

Teaching in Two Worlds:

Critical Reflection and Teacher Change in the Writing Center

BY DALE JACOBS

As a novice teacher and Ph.D. student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1994, I was assigned to teach in the school's writing center, an experience that would profoundly change my approach to teaching. I had previously taught a semester of first-year composition at UNL and a year of literature at a large Canadian university. At the time, I prided myself on being a teacher who practiced what I then perceived as student-centered pedagogy — getting everyone involved in discussion, allowing students to choose the readings (albeit from an anthology that was chosen for them), and workshopping writing in peer groups. However, my so-called student-centered pedagogy was, in essence, a collection of methods, a pedagogical template overlaid on each new group of students, regardless of the individual makeup of the class. I had strategies for getting students to talk in class, but my words always remained at the center of the pedagogical relationship. I laid out ground rules for peer writing groups, but never shared my own writing. I wrote comments on student papers, but never talked *with* students about their writing. Despite the veneer of student-centered methods, I was engaged in what Paulo Freire calls “banking education,” pouring knowledge into passive students. Working in the writing center radically challenged my approach to teaching and forced me to step back and examine critically my pedagogical location, methods, and philosophy.

In the classroom, I had easily categorized students based on work ethic and ability. There were the “good” students who always brought their drafts, did the assigned reading, spoke in class, and took exact

notes. Then there were the “ballcaps” in the back of the room, the young men who seemed only marginally engaged in school and who often interjected sarcastic comments into any class discussion. There were also the shy students who were usually prepared, but who would never speak a word in class. There were the perpetually late and the perpetually absent. These broad, uncritical categories allowed me to avoid thinking about the individual makeup of any class and about the individual learning needs within it. I was neither seeing students as complex persons nor allowing my own multiple locations to inform what I perceived to be my role as teacher.

Jimmy set the agenda for our meetings, thus displacing me from the center of authority and unsettling my teacherly desire for stability and, perhaps, control. Here was a student who clearly did not fit my prior categories.

By its very design, UNL's writing center led me to reconsider my role as a teacher, allowing me a space to interrogate, reflect on, and transform the theoretical, personal, and institutional voices that informed my work and my relationships with students. The structure of the writing center is such that teachers meet one-on-one with students in weekly fifty-minute sessions, responding as fellow writers and readers of texts and asking questions to get students to think more about their writing. Students can work on any type of writing, not just

academic or course-related writing, and there is no evaluation or grading. Other than a closer physical and mental proximity to students, I imagined that teaching in the writing center would be similar to classroom teaching. I expected the writing center students would fit into my teacherly categories and I was convinced that my classroom strategies would easily transfer to the writing center. What I failed to understand, however, was the profound effect that working at the margins of the institutional hierarchy of grades and formal class structures would have on my relationships with students and on my approach to teaching. This border space pushed students and teachers toward critical reflection that is not always possible when we are enmeshed in traditional classroom interactions.

Disrupting the Student-Teacher Relationship

It soon became apparent to me that I could not fit writing center students into a neat typology. Students came with a wide variety of writing experiences and concerns: Juan came to practice writing and speaking in English to help him in his future search for a teaching job; Lily wanted to work on writing structure for her education courses; and John, a creative writer, wanted time to write and a person to respond to his writing. Even the authority that I derived from teaching writing within the field of English studies was challenged by the broad range of disciplines represented in the students who came to the writing center. In any given day, it was likely that most of the students I worked with would be writing on subjects outside of my discipline and in varied forms, ranging from a lab report for

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biology to an application essay to Teacher's College. Working closely with different students on many types of writing in this unique space disrupted my idea of the relationship between student and teacher. Over the course of the semester, I came to realize that for a pedagogical relationship to be truly student centered, I had to move beyond method and enter into a dialogue that includes the fluid, changing, and contradictory stories of both student and teacher. I had to become, as bell hooks says in *Teaching to Transgress*, an engaged teacher, concerned not only with students and their lives, but with how teaching and learning fit into my life.

Of the many students who forced me to think about my teaching, two of them, Jimmy and Judy, though very different from each other in their needs, goals, and agendas, were especially influential in helping me to reexamine my pedagogical position.

