

SHOULD I WRITE ABOUT MY GRANDPARENTS OR AMERICA? WRITING CENTER TUTORS, SECRETS, AND DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

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Dolores, a high school dropout, is writing an essay for a freshman composition class about her decision to attend college. In her rough draft, she refers to her restricted life under the care of her grandparents, to frequent parties with peers, and to her many years as a waitress at an all-night doughnut shop. Although Dolores has managed to compose several interesting scenes, she has yet to discover anything about her motives for returning to school or anything about her experiences in general. Sometimes she feels as though she's writing three papers instead of one.

Jim, Dolores's writing center tutor, is a sophomore history major at their small liberal arts college in South Carolina. While Jim reads over Dolores's draft, he is formulating questions about socioeconomic class to ask his tutee. Particularly, Jim is concerned about the meaning of college degrees to a society that places much value on personal and financial independence. He is also wondering what Dolores's experiences as a woman might add to what he sees as a promising cultural critique. Informed by current theories in composition and conferencing, Jim is imagining ways that he can get Dolores to think through some of these possibilities

herself and to decide whether they might help her with the development and organization of her paper.

Seeing multiple connections between Dolores's experiences and his readings in cultural theories, Jim begins asking Dolores questions about her draft, hoping that she might be willing to explore some of the political implications of her essay. He anticipates a successful tutorial; however, something goes wrong. Dolores has intuited that Jim knows the direction her thinking ought to take. Instead of a meaningful conversation about Dolores's life and her situation in culture, what develops is an exercise in verbal subterfuge, with Dolores trying to worm out clues from her tutor and with her tutor trying to drop nothing more than hints.

"So what you mean," Dolores says, "is that I need to talk about money and individualism in America."

"No," says Jim, "I'm not saying that. I'm only asking you what the connection might be between your run-ins with your grandparents and your decision to go to college and the broader, cultural contexts of your decision. What do you think these connections are?"

"So I just need to talk about that, right? Focus on that."

"I don't know what your focus should be," says Jim.

"Well," Dolores says, "should I write about my grandparents or should I write about America?"

Secrets as Speech Moments

The speakers in the above scenario are both aware of at least one thing: there is a secret going on. In this essay, I offer a critique of the kind of secret that Dolores and Jim are experiencing. I talk about the implications of such "speech moments," as I call them, in terms of liberatory writing centers. Attention to such moments can help tutors in liberatory centers resist imposing their views of culture on their students and, in this manner, ensure the dialogic and democratic nature of their tutorials. Explaining the complexity of pedagogical factors that—despite Jim's training and his center's commitment to dialogic and democratic intentions—interrupt his tutorial with Dolores, I suggest some practical ways tutors like Jim can transform such situations into occasions for learning and, perhaps, democratic change in the ways student writers think

about their work, their schooling, their society, and themselves as critical agents.

When tutors and teachers keep secrets like the one Dolores believes Jim is keeping from her, knowledge becomes a static entity – or at least this is the impression of knowledge that gets transmitted to students. Secrets such as the one between Dolores and Jim produce environments in which knowledge is no longer created by the interlocutors, but rather is sought (by the guesser of the secret) within an enclosed context (either assumed by the guesser or established and maintained by the secret keeper). The keeper of the secret does not engage in a dialogue with his listener, but speaks to maintain the listener's separation from what is known (or at least the listener/guesser perceives him to be doing so); the guesser speaks not to create knowledge, but to uncover what is known; and all the while, the secret itself avoids scrutiny. Neither Jim's theories on class and gender nor Dolores's view on her decision to attend college is being interrogated here – there is nothing to discover, only a secret set of political assumptions in Jim's head waiting to be transmitted (if she can only guess the right answers) to Dolores's.¹

