TRANSLATING NORMALCY: TUTORS NAVIGATING SPACES BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Jennifer P. Gray
College of Coastal Georgia
jgray@ccga.edu

Non-traditional students make up a large portion of the current college student population. Mike Rose indicates that the "non-traditional student is becoming the new norm" for higher education, and according to the National Center for Education Statistics, non-traditional students make up "almost 40%" of all students enrolled in higher education (8). This number is slippery, however, as there are different definitions of non-traditional students. The National Center for Education Statistics defines non-traditional students as students who have had at least a five-year break in their education (National). Sometimes financial independence or high school-related experiences are the guides for this label, which includes those who have a GED, were homeschooled, or have an international schooling background (Hess, National). At my institution, non-traditional students are classified as students over the age of 25, and they make up 37% of our student population.

With these growing numbers of non-traditional students, writing centers need to focus on the unique needs of this student population. My essay will discuss these needs and the unique work tutors engage in as they work with non-traditional students. Writing classes have changed, especially since the 1990s, and conversations during tutoring sessions often revolve around highlighting those changes and explaining why they have occurred. In our center, tutors take time to talk to non-traditional students about student-centered pedagogies, process-based writing instruction, and writing in the digital era. We discuss how current writing classes may be quite different from a non-traditional student's former classes. Taking the time to discuss these differences has been helpful because many classes are unfamiliar to these students. One non-traditional student in the study shared that she does not understand "these new types of writing."

This essay uses qualitative research conducted at my Southeastern institution with almost 1000 student participants. Students responded to a survey that collected data about their thoughts on writing at the college level and about the work of the writing center. For this piece, I selected a reflective excerpt from a non-traditional student, "Janet," which is her pseudonym. This excerpt is emblematic of the responses collected from other non-traditional students in the larger study. Examining reflective writing from non-traditional students can provide researchers with a window into the students' worlds.

My main method of analysis will be a close reading that will examine Janet's thoughts about her college writing and the writing center. Paying attention to Janet's language choices can provide researchers with insight into her conscious and unconscious thoughts about writing and being a writer. Writing centers can then use this information to improve session success. Linguist James Paul Gee explains the function of a close-reading analysis:

> What is language for? Many people think language exists so that we can 'say things' in the sense of communicating information. However, language serves a great many functions in our lives. Giving and getting information is by no means the only one. Language does, of course, allow us to inform each other. But it also allows us to do things and to be things. In fact, saying things in language never goes without also doing things and being things. (*Introduction* 2)

Looking at student language illustrates not only what the student is communicating but also what the student is doing, what position the student is taking, what relationship the student is advancing with her subject, and how the student values what she is discussing. According to Gee, we take on the role of a "designer" when we use language (211). We make a decision to speak and/or write in a certain manner, and those choices highlight our perception of reality and what we value and see as important.

I will use Gee's theories of analysis to examine Janet's 113-word piece of writing. This selection was written by hand in 10 minutes, and I have kept her original spelling, agreement, word, and punctuation choices.

> I am not a big fan of writing, but writing about new worldly things are interesting. Researching and keeping up with the times. Many classes are redesigning essay research papers. Professors are changing the way they want us to write papers & it can be difficult. I don't enjoy writing. I do it because it is a must to do a Bachelor degree. I get

confused with what is right and wrong and I'm very intimated. Sometimes I feel like professors bog you down with papers just for busy work, though. The writing center is a place where I can find my person to help and encourage my writing in a 'proper way.'

I will focus my analysis on three points. The first focuses on Janet's position in the sentences in her excerpt: how she talks about herself reveals whether she sees herself as an actor or whether she is passive in what she experiences. The second point examines Janet's specific thoughts on not being a writer. The final point highlights the potential that is just beneath the surface of Janet's thoughts as she struggles with control and ownership over her writing.

Point One: Janet's active position in the sentence is predominantly negative.

