The Art of Negotiation: Student Writers Claiming Authority and Humility

I am sitting in my office reading a stack of papers my composition students have written. With multiple deaths of black men killed by police officers this past year, our classroom discussion and assignments have become an open critical inquiry regarding race, white privilege, and judicial power. The paper I am now reading is by a young man named Mickenson, who is smart and conscientious but very hesitant and unsure of himself. In class, we recently saw a video clip of political commentator and author Tavis Smiley interviewing Fox’s Factor commentator Bill O'Reilly on whether white privilege exists. Mickenson is writing in response to this conversation. His opening lines are the following: “White privilege has always existed and racism is as bad today as it was years ago. As if one cannot live without the other and as long as racism and white privilege live they continue to create a racial caste system.” I ponder on these two lines. This is a bold and strong opening: the writer is without any doubt or uncertainty taking a controversial stance. This opening contradicts the student’s reserved persona who rarely shares in class and when he does he speaks in questions as if to soften his stance on issues. I write in the margin on the paper: “Why did you start with such a controversial statement? What if your skeptical reader disagrees? Do you think there is another strategy where you can lead your reader into this argument so your skeptical reader does not immediately dismiss you? Or is this your intention, that is, are you intentionally being forceful, ready for a hearty debate from the very first sentence of your paper?”

Two weeks later, I am now reading final drafts. Mikenson, as all my students, must first complete a post-evaluation “intertextual exchange” where the student writer addresses the questions and responds to my comments I wrote on his paper, telling me why he agrees or disagrees before submitting his final drafts. I look at Mikenson’s post-evaluation. He writes, “Why open will a gentler, softer strategy? This is the truth so why deny it?” and he keeps his first two sentences on his final drafts. Although I do not necessarily agree that he is implementing the best rhetorical strategy to engage a skeptical reader, his
comments indicate that he is one, aware of his writing moves and two, confident enough to claim his authority as the writer and not subsume his ideas to the teacher’s.

I am pleased, very pleased as a composition teacher to read his paper. It is not a model paper. There are awkward sentence structure, non-sequiturs, incomplete thoughts, and incorrect in-text citation, but it is an ambitious, smart, and important paper speaking back to a community of thinkers, scholars, and concerned citizens on race relations in the 21st century. The writer does not simplify and dilute a complex and complicated topic into a set formula of commonplaces; instead, he engages in its messiness where there aren’t any panaceas, axioms, and clichés. His paper demonstrates his authority – his knowledge of the issue and his ease and commitment participating in the conversation. His courage and ability to assert his authority “does not move the writing toward the teacher’s Ideal Text; in fact, it does not even guarantee a more successful next draft. But what it does is to force the writer to reassert control . . .” (Brannon and Kroblauch 168).

One of the hardest concepts to teach to first-year composition students is the role of authority in academic writing that Mickenson demonstrated. How are young adults who have a limited social world view and older adults who have left school for several years expected to enter the classroom with a sense of authority? As a young student expressed to me a couple of semesters ago, “How am I as an eighteen year old expected to speak back to scholars who have been studying these issues before I was even born?” He voices the concerns of many of my students. College composition teachers know very well that our students from their high school days equate writing to prescriptive, formulaic writing, what I call “writing by numbers.” It is about putting their opinions down in a “one-size-fits-all” template. They do not have to encounter uncertainty because many of my students believe that writing is about stating an opinion and because it is an opinion no one can dispute it. First-year writing courses therefore pose a huge problem for these students and I find one of the biggest challenges for my students is understanding that writing is a social act that involves a relationship with a discourse community that
establishes and maintains knowledge. One cannot write outside of this community if one is going to be taken seriously. Writing, then, is not an isolated act where students write their papers in the corners of their bedrooms, libraries, or cafes, a space away from everyone for a single reader, the teacher. As James Reither states, “Writing begins not within the individual but in the writer’s relationship to the world” (623). This requires the students to move beyond their opinions and join the “inquiry community” to investigate what others have been speaking about the topic at large and where the points of contention are. And to move from commonplace opinion to inquiring ideas, student writers have to establish a certain degree of authority to participate in the discourse/knowledge community.