Moments of secrecy like Dolores's and Jim's represent speech moments antagonistic to democratic, dialogic intentions. During such moments – during such secrets – tutors no longer encourage their students to produce knowledge or take responsibility for their educations; they encourage them to react within narratives that other people (classroom teachers and writing center tutors, members of the dominant class, race, gender, etc.) prefabricate and control. On the other hand, writing center tutors can help students to experience the significance of their writings and readings in dialogic sites functioning as democratic public spheres. By “dialogic” I mean sites in which words, languages, or cultures are relativized, and understood as part of a greater whole (Holquist 426–27). As opposed to conceptions of knowledge propagated in classrooms and writing centers where teachers and tutors harbor “secret meanings” or prescribe the content and direction of discussions, knowledge in dialogic environments appears open-ended, in process. Students and tutors in these

environments, described in detail by educators like Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, and Henry Giroux, function as co-learners as they examine the interests and concerns they bring to writing and reading against the broader cultural contexts that situate them as subjects, and as they act as vital citizens engaged in dialogues committed to moral regulation and cultural production (Giroux, *Schooling* 6-7). In environments like this, participants can experience writing and reading as something other than static mediums; they can experience them as the products and producers of cultural forces of which students and tutors and teachers are vital components.

The writing center at Jim and Dolores's school tries to be just such an environment, but Jim and Dolores will need to address critically their moment of secrecy if they are ever going to experience their tutorial as a cultural force.

Secrets and the Liberatory Writing Center

Any calls for democratic change sparked by writing center tutors and their students entail a certain kind of writing center. Far from the traditional "fix-it shop" model, where writers with problems go merely to brush up on "basics" like grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the five-paragraph theme (see North), the writing center at which Jim works is in a position to inspire change in the ways students think about their roles as the readers and writers of culture. The writing center in Jim and Dolores's college is much like the one that C. Mark Hurlbert envisions in "Ideology, Process and Subjectivity: The Role of Hermeneutics in the Writing Conference." Directors of the writing center at Jim and Dolores's school

help tutors become, through reading, directed journal writing and staff discussions, more sensitive to the ways in which their ideologies and interests and the ideologies and interests of students come into conflict during the course of a conference. (Hurlbert 10-11)

Jim's training, which began last semester, has included his introduction to composition and conferencing theory, particularly to meaning making as social process (4-5). He

meets with other tutors two to three times a month to discuss readings in cultural criticism, especially those readings concerned with issues of gender, race, and class; and with the help of the center's directors, he has discovered methods of critical self-reflection, particularly reflection about educational ideologies that permeate the student/tutor relationship (5)

The center at Jim's school is, by design, a liberatory one. Liberatory writing centers, Dave Healy writes, "[help] students learn to negotiate issues of authority and learn to take more responsibility for their own learning" (18; see also Summerfield 7). And as Nancy Welch argues, the liberatory writing center functions as a type of critical exile, "a space in which [students and tutors] can reflect on and intervene in the languages, conventions, and belief systems that constitute our texts, our sense of self, our notions of what is common sense" (4; see also Warnock and Warnock 22). Having stepped out onto the margins of institutional constraints to a place where they can interact, dialogically and democratically, with other readers and/or writers and reflect on the goals of their papers, student writers can reenter their classrooms better prepared to think critically about pedagogical practices, and better prepared to question (at least privately, if not publicly) elements of the curriculum that interfere with dialogic and democratic practices.

In theory, then, liberatory writing centers offer environments in which students can engage more genuinely with the issues pertinent to their papers than nontraditional and traditional classroom environments permit. As a consequence of their situation at the borders of classroom life, writing-center tutors should be able to "honor their own ignorance" (18)—as the Warnocks say—and take part in student writers' genuine inquiries. Rather than conduct discussions based on series of carefully arranged readings and leading questions, which many classroom teachers design to help learning writers ascertain secret texts inside instructors' heads, tutors in liberatory centers can help students to generate a dialogue characterized by mutual tutor/client authority.

Even in liberatory classrooms, it is easy to see why democratic and dialogic intentions might get interrupted where

students' perceptions of a teacher's unchallengeable authority, competition among students, mandated curricula, and the focus on grades are at times nearly inescapable; but what is it that curtails such intentions in writing centers, especially in those like Dolores and Jim's?

What Happened to Dolores and Jim

To answer this question, we need only, as John Trimbur suggests, "expand [our] frame of reference to see tutoring not simply as a dyadic relationship between tutors and tutees but as part of the wider social and cultural networks that shape students' emergence into literacy" (174). Specifically, we must keep in mind that writing-center tutorials are always intruded upon by the presence of Bakhtin's "absent third" (Todorov 111) and the student's teacher and former teachers (Hurlbert 5), who are implicated within a chain of pedagogical and societal practices conducive to secrecy—conducive, that is, to practices that hypostatize knowledge and reproduce hierarchical conceptions of human relations.

