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LEARNING TO CHANGE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A (BASIC) WRITER AND HER TEACHER

ABSTRACT: The piece examines issues of student and teacher development and identity, considering how our metaphors for basic writers often constrain possibilities for teacher learning. So long as we position ourselves as problem-solvers (with the basic writers standing in for the problem), we foreclose potential for changing ourselves in relation to students. By examining my interactions with an African-American, working-class, basic writer, I argue for the importance of attending to the identities students construct for themselves (Gray-Rosendale) and of enacting a two-way dynamic between teacher and student, whereby students and teachers together negotiate their identities, needs, and developmental goals.

Basic writing scholarship has devoted substantial attention to examining how we construct our students' identities and needs, and how these constructions impinge upon our pedagogies. As Joseph Harris has argued, three metaphors for teaching basic writers have dominated the scholarship: growth, initiation, and conflict[1]. Each metaphor, which critiques and extends the one preceding it, claims an increasingly complex understanding of students, their social locations, and their needs as learners. What this "evolution" has not sufficiently altered, however, is the teacher's identity and role in relation to student writers. Even in those "critical" or "conflict"-based pedagogies, which are driven by claims of de-centered classrooms and student empowerment, the teacher often occupies the same position she did in seemingly less "progressive" pedagogical approaches: expert, authority, hero.

As Laura Gray-Rosendale contends in her 1999 article "Investigating Our Discursive History: JBW and the Construction of the 'Basic Writer's' Identity," no matter which metaphor is employed, "scholars [tend to] produce constructions of student identities which their preferred theoretical models are likely to solve" (127). She likens this tendency to the computer software hackers who create computer viruses so that they may later market antidotes (127). Consequently, a top-down relationship is created, whereby the expert/researcher's role

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is to diagnose and solve the problem, the teacher's job is to enact the solution, and the student's role is to simply be (or stand in for) the problem. This one-way dynamic from researcher down to student often blinds us to the ways students, themselves, construct their identities and needs in specific learning contexts, as well as to the ways we need to change in relation to our students.

Of course, there have been efforts to alter this dynamic, and in fact, Gray-Rosendale contends that a new "contextual" metaphor is underway, which views the basic writer's identity as describable only "in terms of specific situations, specific activities, specific institutions, or specific moments," and thus emphasizes "students' own self-constructions of their identities" ("Investigating" 125, 129). (See for instance Fox 1999; Gray-Rosendale 1996; Harrington and Adler-Kassner 1998; Severino 1995; Mlynarczyk 1995; Young 1996; Herrington and Curtis 2000). Rather than viewing this new "trend" as necessarily progressive, however, Gray-Rosendale reminds us that even as we work to "construct disruptive perspectives that operate to challenge the predominance of these metaphors," we need also to attend to the ways assumptions about "growth," "initiation," and "conflict" continue to seep into our pedagogies and our representations of students (129). In addition, I would contend that we would be served by more carefully examining how these assumptions result in limiting teacher identities, often in ways that foreclose possibilities not only for writing development, but also for teacher development.

In this article, I ask not "Who is the basic writer?" but "How do particular basic writers construct their own identities?" and "How do we, as teachers, construct our own identities in relation to students?" In doing so, I—a white, middle-class teacher—will study my interactions with Linda—an African-American, working-class, basic writer—and her efforts to construct an identity in a writing studies curriculum, in which she was one of the only "basic writers."

This inquiry, then, is intended to both argue for and enact a two-way dynamic, whereby Linda and I are both subjects undergoing "revision" as we learn together. It is only by studying these specific interactions with students—who commonly refuse the categories we have pre-assigned them—that we are able to see how dominant ideology infiltrates even the most "critical" approaches to the classroom. Indeed, my work with Linda enabled me to wrestle with unexamined assumptions in a way that my training as a writing teacher and my reading in basic writing research could not.

In the end, then, this piece is less about what I offered Linda, and more about the pressure Linda exerted on my construction of a basic writer, a category informed by my reading of her cultural identity. But I want to be clear: this is not a story of moving from darkness into light. The interactions Linda and I had, while unique in their strong

impact, happen in small ways every semester; this is an education that should be ongoing, since our metaphoric investments, always informed by dominant ideology, can never finally be unlearned.

