CHAPTER 12.

OPENING DOORS TO THE IVORY TOWER: HELPING STUDENTS FEEL WELCOME TO ENGAGE IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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Faded jeans and worn-out Converse shoes jutting out from a Midtown Manhattan rooftop. The image looks like it was taken just as the photographer jumped, but I know it wasn't because he was sitting next to me, eyes locked on the pages I was reading, anxiously awaiting my response. I was enthralled by this account of an urban explorer, a photographer who documented abandoned and dilapidated places made beautiful by his friends, graffiti artists back in his old home, Algeria, and his new one, New York. I couldn't stop reading and looking at his photographs, showing me secret dark spaces, illuminated through rays of light from holes in ceilings revealing glimpses of the graffitied walls. This was one of the most interesting personal essays I had ever read, and I knew the ideas in it could also be the basis for an exceptional academic argument.

Imagine my disappointment when, six weeks later, after weeks of development, this young man turned in an essay about the well-worn topic of the inequities in the American prison system. As a photographer, he explored spaces fraught with real peril to life and limb, fueled by the adrenaline of discovery, but as a writer, he switched from writing about his true passion because he was afraid he would fail.

I turned to the reflections I had students write about their academic argument drafts, hoping for an answer there for why Sami (pseudonym) switched topics after weeks of developing an ambitious research agenda on the nature of graffiti as an art form that gives voice to the oppressed and marginalized. Instead, I saw a breakdown of his interest in the inequities of mass incarceration and his writing process for his new essay, with no mention of the abrupt topic switch. I waited until after our next class meeting to ask Sami if he had time to talk about his essay. I had known Sami for months before this conversation. Prior to the spring first-year writing class he was currently taking with me, Sami was in

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two previous courses I designed that were offered exclusively to Education Opportunity Program (EOP) students—one in the fall and one as part of a bridge summer program. Sami's work in those previous classes highlighted his unique background and perspectives as a recent immigrant navigating, both figuratively and literally, the new spaces he found himself in, learning a new language, adapting to a new culture with a different dominant religion and the reality that he was now surrounded by many who feared and misunderstood him as a young, Arabic man raised Muslim. There was no discernible anxiety coming from Sami as he accepted my invitation to walk with me back to my office for our conversation, just a subtle smirk that let me know he knew what I wanted to talk about.

Unusually, our classroom was in the same building as my office, so the walk was a short one filled with small talk. Once in my office, I asked Sami why he had switched from a topic I knew he was passionate about, and I was excited to read about, to one he had expressed no prior interest in or personal connection to. I had already made some assumptions about how our curriculum may have led to Sami's decision to switch topics to something safer. Just a couple of weeks before reading his essay draft, I'd learned that the Director of our Writing Program, and the only ladder faculty member in our program, was leaving the university, and she expressed that she no longer wanted our university to use the curriculum I had helped her develop in my role as Associate Director. I had spent the previous two years developing a custom textbook for a standardized version of this first-year writing course, and I was grappling with the reality that we would no longer be using that textbook and that we would have to develop a new curriculum over the summer. Because of the uncertainty around our program's future, and my own future in it as a WPA, the decisions about where to take our curriculum next weighed heavily on me and I could not help but think of Sami's situation in light of my own doubts about our curriculum.

Had our assessment practices, which were informed by post-process theories emphasizing finding a balance between focusing on teaching writing processes and acknowledging the need to assess writing products as socially significant texts (McComiskey, 2000), caused a fear of failure that made Sami switch to something safer? Did our curriculum put too much weight on finished products by assigning 80 percent of the course grade to the final portfolio? Did these grading practices encourage students to avoid challenging research agendas? Would switching from a quality-based rubric to labor-based grading practices have helped Sami be less afraid to pursue his research agenda and more comfortable writing about a subject that was breaking new ground (Inoue, 2014)? I continue grappling with questions like this about our standardized curriculum now that I am director of our program, and I am sure these issues played a role in Sami's switch in topics. But these were not the issues Sami focused on when he

opened up to me in my office. Instead, Sami articulated another frustration that led him to switch topics. He confessed that he simply did not think he could make his argument about what this art meant to him and his friends within the genre conventions of academic writing that we had been covering in class. Our curriculum was largely based on genre theory, and we spent a lot of class time discussing genre awareness and the differences in conventions and expectations among personal, civic, and academic genres of writing (Bawarshi, 2003; Devitt, 2004). Sami had successfully been able to write within the conventions of the personal essay, but he did not feel he could do so within what he believed were the confines of academic discourse.

As previously mentioned, Sami had written a spectacular personal essay. In it, he described his adventures exploring abandoned, often dangerous, places. In Algeria, he had explored every abandoned place he could get to—a school, a hospital, a police station, a mental institution, an abandoned military base. In New York, his love for exploration led him to old subway stations, derelict buildings, even bandos and trap houses, all with camera in hand, trying to capture the images he found, making new art with his friends using steel-wool photography with graffiti-art backgrounds. He had exposed me to a world I had not previously known. As anyone who has read hundreds of student essays a year knows, finding one that does this is rare and special. I wanted to learn more about Sami's art and his ideas about what it meant. While our curriculum at the time did not require students to maintain a consistent research agenda throughout the semester, after receiving my feedback on his personal essay, Sami seemed excited to explore his ideas by writing about them in a researched academic argument.

