with

Herbie.  Had I made a quick judgement about what had seemed to me his

belligerent attitude, I might have dealt with him more sternly from that day

forward.  Though doing so might have asserted my authority as classroom

manager and disciplinarian, I could have lost the opportunity to experience the

congenial relationship that later developed.

While my experience with Herbie illustrates the dangers of making

unilateral judgements regarding student behavior, judgements regarding

academic performance can, likewise, be aided by the utilization of student

responses.  On Day 3, we discussed an assigned reading.  The students were to

share with the rest of class the most interesting point from the homework.  No

one was required to speak up in the discussion, but afterwards I asked for a

journal entry addressing why students either spoke or kept silent.  Carla wrote

the following:

> I noticed that during class, I didn't say much.  Okay, lets be honest, I didn't
>
> say anything.  However I came here excited about this discussion
>
> because while I was reading the book I realized that loved it and had to
>
> make myself stop reading so that I wouldn't be ahead in the discussion.
>
> What frustrates me the most is that I waited during the discussion for the
>
> perfect moment to bring up my point of view.  Unfortunately that moment
>
> never came.  The girl that actually sat right next took my most favorite
>
> point and the young man that sat next to Mr. Boozer took my other point.

By the time the discussion was almost over, I had had so much to say and

hadn't anything at all.  I felt so stupid and almost foolish.  Next time I think

I'll jump right into the conversation maybe even start it off instead of

waiting.  Oh well, I guess you live and you learn.

Prior to reading Carla's journal entry, I had assumed that the silent students had

failed to read the assignment and therefore had nothing to say.  In her journal,

Carla corrected my assumption and educated me to some of the potential

feelings of my students regarding class discussions.  Had I made a decision

about the students based upon my own assumptions, I would have had a

negative opinion about what I later understood to be perfectly logical behavior.

Another episode from the semester further illustrates the educational

potential of requesting students' opinions in order to clarify confusing moments in

class.  On Day 14, I suggested that we begin taping our class sessions for the

purpose of my data collection.  When I asked for feedback regarding this change

in classroom procedure, Tom responded that such an intrusion might inhibit

some students' participation.  I accepted Tom's concern and said we would

shelve the idea for the moment, at which point the class surprised me by

breaking into laughter.  The following is a research memo I wrote for myself

regarding this incident:

Why did my students laugh when I said that we wouldn't tape the class on

account of Tom's suggestion that it might inhibit certain students from

participating?  I'd like to know if this might be indicative of their surprise

that I would simply change the plans so casually based upon what a

student has suggested.  Or maybe I'm way off.  I'd like to hear from them what their analysis is though.

I decided to ask the students to address the issue of the laughter during the next class session.  The following is from my journal of Day 15:

I asked my students to write about one of three possible prompts, one of which was to explain why they thought there was laughter when I agreed with Tom that we shouldn't tape class discussions.

Dineen responded that the class's laughter might have been a sympathetic reaction to Tom's opinion:

I think the laughter caused by the suggestion of taping a class was from us not expecting Tom to say anything about.  Then when he did say that people might be less willing to talk, we realized that that was probably true and what we were thinking, so we laughed.

Ted's response echoes Dineen's in his recognition of the popular, though otherwise unstated, opinion voiced by Tom:

The changing of your plans was funny because I don't really think anyone really wanted to say to much when the tape recorder was on.  When Tom said, it was funny because I'm sure a lot of people were thinking the same thing but they just didn't want to say it.  Then when you changed your plans real fast it came across as you basically saying "screw it" as like oh well will [sic] do something else.  It seemed you really didn't mind it.  All of this tied into one thing that made it funny.

Kayla, likewise, suggests that the laughter developed from my willingness to discredit the idea so quickly:

> I didn't have a problem with the taping, but I can see where he was coming from, about everyone possibly being less talkative. I think the reason we all laughed was because you changed your mind so quickly or that you changed it at all.

The last part of Kayla's response raises the question of her expectations of me, her teacher. She tells me that simply changing my mind was funny, suggesting perhaps that such behavior is atypical in her prior experience with teachers. Alice and Matt write responses similar to Kayla and Ted, but provide a more analytic explanation of the humor inherent in my willingness to change plans, addressing why such a response seems both atypical and funny. From Alice's journal:

> I don't think that it (taping in class) was a problem I just agreed with Tom that more people might clam up and not talk. I don't think that they were laughing at you, I think that they were just surprised by how quickly you had changed your mind, and it was shocking. Most teachers once they say that they are doing something, they stick w/that.

Matt echoed Alice's point about the class's surprise at my abrupt change of plans:

> The events of the "laughing day" are not as clear as some; probably because a wander mind usually does not remember as well as most. But anyway, when my mind came back to my body I caught just the tail end of

the conversation, which was "Blah, Blah, Blah, Oh…maybe we shouldn't

do that then." "HAHAHA," from the crowd, and I joined in because I

thought the moment and tone of the statement was unreal. Most teachers

would never admit to a wrong decision. And the tone of the realization

was priceless. Good times to remember.

The students, here, are raising an important point–one I will address more fully in

Chapter 15. Namely, their prior experiences with teachers have been less

collaborative than the experience I sought to create this semester, making this a

rather novel classroom experience for them and one which I would have to ease

them into and teach them about. I was, after all, requesting collaboration and

candid communication from students who were expressing their expectations to

sit quietly and take notes.

Carla and Jim took the responses of Alice and Matt a step further by

providing a broader context from their experiences with other teachers. From

Carla's journal:

Throughout my entire education, I have been told what to do and how to

do it by my teachers. My teachers have made me feel as though the only

opinion that was of importance was theirs. I guess the reason I laughed at

the situation with Tom is because you immediately changed your plans

because of one of us. Although now I realize that you have expressed

your interest in our opinions, at the time it seemed very much out of the

ordinary that a teacher would not only listen to a student's opinion but

base their decision off it. I actually now appreciate your consideration to

our feelings and opinions because I don't believe we ever received that much respect in high school.

From Jim's journal:

Throughout my education experiences the student is always told what to do by the instructor. All tasks and assignments that the student is given seem to be forced upon by the instructor. As much as students complain to the professor, they don't care what the students opinions are, they are going to keep the task. Well when you said that you weren't going to tape us because Tom said simply not to. It was just abnormal and I believe that was the cause of laughter. You did not hesitate when making your decision, you simply just stated, "Lets not do it." Due to the unfamiliarity of the situation people reacted to the situation with laughter.

The laughter incident was never troubling to me, merely a bit confusing, as I did not expect the loud peel of laughter that followed this particular exchange with Tom. Asking students for clarification of a confusing classroom incident, however, clarified an otherwise unclear situation. In the process, I learned something valuable: that the question of taping aside, my students appreciated my willingness to change my plans based upon their responses.

My students' educational opportunities always took precedence over my research goals during the semester, which is why I was concerned in the first place with potentially inhibiting their participation by introducing a research tool that would be of benefit only to me. The journal activity written about here not only cleared up the confusion over the laughter but also affirmed my commitment

to student-negotiated curricula by informing me of the appreciative way such a pedagogical stance is received by the students, themselves.  Such expressions of one's student-centered orientation support the creation of community by elevating the status of the students while presenting the teacher as a conversational partner, willing to engage in a give and take exchange of ideas. The following chapter further examines the development of community in the early days of this semester.

CHAPTER 9

DAYS 1 & 2:

DEVELOPING COMFORT AND CREATING COMMUNITY


Thus far, I have attempted to exemplify the pedagogical perks of using student-centered classroom practice in conjunction with self-inquiry. Those examples were drawn from different points during the semester, when such inquiry was useful to the clarification of otherwise confusing incidents. In order to benefit from our students' candid responses later in the semester, however, we needed to establish a response-oriented classroom early on. On the first day of class, my goal was to break the ice with my students and try to disarm whatever negative expectations they brought with them to class. As interpersonal communication is the essence of a peer-response oriented writing class, developing a supportive and cohesive classroom community is key to our productivity. That said, however, experience had taught me that many students enter my classes with negative expectations, bred from embarrassing and minimizing experiences in their previous writing classes. Such a negative predisposition is apt to work against my goal of engendering active participation.

In order to create a sense of comfort on Day 1, I asked the students to share something interesting about themselves. We then wrote informal journals on this topic as a means of developing our thoughts prior to sharing them in discussion. In order to facilitate the eventual discussion, we wrote our names on notebook paper, folded them into A-frames, and placed them on our desks,

which were arranged in a large circle seating pattern.  This allowed everyone to look at everyone else, facilitating our familiarization with both faces and names. From my personal class journal of Day 1:

> We went around the room, introducing ourselves by sharing something interesting.  I started us off by telling about my undergraduate major in theatre and my experience in professional theatre.  I shared that I had had a wonderful time, but that eventually I wanted more security in my life and went to school to become a teacher.  I then chose the first name on the list and asked him to tell us something interesting.  He then chose the next person and the process went on until the end of class.  Though I had made a point of expressing the importance of students speaking up and taking part in the class discussions, I was blown away when five students…actually spoke up during other students' introductions to ask questions and extend the discussion.  They were Dan, Jenna, Tom, George and Ann.  I had said earlier that I wanted us to become comfortable in speaking with one another in large group discussions, but I also said I understood that for many, this might seem difficult to do on the first day.  I was, therefore, thrilled to actually have real participation on the very first day.  *I will have to ask these five students what made them feel comfortable in speaking up and joining the discussion on the first day, anomalous behavior even for well into the semester.*

In my journal, I italicized the sections I intended to use as future journal prompts. This facilitated with ease the later act of retrieving such prompts for use in class.

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I had expected students to be shy on Day 1 and draw as little attention to themselves as possible. As it was for my class over the course of the semester, however, sitting in the back of the class was never an option since we arranged our desks in a circle seating pattern, ensuring all members geographic positions of equality. Seats were not assigned, nor did I sit in the same area from day to day. I hoped this would aid in my desire to create a more level playing field, lowering my traditional teacher status by eliminating the teacher's traditional geographic position in the front of the classroom.

On Day 2, I started class by asking the students to address their expectations for the class. I also asked the five students who participated in more dynamic communication on the previous day to write about that experience. From my daily class journal of Day 2:

> I assigned the following journal prompts related to the first week of class: "How comfortable do you feel with the prospect of talking in class and taking part in discussions? If you added comments to the dialogue on (Day 1), were you nervous at all? What made you feel comfortable in adding to the chat? If you didn't talk, can you tell me about your feelings?" I specifically requested that the five students who spoke out during our discussion from the first day address that participation, as they went beyond the call of duty in adding to the discussion. I want to know why they felt comfortable talking in front of everyone else, particularly when so many of their classmates wrote in their journals that talking out loud in class made them nervous and uncomfortable. If I can better understand

why these students felt comfortable on Day 1, perhaps I can help other students to feel more comfortable, as well.

By instigating student responses to class, I wanted to foreground the semester with a manifestation of my desire to incorporate my students' input into the development of classroom activity. By learning what made students either comfortable or uncomfortable regarding active participation, I developed a better understanding of how to promote such activity.

Jenna, one of the five more extroverted students from Day 1, writes:

I really enjoy taking part in discussions. I get really nervous when it comes to talking in front of others, whether it is a few people or the whole class. It has always been something that really gets me nervous. But I think that the only way I can overcome this is by doing it more. The more I talk out loud in class and participate the more comfortable I will feel, or so I think. When I made a comment in class, yes it made me nervous, but it pertained to the military and that is something that I am interested in and I can make a conversation out of. When it has to do with a comfortable subject for me, I am more comfortable to talk about it in front of people, because I know what I am talking about.

Jenna makes an important point here regarding the need for personally relevant subject matter in class discussions. If a pedagogical goal is to engender community and participation, then personal connections need to be drawn between student and subject matter.

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Tom, another of the extroverted students from the discussion on Day 1, writes:

> On the first day of class, we took part in a dialogue to meet one another. I personally enjoyed the experience. I enjoy meeting new people which also gives the classroom a more comfortable atmosphere.

Tom's journal entry seems to suggest that by sharing personally interesting information in a group discussion, we might minimize the discomfort so many students seem to carry with them on the first day of a new class. Not only might such an activity minimize the discomfort of being put on the spot in front of a room full of strangers, but, for students like Tom who appear to be less intimidated by strangers, such an activity might simply be enjoyable. Dan, another extroverted speaker from Day 1, writes:

> Holding a discussion in class is something that I enjoy. I absolutely loved my junior year English class due to the fact of discussion. We didn't just read and write, we discussed topics and opinions as well as ideas. I am a talker and like the idea of sharing with other people. I was not at all nervous when adding to the discussion in class. I am very comfortable talking in front of people and a class full of peers. I asked the questions because I had some curiosity and wanted an answer. I got what I wanted.

Referring to the questions he posed to other students during the discussion, Dan suggests that some students are naturally predisposed to more overt participation in class. He also, however, suggests that by having had similar experiences before, he comes to such activities with a productive and willing

attitude. Evidently, this is a pedagogy that Dan appreciates, and being a student, his opinion of pedagogy means a great deal to me. Who other than students, after all, have such a breadth of experience *witnessing* pedagogy?

My interest in the development of comfort and participation in class, however, does not begin and end with my most participatory students. I am also, of course, interested in the opinions of the students who merely shared their journals, as required, but did not offer any other comments in the discussion. Of these students, Alexander echoes Dan's comments regarding his own positive classroom experiences:

> As this is a class with a lot of discussion, I think I am going to enjoy this class quite a bit. My AP History class in High school was the exact same way as this one will be, where we talk about many issues, discuss and debate them and then write a paper on it….After my AP History class in High School, I am perfectly comfortable talking in-group discussions. My only hesitation becomes trying to form my own opinion quick enough to add to the conversation at hand. As long as the topic is something I know at least a small amount or I am interested in learning, I find adding to it or asking about it pretty easy, but it does take a little time for me to warm up to the other class mates just to get to know them a little.

Alexander makes some important points, here. First, like Dan, he relates a positive experience from his past, when he took a similarly designed class, in which regular classroom discussion accompanied writing assignments. Since Alexander received this pedagogy positively in the past, my resolve to engage it

in the present is bolstered.  Secondly, Alexander echoes Jenna's comments regarding the necessity of having personally relevant topics in order for a classroom discussion to flourish.  This tenet of student-centered pedagogy illustrates the principle that such an orientation is beneficial not only for developing a connection between our students and our subject matter, but in creating a productive and engaging classroom community, as well.  Alexander's third point is that without having first established a supportive community, participating in a class discussion is very challenging.  By utilizing name tags and personally selected writing topics, I tried to support the development of our community by increasing personal engagement and familiarity with one another.

