

Confrontational Discourse and the Working-Class Student: Student Voice, Teacher Authority, and Community Engagement

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The conversation regarding the level of engagement of working-class students in the composition classroom is a relatively new one. Recent arguments place the onus for success entirely on the principle of critical pedagogy, i.e., solely on the educator. This principle leaves little room for student voice, and in fact favors academic discourse. As a result, students unaccustomed to the discourse are offered an ultimatum: choose or be left behind. In this essay, I argue that students need not discard home discourse, but must develop the ability to negotiate between multiple discourses. In addition, I explore the complications that ensue from such a confrontation, as well as suggest a framework for managing the interactions between student voice, teacher authority, and community practice.

The broadcast came in fragments: “firetrucks arriving,” “heavy smoke along the river,” “explosion...nearby windows,” “verso officials...no response.” The words flashed like newspaper headlines across my mind. I knew, but I did the math anyway. Sixteen hours, if he went in at seven...that would be until three, and three that would get him... until 11:00. I looked at the clock, 11:12.

As I reflect on the morning an air compressor in the Verso Paper Mill exploded, taking away 259 jobs and one life, my emotions are mixed. I am grateful my dad used vacation to take off the second half of his shift; I am mad he was asked to work a double shift after the company laid off nearly 300 employees. I am grateful the casualties were minimal; I am mad the man killed was only a temporary hire working without benefits because he was previously laid off during an earlier string of cuts. I am grateful the governor promised intervention; I am mad nothing ever came of it.

The contradictions I felt in these situations unfolded across months and now years. I struggle daily with the impulse to blame and the desire to be thankful. I am caught between a deep need for anger and an instinct to remain silent. Indeed as a student of the working-class, I have become all too familiar with these silences. In fact, the further I progress in academia as a student, the more I notice how these silences permeate my life. Through this essay I hope to break those silences—though I am by no means the first to do so. Academics, and more recently, politicians, have begun to speak on behalf of the working-class student. It may be more accurate, then, to suggest that I add my voice to the small but growing number who protests class stratification within the academy. As a working-class student, however, my voice and the voices of those like me remain persistently absent from the conversation—spoken for, rather than speaking out. Through analytical evaluation of personal experience, I believe student voices can immeasurably enrich the current conversation and supply the student perspective, which is so sorely needed.

The conversation regarding working-class students in the composition classroom is relatively new. Beginning in the early 1990s and carrying forward to 2007, the conversation has deadened somewhat recently. However, picking up the threads of this conversation is now more important than ever, especially considering the ever widening socioeconomic gap between the working and upper classes and our inability as a society to address that gap.

In an environment that seeks to divide in order to quantify student worth, to emphasize the life

of the mind rather than lived experience, the voice of the working-class student is integral in affecting change in institutional power structures. My experience as a working-class student and my struggles with working-class consciousness, then, position me to successfully interrogate the structures within academia that alienate countless students like me. However, I must make it clear: I cannot speak *for* the working class; I can only speak as *one* of the working class. At the same time, I must admit I cannot and indeed will not speak in a detached way about my personal experiences.

Ironically, speaking about one's personal experiences is often considered taboo in an academic setting, and as bell hooks points out: "One of the ways you can be written off quickly as a professor by colleagues who are suspicious of progressive pedagogy is to allow your students, or yourself, to talk about experience" (148). As a student, without formally recognized academic prestige, this perspective in my narrative is perhaps an even riskier decision, but I employ these voices purposefully. After all, a multi-dimensional problem deserves a multi-dimensional approach. In choosing to unite my academic voice with the voice of my personal experiences, I hope to illustrate the contradictions students from working-class backgrounds face and simultaneously demonstrate conscious negotiation between multiple voices. I, like hooks, believe that linking these experiences "really [enhance] our capacity to know" (148). Furthermore, this connection between students as people and students as learners is vital for educators to recognize. To learn in a meaningful, connected way enhances our lives not only as students, but as teachers and community members as well. It should come as no surprise that the students' ability to negotiate between the discourses of home and the academy rests on these three basic principles: empowering student voice, re-evaluating teacher authority, and building an engaged community of learners. Awareness and evaluation of the intersections between student voice, teacher authority, and community establishes a system of mutual support and accountability among learners. It is only through this engaged network that working-class students can hope to preserve their individual voices and actively use them—while at the same time mastering purposeful use of the institutional and academic discourse of the four-year university.

