DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 042 JC 930 424

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TITLE	Stories Told in a Different Voice: Women Students as Developing Writers.
PUB DATE	[93]
NOTE	13p.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Colleges; *Females; *Learning Processes; Learning Theories; *Nontraditional Students; *Personality Theories; *Self Esteem; Self Expression; Sex Differences; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students; *Writing Apprehension; Writing Difficulties

ABSTRACT

Many women in two-year colleges are returning to education after having been away from a school setting for an extended period of time. In a community college writing class, written comments to a teacher on the first day of class indicated that women were considerably less self-confident than the men, with several revealing fear of expressing themselves in public. According to Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, women have five basic ways of knowing: Silence, Received Knowledge, Subjective Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, and Constructed Knowledge. Instructors can develop a framework for tracing the growth of women students in class based on these levels of knowing. A woman in silence fears the consequences of her words, thus says nothing. Students in the received knowledge stage have not developed a voice of their own, and want the authority (the teacher or text) to provide them with "the answer." In research papers, these women tend to tie together a string of quotes. Women in the subjective knowledge stage tend to reject or support what authorities say based upon their experiences, are often angry at authorities, and tend toward global generalizations. Women in the procedural knowledge stage recognize the need to learn procedures for developing their understanding of a subject. In the constructed knowledge stage, women synthesize their knowledge and experiences using appropriate procedures, often transferring classroom learning to their own lives. In writing classes, women's written work over the course of a semester can show evidence of the slow process of moving from stage to stage. Instructors can further the process by requiring students to think and write about what they have learned and incorporate conferences on students' writing into class time. By helping students monitor their own growth and learning, teachers encourage students to take control of learning and value their voices. (PAA)

Stories Told in a Different Voice

Women Students as Developing Writers

by

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"You prefer the men in this class." Denial rose to my lips as I reread the student evaluation. But when two more students wrote similar comments, I became concerned. I spent considerable time thinking about my behavior and methods in the classroom. How could I better address the needs of these students, women returning to education?

Many of the methods I had already used are designed to involve all students in critical thinking. Frequent small group activities and writing-to-learn assignments give students the opportunity to think about and practice their words and thoughts before contributing them to large group discussions. With confidence gained from hearing peer feed-back and seeing their ideas in writing, women (and men) become more willing to risk expressing their ideas for all to hear. Journals further ready them for discussion of readings. Despite these methods, women felt undervalued in the classroom.

Listening to Student Voices

Last semester, one-third of my students were women who had been away from a school setting for an extended period of time. Their situations vary, but nearly all had one thing in common- full-time jobs. Some balance school, children, husband, and job. Others are single mothers with hopes of careers in the not-too-distant future. These women deserve equal opportunity in the classroom.

I started carefully listening to these voices from the first day of class. A card activity, designed to break down barriers, giving students the opportunity to meet and talk with each other, made me aware of the underlying insecurity of many women in the classroom. On the back of the card, for my

eyes only, they responded to several questions. The last prompt was, " Tell me anything else about yourself that would help me as your teacher." Sample responses from women follow:

"I am a terrible writer."
"English is my worst class."
"I don't have enough confidence in my work and sometimes I don't or won't put enough effort forth because I'm sure it will be wrong or just not good enough."
"I'm shy and emotional. Very involved in family life. There is much illness in my family."
"I like to participate in a group, but I dislike being in front of a group. I have been out of school a long time."
" I'm a little nervous expressing my ideas and opinions in front of the class...I wouldn't want anybody to laugh at me for poassible mistakes."
"I am nervous about starting school again. I have just been remembering times when I was abused as a child and sometimes I get kind of sad."
"I'm scared shitless about starting school again."
"My writing ability is very poor. I feel very inadequate about it."
" I have taken this class before. I had a problem with my teacher that has made me very self-conscious of my writing and afraid to write."

