HELPING JUSTIN STAY IN TOUCH WITH HOME: A WRITING ASSIGNMENT TO FOSTER WORKING STUDENT WELL-BEING AND SUCCESS

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Introduction

"My dad's just a welder. What can he know about writing?" Justin P. asked at the beginning of the semester. I first met Justin P. in a writing class I taught in the New Center Program at Minnesota State University Moorhead. He appeared an average student in our program, no more at risk than any of the others who were struggling to find focus and purpose through higher education while building a foundation for advanced study. I did not know of the struggle he was going through except in general as I know that many working-class students work hard to fit into the academic and social environment of higher education.

Justin P.'s question about his father's possible understanding of rigorous literacy practices surprised and saddened me, but the assignment he was engaged in allowed him to answer that question positively and in a way that restored his respect for his father. The assignment through which Justin reconnected with his father involved the investigation of literacy practices in various workplaces of particular interest to the student-author conducting the research. By sharing Justin's experience, I hope to underscore the importance of helping students negotiate entry into higher education by allowing—but not forcing—their focus on the junctures where their home and academic worlds might be examined productively.

The Program

The New Center is an alternative entry program for students who do not meet regular admissions criteria. Justin P. (who does not want me to change his name) began the course with twenty-three other freshman in the same program who were taking a course that precedes the first-semester composition course. While not specifically developmental in design or in content, MDS 110 (Multidisciplinary Studies 110) loosely follows an Expressive Pedagogy, where process and voice form the basis for study in the development of writing proficiency.[1] In those sections of MDS 110 that I taught in 2002, I relied on an Expressive Pedagogy while assigning standard essays and small research projects for students to write, while other instructors had chosen more "expressive" assignments, meaning those kinds of assignments that might have been construed as more creative than critical in nature. In creating my version of the course, I wanted to rely more heavily on the idea that literacy is situated in specific contexts and that through participation in the conversations occurring in those contexts we begin to acquire those languages (see for example Finn's (1999) chapters on "Making Literacy Dangerous Again" and "Taking Sides" as well as Harris's more recent article "Opinion: Revision as Cultural Practice"). It makes sense in the context of literacy as a project, or conversation, in which we engage that I assign a primary research study in a course that is supposed to fulfill the function of a basic writing course. In many ways, my approach differed from that of other instructors, yet the aim of the course is to introduce students to writing in a way that fosters their sense of well being and wholeness while they develop their writing abilities and prepare to take freshman composition and other courses.

Justin P. was in a classroom filled with students from a variety of backgrounds, including two African-American students, several Hispanic students, and students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, from mothers who received government aid for living expenses, to a child of faculty members at another state university, to children of business people and those of skilled and

unskilled laborers. In general, the mix of students included a broad cross section of society, and even from a working-class background Justin was not in any way out of the ordinary.

Through previous research,[2] however, I was well aware of the difficulty working-class students have faced in mainstream composition courses because they have felt different from other students in the classroom (see Hoggart, Rodriguez, Plummer, Rose, Brodkey). They have felt different because of pressure within the system of education to distance themselves from their parents and their home communities, pressure felt by Justin at the beginning of this class (for similar phenomena exhibited by academics from the working class see Zandy and Ryan and Sackrey). Often, students from working-class families come to feel a separation from their home communities because of their experiences in higher education. Separation from family, which can be either or both real and perceived, challenges their ability to do well because they experience self doubt when their social support system is called into question. Lisa Delpit and others have demonstrated this phenomenon in a variety of academic areas.[3]

Justin P. seemed to be having common problems faced by some working-class students. As he sat in a posture with his arms crossed, he seemed a little withdrawn from classroom discussion and insecure about opening up in front of his peers. Justin expressed insecurity about his skills in writing, particularly in terms of peer editing and group assignments, seeming to want to remain outside the mainstream of the classroom. I suspected Justin feared that he was being rejected in the classroom because he was feeling out of place, something that might, as Hicks notes, result in his rejecting me as representative of the culture of the entire academy. Justin P. was similar to other working-class students striving to find better lives through the acquisition of higher education. Justin P. was not different from other students in terms of writing ability or feeling about higher education.

