

The Other End of the Kaleidoscope: Configuring Circles of Teaching and Learning

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Have you ever made a kaleidoscope, or taken one apart? You can hold the tube with its mirrors in one hand and the baubles that provide the color and movement in the other. Put the baubles back into the kaleidoscope. Close up the base. Look. Turn the kaleidoscope. Look again.

Circling the Rules

In the turns of my memory, I see my second grade self heading back to school one day after lunch. It had been rainy, but, while I was eating lunch at home, the rain let up. As usual, I'd left my preparations for going back to school too long, and, in my rush to be on my way, I did not remember to pull my school-mandated rain gear (innocently called "rubbers") back over my shoes. Instead I dodged puddles for the three blocks back to school. I rounded the corner of the school building on a run to line up with the others at the back door. Heads turned towards my shoes. "You're in trouble!" The news was elbowed down the line and more heads turned. "But my shoes didn't get wet, look!" I held up a sole for inspection. "It doesn't matter. You're in trouble."

As the line made its way into the building, I held out some hope that I could slip by unnoticed. But my peers' assessment of the reaction to this infraction of the rubbers-on-rainy-days rule was accurate. As I re-entered the building, I was pulled from line and sent to the principal. He sent a note home with me: it cited my "refusal to follow school rules" and included a warning of subsequent consequence. This missive was met with laughter from my parents and siblings and became a family joke. In my large family I was the quiet bookworm—a child less likely to knowingly break a rule was difficult to imagine.

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I have a kaleidoscope of memories from my decade of teaching in the public schools. Homerooms, assemblies, classes, exams, parent meetings, staff relationships lunchroom, detention, study halls, students, janitors, parents, secretaries, principals. The context and the content: the structure of a school and the people in the school. Somehow, between them, something is wrong. How can I discover what is wrong as a step in making things right? Turn, look. What is going on?

On the way to becoming a teacher, I worked as a substitute. An early view of the schools came from my experiences as a substitute teacher and student teacher. One day in an elementary school, I was walking from child to child, leaning over to help them along. The smallest ripples of each child's excitement over an encounter with a new adult traveled with me. I looked up to the other side of the room; one of the boys was standing. The school rules I had been instructed to enforce were posted on the front wall in all classrooms; there was a rule against standing without permission. This was an early grade, second or third, so even standing he didn't make much of a mark in the world. I thought of myself as a second grader turning that corner of the school building to line up with my classmates and coming up against the rules. My family's laughing response to that encounter was the first contribution, perhaps, to the skeptical lens through which I view the goings-on in schools. I squatted down next to the child so we were just about eye-to-eye.

"Did you know you're breaking a rule?"

"I am?"

"Yup. Do you know which one?"

"No."

"Can you read the rules on the wall to figure it out?"

"Some of the words, but not all."

"Let's read the first one together."

So we read the rules until we came to the one about standing. "That's the one," he said, and sat down. "Are you going to write my name on the board?"

Later, as a student teacher, I was on rotation for after-school detention. Two high school boys sat in the back of the room, scowling. The older boy whispered things I could not quite catch; the effect on the younger boy, though, was easily read. He was in bad company and uncomfortable, but also pleased. I asked them to be quiet. I moved them a few seats apart. The muttering and dark looks continued. I called the younger boy up. "Here's your new seat. No, right here, in front of me." He dumped his books and sat, shoulders slouched, arms crossed, eyes down. He was hunkered in for a miserable hour. In the back of the room, the older boy settled into his homework.

I noticed a novel in the younger boy's small stack. "What's the book you're reading?" He looked up at me, then down to the pile. He told me the title. "How is it so far?" His scowl relaxed; we began to talk. We talked about books; he told me why he was on detention. He started doing his homework. The hour passed, and we said, "Good bye. It was nice to meet you."

In both these instances, the students and I were participants in a system that sets children away from the group in order to punish them. The system of name-on-the board, checks-after-the-name is like a secret handshake in reverse. There is a shared meaning behind the ritual, but, where a secret handshake binds relationships, names on the board rupture them. The children whose names go on the board are not being drawn into a community in which they might derive comfort

and modify their behavior to keep status as members; rather, they are being isolated from the community.

