Reinventing The University
Schroeder, Christopher

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Jean,  
In thinking about the problems I’ve encountered with writers and readers in
the classroom, like confusion and vagueness, I wonder if many of these
*miscommunications* stem from the fact that I’m beginning with a different
understanding of knowledge, learning, and meaning than many of them are
accustomed to. At the beginning of each semester and regardless of whether
it is a literature or a composition course, I feel this tension between outlining
my immediate understandings of knowledge, meaning, discourse, and world,
in which case the course becomes an introduction to postmodern rhetoric, and
simply beginning with the ostensive material of the semester in the hopes that
they (i.e. the students) will elicit my understandings of knowledge, meaning,
discourse, and the world along the way . . . .

To this day, I’ve never found a good way to mediate this tension. Given
what seems to me to be the radically different understandings of the nature of
discourse, knowledge, meaning, and reality that, for me, are generated by
postmodern insights (see, even language itself trips me up—“insights” elicits a
foundational/essentialist epistemology, which is not at all what I’m trying to
suggest.), I feel a certain sense of responsibility to explain, at the very least,
that what goes under the heading of “learning” in my classrooms may not
resemble what they’ve come to see learning to be. (So how much are
teachers responsible to give students the learning they think they need (i.e.
conform to their expectations), and how much should we remain consistent to
what we believe to be true about learning, even when our understandings
might be incredibly alien to them?)

Invariably on the first day, I ask all of my students to fold their hands and
then to refold them in such a way that changes the position of their fingers.
“How does that feel?” I ask, and I always get the same answers: strange,
awkward, uncomfortable, etc.

“But are your hands still folded?” I ask, and they always tell me that they are.
I go on to explain that this exercise is a *metaphor* for what will happen in the classroom over the course of the next sixteen weeks: that what might feel awkward, uncomfortable, strange is actually learning, only learning done in different ways.

Unfortunately, this explanation seems to dissipate even before the next class. It seems like the more I try to explain where I’m coming from, in an attempt to attenuate the inevitable confusion, the more complaints I receive that I’m teaching things they’re not interested (i.e. shouldn’t be expected, given the description of the course, to consider; can’t see the relation to the purported content of the course; etc.) in learning. Over the years (I’m merely finishing my sixth year, but I’ve encountered this situation too many times to ignore it), I get the feedback, either during the course but, more often, on evaluations afterwards, that the students think my courses are filled with too much theory. The other consistent complaint is that I’m talking over their heads, which, I’m wondering, may not be over their heads but about issues that seem too complicated, such as discursive formations, because they’ve never been asked to think about knowledge, language, or the world in these ways). What they’re calling “too much theory” or discourse that is “over [their] heads,” I suspect, is my attempt to explain how my understandings of knowledge, meaning, discourse, and the world may be substantially different from what they are bringing to the class or my effort to talk about fundamental issues that they don’t have enough prior experiences, or requisite language, to discuss! If I don’t explain these differences or talk about these issues, I’m concerned that they will be overwhelmed and frustrated by what is happening in the classroom, which they confirm in their comments), but if I do take the time to explain these alternative understandings, I receive all kinds of complaints about how there is too much theory or too complicated language, which they also corroborate with their feedback).