In contrast, the men in the class made comments like the following:

"I want to learn how to best express myself in writing and do it in a logical manner."
"I do not like to do homework. This is the second time I've taken Comp I.
"I got a C in high school. But what does that teacher know about writing. He doesn't do any himself."

The lack of confidence in these women's voices, expressed over and over again, made me far more conscious of concerns activated by returning to the classroom.

Analyzing Women's Voices: Stages of Development

These voices, often expressing fear, reminded me of the research conducted by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule in their book, Women's Ways of Knowing. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule convincingly demonstrate that women have five basic ways of knowing: Silence, Received

Knowledge, Subjective Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, and Constructed Knowledge. Women progress from having no voice, to developing a strong voice. Starting with fear of responses to their words, women move first to reliance upon authorities, then to viewing themselves as authorities. Later they search for procedures which will help them know, finally developing to connect their experiences with that of authorities, constructing their own world view. Women's Ways of Knowing provides a framework for tracing the growth of our students. Reading student journals and listening to discussions, I began to recognize the stages of development my female students were expressing.

Silence: The initial quotes from the first day of class indicate that these women could easily be forced into Silence. A woman in Silence fears the consequences of her words, thus says nothing. These women express fear, nerves, or a lack of confidence. Our (the teacher's) behavior toward these students greatly affects them. With these students, we need to watch our intonation patterns and our body language. We see Silence in our class, often hiding in the back row. This semester, Shelly comes late, hides in back, does not bring a rough draft to the workshop class, and does not turn her papers in on time. Unless I conference her fast, she will disappear. We need to ask ourselves: Who are the women who withdraw from our classes or just never come back?

Received Knowledge: Students in this stage want the authority (teacher or text) to provide them with the answer. They still have developed no voice of their own, only echoing what authorities say. Questions they ask reflect their search for the answer.

"What do you want me to do?"
"What should I say?"

"How many quotes should I use?"
"How many articles should I read?"
"How long should this be?"

In writing research papers, these women tend to tie together quote after quote, relying totally on what authorities say.

Students in this stage of development have the most difficult time in my classes because I refuse to provide definite answers. My usual response is, "What do you think?" "What would you like to do?" or "How many quotes do you think you need?" My requiring them to make their own decisions frustrates them. Although they criticize that I am not clear on my expectations, I continue to challenge them to take charge of their own learning. It is important, I believe, for teachers to recognize which students will have difficult times in our classes based on their stage of growth and our methodology.

Subjective Knowledge: Women in this stage tend to reject or support what authorities say based upon their experiences. Often these women are angry at authorities. For example, a young mother may say the psychology teacher knows nothing about his subject because her two-year old does not show any characteristics described by the teacher. Global generalizations are made from very specific examples: "My high school taught me nothing, " or "I learned nothing in that class," or "I smoked and drank when pregnant. My baby's fine."

In discussions of literature, women will say, "My experiences do not validate what that author is saying. Therefore, the author is wrong." When reading Ellison's first chapter of Invisible Man, one Subjective Knower could not believe whites would ever treat blacks as this young man was treated; therefore, she dismissed the whole story, finding no bit of truth. "I feel that in order to analyze literature to our understanding, we must be able to

relate it to our life, and analyze in our own opinion," she wrote in her journal. These students also focus on emotions, starting sentences with, "I feel...." While this is an admirable and psychologically prior stage or approach, students must progress out of Subjective Knowledge.

Procedural Knowledge: In this stage, women recognize the need to learn procedures for developing their understanding of a subject. They use the methods taught to help them explore the subject. For example, in writing classes, these students effectively generate information using intellectual strategies such as change, contrast, and logical sequence. They learn to analyze their audience in terms of knowledge, values, and language. They recognize the need for balancing the rhetorical elements of subject, purpose, writer, audience, and form.

