Disciplines in Dialogue: A Learning Commons Perspective

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I'll begin with a familiar scene in the Quinnipiac University Learning Commons, where I mentor freshmen and sophomores who often struggle with college-level writing: A student stares at her scant rough draft with a sense of meaninglessness. She tells me the assignment is for a breadth component course outside her major, and the task is a "waste of time." At first I balk at what I assume is a consumer mentality, a dismissal of assignments outside her career field as inherently unprofitable. But as she describes her challenge, I see she is actually disoriented, as if she found herself jettisoned into foreign territory. She believes that the main ideas of this paper exist in an academic realm far outside herself, and so her draft sounds forced and stilted, without the energy catalyzed by personal investment in a topic. She recalls Peter Elbow's (2000) image of the student "writing uphill" to an "authority dimension" (p. 34). The prose is not an act of communication but of performance for a grade—"an exercise in being judged or trying to get approval" (p. 34).

I try to inspire a sense of purpose, not only for the assignment but for the course itself. How might this course, as remote as it might seem from what the student values, add dimension to her major or career? I learn that she sees most of her educational experience as disjointed, with few connections between courses and therefore little sense of the purpose of classes outside her major. I consider the added meaning assignments would take on if instructors more consciously integrated them with students' learning in other fields, and I realize that through the years when I was a classroom instructor at the college level, I rarely made such efforts.

I'd therefore like to propose a radical pedagogy: that we teach student writers as though we are aware of the other disciplines in their course load. I suggest that we open ourselves to a natural curiosity about those disciplines that could transfer into student prose. I propose that we consider the possibility that each of the disciplines is interconnected with the others in unexpected ways. Indeed, since learning begins when students connect new material to what they already know, why not explore the intersections between one's own discipline and those in which the student may have prior expertise? (Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence, 2012). Along with theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who believed that subjects are not unitary things but that they exist in relation to others, we would perhaps be curious as to the ways our disciplines exist in dialogue with each other (Holquist, 2002, p. 36). Through such an approach, our classroom drama could be enlivened by more players (Holquist, 2002, p. 18). Recent publications such as James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* or Scott Page's *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies* provide compelling proof that collaboration among dissimilar ways of thinking catalyzes progress. Yet in practice in universities and colleges, interdisciplinary conversations can be fraught with tension, especially when varying

departments vie for recognition and resources. Within this political context, educators often withdraw from the risky exploration of fields that vary from their own. Students are then left with a jumble of disparate course material, since opportunities to integrate it in a meaningful way are overlooked.

I am not advocating for more team-taught or cluster courses that require restructuring at a university-wide level. Rather, I am promoting an informal, incidental way to talk with students about the other subjects that might bear upon an assignment. Such an approach would not only foster writing with expanded dimension; it would establish connections among the disciplines that would give meaning and purpose to the student's educational experience as a whole. For now, however, we seem a bit stuck in the assumption that *my* discipline has no relation to *those other* disciplines, a notion my student showed she had absorbed when she told me her paper had nothing to do with her major.

Our paradigm of a fragmented education does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it has a historical context. Awareness of that context could help us dismantle assumptions that content areas are essentially distinct. We can trace the divide between the humanities and the sciences to the burgeoning industrialization of the Romantic period, when the literati feared that "calculation and measurement generally might be displacing cultivation and compassion" (Collini, 1998, pp. x–xi). However, it was in the late 1950s that the great fissure between science and the humanities was more firmly fixed. In his 1959 Rede lecture, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, C.P. Snow observed that literary intellectuals harked back to an ideal age of Greek and Roman antiquity, a "traditional culture […]which manages the Western world" (p. 11). According to Snow, science, by contrast, was concerned with a creative future rather than a deteriorating past. Unlike the ossified "tragic human condition" that he observed preoccupying the literary elites, science was based on ever-shifting paradigms as knowledge of the natural world unfolded anew (Gould, 2003, p. 39). As he witnessed technology and industrialization promising vast improvements to the social condition, Snow remarked, "I believe the intellectual life of the whole of Western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups" (p. 3). However, between the promises of the post-war boom and the uncertainties of our current day, we have seen both science's triumphs (vaccines, mass food production, computer technology) and science's failures (industrial wastelands, global warming, cancer). In our day, it seems that we have come to a jaded understanding that the tragic human condition co-exists alongside (and paradoxically, because of) any improvements in the social condition, and we need to live with both.