Similar to Dan's comments, Herbie writes:

I am pretty comfortable about talking in front of class except for the first day because I did not know anyone in the class, so I was a little hesitant about participating….Now that I feel a little more relaxed about talking in front of class, because I noticed that some people have some of the same interests as me.

Herbie illustrates, here, the relationship between finding solidarity with fellow classmates and feeling free to express his opinions.  Though theoretically, I believe that developing community is important in prompting participation from students, Herbie's comments provide support from an actual student.

Kayla, likewise, indicates the importance of compassion and respect in developing a classroom where discussion can develop freely:

I think that the class will be interesting, and I feel that I'll like it, everyone

seems to be nice.  I like the fact that we will have the chance to talk about

whatever it is that we are working on at the time.  I believe it is a good idea

to let everyone share whatever their feelings about our work, but I am not

a very outgoing person and the only concerns I have about the

discussions we will have in class is that I have a tendency not to join in on

conversations because of my quiet attitude but I will try to work on that.

Kayla's appreciation of "nice" classmates raises an important point regarding

student-centered pedagogy.  By being less authoritative and more democratic,

the teacher can model for the students the type of supportive behavior that is

expected.  This is certainly a pedagogical goal of mine, so I was encouraged to

read such a sentiment from a student.  Similarly, Betty wrote:

I feel that we will all be able to express our ideas by doing free writings,

and having class discussions.…I am known to be a shy student at first.  I

have the feeling this class is going to give me the opportunity to express

my opinions more.

Alonah, likewise, indicates a concern regarding her predisposition towards

shyness, but also expresses a sense of comfort, developing from the classroom

environment:

This seems like a pretty laid back class that I will not be stressing out over.

Somewhere I can feel confident and comfortable about doing my

work…The only worries I really have are those of speaking up and getting

up in front of the class, I am a very shy person.  So I guess I don't feel that

comfortable with taking part in discussions.  Maybe as we get further into

the semester I will.  My feelings are that I would rather just think about

things in my head then [sic] speak out loudly.

Though Alonah expresses her reticence in speaking out during class discussions, she also indicates a willingness to open up more as the semester proceeds.  This was a response I was happy to receive, indicating as it does a positive attitude towards my desire to engender lively class discussions regarding our work throughout the semester.  Positive attitudes breed positive attitudes, and if the teacher's attitude is impersonal and arbitrary, then students are given little reason to behave otherwise.  Student-centeredness, with its inherent respect for the opinions of others, provides teachers a means of modeling the positive attitude they seek from their students.

Several students addressed my prompt regarding their expectations by relating stories of negative experiences they had had in previous classes.  Like the stories of positive classroom experiences, negative experiences also have an educative potential for the teacher.  By sharing their perspectives on pedagogies that did not work for them in the past, the recipients of pedagogy can inform the creators of pedagogy of its efficacy, or lack thereof.

Chloe writes:

I am not used to writing everyday, in high school we only had a couple

major papers to do each year.  I am also not used to having peers review

my work as well as the draft process, so it should be very helpful.  I was

pleased to hear that you would be letting us pick the topics from time to

time.  I found it hard to write papers in high school for the simple reason

that it was subject matter that I was not interested in.…At first, I was

uneasy about the fact that we were going to have to share our work with

others, but then I began to look at it as a new learning experience.  I'm

very shy at first but if I feel comfortable then I am able to open up.  I think

this class will help me to do this and it will hopefully carry over into my

other classrooms.

Chloe's dislike of assigned writing topics suggests that such assignments are of

an uninspiring and arbitrary nature, an opinion with which I concur.  Simply

coming to this conclusion on my own, however, without input from students, is

itself teacher-centered; my appreciation of student-chosen writing topics attains

more credibility after receiving such analysis from a student.

Carla also drew from experiences in earlier classes in her analysis of this

one:

This particular class seems to have a more laid back atmosphere than my

last English class.  I appreciate the idea that students are encouraged to

talk to one another rather than talk only to the professor…I feel that talking

in class and being able to express how I feel about something is

important.  I like the idea that if I feel a certain way about a topic that

someone is saying, I can just have an open discussion with them.

Carla indicates that "open discussion" among all members of the classroom

community is a novel experience in her educational background, and one that

offers a welcome change from the status quo.  Jenna, like Carla and Chloe (and

in addition to her earlier comments), writes about her difficult experiences in past English classes:

> I have never really enjoyed English throughout my high school years. So now that I am in college I am hoping that this class will make me actually like taking English. I think that this course seems to be really interesting and getting everyone involved…My grades in English have always been low, even when I tried hard. I would really like to become a good writer, because in the past it has always been a weak point for me…I am worried about the writing. I have never been a good writer and I get worried about it.

Jenna expresses trepidation here regarding her writing, but indicates an optimistic attitude inasmuch as our class, through its community building and participatory involvement, suggests a pedagogical style that might actually be enjoyable to her. I, likewise, recognize that when she enjoys the class and begins to see the act of writing as a personally interesting and engaging activity, her commitment to her writing will grow–as will her skills.

During our first class session, we shared stories about ourselves. During our second class session, we examined our predisposition towards active participation in the classroom community. By writing about their thoughts on this topic, I hoped to engender some critical self-analysis, thereby deconstructing their discomfort with the prospect of engaging with the classroom community. In the next chapter, I address lessons learned on Days 3 and 4, when I became concerned about the authoritarian implications of my classroom practice and

sought clarification from my students as a means of better understanding how my

pedagogy was being received.

CHAPTER 10

DAYS 3 & 4:

ORGANICALLY DEVELOPED DATA AND NEGOTIATED PEDAGOGY


If the context of the actual classroom is so important to developing teacher research and if such a context cannot truly be understood prior to soliciting the input of the students, then how can a teacher develop plans to conduct teacher research prior to the semester?  Formalized research, of course, needs to be organized prior to commencement.  The nature of teacher research, however, develops from its self-reflective nature, which severely limits the truly practical prep work one can undertake.  Without the context, the prep work is largely hypothetical.  The result of such work might be the artificial forcing of data into a pre-fabricated question, rather than the organic growth of questions from the actual work of the semester.  To gain an understanding of these organically developed questions, a self-reflective research journal can help to clarify how things are going, what is working, and what is not.

Locating areas of inquiry, then, should be an organic activity–a process, at best, only partially completed prior to the start of the semester.  One such inquiry that developed early in this semester came from my concern that I was too dominant in classroom discussions.  Committed as I am to student-centered teaching methods, I am likewise wary of silencing my students in class discussions by forcing my analyses upon them.  Rather, I'd like them to develop confidence in voicing their own analyses of the work at hand.  To this end, I

assigned a journal prompt on Day 4 to address the issue.  From my research journal of Day 4:

> Toward the end of class, I handed out journal prompts, taken from my class notes following the previous class.  I asked students to address the question of whether I talk too much during discussions and "steal their thunder."

In order to share the inquiry with my students and clarify the context of the question, I passed out the following excerpt from my research journal of Day 3:

> As students appeared to be ready with their reading selections, I started the discussion by soliciting a volunteer.  17 students volunteered to speak. I told them they needn't initiate a topic, but that they could jump into the discussion and comment on someone else's comment, as well.  I extended and added my own ideas, but tried not to do this too much.  As it was, though, I definitely did speak more than any other person.  I hope to exemplify the participatory nature of the discussion by doing this, but I fear that I may instead just be solidifying my authoritarian role as teacher-lecturer, thus co-opting the students' sense of responsibility for the development of their own educations.  I will ask the students to comment on this during our next class.  I would like to know if my talking prompts them to talk more or if the opposite is true.  Do I steal their thunder by talking too much?

The responses I received seemed to fall into several categories.  Of 23 respondents, 4 opted to write about a topic of their own choice, which was

always an option when we wrote journal entries.  Of the 19 who opted to write

about my prompt, 14 said that my participation in the discussions was helpful,

while none responded in the negative.  Some, however, responded with more

ambivalence than others regarding my additions to the discussions.  The most

significant information I gleaned from the responses regarding teacher-talk was

that:

- Many students felt a sense of discomfort in speaking out due to the

    threat of potential embarrassment.

- My comments in discussions are considered encouraging because

    they support students' ideas.

Two students chose to address the broad question of why students feel reticent

to speak out in any class.  As Herbie writes:

> People will want a chance to speak out loud when, and only when, they
>
> are not intimidated by a couple things.  One, is not knowing anybody in the
>
> class, and the other is not having anything in common with anybody.

Herbie's analysis addresses my concern regarding student comfort and my belief

that comfort must be established in order for a class to engage in productive and

creative dialogue.  Tom addresses a similar point:

> The feeling of being shy comes naturally to everyone.  There is a certain
>
> uneasiness about speaking up to a group of people you have never met
>
> before.  You may ask yourself, "Are they going to negatively judge me if I
>
> say something wrong?" or "Am I going to say something stupid and
>
> everyone will get a bad impression of me?"  For some people, speaking in

front of a group is a terrifying event. Others, who do not lack the self-confidence to speak publicly, can openly talk to anyone without feeling the same pressure. It is a shame to think eighteen to twenty-two-year-old adults are afraid to speak to group of fellow adults. It is as if we are programmed this way. In high school, everyone was exposed to the authoritarian figure in the classroom environment. After experiencing this for 12 years, it is easy to continue further that same habit.

Tom addresses the insecurity with which so many students enter our classes and suggests that the shared experience of students in authoritarian secondary schools serves to perpetuate the habit of deferring to teachers rather than engaging in critical thought, themselves. He makes the interesting observation that such behavior might be strengthened by its own repetition during years of primary and secondary education. By recognizing the "programming" of students into submissive classroom roles, we teachers can then address and counter this behavior.

The majority of the responses to this prompt reflect a positive analysis of teacher-talk. Five students specifically address the issue of comfort, inasmuch as they suggest my additions to the dialogue create a more comfortable setting in which students can participate. Jenna writes:

When my teacher Wes Boozer shares his ideas and his stories I know it makes me more comfortable to speak out. By him speaking, I can often relate and then it might give me an idea to share as well. I don't think that Wes talks too much to bore us but he talks enough to express his ideas

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that he thinks are relevant to the subject we are on. I think that when Wes

shares things about himself and his life makes me and possibly the rest of

the class feel more comfortable.

I hadn't considered the question of students' boredom prior to reading Jenna's

journal entry, so this was a new angle to consider. My thoughts had been

focused on the question of whether my talking during discussions had a silencing

effect upon the class, but now I saw the question of teacher-talk through my

students' eyes, as well. In Jenna's case, I was pleased to learn that my additions

to the conversation (even if they were long-winded) at least were not boring.

Offering a similar but perhaps more expanded response, Jim writes:

Speaking up during a discussion can be a difficult task for anyone. Your

style of teaching definitely makes the classroom setting more relaxed. I

am always hesitant to speak out in class, so I am encouraged by your

prompting. Many people are very introverted and find refuge in someone

else leading or assisting them. I am more likely to add something to a

conversation that already exists than to bring up my own topic for

discussion. I do not see you as trying to possess an authoritarian role

over the class. When you prompt a topic I am sure that it helps less

comfortable people, like myself, to take part in the conversation. By

assisting the class in discussion I think that you will slowly open people up

and everyone will soon feel comfortable speaking up.

I was pleased to read these responses as they specifically addressed the issue of comfort, providing me with student perspectives on the effect my participation in discussions had on their own burgeoning comfort levels.

In her response, Chloe relieved my concern over taking too authoritative a stance during class discussions:

I don't think you steal anyone's thunder. You've already expressed your willingness to talk and be open to us. I think it is just part of your personality to be excited when we start to open up and talk, and you just jump in there with us. You've made it very clear that our opinion counts and we need to express it. This aspect of your teaching style alone separates you from all other "authoritarian teacher-lecturers."

Chloe's comments let me know that she already understood my desire to minimize my authority in the classroom prior to the commencement of the discussion in question. Without this response, however, I could not have assumed that particular goal had been achieved.

Like Chloe, Betty writes that my early efforts to create a classroom environment conducive to participation had been successful, particularly the arrangement of chairs in a large circle:

I think that the seating arrangements for the class help us with our class discussions. It helps me to feel like I am more a part of the class and it persuades me to participate more. When you as a teacher speak often, it helps me realize that no one's comments are incorrect, and we are enabled to speak what we feel…. Everyone seems to feel welcome and

open-minded during our discussions.  I think we have a good class to work with this semester, and I am thoroughly enjoying this class and the opportunities that are given.

Kiley echoes Betty's opinions regarding the seating arrangement:

I feel you keep the discussions moving forward and changing the subjects so different students can put in their own input.  You frequently bring up new ideas and topics.  The class participation in this class is more than in any of my other classes.  Also, I love the fact that we sit in a circle with large name tags on the desks.  It's a great way to have an open discussion and get to know your classmates right from the start.

Comments like Chloe's, Betty's, and Kiley's clarifed for me that my efforts to minimize my authority and create comfort among my students had thus far been successful.  Betty's and Kiley's indicate, further, an understanding of the empowering implications of the circular seating pattern.

In Amy's response, she addresses the novel nature of response-oriented classes, pointing out their frequency in college and their rarity in high school:

Discussion in a class can be very open if there is a leader for the discussion.  The instructor is always a great leader for the conversations.  So far with this class, discussion topics are able to change rapidly and even stay on course with the book's points.  When the instructor talks, he leads us in another direction, that allows the topic to broaden, he is not "stealing our thunder" but letting the discussion be wider in thought as he states his opinions.  I believe that people need to get used to talking out in

class, but be polite about it.  The classes we are currently taking are more

than likely a complete opposite of what we had in high school classes.  I

know that last semester, the classes I had, opened my eyes.  Professors

and instructors wanted us to voice our opinions.  I know that in high school

was not able to be as opinionated.  Talk about a difference.  The style of

class you are in also leads the behavior of the class's participation.

Amy's recognition of the difference between high school and college classes

indicates that students might come to higher education with a scarcity of

discussion-oriented classroom experiences.  This, likewise, suggests a need for

teachers to carefully model for students the participation necessary in a

response-oriented curriculum.  Rather than urge me to hold back more in class

discussions, Amy's response clarified for me the need to exemplify the kind of

participation expected of them in discussions.

Though I was concerned on Days 3 and 4 that my participation in

classroom discussions was silencing to my students, I was relieved to learn there

seemed to be some sense among them of my liberatory intentions.  Though

classroom participation thus far had been encouraging, many students still chose

to remain silent.  During the next couple days, I sought from the burgeoning

community a greater level of participatory activity.  Chapter 11 addresses these

efforts.