In literature classes, students in this stage analyze literature using approaches modeled in the classroom (i.e. formalist, psychological, sociological, archetypal). Last semester, in analyzing Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays," one Procedural Knower, in response to the formalist question, "how does imagery contribute to conflict?" said, "The word which stood out in the poem is 'too.' It conveyed the self sacrifice of the father, who put the welfare of his children above his own. He did this not only six days a week, but even on the day of rest." Here, she focuses on language and the insights they offer to the poem.

After class discussion, she added another entry on this poem, stating, "I gained insight from the word 'cold' although at first I was turned off. I learned that cold was a very large part of the imagery and it was necessary to create the tension. In a cold world, a father created warmth for his children." Even though this writer did not initially appreciate the analysis

presented by her classmates, she recognizes the worth of these procedures. These women recognize that procedures will help them achieve their goals. Thus, Their efforts toward understanding a subject include using procedures.

Constructed Knowledge: Here, women have "gone beyond the information given" as Bruner would say, to synthesize their knowledge and experiences using appropriate orocedures to construct their worlds. These women have well-developed voices, showing this synthesis and subsequent transfer from classroom to lives and vice versa:

"I have learned quite a bit about writing while also learning about myself. I feel much more comfortable in areas such as organizing, research and surface structure. The intellectual strategies were of great help to me, and I will continue to use them when writing. There were many areas which provided insight into several areas of communication. This has helped me in other areas such as my work and relationships with others."

"Everything I have read and discussed in class has become a part of me. I feel like I know the characters personally. I think about them from time to time when a similar situation occurs in my dail life that reflects the memory of the literature."

In a women's literature class, Constructed Knowers carefully designed their end-of-semester projects. They used their knowledge and experience with women's literature and issues, as well as procedures for studying literature, to address questions meaningful to them in their lives. For example, one woman wrote a letter to her mother in which she examined mother-daughter relationships as portrayed in the literature, offering her mother models of and reasons for their own behavior. Another student used a series of journal entries written for her daughter to explore Cather's "A Lost Lady" and

Wharton's "The House of Mirth," examining the enduring themes in each.

Changing Voices

In examining samples of writing collected over the course of a semester, I can see changes in the way a woman is thinking. However, it soon becomes apparent that change can be a slow process. The exerpts here trace the development of Melinda, a 35-year old married mother of two with a full-time job. On the first day of class, Melinda's journal entry on Hayden's poem, "Those Winter Sundays," shows she is a Subjective Knower. In response to the question, "What's the most important word, phrase, or idea and why?" she talks about her experiences: "'No one ever thanked him.' This phrase really stood out to me because when I think back on my childhood I remember how many things were done for me out of love, and how many of those things were taken for granted...."

After discussing the poem in class, where a number of students (like the Procedural Knower previously discussed) analyzed parts of the poem, students were directed to write a second entry, one summarizing class discussion, or synthesizing it with their first entry. Melinda wrote, "I really came to enjoy this poem....this particular one has a lot of meaning and brings out many emotions from within myself." Her response to poetry is that of a Subjective Knower, one whose experiences dominate thought. Despite classmates using procedures to understand this poem, Melinda uses only her experiences.

During the semester, Melinda learned to support her responses, using details from the literature. Also, she was taught procedures for analyzing literature. In her response to Frost's "'Out,Out-'" she wrote two paragraphs of a subjective response, starting "I was taken completely off balance by this

poem...," but ends with "This poem is being told in an objective point of view - 3rd person narrator. He sees things, hears of each character but we as the reader must interpret it the way we feel is right for ourselves." Even in her attempt to use procedures, she returns to support her responses as a Subjective Knower.

A later paper on O'Connor's "Greenleaf" is a comparison and contrast of the May sons with the Greenlear sons. Melinda notes many differences in "social stautus, religious beliefs, and educational background." But her analyzsis is not tied to theme nor does it provide insights into this story. In many ways, she is now using procedures in the manner of a Received Knowledge learner. I taught her these procedures; therefore she must try them. But they lead her nowhere new for two reasons: she views procedures as Received Knowledge, something to be memorized, and consequently, she uses these procedures as an exercise, not being able to go beyond the obvious.