The second reason, I think, to explain the confusion and uncertainty that students in my classrooms encounter emerges from one of the key components in this pedagogical approach, which I and others call a problem-posing pedagogy. Consistent with postmodern understandings of meaning, a problem-posing pedagogy provides students with problems and holds that learning occurs in both how they solve them (the process) and the solutions they generate (the product). Perhaps the biggest difference between traditional pedagogies and problem-posing pedagogies is the fact that p-p pedagogies don’t posit a single, coherent answer. Rather, they believe that “answers” are context-specific and are products of the participants, their languages and the ways they use it to negotiate contexts, and their experiences of the world (in other words, more indicative of the discursive
formations of particular classrooms, specific disciplines, and individual teachers rather than reflective of transcendent answers). One of the difficulties that this pedagogy creates, then, is that it cannot provide students with the "right" answer because notions like "right" and "correct" represent particular contexts and specific situations, ones that may not be consistent with the contexts and situations that students create for themselves. (This pedagogy is not entirely relativistic, rather protean (others, like Vitanza, use the term "rhizome"), one that takes its shape substantially from the parameters and boundaries that students establish in their *reading* of the posed problem.) Consequently, I turn writers and readers back to themselves and to their understandings and descriptions of contexts and problems in order to discover their own answers to their questions (Of course I don't leave them to flounder; I will assist them in eliciting these answers when they appear to be having problems.). What often happens, however, is that the student starts acting out angrily, like one did this summer, and/or refuses to engage in the process of learning. (I must admit that I feel somewhat betrayed by this particular student: throughout the semester, she came to me with her problems, many of which were unique to her particular circumstances (e.g. her anxiety about poetry, her general panic about the world), and, I believe that I was more than helpful. (She even went so far as to request to do extra credit in order to facilitate her application to a prestigious university on a 3:2 plan!) throughout the entire experience with her, I was patient and cooperative, offering her suggestions, watching her act out her anger without taking offense, and providing opportunities for her to supplement her grade. The fact of the matter remains, though: for whatever reasons, this reader, and other good students like her, didn't feel comfortable enough to bring those problems to me, a condition that undermines all that I'm trying to accomplish in the classroom.)

I think that there are two main explanations for the complaints from writers and readers in my classrooms about confusion and uncertainty: the fact that I'm beginning from places different from them and the fact that my pedagogical approaches are context-specific approaches. My options, I think, are three: to abandon what I believe about discourse, knowledge, meaning, and the world in order to provide students with what they expect; to persist in teaching composition and literature from where I am in my understandings of discourse, knowledge, meaning, and the world and hope that they'll "get it" somewhere along the way (even if it isn't before the end of the semester); or to negotiate and collaborate with students in beginning with where they are and explaining where I'm coming from. Abandoning what I believe isn't a viable option (feels too much like intellectual dishonesty), and ignoring the problems won't work either (learning doesn't seem to be occurring). All along, I've tried this third option, attempting to negotiate and to explain, but it doesn't
seem to be working as well as I would like . . . . The problem is not, I don’t think, that I cannot communicate these things in ways that the writers and readers with whom I work can understand. (I may, however, need to take more time to explain them or explain them in alternative ways.) Rather, my reading of the problem is that the bigger obstacle is that students are unwilling to even consider these issues, which would account for, among other aspects, the startling silences (absence of questions) in spite of pervasive confusion, in which case, no amount of explanation is going to help. For me (at least today), the tension seems to emerge from the conflict of modernist understandings of discourse, knowledge, meaning, and world and revisions of postmodernism. I wonder if students have been conditioned to these modernist perspectives and if what I’m asking them to consider requires them to rethink issues that are easier to leave untouched. One student this semester has already written: “I have thought about language more in the past three weeks than I probably have in my whole high school career. Maybe this is good, but maybe I am looking too much into language and not just letting it flow.”

Given what I’ve called a conflict between modernist and postmodernist understandings of discourse, knowledge, meaning, and the world, how are teachers of language to negotiate these differences?

From: Jean
To: Chris
Subject: pedagogy

Chris,

I’m afraid my response will be rather rambling as I try to reflect on all the issues in your correspondence that interest me. When you say that “postmodern understandings of what knowledge is necessitate some changes in pedagogical approaches,” I’d (1.) like to hear a bit more specifically what those changes look like, and (2.) whether they are to take place on all levels of education, K-college? Moreover, if we say that they are, what do we do in making a switch with people who have been educated more traditionally? Actually, I think this is the question you are struggling to answer right now—right?