CHAPTER 11

DAY 6:

PROMPTING PRAGMATIC PARTICIPATION


Earlier in my analysis, I examined the first two days of my class, when I sought to foreground the semester by developing comfort, disengaging apprehension, and inducing discussion.  By eliciting student feedback, then, I was able to learn my students' perceptions of the success or failure of my efforts.  I'd like to jump now to the sixth day of class, when I attempted to draw students into a more participatory role.

During the semester prior to this study, I had spent the final class session in a large round-table discussion, during which students shared the most interesting topics they had written about over the course of the semester.  Since my students had chosen their own topics initially, they had many interesting stories to tell, and we enjoyed an engaging dialogue.  I remembered this experience when, after Day 5 of the current semester, I sought to draw deeper engagement from my students.  During our prior class session, we had written journals about our earliest dramatic memories, or "pow-bang" experiences, as King (2000) describes them.  The personally important nature of these journals seemed to me a likely catalyst toward more active dialogic participation from my students.  From my daily class journal of Day 6:

Today, I felt the need to involve the class in a really engaging round circle discussion on account of the fact that I still have several students who

haven't added their comments in the class discussions.  Last semester, I

was amazed at how interested the students got during our end of

semester, round-circle discussion regarding their writings from the

semester.  I thought then that it would be a good idea to get the students

to engage in oral sharing of their writings early and often during this

semester.  This activity prompts a vibrant and honest connection between

the students and the coursework, creating the type of authentic community

of learners that I strive to engender.  I had expected to spend about half

the class sharing our journals from last time, which were about our earliest

memories/pow-bang experiences….Instead, we spent an hour and 20

minutes in the discussion….I was very glad to spend as much time as we

did on the pow-bang discussion, as it was lively and engaging.  I hope that

it made the students comfortable with one another and made class more

enjoyable.  I began the discussion by sharing my memory of seeing my

grandfather as a very young child.  He was suffering from cancer and his

face was bandaged up, which made me a little frightened of him, thus

creating the vivid memory.  I value this memory because it is the only one

I have of my grandfather, with whom, according to my mother, I share

many similarities.  I think it relates to who I am today since I find family to

be very comforting.  I then chose George since he was sitting directly

opposite me.  When George was finished, he chose another student, and

so on and so forth.  I had some very interesting observations of the

discussion; students got particularly enthused when certain topics came

up for discussion, prompting much sharing of unsolicited comments with the group:

- When Eric talked about moving to a different school and community as an adolescent, this brought out comments from Alexander, Ann, and myself.

- Dan brought up his trip to the hospital, and the stitches he received, prompting comments from Alexander, Herbie, and myself. Herbie's comments made the class laugh.

- Ted talked about being punished as a child, bringing out comments from Tom, Alexander, and Herbie, who again made the class laugh.

- Dineen spoke about her biking accident, prompting comment from Dan, Ann, and myself. Again, the class laughed.

- Alice spoke about taking a needle at the doctor's office. Herbie, Amy, Tom, George (who spoke twice) and I added comments. Again, there was class laughter.

- Jenna spoke about getting yelled at as a child. Beatrice, Ann, and I responded.

- Herbie spoke about a skiing accident and reentered the conversation two more times, later in the discussion. Alice, Tom, Jenna, George, Beatrice, and I took part. Alice's story of seeing a skier's leg torn from his body made me physically cringe, which, in turn, made several students (Betty particularly) laugh.

- Beatrice spoke about school lunches and assigned seating, prompting responses from Jenna and myself.

I was excited by the amount of non-coerced participation we enjoyed during this day. Since our first day in class, when only five students offered unsolicited comments, here we had nine. The discussion was lively and engaging, prompting not only active verbal participation from the nine more extroverted participants, but laughter from many others, as well. The students were developing a greater level of comfort with one another, something that would allow us to work together more closely in our other student-centered classroom activities. They were also enjoying class, making for greater trust in my role as the planner of classroom activities.

My analysis of Day 6, helpful as it is in understanding my own pedagogy, is still the subjective analysis of only one person. To gain a better understanding of how the class really went, I needed to engage the responses of the other participants, as well. While follow-up discussions about students' responses can often provide deeper and clearer understanding of students' thoughts, much can be gleaned from simply reading the responses without a subsequent dialogue. Indeed, the ease with which a teacher can gain insight to pedagogy is one of the most compelling reasons to elicit student responses in the first place. For even the most over-burdened teachers, such an activity offers much understanding for comparatively little effort. These opinions are, after all, there for the asking.

When asked to respond to the discussion of Day 6, several students

commented on the similarities they discovered with one another and the positive

effect this had on their comfort in participating within the burgeoning community.

Another recurrent theme of these responses was the usefulness of such an

activity as a means of idea development.  Selections from these responses

follow.

<p style="text-align: center;">Developing Connections among Classmates</p>

In their journal entries following our "pow-bang" discussion, several

students commented on the effect the discussion had on their developing level of

comfort in class.  Jenna writes in her response about the pragmatic benefits of

creating community:

> I thought that the previous class that we had was a good class because it
>
> helped us get to know one another better and more about our pasts.  It
>
> was nice because we could relate to one another's story and share our
>
> thoughts and experiences with them.  There were many things that
>
> everyone could say about the topics and I think this was essential in the
>
> classroom because it got us all interacting with one another and giving us
>
> more things that we have in common with others.  I thought this was a
>
> very good topic for us all to share about because it is something that we
>
> know about very well.  I think that classes like these are great and I wish
>
> that more professors/teachers assistants would conduct more classes like
>
> these.

Peer review is certainly an important tenet of my writing class because I recognize the transformative power of jointly constructed work. In her response, Jenna, likewise, indicates an understanding of the importance of working with others and recognizes the positive effect a discussion such as this one can have on working relationships.

In her analysis, Jamie confirmed my hope that this day's discussion was productive in its ability to engender greater comfort in sharing with one another:

> Today in class we shared our pow-bang experiences. We were asked to write about our reaction to the class. And at most all I can really say is I had a good time! I love to hear interesting stories from other students in the class about experiences they have had. The students get to see how they relate to other students. When I told my story, I liked the reaction of the class, which was kind of freaked out! This class seemed to also make students more comfortable speaking in front of the class because they also wanted to see the reaction of others. It reminded me of high school and gossip, just not that extreme, so of course everyone would join in! One thing that this class has showed me is that everyone seems to become more comfortable in front of each other because when one student would tell a story another one would make a comment or have a question for them.

Regarding the connections students felt with their classmates, Taylor writes:

> Last Thursday's class I feel was one of the most productive classes we have had this semester, so far. I really enjoyed going around the circle

and listening to everybody's Pow-Bang moments.  Just be [sic] listening to

their stories, I became better connected with my peers; it is nice to learn

about someone's past, even if it is a two minute explanation of an event.

Another thing that I really liked was how my classmates would jump into

conversations with the person telling the story.  I thought it was amazing

how we are totally different people, but can be connected to each other all

because we may have experienced that event.  After that class session, I

think I am more excited for our next discussion to come!

Similarly, Ted writes:

I felt that class was very interesting and fun Thursday.  We listened to

each other's storys [sic] that impacted our lives, some were happy and

some were even gross.  I think it made class go by really fast because

everyone was involved and listening.  In a way I think it made everyone

relate to one another and get along.  When I looked around everyone was

paying attention to what the person speaking was saying.  Sometimes

other people added in and said that happened to them or else they heard

some thing like that.   Everyone in the room talked and added their

comments.  I liked it a lot.

Ted and Taylor point out in their journal responses that the personal nature of

student-directed writings can provide a touchstone that connects the various

members of the classroom community.  After all, the students share many of the

same experiences simply by being students.  In the case of this particular class,

all of the students were in their late teens or early twenties, providing a common

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temporal reference point for many of their early pow-bang memories.  Alice
writes about this common frame of reference:

> One thing that really stuck out in my head during class was that most of
> my classmates pow bang related to another person's pow bang.  I had
> thought that this was very interesting.  Someone would start to talk about
> their earliest experience, and then someone else in the class would have
> something to add to that and I thought that was great.  I know that I am
> only one speaking for one person, myself, but I feel that the conversation
> in class was one of the better "group" conversations that we have had.
> Everyone had a chance to speak, and voice their opinion, and say how
> maybe they had an experience like that other person.  I am learning
> several things in this class, but one thing that I have noticed is that I am
> learning who a person is, by not even having a conversation with them,
> just listening to them in the class room.  I feel that this class is a good
> learning experience for me, because I get to voice my opinion whenever I
> feel it's necessary.

Alice indicates here an important lesson for a college writing class–that listening
is imperative in analysis.  That lesson serves students well as they engage in the
peer review element of writing workshops.  Students also benefit from the sense
of familiarity they develop with their classmates, easing the discomfort of both
opening themselves to criticism and offering criticism, themselves.

In his response, Alexander recognizes the community building potential of
this activity:

In class on Thursday, we spent the entire class discussing our first or one of the first Pow-Bang experiences we have had. This is an absolutely great way to begin to know your fellow classmates in hopes of trying to form a small community. Pow-Bang experiences shape us as people in many ways. This is where the greatest learning takes place. I think that sharing some of our earliest memories and experiences will both teach us about the person and what their personality is like.

Renee speaks to the usefulness of utilizing a student-centered writing prompt in order to prompt classroom discussion, leading to greater levels of student comfort within the classroom:

The class discussion on Thursday…was exciting to me because we got to know each other better by sharing our personal outrageous childhood stories. The discussion helped me to feel more connected with some of my classmates because I could relate to some of the stories that they shared. I think the discussion also helped me to feel more comfortable speaking out during class discussions.

Ann comments on the interesting nature of self-directed writing prompts, a pedagogical imperative if engaging dialogue is a goal:

I found it very fascinating how everyone had a different story to tell and every story had a reaction. Questions were asked about their experiences and some people had similar experiences. It gave our class something to talk about and held the attention of everyone quite nicely. By sharing

these memories, we are becoming closer together and the closer we get,

the more comfortable we will all be able to be.

By engaging the students in an interesting and personal discussion, I was able to

develop in them a heightened level of comfort, an important element of my

participation-oriented classroom.  With writing workshops and peer review

exercises looming on the immediate horizon, breaking the ice between the

students was an important step forward.


### Discussion as Idea Development

Using personally important memories as a discussion starter got the

students engaged in an important element of my writing class, an appreciation of

writing as a means of thinking through personally important issues.  The following

two students write about the connections they felt with their classmates but also

focus on the relationship such a participatory discussion had on the development

of their ideas, the earliest stage of the writing process.  Chloe writes:

The class discussion went well on Thursday, it was interesting to [sic] how

many details people can remember when they were so young.

Everyone's experience seemed to be medically related which made me

think differently about what I had written.  It brought back my memory of

falling on the concrete stair and being taken to the emergency room.  I

guess when I was writing my journal, my train of thought went straight to a

pow bang experience that changed my life instead of one that was

traumatic.  I thought it was nice to sit around and just share stories, it was

a great way to get to know people and it was kind of relaxing compared to
other classes.  I think our class is starting to be more open with each other
because we feel more comfortable and are getting used to the way things
are done.

Similarly, Amy writes:

I believe that by us sharing these experiences, allows us to maybe build
friendships with people who had similar ones….By our other classmates
telling us their stories we were then reminded of other experiences that we
had, but maybe not had come to mind when we thought of a Pow-Bang
experience.

Amy and Chloe indicate that via the participation of their classmates in this
discussion, they thought of more possibilities for their writing.  This reflects the
benefit of prewriting in a writing workshop, so I was pleased to see it addressed.
Such an awareness by the students indicates a practical understanding of the
work we undertook in class–the antithesis of busy work.

## Establishing Student-Centeredness

Jim and Sue chose to write about my willingness to forgo prior plans in
order to allow for more participation from students whose participation would
otherwise have been curtailed.  Jim writes:

Uncovering a common denominator that the whole class is able to relate
to is very difficult.  Everyone sharing their memories is a great way to open
things up.  People on some level are able to relate to a memory or a

problem that another faced.  This allows for interaction between one another.  I thought it was good how you let things flow, having one topic lead to another.  You did not stop anyone from sharing their thoughts or feelings on the topic.  I thought that the discussion made the atmosphere more relaxed, allowing people to speak up with their thoughts and feelings on any topic.  Even though you had other things on your agenda for that day; you set them aside and let the discussion continue, knowing that this would allow people to feel more comfortable with speaking out.  I believe that people are beginning to feel more comfortable with speaking up during discussions due to exercises like this one.

Jim points out a periphery benefit of this discussion: an appreciation of my willing subversion of plans in favor of a student-generated activity.  This seems to have exemplified to him my commitment to lead a student-centered class, one with a negotiated curriculum.

Like Jim, Sue appreciates the class, but comments on the relative infrequency of such community building activities in her educational experience:

I like times like these where you can just sit around and talk casually to our class mates about stuff we have in common or have shared the same experience.  It was really fun and I am glad the teacher took time for us to share them with our class; most professors wouldn't have done that, as I have experienced.  It's so easy for us to talk to the class about something we have experienced or enjoyed.  This was a great exercise!

Sue and Jim point out that, aside from the benefits of community building and idea development, student-centered writing activities can be pedagogically useful as a means of simply impressing upon students a teacher's commitment to student-centeredness.

<div style="text-align:center">Constructive Criticism</div>

As popular as this activity was, not all students expressed appreciation of the discussion on Day 6. Dineen, for example, writes:

> I think the class…was okay. We had to tell the class what we wrote in our journals, which were our earliest childhood memories. I would have like the class better if it was voluntary. I have said this in a journal before this one, but I don't like reading stuff I write out loud. This journal wasn't that bad, but if we have to continue reading our writing out loud, eventually we will probably have to read something that I don't want to read out loud. If I choose not to do it I will probably lose points for not reading and that would be bad. Other than that, I didn't mind class. It was also funny and interesting to hear some of the wild stories that were told.

As our earlier class discussions had been voluntary in nature, this one sought to elicit participation from the heretofore non-participatory students. Dineen, for one, did not enjoy it. She brings up some helpful points in her critique, however. It is important to protect students' privacy in a class like this one that elicits personally important topics for writing assignments. On the first day of class, when I first explained the response journal activity, I told the students that they

ought to refrain from writing about topics they do not want to share since others would be reading them. Likewise, when choosing topics for their essays, I reminded the students of the same concern.