Even as sites marginal to the demands of academic decorum and grade-point averages, writing centers nevertheless deal with students and employ tutors whose subjectivities have been at least in part constructed by their experiences within the academy. At the same time writing centers function outside of institutional demands, they remain very much a part of the institution, especially in terms of the expectations that students bring with them to their tutorials and that tutors bring with them to their tutees. Simply put, what goes on in classrooms affects what happens in writing centers. Jim and Dolores's moment of secrecy signals that both have brought to their session a vestige of the standard curriculum—one that sets up teachers as indisputable knowers and students as empty vessels (Freire 58), and this is something that Jim, who has been trained to be self-conscious about these forces of educational ideology, must recognize if his conference with Dolores is ever going to get moving again.

Jim's mistake in his tutorial with Dolores is his decision to withhold stating his assumptions that Dolores's paper represents a great opportunity to interrogate issues of class and

gender in her life. Jim restricts the contexts available to Dolores. She is no longer “thinking for herself,” as Jim would have it: she is concerned with discovering her tutor’s “secret.” By the same token, Jim advances a static conception of knowledge, and he does so by removing himself from the dialogue. He is not an active participant in Dolores’s search for knowledge (see Gillam 10); rather his line of “teacher questions” and evasions only suggests to Dolores that a better essay than she can possibly write already exists inside her tutor’s head. As long as this speech moment continues, Dolores can only believe that it is her job to discover Jim’s secret text, not to create or critique one of her own. Secrecy in pedagogical situations limits the contexts in which students can perceive, interpret, and discuss their world, and it generates unfair power relations between instructors and students. Tutors, especially tutors like Jim, who is only a semester into his training, must learn to resist these moments of secrecy to ensure the democratic and dialogic intentions of their tutorials. Otherwise, as Jim finds out, tutors can disempower students in their very attempts to empower them.

What Jim Needs to Do

Jim’s responsibilities toward Dolores in this tutorial are at least threefold. First, Jim needs to be honest with Dolores. The moment he feels himself withholding information from his client is the moment at which he should recognize that their tutorial is in trouble. Once the context of secrecy is established, Jim’s hope for a productive dialogue diminishes. Given the present course of things, Dolores will probably leave their tutorial confused, with little sense of what she wants to say in her paper and, possibly, with the feeling that she has been lied to or cheated out of some vital information (see Boquet 107). She may even go home and attempt to write a paper about class and gender in America, but having been deprived of any useful dialogue on the subjects, chances are she will have little to say about them, let alone any sense of why she should say anything about them at all.

Jim’s best bet would have been to divulge right away what he saw in Dolores’s paper. Introducing Dolores to the issues of

gender and class implicit in her draft, Jim could have stimulated an effective dialogue in which Dolores, discoursing at the level at which she perceived reality (Freire 52), might have expanded her views of her culture and her situation in it. If Dolores were interested enough to pursue with Jim a dialogue on these matters, Jim's comments could have helped Dolores develop a critical vocabulary that she could apply to her paper and, in doing this, she could perhaps develop her thinking in ways that she had never before imagined. At the very least, by divulging his "secret," Jim might have learned that Dolores has no interest at all in writing about the class and gender issues that he had implicitly made such a big deal about.

This leads to Jim's second responsibility toward Dolores. Although he needs to be informed about the cultural matters he addresses to his tutees, particularly about the ways that his interests and ideologies and those of students can come into conflict during the course of a tutorial (Hurlbert 10), Jim must also know when to be *uninformed*. By this, I do not mean that Jim should, as Walker Gibson would suggest, play the "dumb reader." Although such a strategy may be helpful in some instances, playing dumb is but another form of secrecy, and I do not think we give our students enough credit when it comes to their recognition of our secret methods. What Jim needs to do is realize that to a great extent he *is* a dumb reader of his tutee's work. He does not know (because Dolores does not know) how the three main scenes of her paper should connect, and he does not know (because he is too concerned about having Dolores "think for herself") whether the principles of gender and class have indeed had as much impact on Dolores as he suspects.