"Education Destroys Something"

Early one evening I closed my computer, discouraged. I couldn't write anymore, couldn't think anymore. What am I doing here? A few words from a recent meeting with a professor came back to me: "Kelsey, I don't think you could be doing anything more important than what you're doing here." What exactly is that, again?

I have saved every paper I have written since the seventh grade. Reading these papers, I see a striking pattern emerge: over the course of nine years as a student, I have written about my family on numerous occasions. In fact, they make it into at least two or three papers each year. What started off as purposeful storytelling and sharing of cherished memories, however, soon became scientific and removed. With each ensuing paper I have moved further and further away from home. Academic discourse, in some ways, has effected an evacuation of the self. My writing has become less a thing of the body and is now fully defended by the mind. If my grandmother were to read a paper I wrote in eighth grade about canning peaches with her, she might cry. If she were to read the paper I wrote as a junior in college about dialectal speech patterns in rural communities, well the fact is she would not read it. This shift in my ability to speak of home tells largely of my transition from a writer who relates experience to a writer who has developed analytical skills; however, this phenomenon ultimately illustrates a deep-seated source of conflict in my life as a working-class student: the critical insight academia gave me.

The ability to critique is simultaneously one of my most prized possessions and a source of alienation from all that is familiar. Aware of this alienation, Carolyn Law writes, "Education destroys something" (Dews and Law 1). In all likelihood, this statement strikes most readers as

shocking, or at the very least disconcerting. Education, though for many it is seen as the one-way ticket to somewhere “better,” is often used to verbally address inequality while inwardly perpetuating it. What students from the working class seem to recognize better than most is the truth of this statement. In college, they are forced to choose. They must reconcile the language of home with the language of the academic institution they attend. Although outwardly a simple task, this negotiation can be alienating and psychologically damaging. This damage is demonstrated in many volumes, perhaps most striking among them is Dews and Law’s *This Fine Place So Far From Home*, which details the conflict faced by working-class academics. Many of their stories detail regret, painful marginality, and an inability to connect—a pattern replicated and amplified in working-class students. With these painful stories in mind, it becomes easier to recognize education as something that destroys as well as creates. How then, must this alienation and antagonism be addressed? The question is most prudently answered by going to the source: a student voice in conflict with academic discourse.

Discourse and the Academy

The journey to critique the academy must begin with the discourse that comprises it. Discourse, though widely discussed, remains an elusive concept. In fact, Stanley Fish argues, “the main business of English studies should be to investigate the nature of discourse communities” (qtd. in Bizzell 489). As a subject that engages the expert and attracts the initiate, discourse often—perhaps counter-intuitively—works to alienate the novice. This dynamic can be best understood by taking a close look at the definition of discourse community. Patricia Bizzell writes:

Groups of society members can become accustomed to modifying each other’s reasoning and language use in certain ways. Eventually, these familiar ways achieve the status of conventions that bind the group in a discourse community, at work together on some project of interaction with the material world. An individual can belong to more than one discourse community, but her access to the various communities will be unequally conditioned by her social situation. (480)

I choose Bizzell’s definition because it does several important things. First, it acknowledges that individuals have an innate ability to assemble complex conceptual structures based on their involvement in a particular discourse community. In other words, her definition recognizes the validity of what I characterize as home discourse—the language and system of knowledge most students possess before entering college. Second, her definition describes discourse communities as inherently interactional. That is, a home discourse must necessarily engage with other discourses in order to create meaning and advance systems of knowledge. The understanding that a student’s access to discourse communities “will be unequally conditioned by her social situation” (Bizzell 480) becomes particularly vital when returning to my original assertion that discourse can be alienating.

This tendency is nowhere more apparent than in the university classroom, particularly the composition classroom, where students begin to test and reformulate their voices within an academic context. The classroom acts as a microcosm of what Bizzell calls interactional discourse, but what I prefer to term confrontational discourse. Interaction suggests a mutual or reciprocal action, while confrontation suggests a power imbalance, which is certainly the case. Indeed, denying this power imbalance is one of the main reasons for the perpetuity of the hierarchical structures employed by academia. As Peter Elbow points out, “Discourse carries power” and to leave an institutionally sanctioned “power vacuum” in place is to privilege those who have “learned the roots or propensity for academic discourse at home” (135) and disadvantage those whose home discourse does not function similarly. Students who are clearly advantaged by this system are traditionally those from the upper or middle classes, where the gap between home and academic discourse is not nearly as

wide. Students who hail from working-class backgrounds face more than just a socioeconomic barrier. Indeed, there is an entire language and value gap that universities, and writing courses in particular, fail to address when they ignore working-class consciousness, a gap I believe is deliberately unaddressed.