Explaining to an eighteen year old youth or a thirty-two year old mother who left school at sixteen the importance of authority in writing is daunting and overwhelming. It is like asking them to be an impostor. Yet, that is exactly what they need to do: “good” writing requires a certain level of imitation. Student writers are imposing to be professionals-in-training, or as Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz call it, “novice-as-experts.” But before they can play these roles, they need to understand what authority is and why it is a critical to write effectively in college.

Authority is not singular or monologic; it is dialogic (Mortensen and Kirch 557). Authority is grounded in a dialogue with other community members who are constantly in the process of negotiating meaning, advancing ideas, and investigating new problems. There is a healthy “give and get” tension in authority: one learns the conventions while at the same time resisting against these conventions to make room for new knowledge. Henry Grioux defines authority as “a historical construction shaped by diverse, competing traditions which contain their own value and views of the world” (qtd. In Mortensen and Kirsch 558). As a result, authority is always situated and problematic (Horner 523). And its ways of knowing are only legitimate if the discourse community finds them valid; equally, these ways of knowing are always being challenged and questioned by community members. This is why students cannot write in “arhetorical situations,” cut off from any strand of conversation and
debate on the issue. Writing in a vacuum is a lonely voice speaking to no one. It does not generate and build upon ideas; rather, it is an end product in itself.

So what does all of this mean to first-year college students? Before they can begin writing, they must first be participants by reading and researching. Reither clearly states, “To ‘teach writing’ is thus necessarily to ground writing in reading and inquiry” (624). As we all know as composition teachers, students cannot simply pick up their pens or sit in front of the computer to compose an essay as they did writing a five-paragraph theme essay for the standardized English test in high school. They have little to nothing to say not because they are void of knowledge. Our students are coming to class belonging to multiple knowledge communities. They have a lot to offer on diverse and important topics. I do not want to minimize this. But many are unaware what others are saying – where the electricity and heat is in the debate and why these disagreements and opposing viewpoints exist. This is why many students write in commonplaces, stringing clichés together to frame an argument. They know the issue at large is debatable but they are not sure why or how. For example, Ana, one of my students from last semester who wrote on the National Security Agency’s role of collecting data was able to describe what the NSA is and what it purports of doing, but she was not exactly sure where the heart of the debate is. On her first draft she wrote, “Since 9/11, National Security Agency (NSA) collects and mines information from American citizens and residents. Now with the threat of more terrorist attacks from ISIS, NSA is more committed to mine through any suspicious data to keep United States safe.” Her paper proceeded to explain how it collects data. It was a summary, a regurgitation of what she heard in the news and read in articles. There were no “writing” issues, per se, if one looked at the organization, structure, documentation, and grammar. It was a well-written paper. But the writer had nothing to offer the discourse community who has been exploring the constitutionality and success of NSA. This is because Ana was writing the paper as an outsider; her “outlandish” role, as Patricia Bizzell calls it, was obvious: she was not yet a participant because she was not aware “whether or not the contribution, question,
answer, or criticism has already appeared in the ‘the literature’ – whether or not it is the point, relevant, or timely. A writer addressing dead issues, posing questions, already answered, or voicing irrelevant criticisms is judged ignorant and viewed as, at best, an initiate – not yet an insider . . .” (Reither 624). Ana resolved to summarizing what NSA does because she could not claim any authority to establish a position on the issue.