Encountering Jimmy

Jimmy had just returned to UNL to finish his BA and to improve his writing skills, which he considered far below where they should be. A recently retired NFL line-backer, Jimmy was an outstanding football player during both high school and university. He was also deaf. In a process log written after our first session, Jimmy described his writing as "English code" and said that it was difficult for him to express himself in English grammar. For him, writing and reading involved translation from and to American Sign Language, his first language. In this way, Jimmy was like other ESL students. However, unlike other ESL students, Jimmy had, because of his

athletic ability, been mainstreamed and passed through the system.

It soon became apparent that Jimmy was very frustrated both at his inability to communicate and at the school system for not serving his needs. Jimmy knew that what he wanted from the writing center and from me as his writing center teacher was what he had not received in all his high school and university classes — real attention to his writing so that he could improve his fluency in English. From the outset, Jimmy set the agenda for our meetings, thus displacing me from the center of authority and unsettling my teacherly desire for stability and, perhaps, control. Here was a student who clearly did not fit my prior categories.

Although I had worked with many people with hearing disabilities in my former position as information officer with the Alberta Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, I had never taught a student with hearing disabilities and did not know exactly how to approach this pedagogical situation. Unfortunately, I then saw my prior work experiences as part of the rest of my life, which somehow seemed to exist outside of the ways in which I conceptualized myself as a teacher. It would take me a large part of the semester to see that I needed to connect this part of my own history to my current dialogue with Jimmy.

Through interacting with deaf people in my former job, I knew that there is a deaf culture that is separate from the hearing world and that there is a fierce pride and independence that accompanies it. Unlike many of the ESL students with whom I

worked, Jimmy had a home culture with which I at least had a bit of familiarity. At the outset, however, I felt pressure to teach Jimmy how to write, even though I had no idea how to do so. I thought I would somehow be his educational savior, redressing the wrongs he had suffered from the educational system so that he would be able to communicate his own story and ideas. Unfortunately, in my role as teacher, I neglected everything that I knew about the hatred of paternalism that is so strong in deaf culture.

With Jimmy I was not so much a teacher as a co-learner, negotiating ways to communicate and slowing down so that my usual teacherly monologue could be displaced by real dialogue. I suspect now that Jimmy refused an interpreter for just this reason.

As a teacher, I thought that I knew what Jimmy needed. In my teaching log after our first session, I wrote,

Jimmy is very serious about improving his writing. He is taking several courses in which he will write. I think that he thought I would be doing some of his proofreading (or most of it). Now he realizes that I will help him to be a good proofreader. He is eager to learn about writing and to improve his skills.

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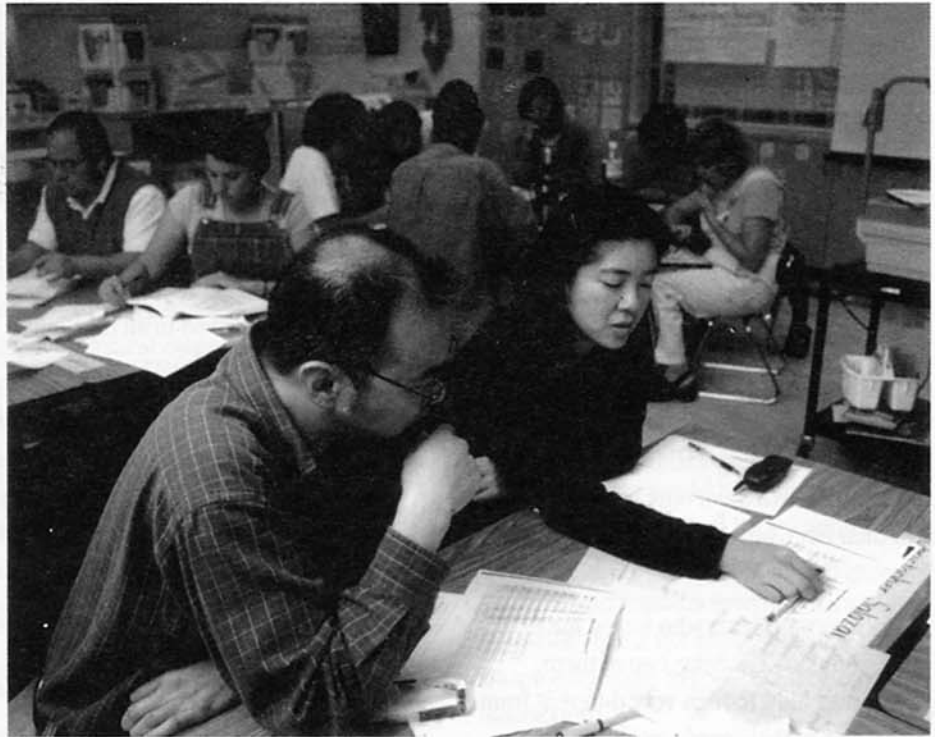
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In this passage, it is evident that I tried simply to *diagnose* Jimmy's problem and provide a solution for it. In one meeting, I had already speculated ("I think he thought") that Jimmy wanted a proofreading service from me. But notice that my wording here betrays the fact that I'm not positive, that I'm not sure at all what Jimmy thinks. In fact, throughout the semester, I was never sure what Jimmy thought, although I wanted to believe that I was, just as I wanted to believe that I knew what my classroom and other writing center students needed and thought. Also, in this passage I delineate one of my perceived functions in our relationship: "I will help *him* to be a good proofreader." At this point, I did not even know Jimmy's issues with writing, but, as a teacher, I projected my own solutions to the problem that I perceived. After all, I surmised, isn't that what teachers are supposed to do?

