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ABSTRACT

Strange as it may seem, the classroom is not, by and large, accepted within the composition discipline as a scene for genuine knowledge-making and theory-building. Teachers should go back to the "concrete materials" from which knowledge and theory are made. An example of what can be learned in the classroom comes from an effort to encourage students to reflect on the extent to which people are "constructed" by culture. Students are encouraged to bring up, in class and in their writing, examples of groups with which they are affiliated. As an assignment, students in a community college writing course are asked to identify one community to which they belong and to describe the roles they and the other members play. Turning from community, attention is next directed to culture. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz's "'Deep Play': Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" is used to prompt discussion about culture. Students are then asked to observe a ceremony from their own communities. Finally, students are asked to do a reading of a television advertisement as indicative of the culture's values and beliefs. Students gain much from this kind of research into culture. And just as students have come to see the significance in their "local knowledge," so too teachers may come to see that "what happens" within the community of the classroom or a day-to-day basis is worthy of observation and may even generate knowledge. (TD)

Teachers and Students "In the Field":
What We Have (re-)Learned from Anthropology

Stephen North, who so often angers me even as he goes to the heart of the matter, speaks to a central problem in our discipline today, the devaluation of classroom knowledge or "lore":

> Without question, the academic reflex to hold lore in low regard represents a serious problem in Composition, and Practitioners need to defend themselves--to argue for the value of what they know, and how they come to know it. (North 55)

Strange as it may seem, we are in the situation of having to argue for the value of what we learn in our classrooms. The classroom is not by and large accepted within the discipline as a scene for genuine knowledge-making and theory-building. Instead, what we have witnessed within the last decade--even as Composition has been gaining prestige and influence within academic departments, note--is a rush to embrace theory and to leave the classroom.

A Call to Return to the Field

In this paper, I would like to issue an invitation to all of us to return to the "field," as it were, to go back to our

classrooms and to observe and report what is said and done there. I would like to propose the notion that the classroom is a place where knowledge may be made. Unexpectedly, I come to issue this invitation through having spent time reading outside our discipline--most especially in anthropology. In some sense, anthropology has reminded us of something that we seem to have lost sight of: that language and meaning are locally generated and situated. It is a view that goes to the heart of what we do everyday in our composition classroom, when we tell our students that words derive their power from being situated in lived experience. Yet, curiously, it is a view that we teachers, when speaking among ourselves, need to be reminded of, especially when we feel overwhelmed by the "local detail" of the classroom. We should go back to the "concrete materials" from which knowledge and theory are made, with a renewed and revitalized perspective, better prepared to read the "text" of our classroom experience. This paper is a reading of my own classroom. It is my report "from the field."

Seeing Themselves Among Others

I recently devised a writing course at my community college that encourages students to reflect on the extent to which we are "constructed" by culture: How are we shaped, how are our choices defined, by the traditions, beliefs, and values around us? Students must view their beliefs and behavior as embedded within the context or "field" of their community's beliefs and behavior.

They are being asked to recognize that they belong to particular communities and to offer first-hand accounts of the ways of such communities. They must achieve a felt engagement with experience. They must know and express what it is like to "be there."

Before attempting to define that difficult term "culture," I encourage my students to see themselves as part of a group or community. Students are encouraged to bring up, in class and in their writing, examples of groups with which they are affiliated: sports teams, work places, religious institutions, and so on.

We begin by brainstorming the ingredients necessary for any community: members, a common purpose, a set of rules for its members to observe, a distinct language, and various roles or duties to be performed. We then list various examples of communities from daily life: religious denominations or congregations, political parties, workers' unions, the family, nationalities, and so forth.

In an assignment, I ask my students to identify one community to which they belong (one of many, I reminded them) and to describe the roles they and the other members play. I encourage them to reflect whether they consider themselves "leaders" or "followers" in the group, or indeed whether such terms are relevant.

One student chose to research and write on her work community, the residents and staff of a nursing home. Early on she describes the role of the residents:

> The residents in this establishment are here for one main reason and that is personal care. They need to be here because they can no longer take care of themselves. They can no longer do as they please when they please. An example of this is each meal is served at a certain time everyday. Another example is they go to bed and rise in the morning at a certain time each day. And one more example is they are on a schedule for showers each week and . . . only get showers on [their] assigned day. In other words they have very little opportunity to make their own personal choices.

As contrast, the nursing aides' job (the student is an aide) is, essentially, to make those choices and perform the tasks that come with that responsibility: feeding, washing, cleaning and drying.

Yet in reflecting on whether she is a leader or follower, that is, when reflecting on her place within the context of this particular community, the student begins to see her role as rather complex. Although she has, in one sense, greater autonomy than the residents, she recognizes that when residents ring their bell she must respond quickly to their needs, thus yielding up something of her own freedom to "choose." Moreover, as a nurse's aid, she is herself supervised by, and dependent on, nurses, who leave the "dirty work" for the aides to do.