Applying Gee's theories to this excerpt reveals that Janet is doing the action described in her sentences. She is an active participant who plays a role in the named action. Active positions often appear with the word "I" as the subject, or actor, in the sentence. The actor has agency over the action being completed. Janet uses an active "I" construction seven times; and in six cases, this construction portrays writing negatively.[1] She owns these statements; for Janet, writing is very much about doing what she must, in a confusing, unenjoyable manner that is, ultimately, a waste of time. Writing is "done" for the purpose of completing a degree (a degree that the writer did not write out correctly but that still is a "must" to "do"). These are not the descriptors I want students to use when they think about writing or about their college experience. People "do" dishes or "do" laundry. When students use the term "do" to describe a class' writing, the work is often cursory and ultimately just a performance of something considered "just busy work."

Point Two: Janet is not a writer

At the beginning of the excerpt, Janet muses twice about writing. These two musings stand out; however, she is not active in them. She says that "Writing about new worldly things are interesting," but it is not clear that *she* is the writer. She mentions "Researching and keeping up with the times," but there is no actor in this sentence. She knows of these activities, but she does not connect herself directly to them. She could easily have written, "I like" researching and keeping up with the times, but she did not.

The next two sentences are also missing Janet. Classes and professors are in charge of writing; Janet

indicates that "Classes are redesigning essay research papers" and "professors are changing the way they want us to write papers." The classes and the professors are the subjects, and Janet is missing. Presumably, there is no place for her to contribute to "essay research paper" design or to converse with professors about how to write papers her way. Finally, her language choices reveal a clear split between student and professor, as represented by the use of "us." She could have said that professors are changing the way they want *her* to write papers; however, she selects the word "us" instead of naming herself directly. Perhaps she finds strength in numbers. The classroom community has a strict divide between professor and students, and only students "do" the writing. This strict divide is reminiscent of non-student-centered classrooms, common in pre-2000 first-year writing classes.

Point Three: Two possibilities for control and ownership in Janet's writing

In the final sentence, Janet exhibits a sign that she might take control over her writing at some point. This shift means there is a possibility that she may feel ownership over her writing. In the last sentence of the excerpt, the subject is the writing center, and the center functions as a place where Janet can find her "person" that will "help and encourage" her writing. Her use of "my" is promising because it is the only time in the excerpt that she takes ownership of her writing. She uses "my" twice, once in reference to her writing, and once in reference to her "person." Prior to this sentence, she represented writing as designed or controlled by the professors or the classes. Janet is still offering some control over the writing to the writing center person, supposedly the master of the proper way, but her use of "my" shows promise of some agency. It is meaningful and exciting to me as a writing center director that the only use of "my" occurs when she is talking about the writing center. It is disheartening to think she might not feel such ownership in her writing classes. I would rather have a student take ownership of her writing; we can work on the problematic concept of "proper" later. Curiously, this last sentence, which focuses on the writing center, is the longest sentence out of the nine presented. The average sentence length in the excerpt is 12.5 words, and this last sentence has 22 words.

The second sign of Janet's possible growth as a writer revolves around the use of "but" in the first sentence of the excerpt. This sign is less obvious than the previous one, but still worth mentioning. Janet begins the excerpt by saying that she is not a "big fan"

of writing. However, she goes on to say that writing about new worldly things can be interesting. She combines the thought "I am not a big fan" of writing with the thought that writing can be interesting. She combines these thoughts with the word "but." The use of "but" in the sentence cancels out whatever material came before. For example, we might say, "I am really tired, but I am going to go to class." Ultimately, we are going to class; the later half of the sentence is the meat of the sentence in that case. This is the same effect the first sentence in Janet's excerpt has. Writing *is* interesting at times. She may not be the biggest fan of the activity, and she may not be the one doing the actual writing about the worldly things, but there is potential: writing *can* be interesting. The mere potential for interest suggests that her views about writing have broadened. As a writing center director, I take this potential for growth as a charge to make my writing center sessions interesting to the student. Janet expresses that control of the writing (designing and changing) is in the faculty's domain. Perhaps if Janet felt more in control of her writing, she would become more involved and interested.