Writing in the Sequence: English 202

When I met Linda in our department's introductory Writing Sequence course, Rhetoric and Poetics (English 202), she had recently transferred to the university from a community college, where she had studied journalism but hadn't, she felt, gained adequate experience or expertise as a writer. Consequently, she enrolled in our Writing Sequence, a five-semester series of courses emphasizing the study and practice of rhetoric and poetics.

Linda explained that she enrolled in the Sequence because she wanted an opportunity to move beyond journalistic forms into more creative ones, and to work on her greatest challenge as a writer: grammar. "When I sit down to write," she told me, "the first thing I think about is grammar, and I know that takes away from the writing." Because of the latter concern, it is likely that at another university, Linda may not have found her way into a program like the Writing Sequence.

Unlike many first year writing programs, where placement is determined by a written diagnostic exam, enrollment in the Writing Sequence was first-come, first served. This meant writers of all "levels" were thus welcomed in the program. And while the study and practice of "poetics" is typically reserved for advanced students, or even graduate students—as it is often a mode of writing presumed to follow one's "mastery" of academic discourse—our entry level course focused on rhetorical and poetic writing, and raised issues of authorship, form and genre, and subjectivity.

The driving assumption behind the curriculum was that students are best enabled as writers when they are allowed, as Wendy Bishop puts it, to "explore creativity, authorship, textuality, and so on, together, all at once" (129). Linda clearly agreed, having self-selected into the program. I, too, believed that the Writing Sequence seemed as appropriate a site for her study as it did for any of our other writers. But it was true: most students in the program—the ones we imagined to occupy its center—were not "basic writers." They tended to have a good grasp of mechanics, and to see themselves as adept writers, either in creative or "academic" forms, often in both. Of course, herein lies part of the problem: I was defining "basic writer" based on a naturalized, uncritical understanding of the term. Even in this institutional context where "basic writer" didn't have a referent, the construction still exiisted in our, or at least my, mind.

So as much as I felt she would be served by the program, I also worried that Linda would feel like an "outsider," that the surface-errors in her texts would signal to her or to the other students that she did not belong. And in some ways, I suppose *I* wondered if she belonged. That is, I experienced a conflict between my desire to position her as a writer, and my reading of her—her body, her texts—as positioned outside of that subject position. I saw it as my job, then, to serve as initiator—not primarily by helping her assimilate to "standard" English usage—but by enabling her to assume the identity of a writer and to participate confidently in our workshop.

This issue of the writer's identity was the first we addressed in 202, using an assignment drawn from Linda Brodkey's "scene of writing." Students were asked to think about their conception of a writer, and to consider whether (and how) they fit into that understanding. I hoped this assignment would work in two different ways. I knew that many students entered the Sequence with romanticized notions of writing and writers, whereby writing is understood as an individual statement that should not be touched or revised, and as externally inspired rather than a process one has to work at. On the one hand, then, I wanted to disrupt this conception, so as to challenge those students who came in to class imagining themselves in this way, or hoping to adopt this subject position.

On the other hand, I saw the assignment as a means to empower students to think of themselves as writers, not as mere "student" writers in relation to "Authors." I wanted to work against a tradition of writing classrooms in which students are constructed as, or as Susan Miller puts it, *required* to be, "presexual, preeconomic, prepolitcal" subjects (87). In such models, the writing class is established to prepare students to *later* participate in disciplinary conversations, to learn the skills necessary to write about content. Alternatively, I wanted to my students to see writing as a disciplined activity, and themselves as writers who had something to say, argue or express right *now*. I expected that many would enter my classroom having learned something quite different, and that it was my job to empower them to think differently about themselves.

When I asked students to share the writer and the scene each described, I heard much of what I expected: an old, white man writing alone on an old typewriter, often with a bottle of hard liquor by his side. Linda described a writer, however, who looked much like herself:

> She is a professional person but derive real pleasure and satisfaction from writing. She writes about events and subjects others wouldn't write about or subjects deemed taboo in our society.

> After a long day at the office writing was a way of winding down as the day came to a close, it was a way of recapping pleasant moments or escaping some of the unpleasantness she encounters from day to day. When she get a cup of hot tea, pen and pad she becomes transformed into this new person. As silence surrounds her she breaks from time to time in deep thought waiting for the right words or next line the muscles beneath her smooth skin seemed undisturbed. However her face provided you with story lines of love, hope, laughter and tears, failure and success.