How much different would Jim and Dolores's session be if he asked her only questions that expressed his genuine interest in her paper (see Harris 62); and how productive would their session be if he responded honestly only to questions that Dolores posed for him? Jim might learn that Dolores was raised by wealthy grandparents and that her decision to enroll in college was actually an attempt to fulfill their expectations that she "become cultured"; or he might find that Dolores feels the

oppression she experienced as a waitress has been matched only by that she feels as a student in her freshman composition class; or Dolores might identify with the connections Jim is drawing between her class status and her gender; or she may find she can use Jim's notions of gender to critically reflect on misunderstandings she's had with her grandfather, her composition teacher, Jim, and other men in her life.

Even genuine questions and answers, however, can be misconstrued in situations infested with secrecy. Listeners and/or guessers of secrets, accustomed to the static truths of the traditional curriculum, might react as though secrets are happening, even though tutors may very well be honoring their own ignorance. This bears on Jim's third responsibility to Dolores: he needs to be aware of moments of secrecy and of what he needs to do to rectify these situations. The resistance to secrecy demands more than the divulgence of information or opinions; it should also entail extended dialogues on the effects of secrecy in pedagogical situations. Once Jim recognizes that a secret between Dolores and him is "happening," he needs to interrupt their discourse and identify the secret for his tutee. He needs to discuss with her the consequences of their secret and to help her redefine their roles as tutor and student. Otherwise, the two will persist in a speech moment in which neither will learn and nothing is changed.

Resisting secrecy, Jim can help Dolores, as well as himself, work through what may very well be issues of power, stemming from his growing expertise in the area of cultural studies and Dolores's experience with traditional pedagogies.² At work in his tutorial with Dolores may be an intersection of two issues of power that Lisa D. Delpit describes in "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." First, if Dolores has had no experience with democratic and/or dialogic pedagogy (what Shor would call "empowering education"), she should be told the rules so that she might acquire power more easily (Delpit 283). Dialogic and/or democratic approaches represent a set of practices and values to which Dolores could be introduced: a willingness to take risks, a mutual student/teacher authority, an understanding of truth as something negotiable, and a

persistent self-critique. Once Jim makes his intentions explicit, Dolores will be in a better position to scrutinize her motives for writing, Jim's motives for his line of questions, and perhaps even her teacher's motives for the assignment. Helping Dolores locate this position by explaining his own (over the course of several tutorials, should Dolores wish to return), Jim could open his tutee to a field of countervoices in which she can decide for herself what is at stake in using gender and class as ways to rethink her paper.³

Jim may have, for the moment, forgotten the power his background in cultural studies allots him over Dolores. As Delpit writes, "Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence" (283). Dolores recognizes Jim's knowledge of gender and class issues, which, along with her understanding of writing centers as the domain of "writing experts," situates her in a passive, uncritical position to his authority. And in his very attempts to de-emphasize his power, to generate a dialogic and democratic relation with his tutee, Jim moves toward indirect communication, rather than a direct interrogation of the personal, sociopolitical, and institutional powers (the specifics of Dolores's background, her goals for her paper, Jim's politics, the long history of teacher-centered education) at work in their tutorial. Through a resistance to secrecy, however, Jim can recognize such moments as a time for self-criticism—a time not to propagandize by telling Dolores what her paper should say about gender and class, nor to inadvertently reinforce the status quo by allowing their guessing game to persist, but to bring into open discussion the various attitudes and beliefs that have stalled their tutorial.

It is difficult to prescribe what Jim ought to say at this stage in their conference or to conjecture as to what Dolores might say in response. People are complicated, and any number of factors might determine the manner in which Dolores and Jim interact with each other (e.g., the time of day, the due date for Dolores's paper, their comfort or discomfort in dealing with someone of a different age group or gender, etc.). But in such a situation, in such a moment of secrecy, Jim should find some way to reverse the process. He should divulge to Dolores what

he is thinking about her paper and talk with her about the limitations of their secret in terms that reflect its social, political, and institutional implications.

“Look,” Jim might finally say, “I’m sorry, but I keep thinking about a whole lot of interesting things this paper is saying to me. I’m just going to tell you what I’m thinking, so then you can tell me whether you think they are things you want to write about. Otherwise, it seems like I’m keeping some secret from you, but I really don’t know what you should be writing about because that’s something you ought to decide. Your paper’s about you, and I don’t really know you. If I’m making you feel like I have the right answers here, then you’ll probably be trying to figure out what my answer is and not what’s going on in your paper and not what your paper can say about your decision. Is this what’s happening? Do you often feel this way when writing papers or talking to teachers and others about your papers? Is there something about this particular assignment that makes you feel this way? Or something about this writing center or about me that makes you feel this way?”