What you explain as start-up problems seem very clear to me—how to prepare students to expect something different without turning the course into a theory course at the outset. While I am a proponent, in general, of telling students what to expect when they are about to encounter the unfamiliar, here I think one needs to blend familiar with unfamiliar, creating exercises, perhaps, that resemble what students are used to doing, and then talking about them in new ways. I’m not sure, in relation to this issue, what you mean when you talk about “distilling,” and “learning to play the game.” I think we all want to “teach students to fish,” but writing and reading are so infinitely more complex than
fishing, that the metaphor limits one’s thinking. Throughout our lives we learn language skills, and in some ways composition instruction has to fit into that pattern of learning. Some one who has never heard of fishing can learn the rudiments in a day, (although my husband has been reading fishing magazines and learning new techniques for years,) but someone who has never used language has lots of skills to develop before he or she can hope to advance a position.

I have felt the exact response that you describe when you ask if we are responsible for giving students what they want and expect. When students on evaluation forms start telling me how to teach them, I get cranky. I think we have the right to teach in ways we think will facilitate learning.

I would venture to suggest that your hand-folding exercise dissipates before the class is over because our students do not think metaphorically or at least not with ease. I know you want to give them every bit of credit for their expertise with language and for their banks of cultural capital, and I respect that assessment, but experience has convinced me that they have no confidence in these resources and that a lack of awareness is just as bad as a lack of capital. I recognize that your efforts are directed at facilitating their awareness of these resources, but I think such goals cannot be achieved through the explanation of a theoretical position. I think that in addition to the negotiation and collaboration that you mention later on, skills have to be a part of courses like comp. and lit. I’ve seen you teach them so I know you agree. The skills areas may provide that dose of the familiar that you are looking for since students are familiar with skills development.

As I read and reread your discussion of problem-posing pedagogy, I’m not sure I find it any different from anything I’ve ever believed or ever done. Does any teacher of literature and writing ever say there is a single, coherent answer? Isn’t it inherent in our discipline that we are content with ambiguity and multiplicity. Still, as a teacher of literature I like to lead my students, with at least some texts, to a single coherent interpretation so they know what one looks like—always, of course, with repeated emphasis on the idea of “a” reading rather than “the” reading. I taught business writing for many years and even in that most formulaic of courses, I steadfastly resisted the formula, suggesting that each communication act was a particular problem to be addressed, and yet we had to know some things about letter writing to understand the singularity of the particular problem and the range of considerations for reaching a solution. And I have always, in fact, used some issues from physics to explain some issues in both 19th and 20th century literature.

At the moment I’m not prepared to answer your questions about the impact of postmodernism on my own pedagogy—although I’d like to try. I think I could have done better with the question 20 years ago before I’d seen quite so many
students with quite so many different needs. I’ve been in the classroom for too long even to find the question very compelling, and I need help to get involved with your enthusiasm. I think I need such involvement, however, so I challenge you to bring me along! I’ve been through waves of theoretical approaches to teaching writing, and I’m convinced that anything works for some students and nothing works for others. There are others in the middle who can be reached if we do the “right” things. My own experience is that the teacher’s character may have more to do with success in these instances than anything else. A teacher who cares and who goes the distance with a student can do more than any theoretical position. I wish you could see [colleague] in action with students and I wish you could see some of the great results he achieves with Advanced Comp. students, with a pedagogy that you might find problematic.

There is much more that I should say, but I’m out of time—for now. Just a few random observations for further discussion.

(1) When I took your classes last year, I really liked the way you have students in groups working on the same topic. I thought this seemed a very effective way to create dialogue which might lead to a rather rich approach to a topic. I plan to try it. But when I sat down with a group of students, who told me they didn’t know what to do, and I heard that their topic was abortion, my heart sank. They could not use the process on this old topic, and they were destined I felt to produce a construct from the old, old world of composition. In fact, no legitimate dialogue took place. Students held forth and used my questionings to pin down my position.

(2) How does evaluation work with your pedagogy? I have not checked, but rumor has it that you are a very easy grader who gives almost all A’s (?)

(3) Point of information: I believe that campus statistics show that the majority of [our institution’s] students are first generation college students. I fear you may be over-estimating them. Our average ACT is about 22—not very impressive.

I look forward to continuing this discussion. Have a good weekend.