In our discussion of these scenes, Linda shared that this, indeed, was a picture of her–that writing became the "real" job she did after completing a long day of work and school. Her response surprised me, as I expected that her "marginal" status in the class–as both a "basic" writer and an African-American woman–would also place her on the margins of this construction. That is, I assumed she would have internalized this model that excluded her, when in fact, she came to class already having challenged this dominant construction, already positioning herself as a writer, ready to pursue a project she had already begun.

Linda's "project" became clearer to me when I read her response to my next assignment, which was designed to build upon the first. Here students were invited to respond to Zoë Wicomb's piece "An Author's Agenda," which argues that all writers do political work and write from a social location. In their responses, I asked students to respond to Wicomb's notion of "political" writing and to articulate their own "subject positions" as writers. Many students had difficulty with this piece, associating "political" with Republicans and Democrats, and not an interested, particular social location. Linda, however, demonstrated a more complicated understanding of the term and of her position as a writer:

> At times I see myself as a political writer because I try to write from a position away from the norm of ideology, not only as a black woman but as a person. I write from the political position of a working African American and student. These "subject positions" inform my writing because I bring to the table a number of issues that are political from the start and being black is the number one issue, just being black is political, as a student how I've being perceived by the professors and students in view of my opinions of the world around may be viewed differently from the students and instructors and not being black may make it difficult at time impossible to understand who and what I am as a person.

As Gray-Rosendale notes, one of the central problems with the assumptions about basic writers' identities that pervade our scholarship is that they prevent us from acknowledging the fact that"the students we call"'Basic Writers' seldom, if ever, think of themselves as such" ("Revising" 26). Even those "conflict" approaches that seek to highlight the social and political aspects of basic writers' positions, and to empower them to move beyond those constraints, make the assumption that students are not already engaged in critical thought, are not already aware of the complicated positions from which they write. I assumed Linda would need me to make her aware of the cultural conditions that contributed to her disenfranchisement as a writer. Even as I proposed to work out of "critical" position, focusing on the political dimensions of my students' identities, my assumptions were clearly laden with remnants of the "growth" metaphor, whereby students are understood as cognitively immature; students remain "prepolitical," waiting to be enlightened by the critical knowledge of the teacher. In either case, the result is the same: the teacher is positioned as knowing more about the student than she does herself, as well as having access to knowledge (whether skill-based or "critical") that will improve her writing and her life.

Linda's response not only challenged the pre-political status I assigned her, but implicitly asked me to re-think my assumptions about whom I was teaching and how I understood their needs. I had assumed my students would fall into two categories: those who felt unentitled as writers, and those who felt *wrongly* entitled. Not only did Linda not fit neatly into one of those categories, she disrupted them entirely. She understood the subject position of writer to be central to her identity, and even more, she understood it as socially informed and informing, necessarily dependent on cultural values and assumptions. She did not locate herself on the outside of our curriculum at all; her work as a writer and thinker, in fact, seemed to be a perfect fit for the program.

Linda was correct to contend that the text of her body impinges upon how she is read by her professors and students-that her "opinions of the world" always exist alongside others' readings of her raced body. Of course, the body of her written texts—marked as they are with linguistic tendencies of Black English—also contributes to a particular reading of her identity and needs. Though I had designed the assignment to enable students' to name their specific subject positions, and to think about the implications of such, I now needed to consider how *I* was making sense of my students' social, embodied locations, and how I was responding pedagogically to those assumptions.

"The Look": Making Writing Visible/Making Selves Visible

> As an African American woman struggling to become a writer I know what it is to be oppressed politically on a smaller scale, often times when I express my opinion on an issue it becomes a problem not because of the context of my opinion but the mere fact that I have one. I sometimes feel that society see us as they once saw children that they should be seen and not heard. Black women are like an invisible race, our voice is not heard enough, and when we began to speak out on issues it is often misunderstood most often in a negative way. This can paralyze as writers, thinkers and verbal participants. (3rd response paper)

As I continued to read and consider Linda's early response papers, which were circulated only between the two of us, I came to see her not as a "victim" or marginalized presence in our course, but as a source of subjugated knowledge, from whom her classmates and I could learn. I saw it as my objective, then, to encourage and make a space for her resistant writing, to foster what I understood to be her project. Rather than a rescuer, I would act more as a facilitator of her knowledge.