So how do student writers claim authorial agency? Thomas Recchio contends that composition teachers need to “provide them access to powers of language generated by the multiplicity of competing voices inside and outside the classroom” (141). One way to accomplish this is through research. Research allows our students to become participant observers of academic culture; it grants the writer to play the role of “the knower, struggling to represent what he knows to connect that to the knowledge made by others. As he participates in research, he comes to understand what constitutes authority. . .” (Kutz 349). After receiving her first draft on NSA and seeing that her paper was what I call “tone deaf” to the discourse community, unaware of its concerns, Ana was encouraged to put down her pen and go back to research. She realized that the six weeks she spent reading articles, watching documentaries, and listening to news on the NSA was a critical phase in her writing; that is, these six weeks were still an integral part of writing. She told me after class that she did not realize how important it is to know the subject matter, that she thought the six weeks reading and discussing NSA was repetitive and had to do more with a reading class than a writing class. Now she realized that she was gaining inside knowledge, observing not only the debates being discussed, but the language being used to frame these arguments.

One way to establish authority is for student writers to be deeply immersed in the subject matter. Writing cannot be separated from content. Our students cannot write effective and compelling papers ignorant of content. Asking them to write about, say, feminism when the class spent a week or two reading about and discussing gender and sexuality is inadequate. We are setting up our students to
resort to formulaic ways of writing where content matters little. Many of us in academia spend weeks and months to write essays for conferences and journals. Why then do we expect students to spend only a week or so on a topic and be able to write an engaging paper that has something to offer the reader? Writing takes time, lots of time. It is a time-consuming process: it involves multiple steps before even sitting down and begin composing. An essential key to writing is being a participant in these multiple conversations on the issue at large. And time is a factor. This is why I have students explore one topic the full sixteen weeks. So Ana had an entire semester to observe and eventually participate in several conversations on NSA through scholarly articles, newspaper articles, documentaries, blogs, among other venues.

Ana and her classmates are encouraged to become participants of knowledge communities instead of academic communities. I agree with Douglas Down and Elizabeth Wardle that “academic writing” is an “umbrella term . . . [that can be] dangerously misleading” (556). Although I am as a composition teacher indoctrinating my students into academic culture, I do not feel equipped to introduce them to academic discourse because there does not exist a singular discourse in academia. I am a generalist; I am not privy to the specialized ways of knowing and jargon that other disciplines use. And many of my students are going to write for various communities throughout their academic careers. For example, Ana, writing on NSA, is not necessarily writing for an academic audience; she is writing for a larger community that is heavily invested in this issue. Learning how to anticipate, inquire about, and engage a larger and more realistic and practical audience helps with the transfer of writing skills she is developing and strengthening in her composition courses to her other courses. Ana is an accountant major. For her core courses, she will write several papers, some that include business reports, clinicals, PowerPoint presentations, literature review, and essays. Once she becomes a junior, she will most likely take classes to fulfill her accountant major requirements. I am unsure of what writing she will do then. When I asked Ana what type of writing she anticipates doing as an accountant major, her reply was succinct, “None.”
This may or may not be the case. The point is she and I are both not sure what particular writing genre she needs for her major. Regardless if she will do any writing in her accountant courses or not, she will still have multiple audiences for her core courses and each of her professor ensconced within her own discipline will have different demands and criteria.

There is no way any composition teacher can introduce Ana or any other student to these diverse disciplined communities. Down and Wardle assert, “By teaching the more realistic narrative itself, we have a theoretically greater chance of making students ‘better writers’ than we do by assuming the one or two genres we can teach them will automatically transfer to other writing situation” (558). This is why I have as one of the criteria for each writing assignment students identifying who constitutes their knowledge community. Because my students choose one topic and spend the full semester exploring that topic, they are exposed to multiple sources and outlets over the sixteen weeks and become acquainted with various thinkers, activists, writers, think tanks, corporations, etc. who make up their knowledge community. When I ask them to identify their discourse community, I am monitoring how aware they are of all the strands of conversations they have been exposed to and why these individuals would participate in these conversations. If they fail to grasp this, how then are they expected to situate themselves among these individuals?