> Melissa also had an objection to the discussion, but for a different reason: English class on (Day 6) discussed everyone's pow bang experiences. For the most part everyone shared an experience or memory that wasn't pleasant. People told stories of going to the hospital, watching others lose legs and just some horrifying things. I found most of the class to be too much to handle. I don't really enjoy gore and to have to sit there and listen to people describe in detail someone's leg being ripped off or sewing a skull back together just doesn't not make me feel well. I think the reason is that most people shared these types of stories with the class was because after reading the book and seeing that Stephen King's experience was slightly gross they felt their experience had to be too. Kiley was the only one who shared with the class a happy memory. It was about her family and all being at the pool; not exactly as thrilling as the others but not disgustingly gross either. It was kind of interesting to see what people have done or been in trouble for doing.

Melissa's is a point well taken. Many of the students chose to write about negative experiences, though the prompt asked only for an early memory, indicating a preference toward neither good nor bad memories. From this journal entry, however, I resolved to clarify in subsequent classes that such memories

need not necessarily be negative.  As Melissa points out, using King's book as a prompt for this activity might have skewed responses in this direction.

While the requirement to share our writing topics on Day 6 was a means of prompting more participation from those less participatory students, this was not the only idea I had for pursuing such a goal.  On Day 7, I tried another method of engendering community and comfort.  As with Day 6, this served the goal of our academic growth, as well as that of our community–particularly as the two are not mutually exclusive.

CHAPTER 12

DAY 7:

LEARNING ABOUT THE BENEFITS AND HINDRANCES

OF SMALL GROUP WORK

On Day 7, I decided to try a new approach to our discussions of the

assigned reading.  Rather than share our analyses in a round circle discussion, I

thought we might try using smaller, more intimate groups as a means of

minimizing the intimidation factor that some students (due to their persistent

silence) still seemed to be feeling.  From my research journal of Day 7:

I asked the students to write the most interesting point, along with page

number, from the reading on a 3X5 note card that I handed out.  These

were then collected.  Then I broke them into groups of two to five,

depending on the topics they chose.  There were six groups.  The

students then discussed the topics and a secretary notated the small

group discussion.  They then arranged the information into an outline and

wrote it on the board.  We then went around the room, and each group

presented its outline to the class. Ann and Melissa were the only students

who volunteered to speak regarding another groups' topic.  Otherwise, it

was really just one person from each group that spoke, with an odd

exception of an additional member in two groups.  In previous semesters,

this activity had always felt stilted to me and felt so again.  I really prefer

the large group discussions, and they seem to be working.  I think that we

should continue with them until they seem to lose their ability to engender

discussion.

From my own perspective, this activity seemed artificial and stifled, and I missed

the more vibrant interaction we had been enjoying in large group discussions.

When we reconvened as a large group, after the small group work, the

presentations did not promote further discussion, and the students seemed bored

with that particular part of the activity.  As with my earlier analyses of class, I

needed to elicit the students' responses prior to making any sweeping judgment

of the activity's efficacy, so I assigned the following journal prompt at the end of

class: "Respond to today's class, as compared to the other discussion classes

we've had."

Four students responded with negative appraisals of the experience; I will

present them together, with commentary following the last.  Dineen wrote:

I think that both ways of discussing Steven King's book are very similar.

Both involve discussing the parts we like out loud.  Usually we just make it

a class discussion about the book, but this time it was more of a group

discussion.  The class was separated into groups of people whose favorite

part was the same, and then we discussed it amongst ourselves.  After

that, we made an outline and then telling the class about our choices.

There is more work involved in the new discussion method, so I like it the

least.  I think we should continue to stay in the big circle and discuss the

topics we choose to talk about.  Since this way showed us that many

people chose the same topics, I don't think that everyone should have to comment unless they have something to say.

Eric wrote:

Over the past few classes we have gone through a couple different formats regarding how we go about discussing the reading.  The one day we did a large circle talk and the following day we did a kind of group activity which placed us together with similar related topics that we choose out of the reading for that day.  I personally like the circle more than the small groups.  I think that in the circle there is more of a variety of topics discussed along with an opportunity for everyone to think or even comment on everything in class.  Although I did not mind the small groups I just prefer the large circle instead.  Either way class is and was still productive and enjoyable for relating to one another on the topic at hand.

Chloe wrote:

The in class group activity that we did on Tuesday was good for focusing in on specific points that were made in the reading.  In the group discussions we talked about the things that we wanted to in depth.  When these things were put on the board in outline form and explained to the rest of the class, everything that was said within the groups was generalized and the rest of the class didn't really have much to say or add to it.  I think that when we have a full class discussion more points get brought up and more people add to them with their own comments.

Melissa wrote:

Today's discussion on the Stephen King book, I felt wasn't very good.  I

can see how breaking into groups can be a good idea but I don't think they

were divided very well, or at least my group wasn't.  I also think that less

people participated today than usual and the round structure we usually sit

lets people talk more.  What I found interesting about today's discussion

were the outlines people made.  Maybe it's just me, but I couldn't help

notice the groups that put A's without B's and 1's without 2's.  My group's

outline wasn't much better because I felt it wasn't organized properly.  I

personally prefer discussions in the big circle where everyone can hear

everyone's thoughts and ideas.  It also makes everyone stay on topic.  I

found that in the individual group setting people were straying away from

the task at hand.  It is also goes faster when the whole class discusses

together.  I do enjoy individual group work though.  It gives everyone a

chance to meet the other people in the class.  I feel previous class

discussions have gone well, even though, I know I haven't participated a

lot.  It's also good how everything is connected to something that

everyone can relate to.

A recurrent theme in these responses seems to be that these students preferred

large group discussions due to the greater variety of topics they engender.  In

contrast, grouping students together who share similar analyses seems to

minimize the inclusion of variant points of view.  Though I had hoped this

exercise would flesh out different analyses of the assigned reading, the

summative outlines of each group were not any more substantive than the

individual comments made in our earlier large group discussions.  As Melissa

points out, there is also a greater opportunity to go off topic in small groups,

when the teacher is off working with other groups.  Though I wandered

throughout the class, working with one group and then another, I, too, noticed

that some groups lost focus when I was working elsewhere in the room.

Though the opinions expressed in the journals above indicate a negative

appraisal of the small group discussions, the following three students'

experiences were more favorable.  As with the previous analysis, my own

comments follow the last student's.  Kayla writes:

> I actually liked the activity we did on Tuesday better than an open
>
> discussion because I felt more comfortable than being in big groups.  But I
>
> do like being in the big groups sometimes [sic] I just feel more comfortable
>
> when we do the smaller groups.  I thought that Tuesdays activity was a
>
> good way to get to know other people in the class especially since they
>
> had the same interests as you did in the book.  And you weren't around
>
> people you were used to sitting by.

Sue, likewise, writes:

> Today in class we did our King's discussion in a little different way than
>
> what we have before and I found it really helpful and fun.  We usually just
>
> sit in a big circle and wait for someone to say some thing they found
>
> interesting in the reading.  Today we got into groups with others that found
>
> the same thing in the reading interesting.  This worked well in our group;
>
> we all shared what we found interesting in King's story writing about his

novel <u>Carrie</u>.  Being in these groups not only helped us to discuss the

reading in a fun way, but we also got time to meet new people that we

haven't worked with before, I really enjoyed this an [sic] it helped me a lot.

I feel more comfortable talking in a group of five or six, than in front of 25

or so, it's not as hard to share.  Sharing this on the board and with the

class was something different and enjoyable, it gave the people in the

group that liked to speak out an opportunity to and the people that tend to

be shy an opportunity to just talk to a couple people.  I enjoy working in

groups and I enjoy doing different things in class.  It makes the class more

fun and different is good.

Tom writes:

Last class, we did something a little different than normal.  We brought

variety to the lesson to get away from doing the same thing day in and day

out.  Instead of having our usual seminar discussion about King, being in a

circle and listening to each other from across the room, we broke down

into small groups and discussed.  This method does more for the

betterment of the class because people can feel slightly at ease

discussing in a smaller group rather than to the entire class.  The setting

off the small group is less intimidating.  Working in groups also allows us

to get to know our fellow classmates better.  With direct contact, you may

find out something new about someone that may not have been brought

up to the entire class before.  It seems like a good idea to me to try the

group discussion again sometime.

Kayla, Sue, and Tom's responses to the small group work indicate that smaller, more intimate groups provide a more comfortable forum in which to speak. This activity also succeeds in introducing students to one another, an important element of community building. Perhaps, then, such an activity would be more conducive a bit earlier in the semester, when the classroom community is developing and students might benefit more fully from getting to know one another in small groups.

Kiley writes a response to this activity that supports the comments in favor of small group work. One of her comments, however, led me to respond, and we engaged in a further discussion of her point. From Kiley's journal:

I always look forward to coming to this class. I enjoy the open discussions and free thoughts people express. But, I did notice that last class some students felt that they were put on the spot. I think this is good. Some, including myself, had to speak out. I read out loud, some thing I am not good at. But, I was more comfortable since it was in a group setting. I have always been uncomfortable talking in front of groups, as I have mentioned before. Since the class is set up in a circle with name tags, I feel I have been able to get to know my classmates in this class more than I have in my other classes. I am beginning to feel comfortable. The discussions are always new and interesting, everyone has something to say, some sort of input. Now, my only problem is becoming a more creative, humorous writer. I will be the first to admit, the writing I produce is dull and lifeless. I definitely need to work on that!!!

After reading Kiley's response, I was confused by what seemed the incongruity of her appreciation of "being put on the spot." I would have assumed such an action to be negatively received, yet she wrote about it as a positive experience.

I wrote in response, "Why was being 'put on the spot' good, Kiley? Can you tell me about being 'put on the spot'?"

She responded, "Well I am not one to speak out loud by choice so if I am asked to give my opinion here-or-there it wouldn't hurt." This exchange clarified for me a response that seemed unclear at first. While I wrote comments on every journal I read, some, like Kiley's, necessitated further development in order for a more complete understanding. Practicality is at the heart of student-centeredness since it is the practical connection between students and their classwork that makes the classwork relevant. Practicality, likewise, prompted this exchange with Kiley.

CHAPTER 13

DAY 11:

STUDENT ANALYSES OF OUR CLASS AFTER ONE MONTH


On Day 11 of our 25 class sessions, I asked the students to write a journal entry analyzing our class.  Students were free to write about whatever aspect of class they felt most compelled to address.  Once written, we shared our opinions in a voluntary, large-group discussion, during which I took the following notes:

- Ann said that she liked the focus on writing and peer review.

- Alonah agreed and said that she was very comfortable in class, particularly since she did not feel judged on everything she said.

- Jenna said that this was the first time she enjoyed an English class.

- Tom said that he enjoyed the freewriting.

- Taylor said that she enjoyed the large group discussions in the big circles since such activity was conducive towards making a connection with others in class.

- Alice said that she was more comfortable now than she was in the beginning due to the fact that we all know each other now.

- Alexander said that discussion participation depends on the topics.

- Alexander also said that King's Pow-Bang readings created more discussion....The more emotional the reading, the more discussion it inspired.

- Dan said that college was not as hard as they had said it would be in high school.

On this day, I also utilized a class secretary, Jim, to record his own opinions of the discussion.  After class, Jim typed up his notes and shared them with me in a private conference.  From Jim's notes:

Class started out in small groups, and shared ideas of how class was ran

    a) students feel comfortable  with writing, being more accustomed to it.

    b) Free writing, freedom to write whatever

    c) Feel that this English class is easier than what they have experienced in the past

    d) Students find the class to be more fun and relaxing then what they are used to

    e) Group circle has made students feel more comfortable, allows students to speak up more

    f) Feel that college is easier than what people made it seem

After Jim and I discussed our opinions of what transpired in class, I wrote the following post-conference journal entry:

Jim thinks the class is easier than other English classes, though he also thinks we do a lot of writing compared to the other classes.  We do write daily, and that seems to be more than usual (for the students).  In spite of the extra writing we do, the class seems easier (to Jim) due to the freer, more relaxed atmosphere.  Being allowed to make choices makes the

class less strenuous (to him). Jim wrote something very interesting in his response journal. He said that class was funny. He meant that the discussions and journals show a sense of humor. I have pointedly said that I think a sense of humor is important over and over, so I was glad to hear that he thought a sense of humor was indicative of the class, now. Jim also said that name tags and the big circle make the discussions easier to participate in and follow. He said that the daily writings make the larger writings–the short story and Pow-Bang story–seem less daunting. He also said that since the students like and respect me, they want my respect and that makes them want to perform better in class.

The class critique we engaged in one month into the semester allowed me to gauge the progress we were making in terms of community development. I was encouraged by these responses, particularly as they represented the students' perspectives, and not merely my own. Utilizing a classroom secretary that day, likewise, provided me deeper insight inasmuch as I was then able to engage one-on-one with a representative student to explore the responses more deeply.

To round out my understanding of my students' responses to class, I also collected and read their journal entries. We then set up conferences to address their concerns and criticisms privately. The beauty of conducting teacher research in a student-centered class is that the one leads seamlessly into the other. The primary analysis of import in soliciting student responses to pedagogy, after all, is that of the students. By incorporating such activity into the curriculum, teachers can learn volumes about their practice with few extra

demands on their typically overburdened schedules. What follows are the responses I received after one month with the students in this particular community. I have separated them into the four categories that organically arose from the collected journal entries. They are:

- The Freedom of a Student-Centered Class

- Friendship and the Development of a Classroom Community

- Various Other Lessons from these Journals

- Criticism

The Freedom of a Student-Centered Class

One theme that several students chose to write about was the sense of freedom they felt in our class. This was novel for many, as they explained that their experiences as students were largely teacher-centered. Alonah writes:

Personally this English class is not like any of my others, my friends think I'm crazy when I tell them that I like English. I like the fact of not feeling overwhelmed, but free, not only in writings, but also in class.

From my conference with Alonah, I learned that she appreciated the participatory nature of the discussions, inasmuch as she was not regularly forced to participate unless she felt naturally inclined to do so. This creates a sense of comfort, which, in turn, prompts students to practical and self-initiated participation.

Kiley and Alice also compared our class to other classes they had experienced, drawing comparisons between the student-centered and the traditional teacher-centered approach to pedagogy. From Kiley:

> All of my English classes of the past have been based on famous authors and picking apart novels to find the true meaning. I feel I have had a lack of practice when it comes to writing. This class allows me to free-write and really put pen to paper. This is a class I really do enjoy coming to. The way the class is setup does create a comfortable atmosphere. Also, the name tags help the class become more familiar with each other.

Regarding nametags, Kiley is commenting on my policy of using nametags for the first month of the semester in order to facilitate students learning one another's names. Of course, this helps me learn the students' names, as well.