In the above response, Linda raises an interesting tension: on the one hand, she notes that making her voice heard, in whatever capacity, brings with it a certain degree of risk, risk that she will be misunderstood or will remain unheard because of the position from which she speaks. On the other hand, she knows that not speaking is equally risky, as it potentially reifies the cultural invisibility of black women. My hope, my expectation, was that Linda would use our first formal assignment to further pursue this issue of visibility and invisibility, black women's voice and silence. In the assignment, students were asked to articulate one of the lenses through which they see the world:

> Zoë Wicomb argues that each of us writes from a political position, meaning that both how and what we write is necessarily informed by our location(s) in the "social." So in your process of writing, you'll reflect on a moment in your life that will in some way show your readers how and why you have come to see the world in certain way. In this piece, you'll work to move beyond just "telling" this moment to also "show" or represent this through the form of this piece—so that the form and content are working in a meaningful way.

I saw this, in many ways, as an ideal assignment for Linda, allowing

her to continue the examination of her interlocking subjectivities, particularly how her race, class, and gender informed her writing self. Even more, it seemed to set up clear roles for us as student and teacher. Linda would continue the inquiry she'd begun in her early response papers, and I would help her to critically scrutinize her text and the social conditions that shaped it. I could imagine the kind of response I would offer even before reading her piece.

But Linda's piece, "The Look," did not look as I predicted it would. In response to the assignment, she composed an office romance narrative, written in third-person perspective, which seemed to move away from the overtly political realm entirely. The "Linda" she had composed in her earlier pieces had been replaced by "Ann," a character who was seemingly constructed according to dominant understandings of "good" or "nice" women. Ann is raceless, concerned with what others think of her, ashamed of herself when she gossips or thinks "wrong" thoughts, and is hesitant in conversation with the male protagonist:

> Ann was the kind of person who didn't get caught up in office gossip and treated everyone with kindness and respect.
>
> One day Peter needed some information on a customer and Ann had a difficult time getting the information from a policy writer. "I need to find a rich man to sweep me off my feet and get me out of this office." Disgusted at her co-worker, these words just sorta uncontrollably flew out of her mouth and she thought "Oh my god, what did I just say?"

Because I had expected a particular "version" of Linda in this "autobiographical" piece, and was instead presented with Ann, I was uncertain about how to respond. I wanted to get her back "on track," to help her resume the line of inquiry she'd begun, which involved exploring the way her race, class, and gender informed her writing. My response dealt largely with questions about character construction:

> I'm wondering why you chose to tell the story in 3rd person. What effect do you want it to have? How would it change the story if Ann told it in first person? For me, Ann gets a little lost in the piece. I want to know more about her. Why doesn't she engage in office gossip? Why is she hesitant about starting a new relationship? I want to know more of Ann's thoughts, and more of the stories of her life so that I get a better understanding of who she is and why she responds the way she does. Right now, I'm reading her as a very sweet character, quiet, understanding, thoughtful—but I'm left still curious. I guess I want her to be even fuller in the story—

> more complicated. I want to see the contradictions in her, maybe what she's like when she's with friends—not on her best behavior at work.

As I consider my response, with the benefit of hindsight, I am aware of its multiple implications. First, despite my many warnings to students that autobiography is not a synonym for "truth," that we must not conflate the narrator or main character with the writer, I wanted to do exactly that: to see a character who reflected the Linda I had come to know, the Linda who would write overtly political texts. In doing so, I may have been containing her just as I perceived her to be containing Ann, asking for a voice I assumed to be more authentic because she is black, because I wanted to believe her earlier writings as "true." I wonder, despite my claims about the "fictionalizing" of autobiography, how much I expected students to disclose of themselves in these pieces—of selves that fit in with my readings of them, that is. As Lester Faigley writes, " The freedom students are given in some classes to choose and adapt autobiographical assignments hides the fact that these same students will be judged by the teachers' unstated assumptions about subjectivity and that every act of writing they perform occurs within complex relations of power" (128).

Indeed, Linda was writing within complex relations of power. Not only was she the only (traditionally defined) "basic writer" in the room, but she was one of only three African-American women. And she was being asked to make her writing public to her classmates for the first time. I am reminded of Linda's claim: "my opinions of the world around may be viewed differently from the students and instructors and not being black may make it difficult at time impossible to understand who and what I am as a person." If, instead of assuming that Linda's piece was "lacking" something, I read her textual choices *as* choices made amidst complicated contexts, I can see that it may have been more important for Linda to construct her main character according to dominant conceptions of "any woman" rather than to risk making further visible to her mostly white class the social location she named in earlier pieces.