Options for Change at Writing Centers

Based on the research data collected, our writing center has made several changes in the areas of document collection and conversations on campus. We have altered two well-used documents: our student-satisfaction survey and our presentation-reflection documents. For our student-satisfaction survey, we have added a checkbox for students to indicate if they are non-traditional, and a space to describe why they believe they belong to that category. This allows us to sort the surveys based on this classification, and doing so may add to the multiple definitions of "non-traditional student." Our next research project will involve sorting the data to see if patterns are present, such as the prevalence of a particular discipline or a similar point of struggle. We also added more space for qualitative open-ended questions to collect information about what students think about their current assignment. As Janet indicated, she can "get confused with what is right and wrong" with her writing assignments. Having the space required for Janet to explain her understanding of an assignment can highlight whether she is confused or not, and whether she might need to take an active role in her learning and return for another tutoring session. As a bonus, the writing center can also anonymously share these insights with professors on campus, which could be helpful if many students are confused.

The writing center uses the second document, the presentation-reflection document, during in-class presentations in first-year writing classes. These presentations range in topic from MLA/APA/Chicago documentation, to Avoiding Plagiarism, to Writing Literature Reviews; and they are led by the tutors and the Center's director. After a presentation, the writing center collects information from the student audience via the presentation-reflection document to ascertain their knowledge going into the presentation, and how that might have changed after the presentation. Janet's comment about professors "redesigning essay research papers" reminds us that each presentation presents an opportunity to demystify the college writing experience for a student. While the presentation-reflection document helps to "prove" the effectiveness of instruction to the administration, it more importantly helps the writing center revise presentations based on students' needs. If students do not understand a concept or if that concept is completely foreign (as it may be for many non-traditional students), we receive immediate formative assessments. The document invites students to take an active role in helping the writing center reassess its presentations. Our most senior tutors compile and analyze these reflective documents at the end of each month. They present the information at staff meetings, and these presentations represent the early stages of data collection for sections of SACS or annual reports.

We have also altered conversations at our center. These conversations often revolve around why writing classes have changed over time; students must work to make sense of what it means to be a writer at college in 2013. We encourage students to think of themselves as writers, and we call them writers to reinforce this identity (for example: "As a writer, why did you make this choice?"). We have held impromptu and informal focus groups of non-traditional students currently using the writing center, and we talk to them about their struggles or successes. Some specific topics include animated discussions of what is normal behavior in a classroom, why teachers might be assigning what they are assigning, and how to increase confidence in writing. In one focus group, a non-traditional student said she had not had a writing class in five years, and she wondered why her current writing teacher was not focused on correcting her paper "grammatically." Another student wanted to know why the teachers did not provide models or share examples. Another student remarked, "Literacy narrative? What the heck is that? Isn't this an English class?" We took some of this informal data to their

teachers, anonymously of course, and collected assignment samples to keep in the writing center for future sessions. We even invited Writing-Across-the-Curriculum teachers to writing center staff meetings and open-house events to talk about their assignments. Finally, our campus is fortunate enough to have a non-traditional student club, and we are frequent attendees and impromptu presenters at the club meetings. All of the examples listed above represent our effort to include non-traditional students' perspectives into our conversations about writing on campus, while encouraging active participation with a positive spirit for growth as writers.

In *Back to School*, Mike Rose urges faculty to see non-traditional students as what they could be, not just as what they were or what they have been. He says that "to respond fully and well" to non-traditional students, we have to "know them better" and that we need to move "beyond the ready-made labels and explanations" and understand why they are in our classroom and what is important to them (97). Listening to non-traditional students reflect on their experiences and thoughts about writing can provide directors, teachers, and tutors with a way into a discussion about writing successfully in college and beyond. As James Paul Gee reminds us, "when we choose words and build phrases and sentences with grammar, we are giving clues … to listeners about how to construct a picture in their heads" (71). I urge us all to be better listeners who work to see the pictures our students create.

Notes

1. The six cases: not being "a big fan," "not enjoy[ing] writing," "doing" what she "must" in order "to do" her degree, getting "confused," being "very intimated," and feeling bogged down by professors assigning "busy work."

Works Cited

Bell, Steven. "Nontraditional Students Are the New Majority." *New York Times.* 8 Mar 2012. Print.

Gee, James Paul. *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit.* New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.

–. *Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method.* 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.

Hess, Frederick. "Old School: College's Most Important Trend is the Rise of the Adult Student." *The Atlantic.* 28 Sept. 2011. Web. 26 Feb 2013.

National Center for Education Statistics. "Definitions and Data." 2013. Web. 26 Feb 2013.

Rose, Mike. *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education.* New York: The New Press, 2012. Print.