Kiley compares our class to her previous English classes, which seem to reflect a more traditional pedagogical orientation–finding the "true" meaning of teacher-chosen pieces of literature. Writing as the primary focus of an English class was to her a comparatively novel experience. In our conference, I asked Kiley to explain what she meant by the class setup creating a comfortable atmosphere. As she explained, this was due to the circle-pattern seating arrangement. Breaking the traditional grid pattern of desk placement (with the teacher's desk in front) makes a powerful statement regarding the teacher's aspirations to create a student-centered class, where no-one is relegated to a position of silence by sitting behind others in the back of the room. No-one, likewise, has to speak to the back of another person's head; everyone makes

eye contact in a circle.  Ira Shor (1997) calls the back of the traditional classroom Siberia–appropriate considering its distance from the teacher, who is the comparative Moscow in a traditional, teacher-centered class.

Like Kiley, Alice also comments on her expectations of what an English class should be, both in her journal entry and, more deeply, in her subsequent conference.  From Alice:

> I feel that everyday I am learning something new, even though it may not always be about English.  I am learning several things about different people, life and how to communicate with people that I hardly know.  I agree with one point that was brought up in class about how more people talk and bring up points in class, when people can relate more to a certain subject.

During our conference, when I asked her what she meant in her final sentence, Alice said the diversity among the class participants and their writing choices creates more opportunities to connect with and get to know others.  This point is an important one: in order to prompt participation from my students, I must engage them with practical and personally relevant writing assignments.

Though Alice does not seem to equate studying English with learning about "different people", "life", and communicating with unknown people, I think these are primary reasons for studying English and was, consequently, pleased to read that she listed these as typical activities in our class.  I asked Alice to tell me about her prior educational experiences during our conference, and her response was that these experiences were all lecture-oriented.  Her analysis of

our *non-English* related classroom activities made more sense to me when read against the background of her previous, traditionalist classroom experiences.

Tom also comments on the differences between our class and his earlier ones. From Tom:

> My class is much easier than in high school not because the material is less challenging but because the structure of the class. We are able to freely write what we want to write about if we do not have an interest in the prompt given which appeals to me greatly. Never in high school did I ever have this opportunity; always finding myself writing some "bullshit" paper on a topic with no relevance to me.

I appreciate Tom's response because he points out the important point that though student-centered classes might seem easier to students than teacher-centered classes, this is by no means due to a watering down of the content. Very likely "the structure of the class," as Tom puts it, is the reason for the sense of ease. As a teacher, I recognize that in order to make learning interesting and enjoyable, I have to invite my students to share in the design of "the structure of the class." Student-centered instruction is no more about watering down our standards than it is about imposing our personal agendas on our students. By opening up the design of our lessons to incorporate student choices, we instigate deeper connections between our students and our lessons–just the opposite, in fact, of watering those lessons down.

During our conference, I asked Tom to analyze and explain why he was such an active participant in class. He responded that his desire to participate

comes from his discomfort with silence, his confidence in himself as a leader, and my own requests for active participation.  Tom further commented that the best classroom discussions come from natural interests.  He also suggested that casual discussions prompt community building and that good ideas come from synthesizing his own ideas with those of his classmates.  As for conversation starters, Tom said that our daily journals had been helpful.

Like Tom, Beatrice also addresses the myth that student-centered classes are simply easier than teacher-centered classes, pointing out that though the class is enjoyable, a large amount of writing is expected of the students.  She writes:

When I first started this class I figured it would be a rigorous grammar class with lots of textbook reading on the proper method of writing with subsequent exams.  This class has from the beginning been a relaxed, fun, free-style writing atmosphere. Having no exams adds to the atmosphere.  The book also takes a relaxed attitude toward writing–that writing is ideas that come from within us.  For the first several weeks all the writing required was irritating because I am not used to coming up with so many writing ideas.  I am starting to think more about writing ideas.  I think this class has allowed me bring out more of my own creativity.

Melissa, likewise, expresses the novel nature of class in that it instigates student responses, rather than merely asking students to memorize the teacher's opinions.  She writes:

I think class so far is going well. There are times still when I feel out of

place. The participation factor for me is getting better. I enjoy how we are

able to write and speak about our opinions and ideas. Usually you have to

give the teacher back his or her own opinion.

Like Melissa, Amy comments, as well, on her experiences in classes where her
opinions came second to those of her teachers. She writes:

This class is very open minded. It is very different than any class I have

had before. The role of the student is used. We are able to let our voice

be heard. The history of my education showed me that even though

English is an art and can be expressed different ways, our teacher always

wanted us to use their voice in our papers, not our own. I think the only

classes that should be strict or "lecturer" to "lecturer" should be science

oriented classes and history classes and maybe to some degree English

classes such as Research Writing or Literature, but still have our own

opinion. This class showed me that we can form our own opinions and

voice them to you and the other students.

Matt also compares our class to other classes he has experienced. Matt,
however, takes issue with liberal arts curricula, in general, not merely English
classes. He writes:

Classes, of the liberal studies, are by nature typically boring and

uncomfortable for most people. The liberal studies tend to be just hoops

that people have jump through so they can arrive at the real interests of

their life. This class, however, is not what I would call a typical liberal

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study.  Sleeping is avoidable, the atmosphere and chairs, and most

importantly the class is productive.  Spending time in a class for at least

three hours a week and find that nothing has been accomplished is by far

the most irritating experience imaginable, especially when you are paying

for it.

Matt expresses the predisposition with which some students enter our classes–a

negative foreboding of irrelevant busy work, absent any practicality.  I do not

believe this negativity can be eradicated by authoritarian pressure from the

teacher, but, conversely, by the teacher's minimization of his or her own authority

in lieu of the creation of a class that reflects the students' own academic

interests.

Sue also expresses the novel nature of choosing her own writing topics

and having her opinions solicited as part of the class.  She writes:

This English class has been a great experience for me so far.  I have

never been able to write about what I want to, or I haven't had the

opportunity in classes to discuss issues with classmates.  Reading our

book in segments instead of starting from the beginning and going to the

end has really helped me because I don't enjoy reading.

Regarding the book *On Writing* by Stephen King, I broke it into nonconsecutive

segments in order to address points that were made and reiterated at various

points in the text.  As Sue writes, this made it less daunting a proposition than it

might have been had we started on the first page and read consecutively until the

end.

Eric's comments, like those above, express a comparative unfamiliarity with student-centered classes such as this one.  He writes:

I basically look forward most to coming to this class most of all of the rest of my classes due to the fact that its not just straight lecture here.  This classes [sic] freedom in such things as writing and open discussion makes class a lot more interesting for everyone I think.  Also, the fact that we have steady writing assignments that are shorter but consistent makes class flow a lot better for me as far as being guided or having more structure in and out of class.

Carla also comments on the easy going nature of class, as well as the atypical nature of a class that strives to form a cohesive classroom community.  She writes:

-I like the class atmosphere.

-The class is very free and open to discussion.

-I can be heard and have an opinion.

-I also like being able to write about anything that my little heart desires. This class, in my opinion, is different from every one of my other classes. In my opinion, the open discussions are interesting and play a key role in what makes this class stand out.  In my other classes, that are outside my major, I hardly speak to anyone, not to mention, knowing anyone's name. I also like the idea that my opinion is of interest in this class.  I enjoy being able to write about whatever I want.

From the responses above, I gleaned a better understanding of my students' responses to my pedagogy. Though I had based my syllabus on a student-centered theory of teaching, I needed to hear from the students, themselves, in order to learn whether or not my theoretical underpinnings were as practical in the classroom as they had earlier seemed on paper.

### Friendship and the Development of a Classroom Community

Another recurrent topic from the students' journals on Day 11 addressed friendships that developed within the classroom community and existed outside of class, as well. This seemed significant to me, as it provided evidence of the authentic community I sought to establish–one that transcended the work of the classroom, thus allowing us to work more intimately during peer reviews and writing workshops.

Taylor writes about meeting her friend Jenna through the course of our classroom discussions:

> I love coming to this class knowing that we are going to have upbeat and interesting conversations. This semester has been very long and tiring, without the enjoyment of this class, I don't feel I would be making it through. The one thing I love about this class is how we sit in a circle for our class discussions. I feel better connected to my peers and without the circle I would never have met my best friend Jenna.

In our subsequent conference, I asked Taylor to speak further on the relationship between sitting in a circle and making connections with her classmates. She

explained to me that building community is key to developing comfort in class, the two things being directly related.  And in *her* journal entry, Jenna, likewise, writes:

> This class has really changed my perspective on English classes.
> Through middle school and high school, I hated English class.  This class I
> really enjoy.  I like how we sit in a circle, it gave us the chance to get to
> know one another.  Most of us, if not all of us are freshman here at
> (college) and the more people we all get to meet, the better we'll be.  I
> think it is important for students to interact in the way our class does.  I
> know I have met some great people through this class.  Without the
> 'circle', I never would have met them (especially Taylor).  I also like how
> this class isn't 1-½  hours of lecture.  That sucks.  It helps me stay awake
> by interacting and conversing with my fellow classmates.  I think small
> classes are much better than large classes because it is so much harder
> to meet people.

In our conference, Jenna shared with me that she had gotten to know many of her classmates outside of class, indicating that my efforts at community building had enjoyed some level of success.  She also commented on her appreciation of the ratio between lecture and group work, which seemed to her a 50/50 split. She further shared that she appreciated the editorializing commentary I provided in our large group discussions.

Alonah writes about the development of her comfort in speaking out during class discussions.  Our conference helped to clarify her feelings on this, as well.  She writes:

> I was a little weary of speaking out loud at first, and also group projects, but I grew to it, and I'm sure others have also.

From my discussion with Alonah, I learned that she appreciated the participatory nature of the discussions, inasmuch as she was never forced to participate unless she felt naturally inclined to do so.  Alonah also shared with me that though she was nervous about speaking up at first, by the second week, she felt much more comfortable; getting used to her classmates by talking about interesting subjects led to this increased comfort.  She also said she enjoyed the group discussions, adding that this was the only class where she had gotten to know her classmates outside of class.  She suggested that using name tags facilitated this camaraderie.

In his journal, Herbie comments on the unthreatening nature of the classroom.  He writes:

> It makes me feel comfortable the way we talk in class [sic] it is not like you are going to get booed if you are a comic.

Herbie mentioned in our conference that he particularly enjoyed the way we identified areas of commonality among the members of the classroom community.  Such a sense of community, he said, leads to an extension of the community outside of the classroom.  Likewise, he said that the sense of community created a trust and familiarity with one another that facilitated opening

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up about potentially embarrassing issues.  When asked about the development of community, Herbie said that talking with one another in class discussions served as an ice-breaker.  He also told me that the large circle-seating pattern creates a sense of comfort, particularly regarding our discussions.  Herbie explained that this was only the second class he had had where there wasn't a competitive relationship between the students and the teacher–where, as he explained, the teacher uses tests as one of his adversarial plays, as if the students and teacher were competitors in a football game.  Our relationship, apparently, did not have such an adversarial relationship, and I appreciated the knowledge that Herbie felt as such.

## Various Other Lessons from the Journals

The remaining journal entries were chosen for inclusion here because they addressed issues that taught me something about my pedagogy.  Unlike the previous sections on classroom freedom and the development of real friendships from within the classroom community, these journals do not all reflect similar themes.  They are presented here along with my notes from our subsequent conferences.

From Kayla:

I wouldn't say I have any dislikes so far.  I like talking in the groups, especially the smaller ones.

In our subsequent discussion, I asked Kayla to expand upon this point, and she explained that small-group work made her feel less judged than the large-group

discussions.  Comments such as this one renew my confidence in small group

work as a means of breaking the ice early in the semester, when students are

still unfamiliar with one another and, hence, less comfortable sharing their

thoughts.

From Ted:

I really like this English class compared to all of the other one's in the past.

I like the sense of a community in here.  How we sit in a circle.  I also like

when we have class discussions on subjects, because I think it gets

everyone involved and gets everyone to get to know each other.  The "free

writes" are also one of my favorite, because sometimes its hard to write

about something you don't like and have a passion for.  Also it gives me a

chance to get stuff off my mind and onto paper.  In the beginning of the

semester I was kind of worried about talking in front of class but I got use

to it so its not that bad anymore.

When I asked Ted about his interest in class discussions, he said he enjoyed the

open field of topics that developed.  Since the students were asked to write about

topics that were interesting to them, the discussions about their writings brought

a wide variety of subjects to the table.

From Betty:

Free writing helps me learn more about myself, it also frees my mind in

the words on paper.  If I am assigned a book, not of my preference, most

likely I will not develop a well-written paper to the most of my ability.  I

would try the best I can, but I need to be interested or involved in something, to share my ideas or thoughts.

In our conference, Betty said that large group discussions of personal topics are her favorite activities. She also said that the peer review we engaged in was helpful inasmuch as it provided her a means of understanding how interesting her work was to others. It seems significant that Betty enjoyed both the large group discussions about students' writings *and* the more intimate one-on-one activity of peer review since one of the most important reasons for utilizing large group discussions is to facilitate a greater level of comfort in sharing work via peer review.

From Renee:

I have some classes that I dread going to but I never feel that way about this class. I think what keeps me most interested is our discussions we have during class. Although I do not normally get involved in the class discussions as some of the other students I do feel connected with a lot of the things other students say. I think the book contributes a lot to keeping the class interesting because it is a very good book and it gives you something interesting to think/talk about.

In our conference, I asked Renee to explain more of her feelings about the book, and she responded that the book is easy to relate to. She specifically pointed to the many pieces of advice offered by King, which she said were very helpful. When asked for an example, she said that King's admonition to "write with the door shut" (in other words, to write initial drafts only for oneself) helped her to

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focus on her own feelings regarding her subjects, thus minimizing the anxiety of writing for an audience during the early drafting stage.

From Chloe:

This class has gone well so far. I like the fact that is so much more relaxed than my other classes because that makes it a lot less stressful for me. I've never really been a great writer, so I was afraid I wouldn't be able to keep up in a writing intensive class. I was actually afraid that this class was going to be incredibly hard and time consuming for me. This definitely has not been the case. I've enjoyed the free writing because it's so much easier to write about something interesting to you. I've also enjoyed the class discussions and I have become a lot more comfortable talking in a large group, which was a big thing for me. It's helped me to get over some of my shyness.

During our discussion, Chloe told me there was more participation a month into the semester than there was earlier because, later, people know that their opinions are not going to be judged. When asked to explain further, she suggested this was on account of my trying to make everyone equal by utilizing the big circle and showing no favoritism toward anyone.