The Writing Assignment

The first two papers Justin P. wrote were average works, one about mountain biking and another about his high school wrestling experience that ended in his losing the final match for the State Championship. Both were clearly the kinds of writing any student might produce in a course whose emphasis is on the development of student writing through individual student commitment to writing. Essentially, the assignments, by design, ask students to share important and positive moments in their lives. As instructor of students who are already uncomfortable with writing and who have already experienced negative consequences because of their writing, I try to find topics that elicit self assurance, well-being, and comfort. While some believe that a critical orientation toward education is essential for the students' development of critical thinking abilities (Shor, Friere, Fitts and France), and I often concur, in this particular context, a more affirming approach is preferred. At this writing level for alternative enrollment students who are significantly at risk, scared, and insecure about their abilities (see Kohl particularly and Delpit), an affirmative approach is important: leave for another day an activity that foregrounds the discomfort students already feel. But something happened with the research assignment that brought Justin's sense of difference to the foreground.

The assignment to which Justin responded when he questioned what his father might know in relation to literacy was the third of four papers in that particular class. In designing the lesson, I drew on Mike Rose and Malcolm Kiniry's literacy assignment in *Academic Thinking and Writing* (672), where students are encouraged to examine the literacy practices within a particular environment, for example MacDonald's or another public space. Instead of asking students to choose any public space, I asked them to study the literacy practices of a place where they worked, where someone they knew worked, or where they eventually would like to work.

The design of the study was to encourage investigation of the literacy practices of a place in which they would very likely be

interested and also a place where they would likely be able to gain access, two critical concerns for primary research, even for such a short assignment of five to six pages. The rationale of the study was to help students develop critical thinking, observation, and writing skills as well as to develop a level of proficiency in recording and analyzing the information they observed. I wanted them to interact with the literacy project in quite a personal way. Finally, students need to develop a bi-dialectal proficiency, where they can move between languages that they already possess and the academic one they are acquiring, much in the spirit that Elbow suggests (see "Vernacular"). Further, students can try out new academic language in writing about a non-threatening environment, one that they select themselves, and then use whatever language feels most comfortable to introduce the people in that place to their academic project. Because of the Expressive emphasis of the course, I also wanted to make certain that students would be able to write about a place that mattered to them in order to provide them the impetus to commit to the writing situation.

To get students started on selecting places they might research, I guided them through a brainstorming activity of possible places, focusing on people with whom they had a relationship rather than on only particular environments, and asking them to begin by thinking of "a person who is employed in a field where you would like to find employment." Students then listed other people whose work environments they might find interesting or informative, including their own current work environments, their families' work environments, and work situations they would like to avoid.

It was in response to the suggestion of parents' work environments that Justin P. uttered the statement with which I opened this essay: "My dad's a welder. What can he know about writing?" I responded by turning the question back to him, asking what he thought he might find out about literacy in the environment of a welding shop.

I was not surprised, however, when I heard Justin question the value of his father's literacy, considering the pressure placed on

working-class students to sever connection with their home communities as they forge their ways into higher education, which is also supposed to mean raising themselves up in the social hierarchy. Much research focuses on this phenomenon throughout education, from the work on primary and secondary education by Lisa Delpit and Herbert Kohl, to Ira Shor's and Thomas Fox's similar work on college and university education, to Barbara Ching and Gerald Creed's work on identity and cultural hierarchy, to Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey's and Janet Zandy's work on academics from the working class. All of these researchers predict Justin P.'s attempt to protect his father from the scrutiny of the academic eye while distancing himself from his working-class background.

I did not reassert my suggestion that Justin P. study his father's work environment. I thought he had gone on to study a place in which he might eventually work as a design major. Surprisingly, in the following class period when we were beginning to brainstorm questions students might ask their informants, Justin P. announced that he had changed his mind and was going to study his father's welding shop. It seems that Justin had brought up the idea to his father on the telephone and a deep discussion occurred between father and son about the literacy of the welding shop; following that discussion Justin P. seemed to feel a greater security in asserting himself in the classroom. He was much less timid in speaking out about his project and thereby about his father and his father's work environment.