In the detention room, also, students are isolated. They are placed away from their friends, with an adult whose role is not to talk to them except to enforce the punishment. Neither of the detention boys was eager to fill the role of “bad” student. The older boy readily gave up his attempts, and the younger boy dropped all pretense. He taught me that a simple invitation to community, through a conversation based on shared interest, could help a child step back into a trusting, respectful relationship with a teacher.

Several years later I learned another lesson about community, this time with writing instruction playing a role. I owe a debt of gratitude to a class of four boys who would only stop taunting, spit-wad shooting, complaining, and falling out of their chairs for one activity: writing and reading back to the group what they wrote. Occasionally I read from a published work, but most of what we all did was to write and read our writing to each other. Alas, the ceiling was still dotted with spit wads, but all other misbehavior stopped, the atmosphere became collegial, and my students’ writing greatly improved. It took me another few years, and a supportive week with a poetry performance group during a summer, but I finally transferred what my students had been teaching me over the years into my 8th grade language arts classroom.

People improve their writing by writing, and I finally figured out how to get my students to write—by listening to what they wrote. One way I reminded myself to be a listener in my classroom was through a “write first” policy. Each question I asked the group was answered first on paper. (If I forgot and called on someone before I had given the class time to write first, the student who reminded me got a participation point.) We all wrote and then a few read out their answers. They had to read it just as they wrote it, but they could note changes they would like to make when they were finished reading it out, a method that taught them more about editing than any other thing I’ve done in the classroom.

Each week we shifted the environment in the room by sitting on our desks and reading our words to each other. We tried out typical writing workshop responses: for my 8th graders, “I heard” paired with “I wonder” worked very nicely. What my students really needed, like most writers, was someone who showed interest in their work—someone who listened to them. I called these “read alouds.” I believe they were particularly effective because I kept track of who took a turn. Prolific and glib writers shared the stage with those less ready with an answer or less practiced at speaking. My students wrote more, they wrote better, we shared laughter, and misbehaviors plummeted. When my colleagues spoke of this problem student or that during staff meetings, they would often look my way and say, “But he’s not a problem in your class, is he?” And no, I had to admit, he wasn’t.

My students came to my classroom with many curious rules about writing in place. How did a rule like “You can’t start a sentence with a conjunction” come into being? It clearly isn’t so based on a look at the work of published writers. Another school “rule” that suffers when compared to published work is the ban on the word “I” in essays. “It’s hard to say your opinion when you can’t write ‘I,’” my students tell me, and I can well agree. Why are we holding young, inexperienced writers to a standard more confining than the one mature writers are held to? This is not to say that we shouldn’t hold young writers to the standards of good writing that hold for anyone else. It is to say that when we hold them to

contrived standards that apply to no one else, we isolate them by ensuring that they will not be conversant in the writerly practice that takes place outside the grade school.

The faults in school have typically been thought to reside in the people: the students and, more recently, the teachers. Solutions have been applied there. Tougher standards for students and teachers are the current try at reform. Reshape the baubles and funnel them back into the same kaleidoscope. But it is the structure of the kaleidoscope that rules the view, not the baubles. What is wrong is not the people, but the structure that constrains them.

Circles of Responsibility

As a child taking horseback riding lessons, I followed a strict set of rules that kept me safe and earned a stream of praise. From the center of the circle, my instructors called out their corrections to our form (“Eyes up! Heels down!”) and directed our movements around the circle. I relished the praise, and I was embarrassed by mistakes and misunderstandings.

As an adult, I ride through open fields with an arthritic and ornery horse and an aging back of my own. Our course is an uncertain negotiation through uneven grass and on paths cut by deer leaping away from us into the woods. I still find that it helps to keep my eyes up and heels down, but only in order to keep my balance when my horse shifts his. I do not focus on rules and praise, but on staying loose, responsive, and in charge more often than not. Sometimes success means knowing when to dismount and walk alongside my horse, offering another kind of leadership before trying again.