Another point Chloe makes in her journal addresses the student-centered method of teaching grammar via revision of the students' own work. From the students' perspective, this learning experience is personal and practical since they are allowed the opportunity to correct their errors and raise their grade. Chloe writes:

I like the fact that you correct our papers and give us a chance to see and

correct our mistakes before a final grade is placed on them.  I learn best

from my mistakes.

As Chloe writes, learning can be most constructive when students are permitted

to revise their errors.  Theoretically, I find such a method of grammar instruction

more salient than the assignment of generalized grammar worksheets.  Lessons

that develop from the students' own writing provide them the opportunity to learn

from their own shortcomings and focus their grammar lessons on those pitfalls

that apply specifically to each individual student.  Chloe's journal entry validated

my theoretical leanings in this area.


Constructive Criticism

Presenting the above student responses might seem like a particularly

self-aggrandizing gesture, but I'd be remiss if I failed to comment on the positive

effect of such encouragement from my students.  My interest in student

responses is due to my belief that students are in an ideal position to cast

judgment on their teachers.  Their approbation, therefore, is not only helpful in

gaining a broader understanding of professional development, but also as

encouragement to continue down a particular path.  When asked about

successful methods in the classroom, whether at a conference or at the water

cooler, I feel far more qualified to speak about my own best practice when I've

learned it from the responses of my students.

Teachers who open themselves up to student responses, though, also

have to be prepared to receive criticism.  This might, perhaps, be the greatest

hurdle for prospective student-centered, response-oriented teachers to

overcome.  Traditional classrooms, after all, are rooted in a one-way method of

criticism–from teacher to student.  While most of my responses from after one

month into the semester were positive, I did receive several negative ones, as

well.  These, too, were informative and educational.

From Taylor:

The one thing I don't like is the scheduled routines and the prompt

writings.  I would rather do free writing and be able to express my self

freely.

Taylor's response reflects her comfort with personally directed classroom

activities and her relative discomfort with my teacher-directed activities.  It was

helpful for me to understand Taylor's criticism since it reminded me that student

directed lessons are, indeed, more engaging for the students.

From Tom:

The only grievance I have regarding the class is having to read a story

about a famous author's life.  Though (Stephen) King may have been a

great person, with great impact on the world of literature, however his

impact on me is very minimal.

Tom's dislike of the assigned Stephen King book, here, is significant because it

reflects the trouble inherent in teacher-directed assignments.  Though I find the

book to be pedagogically useful, I must still recognize that since the classroom

community is made up of different people with different tastes, it will appeal more

to some and less to others.  Tom clearly did not appreciate the assigned readings, which is ultimately an insurmountable shortcoming when introducing teacher-directed assignments in a student-centered class.  His criticism made me rethink its inclusion in future semesters.

> From Melissa:
>
> At times, I still find it hard to give my idea because someone already covered it.  It feels like the class is on a plateau right now with just journals, discussions and readings; but I know that is going to change soon.  I enjoy coming to class even though at times it feels like it will never end.  This class is different from high school and I think that's why everyone enjoys it.

I appreciated Melissa's criticism since it made me aware that, at least to her, we had gotten into a rut with our routine, bringing to my attention the potential need for a change in plans.  Without a student's response to this effect, however, I might not have recognized the "rut" until much later, if at all.  Jim's similar comments provide further credence for Melissa's concerns.  From Jim:

> The thing I like most about the class is how comfortable everyone is with one another.  On the other hand I find that the group discussion is getting dry.  People do not feel the need to speak up as often.  I do believe that it was paramount in making people comfortable.

Like Melissa, Jim suggests that the routine of discussing our writing in a large circle is getting old.  When multiple responses are written to the same effect, the

teacher can glean similarities from the collected responses and begin to spot trends in student opinions.

As a teacher who strives to be student-centered, I find myself in the paradoxical position of wanting to equalize authority in the classroom while remembering my responsibility to lead the class and, ultimately, assess my students' work.  Though a total equalization of authority is a disingenuous goal, we *can* bring the status of both teacher and students closer by asking for our students' responses, particularly their criticisms.  Of course we evaluate our students, but by allowing them to evaluate us, we extend responsibility and authority to them, in turn, and a more egalitarian classroom emerges.

CHAPTER 14

DAY 14:

STUDENT RESPONSES TO PEER REVIEW–PART ONE


During the first half of the semester, the class read Stephen King's book On Writing (2000), which I assigned due to its practical and personal approach to the writing process.  My experiences in the classroom have shown me that many of my students come to class with misperceptions of writing as merely an arbitrary hoop they must jump through en route to their diplomas, an activity disconnected from the relevance of their lives outside of class.  On Writing paints a picture of writing as a means of analyzing and addressing issues of personal importance in the writer's life, and from the book, we developed essays drawn from important experiences in our own lives.  We called these our "pow-bang" stories.

The book also provides a template for a short story, which serves as a starting point for a lesson in creative writing.  We called these our "Dick and Jane" stories, after the names of the protagonists that King describes for the reader.  After providing a backstory, King asks the readers to try their hands at composing an imaginative piece of short fiction.  We wrote these in a workshop environment, allowing for peer review, discussion and revision.  Once we had completed the activity on Day 14, I asked the students to respond with their analyses of the activity.  What follows are my notes from Day 14 and my students' responses to the lesson.

In my journal from Day 14, I write about "ideal readers", a term used by King (2000) to identify the persons who read and comment on a writer's drafts, prior to publication or submission.  From my journal of Day 14:

On this day, we started out with a discussion of the reading from King. After giving the students a chance to refresh their memories (via journal entries regarding the most personally interesting point from the reading), we began the discussion.  Alonah mentioned that writing fiction was difficult.  This reminded me of Melissa's comment from the previous class, when she brought up King's quote about the trouble with seeking perfection.  Jenna mentioned that the idea of an ideal reader makes a lot of sense, to which I responded that the reason I have tried to engender a sense of community is that I want us to find ideal readers here, and that requires a significant level of comfort and familiarity.  Ted spoke of King's sudden connections with his own work, as when he realized after having written *Carrie*, the theme of blood.  I used this comment to lead us into a discussion of theme and symbol, two important points from today's reading.   I used *Carrie* as an example of finding these things in one's own work.  Alice mentioned that a writer can't please everyone all the time. King even writes that you can't please some of the people all of the time. Amy brought up King's revisionary formula that the second draft = first draft – 10%.  I mentioned that losing excess baggage in our writing is like losing excess weight.  I used myself as an example and said that the fat around my waist did me no good at all and that I would be better served

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by getting rid of it.  Likewise, revision seeks to make our writing leaner by cutting out parts of it that have no redeeming value.  Dan mentioned that sometimes, as King says, you have to kill your darlings.  In other words, sometimes parts of a piece might seem really great to the reader, but they might actually put a drag on the piece and, therefore, need to go.  This can be a tough thing to do.  I mentioned my own experience writing my dissertation proposal last semester, when over multiple revisions, it went from 50 pages to 30.  I had to lose a lot writing that I had earlier spent a lot of time on.  That was hard.  Taylor said that receiving subjective evaluations from others can be very hard.  I agreed and hoped that the comfort and familiarity we now felt with one another would make this a little easier to take.  Dineen said that she appreciated King's admonition to write the first draft with the door closed, simply for oneself.  I said this was a great point, and reiterated the importance of knowing when to keep the door closed and when to open it.  I was very excited that Dineen spoke up today.  That was excellent.  It really seemed to show a burgeoning sense of comfort on her part.  I was very supportive in my comments, saying that her point was a very good one, and thanking her for it.  *I should ask her about this.  Why was she compelled to speak up today?  Have things changed from the beginning of the semester?*  Chloe said that backstory shouldn't be the focus of the story.  Tom, likewise, said that too much backstory is too clumpy.  I agreed with these points and pointed out my own problems with clumpy flashback backstory.  With the final discussion

comments, I said that I would read my own story to the class to give them

a chance to look for symbols and theme in my story.  I said that I hadn't

shared the story with them earlier, as I hadn't wanted to influence

anyone's "door-closed" writing too much.  When I had finished the story, I

asked for comments on theme and symbol.  No one picked up on any

repetitive symbols in my story, and I said that finding such repetition is not

easy for the first time reader.  I said that upon subsequent readings of my

own work, I found repetition of the ideas of luck and poor self image.  Dan

was the only person who spoke up regarding a theme for my story.  We

then broke up into small groups to read one another's work and look for

both symbols and themes.

After we completed our work, the students wrote journal entries analyzing the

day's activities.  I've divided them into positive and negative appraisals of my

plans.  As with my earlier analyses, I've winnowed down each journal entry to the

most pertinent points.  From Taylor:

The session today was really neat because I was able to read and hear

many different themes.  Also, I got great feedback on my paper when my

group revised it.

For Taylor, the utilization of her classmates as a means of uncovering themes in

her story seems to have been a positive experience.  Without her response

journal explicitly telling me so, though, my appraisal of the activity would be far

too one-sided to be credible.  Taylor, like Jamie and Renee (whose responses

follow), also appreciated the activity of peer review as a means of learning her

readers' responses.  From Jamie:

> I like today's revisions because I kind of got to see what someone else's
>
> reactions are to my story.

From Renee:

> I really enjoyed today's class [sic] it was very helpful for me because
>
> someone pointed out to me things in my paper that I didn't catch that will
>
> definitely make a difference in my paper.

Kiley, likewise, writes that the revisions she worked on with her classmates were

productive.  She also writes of having enjoyed hearing my own story, which I

read to the class as a means of sharing my attempts at completing the activity.

She writes:

> Today's class went by really fast!  I really enjoyed listening to your story
>
> and the new revisions really helped.

Kiley's response reflects my ideal classroom experience: one that is helpful and

enlightening but also fun and engaging.  Melissa responds, like Kiley, that she

enjoyed hearing me read my story.

> Today's class went well.  It's good to see how King's writings are relevant
>
> to what we are doing.  I enjoyed your story.  I think class is getting to be
>
> more fun than previously.  The slump or plateau seems to be gone.

Melissa also notes that King's book seems to relate well to the work of the class.

This reflects an appreciation of practicality concerning classwork, an important

goal of mine, pedagogically.  Melissa also comments on our having passed a lull

in the class.  Earlier, on Day 11, she had written a journal entry stating that she felt the class was stuck in an increasingly tiresome routine of reading, writing, and discussing.  The short story activities seem to have provided her the type of change necessary to make class engaging again.

Not all students, however, were uniformly impressed with the day's activities.  Jenna, for example, writes:

> Finding the themes can be fun and boring.  I don't think it helped my story at all.  Good discussions and it got me reading others papers.  I am sick of reading about Dick and Jane.  I like reading different stories.

Jenna's honesty, here, helped me to gain an understanding of how this activity can be regarded by my students.  Her complaint about being sick of Dick and Jane made sense to me, as I realized that everyone's short story had the exact same protagonists.  Though she disliked the repetitive elements of all of the short stories, she did seem to appreciate reading her classmates' work.

Like Jenna, Dineen, Amy and Betty write responses that appreciate elements of the activity but provide helpful criticisms, as well.  From Dineen:

> This revising/checking for theme + reoccurring images was good for the writing.  Revision is always good and useful in the completion of a story.  I am always willing to hear some constructive criticism.  There was enough time for me to read the story, but not enough to discuss it.

From Betty:

I think we should have spent more time on revising each other's papers.  I

enjoyed reading other's papers.  It also helped me to get advice from my

peers.

From Amy:

I do not think we had enough time on peer review.  I think the session

helped greatly.

Amy, Dineen and Betty seem to have enjoyed the experience of peer review,

though they all point to the lack of time needed to successfully complete the

activity.  As a teacher, I can certainly misjudge the time needed to complete

lesson plans, particularly when those plans are new and untried.  Culling

feedback from students, then, provides me an important means of judging the

efficacy of my plans.

In what is becoming a common theme of these journals, Tom and Chloe

submit the following responses.  From Tom:

I think we could have spent more time on our papers rather than talking

about King.

From Chloe:

A little more time would have been helpful.  It's hard to read a paper and

make all the needed changes while finding the theme or recurring images.

It needs to be read through several more times.

Tom's and Chloe's responses suggest a criticism of my plans, in that not enough

time had been allowed for the activity to be completed successfully.  Chloe's final

sentence might also be read, however, as more than a criticism, but as a

suggestion for the following class' lesson plan.  This is an exciting move for a student-centered teacher to comprehend–witnessing a student take the initiative to impose her own ideas on her teacher regarding what she believes to be in the best interest of her education.

Jim, likewise, submits his own suggestion for our subsequent lesson plans, placing more value in peer review rather than the time consuming King discussions.  He writes:

I think that we need to spend less time on King and more time with our own writing.  Revising and proofreading is a task that should not be rushed.

As with Chloe's response, Jim provides an opinion of how we might alter class to make our time more productive.  Alexander and Carla also suggest alterations to the class plans.  From Alexander:

No, not enough time again. You should give us almost all of Tuesday to switch papers around with multiple people.  Today's was quite insightful.

From Carla:

I enjoyed the class today.  I feel that revising each others papers is a great idea and a good way to improve.  However, I wish that we had a little more time to read papers and revise.  I also think it would be a good idea to switch people who read my paper so that [sic] can get different feedback.

Alexander and Carla, like Chloe and Jim, exemplify students who recognize their prerogative to impose their pedagogical opinions on their teachers, thus making their educational experiences as productive and meaningful as possible.  This is

an exciting reorientation of classroom authority, as students recognize their position as knowledge makers, and not merely as empty vessels waiting to be filled by their teachers.

Like my own desire to be more than a mere practitioner of other theorists' theories, my students, likewise, are embracing their rights to be more than receptive partners in their own educations.  As I am finding more comfort in my identity as a theorist, myself, so, too, my students are finding comfort in their identification as active partners in our classroom.  That is very encouraging.

To gain a better understanding of this phenomena, I solicited journal entries a few days later, asking for suggestions that might make our peer review activities more productive.  Those responses follow in Chapter 15.

CHAPTER 15

DAY 17:

STUDENT RESPONSES TO PEER REVIEW–PART TWO


On Day 17, I suggested a journal entry addressing the challenges of peer review and, even more importantly, how we might minimize them.  I sought here to get the students to not only identify a potential problem, but to uncover possible solutions, as well.  The responses were varied, but seemed to fall under three main thematic categories:

- Fear of hurting the feelings of the author

- Being unclear as to the author's intentions for the text

- Lack of confidence in the reviewers' own grasp of grammar

These are compiled below and then addressed by the students, themselves.


