

Walking the Line Negotiating Voice as an Undergraduate Peer Tutor

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Introduction

The scholarly work of veteran college composition instructors David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow animates one of the key questions discussed and debated among university-level composition instructors today: what should the goals be of an undergraduate composition class, and what type of writing best achieves these objectives? Bartholomae and Elbow, who represent differing viewpoints in the debate, distinguish themselves by the importance they place on preserving the conventions of academic discourse and by the degree to which they believe undergraduates should assert their individuality in academic writing. My research will focus on those instances in which student writers break with academic convention to assert an individualized ‘voice’ contrary to the formality of traditional academic discourse. I aim to explore, using the arguments of Bartholomae and Elbow as a framework, how undergraduate peer writing tutors navigate departures from the unspoken rules of academic writing and how they, if at all, shape their critiques to respond both to the expectations of the discourse and to the individuality of the writer.

David Bartholomae places great import on familiarizing undergraduates with the conventions of academic discourse, and he advocates for a composition course which seeks to accomplish this. Students, he maintains, should learn to „speak [the] language” (Bartholomae: 1997) even at the risk

of clumsily and ineffectively „mimic[ing]” that style (Bartholomae: 1997). This means adopting the jargon and impersonality so often present in the writing of established academics but not in the speech of undergraduates. Bartholomae does not celebrate individualism, authorship, personal narrative or expressive forms of writing because they break, or foster a break with, academic convention. Personal stories or poetic language, for example, have no place in his composition course; they do not help undergraduates learn the specialized language of academia.

Conversely, Peter Elbow favors “personal” writing which „attend[s] to... the [student’s] own experience” (Bartholomae/ Elbow: 1995) and which encourages voice and personality— writing that often violates the impersonality of academic convention. While Elbow does not deny the importance of acclimating students to academic discourse, he does disagree with Bartholomae’s assertion that this type of writing should be the only one emphasized. The undergraduate composition class, Elbow stresses, should be a space where students can express their individuality, regardless of academia’s unspoken rules and regulations.

The rupture with academic convention which concerns both Bartholomae and Elbow also concerns my research, however I focus on a specific element of writing integral to their debate: voice which violates academic convention. For my research, I loosely explain voice in terms of devices which reveal the writer’s individuality and unique writing style. These include things like the vocal quality of the text (how much it sounds like the author would speak), the use of first person, personal narrative, colloquialisms, and literary or metaphorical language, among others. As an undergraduate peer writing tutor myself, I was curious how others in my position-- tutors without the freedoms Bartholomae and Elbow have to structure composition courses-- navigate voice. What sort of space do Fellows inhabit in relation to Bartholomae’s and Elbow’s positions, and how do they mediate between helping writers learn to write for an audience (the professor) while preserving their unique identities as writers?

To answer this question, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with Writing Fellows at the University of Wisconsin- Madison. Writing Fellows are trained undergraduate peer writing tutors that work closely with a group

of 10- 16 students in a writing intensive course. Fellows read and comment on the first drafts of papers and then conference with the student in order to facilitate revision. Fellows do not grade papers, but serve as intermediaries between professor and student, and as such, are expected to relay the expectations of the professor to the student. This relationship thus renders Fellows not entirely autonomous in their decision-making and affects how a Fellow can negotiate unconventional voice. In addition to developing a series of questions that explore this issue and uncover the tutors' personal and professional experience with voice, I also presented interviewees with hypothetical situations and formulated instances of voice to explore their reactions.

Results and Analysis

“Sarah”

“Sarah,” a four semester veteran of the Writing Fellows program, felt the most comfortable negotiating voice of all my interviewees. Sarah, like Elbow, values and aims to preserve the presence of the individual in writing. When questioned about a particular use of colloquial language in an academic paper, Sarah „would advise [the writer] to leave it in because it’s their writing.” Her response shows that she recognizes the ownership the writer has over his or her paper, and thus maintains the writer’s individuality. Sarah defends this space for the individual because she sees that it serves an important educational purpose: engagement. When students have the „freedom to insert [themselves]” into a paper, they can engage with the material more and understand it better.

While Sarah appears unconditionally liberal in her treatment of unconventional voice, further questioning suggests she is much more discriminating in practice, and distinguishes between the voice of inexperienced and experienced writers using intent. She notes that if a „beginner writer came to [her] with a paper that was infused with personal voice,” she would tend to think the student did not „choose to use their personal voice,” but rather he or she „didn’t know how to not use it”. In these cases, Sarah would help the inexperienced writer try to „access...the standard practices”, but would not explicitly recommend removal.

“Katherine”

Conversely, “Katherine,” my second interviewee and a first semester Writing Fellow, is ambivalent when navigating unconventional voice, noting that she feels wedged between two opposing desires: the desire not to „stifle” the writer and the desire to make him or her aware of the audience (the professor). To mediate these goals, Katherine considers both, experience and intent, like Sarah, linking „inexperienced” writers with unintentional voice. She cites several cases, such as using first person in a thesis, where voice, she felt, functioned as a means to „figure out” an assignment. Because of significant structural concerns in the paper of this particular instance, Katherine felt that she was dealing with a weak, and as she describes him, „inexperienced” writer trying to understand the assignment by inserting himself and his feelings into the paper. Katherine feels that voice which fulfills this purpose is unintentional, and therefore not valid to be included in the paper. On the other hand, Katherine feels that experienced writers (writers with strong papers) who use voice and break academic convention do so intentionally, and that this intent legitimizes the break. Instead of suggesting removal as she would with an inexperienced writer, Katherine is hesitant to intervene and „stifle” the writer’s style. She leaves the decision to the student, reminding him or her of „who [the] audience...will be.”