I love my job as a writing teacher at a small state college. I try hard to help students develop their compositional skill and to motivate them to pursue difficult answers, to communicate complex ideas. Many students seem initially convinced that they just don’t like academic writing or are not good at it. I believe instead that they are limited by their training in stringent rules for writing. I try to loosen those rules for them to make room for new priorities.

In writing centers, I first saw the effects of students’ training in prescriptive rules. Students’ written work seemed complete to them: it had a thesis, examples, and a restatement of the thesis. These, they had learned, were the unquestionable features of a good essay. They were dismayed when their college teachers criticized this sort of writing for its fractured argument and unclear connections. Students failed even when they thought they were following the rules perfectly. Teachers wanted a clear thesis, support, and a summary, but they also wanted writing that displayed critical thinking. Teachers and students could not translate their views of “good writing” for each other. In this conventional training, the features of a clear essay are presented as simple steps: first, pick a thesis; narrow the thesis to fit the form, making it easy for all to understand (notice that no exploration or development has occurred); arrange three examples that support the the-

sis, leaving out any questions or contradictory evidence; restate the thesis in different words, but without real change. Students report this same simplified process to compositionist Amy Lee when she asks them to list the “rules for good writing that they have learned in school” (210). Several rules are stated across the years:

Always have a thesis statement in your introduction. Do not use the first-person pronoun, “I.” . . . Do not directly address the reader. Repeat your thesis statement in every paragraph. . . . The conclusion should restate the introduction but in different words. Be sure to have transition sentences between paragraphs. Have 5 paragraphs (introduction, 3 bodies, conclusion). (210-11)

Working to these rules, students will force meaning into the prescribed form, even if the meaning is distorted beyond recognition (Brodkey 137). Yet students can be punished for violating the rules and rewarded for following them even if they produce an essay that is fractured, unclear, or insignificant. The rules describe a finished essay, but they constrain the process for achieving it. The steps require students to put aside uncertainty and questions, complexity and contradiction, the features that could stimulate the thinking that college teachers often value.

As a classroom instructor, I regularly discuss differences between writing instruction in high school and college. I reward students for developing a significant thesis as they write and revise, not before. I ask them to use writing for inquiry and revision to translate complex ideas for readers. I encourage students to assess drafts from a reader’s perspective and to test them on peer readers. I choose never to blame students for using the model they have learned or to impose a new set of prescriptions. I try to gently point them out of the rut they have worn by following old rules, inviting conversation about their training and listening generously. I am patient with their reluctance to change. After all, I am implicitly critiquing their educational experience.

In resisting and loosening the rigid rules of school writing, I draw support from compositionists who argue that those rules reduce student motivation, foreclose inquiry, and encourage shallow arguments (e.g., Bartholomae; Brodkey). These compositionists caution that literacy is not neutral or mechanical, but interpretive and socially situated. Furthermore, others see the sources of prescriptive rules in ideologies of literacy, economic factors, and disciplinary exclusivity (e.g., Fox; Rose; Russell; Trimbur). They assert that it is not necessarily a great equalizer. I agree with these readings: for me, the persistence of this system of “rules for good writing” is not an isolated error, but political and fueled by many sources.

These three arenas—helping my students, adhering to intellectual expertise, and acting on political analysis—are areas of responsibility for me, but I draw thick circles around each, separating it from the others. I fear that critiquing the politics of literacy will discourage students and throw their focus off of their development. I fear jeopardizing the gentle reconsideration of deeply ingrained rules. I fear closing down their inquiries by imposing another set of rules, rules about how we “must” see literacy. On the other hand, I am also concerned about the silence on important social questions about literacy. I want these circles to

overlap, but they seem stuck, jammed like pieces in a broken kaleidoscope. I want the parts to turn, yielding a new and more integrated picture for me and for my students. What is politically responsible, in this situation? What is helping? What is intellectually sound? I want to look, turn, look again. But my kaleidoscope is jammed, and the pieces stay where they are. I am increasingly uneasy with this separation.