Fear of Hurting the Author's Feelings

The biggest concern voiced by the students in their journal entries was the fear of hurting the feelings of their classmates by criticizing their work.  Below are the responses of students addressing this concern.  As Kayla writes:

I think that it is hard to give advice on other peoples papers because you don't want to hurt their feelings or upset them.  Because alot of the time when you take a long time concentrating + working hard on a paper you think it's the best and then to have someone come and criticize your work is hard.

What follows are responses of a similar nature from other students.  From

Renee:

> I do not usually find too much difficulty in giving feedback on other
>
> people's papers, but sometimes I do.  A reason for this is that I may be
>
> afraid what I may say will offend the writer.  It is hard to find the right
>
> words that lets the writer know that their paper needs improvements
>
> without sounding like your saying their paper sucks.

From Alonah:

> But maybe the way they have something set up, you wouldn't want to hurt
>
> their feelings about it.

Other students did not write about "feelings" per se, but did address a sense of

discomfort when it came to criticizing their peers.  From Taylor:

> I also as a person feel bad writing a lot of marks on someone's paper
>
> because you never know what their response will be.

From Ted:

> Also, sometime people are just afraid to make a comment because they
>
> don't want the person to be mad at them.

From Carla:

> I don't exactly feel that giving advice on the content of others papers is
>
> hard.  However, I believe that critiquing other's papers may make us feel
>
> uncomfortable.  We feel like we don't have the right to tell somebody that
>
> their paper is incorrect.

From Melissa:

It's hard to give advice on other people's papers because sometimes it's hard to know how they will react to the advice.

From Jim:

While trying to give constructive criticism I sometimes find it hard to be completely open about adjustments the individual could make to improve their paper. I don't know why this can be difficult, maybe it is because they are my peers or maybe I am just not one for confrontation.

The preceding comments indicate a common theme among the students of discomfort with the task of peer review. What follows are culled from the same batch of journals but address possible solutions, instead. Renee, however, does not see a solution to the problem:

I don't think there is really a way to make this easier.

Ted, likewise, seems to be saying that there is no solution to the discomfort other than to simply get over it:

I dunno how we can fix it other than mention it to the writer no matter if you want to or not. That's the only way to help the other writer out and to help your own proofreading skills.

Other students, however, offer more proactive suggestions. From Kayla:

I think if we didn't know whose work we were giving advice on or if we didn't now who was giving advice everyone would feel more comfortable giving their best advice.

Carla suggests limiting the peer review partners to one or two, so the author can develop a more comfortable rapport, thus easing the discomfort of exchanging criticisms.

> My idea for making this easier is to probably focus on one or two partners, then we would be able to be more honest about what we say and tell each other.

In this section, the students, themselves, identified a problem and developed two viable means of minimizing it. Had I superceded their authority here and failed to solicit their opinions, the power in the class would have remained in the hands of me, the teacher, and the students would not have experienced the opportunity to engage so meaningfully with the planning of their learning experiences.

Being Unclear as to the Author's Intentions for the Text

Another major theme that developed in these journal entries was a concern over misunderstanding the author's writing and therefore giving superfluous advice. As Taylor writes:

> Yes, I feel that it was hard to give advice on the content of other's papers because as a reader it was sometimes hard to understand just exactly what the writer was trying to say.

Ted echoes Taylor's concerns:

> Whenever I read someone's paper I'm not really sure where their coming from so I just let it go and hopefully their right or someone else will catch it.

I know its not right to do this, its just being nervous and afraid to mention

it.

From Melissa:

It can be difficult to know what the right kind of advice is and the writer can

have a totally different idea than the advisor.  I am not sure how this

process can be easier.  It seems to be going well right now.

Regarding Melissa's first sentence, I replied, "Interesting.  Can you elaborate a

little about this on the back?"  She replied:

You might not know what the writer is saying and there can be two

different ideas going on at once.  The reader may be thinking one way

whereas the writer is totally different.  Sometimes you also can have a

feeling something is off and just not know what to say or where to go with

it.

Chloe and Taylor suggest possible solutions to the problem of misunderstanding

the meaning of a classmate's text.  From Taylor:

I feel we can make this process easier by sitting down with both the reader

and writer and do an overview of the paper.  Have the writer talk about the

story, where he or she is coming from, and what they are trying to say.  I

feel that this would help out a lot!

Taylor provides excellent advice, here, for the clarification of confusion between

reader and writer.  As a teacher, I could make this point to the students, myself,

but by having Taylor make the point, we create a more jointly constructed class.

Further, when the other students see Taylor speaking about her suggestion,

they, likewise, witness an example of a student taking an active and participatory role in her own education.

Chloe provides another possible solution to the problem of confusion between reader and writer:

I think when we work in class peer editing we should keep the same partner.  This would solve the problem of not getting good feedback or the feedback just being grammatical corrections.  This person would understand our story and if they had questions about certain areas, they would be able to check it in the next editing session making sure that everything makes sense.  Often the first time a person reads something they find grammatical corrections first, and the content would not be developed by having a different reader each time.

Chloe raises an important issue here: that by using different review partners each time, writers and their readers might fail to develop enough comfort and familiarity to breed ample candor.  As with Taylor's comments, by having Chloe share these thoughts with the class, I am able to strengthen the atmosphere of mutual negotiation and personal engagement that has been my goal since the beginning of the semester.

### Lack of Confidence in the Reviewer's Own Grasp of Grammar

Another issue that concerned students was their own fledgling grasp of grammar and their inability to identify incorrect grammar in their classmates' work.  As Ted writes:

I think it is hard to give advice on the content of other's papers because

sometimes we're not really sure if we are right or wrong so we just don't

say anything.

Carla, likewise, suggests:

I feel that the possibility exists that we may be incorrect ourselves.

Kiley adds:

My grammar skills are not the best.

While no one directly addresses the question of grammar in their suggestions,

Kiley touches on a related point in her journal entry:

I have a hard time giving my opinions and responses on the content of

other's papers because I do not want to change or rewrite anything. I

know that's not what proofreading is all about but I feel that is what I am

doing.

My answer to students concerned with grammar would certainly contain the idea

that they needn't be concerned with rewriting their classmates' work at all, but

merely bring to the attention of the author that something seems confusing. I'd

further remind them that it is the author's responsibility to verify whether the

grammar is correct. Matt, however, addresses this nicely:

Personally giving advice on content of others work should only go to the

extent of what the author's point of view to sound right. Too much advice

can sometimes interfere with the style of writing. If something does not

sound right or is confusing it should only be brought to the writer's

attention so that they can clear it up without changing basic idea.

By utilizing Matt's ideas here, rather than lecturing on the proper method of peer

review, I can create a more student-centered classroom, where students,

themselves, identify problems as well as solutions.

CHAPTER 16

DAY 17:

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO THEIR TEACHERS


At this point in the semester, we had completed 16 of our 25 meetings, we had completed reading the Stephen King book, and we were diving into two new daily activities:

- reading and analysis of books chosen by the students

- the development of personally relevant "pow-bang" essays via writing workshops

As this was the start of a new period of work, I thought it might be advantageous to engage the students in a discussion of their suggestions for our subsequent class sessions. To start us off, I had the class write journal entries about one of the following topics:

- how we might change class

- how the writing workshops should go

- if and why it is hard to give advice on the content of other people's writings and how we might fix this problem

- whether anyone had ever been asked by teachers to provide responses to their classes.

We then discussed our responses to these points. I took the following notes during the class discussion, which was strictly voluntary. At this point in the semester, I was pleased to have so much uncoerced participation from the

students, which indicated to me their comfort and sense of engagement with our classroom community.  My notes from the discussion follow:

- Alexander: critiquing others' work is difficult because it can cause the other person to lose face, and you don't want to be too critical.

- Ann: It is a long, hard process to be critical and pursue logical analysis.

- Melissa: You never know if the advice will be received well.

- Chloe: Using the same partners perpetually is better than switching, as it supports greater focus on content.  By working with new and different partners, people always seem to focus on grammar.

- Tom: People have trouble enough with their own work, and it is difficult to advise others when you, yourself, need help.

- Alice: She agrees with Jason and says that people really just don't know what they should say.

- Ann: We have had too little time to respond to others' work in class, and we have spent too much time on King.

- Alexander: Some high school teachers asked for critiques, but only at the end of the semester.  One teacher refused to look at them until after graduation, and Alexander was the designated keeper of the evaluations until that point.

- Chloe: The teachers who ask for evaluations are usually first year teachers.  She also agreed with Alexander that such evaluations were usually made at the end of the class, so as not to affect grades.

- Jenna: Younger teachers are more prone to ask for evaluations, as older ones are more set in their ways, and don't care as much about what students think of their practice.

- Herbie: Teachers never asked students' opinions in high school.

- Ann: Ratemyprofessors.com and ratemyteachers.com offer students a means to speak their minds regarding their teachers.

- Jenna: There was too much work in high school.

- Ann: There was way too much work in A.P. classes in high school.

- Dan: High School was not much different than college. Those who said high school was easy and college would be hard are as wrong as those who said high school was hard and college is easy. There is really the same amount of work.

- Taylor: High school did not depend as much on tests, though there was a lot of other work. College, on the other hand, relies nearly entirely upon tests.

- I asked if attendance is required in all the students' classes here.

- Dan replied that he hates the attendance policy for his piano class.

- Beatrice said that she was home-schooled and received college level credit.

- Ann: Regarding the prompt about the class, proofreading everyday is not a good idea for writing workshops.

- Dan agreed with Ann.

- Jenna: Several shorter papers are better than one long one. An eight page paper seems like a dirge.

- Taylor agreed with Kim, saying that you just run out of things to say.

- Jim: It's hard to proof 8-10 pages.

- Ann: When a paper is over five pages, it is difficult to add meaningful information.

- Tom expressed a curiosity about the books, and suggested we scrap the reading project, as he does not like to read.

This discussion was lively and seemed to touch on many points of personal relevance for the students. What follows are the responses that speak to the students' experiences providing feedback in earlier classes. Of particular interest to me are the points made in the discussion by Alexander, Chloe, Jenna, and Herbie regarding their experiences offering teachers advice.

In Alexander's experience, high school teachers only asked for student critiques at the end of the semester, after the opportunity to revise the current semester's plans would be lost. Likewise lost were the opportunities to encourage students' critical analysis skills, engagement with the class work, and sense of responsibility for their own educations. In her journal entry from Day 17, Alonah affirms this situation in her own high school experience:

Um, I'm not sure if my opinions have ever been used, because usually I give my opinions at the end of the year on paper, so it wouldn't be used to the following year. They should be though [sic] I have some good responses!!

Alonah recognizes the expertise she bears as a primary witness to her teachers' practice. Unfortunately, her experiences had been such that those opinions were never solicited until after she had completed her classes. While post-semester critiques likely helped her teachers to better understand their pedagogical choices, the benefits such understandings might have brought were lost on Alonah, who had moved on to other teachers and other classes.

Chloe picked up on Alexander's lead and offered that teachers who ask for evaluations are typically new to the profession. Perhaps this is due to the inquisitive nature of teacher education programs, in which student teachers recognize their inherent ignorance as neophytes to the profession and seek to learn how to teach successfully. Do we learn all there is to know about successful pedagogy during our teacher education programs, though? Of course not, as is evidenced by the profession's recognition of the importance of professional development throughout a teacher's career. Like Chloe, though, Jenna comments that only younger teachers in her high school were interested in student feedback. As Jenna said, older teachers just did not seem to care as much about what students thought of their practice. Herbie adds that *no* teachers at his school asked for student responses. And in her journal entry from Day 17, Jamie writes:

> Mostly in high school, I never really had the chance to review classes and
> state my opinion about it. one [sic] class however I was too upset with
> how the teacher ran the class. I eventually was so frustrated that I told the

teacher how I felt.  His response was his way of teaching was to prepare

us for college.  I don't know how he did that because he didn't teach us.

In her story, Jamie felt compelled to share her opinions of class with her teacher.

Without more knowledge of the discussion that transpired between Jamie and

her teacher, however, analysis would certainly be spurious.  From the student-

centered perspective I am advocating in this study, however, I would hope that a

teacher in such a situation would let the student know that her comments are

welcome and respond with serious consideration.  If nothing else, the teacher

could read such a situation as bringing to light a problem that needs to be

addressed–that of a disgruntled student who does not see her efforts in class as

productive and practical in support of her larger goals.  Regardless of the need

for pedagogical revision, a student who fails to see relevance in her coursework

has a problem that needs to be addressed.

The semester that provided the data for this study was made up of 25

class sessions.  I chose to cover the days between Day 1 and Day 17 because

they provided me with the most salient lessons.  During the later days of the

semester, when we engaged in a writing workshop environment, we utilized the

methodology jointly developed by the community over days 14 and 17.

What works for us as student teachers continues to work for us as

experienced teachers, and if soliciting student responses to pedagogy is

successful for the neophyte, it can be equally productive for the experienced

teacher.  Taking nothing away from inservice presentations and faculty retreats,

which are indeed powerful methods of professional development, we teachers

can learn a great deal about teaching by simply asking our students to play a larger role in the planning and analysis of classroom activities, thereby learning from our primary source the strengths and weaknesses of our practice.

CHAPTER 17

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching by telling students to be more like me never seemed to work particularly well in my classrooms. Rather, I found that instigating personal connections between my students and their work produced the greatest educational results. I have found the same to be true for pedagogical theory. It sinks in and becomes most useful when we relate to it personally and have a hand in its development.

As I have become more aligned with student-centered pedagogy, I have also begun to recognize its confluence with teacher research methodology. I am no more comfortable lording authority over students, after all, than I am being lorded over, myself, by personally-disconnected theory—being told, in other words, how best to teach by theorists who are unfamiliar with the dynamics of my classroom.

When we forget to analyze our local classrooms in place of strict adherence to *any* theory, we run the risk of losing the important practical connection between our students and their studies. This might be likened to following a recipe from a cookbook, regardless of the microwave wattage or the altitude of the kitchen. In such a circumstance, someone, somewhere is going to end up with bad cake. Details are important, and who but the local teacher can address the details of the local classroom?

With an appreciative nod to the theories and methodologies of others, without which I would never have had a point of origin, I have attempted to step out from the shadows of practice and assert my own identity as a theorist. Rather than identifying as a researcher whose interest lies in pedagogy, however, I am a teacher first, pursuing practice-based research, located within the everyday workings of my own classroom. Who but full-time teachers are better positioned, after all, to comment on what it is to *be* a teacher?