Knowing how important it is for student writers to be immersed in the subject matter, I changed the format of my composition courses two years ago. Students choose one topic out of four (NSA, ethics of torture, body politics, and education) to write on and spend the entire sixteen weeks exploring the intricacies and depths of their chosen topic. They write a total of three papers. Each paper builds upon the next. Their first paper is an analytical summary where they write about a debatable issue on their topic providing a literature review of what scholars, activists, thinkers, journalists, and concerned citizens have to say about the issue. This paper captures all the points of views and identifies allies who
agree and contrarians who disagree. Basically, this paper is for the student writer to put her pulse on the heart of the debate. This is a critical step in establishing authorial agency as a writer.

The second paper, a rhetorical analysis, is built out of this first paper. Unlike the first paper, where the student writer provided a literature review remaining neutral, she asserts her view in the second paper. This paper is completed approximately eight weeks into the semester. This means that students have two full months to explore their topic. They are fully engaged in assigned scholarly readings, documentaries, news outlets, journal articles, and class discussion. Students are given ample time to achieve a sense of textual authority; they can speak back to their knowledge community stating why they agree and disagree with certain ideas as they explore and develop their own ideas. Finally, for their third and last paper, a larger, more complex paper, they are able to more easefully situate themselves in the middle of the conversation as they do more research on their topic. Moreover, they choose one specific audience to speak to. So unlike their first two papers where their knowledge community was broad and therefore their rhetorical strategies and structure had to appeal to a larger audience, their third paper is exclusively engaging one particular audience. Their writing moves – word choice, organization, type of data, use of emotion, etc – are determined by the relationship with this specific audience. They need mental time and space to explore and be part of the inquiry community that provides “the place where authorship can be realized [that] lies in the boundary between a discipline and a person between convention and experience” (Recchio 132). This is where the students begin making the leap from beginner writer to an emerging writer who can claim authority.

Authority grants a student to “write into expertise” not “from a position of expertise” (Sommers and Saltz 134). She is not looking for “originality” in the sense of developing a new idea no one has yet thought of; she is too new to the discourse community to have such inside, cutting-edge knowledge. Rather, like a spectator, she is observing a high-stake debate becoming familiar with several of the complex subtopics with their own set of reasons and evidence before taking an important issue from it
that resonates with her that she wants to speak directly to. She is learning that “[s]tudents write in a space defined by all the writing that has preceded them. . . . This is the busy, noisy, intertextual space . . . .” (Bartholomae 64). That is what research is: a cacophony of voices creating an intellectual tension of ideas. Our students need to be part of this. This is demonstrated by Ana who once realized the importance of knowing her subject matter was willing to be an active participant and for her final draft she was able to establish authority by declaring her position on NSA as problematic, capturing the heart of the debate, stating, “NSA is more committed to mine through any suspicious data to keep United States safe, but is this safety coming at the expense of Americans’ right to privacy? The NSA is violating the fourth amendment by unlawfully spying on its citizens.” Unlike her first draft that offered no relevant and current insight, her final draft not only was engaged in an intense debate on the constitutionality of mining personal data, but it also revealed the complexity of this issue with the writer stating throughout her paper the importance of “NSA tracking data to keep its citizens safe. The problem is who is to say NSA is gathering important information or spreading a wide net capturing personal data that should never be in the hands of NSA.”

This student’s final draft was speaking to a larger audience than her instructor. It was one important strand of a multilayered conversation on the issue of NSA thinkers, writers, politicians, and concerned citizens are having. This was possible because she was willing to be a “novice,” that is, she was willing to move beyond her five-paragraph themed essay where writing is static and arhetorical and be completely opened to a new way of thinking, reading, and writing. Being a novice “involves adopting an open attitude to instruction and feedback, a willingness to experiment . . . . Being a novice allows students to be changed by what they learn, to have new ideas. . . . By contrast, those freshmen who cling to their old habits and formulas and who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing” (Sommers and Saltz 134). I am not saying that I saw a huge improvement in the Ana’s paper. Rarely do I see a huge leap in students’ writing the first
year of composition. As Sommers and Saltz emphasize, “The story of the freshman year is not one of
dramatic changes on paper: it is the story of changes within the writers themselves” (144). This was the
case with Ana. At the end of the semester, she understood threshold concepts, primarily that writing is
an ongoing, dynamic conversation that has been historically and traditionally grounded in time and
place. This conversation preceded her and will continue to proceed her. Writing is part of this
community of inquiry.