Cognitive development provides an additional insight as to why we silo off one subject from another in our minds and practices. New knowledge forms in a series of synapses, or connections, between neurons. Young children have a quadrillion of these connections as opposed to adults, who have labeled and filed knowledge in such a way that new connections are far fewer (Berger, 2014, p. 42). The brain utilizes this economy to manage the bulk of stimuli it receives. It is not surprising, therefore, that when schools feed unasked for information to children, kids begin to ask things less and less (Berger, 2014, p. 43). Questioning starts to disappear in grade school and "falls off a cliff" in high school (Berger, 2014, pp. 43, 45). We likely witness the continued descent of questioning as

students amass information in college. As students become "experts" in a content field, they may become less competent questioners, and their ability to approach that field with creativity diminishes. As Warren Berger (2014) reminds us in *A More Beautiful Question*, "Frank Lloyd Wright put it well when he remarked that an expert is someone who has 'stopped thinking because he *knows*'" (p. 13). When you *know* all about a field, you assume there is nothing more to be *asked.* That dynamic, spread across experts in one field, could in turn limit the arena or cause it to be outdated (Berger, 2014, p. 13). Berger discussed the merits of "beginner's mind," or *neoteny*, a state where, like the preschool children, "you see things without labels, without categorization. Because once things have been labeled and filed, they become known quantities—and we don't think about them, may not even notice them" (pp. 41–42).

Interestingly, outsiders are often better problem-solvers than experts because they readily form meaningful connections to external domains more familiar to them than the field at hand. It was the athlete and amputee Van Phillips, not a physicist or engineer, who in the 1970s challenged the field of prosthetics by designing a C-shaped blade that far exceeded the traditional L-shaped limbs in comfort and flexibility. Phillips needed durability and a range of movement missing in the traditional limbs. The "external domain" to which Phillips connected his problem was East Asian weaponry. His father's antique Chinese sword with its unusually strong curved blade provided the necessary inspiration for the flexible, durable limb that Phillips designed and later marketed on a wide scale (Berger, 2014, p. 37). In time, amputees world-wide competed in NCAA track, ran in the 2012 Olympics, and climbed Mount Everest with Phillips's Flex-Foot (Berger, 2014, p. 38). Yet the "experts" in prosthetics had been stuck in one rigid paradigm for decades (Berger, 2014, p. 35).

As Phillips viewed the discipline of prosthetics design through the lens of East Asian weaponry, a student could view his course material through alternative disciplinary lenses. He could now begin to see startling connections—perhaps to other courses in his major, perhaps to other fields interesting to him—that would enrich the experience and deepen his knowledge. If explored in the classroom, this approach would require little expertise outside an instructor's own discipline. The instructor need merely a spirit of inquiry and openness about the connections that the students themselves would generate. Class discussions or writing prompts could begin with, "What other courses do you have?" Once these were listed, a subsequent question could be, "Discuss one reading (or concept) from your other courses that bears upon our topic at hand."

However I encourage this approach in the classroom, I realize that instructors likely feel constrained by a lack of time when they have a vast amount of content to be covered each semester. This dynamic, along with departmental directives and the many other obligations that limit instructors, would make a substantial exploration of other fields very difficult, though an occasional nod to the other courses in each student's schedule as I've outlined previously is more feasible and could be quite valuable in enhancing learning. I do hope that classroom instructors would consider such an approach periodically throughout the semester. The Learning Commons, unlike the disciplinary classroom, however, has a privileged position at the center of the student's education. As the site offering assistance for any number of subjects, the Learning Commons is the hub where all of the disciplines in the student's course load can intersect. As our professional and peer mentors help students

recognize the connections between subjects, Snow's divide between the disciplines can close and education can take on rich meaning for the students we serve.