I am by no means alone in this assumption. Scholars such as Lynn Bloom, William DeGenaro, and bell hooks make similar accusations. First and foremost, these writers share the knowledge of language as necessarily politically charged—in other words, confrontational. Second, many of these scholars write from the margins of academia: working class, African-American, female. This likewise positions them to question the hegemony of the majority, a conversation that for obvious reasons cannot avoid political engagement. After all, as Lisa Delpit points out, access to a dominant discourse grants access to economic power (1318). Therefore, the ability to wield a dominant discourse entails greater power for those who are disenfranchised or otherwise on the margins. It is important to note that those who are the gatekeepers of a dominant discourse also function as gatekeepers of economic empowerment. The stakes, when regarded in this light, are incredibly high. In the end, the only way to counteract these exclusionary practices is to recognize and challenge the language used to defend them.

Working-Class Students, Middle-Class Universities

When you lost your job, what did the company offer you? I asked. Well, he said, they worked their hardest to do as little as possible for us. Indignation. What? Why? I—he interrupts me. Kelsey, they don't owe us anything. We worked for them; they paid us; we stopped working for them; they stopped paying us. Simple as that. I paused. How did I get here?

This is the first instance I remember consciously recognizing the imprint academia has left on me. I had internalized the middle-class values of meritocratic individualism—my dad worked hard, he was a good employee, therefore they owed him compensation. My dad knew better.

In his essay, “Class Consciousness and the Junior College Movement,” William DeGenaro details the values I imbibed, which my dad had somehow known to be hollow. DeGenaro suggests these values are largely inscribed by educational institutions in students like me. Although his discussion centers on two-year colleges, he provides key insight into the model these colleges seek to imitate: the four-year university. Discussing the leaders of the junior college movement, DeGenaro says they, “Saw students as undisciplined bodies who needed to be taught taste and to assume their positions within industrial capitalism.” Furthermore, leaders sought to internalize in students “the meritocratic cultural myths of individualism and capitalism” (499–500). These middle-class values of meritocratic individualism and pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps ideology are still largely enacted. Responsibility for success rests on the individual, and despite persistent systems of inequality, failure, too, is largely framed as a student’s responsibility. Sarah Kendzior, writing for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* subsidiary “Vitaē,” describes this phenomenon specifically regarding the workforce. She says:

In a post-employment economy ridden with arbitrary credentialism, a resume is often not a reflection of achievement but a document sanctioning its erasure. One is not judged on what one has accomplished, but on one’s ability to walk a path untouched by the incongruities of market forces. The service job you worked to feed your family? Embarrassing. The months you struggled to find any work at all? Laziness. The degree you began a decade ago for a field that has since lost half its positions. Failure of clairvoyance. Which is to say: failure. (Kendzior)

This ideology, she elaborates, leads to the internalized notion that professional identity is a reality for everyone if they would just work harder and be uninfluenced by the “incongruities of market force” (Kendzior). Her sarcasm speaks to the hypocrisy of this meritocratic creed. More

importantly, she reveals how failure to achieve a professional identity can be twisted to fulfill a middle-class agenda—reinforcing rather than repudiating class divisions.

As can be clearly seen, much of the stratification enacted by the early education leaders of the 1920s and 1930s is still in effect today. In fact, this stratification is now even more difficult to detect, having been sent underground in large measure by the desire for politically correct language. As an example, *Inside Higher Ed* recently published an article asking, “Can schools build students’ cultural capital? And should they?” John M. Braxton, a leader of a recent conference on the topic, believes, “it’s very much in their [colleges’] interest to encourage students’ involvement in cultural activities that may connect them to each other and to the institution.” He further argues that, “colleges should collect (and make available to advisers and other student influencers on their campuses) information about the level of cultural capital that students come into college with, so that *those who are most lacking can get special attention*” (emphasis added, Lederman). Much of the article can be taken to be fairly innocuous. After all, the writers carefully avoid any mention of deficiency or cultural replacement. However, the implication is there, and it becomes especially grating in the italicized portion of Braxton’s comment. The first assumption this compartmentalizing program makes is that all students from working-class backgrounds are somehow culturally deficient. By the very nature of belonging to the working class, they cannot possibly have been exposed to *good* music or *tasteful* literature. The second assumption is that students from the working class desire to be exposed to these things. In fact, some students may actually resent being pulled further from their home discourse as they become more aligned with the cultural myths of academia.