Her revision showed how she grappled with communicating with a larger community, conscious of
what rhetorical strategies and compelling data to use to engage her audience. She knew there is
“something” much more to writing than putting an opinion down on paper although she was not yet
sure of what that “something” was. For example, in her final draft, she wrote the following paragraph:

NSA uses stingrays for obtaining information. Media critic Nathan Wessler describes
the device as such, “The equipment also sends intrusive electronic signals through the
walls of private homes and offices, learning information about the locations and identities
of phones inside” (par.1). He believes that stingrays are such powerful devices that
people no longer have their own privacy in their homes and offices. Therefore, he claims
that stingrays should only be used in emergency situations and serious cases. Nathan
Wessler is right in the fact that people will lose their privacy and they will definitely be
angry about it. One of the basic rights of human beings is privacy, and that is the reason
why people were furious, after the government secrets were revealed in 2012.

Ana is struggling to fully converse and build upon her source’s ideas and words. It feels mechanical, yet
that “something” she is struggling with is a threshold concept: having a dynamic conversation with other
voices and points of view, to be able to agree and disagree at the same time with her sources,
highlighting their strong points while respectfully pointing out their weakness. This paragraph above
shows me that she is playing with her rhetorical authority, even if she is not fully comfortable with it and
not sure how to fully claim it.
Students who resist being the novice rely on the writing strategies they learned in high school. The arguments are always neat and tidy as they provide unrealistic solutions to complex issues. They do this by diluting the issue to a commonplace that does not allow uncertainty and doubt. For example, a student, named Joshua, writing on the relevancy of higher education, wrote the following introduction:

Every student is faced with a choice upon graduation. Attend a four-year university, or pursue another option such as vocational school or working. If said student knew that according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the 30 jobs projected to grow at the fastest rate over the next decade only seven will require a bachelor’s degree, would that effect their decision on what road to take, degree or not? Higher education will undergo many drastic changes soon due to an increasing amount of students opting for alternative forms of secondary education because getting a college degree is no longer as useful.

I would consider Joshua to be one of the strongest students at the beginning of the semester. This does not mean I thought his writing was strong; rather, he seemed to have a stronger command and ease of the writing process. Yet, he was completely unaware, even uninterested, in any other viewpoint except his own. For his post-evaluation, he told me, “These are my opinions. I don’t understand why I got such a low grade. I always got good grades in high school.” The paragraph above reflects this. Despite being a smart young man who does make valid points about higher education costing too much putting students in debt for the rest of their lives, he remains willfully ignorant of a discourse community who would disagree. I am not even sure Joshua is aware of how and why these community members would disagree. Thus, his sentence, “Higher education will be undergoing many drastic changes soon due to an increasing amount of students opting for alternative forms of secondary education” begs the question: Are current and potential students aware of the statistics and are indeed choosing vocational and apprenticeship over college? Moreover, how would he respond to those who argue that we are a post-
industrial society that is centered on manufacturing of ideas not products, so higher degrees are needed to obtain access to these ideas? The student’s paper does not engage any opposition or criticism. His argument is clear: college degrees will become less important over time so college curriculum and cost should change to reflect this lowered status. There is nothing wrong with his argument. And he is right, this is his opinion; he has right to assert it. But the reader has a right to not read it, to not take it seriously, to not feel she is part of this conversation. Refusing to be the novice, he treated his writing as answer-getting formulas for the teacher to grade for accuracy in his presentation.