Because we work one-on-one with students in the Learning Commons, we have the opportunity to guide them in making connections between the difficult material at hand and something they already know. Sometimes that knowledge comes from personal stories. At other times, as I've advocated here, it emerges from other disciplinary curricula. It is particularly fruitful for students' learning when these two domains coalesce. For instance, Nick, a sociology student, struggled with the concept of "McDonaldization," sociologist George Ritzer's (2009) theory concerning American culture's adoption of the mechanized, efficient and predictable qualities of a fast-food restaurant. Nick had trouble integrating the abstract terms in Ritzer's analysis ("efficiency," "calculability," "predictability") into his essay. Nick's F at midterm made the paper at hand particularly high stakes. But my explaining each term in succession only alienated Nick. My recursive loop of disciplinary terminology (as I understood it) held little meaning for him.

I therefore chose a new tack and told Nick a personal story about a scene I witnessed in McDonald's recently when a customer harassed a McDonald's worker who happened to be another student of mine (I'll call her *Jess*). The customer demanded that Jess, who is hearing impaired, "for once, get [his] order right" and commanded, "When my food comes, it best be hot!" He called Jess some choice names that do not bear repeating here. (I must break from my discussion of pedagogy to let inquiring readers know that this cringeworthy scene ended when I gave the customer a piece of my mind.) In a sense, my gathering Jess and her customer into our sociology discussion recalls the Bakhtinian classroom drama with disparate players in an academic dialogue. I asked if Nick could relate anything from the course to such a scene where *McDonaldization* was likely at work. However, Nick shifted from the sociology discussion to the class where he had first learned about bullying: psychology. It was a definition of bullying from psychology that emerged as a preliminary step in his making a meaningful connection to Ritzer's theory. Nick told me that he had learned from psychology that bullies have more social power and therefore a sense of entitlement over their victims. In our scene, the bully's greater social power was clear. The able, affluent, middle-aged male contrasted starkly with Jess, who was hearing impaired and who likely had far less income than the customer. This definition and portrayal of a bully was pivotal in helping Nick grasp the sociology concepts because it begged an important question: just what did this bully see himself entitled *to,* exactly? I posed this question for Nick and, after reflecting for a moment, he told me that the bully must have seen himself entitled to "quicker service with results." Then, after another moment, he asked, "That's efficiency, isn't it?" Then, as he reflected more, Nick realized that the bully felt entitled to the very principles Ritzer identified in his theory of *McDonaldization.* As we enumerated Ritzer's terms, he described how the customer demanded *efficiency*, but Jess, addled and distracted by the threats and challenged by her disability, could not answer his demands. Nick described how the customer was likely *calculating,* as he had probably done many times, that he would pay relatively little money for a large amount of food. In fact, I told Nick, he was angry that some of the products cost too much, in his estimation. Finally, Nick recognized that the scenario had flouted the usual *predictability* that the customer had come to expect of McDonald's. Here was Jess, a worker with a disability she could surmount under the usual circumstances but which was presenting enormous challenges in the face of this customer, in all his red-faced rage.

For Nick, these sites of entitlement were, in fact, a place where psychology overlapped with sociology. But there was one piece missing. I asked Nick how the scene reflected *socialization*, since socialization is a crucial term in grasping sociological concepts. Nick then described to me McDonaldization as a dynamic in which Americans, with some exceptions, are *socialized* through daily interactions and the media to demand efficiency, calculability and predictability in our culture at large. The bullying dynamic illustrated evidence of this socialization deeply ingrained in an individual whose personal power inspired him to express it.

The two connections to outside content, an all-too common scenario from daily life in McDonald's and the memory of the bullying dynamic from Nick's psychology class, recall Bakhtin's idea of "surplus of seeing." Put simply, the term describes how two individuals in dialogue can each see elements (the other individual's face or the wall behind her) that the other cannot see (Holquist, 1990, p. 36). Psychology "sees" where the sense of entitlement comes from in an individual bully. Sociology "sees" how the objects of entitlement are instilled within a majority of Americans in a large group dynamic. These disciplines in dialogue round out the vision of McDonaldization at play, adding dimension to the concept. Given what each discipline can offer to the other in terms of missing vision, opportunities to let disciplines "speak" to one another should be encouraged wherever possible.