Our students, likewise, are in a privileged position to comment on what it means to be a student. Their voices ought, therefore, to be engaged, and their opinions about good and bad classroom practice solicited. Part and parcel of this pedagogical methodology is the need for students to recognize their position as co-creators of the class. In order to achieve this end during my study, I had to minimize the authority so many students expected of me as a teacher. By eliciting their help in the planning and analysis of our daily lessons, I brought our statuses closer together. While my status as teacher is incontrovertibly higher due to my final authority in assessing their work, by asking my students to assess *my* work, I *can* minimize the traditional distance between their status and my own. Since such an active role in the classroom was alien to many of my students, however, regular reciprocal communication was key to my dissemination of authority and the development of communal rapport. For a student-centered teacher, such a pedagogical orientation offers not only a productive means of development for the students, but for the teacher as well.

This study is by no means an effort to present a best practice example of teaching, but an answer to other teachers who question why a teacher would utilize a student-centered pedagogy.  Some of those teachers might instinctively appreciate the theory, but lack an experiential touchstone with which to relate.  My experiences in graduate school provided me with many such touchstones, but out in "the real world," like-minded colleagues have been harder to find.  For those teachers who have not had the opportunity to engage as I did in a progressive graduate program, I hope this study might provide a touchstone of sorts through which to find solidarity with a fellow teacher who knows what it is like to pursue progressive ideals in a more traditional environment.  What follow are five principles of student-centered teacher research I found helpful in the pursuit of my study.

Five Principles of Student-Centered Teacher Research

| Pedagogical goals always supercede research goals.  *Never introduce research methods that might hinder the students' educational opportunities, your primary objective in the classroom.* |
|---|
| The symbiosis of pedagogy and research serves both and creates learning opportunities greater than either could alone.  *By utilizing self-study in the classroom, you provide the students a model of self-initiated inquiry: research at its most pragmatic.  The data you receive from your students, likewise, provides you with multiple perspectives on your practice from the daily observers best qualified to assess it.* |

| |
|---|
| Student feedback and conferences work to promote both pedagogy and research. *By eliciting feedback and holding conferences with students, you promote a practical use of writing in the classroom and encourage authentic participation while gathering data that can illuminate your understanding of how your pedagogy is received by your students.* |
| The principles of Freirean empowerment apply to both students and teachers in their respective attempts to learn. *The development of voice experienced by Freire's literacy students is comparable to the development of voice your students experience when they take a more active role in your class. You, likewise, develop your voice as a theorist when you recognize the validity of your experiences as a teacher and your inherent right to develop theory from them.* |
| Students' interaction with subject matter should take precedence over their teachers' subjective interpretations. *In order for students to understand the potential for growth inherent in their engagement with your class, their opinions and proclivities need to be welcomed into the planning and assessment of activities.* |

My academic interest in the symbiotic relationship between student-centered pedagogy and teacher research methodology owes much to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Though I initially learned the merits of student-centeredness through trial and error in my early classrooms, reading Friere provided me a sort of template against which to read my own attempts at utilizing a similar pedagogy. Freire writes about the empowerment experienced by his

otherwise disempowered, peasant-class literacy students. The key to this change was a pedagogy that did not place the teacher and the subject matter on a pedestal, but instead sought connections between the subject matter and the students themselves.

This concept relates to my students but also to myself. Theory is no more unidirectional than classroom lessons. Just as my students engage more deeply with their studies when their personal connections are elicited, so, too, I engage more deeply with theory when I recognize the role I can play in its development.

The process of conducting research in my own class was useful to me as a teacher, as it provided me a sense of empathy for my students I might not otherwise have had. This empathy developed from my attempts to become a student, myself. While my students were learning better ways to write, I was learning better ways to teach. We were all students, and that helped me conceptualize classroom authority, as mine was minimized and theirs heightened. Researching the class also allowed me to model for my students the personal connections I wanted them to make with their own writing topics. This allowed me to basically say, "do as I do," not merely "do as I say." Students learn better when they have a model of the behavior they are being taught, and this confluence of pedagogy and methodology allowed me to provide such a model. Finally, by utilizing the myriad perspectives of the entire class, I was able to provide an authentic example of collaborative critical analysis, another important tenet of my composition classes. By recognizing the importance of others' perspectives on their writings, students gain a deeper understanding of

their work.  The same is true for their teacher; by recognizing and trying to understand the students' responses to my lessons, I was able to better gauge the efficacy or lack thereof of my own efforts.

Implications of Positive Student Responses

The impetus for this study has been my desire to demonstrate what I do and clarify why I do it.  As I believe that students learn best via real-life experiences, as opposed to hypothetical, personally disconnected lessons, I also believe the best way to teach teachers about the merits of student-centered pedagogies is to provide personal examples, drawn from real classrooms.  The down side of utilizing a self-analytical research methodology, however, is that it *can* appear to be little more than an exercise in self-aggrandizement.  Indeed, one might infer from the preponderance of positive student responses, and the relatively fewer number of negative ones, that this study is narcissistically ego-driven.  The fact that students responded so encouragingly to this pedagogy, however, *is* important.  The data I received suggested that such a classroom experience was not only a positive experience for many of my students, but a novel one, as well.  By attempting to draw the students more personally into the planning and execution of our activities, I was able to elicit a more genuine interest in our class, also something novel for many students.  The crux of the negative appraisals I received dealt with lessons that seemed to the students arbitrary and personally irrelevant, but the very act of requesting such criticisms served to express my interest in making class less so.

Approbation for good work is an important element of pedagogy inasmuch as it encourages students to continue in productive paths.  Overwhelming negative assessment, on the other hand, drives students out of the classroom.  The same is true for teachers.  Receiving positive responses from students lets us know that our efforts are helping our students and keeps us focused on our work in a positive manner.  Too often, we teachers have to contend with criticism from students (and administrators) that overwhelms our practice and results in a more hardened and less personable classroom demeanor.  In schools where I have taught, we call it "burn out."  Teacher's lounges sometimes become repositories of these negative feelings.  Too often, teachers accept the normalcy of an adversarial relationship with their students, and when that happens, classroom productivity suffers.  By establishing a mutually respectful community, we are able to minimize classroom management issues and move more aggressively into our work.  And the teacher can make the first moves in that direction by asking students to participate more personally in the development of their work.

Assessing Criticism from my Peers

While the pedagogy espoused here has been cathartic for me in my own practice, I can understand the likelihood that colleagues might harbor certain reservations.  One such concern might likely regard the time required to conduct on-going classroom inquiry.  To address this issue, I point to my second and third principles of student-centered teacher research:

- The symbiosis of pedagogy and research serves both and creates learning opportunities greater than either could alone.

- Student feedback and conferences work to promote both pedagogy and research.

The methods I've utilized in this study were only included when they could be shown to promote my students' educational goals. That preserved the primary goal of the classroom: my students' education. My own education, though important, was always secondary. The time required, therefore, was really a non-issue, as what helped me to gain a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses occurred naturally in the context of an otherwise normal college writing class. The act of writing up the study has certainly required a great deal of time, but that is hardly necessary for the teacher concerned with her or his own personal development. The document you have been reading is not so much for my benefit, but for fellow teachers curious about such an activity. The benefits I incurred came when I initially read my students' responses and conferenced with them, thereby learning how my lessons were taking root.

In response to those who say student-centered pedagogy is merely about lowering our standards, I would counter that by utilizing the pedagogical methods described in this study, I have held my students to a higher standard of responsibility in the classroom: that of co-creators, responsible for the refinement and development of their own educations. As Donald Graves writes, American students are too often weaned of responsibility for their educational activities in primary and secondary writing classrooms, where teachers set the agendas and

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students are put on "writer's welfare, dependant on the teacher for everything" (1983, p. 98).  By disallowing student choice in the classroom, teachers, likewise, minimize students' voices, the development of which should be our primary objective in the writing classroom.

Though students may need a collaborative orientation to learning and problem solving, such a pedagogy can be a somewhat daunting proposition for a writing teacher to entertain.  Nancie Atwell, contemporary champion of student-centered pedagogy, admits that she once viewed such classroom practice as "naïve and permissive" (1998).  As she came to understand (and explain so eloquently), however:

> Freedom of choice does not undercut structure.  Instead, students become accountable for learning about and using the structures available to writers to serve their purposes.  Everyone sits at a big desk, and everyone plans what will happen there. (Atwell, p. 15)

Atwell's experience moving from a more teacher-centered to a more student-centered orientation mirrors my own.  I recall that during my student-teaching experience, my cooperative teacher advised that I begin the semester like a drill sergeant in order to subdue the students and assert my authority.  Such a pedagogical stance, however, failed to elicit the personal engagement I later came to appreciate, as the students were more concerned with avoiding punishment than with relating to me as a partner in learning.  Rather than encourage critical thought, such pedagogy encourages students to merely feed the authority figure what they think she or he wants.  This style of class creates a

"path of least resistance" orientation to learning. Students who thrive in such a pedagogy are apt to ask questions like, "Do I have to attend class on any day other than for the mid-term and final exams?" They are also prone to grill the teacher on exactly what she or he wants as a final product, eliminating the need for critical thought in favor of memorization and repetition of the teacher's dictates. In the style of teaching I advocate here, though, students are encouraged to develop their voices and share their own agendas with the class.

In order to move into such a paradigm, teachers need to see the best in their students and expect the best of them. Self-determination is not an easy goal to achieve, particularly as many students have been conditioned to minimize their role in the classroom as a means of attaining success. By maintaining high expectations in this regard, however, we can enable our students to take responsibility for their education in our classrooms. None of this is to say that teachers are absolved from establishing a sense of discipline among the students, but I believe teachers can set limits and boundaries while also creating a participatory community. In fact, unless students have faith in the teachers' proficiency in organizing a structured learning environment, they are unlikely to have much faith in the teacher's ability to teach.

Implications for Teacher Training and Further Research

When I began my student teaching, I was optimistic and energetic, yet naïve. Without experience in the classroom, all I had to rely on was theory. And that theory helped me a great deal as I prepared to lead my first classes. It

provided me an expectation of what I might experience in the classroom and provided me a toolbox of sorts, with which to address the challenges I was likely to encounter. Once I completed my teacher training, though, and began teaching full-time, I began to realize that reliance upon theory alone was insufficient to my goals. I discovered that what sounded good on paper did not necessarily fit neatly with the dynamics of my classrooms. Something was missing, and as I later discovered, that missing element was the input of my students. I needed a more personal connection to theory. What I needed was praxis. And I found it by going back to school.

The paramount appeal of starting my Ph.D. program was the lure of working alongside other experienced teachers in a communal study of education–hearing their theories and developing confidence in my right to identify as a theorist, myself. That right, however, is due all teachers, not merely those engaged in doctoral programs and dissertation research. Whether we are actually engaged in sharing our thoughts with others, we are all theorists when we teach and consider our teaching.

During this semester, I learned about the efficacy of my lesson plans on a local level. To some, this may sound like a lesson with no beneficiary other than myself, but I would counter that absent real-life stories from the classroom, lessons in pedagogy are superficial. As Graves (1984, p. 185) writes, generalized prescripts on the best practice of teaching writing "are substitutes for thinking. They clog our ears. We…cloud the issues with jargon in place of simple, direct prose about actual children" (quoted in Atwell, 1998, p. 16).

Though the lessons I learned were pertinent, perhaps, to only the specific activities on which the students commented, the greater lesson is that there is much to learn about our practice when we open ourselves up to the lessons our students are so appropriately positioned to impart.

What I did during this semester worked for me in refining the productivity of my class; what works for you will depend on your own classroom experiences. In the end, what is important is not that there in one best way to teach, but that we should be free to pursue our own paths and recognize our right as teachers to blaze a path that suits our own particular classrooms.

Such an understanding would also be useful to teacher training, as newly minted teachers begin to recognize the practical opportunities for perpetual development that come from entering into authentic dialogue with their students. Unfortunately, as Nancie Atwell points out, teacher training programs, particularly in graduate schools, are often more concerned with theoretical development than with practicality (1998). And until student teachers understand the inability of stock theory to apply with cookie cutter precision to their individual classrooms they will achieve less understanding of their practice. Rather, teacher training programs ought to promote teacher-student dialogue as a means of coalescing theory and practice. We need to recognize that though we lose our identity as teachers-in-training when we enter the profession, we needn't stop scrutinizing our practice. Such self-reflection would serve student teachers in the short term, but would also support their professional development throughout their careers.

Reading Adam Haridopolos' teacher research dissertation was cathartic for me in the answer it provided for my yearning to identify as a teacher researcher. It said, "Go ahead. You're a teacher, so you're qualified to talk about teaching." I would be pleased if my study, likewise, said to others that the lessons we learn in our own classrooms can be just as valid as those we read about in books and journals.

In her appeal for greater numbers of teacher research studies, Ruth Ray (1993) inspired me to pursue my own. In regards to the need for further research, I can do little better than to echo Ray's call. When we sit with colleagues and share our theories, we need stories from the classroom to give them life, and the possibilities for future study in this area are limitless. Even if another teacher chooses to follow the template I've provided here for regular student response journaling and teacher-student collaboration, the results will be different due to the differences in our lesson plans, as well the vast ocean of difference between one group of 25 people and another. Everyone has a story to tell, and we will not know what those stories are until we write them up.

Considering the question of further research from a somewhat more personal perspective, I might suggest the study of two questions that arose during this semester, but which were not directly addressed here.

- How do students' perceptions of their teacher as a fellow learner affect the development of a mutually supportive classroom community?

- How do more progressive, student-centered teachers pursue their pedagogies in more traditionalist, teacher- and administrator-centered schools?

The first question reflects my suspicion that my students during this semester were so supportive and respectful, both to me and to one another, because they viewed me more as a colleague and less as a taskmaster. Creating a learning environment without disharmony is, indeed, important if the classroom is going to be a pleasant workplace over the course of a semester. This question of identification, therefore, is an important one.

The second question is one I would like to understand better from teachers' first person accounts. While I was lucky to conduct the class in this study at a progressive university that welcomed student-centered pedagogy, I have also taught in less nurturing schools, where such pedagogy is frowned upon. How, then, do student-centered teachers maneuver in institutions where student choice is not encouraged, but strict adherence to a prescribed curriculum is? These seem to me important questions for real-world teachers attempting progressive practice.

This study is an examination of the lessons I learned in my attempts to create a practical class via the development of a comfortable and mutually supportive community. Ultimately, whether the critical voice comes from the teacher or the student, the result is empowerment, as we learn to identify ourselves as participants in our respective classrooms–not merely practitioners of other people's agendas.

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