As I have made clear, there is something extremely problematic with both past and present assertions from these educational leaders. Both assume working-class culture is not enough in and of itself. In fact, the presumption is that working-class culture is something that must be discarded in order for students to truly “make it.” This sort of ideology—while emphasizing the enrichment of the individual—often neglects to address students *as* individuals, as whole minds and bodies.

Of course it is in the best interest of the university to turn working-class students into denizens of the middle class, at least in affect if not in economic status. After all, those of the middle class have, by economic definition, more to lose. Working-class students might have a greater interest in altering the status quo, which would in turn disrupt the entire social milieu that allows universities to operate as centers for middle-class ideology. Indeed, by encouraging students to identify with middle-class values, universities can safely preach a non-threatening, insular critical consciousness, without any regard for personal experience. The composition classroom, rather than a place for open inquiry, diversity of experience, and intellectual development, becomes an assembly line. In the end the insular critical consciousness practiced by most universities ceases to be critical. The academic and middle-class agenda, when revealed in this light, can easily be identified as exclusive. However, it is important to understand that the academic and working-class agenda are not always diametrically opposed. Turning this division into a neat dichotomy is really, in fact, ineffective. Rather, it is important to look at how these differing discourses react in confrontation.

Student Voice

In class on a Monday morning. Topic of discussion: poverty and the working-class. How might one explain the nature of the despair felt by those who work persistently and never get ahead, who are trapped in a cycle of poverty? I steal a quick glance around the room, eyes downcast. No one speaks. I think about the past year at home. I recall something my dad said and my eyes burn: “I’m worth more money to you guys dead than I am alive.” The sheer hopelessness behind those words is something no kid wants to hear, especially from a parent. I take a minute and collect myself, swallow, then offer this example under the guise of a “friend I knew talked about....” I pause for

a moment and am surprised when my statement is met with laughter. “Isn’t that from It’s a Wonderful Life?” A simple enough question. I smile, but it isn’t easy. Yes, I thought, that is exactly what I was going for: It’s a Wonderful Life. Of course part of me felt I deserved it. I had done the unthinkable, I had uttered a cliché—a betrayal of original thought. What am I doing here?

As an institution, academe has considerable sway over the individual. To face down a monolithic set of values as an individual, as previously demonstrated, is difficult and successfully doing so unscathed is rare. Three main patterns seem to emerge in this confrontation of language and values on behalf of the student: rejection, assimilation, and ambivalence. Rejection implies students outright dismiss the values propagated by four-year institutions. While this route ensures students will preserve their home culture, it also exacts a huge psychological toll as students must consciously separate themselves from the culture that is, at least temporarily, a home. The second adaptation is assimilation. This method assumes the student successfully adapts to his or her new environment, accepting academic discourse, and disconnecting oneself from a working-class background. However, much like rejection, this choice is not without its consequences. Although it allows students to succeed in an academic environment, it also moves him or her further away from a home culture. Finally, there is ambivalence. Ambivalence consists of an amalgamation of rejection and assimilation. This is perhaps the most damaging for students from the working class, as it enacts a split consciousness, which inhibits student growth. None of these choices seem largely positive. What options, then, do students from working-class backgrounds have?

First and foremost, students have the ability and indeed the right, to use their voices. However, it is—as I have suggested earlier—the conscious and purposeful use of this voice that is the most empowering and the most effective. How, then, is this use cultivated? The answer must first be addressed by examining the gap between working-class student values and ways of speaking.

The problem in confronting the gap between discourse and ways of living that working-class students face in the academy lies less in recognizing the gap exists and more in resisting attempts to succumb to the belief that this gap will *always* exist. Much of the research concerning working-class students in the composition classroom focuses on ways to cultivate this resistance. While resistance is useful in debunking the myth that academic discourse is the only practicable narrative for college students to follow, as a theory it is somewhat lacking. It strands students in a figurative no-man’s-land of false action. Because of this, resistance cannot be the sole pillar upon which new learning rests. Although at the outset resistance suggests a break from tradition, what is truly needed is a combination of resistance and response, specifically a critical response, for learning to progress. A movement toward voice for working-class students begins with recognition, progresses with resistance, and actualizes in response.

This is true for both teacher and student. Students must resist succumbing to and merely accepting the script given to them. The first-year composition classroom is ideally situated to identify, interrogate, and finally rewrite this script. However, before these alterations become a possibility the mutual responsibility of the teacher must be to help locate harmful scripts among her or his own practice.

