ED 412 570   CS 216 056

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TITLE   "Bagels Anyone?": Pedagogy of the Confused and Hungry in the
                Dead Zone.
PUB DATE   1997-03-00
NOTE   7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference
                on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ,
                March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE   Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Opinion Papers (120) --
                Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Classroom Environment; Higher Education; Literacy; *Student
                Experience; *Student Needs; *Student Problems; Urban
                Environment; *Writing Instruction; Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS   *Academic Discourse Communities; *Critical Pedagogy

ABSTRACT
        One instructor's "dead zone" (her windowless classroom in
the depths of the Humanities building) was the place where little exchange
between teacher and students took place. When one day she overheard the
students talking about how little money they had left on their meal cards,
she took a few dozen bagels to that afternoon's writing lab. The experience
made her realize that some changes were necessary to begin recognizing and
acknowledging the reality of students' lives inside and outside the
classroom. Since that "dead zone" semester, the instructor has tried to
rethink, reposture, and reposition herself and her attitude toward the
classroom environment, the students, their writing, and what they have to
offer. These urban students do not come from anything remotely resembling a
traditional family--they come from unstable environments where drugs, crime,
and violence are daily occurrences. They cannot buy textbooks because their
financial aid has not come through; they have learning disabilities that they
desperately try to conceal from their peers. Writing teachers need to examine
how the discourse of the discipline constructs students as others; they need
to question how to understand the students' reality; and, they should apply a
humanistic attitude to their pedagogy. Such a reevaluation would allow
instructors to see that there is no "ideal" assignment, ideal setting, or
ideal student. Existing practices and theories must be questioned for
literacy to have any meaning in students' education and in their futures.
(NKA)

CCCC/1997

Julie Katz

Title of Session: When "Reality Bites" the Writing Instructor: Going Beyond "Just Teaching and "Just Writing."

"Bagels Anyone?": Pedagogy of the Confused and Hungry in the Dead Zone"

Flashback to last year:

The Setting: The classroom is located in the dungeon of the Humanities building. The dimly lit windowless room is the color an ancient, tattered manila folder soiled from decades of spilled coffee. The students' desks, bolted to the floor arena style, face the teacher's desk situated precariously on a five by four platform three feet off the floor—basically, a miniature version of the set for the Sally Jesse Raphael show. The blackboard, not much bigger than a computer screen, is rarely equipped with chalk or an eraser.

Now for the characters: The students, who sit as far back against the wall opposite from my desk, wait passively for something to happen, for instructions, for external stimulus. Slumped in their chairs, they project a bored, bothered, and bitter demeanor. Enter the dreaded stimulus, me. I make a few announcements, ask if they have any questions, and then I wait. No response. "No questions at all?" I say. Nothing, just the sound of the antiquated fan under my platform monotonously cranking and whirring amidst the deadening silence. "Ok," I say, then let's talk about your essays."

The conflict: They want to talk about correctness; I want to talk about concepts. They want quick answers about writing; I want them to step back and think about the meaning and purpose of writing. I'm preoccupied with theories of collaboration, academic discourse, and my quasi-applications of Freire's and Giroux's liberatory pedagogies; meanwhile, the students try

to conquer anxiety, boredom, hangovers, hormone rages, and hunger pains, among other ailments. The only thing we all have in common is the desire to end class early.

This was my "dead zone," a place where little exchange took place, where students seemed inanimate and indifferent, where I felt confused and frustrated. Admittedly, this scenario is overly dramatized and generalized but only slightly.

The critical moment for me, however, came one day when I overheard several students talking about how they had four dollars left on their meal cards, with a month of the semester to go, and only enough change in their pockets to purchase a granola bar a day from the vending machine. I managed to alleviate the immediate hunger problem by bringing a few dozen bagels to writing lab that afternoon. (Several students ate as many as four bagels that hour and every student ate at least one.) They were thankful, but I was enlightened.

This may sound like a trivial situation, but it had a major impact on me. I realized that some changes were necessary in order to begin recognizing and acknowledging the reality of students' lives inside and outside the classroom. I realized that the students' middle class status does not correspond to their financial realities, that most students spend their extracurricular hours working, that they come from families only tenuously and marginally connected to middle class culture. Furthermore, I realized, as has Bruce Herzberg, (in "Composition and the Politics of the Curriculum") that the "distance between the culture represented by the traditional college curriculum and the culture of college students has been increasing" (qtd in *Politics of Writing Instruction* 115). Specifically, I realized that the course syllabus and my objectives were not acknowledging the immediate concerns of the students.

Since my "dead zone" semester, I have tried to rethink, reposture, and reposition myself and my attitude toward the classroom environment, the students, their writing, and what they have to offer—rather than solely what I have to offer them. Accordingly, over the last year, I started listening more closely to the voices of the students.