Jean

From: Chris
To: Constantine
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence

Constantine,

Okay, here goes. (I’m working out this question as I write, so you might have to read a bit before you understand what I’m asking.)

Your initial response after visiting my classroom was surprise at the degree to which the students were engaging in critical thinking, and then, after some
reflection, you were talking about a classroom presence that was missing (but that you could see in the videotape I sent last year. In both of your responses lies the issue that I’m trying to understand: authority and dialogue. In . . . ReInventing . . . , I [talk] about dialogues, which are the kind I’m advocated, and Socratic dialogues/ordinary discussions. In Science, Order, and Creativity, David Bohm and David Peat describe the difference between what I’m calling postmodern dialogues and other forms of communication:

a key difference between a dialogue and an ordinary discussion is that, within the latter people usually hold relatively fixed positions and argue in favor of their views as they try to convince others to change. At best this may produce agreement or compromise, but it does not give rise to anything creative. (241)

The question I’m wrestling with right now has to do with these postmodern dialogues and authority . . . . I’m stuck, however, in trying to work out the relationship between postmodern dialogues and authority.

I would say that the students from class that day were so engaged in the act of critical thinking, and thinking for themselves, because, at least in part, I was restricting my authority to a facilitator and a participant. If I were more authoritatively involved in the discussions, I wonder whether they would have been as engaged or whether they would have waited for me to tell them The Answers, rather than their own answers. In other words, I would say that what you observed was what I’m calling postmodern dialogues. As for socratic dialogues and ordinary discussions, I can readily see the role that authority plays. But, if postmodern dialogues are valuable, then the role of authority becomes much more murky. What’s your sense?

From: Constantine
To: Chris
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence

Chris:

Thanks for your thoughtful remarks and distinctions between the traditional, Socratic, and the postmodern type of dialogue. Such things are truly the great concerns of a teacher, especially in the postmodern era.

The first I want to say is that it is a delusion to think the Socratic dialogue as uncompromising authority. Those that spread this particular point of view have a limited idea of what the Socratic dialogue is.

For one thing, I believe the Socratic dialogue is open-ended (as well as the grandest intellectual theater in western civilization), and not always leading to a Socratic victory. Socrates has his opinions, but Socrates does not always
win—in fact most dialogues seem to go on, permitting the reader to surmise, or imagine, that antithetical positions will go being so, with no established positions in the end; in fact the idea “dialogue” means that: two views being debated, not one. Evidence of the openendedness of Platonic dialogue is to be found in early Socrates dialogues, such as “Euthedemus,” “Laches,” and “Lysis,” though most critics concentrate on “Gorgias” and “Protagoras,” which bear the names of the famous sophists.

In the first three, Socrates is engaged—with much humor—in the debate whether education is given by the teacher to the student, or by the student to the teacher, and whether the teacher can make anyone “wiser.” Euthedemus, the name of the sophist in question, claims that the teacher’s position is far from clear. In fact, he and another sophist on his side, examine the same student from two opposing points of view, and the student admits that what he thinks he knows one moment he does not know the next. It’s great fun to read this one, and one can have students read it in a class.

It is worth reviewing these dialogues to see that the crux of the idea lies in the reciprocity; many Platonic scholars have noticed this, and, in fact, they argue that the Socratic interrogator is not an authority—which Socrates himself never admits—but one who stirs up thought—the “gadfly” being the most famous metaphor. Or “the unexamined life is not worth living,” and such things. Postmodern rhetoricians have simply forgotten that, and view Plato from his metaphysics, from the top down (ontology, etc.) I believe semioticians and postmodernists have seen Plato as the basis of “logocentrism,” and therefore the arch-enemy of rhetoric, when Plato was indeed the first to employ rhetoric in the open-ended form. He did hate the sophist, but for their relativism; his own method is itself largely sophistic.