Moving Toward Dialogue

There was no doubt that Jimmy and I needed to enter into a dialogue about his writing and learning. But when I first began working with Jimmy, my concept of dialogue was a long way from the dialogue Paulo Freire describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: "a horizontal relationship of which a mutual trust between the dialoguers is a logical consequence" (1970, p. 72). Working with Jimmy, however, would lead me to understand and internalize Freire's definition.

I soon learned that student-teacher dialogue between Jimmy and me would be difficult because of the language barrier that separated us. Jimmy did not want a third person in the room to sign or translate



our conversation because of his past experiences with teachers ignoring him and talking to the interpreter. Despite the frustrating difficulties that we often had communicating, Jimmy wanted our sessions to be unmediated. We wrote to each other, took additional time for our sessions, and repeated what we had said to each other as slowly as possible. Through this long and often frustrating process, I came to see the ways in which my pedagogy was not as student-centered as I had previously imagined. The frustration and disruption were generative to me since I was under no institutional pressures to pass him through, but was instead forced to continually think about our writing relationship. I came to see that in my relationship with Jimmy I was not so much a teacher as a co-learner, negotiating ways

to communicate and slowing down so that my usual teacherly monologue could be displaced by real dialogue. I suspect now that Jimmy refused an interpreter for just this reason.

Freire writes, "As a democratic relationship, dialogue is the opportunity available to me to open up to the thinking of others, and thereby not wither away in isolation" (1995, p. 119). My interactions with Jimmy disrupted my thinking about my teaching, led me to see what real dialogue is and, in the process, opened me up to his thinking and caused me to critically reflect on my own pedagogical practices.

Working with Jimmy in the writing center allowed me to begin to talk back to the pedagogical voices that informed my teaching — past teachers, past teaching

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experiences, past theories — since these voices gave me little or no direction in my working relationship with Jimmy. Instead, over the course of the semester, I learned that I needed to rely on Jimmy as much as, or perhaps even more than, he needed to rely on me; I learned that a dialogue is, as Augusto Boal said in his keynote address at the Pedagogy of the Oppressed Conference, more than the sum of two monologues.

Since Jimmy was older than most students and had come to the realization that his disability did not have to equate to a substandard education, he did not allow me to slip into the easy role of knowing teacher. Instead, Jimmy asserted himself and expressed anger at how he had previously been served and was being served (or not served) by the educational system. Much of this resentment at the educational system comes across in a paper that Jimmy wrote for a class on sociology on deviant behavior and disability:

It was not easy for people around me to understand my personal struggles and often they were unable to relate to me. As in my childhood, the challenges I faced forced me to overcome them and be successful. I have learned to share my feelings with people who will understand and have learned a great deal about my feelings and behaviors towards Cultural Transmission from my Sociology class. One example is that I have failed some exams due to my difficulty in communicating American Sign Language over to English. It is not that I have not studied, rather it's my misunderstanding of the English language. This has

been frustrating again and again because I have tried the best I can.