One of the important things here is that Jim not assume that Dolores feels the same way he does about the situation. He needs to ask her what her intentions are so that the two can become involved in a dialogue concerning forces that may actually be affecting their tutorial at that moment, not merely forces that Jim assumes to be determining Dolores’s responses. Dolores’s input in this dialogue will help both her and her tutor examine the actual social, political, and institutional forces that affect them; with Dolores’s input, Jim has a better chance of assuring that their discourse arises from the level at which Dolores herself perceives reality than he would should he proceed as if she were some objectified entity from his tutor-training readings.

In turn, extended dialogues on the consequences of secrecy can follow students back into their classrooms where they can be more attentive to their teacher’s and to their own moments of secrecy. As a student in a classroom, Dolores can begin to discern those moments in which her own secrets—those moments in which she withholds or feigns opinions or

information—are warranted (as they may be in classrooms where instructors practice oppressive, monologic approaches to knowledge), or whether they are unwarranted and therefore antagonistic to dialogic exchange and democratic intentions. In this sense, writing center tutors like Jim aid liberatory teachers by helping students to resist institutional forces that silence students, that produce student passivity and that deny them opportunity to affirm the contexts through which they find their voices (see Giroux, “Textual” 308; Tassoni).

Change Agents

Resisting secrecy, tutors not only can help students to identify and learn how to operate within the rhetorical contexts that their classroom teachers construct (North 441), but they can also help students to see these contexts differently. Understanding difference, students can research the often unarticulated codes and biases with which they contend in many classrooms: they can examine these rhetorical contexts in terms of particular teachers’ agendas rather than see these agendas as inroads to transcendent Truths. Tutors can help students to see classrooms and their own roles in classrooms within a context facilitative to the creation and critique of knowledge and to see the need and the possibilities to change those contexts that prohibit their active participation.

Of course, such changes must originate within a chain of pedagogical and institutional practices conducive to dialogic and democratic intentions. That chain includes classroom teachers and administrators, as well as students and writing center tutors. Classroom teachers must be willing to share power in their classrooms so that students can learn what it means to be the readers and writers of their culture—not merely the passive recipients of predetermined knowledge. And administrators need to support the training of tutors like Jim, who should be adequately compensated in money and/or academic credit for the four to five hours a week he devotes to developing his skills in libraries and training sessions, not to mention the six hours a week he actually spends tutoring students. Everyone committed to a democratic society shares

responsibility for a dialogue in which change is possible. As Foucault writes,

One of the first things that has to be understood is that power isn't localized in the State apparatus and that nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed. (60)

Not the least of these “mechanisms of power,” Jim is responsible for resisting his secrets so that people like Dolores can see those societal forces with which she must contend as a working-class woman in an institution that still often functions very much according to elitist, masculinist codes. Jim needs to resist his moment of secrecy so that Dolores can begin to see the reasons why and the ways how people can have a stake in what is said and what is done about their world.

NOTES

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1. Jim's secret is similar to Knoblauch and Brannon's "Ideal Text." They write: "To the extent that the teacher's expectations are not satisfied, authority over the writing is stolen from the writer by means of comments, oral or written, that represent the teacher's agenda, whatever the writer's intentions many initially have been. A student's task to match the Ideal Text in the teacher's imagination which is insinuated through the teacher's commentary, not to pursue personal intentions according to the writer's own developing sense of what he or she wishes to say" (120). I prefer to discuss Jim's interaction with Dolores as a moment of secrecy because his intentions are different from those of the teacher Knoblauch and Brannon describe. Jim really does want Dolores to think for herself; he has just happened upon an issue of power that he needs to work through. Dolores and Jim are caught in but one moment of their conversation, a moment of conflict that can become a site for dialogue and change (See below). "Moment of secrecy," I think, captures better than "Ideal Text" the dynamics of what's happening between Dolores and Jim.

2. Thanks to John Trimbur for this insight.

3. This method of inquiry is consistent with Jay and Graff's call for Left self-criticism in "Some Questions About Critical Pedagogy."

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