Teacher Authority

Most scholars, when designing ways for teachers to locate and help students grasp these scripts, focus on curriculum. This was initially part of my research plan as well. After all, it is seemingly an easier fix. If we just find the right curriculum, then our students will learn better and be happier. As I progressed in my research, however, I discovered how shallow a perspective this is. I do believe alternative curricula are useful and even necessary, yet focusing wholesale on curricular goals once again leads to the silencing of student voice. David Seitz expertly identifies this in his essay “Making Work Visible.” He questions the notion of a critical pedagogy so many schol-

ars and educators suggest when it comes to working-class students. Instead Seitz argues, “It is paradoxical, if not hypocritical, for compositionists to argue for the centrality of ‘class’ in our understanding of students, and at the same time advocate a form of skepticism that is antipathetic to the sources of moral and spiritual power in many working-class communities” (101). This demonstrates an incredibly important point. Even progressive curriculum can undermine student ability and authority when it focuses wholeheartedly on results. Ultimately, these curricular interventions function like a Band-Aid over a bruise when the overall goal is to prevent the bruise from happening in the first place. In a sense, even progressive pedagogies throw a blanket over the real issue, the power structures that undergird educational practice. That is why evaluation of teacher authority is essential in supporting the cultivation of student voice.

Largely in line with this approach, bell hooks contends “the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people” (15). Her advice becomes even more important when one considers the teacher is the source from which power in the classroom stems. As a result, he or she has the ability to enact a liberating pedagogy, but also the ability to perpetuate an extreme power imbalance. Because of this, the critical gaze teachers so adamantly demand of their students must be directed toward their own practice as educators in order for student voice to flourish.

Community Engagement

Community engagement, then, becomes important on multiple levels. Indeed it is the glue that holds the entire framework together. Yet, the question remains, how is this engaged community of learners created and maintained in the writing classroom and can this model be applied to the broader curriculum? Several scholars offer suggestions in this respect. In “The Ineluctable Elitism of Essays,” Lynn Bloom suggests a service learning imperative (74). David Seitz suggests a work memoir that allows students to engage with their history of work through interviews with former teachers, bosses, or even family members (214). Many others offer similar curricular suggestions. These different suggestions, however, are always undergirded by a framework that allows working-class students to engage in a meaningful interaction with a community system relevant to their lives. This framework of community exists on a very basic level: the simple recognition of teachers’ and students’ humanity. It is often too easy to fall into the trap of judging each other as minds, or the lack of minds, when what is really necessary is this genuine, bodily acknowledgement of personhood.

Community additionally performs the dual task of recognizing these aspects while also keeping students and teachers accountable to each other. If the task of learning is a mutual responsibility embedded in the ethos of community, its failure is much less likely.

Conclusion

Any application of this overarching framework—student voice, evaluation of teacher authority, and construction of an engaged community—has to be local, carried out first and foremost by committed educators supported by engaged students. It would be naïve, of course, to assume this sort of framework functions successfully at all times and in all places. In fact, nearly the exact opposite it is true. Noted educator and author Ron Scapp admits, “When we try to change the classroom so that there is a sense of mutual responsibility for learning, students get scared that you are now not the captain working with them, but that you are after all just another crew member—and not a reliable one at that” (qtd. in hooks 145), which in turn engenders fear of loss of control on the behalf of the teacher. It is important from the beginning to emphasize that this model of teaching has the possibility to fail. Failure, as much as we laud it as a stepping-stone to success, is another

of those words, much like confrontation, that inhibits action. Yet, if committed students and an equally committed teacher partake in this effort together, the odds of failure significantly decrease.

Indeed, confrontation and the fear of failure is where the problem begins, and it is the site at which the problem is most likely to be solved. The disruption, as student script confronts that of the educator, is vital to the growth of a community of learners. It is only in this confrontational context where dominant scripts are interrupted and brought into question. And it is only once we begin to question these scripts that we can begin to formulate innovative responses and promote more progressive ways of learning and understanding.

In many ways, I wish I could offer better answers. However, as I reflect on this project I realize that it is much more than simply asking questions and hoping to find a few answers. In some ways, it is an attempt to let my academic self breathe, to let the voice of my personal experience guide my academic voice. In other ways, it is an exercise in active listening, not only to my own voice, but to the voice of others as well. However, in the end, it is my attempt to revive a conversation that many of us have a large stake in seeing continue.

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