This problem has existed for years. In past years, instructors have given me good grades as an easy way out, because I am deaf, instead of teaching me the correct way. . . . So, deviant behavior from people with disabilities is often misunderstood. They just simply want to be taught like everyone else and understood like everyone else.

Even though Jimmy was writing here about his own experience and not specifically about his experience with me in the writing center, after reading this paper and talking to Jimmy about it over a number of weeks, I came to see myself in his critique. He helped me to reconsider the ways I had been evading the needs of individual students in my classes by not acknowledging the different ways that people learn and not listening to the polyphony of classroom voices. Further, in the course of our one-on-one dialogue, I recognized the importance of my prior experience working with deaf people — experience I had somehow placed outside of my teacherly role. In this dialogue, Jimmy's history was important, but so was mine.

Encountering Judy

Another student who prodded me into further reflection on my personal history that semester was Judy, a transfer student from a Bible college in Omaha. She had taken first-year composition at her former school and came to the writing center to finish putting together a writing portfolio so that she could be granted credit for that course. From the outset, Judy was the kind

of student I had initially expected in the writing center because she fit into the stable student categories that I had constructed from classroom teaching—a “good” student who was hard working and would cause little disruption. She provided me with a marked contrast to Jimmy, and through the course of the semester, I thought a lot about the differences between my sessions with the two of them and, eventually, about how even Judy did not fit neatly into my student schema.

I was quite happy to have Judy as a student because her needs, at least as I perceived them then, fit perfectly into the things I was doing in my classroom at that time in the semester — invention and generative exercises. I knew, or thought I knew, exactly how to approach working with Judy and this initially affirmed my conception of myself as a teacher. After my second meeting with Judy, I wrote in my teaching log:

Today's meeting with Judy went quite well. I had her do the exercise that involves listing shoes and then freewriting about experiences/memories related to one of those pairs. From that exercise she has begun a piece on helping Kansas flood victims. She is extremely self-directed and writes very well.

As I often did in the classroom, I overlaid my template of student-centered pedagogy onto Judy, congratulating myself on allowing students to choose their own topics for writing. I am not saying that using exercises such as this one to generate topics is necessarily bad pedagogy — in

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fact, I still use similar exercises to help students to generate ideas. What I am criticizing is my easy self-congratulation because Judy fits into the role of “good student;” I give her the exercise, she does it, and therefore she is self-motivated and my pedagogy “works.” In fact, my sense that I was giving her what she needed allowed me to maintain the kind of pedagogical distance that I had set up in my classroom.

I became increasingly aware that my interactions with Judy were also problematic. I was not seeing Judy the person, but rather Judy the ideal writing-center student.

As the semester progressed, however, my work with Jimmy caused me to reexamine my relationship with Judy. While Judy and I had none of the trouble communicating that I had experienced with Jimmy, the substance of our talk was superficial, with little listening on my part because I thought that I knew who she was and what she needed. As my dialogue with Jimmy deepened, I became increasingly aware that my interactions with Judy were also problematic.

Initially, Judy and I were pleased with our relationship. On the same day that I had called her “extremely self-directed,” Judy wrote:

Today I did an exercise on listing 10 pairs of shoes that I have had and then I had to choose one to write on—freestyle writing. Wow did that generate the ideas. I love exercises like

that because it helps me to remember what I have been through and how much I can write about. . . . I'm glad that I have these 2 hours a week set aside to write because I probably wouldn't write if I didn't.

Here Judy echoes my assessment of her — she enjoys writing, knows her reasons for writing, and is glad to have the time to write. These are themes that she comes back to throughout the semester in her process log. Based on comments such as these, I decided that Judy was a remarkably motivated student who needed little from me. And, as the semester progressed, she was, in fact, to receive very little of my attention. Increasingly, I found myself working with multiple students during our appointments and, because I thought Judy needed me the least, I often paid more attention to what I perceived were greater needs of my other students. However, it soon became apparent that I was not seeing Judy the person, but rather Judy the ideal writing-center student. About a month into the semester, Judy wrote in her process log:

This tutoring business is hard but good. I enjoy sitting and writing and it's good having someone available to critique my writing, but Dale has been spending the whole time with other students. Those students do need more help, but I am having difficulty seeing what level I am at as a writer.