But as he attempted to transition from the personal writing he had done in his previous assignment, and in his previous writing classes, to the academic writing he was being asked to do for this assignment, he felt he could not make his argument relying heavily on synthesizing academic sources he did not think really fit his argument. Inherent flaws in the curriculum had encouraged Sami to avoid pursuing a research agenda that was not already well-researched and extensively discussed in existing scholarly sources. I had failed him by not helping him see that it is precisely when we find a dark place where academics have not yet shed sufficient light that we must explore and show with our writing what we believe others should be seeing. In my efforts to help him become familiar with the conventions of academic discourse, I had failed to help him see how his voice could fit within existing academic conversations.

At that moment, I realized the underlying issues of our situation were the same ones at the heart of the constructivist versus expressivist debate between David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow decades prior. The assignments Sami had done in our summer and fall classes were largely informed by expressivist ideals, but the

course he was now in was a standardized course that had recently been created to directly address specific concerns from upper administration about the preparedness of first-year students to engage in academic discourse. The expectation in this course was for Sami to begin learning to mimic the language of scholarly writing. In short, while Sami's previous courses had been informed largely by expressivist ideals, such as those put forth by scholars such as Elbow (1973), who argued that writing should belong to students and teachers are better off largely getting out of their way, the course he was now in, following institutional mandates, and the theoretical perspectives of our program director, took an academic initiation approach. Bartholomae (1985) argued that a student such as Sami has to find "some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other. He must learn to speak our language" (p. 135). Despite my best efforts, my teaching had gotten in Sami's way by focusing too much on making him try to "speak our language" instead of showing him how his language and his ideas could be brought into existing academic conversations about his chosen topic.

Sami was an urban explorer who wanted to bring the beauty he found in abandoned places to light for a larger audience, but did not feel he could connect his passion with the academic conversations he was finding, and he felt the way he wanted to explore this topic did not fit the genre conventions for academic writing we had covered in class. His frustrations with the difficulties of adapting to the conventions of academic writing made me reflect not only on my own teaching but also on the theoretical underpinnings of our standardized curriculum. Potentially making major alterations to our curriculum at the time was an intimidating possibility to consider. The curriculum's development had been led by respected scholars in the field, and as a result of their work, our program had won the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Certificate of Writing Program Excellence. Contemplating the risk of failure in deviating from the established path of our program as a non-tenured, non-ladder faculty member helped me appreciate the fear of failure Sami must have felt when he decided to play it safe and stick with a well-established topic that he knew he could write about easily.

Ultimately, our remaining faculty found what we believed was an approach that was consistent with the mandates of our program's foundation and respectful of what had made it successful but adaptive to the needs of our students, like Sami, who needed more support and encouragement in finding a way to bring themselves into academic discourse communities. Part of these changes involved adjusting our assessment practices to make it safer for students to experiment in their writing processes on their way to finished products. We considered that genre awareness did not need to lead to total conformity of established genre conventions. We could allow students to expand the boundaries of

academic writing to be more inclusive of personal experience and family history (Rankins-Robertson et al., 2010; Hindman, 2001). We were able to develop from sociocultural and postcolonial theories practices that help students to cross boundaries between discourse communities without positioning them as deficient and needing to conform fully to the conventions of an existing community for them to transition from being considered outside of that community to being accepted within it (Viete & Le Ha, 2007).

But I did not get a handle on a better approach in time to help Sami switch topics back to his passion that semester. Instead, after discussing his practical concerns, given our established standardized curriculum at the time and our model of collective portfolio grading that meant his work would be evaluated not just by me but by others trained in following our shared rubrics, Sami stuck with his newer, safer topic and continued to develop his draft for his portfolio. His primary frustration was in trying to reconcile how he wanted to share his truths within the limitations I had identified as the genre conventions of academic writing.

I learned that what we lose in setting such limitations is the willingness of students like Sami to shed their light on the secret, dark spaces they have found. We potentially lose their unique perspectives if we do not allow students like Sami to push the boundaries of academic writing by openly approaching their research agenda from personal experiences that they can weave into current academic discourses, allowing them to bring a part of themselves into their research so that their work becomes more than simply a synthesis of established ideas found in scholarly sources.

Thankfully, my failures in making Sami feel safe to explore his initial research interests did not end up derailing his success. He went on to earn his degree and graduated excited to begin his post-college journey. But, to my knowledge, he never ended up writing about urban exploration and graffiti in an academic essay. It is this realization that leads me to continue to grapple with the best ways to teach students the conventions of academic writing while also ensuring they feel safe and welcome in entering academic discourse communities.

Because I know it is a loss for both those communities and the students in my classes if I do not help foster a sense that it is safe for them to explore the corridors of the ivory tower, bringing something of themselves along the way to help connect existing academic conversations to their experiences.

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