In the course of conducting his research, Justin visited his father's place of work several times, examining the uses of language he found there. Through the process of his research, I watched a certain change occur in him. Each time he returned to class through the process of writing his research paper, he brought with him examples of the language used in the shop, including copies of instruction manuals, signs, and blue prints for the complex machinery that was fabricated in the shop. And each day, his attitude toward the classroom improved.

Let me provide a few passages from Justin P.'s paper to illustrate the changes his thinking went through. In examining the literature of the steel shop, Justin P. noted four different kinds of texts, including signs, advertisements, instructions, and prints. Within these categories, he notes the rhetorical function and complexity of each, observing a motivational function in the advertisements, specific directions embedded in the signs, and symbolic representation in the prints and instructions.

Coming to understand the complexity of those items that he was certain were mono-vocal, rather than carrying the complex embedded messages that they did, Justin had to reassess his estimation of the skills required by someone working in that environment. Of the advertisements, Justin says, "I am sure there signs were to entice people and owners of other companies who tour the shop to buy these items. The other signs that complimented the company were there to encourage the workers to keep up the good work."

Of the instructions, he says, "some . . . were very complex, such as the instruction booklet on how to run a completely robotic welder." He adds, "The machines with 'technical' instructions required additional training to use." Here he marvels at the complexity of the minute details that must be communicated by the manual and perceived by the welders.

Finally, he says, "The workers in the steel shop need to go through extensive training to be able to read, comprehend, and perform the tasks that are described in the blueprints. . . . All welders in the shop must read them with ease." Here, he realizes that the print contains descriptions of the work to be done and the methods by which these tasks must be performed, thus beginning to understand the truly symbolic representation implicit within the prints.

At the beginning of the assignment, Justin wondered about his father's knowledge of language. He seemed to think negatively about the intellectual prowess required to work in a steel shop. His original skepticism is apparent in his final draft of the research project where in the introduction he admits, "Until I did this

project, I never realized how much writing there actually is in a steel shop or the complexities and special training needed to work in a steel shop." This observation stands as the thesis statement of his research project which traces the progress and analysis of his growing awareness of the literacy skill required in the welding shop.

Justin felt strongly about noting his changed position and newfound respect for his father's work as he reiterated his point at the closing of his paper:

> I feel that it is very important for other people to know that, whether they notice it or not, there is writing everywhere, whether it be in a place of high prestige or in a place such as a steel shop. I think that many people look down upon blue-collar workers, assuming that their jobs are no-brainers. Now through doing this paper I have proven that this is not true.

By refuting the lack of respect afforded by "people" to blue-collar workers, Justin is able to work through his own difficulty with his father's occupation and the inherent distance higher education seems to assume between himself and his father, in many cases assumed as necessary (see Fox in his chapter on Mr. C. and Spellmeyer 58-59). After completing this project, Justin may no longer feel he has to succumb to the pressure to sever ties with his home community or to feel that his father's chosen occupation is lacking in intellectual rigor.

In his paper, Justin says "I found that a lot of the literature in a steel shop is symbolic and acquired thorough experience and/or education to comprehend." In saying so, he reclaims and renews his respect for his father, something that is essential for him to be able to continue with a clear conscience to pursue his education. In other words, by understanding and validating the legitimacy of his father's work, Justin P. is able to be comfortable in his relationship with his father and to be comfortable in his role as a student because he is not forced to choose between the two.

He concludes his paper reasserting his right to family and his father's right to respect:

> I feel that it is very important that people respect steel workers and all that they do. A steel worker works harder in a day than some people do in an entire week and for that they deserve our respect. My father had been a steel worker for thirty years and I am proud of him.

Justin restores himself to a balanced position, secure in higher education and with his family.