In the end, the student comes to realize that for this community, the question of who leads and who follows becomes

subsumed by the interest of the community as a whole:

> Altogether we all are a vital part in this community. We need the residents as much as they need us. For without them none of us would have jobs or fulfillment, and without us they would not have proper car. Who the leaders and followers are in this community I see as insignificant. The important thing is that these people are taken care of to the best of our ability.

Each member of the community pulls her own weight; each member is essential to the maintenance of the group.

From Community to Culture

Central to the maintenance of any community is that community's "culture," the ceremonies and beliefs that are the glue of the community. It is to the idea of culture that I and my students now direct our attention. For assistance in understanding the concept, I ask my students to read Clifford Geertz's "'Deep Play': Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." The essays begins anecdotally with the Geertzes' entrance into a Balinese village and their witnessing of an illegal cockfight, which is broken up by a police raid (the Geertzes flee along with the villagers and thereby gain acceptance in the village). Geertz then proceeds to describe the rules by which cockfights operate and the roles played by the participants. Eventually, the essay probes what the ceremony means for these villagers, that is, how it expresses the great themes: "death, masculinity,

rage, pride, loss, beneficence, and chance" (Geertz 295).

We begin our discussion of the essay by considering what it like for someone to be amid a culture far different from her own, as is the case with the Geertzes. What are the obstacles that such a person faces in trying to observe and understand the culture? The Geertzes, we note, are intially treated as "non-persons" (272). Their experience as an "outsider," or, as one student observes, an "intruder," attracts my classes' attention early. In his journal, one student reacts to the Geertzes' dilemma by recalling an experience of his own:

> I have had the same experience that Clifford Geertz and his wife had. I was born in Portugal and immigrated to America when I was two years old. When I was 12 years old I went to Portugal to visit my family with my parents. I also felt that I was not wanted there. When I walked in the street I felt that everybody was staring or talking about me. I don't know what they were talking about or why they were staring. I used to always ask my mother why they stared and she replied, because you are a new face in this town. She also said that not too many new faces come by here for years. One day my mother sent me to go out and get some milk. I really didn't want to go but I was glad I did . . . When I got to the corner to pay for the milk I didn't know how to count the money to pay for the milk. Some young gentleman helped me count the money and from that day I knew how to count Portuguese money and felt more comfortable

walking in the streets.

It is a narrative of estrangement and gradual adaptation. In retrospect, I am not surprised that this immigrant student would have reacted in this way to the Geertz piece, since the experience Geertz describes to some degree is shared by immigrants generally: the shock of entry into a strange culture; the fear of estrangement; the desire for, and achievement of, assimilation. The student, while very young, must have experienced something of the same feelings when settling into this country.

Reactions to the piece are certainly wide-ranging. Many students betray their own ethnocentrism when reading Geertz' rendering of a Balinese cockfight. They are appalled by the violence of the "sport," the callous treatment of the animals themselves, and are quick to condemn it. Yet others attempt to take the view that the ritual is exempt from criticism since "it is not part of our culture," as one student observes in her journals. But she goes further: "Cockfighting had a lot to do with the masculinity of the owners of the cocks."

That one observation prompts me to ask my students whether our culture contains rituals that "had a lot to do with . . . masculinity. . . ." By that I mean, Are there ceremonies that express and define what it means to be male in our society? In a brainstorming session, students are quick to list sports like football and hockey, whose combination of physical contact and fierce competitiveness seem to suggest cultural norms of

"masculinity." For one student, the Balinese cockfight reminds him of boxing, but not merely because of the shared violence: "It reminds me of boxing in a way, [because] a fan would call his bookie and place his bet on his favorite boxer and see who wins." He notes that, as in the Balinese cockfight, in boxing, "die hard betting fans stay round ringside, while the fans who are just there to see the event stay in the outskirts." This student was beginning to "read" his own culture. It was now time to go out into the field to engage in more thorough observation.

Reading Culture: Two Students "In the Field"

As an assignment, I now ask my students to identify a ritual themselves for observation and interpretation. Specifically, I ask them to observe, with journal notebook in hand, the conduct of a particular ceremony from their own communities.

Before sending the students out in the field, I ask them do more brainstorming, this time, on the necessary ingredients of a community's "ritual." A ritual, they decide, must have the following characteristics: repetition of action and a formal code of behavior or rules. In other words, rituals do not and cannot vary substantially with each enactment. They must be predictable and the rules must be known by those who enact the ceremonies. Importantly, rituals must mean something to those who participate in them; rituals, in Geertz's sense, must be "deep." The class then produces examples of rituals: mass, a Thanksgiving meal, a bar-mitzvah, a wedding, a first date, and so

on.

One student produces an observant and amusing essay on the ritual of "hanging out" at the neighborhood mall. He describes the "mind games" that occur when boys and girls begin their flirting:

> We followed the two [girls] on the opposite side of the mall and we [both guys and girls] kept walking until we got to the end of one side. We made a U turn and switched sides and went the opposite way. Eventually we got to walk on the same side of each other, got to look at each other. We [the boys] said, "Hi." The girls did the same but they kept walking . . . .