Voice, for Katherine, must be intentional before it can be used effectively in a paper. However, mediating breaks in academic convention is not easy for her; she expresses discomfort the entire interview. While it appears she uses two factors, experience and intent, to assess unconventional voice. Ultimately, Katherine is always hesitant to draw “where that line is” which separates acceptable voice from the unacceptable.

“Eliza”

“Eliza,” a first semester Fellow and my final interviewee, is unique among the Fellows in that she does not make distinctions when negotiating voice in academic writing—anything that ruptures the conventions of academic discourse is simply inappropriate and unacceptable. When questioned about various examples of unconventional voice (colloquial language, extended metaphor, personal narrative) and their place in a literary analysis essay, Eliza rejects them all, articulating repeatedly that language of this type „is not appropriate for a literary analysis paper...for this kind of paper.” The confi-

dence and ease with which she responds suggest that Eliza does not view the type of voice my examples embody as appropriate to academic discourse. Unlike the other two interviewees, she makes no distinctions based on experience, effectiveness, or intention.

Eliza's unwavering alliance to the conventions of academic discourse appears to also make her a very hands-on tutor more likely to intervene and offer directive advice to the writer. In response to an extended metaphor appearing in the literary analysis paper mentioned earlier, Eliza states that she „would say to take it out, take this out completely.” Questioned further about her comfort in advising writers like this, Eliza replies:

„I think it's very important to tell them how to write, because that is such a huge part of the final product, the language you use, the way you present your argument. I wouldn't feel uncomfortable at all telling them to take whatever out if I feel like it's not helping their argument at all.“

Eliza's approach may initially appear invasive, but through a Bartholomew lens, she is merely helping students learn the language of academic discourse. In her words, if a student is „being initiated in the discipline of... academic literary writing...voice has no place there.” This belief, that voice and academic discourse are incompatible, explains her hands-on approach, as well as her comfort negotiating voice. Eliza does not intervene to impose but rather to help acclimate the student.

Conclusion

My goal in conducting this research was primarily exploratory: I wanted to uncover the attitudes of Writing Fellows toward the usage of unconventional voice and to reveal their methods for mediating voice given the limitations as undergraduate peer tutors. Based on my results with Katherine, Sarah, and Eliza, I have developed a fluid spectrum detailing the various roles a Fellow can adopt when negotiating voice. While I provide three main categories, the assignments are not rigid. As I indicated previously, the spectrum I wish to present is a fluid one. Katherine, Sarah, and Eliza do not inhabit the same role in every situation and can situate themselves between categories. I intend for these designations to act as markers to orient and spark discussion

among other tutors rather than to act as binding definitions. The three categories I separate my interview subjects into are that of the alternativist, the situationalist, and the interventionist.

An alternativist stance adopts Elbow's philosophy, and Sarah fits this role most closely. Like Elbow, she finds preserving the individuality and ownership of the writer important, and vital to the educational experience. An alternativist is supportive of unconventional voice, and while I believe all tutors are audience focused to some extent, an alternativist is more concerned, like Elbow, with the writer's intentions than the reader and his interpretations. Tutors who relate closely to this description might prefer a very "hands-off" approach.

The middle position, the situationalist, makes distinctions about voice situationally. Katherine best embodies this role because her interview responses invoke both Bartholomae's and Elbow's writing ideologies. She adheres to Bartholomae's principles when she perceives voice to be the unintentional insertions of a basic writer: she intervenes and suggests its removal. With the voice of experienced writers, Katherine adopts a hands-off and writer-focused approach reminiscent of Elbow's practices. Her distinctions reflect a situationalist's hesitation to identify one guiding rule or philosophy to which to adhere.

Finally, the interventionist, on the opposite side of the spectrum, most closely aligns with Bartholomae's philosophy. Eliza is a strong interventionist with a set definition of academic discourse that does not forgive breaks in convention. She rejects the voice in each sample situations I present to her, and feels comfortable intervening and "telling" students to remove these insertions. An interventionist is also the most audience-focused of the three categories.

My hope is that this spectrum can stimulate discussion and reflection among not just Writing Fellows, but also other tutors, about their role, or lack of role, in cultivating the individuality of a writer and his or her voice. Such a dialogue would foster an exchange of ideas, methods, and narratives helpful in navigating the conflicts that arise between promoting audience awareness and preserving writerly identity. This spectrum is a tool to facilitate that dis-

cussion, and it grants Fellows the freedom to move fluidly from one side to the other, between Bartholomae and Elbow. While undergraduate peer writing tutors, in their unique position as peers, tread an unclear boundary outlining the extent to which they can advocate a certain stance, it is my hope that this spectrum makes that line more distinct.

References

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Zu der Autorin:



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