As the good student, Judy downplays her own needs and rationalizes that others need more help than she does. However, she is clearly not happy with the situation and wants to talk about her writing. During the session for which she wrote this process log,

I was actually working with Jimmy. In my teacher's log for that day, I noted only that Judy “spent most of the period writing at the computer while I was with Jimmy.”

As I came to realize that Judy, my ideal student, had become unhappy because I was not meeting her learning needs, I was forced to reflect on my own literate history. As a student, I too had felt I was not getting the attention that I needed because others needed more help. I too did not speak up because I did not want to cause problems. I had not been engaged as a student because I didn't see teachers willing to engage with me. As a result, through my early years in university, I became resentful of an educational system and teachers who did not see me as a complex individual. I moved from being a “good” student to being a “ballcap.” This episode with Judy made me realize that I was being unfair both to Judy and to all the students I had labeled by avoiding real dialogue of the sort I was beginning to have with Jimmy.

However, since we were on the margins of the usual institutional hierarchies, Judy had decided to speak up in her process log, albeit in a polite and muted manner. Reflecting on her experience allowed her to name the problem; critical reevaluation of my experience had allowed me to understand it. Acting on it was another matter. I still felt pressure to spend more time with other students who seemed to need more of my attention. Still, for what remained of the semester, I tried much harder to engage her in dialogue. I learned about her educational history, her involvement in charities, the importance of religion in her life, her career plans, and the ways in which she wanted to use writing. Through our conversations, I

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began to see the multiple locations that informed Judy. I tell myself that we made some strides toward dialogue, but I fear Judy was shortchanged in our pedagogical relationship. Though she did finish the portfolio she began, I wonder if her experience in the writing center went much beyond having a place to write.

Seeing Students as Individuals

My experiences with Jimmy and Judy compelled me to profoundly revise two aspects of what I had seen as my student-centered pedagogy. First, I realized that I needed to see *all* students as individuals with individual needs, and second, I needed to rethink my role as teacher so that it was fully integrated into the rest of my life. These two changes were necessary preconditions for establishing a relationship of dialogue with students. My time in the writing center started for me a process of ongoing reflection on and evaluation of what I am doing, expecting, and assuming as I teach.

Since that semester in the writing center, I have tried to move my classroom teaching in a direction that really is student-centered, though I almost hesitate to use that term because it is so overused and ill-defined. As I describe in "Beginning Where They Are: A Re-vision of Critical Pedagogy," I realized that I had to learn about individual students and to talk *with* them rather than *at* them, that I had to allow my own multiple experiences to inform my teaching, and that I had to be continually critical and self-reflective about my pedagogical theory and practice.

Does that mean that I've thrown all my previous teaching strategies out the window? No, of course not. I still use peer groups, but now I participate in them as a writer who both gives and gets feedback. I also ask a lot more questions of individual people about their experiences in small groups and encourage much more reflection about what we are accomplishing in them. In class discussions, I give much more opportunity for student voices and try not to make my voice the center of the classroom so that we are engaged in a dialogue like the kind that was possible in the writing center. At times, that means that there is silence in the classroom, something I am still teaching myself to tolerate. At other times, I can hardly get a word in. None of these changes, however, mean that I withhold my knowledge about writing, but rather that it becomes part of a dialogue instead of a deposit into a group of passive students.

Now every other week, each student comes to a conference with me in which we discuss a piece of writing that he or she has decided to bring. While the idea of conferencing is not new or startling, my experience in the writing center has convinced me to think of conferencing differently. A conference is not primarily an opportunity to instruct a student one on one; rather it is a site for substantive dialogue, a place where I can learn from students and take seriously what they have to say.

My experiences in the writing center provided an ideal site for productive disruption and subsequent critical reflec-

tion. The center is a place where all involved — students and teachers — can engage in a continual critique and constant revision; it is a structure that helps guard against complacency.

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