What she did make visible to her writing partner, though, was a need for help with grammar. I discovered this when reading her writing partner's letter in response to "The Look": "Well, I'm not sure what else to say that I haven't already said, except for I decided not to edit your paper for grammar. It just feels funny to me! If you really, really insist I do so...well, okay. Next time." It likely felt "funny" to him because I had emphasized to the class that they should fully engage each other's texts, not simply edit or "correct" them. I didn't want any writer—particularly Linda—to feel condescended to, to have her piece engaged only at the surface level. I wanted her piece to be approached

no differently than her classmates' pieces. In retrospect, however, I see that my commitment to an approach I deemed more "progressive," and to the role of "progressive" teacher—focusing on her subjectivity as a writer rather than on formal or grammatical issues—may have hurt Linda. As Lisa Delpit argues, those elements of education often considered to be most "progressive" do not always work for those students who need "skills" and thus function to reproduce unequal relations of power both within and outside the classroom (384).

Gray-Rosendale further contends that as much as the focus on political dimensions of basic writers' identities has resulted in a pedagogical advance—a movement tied to the "conflict" metaphor—there are also risks. These emphases, as Gray-Rosendale notes, "may also relegate other contexts and metaphors for Basic Writers' situations to a kind of second-class status, less important, and implicitly less worth attention, than the 'big' sociopolitical ones." My intention was to treat Linda as a writer, but in doing so, I overlooked the needs *she* articulated. Steering students away from editing each other's papers or pointing out grammatical issues not only set up a dichotomy between "real" writerly issues and "surface" ones, but may have led Linda to believe that her needs weren't worth addressing—that they were too basic. She didn't see a contradiction between being a writer and needing grammatical help—only I did.

The more I worked with Linda, and the more she complicated my assumptions and implicitly challenged my pedagogy, the clearer it became that I was trying to name and respond to her identity apart from her, when in fact, my pedagogy needed to be made *with* her, alongside my engagement with her texts and her articulated needs and interests.

English 303: Re-presenting and Re-positioning Ourselves as Learner and Teacher

Typically, we don't get a second chance to interact with our students. We learn from them, and then move on to a new group, whose needs may be entirely different. I was fortunate, however, to have the opportunity to work with Linda a second semester, this time in English 303: Argumentative and Persuasive Writing. In this course I wanted to do a better job of placing her needs and interests and my course goals in dialogue, and of understanding our roles as teacher and learner (with each of us occupying both roles) as dynamic and in-process. I sought, then, to create a space for more dialogue *during* the class, so that I could be better aware of her needs and interests—as well as those of the other students—as they arose.

I was particularly interested in how my students would have their

development measured, and what practices they felt would best enable this growth. I knew, for instance, that I needed to provide Linda with more opportunities to work on formal and technical aspects of her text—something I'd previously considered outside the realm of my "critical" pedagogy. But in conversation, she also reminded me that creating room for such conversations did not mean abandoning the goals of my pedagogy. In fact, she said that the "writing process is not just putting things on paper" but is a "spider web of things you try to learn to do:"

> The writing process is like a learning process of responding to other people, learning how to take response from other people, learning how to change. [...]If you just say it's the writing and that's all you do, you're not exposed to the workshops and to other people's ideas and writing and you limit yourself.

For Linda developing had become a social process requiring interaction with other writers, as well as a commitment to change. The developmental goals she named for herself were to "make people think" and "make the points clear that I'm trying to get across." Those points, she explained, had to do with "seeing changes in society" and allowing marginalized voices to be heard.

In the same way, the teaching process should not be only about "putting our own pedagogical goals on students" but, like writing, should involve a "web" of things we learn to do in relation to our students. Linda's claim that we must "learn to change" seems as, if not more, important for teachers than it does students—who, after all, are always expected to change. Of course, it is easier for teachers to occupy the stable role of problem-solver; pre-determined roles (no matter how "critical") allow comfort and stasis. In what follows, I trace several more moments where I had to learn how to change, to give up my comfortable role as "critical" teacher, and instead to negotiate a role that would help challenge and further Linda's project.

