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Actively and Critically Learning: The Pedagogical Importance of Student Affinity

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Jennifer M. Cunningham received her master's degree in composition studies along with a certificate in linguistics from The University of Akron. She is currently a doctoral candidate at Kent State University, studying Literacy, Rhetoric, and Social Practice. Jennifer's dissertation, *jus showin sum luv 2 yo page: The Digital Representation of African American Language*, investigates and describes the features (phonetic, grammatical, mechanical, etc.) of African American Language (AAL) in the discursive, digital context of MySpace, a social networking site, while also addressing the importance of obtaining participant consent when gathering data in a digital environment.

Introduction

Intrigued by the concept of "felt sense" as a second-semester Master's student, I decided to implement Sondra Perl's Guidelines for Composing—twelve questions that serve as an exploratory way for students to calm their inner selves, find their felt sense, and use that felt sense to guide them through their composing processes—in my freshman composition classroom. I had naively assumed that "the Guidelines would be easy enough to administer—give a brief description of felt sense, explain the activity, pop in the CD, and away we would go" (Cunningham 119). Oh, how wrong I was. After receiving a stack of angry responses and discussing the process with my class, I concluded that my students were "uncomfortable with the silence in the classroom" that was produced when the CD was paused so that students could listen for their felt sense and compose (Cunningham 122). The only two students who enjoyed the process seemed to enjoy the silence as well.

Although the concept of "felt sense" is not a common pedagogical topic, it is still worth discussing, first, to orient readers to the concept to better understand my dilemma, and, second, as a general means to understanding student affinity and teacher pedagogy. Perl makes a direct connection between felt sense and bodily knowing, writing, "When the emerging words do not feel right, we squirm. We feel uncomfortable. The alignment between our thoughts and our bodies hasn't yet happened" (4). In other words, our felt sense is a felt disconnect between knowing that we want to write and being able to begin writing. Perl explains, "Once you know how to notice it, you may conclude that the process is simple, that felt sense has always been there, available to you; you just never had a name for it" (1).

One way to find and attend to felt sense is by implementing Perl's Guidelines. The Guidelines include "a series of questions Perl asks to guide writers through the process of

selecting a topic to waiting for their felt sense and learning how to listen to the felt sense for inspiration" (Cunningham 117). Perl explains, "The Guidelines are not a set of rules to follow, but rather a set of questions that help writers cultivate a felt sense and then write with this felt sense as a guide" (8).

Years after my first attempt at using the Guidelines in my composition classroom, I continued to be intrigued by "felt sense"—less by the concept itself and more by the trouble my students had attending to and understanding it. Because I am unaware of anyone who has done an empirical study questioning why students may or may not find the Guidelines effective or if silence can affect students' abilities to compose[1], I decided to implement the process again with a different class at a different university. However, using Perl's Guidelines in my freshman composition classroom this time around taught me less about the pedagogical technique and more about the importance of understanding student affinity when considering pedagogical techniques. So often we (especially beginning instructors) are bombarded with a myriad of pedagogical methods and are unsure what to employ or which criteria to use when choosing pedagogy. I'm suggesting that when choosing a pedagogy, we need to be aware of our students' backgrounds—specifically to which affinity groups they belong—in order for our choices to be successful.

Relying on James Paul Gee's theories of *active* and *critical learning*, I will explain, by way of my own critical learning, how many of my students may have reached active learning in terms of using the Guidelines to compose, but because so many lacked familiarity with the

[1] To my knowledge, the only scholar other than Perl who has written about the Guidelines is M. Elisabeth Sargent. However, the scope of my paper extends beyond this one pedagogical technique, so I will refrain from including either scholar's work. What I learned in terms of pedagogy occurred through applying Perl's Guidelines, but this same realization could have occurred via a number of instructional methods. In other words, I'm explaining this theory specifically as it applies to my class and their work with the Guidelines, but implementing the Guidelines is only the vehicle for understanding how student affinity relates to pedagogical success.

principles and patterns (what Gee calls *design grammars*) accepted within the semiotic domain of meditation—a semiotic domain which encompasses felt sense—they couldn't reach critical learning without multiple experiences using the Guidelines in order to become members associated with that semiotic domain (an *affinity group*) and more easily find and attend to their felt sense. Further, I argue that we, as teachers, need to be cognizant of our students' affinities when choosing pedagogy in order for students to reach critical learning.