The student observer is then able to distinguish the various roles and duties of each member of "The Suicide Squad," as he tellingly calls his group:

> First is me. I'm the sensible one who knows when we've reached our limit and say when we should back off . . . . then there's . . . the gung-ho 'bring'em back alive' soldier . . . .

Each member of the squad has predictable traits and is called up to behave in a certain way.

Despite the careful detail, the student's account does fall short, however. After carefully and humorously describing the observed behavior, he is unable to go that last mile: to say what it all means. He is not able to comment on what "hanging out" says about being a teenager: about looking for some action

on a Friday night and engaging in a rather confusing yet requisite mating dance. Perhaps if he could further explore the implications of that label, "The Suicide Squad," the student might begin to read the ceremony more deeply.

To promote that kind of reading, I ask my students to research a more narrow subject, yet one that speaks powerfully about our popular culture, namely, television advertisements. I ask them the following question: Is it possible that television ads may say as much about our popular culture as the cockfight does for the Balinese? Put another way, Is it possible that television may be selling more than particular products, but certain beliefs and values as well?

I invite my students to do a reading of a television ad, as they had done with a "live action" ceremony. First we read a sample critique, written by Mark Crispin Miller, of a soap commercial, a critique that presents the commercial as itself a product, expressive of a strategy and ideology (Miller). Then I advise my students to select a commercial themselves and to describe patiently what they are observing, paying particular attention to seemingly peripheral images, such as clothing worn, background furniture. I invite them then to probe further what the images are saying: Who is the targeted audience? How exactly is that audience being appealed to? What, finally, does the advertisement say about our culture's values and beliefs?

The writing that results from the assignment offers some rather perceptive readings of television marketing. As an

example, consider one student's observation and reading of a commercial selling headache medicine:

> We are watching a woman putting her earrings on. She is in a black dress and she gives the impression of going out somewhere special. She is walking around the room when suddenly she spots her husband (we presume). She says, "Bill, you aren't ready for the party yet. Put your tie on." She is very condescending to him. She cocks her head and exclaims that she didn't realize his head hurt him so badly. She takes out a box of Motrin IB and tells him to take it . . . .
>
> Watching the scene gives the impression that although "Bill"'s wife is 'feminine,' she is in total control of her husband. She makes all the decisions from decorating the bedroom down to the fact that "Bill" will have a great time at this party.

The student goes on to suggest that the commercial offers a view of a relationship aimed directly at the housewives in the audience and that this advertisement purposely and cynically inverts the usual gender roles. What is being sold is a miracle cure, not merely for a headache, but for a dominating husband.

"saying something of something": What Students Have Learned

Students gain much from the kind of research into culture that I have described. To begin with, they come to view their experience as meaningful, from the first week of the semester to

the last. Personal experience and the narrative that contains it are not merely the stuff of those early weeks (before students are skilled enough to attempt argumentative and theoretical writing). The experience they bring with them to the class becomes and remains the subject of study in the classroom.

Moreover, students come to see the "concrete observations" of their experience, as Malinowski might refer to them, as significant and ripe for interpretation (Malinowski 290). Their experience becomes the foundation of such interpretation. In reading their own community's ways, they are, in a sense, seeing it, and creating it, a new. There is rich and "deep play" in their worlds, and their writing expresses it.

Reading the Classroom: What I Have Learned

I too have learned something important from the course. Just as my students have come to see the significance in their "local knowledge," so I have come to view what happens in my classroom as genuinely meaningful. I, too, have come to value the local and to regard "what happens" within the community of my classroom on a day-to-day basis as worthy of observation and, yes, of generating knowledge.

I recall the day when I read outloud to my class the essay on the ritual of "hanging out," portions of which I quoted earlier in this paper. I feel like saying, "You should have been there," much like energized anthropologists who recount an amazing discovery made in the field. It was really a wonderful

scene. There was a great deal of laughing at the funnier moments, of course. But, more profoundly, I sensed that each of the students recognized something of themselves in the writer's words. They owned that writing. They, you see, had "been there," that is, they had experienced something of the confusion and delight that "hanging out" brings. The joy of "being there" need not be the anthropologists' alone. Students can feel it. Teachers can feel it. The classroom can have that kind of richness.

That observation should come as no surprise to any of us. In fact as I argue for the importance of what happens in our classrooms, I feel more than a little silly. After all, what could be more obvious? And yet I hear so many within our field subordinate their classroom teaching to the work they do outside the classroom, that is, to their more theoretical work or to research removed from that class they have to teach on "Monday morning." I can't help but feel when I hear such things that we just "don't get it." We ought to be returning to that class convinced that much can be learned there. What Clifford Geertz observes about cultures might indeed apply to the classroom: ". . .societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them" (Geertz 302).

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