This student reminds me of one of the ten students Johanna Rodgers interviewed in “Defining Experiencing Authorship(s) in the Composition Classroom” about his perception of being an author and writer and his ownership of writing. Addressing his instructor’s comments on his paper concerning U.S.’s role in war, he said that “the professor challenged my opinion asked me things like, ‘Well, what if your son was there, and hindsight is 20/20,’ and I said, ‘Well, my son wasn’t there and maybe I don’t have 20/20 hindsight, but this is my opinion’” (148). Yet, unlike Rodgers who views this student as asserting his authority as a writer, I see it as someone who refuses to play the novice, to show a healthy amount of humility to acknowledge that he is a newcomer to the discourse community. Therefore, I do not see him asserting his authority but losing it by becoming hyper defensive. He is still learning from “expert’s tools” how to establish and frame arguments, while learning how “ideas need to be ingested before there can be questions. Students need to immerse themselves in the material, get a sense of the parameters of their subjects, familiarize themselves with the kinds of questions asked of different sets of evidence, and have a stake in the answers before they can articulate analytical theses” (Sommers and Saltz 134-5). The problem may be that Rodgers’ interviewed student and my student, Joshua, may feel their teachers are attacking them, not respecting their contribution.

Composition instructors cannot expect students to claim rhetorical authority if we do not treat them as a writer who not only has something to share to his audience but has a knowledge base to
speak out of. I am not saying that we should pretend that students’ writings are saying something insightful when they are not. I find this condescending and unfair to the student. Who else is going to expose him to how a knowledge community is going to respond to his paper? I agree with David Bartholomae that “[i]f our goal is to make a writer aware of the forces at play in the production of knowledge, we need to highlight the classroom as a substation – as a real space, not as an idealized utopian space. There is no better way to investigate the transmission of power, tradition and authority than by asking students to do what academics do. . .” (66). But how do we encourage our students to be novices while playing experts, to claim authority while showing humility? We do not want to silence our students and make them feel as if they have nothing to add to the inquiry.

On Joshua’s draft, I wrote, “You have smart thoughts and you bring forth an important issue. Bravo! The problem is that your paper feels like a lecture, as if you are listing all your reasons why a college degree is overrated while not engaging any members of the discourse community.” Did I silence him? He did not revise his paper. Instead, he wrote in his post evaluation that he has a right to assert his opinion without being penalized. I am not sure I did silence him: this student never revised any of his papers. He did claim authority, but it was a false sense of authority. He left the semester as he began it: completely unaware how conversations are deeply rooted in history, traditions, and power, and how a writer has to negotiate his ideas with the discourse community. There is a certain amount of attention given both in respect of and resistance to leading scholars, certain buzzwords as phrases and coined words that the writer is expected to use, and a certain amount of spark that some arguments give off as others are lifeless. Joshua remained inured by this; his writing was completely tone deaf.

The salient difference between Joshua and Ana was humility: she understood the limitation of her social worldview; he did not. As a result, she was a more mature, sophisticated writer because by acknowledging her limitation she was ready to identify the gaps she must address and leaps she must make to become an insider to gain and claim authority. As a reader, I felt heard and appreciated from
her writing. In contrast, I felt a finger pointing at me telling me to shut up and listen as I read Joshua’s paper. So the question remains, Did he feel silenced by my comments? Did he, too, feel that I pointed my finger at him telling him to shut up and listen, that the teacher knows best? I have been guilty of doing this, of being what Ramona Tang labels as a gatekeeper, judge, and editor to my students’ writing.

As a new and young composition instructor several years ago, I thought I had to play these roles. I was too quick to point out how their ideas did not make sense or were not convincing. I never imagined that I can and should treat my students as writers who are an integral part of the writer-reader relationship built on an open dialogue. Today, I am much more conscious and respectful of my students as complex thinkers who are gifted and talented in their own way. I have expanded my role as reader to coach/guide, collaborator, conversation partner, and community member reader (Tang). Students can only be seen as writers who take authority if we treat them as such. Fife and O’Neill remind us to provide a “rhetoric of commentary” that is conversational and “opens up the matters under discussion for a mutual investigation by writer and reader . . . (310). It is interactive. The key word is “mutual.”