This for the time being; I will write further on this, as time permits, as I have not been able to get to your question of authority in the classroom. I’ll drop a hint: I believe authority in the classroom derives from the ability of the instructor to be balancing the dynamic tension between contradictory positions: on the one hand, he not only permits but encourages students to think for themselves, and to express critical views, on the other he maintains a “center” not of opinions, but of presence; students know he knows, and know (as Socrates does) that he can admit his ignorance—but Socrates never so never sounds ignorant. How one maintains that balance is a teacher’s innermost secret. Henry James advised a young novelist who asked him how to write to get into the fray: “Fend for yourself.”

A young Greek athlete bragged that in Rhodes he had leapt a great distance. “Now,” a companion said, “here is Rhodes, and here is the leap.” (In Greek this sounds better.)
By the way, my brother, Gerasimos, is a Platonic scholar at Irvine, having written much on Socrates; I will ask him for some materials and authentication.

C

From: Constantine
To: Chris
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence

Chris:

A few more things regarding presence in the classroom came to mind. I will give an anecdote.

Yesterday, a former student came to office to ask for a recommendation. I had not seen her on campus recently, and she informed me that she is interning.

She was quite excited with her new situation, standing in front of a class and conducting a class (in high school). I noticed her demeanor had changed, and told her. She told me she had to make an enormous transition from a student to a teacher. Now she dresses up, and her students regard her as authority. She cannot slip; she has to know everything (she told me all that); her students now regard her as old-fashioned, straight-laced, and a little bit of an outsider, intruding on their lives (she told all this). She was amazed at how much work she had to do to get prepared. Now she understands ME! the former teacher. Now she is on the outside. She sees the young kids as rebels (their age), but up to this moment she had regarded herself a rebel.

She is quite happy, though, and thankful she is given the opportunity to pass on knowledge she received from us.

I don’t know what this all means—is this the deconstruction of the teacher, or of the student? She seemed intense, as always, exhilarated, and thankful. The transition does not bother her; she only hopes she is up to the task.

Well, is not this the transformation of an extremely shy figure (this girl almost fainted in my class once, having to read a paper before a group), a non-authoritarian figure, to one who had gained authority? How does this happen—overnight I might add?

Let me have your reactions to this. I think this episode might be related to your question, since this transformation seems to have happened of itself—as soon as one is transferred from one cubicle to another. Therefore, a teacher is not born—a teacher is made?

Is, therefore, the authority one has to gain (one does gain) unavoidable?

C
From: Chris  
To: Constantine  
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence  

. . . I’m intrigued by this discontinuity between Plato’s discursive practices and Plato’s philosophy. In fact, you’ve articulated something that I’ve always felt but never formulated about Socrates and Plato (though other contradictions, such as Plato’s fear of writing, were easier to identify). There are places in the dialogues where Socrates does seem to be operating in a dialogic manner (although I can’t seem to ignore the ways that he serves as Plato’s technique, and I have a hard time thinking that Plato was engaging in expressivist writing when he wrote the dialogues).

I think you’re right when you say that postmodern rhetoricians attribute logocentrism to Plato, and to do so, we must ignore the ways that Socrates does contradict the laws of noncontradiction, excluded middle, and third. Nevertheless, I cannot reconcile these dialogic threads of Socrates with the absolutism of his author, and this distinction is the one that I make between Plato and the Sophists (and between monologic and dialogic discourse). For Gorgias, Protagoras, and other sophists, timing and appropriateness were part of determining relevance and meaning (knowledge even) whereas Plato’s search for the ideal seems to deny the context-specific conditions of sophistic epistemology and of dialogue.

Basil Bernstein and his distinction between elaborate and restricted codes come to mind. If I have the difference right, elaborate codes, as you probably know, are those in which the text carries virtually of the information needed to make sense of it in its syntax, sequential relations, et al., and restricted codes are those in which the context is necessary in order to make sense of the situation. To me, dialogues are restricted codes, insofar that participants, time of day, what has come before, and numerous other features factor into the meaning of the *text*, if you will.

As I understand them, restricted codes seem to contradict conventional academic discourse and traditional classroom discourse, and yet elaborate codes cannot be dialogic, I don’t think, because of their need to codify the context in the text itself. For restricted codes, authority is contextual, I think, and for elaborate codes, authority is textual.