While I have found that they are indeed hungry and, in some cases, hungover, more strikingly I have found that they do not come from anything that remotely resembles a traditional family; that they come from unstable environments where drugs, drive-by-shootings, crime, violence, murder, and death are daily occurrences; that they are angered by the media's misrepresentation and glorification of these environments; that they experience various forms of racism and sexism; that they live with a "care giver" rather than parents; that they can't buy textbooks because their financial aid has not come through; that they have learning disabilities which they desperately try to conceal from their peers.

Admittedly, I am an empathetic person and, therefore, to a large degree, an empathetic teacher. But this is not about empathy, this is about reality. The reality is that bagels are not the answer; they are only a bandaid. Bagels alone cannot acknowledge the reality of students' lives, their external circumstances. Therefore, we need to reevaluate the situation in several ways.

First, we need to examine how the discourse of our discipline, as Paul Heilker notes, "constructs students as Others, as people (or things) that are fundamentally quite different from their teachers" (226). Or, to put it more prescriptively, Andrea Lunsford suggests that we "start speaking and writing about the individuals that populate writing classrooms in terms of their idiosyncratic matrices of age, race, gender, class, sexual orientation and so on" (qtd. in Heilker 225). Because students play a fundamental role in our theories, we should not think about them only as equations on paper. We may cite them in our work, but, in effect, we are misrepresenting their world.

Second, we need to question, as does Freire in *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, how we can understand their reality, the reality Freire says, "I must know better and better to the extent that I am engaged in some way with a process of changing it" (148). Accordingly, we must try to become more attentive to the problems and backgrounds that constitute the actual experiences

students face daily in their lives. This, to me, also means that we must recognize that literacy goes both ways and that without understanding and acknowledging the kind of literacy used by students, we, in effect, silence them further.

Third, we should apply a Humanistic attitude to our pedagogy. I realize that the notion of Humanism involves many dimensions and sects, yet the common thread among them, as Paul Kurtz observes, is that Humanists "loudly declare that they are for [humankind], that they wish to actualize human potentialities, enhance human experience and contribute to happiness, social justice, democracy and a peaceful world" (Kurtz 6). It is that sliver of the wide-ranging Humanist definition that we need to embrace in order to alter our stance, diminish the distance, and mitigate the dehumanizing tendencies in our pedagogy and in our theories. Humanism, viewed in this way, corresponds to multiculturalism, pluralism, critical consciousness, and theories of education in the postmodern age. It embodies many of our goals. Admittedly, arguing for a "humanistic" approach may sound idealistic. Certainly, I don't claim that it is the panacea for this situation, but it can help us to recognize that the reality on the other side of our classroom constitutes an inherent aspect of the demands that we must acknowledge if practice, praxis, or theory is to have any relevance to any of our goals.

Nevertheless, rethinking my pedagogy in these ways has enabled me to more clearly see the students in my classes as individuals who do not consistently come to class perky, prepared, unburdened, and ready to leave their identities outside the classroom door. This reevaluation has also forced me to see that there is no "ideal" assignment, ideal setting, or ideal student. Accordingly, this tacit approach seems to have created a classroom environment that now seems more comfortable and comforting, more conducive to talking about writing— whether or not I bring bagels to class from time to time. What is most evident, though, is that as a result of repositioning myself and my attitude, not only have I learned *about* the students as individuals, I have also learned *from* them.

So, before I conclude, I would like to suggest that we go one step further and envision a coexisting curriculum where ours and theirs commingle, a curriculum that not just acknowledges but embodies their lives, their concerns, and their expertise. We need to imagine ways we can be more communicative and collaborative in order to know more about these students; otherwise, we wind up just theorizing, even fictionalizing, the situation. My suggestion, then, is that we discuss how students can play a more integral role in creating a curriculum that includes their reality. Clearly, the reality here is that teaching is a people-centered enterprise, not student- or teacher-centered solely. We need to acknowledge the reality of students' lives, we must reflect on and respond to these realities, and we must always remember that our work involves not "just teaching" or "just writing."

Obviously, my paper today does not outline a specific approach, tool, or strategy, for teaching writing. Instead, it should be received and digested as one step towards opening a discussion about reposturing our pedagogy and ourselves, about aligning ourselves and our pedagogy with the very individuals with whom we work, about closing the gap between how we think and what our students think about.

In closing, bringing bagels to class occasionally, thinking about and responding to students as individuals, trying to start from their perceptions and expertise, and embracing a Humanist pedagogy may provide some "food for thought," so to speak, but that is not enough. Our pedagogy, as James Sledd argues, must be critical if we want our students to become critical, but it also must be practical—that is, we must take into account the contexts of learners' lives. And we must continue to question, rather than accept, existing practices and theories in order for literacy to have any meaning in students' education and in their futures.

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