There is certain amount of “give and get” in writing. I am willing to interact with my students’ writing as someone who wants to be engaged, to learn, to grow but if the writer is not willing to be part of this relationship, then there is no interaction. This is what happens when authority without humility is asserted: the writer fails to see where his ideas end and the reader’s ideas begin. I feel like I did not silence Joshua with my comments because he was never really listening.

Nonetheless, I still have to be careful as the reader, a particular reader I refer to myself to my students pointing out that they are writing not to me, per se, but to a discourse community; I am a singular reader among many potential ones. There is a certain amount of authority that I need to be conscious of that I bring to the paper as a reader and as the teacher who ultimately gives the grade. This cannot weaken the students’ authority. Although the student-writer and teacher-reader (as a particular reader) is never equal, I find that students who are aware of how their writing is situated in and with
audience, intent, and content understand the writer-reader relationship as dialogic and therefore both are critical components of the inquiry community. Ana did not view me as the reader who is checking up to see if she successfully completed the assignment and correctly answered the writing prompt; rather, she saw me as part of a larger audience knowledgeable of the controversy surrounding NSA. As a result, her writing intention was grounded in this “give and get” relationship between writer and knowledge community. In her pre-writing evaluation where five questions are posed to encourage the student writer to reflect on her writing in progress, one question I raise is, “Who do you think will make up your discourse community?” A second question is, “What concerns do you think this community will have?” Ana identified her discourse community as “ACLU, politicians, political science and government professors and scholars, and everyday people like me who don’t want the government listening to my phone calls or reading my text messages.” She also identified a range of concerns from the fear of another 9/11 to violation of the 4th amendment. As a result, hearing all these concerns, her writing became more dynamic and conversational.

Unlike Ana who identified her knowledge community on her pre-writing evaluation, Joshua did not complete his pre-writing evaluation. When I asked him after class who is his audience, he gave me a quizzical look, stating, “Well, you are.” “Yes, I am,” I replied, “but who else beyond me?” He was able to identify all the authors he read, but I felt this was more an afterthought: he was not metaphorically sitting down with them debating the value of higher education with them as he was writing his paper. Because he was unaware of his audience beyond the teacher, his intention was not grounded in a dialogue with these members. There was no real authority because it has to be rooted in the conventions, traditions, and power of the discourse community. Joshua failed to realize that writing as a social act is a form of “internalized conversation” and that “any effort to understand how we think required us to understand the nature of conversation; and any effort to understand conversation requires us to understand the nature of community life that generates and maintains conversations.”
As mentioned earlier, a writer cannot write outside of a community; the audience will know immediately he is an outsider. Joshua remained an outsider despite his smart and at times insightful ideas.

This balancing act, asserting authority while showing humility, is possible when student writers can tap into their own knowledge base to expand upon and beyond it as participants of the inquiry community. Beginning with something they are familiar with not only gives them some sense of confidence and authority, but it also helps them connect to the issue so they are not writing “to pass the class” but to speak to a topic that resonates with them. This does not mean that students should and will find all writing topics interesting and exciting. That is not how academia works; nor is this how rigorous intellectual work outside of academia. Cultivating good writing habits is dealing with less than sexy and thrilling topics than with issues that demand a more mature and distant approach. The student writer may not immediately connect with the topic but if it has a large impact on society he learns that writers have a certain responsibility to treat social issue with intellectual care and rigor. This is the balancing act: to claim authority to enter the conversation either out of interest or social responsibility and to express humility to show a certain amount of distance to see the issue from other perspectives and to show maturity understanding that there are more than one valid viewpoint.