Lessons

As instructors of students from various backgrounds, we must take particular care that our own predispositions and biases do not render us insensitive to the needs of all our students, including those marked by race, gender, *and* class. Very often, the bias toward the life and values of the elite, even as they are coveted by the middle, form the basis for evaluation of what matters in education at all levels. We need to remember, as I have highlighted in the structure of the sentence that opens this paragraph, that we are instructors of *students* who come from a variety of backgrounds and who are informed by many varied strengths and knowledge. As instructors, we must reach across the chasm created by our differences from one another, teachers and students, in an effort to value the variety of occupations and strengths it takes for a whole society to function, not just the strata of society we currently occupy.

We also need to realize that all students need to have a sense of wholeness that cultural bias toward things elite threatens. As numerous researchers point out, including Kohl, Delpit, Brodkey, Fox, Rose, and Hicks, denigration of students' identities and their home communities caused by negative attitudes held by those within the academic environment endangers the well-being of our students and thereby their abilities to succeed in our classrooms. Further, such negative attitudes perpetuate long-standing

erroneous assumptions that some students possess culture that is superior to others, that some have greater rights than others to education. As Kohl says,

> If repudiation of one's birthright becomes a prerequisite for the attainment of equality, and if equality means that everyone has the equal chance to admire the monocultural dreams of Western Europeans, we are on the wrong track. If a school curriculum denigrates one's ancestors, religion, and contributions to the history of the human race, and denies one's full dignity—that is, if it teaches the superiority of one segment of a democratic society over others—it is damaging to the minds and spirits of all children: those taught to believe their cultures are secondary and those given the false security of believing they are the creators of culture. An equitable curriculum must affirm all people as creators of culture and honor the multiplicity of human efforts to come to terms with living on earth. (95)

This assignment, then, sees an essential part of learning as the recognition of culture manifested in the complexity of language use wherever it is found. It calls attention to the value of the knowledge of people in the trades and career paths students may choose to follow and from which many students come.

This type of assignment worked well to teach Justin P. that the acquisition of literacy comes through the process of using language, something that he managed very well. In addition, he learned a lot about field notes, record keeping practices, participant observation, interviewing techniques, and questionnaire writing, all writing practices that he may use later in his academic career. He learned these literacy activities associated with academic investigation as a part of his work at the level of written language. In a context such as this, Justin P. unknowingly laid the groundwork for upper level academic inquiry, and he was not intimidated at all by the activity. Through active engagement in

academic work, he overcame some of the intimidation caused by sudden immersion in the university environment.

Finally, the most important lesson I have learned from Justin P.'s experience in the classroom concerns the reinforcement for activities that position students at junctures where they can choose—but are not pressured into choosing—to explore the positive influences they bring with them to the academy. When students can explicitly find value in their home communities and bring that value into the classroom as a part of a positive learning experience, they are able to undo a lot of the damage done as the dominant ideology, embedded in the practices of the institution, acts upon them to deny the value of their home communities to their personal wellbeing.

I am pleased that the space provided Justin P. allowed him to bring his academic work home where he could share it meaningfully with his family. In doing so, he was able to blur the lines that separate his two worlds, academic and home, in ways that made his academic success more likely and his repeated transitions between the two more comfortable. It has also helped him to develop strengths in communicating across the gap between his home and academic cultures, as suggested both by Elbow and Delpit, creating a space where he can negotiate his own developing identity. Had he not explored the answer to his question about what his father could know about literacy, he might have left intact the unexamined bias he obtained in the contested ground between the two worlds, or perhaps removed himself from the middle-class enterprise of higher education (O'Dair 605).

Notes

[1] For an in depth presentation of an Expressive Pedagogy, see Elbow's *Writing without Teachers*; for an excellent overview, see Burnham's essay in Tate, Rupiper, and Schick.

[2] See the unpublished dissertation *Beyond Alienation: Working-Class Students in the Composition Classroom* or the articles by Virtanen in the Winter and Fall 2003 issues of *Michigan Academician*.

[3] See Meachum; also see Delpit's *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*.

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