As for your former student, I can’t help but wonder whether her transformation could be described as a process by which she acquired or learned this elaborate code of academic discourse. As I argue in this book and elsewhere, become proficient in a discourse amounts to more than simply learning to speak it, write it, or read it but also to use it to construct both the appropriate faces and sanctioned versions of the world of the
community for which the discourse speaks. (That sentence doesn’t seem very clear—was it?)

Ah, the (de)construction of the teacher-student, what a paradox! At what point is the authority generated? What do you think?

Chris

From: Constantine
To: Chris
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence
Chris:
I was just referring to the difference of the early dialogues, where the process is clearly open-ended, and the later dialogues, in which Socrates is used as a tool—or better yet—mouthpiece for Plato’s philosophy. Plato, as a thinker, is honest enough to grant that a dialogue never really ends; it stops. Now, a reading of the Euthedemous (which I plan to re-read) will confirm that. The dialogue can favor the rhetorician as much as it does his opponent. I know Socrates has gotten on everyone’s nerves—after all he was executed—but ultimately, given his premises, he would probably re-examine himself if he lived today. Plato, unfortunately, is read through a series of footnotes (what Whitehead said of him), rather than for what he actually says. I have asked my brother for some help—none has come yet, because he is closer to the recent scholarship on this point. Besides, Socrates never admits that he knows anything—that in itself is a contradiction, for Plato stuffs him up with lots of lumber as things go along.

Sorry—have to write a test!

C

From: Chris
To: Constantine
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence

I’m rushing out to catch my plane to Denver, but I couldn’t resist responding to our conversation about authority and classrooms.

I can see what you’re saying about dialogues being open-ended for Socrates, at least in some of them. But where, then, does authority come from in an open-ended dialogue? From one’s history? Credentials? Or constructed in the moment? Or somewhere in between?

I look forward to continuing this conversation when I return. Have a great weekend.

Chris
From: Constantine
To: Chris
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence

Good question, Chris! Where does authority come from in the open-ended dialogue?

The way I have always seen this—and I admire Plato basically because he gave us the dialogue, not so much for his metaphysics—is that the authority here collapses in favor of the truth; the dialogue is a form used in pursuit of truth. Now, truth for Socrates was the ideal, something that the dialogue would reveal. But as authority is no longer in the Socratic truth, but in the pursuit of truth, the dialogue merely serves as the tool for that pursuit. The dialogue will take you wherever IT goes—not necessarily where you WANT to go. If the truth only matters—whether one can ever reach it or not—then the truth is the authority. If truth is not reached—and some early Platonic dialogues the final conclusion remains open—then there is no truth, and, thence, no authority. What would then happen?

Nothing but further pursuit. One can imagine an endless pursuit, thence an endless dialogue.

The teacher can form himself in this mold: he is the conduit of the pursuit of truth—regardless of whether he and his class and his dialogue will ever attain it.

Still, the teacher has to give exams; but that is a different question—a different authority; an artificial one imposed by the administration—and the need for a salary.

If I were to teach in an ideal/Platonic state, I would not give exams or grades, would not receive any salary, and would only have conversations with my students. I would not claim any authority, but if anybody liked to follow me or find me interesting, that’s OK with me. In fact, that’s what Socrates did. (but of course I’m not Socrates.)

From: Chris
To: Constantine
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence

I like the way that you’ve invoked the dialogue as a model for classroom practices though I’m somewhat suspicious about the notion of truth (Truth? truth? it always seems so context-specific and contingent, but I suppose I can recognize a provisional truth, I guess.) How do you see it? How might the notion of a provisional truth affect (or not affect) dialogues?

I like the way that you’ve raised the question about the political realities of the institutions in which teachers must work. There are ways, I think, of
reconciling the politics of institutional authority with the authority of dialogue, ways of lessening the ways that institutional authorities corrupt the dialogic process. (I’m assuming that we agree that institutional authorities corrupt dialogic discourse by implementing an externally-imposed authority upon it—is this a fair assumption?) For example, we can involve students in the process of evaluation in a way that transforms evaluation from a monologic response to a dialogic text that raises questions about standards and legitimacy. Would you agree? If so, were would be places where we could reconcile institutional authorities with the authorities of the dialogue?