For Composition I, I offer students four topics they can choose from. Every year I change these topics. As I mentioned earlier, I presented four topics this past academic year on education, body politics, ethics of torture, and NSA. I have a sizeable community of veterans each semester. I found over the past year that most choose ethics of torture and NSA. Students who were insecure as writers chose education because the topic is very familiar and relatable. And a handful who found all the topics boring, chose body politics. Although they were restricted to these topics, students chose any subtopic they found interesting. Spending the first month reading various articles, watching diverse documentaries, and discussing them with classmates, students had exposure to multiple conversations
surrounding each topic. There were plenty of issues they could explore for each one. For example, for one Composition I class seven students out of twenty-one students chose body politics. The subtopics consisted of transgender rights, cosmetic surgery, sexual standards, and eating disorders. Interestingly for education, only two students chose education. One subtopic was on standardized testing; the other issue was on lax teacher certification standards. Six students chose ethics of torture. The subtopics ranged from the constitutionality of torture as an interrogation tool to U.S.’s moral role in the world. The remaining six students chose NSA, exploring a wide range of issues on whether Edward Snowden is a traitor or hero to constitutional changes adjusting to a new century full of global terrorism.

As you can see these topics are varied. Although restricted to choose one topic the entire semester, student writers had plenty of “mental” space to choose their own direction depending on their interests. The subtopics they explored were not repetitious; that is, their third paper was not a copy and paste of the first and second papers. Through each paper as they became more committed participants in rich and complex conversations within their subtopic they learned how to agree, disagree, and at times both. This is demonstrated in the following paragraph by a paper on cosmetic surgery by a student named Jaime:

For some, it is believed that cosmetic surgery is damaging to one’s natural beauty. Celebrity Kate Winslet gives her thoughts on cosmetic surgery stating that, “I don’t want to freeze the expression of my face. . . . I’d rather be the woman they're saying 'She's looking older' about than 'She's looking stoned'” (qtd. in Krupnick, par. 4). In some cases it may be appropriate to say that this statement is true, especially in procedures that are botched. In those types of scenarios it can be lead to consider that cosmetic surgery can indeed be detrimental to one’s physical appearance. Media critic Suzanne Moore states, “I feel bloody weird when I see everywhere hard boiled eggs with over-arched eyebrows, duvet cheeks, muzzle chops, squinty eyes, the strange sheen that in no way resembles the oily glow of youth” (par. 2). Again, I can understand the reason behind
those who feel this way about cosmetic surgery. There are circumstances where those who endure cosmetic surgery tend to overdo it, leading to the unusual, unnatural looking features that Moore states. Would it be wrong to say that those who are opposed to cosmetic surgery take that stance because of those who go over-board with surgeries? Possibly the negative attention associated with cosmetic surgery is due to those who have undergone surgeries that have gone wrong? Maybe the terrible reputation that cosmetic surgery has is too heavily influenced on the failed procedures, and not enough on the procedures that were able to change one’s life in a phenomenal way.

This paragraph showcases how Jaime has developed her skill to not only see the nuances in the argument for and against cosmetic surgery, but also deftly situates herself in the middle of this. That is, Jaime sees that the argument on cosmetic surgery as a means to enhance one’s appearance is not a black or white issue: it is in search of vainglory or not; it is destructive or not; it is rewarding or not. As a writer she claims a certain amount of authority to put herself in the middle of this conversation because she has spent numerous hours reading, talking, and writing about it. Establishing authorial agency comes from “knowing how” and “knowing why.” Jamie, like Ana, was willing to play the novice, letting go of formulaic writing and adventure into something much more sophisticated and intellectually rigorous full of uncertainty. She opened herself up to a writing experience that is not as Joshua saw it “answer getting” but rather as Ana saw it “question exploration” (Wardle and Down).

Sommers and Saltz underscore the difference between Jamie’s and Ana’s writing experience with Joshua’s stating:

Being a novice allows students to be changed by what they learn, to have new ideas, and to understand that ‘what the teacher wants’ is an essay that reflect these ideas. In contrast, those freshmen who cling to their old habits and formulas and who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing. Even students who come to college as strong writers primed for success have difficulty when they refused to be novices. (134)
This willingness to play the novice while asserting authority is contingent upon writing instructors treating and respecting students as emerging writers who have something important to share. The composition classroom must allow students to take risks without fearing they will be penalized or worse, silenced, for venturing into and participating in these larger conversations.

Works Cited