Our course was centered around a semester-long assignment that asked students to choose an issue that they found problematically represented in culture and felt compelled to use their writing to revise or re-present. Though many students struggled to articulate a project, Linda quickly came up with hers. She wanted to address her own fears about driving through the Arbor Hill neighborhood, a mostly black and poverty-stricken area that is highly trafficked, since one of its roads connects the interstate and downtown Albany. She had recently been shaken after witnessing some disturbing activity on that main road and instead of heeding the warnings of most of her friends and co-workers to simply avoid the area, Linda decided to go into the neighborhood and talk to the residents. In this way, she hoped to use

the assignment not only to re-present the neighborhood, but also to revise her self in relation to it, to alter her self through her writing. As she writes, "The writing was not just about experimenting with the use of language, but defining who I am as a person[...]." My work with her would thus require me to attend to both her textual construction and self-construction.

To aid the students' projects, we studied issues of language and discourse, subjectivity, and representation. Their first "formal" assignment required them to write a 5-7 page paper considering how discourse impacted their chosen topics: how their issue has been described and named by others, and how they hoped to intervene in that construction. In preparing for her language piece, Linda and I discussed the media representations of the Arbor Hill area, and she decided while those "texts" would certainly inform her piece, she wanted to work less to critique those media depictions and more to create new narratives by showing positive work in the community. Her aim was to allow her readers to hear a different version of the story, told from often forgotten voices. After providing a short discussion of the media representations of Arbor Hill, Linda moved on to demonstrate how these media representations informed her own experience of driving through the neighborhood, specifically describing a time when she did experience some of what the media describes:

> I recall one evening driving home from work onto Henry Johnson Blvd., shortly after passing the first traffic light off the exit I noticed a young man trying to free himself from a man who was holding his coat. I thought it was just a playful moment but as I got closer I realized it was something more. Trying to avoid hitting either of them I swerved my car and moved over to the turning lane. After the young man freed himself from the man's grip, he hurried himself away. The man continued into the streets and over to my car. To avoid hitting what appeared to be a drunken man I completely stopped my car. The dirty curly blond hair man crossed in front of my car looking directly at me as he made his way to my door. I completely froze. The only thing I could think of is that he was going to kill me.
>
> Another car was coming up the street diverting his attention, he slowly walked over and grabbed the car door handle. The middle aged white driver did not stop but drove faster while the man held on and was dragged at least two blocks. His body tossed about the pavement like a rag doll.
>
> I sat frantically in my car waiting for the car stop hoping and praying the man would still be alive. Finally the car came to a red traffic light and stopped. The man slowly let go of the

handle got up and soberly staggered away.

After a couple of sleepless nights and trying to make sense of the whole thing by talking about it with friends I began to realize it is not a black or white issue but a people issue. It could be any neighborhood, there is no neighborhood exempt from crimes. However there is more exposure given to the poorer neighborhoods.

In responding to Linda, I noted the many possibilities already evident in the piece. Still, I wanted to encourage her to think further about the media's effects, and suggested that she might expand her first section by providing some more specific examples. In my comments on this draft, I also focused extensively on challenging her conclusion that "it is not a black or white issue but a people issue." In fact, the question of whether this is "not a black or white issue" or how race should be foregrounded in the piece informed my dialogue with Linda throughout her work on this project. Because Linda focused in several places on the stereotypical image of the black male criminal and highlighted the importance of African American community in Arbor Hill (which is, in fact, a predominantly black neighborhood), I first read Linda's insistence upon leaving this line about it being a "people issue" as resistance to considering the systemic issues at play. Seeing it this way, of course, helped simplify our roles—if she were naïve to these racial dynamics, then I could prompt her to read the neighborhood more "critically"; I could use my "critical knowledge" to help her fill the "lack" in her piece.

When Linda and I met in a conference, though, I began to understand Linda's reasons for *choosing* to maintain her argument—and to see that my role might need to be different than I'd expected. Linda told me that while addressing racial issues is important to her work, she wanted to be careful not to simplify racial categories in a way that pitted races against each other. Linda was worried, she told me, that people in our (mostly white) class would not want to engage her piece because they might read her project as blaming white people. This made her even more careful to tell the story in a way that would allow her to be heard by a wide range of readers. Despite my work with Linda the previous semester, this is something I had not thought sufficiently about during the class—the difficulty of taking on an overtly political topic dealing with an issue (race) that could be read onto the writer. Like the "autobiographical" piece in 202, Linda was aware of how choosing this topic might be read as an issue about her. And indeed, she was right: during one of our workshops, her classmates continually made comments implying Linda lived in Arbor Hill, even as she located herself as a visitor to the neighborhood. Her raced body, in many ways, spoke louder than her writing.