From: Constantine
To: Chris
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence

Chris:

As for truth, let’s settle with provisional. Who knows what it is? It only seems to me that unless truth, of some kind, is the aim, dialogue will be meaningless. Derrida suggests that dialogue can go on ad infinitum, even without truth—just “affirmation,” as he calls it.

I agree about institutional authority, but I don’t know what to do about it. It is too entrenched, and in its way useful; students do need GPAs to graduate and find jobs. The authority of the classroom can be different, depending upon the art of the professor. In this case, we have talked too much of authority, why not presence? Presence in the classroom; again, how this is established depends upon methods. I like the lecture, basically; in the film class, I have deconstructed myself, for I am absent; whatever I say, students don’t see me, because I am in the back, in the dark, and they only hear my voice. They told me in the evaluations this is very effective, since “I walk them” through the movie. Still, the movie is more of a presence than I am. It’s almost weird, and it bothers me at time, because I don’t enjoy this as much as I do a vibrant lecture—which, unfortunately, comes only once in a while.

This is a game one plays; and it is a creative and long-lasting one. It takes many years to perfect, but one is never safe. I can see Drew Dillon, a master in the classroom, sweating before he goes to his first class every fall. I never feel safe, and a class can collapse suddenly for any reason, including bad weather and heat in the classroom. Once, while teaching at the circle in Chicago, it was 15 degrees below zero outside, and not much warmer inside. I could not life a spirit; if one cannot do that, the center cannot hold.

Have to go back to classroom preparation.

Constantine
From: Chris  
To: Constantine  
Subject: Re: conversation on authority and classroom presence  

Constantine,

I like the terms presence and affirmation because of the ways that they invoke a dialogic context instead of a monologic context (a monologic text? a monologic text? is it ever possible to have a text without a context?). From this perspective, the question for institutional authority centers on how does one make such processes more dialogic instead of monologic, more multiple instead of hierarchical, and the answers are beyond me, at least at this point. (I’ve got this interesting book on dialogue, written by a physicist, which I’m going to read over the break to see whether I can get any ideas.) What would Socrates (or Derrida, for that matter,) say about how to make discourse that is inherently hierarchical more dialogic?

Bakhtin has a wonderful passage in “Discourse in the Novel” where he argues that all language is heteroglossic and reflects dialogues occurring at so many levels, and Charles Schuster has applied his ideas to a piece of writing about making wine to demonstrate the multiple dialogues already occurring in a traditional text (fascinating reading of a text, something that I’ve always wanted to try with student writing). If all discourse is always and already dialogic, as Bakhtin, Schuster, and others suggest, then this transformation from purportedly monologic discourse to dialogic discourse might only involve eliciting the sublimated voices always already present in it. (Doing so might also be a way of deconstructing it, but what would that do for students? How would it make their situation any easier?)

In “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae writes that the primary task for students is to reconcile their personal histories with institutional discourse, but I think he is much to sanguine about the political realities of students in doing this "reconciling". (To me, the process seems much more like "acquiescing" or "accommodating" rather than reconciling.) In my book, which, not incidentally, is titled ReInventing the University, I’m suggesting that academic discourses are presented as monologic, closed to students who cannot participate in their dialogic conditions, and that one way to escape this problem is to recognize that, as dialogic, academic discourses are subject to mediation by the discourses that students bring with them into the classroom and that teachers must find ways to legitimate the products of these mediations in order to authorize students to be responsible for their own learning. In doing so, teachers are constructing students as cultural producers, in this case, co-producers of academic cultural capital.
Which brings me to the issue of presence, which started today’s entire response. It is through presence that teachers can do this legitimizing, I think, much more so than through authority (I’m going to steal your distinction though I promise to give you credit), but I’m not sure how, exactly, teachers can engage in this process.

However, you might disagree with my reading of academic discourse and classroom practices. What do you think?