At the end of the semester, Melinda wrote, "Keeping a journal , I learned that if a story or poem reminds me of things in my life, I can write down these thoughts or feelings honestly. By writing the things down, I can go back into my past..." Of procedural learning, she says (and many other women concur), "I find that when I read a story and look for different literary techniques used, I lose some interest in a story. I feel that if I am unable to find each and every technique used that I did not learn all I should have from the lesson." Here is another indication that she sees procedures only as a form of Received Knowledge. The authority would "find each and every technique." Melinda's comments continue, "I believe that by reading so much literature and having to write my own response to a particular poem or story, it helped me believe in my own abilities." She ends her journal talking about fulfilling her goal: "...writing about things that I read will help me to gain

confidence in myself. I will learn to speak up for myself and not fear what others think. I want to be able to support my opinion and I believe that by writing down my thoughts and learning how to prove myself that I will eventually feel more comfortable in verbally expressing those feelings."

Although much of the semester dealt with procedures, Melinda is still a Subjective Knower primarily. Although she has learned procedures for analyzing literature, she values her feelings and experiences more. At least two questions remain: What teaching method is most helpful in moving Melinda along the path to Constructed Knowledge? How can Melinda learn (or be taught) the value of Procedural Knowledge and subsequent Constructed Knowledge?

Responding to Women's Voices

Identifying and anlyzing these women's voices has helped me respond to them appropriately. I made two major changes in the class requirements. First, I required students to spend time after each writing assignment thinking and writing about what they had learned. Second, because the women were too busy to come to office hours, I incorporated in-class conferences on student writing and their responses to their writing. The women prepared well for these meetings.

The metacognitive requirement became an integral part of every collected written assignment, whether a series of journal entries, a major paper, or an in-class writing assignment. Students responded to three questions, evaluating their writing and their learning:

1. What are the strengths of this writing?
2. What did you learn about writing while completing this assignment?
3. If you had another week, how would you improve this writing?

These questions, open by design, give me a window into their minds. They provide the time and place for students to respond to the intention of the assignment as well as to tell me all their pent-up emotions about their writing and this assignment. Also, equally important, I can view what each student records as progress and as strength. Their self-evaluation beneficially reveals to both of us the student's degree of understanding of the writing process.

For example, after a series of journal entries in response to short stories, a 49-year-old woman wrote, "It is difficult for me to analyze something that may have been written as someone's therapy.... It is difficult for me to organize my thoughts (if I have any) and put them down on paper. It is difficult for me to second-guess your expectations." This woman's anger, readily apparent in this exerpt, had been suppressed in class. Had I not provided a place for her to express these sentiments, I would never have been able to help her realize that literature is more than an author's therapy. Through an in-class conference, careful placement of this student in small groups, and subsequent class discussions, I could begin to change her ideas on journals, short stories, and writing, moving her from silence to subjective knowledge, to procedural and constructed knowledge.

In analyzing what she learned from writing her journal, Lynn, a 35-year-old secretary, wrote, "I want to be able to support my opinions, and I believe that by writing down my thoughts, and learning how to prove myself that I will eventually feel more comfortable in verbally expressing those feelings." Another woman who recently lost her job stated, "Seeing my feelings in writing gives me confidence in my voice." Another writer commented, "Keeping a journal based on these three questions has made me be my own critic."

Students begin to realize they are monitoring their growth as writers. Focusing on strengths makes them proud of these sections of their work. Recognition of changes in their writing leads them to realize how much they are learning. Once they begin to see how these writing and thinking strategies apply to many situations, they realize their potential for further growth. Most importantly, each student becomes aware that she (or he) is the primary person in control of learning. This process results in all students hearing and valuing their own voices, as well as the voices of their classmates.