Interestingly, Linda shared with me that she, too, fell victim to

the same kind of assumptions her peers were making. She was surprised that the troubling incident she witnessed was between two white, not black, men in Arbor Hill. Doing so helped her recognize the assumptions she—an African American woman—was making about black men and black neighborhoods. "I didn't expect to see a white face," she told me. "I thought everyone who lived there was black." Linda said this moment was so important to her because it disrupted her assumption that bad neighborhoods are necessarily conflated with *black* neighborhoods; it allowed her to see that she was essentializing blackness and to re-think her association of darkness with criminal behavior.

By occupying the role of listener and learner, I began to understand that Linda was already engaged in the complex and "critical" work of theorizing her own internalized racism. And she was right: this was a "people issue." None of us live outside of dominant ideologies, including racist ones. In fact, I came to understand that my ongoing readings of Linda, and her writing, were informed by this ideology—as much as I sought to work against it.

As we talked, I discovered that Linda wanted to use this incident and her resulting new reading of the neighborhood as a rhetorical strategy to point out to her readers that these problems of race and poverty (and the desire to ignore them, as we see in the man who looked straight ahead and kept driving) affect white and black people. Because Linda wanted her audience to include members of both races, she was careful, then, not to construct this as simply as story that pitted one race against the other or that makes racial categories seem coherent and homogenous. Though Linda chose not to explicitly articulate this idea of internalized racism, with the encouragement of her workshop group, she added details to make the white man more visible in the scene and to show how her assumptions about the neighborhood were triggered by the event:

> The curly blond haired man crossed in front of my car. We made eye contact as he made his way to my door. The street lights were so bright that I could see his blue eyes and ruddy skin. I was shocked to see a white male in that neighborhood and wondered why he was there. I completely froze. The only thing I could think of was that he was gonna kill me. News reports of gun fire and a dead body quickly flashed through my mind. I saw myself as another victim of violence.

I came to see that discussing the choices Linda made in the text—while she was in the process of making them—allowed me to better enable her to make visible those arguments she wanted to foreground, and to help her position herself in the ways she thought most effective. Occupying the role of learner, though, meant that I had to resist im-

posing a pre-determined reading on her text; instead, I worked to understand her reasons for making the choices she did, which we could then discuss and complicate.

When we moved to the subjectivity assignment, which asked students to consider the people who factored into their pieces as culturally informed subjects, Linda decided to focus on three community members: the director of the Arbor Hill Community Center; a beauty salon manager; and a local minister. Her aim was to show these people as "role models," a subjectivity very important to this neighborhood, and an identity that would allow her to continue to focus on "the positive." In the draft following interviews with these folks, Linda did the important work in this piece of guiding her readers away from Henry Johnson Boulevard—the one street most traveled upon by non-residents—and into other areas of the neighborhood, areas rarely represented in the media. This draft also showed more carefully constructed detail and added significant factual information about the neighborhood. Like many of my students, Linda struggled with wanting to include the details and descriptions she uses in her fiction writing but feeling that non-fiction writing should be "factual." Here she began to search for a balance, seemingly discovering that some of the strategies she used in fiction writing could enhance her non-fiction prose:

> As I drove down the one-way streets in search of a parking space, I began to observe parts of the Arbor neighborhood away from Henry Johnson Blvd. [...]I decided to drive further and came across the Arbor Hill Community Center. The tan structure was surrounded by clean manicured grounds. Surprised at the door not being locked, I walked in to a place so clean it mirrored my image as I made my way to the office. [. . .] The wall displayed a huge painting of the bouquet of flowers on the coffee table and two African American paintings. One picture was of a boy giving another a piggy-back ride titled "He is my brother," and the other was what seemed to be a father embracing his young sad son, it was titled, "Part of Growing up." The entrance was full of photos of trips, literature and sketches of black leaders like Malcom X and Dr. Martin Luther King.

In her later drafts, Linda struggled to create a hybrid piece—a piece, I might add, that looked very different from the one I expected, or the one I might have encouraged her to write. But her choice made good sense, as she relied on observation, interview—both skills she'd learned as a journalist— as well as personal narrative, argument and fiction strategies such as description and detail. Once I could see where Linda wanted to go in terms of form—I could help her complicate and nego-

tiate such categories as'"non-fiction" and "fiction" or "creative" and "factual." It eventually helped Linda to think of herself as telling a story—so that she could use the strengths she'd already developed as a fiction writer to construct characters and scenes. I learned, at the same time, that I was best able to aid Linda's development when I approached her as a kind of "hybrid" writer—a story teller, a journalist, a political writer—who chose to play different roles at different times, and whom I could not finally pin down to one identity, including that of basic writer.