Because I work mostly in a one-on-one setting with students, I have the luxury of fostering these intersections between disciplines. When I was a classroom instructor, however, I felt driven by the need to deliver every ounce of content in my curriculum. Yet in reviewing past semesters, I question how efficient I was when I delivered alien content just to "cover" it, rather than allow students to connect it to domains they found more meaningful and in that process truly *dis*cover it. Such an approach would have been like opening a window and letting the air into my classroom, cluttered as it was with dense content. I admit now that I should have taken Mina Shaughnessy's advice and turned my attention away from my students' deficits of knowledge to a revision of *my* approach: "[The instructor] must now make a decision that demands professional courage—the decision to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence" (Shaughnessy, 1976, p. 317). In remediating my approach to students, I would revise my dialectical leanings, which involved steering students—no matter how gently—to expertise based mostly on my own way of thinking about the discipline at hand. Instead, I would adopt a more dialogical model, in which students see the discipline in the context of many influences and lenses; in effect, "mediated by the authorings of Others" (Pasquaretta, 2015, p. 6).

I believe that, ultimately, the "authorings of others"—in this case, the psychology readings and the story of Jess and the bully—helped Nick to arrive at one aspect of critical thinking: understanding not only the definitions of terms, but their implications. The meeting I just described was an involved pre-writing session for Nick. Drafting was still ahead, but at least he would not be writing "uphill." Rather, he had internalized a rich understanding of the topic. Before he left his meeting with me, I said, "Your professor wants you not only to define Ritzer's terms in your essay, but to discuss what they mean in our everyday lives, and the conclusions we can derive from them"—implications, in other words.

"I'm good with that now," he said confidently. Though I did not see the final product, I did notice the jump in Nick's grade: his mid-semester F became a final grade of C+.

A dialogical model not only clarifies difficult disciplinary discourse by allowing students to examine it in terms of material they more readily understand. It can also create refreshing diversity of perspective in the classroom space: "While the dialectic is necessary in achieving disciplinary expertise, the dialogic is necessary in recognizing the value of each human being, as speaker, listener, and co-creator" (Pasquaretta, 2015, p. 6). To recall Bakhtin's useful concept, I've considered how Jess, the bully, and the psychology text each contributed a "surplus of seeing" that rounded out Nick's vision of Ritzer's sociological theory. But for students in general, I imagine that when more widely disparate fields than sociology and psychology "co-create" knowledge about the discipline at hand, they become valued for their ability to broaden and deepen learning as even more startling connections are discovered. It would be interesting to witness the "surplus of seeing" that poetry might lend to medicine, or that mathematics might lend to history. I am grateful that the Learning Commons affords the venue to tap such combinations. But I believe the intersections would be valuable classroom experiences as well.

 In *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox: Mending the Gap between Science and the Humanities*, Stephen Jay Gould (2003) evoked the hedgehog and the fox to exemplify deep disciplinary expertise versus flexible intellectual movement across disciplines (pp. 1–7). The hedgehog has one strategy in the face of enemies: It curls up into a little ball, spines erect, so that a predator gets a mouthful of spikes if it tries any funny business (p. 4). The hedgehog has perfected this approach for a long time, and he's very good at it. The hedgehog represents the expert, who has drilled down through one field into deep, useful knowledge focused on that area (p. 6). The fox, in contrast, moves flexibly between strategies to survive as he hunts and evades enemies. He revises methods that do not work and adopts entirely new ones that do, depending on the situation at hand (pp. 2–3). The fox represents the generalist, or "jack of all trades," whom we disparagingly also call "the master of none," because he hasn't honed any one strategy to perfection as the hedgehog has done. But the fox is smart enough to shed that which no longer works, to peer with curiosity at new possibilities, and to adopt them with enthusiasm (p. 5). Gould tells us, "neither pure strategy can work, but […] a fruitful union of these seemingly polar opposites can, with goodwill and significant restraint on both sides, be conjoined into a diverse but common enterprise of unity and power" (p. 5). The hedgehog, or expert, needs the fox, the cunning wanderer between disciplines, in order to round out his vision. And the fox needs the hedgehog in order to remember that expertise in one very useful area can be exquisitely sharp. We can allow the hedgehog and fox to speak to one another and combine their strengths, as we allow disciplines to dialogue freely with one another wherever college learning takes place.

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