Min-Zhan Lu's work in "An Essay on the Work of Composition" set the pieces of my quandary in motion. Lu urges composition teachers to prepare students to be responsible users of English in a global capitalist economy (16). She does not wrangle over whether we must protect students from controversial theories of literacy and social control. In fact, she argues against the irrational fears of critical pedagogy which she finds persistent in composition (19, 43). Responsible users of English would understand the complexity and specificity of all designers' "actual discursive resources" and how they might affect their design choices. Error, then, would be considered contextually (27).

Lu identifies five kinds of "actual discursive resources": the designer's relationship to standard English; the sort of language use she or he wants to identify with; the sort of language use s/he is emotionally tied to through family; the designer's sense of self, future, and success; and his/her sense of how different Englishes interact, especially in terms of power differences (30). Lu assumes that each designer's resources are uniquely heterogeneous and exist in an "often complex and sometimes dissonant" relationship to each other (37-38). Students' study of tensions around "academic discourse" is not a threat to acquisition: rather, it can "help the writer locate personal and social reasons to critically engage with the very english one feels one needs to acquire" (38). (Lu uses "english(es)" to indicate plurality.)

Despite my fears, I trusted Lu's framework and asked students in two recent composition courses to describe some of their discursive resources, emphasizing tension, contradiction, and power differences among them. They applied that sketch in an analysis of a piece of their school writing (see 38-42). They saw how their choices in school writing reflected larger contexts and tensions, the use or censorship of other kinds of English. Suddenly school writing was not an absolute form, with sacrosanct rules that mechanically reproduced homogeneous performance. Students saw themselves as designers making choices even as they tried to comply with the rules of school writing. They also acknowledged the reasons for their effort, the variations in their compliance, and the costs and difficulties of it. And, in seeing themselves as complex and dissonant, students could expect to find these qualities in others and to critique claims to purity. I told my students in my assignment, "I believe that critical engagement with your own language history and with your own writing will make a positive difference for you as a writer." Many of them later agreed, noting a new sense of their special discursive resources and their particular difficulty with standardized language and form. They thought that this awareness would make writing easier. Lu points out that it has more radical potential to sensitize U.S. users of English to the legitimacy of diverse designs (44).

My application of Lu's rich perspective shifted the separate circles of responsibility I had drawn around politics, disciplinary knowledge, and teaching. Instead of imposing any professional reading on my students, I invited self-study, and I learned from students about language and power. This was an effective yet


non-threatening way to engage political dimensions of language. I was also able to affirm and extend students' self-knowledge as writers, while challenging them to use writing to gain new insight. Applying Lu's model reconfigured a number of my problematic assumptions. I could acknowledge and support students' wishes to be successful in conventional written English, while asking them to situate that desire in linguistic and social contexts (Lu 38). Those contexts would be meaningful to students because they would arise from self-study. Furthermore, I could never be the expert on their discursive history; I would not try to lead them to conclusions about its social significance. Students would engage to the extent they felt comfortable. A few students did limit their inquiry and reaffirmed the primacy of standard edited English. Their choice did not surprise me because I recognize the fear of destabilizing that primacy. The next step would be to see whether Lu's model of critical self-study could provide a bridge into a more complex discussion of literacies in these classes, one which also serves the development of compositional skill.

Lu's work puts my circles of responsibility in motion, merging them to yield surprising new truths about students' capacity to critique the language to which they aspire, while becoming more aware of their personal language history. Students benefited by developing a critical lens on language that will serve both their competence and responsibility, against the myth that rules ensure predictable production of English.

Circles of Understanding

The next step: take your own kaleidoscope—pry it apart.
Put the mirrors aside. Turn your attention to the baubles,
the color, the movement. Set the pieces of your
understanding in motion. Take your new seat within the
growing circle. Look again.

Circles in Response

So much depends on the listening voice
to play on the tensions, negotiate boundaries
open the borders of discourse and art.
So much depends on the juxtaposition
of disparate voices in resonant keys—
the poet invites us to unlock convention
to overlap circles, to take our own paths.
So much depends on the opening minds
and the new-built kaleidoscopes
in each outstretched hand. 

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