Messing up Our Metaphors

In the end, Linda accomplished many of the developmental goals she established for herself. She provided a re-presentation of Arbor Hill for her readers, constructing an image of the neighborhood and its residents that we might not have otherwise witnessed. She challenged her own assumptions about Arbor Hill. As she said, "I'm not afraid to drive through there anymore." And she produced a piece that abided by the rules of "authorized" language, which she felt necessary in order to publish it in our Writing Sequence anthology.

In achieving this range of developmental goals, Linda constructed a complex identity for herself as a writer, with complicated and changing needs and interests. No one metaphor—no single "solution"—finally "fit" her. And in fact, the most significant developmental moments for Linda and me were a result of "messing up" of predetermined ideas and roles. As David Bartholomae argues, we are often so focused on mastery and acquisition that we do not place adequate value on the important learning that accompanies "undoing," disrupting, or confusing (14).

So I want to value the disrupting Linda did—the messing up of categories that would be more easily left coherent and unified. While it would have been easier to stay out of the Arbor Hill neighborhood as her friends suggested, Linda went into it, hoping to "confuse" things for herself. While it would have been easier to tell a story of victims—the story we are used to when we think of poverty stricken areas—Linda sought out a different version of the story, and found it. And Linda found the important balance of making readers aware of the problems in the neighborhood while also calling attention to the practices already taking place in the neighborhood to alter them.

In her piece, where she creates such productive "messes," she offers a useful metaphor for teaching. That is, we might approach our interactions with students not as a way to confirm our beliefs about what they need, but to "confuse" things—to discover whether there is a different version of the story, and to attend to what is already hap-

pening, what we can build on, rather than what is lacking.

Indeed, my process of working with Linda resulted in the "messing up" of my pedagogy and my role in relation to her, as I was asked to make it a little less neat,"not quite so finished" (Bartholomae 14). Despite my self-proclaimed "student-centered" and "critical" approach to teaching, I found that I was abiding by metaphors and dominant ideologies I assumed I had long surpassed. And this, of course, is a danger of assuming that we are following a progressive history, that a "conflict" metaphor will necessarily be better than a "growth" metaphor. It is also dangerous to assume that we can finally unlearn racist or classist ways of reading students. To assume such a clean, neat path is to forget the ways in which remnants of old models remain, to overlook the way we might still position students as immature, pre-political, or lacking. And the way that teachers are still positioned as masters, problem-solvers, heroes. Giving up the idea that we can discover an all-encompassing metaphor, though, is messy. It means also surrendering the idea that we can figure students out and subsequently figure out what, exactly, they need, because as soon as I felt I had Linda figured out, she reminded me that she was much more complex than any metaphor, and pedagogical answer, I could come up with.

If there is an answer, then, it is that both teachers and students will be better served if we leave room in our pedagogies for students to compose their own metaphors, and room for ourselves to change in relation to them. It's neater and cleaner, certainly, to abide by a one-way dynamic where only the students are being asked to change. Two-way dynamics, where our students exert pressure on our assumptions, our values, our practices, require constant, messy negotiations. But it is only in this ongoing, mutual mess-making that genuine development—on the part of the teacher, the student, and the pedagogy—occurs. It is only through this process that both teachers and students can, as Linda puts it, learn to change.

Note

1. The author has obtained the student's permission to write this account and quote from the student's writing.

2. According to Harris (1995, 1997) the "growth" metaphor encourages teachers to see students as immature language users, stalled in an early stage of language development. Teachers are to respect the skills with which students enter their classrooms, and to enable them to develop nascent writing skills. The "initiation" metaphor assumes students are positioned outside of a sanctioned academic "discourse community"; basic writers are thus understood as in need of access to rules,

values, and practices that will allow them to enter privileged language system, but will also require them to leave behind their "home" language. The "conflict" model critiques the two previous models, viewing the basic writer as the "nexus of clashing cultural forces and relations of power within the classroom" (Gray-Rosendale "Revising," 26). This model aims to both respect students' background and to teach academically sanctioned language practices, often foregrounding a critique of the social forces that contribute to basic writers' disenfranchisement in the first place.

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