Theoretical Framework

Gee's terminology affords us a lens from which to better understand why my students had such trouble implementing the Guidelines—and why, more generally, students have difficulty with other pedagogical techniques. Here I will define specific terms that I will later connect to my students' (in)ability to find their felt sense. In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee defines an *affinity group* as a "group of people associated with a given semiotic domain" who can "recognize others as more or less 'insiders' to the group" (27). He explains a *semiotic domain* as "any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings" (18). Gee defines active and critical learning in relation to each other:

> For active learning, the learner must, at least unconsciously, understand and operate within the internal and external design grammars of the semiotic domain he or she is learning. But for critical learning, the learner must be able consciously to attend to, reflect on, critique, and manipulate those design grammars at a metalevel. That is, the learner must see and appreciate the semiotic domain as a *design space*, internally as a system of interrelated elements making up the

> possible content of the domain and externally as ways of thinking, acting, interacting, and valuing that constitute the identities of those people who are members of the affinity group associated with the domain. (40)

Active learning is "using situated meanings and the design grammar…to understand and produce meanings and actions, which are a type of meaning in the domain" whereas critical learning "leverages the design grammar at the metalevel in a reflective way that can lead to critique, novel meanings, or transformation of the domain" (41). Gee lists cellular biology, first-person-shooter video games, Roman Catholic theology, and rap music all as semiotic domains; for my own purposes, I explicitly want to include the semiotic domain of meditation, which would encompass felt sense, yoga, prayer, and any other meditative activity as affinity groups within that domain.

In order to belong to an affinity group within any semiotic domain, a person must not only be able to use the language associated with the domain, but the behaviors as well. Applied generally, this theory suggests that in order for anyone to function within any domain, he or she must already be a member of an affinity group located within that domain. Pedagogically speaking, instructors need to be aware to which affinity groups their students belong, because introducing pedagogy which requires membership within a specific semiotic domain may hinder active learning and make critical learning unattainable when given the time constraints in a semester-long course.

Methods

As a first-semester doctoral student at a large, Midwestern, research university, I taught one section of freshman composition which focused on introducing students to college writing and exposing them to a broader definition of *composition*. This included producing several types of

texts—formal essays, responses/reflections, aural essays, electronic portfolios. This particular freshman composition class consisted of twenty (eleven females and nine males) traditional, White, first-semester college freshmen. Because one of the goals of freshman composition at this university is to "practice educated composing, including planning," I decided that the Guidelines might help with planning and invention and might help ease student apprehension when beginning the writing process, giving them another method, another way to start composing.

None of my students were familiar with the Guidelines or felt sense before taking my class, so before using the Guidelines as an entire class, students read about felt sense and the Guidelines at The Focusing Institute's website[2], which is devoted to the concept of felt sense as it relates to different disciplines. Throughout the entire process, I collected student responses and conferenced with students individually regarding the effectiveness of the method.

The goal of the hour-long activity was to help students focus their ideas—their felt sense—until they had one topic on which they could write. I didn't collect what the students produced during the activity. They were aware that whatever they wrote was private and that no one would see it unless they chose to use something that they wrote during this time in a later response or in their final essays.

When writing their more formal responses, I asked students to refer to The Focusing Institute website and answer the Process Journal Questions included at the bottom of the page titled "Sondra Perl's Composing Guidelines"[3]. The students were aware that their formal reflective responses were going to be collected and used as data. Students also wrote an essay

[2] To find the Guidelines on The Focusing Institute's website (http://www.focusing.org), scroll to "Focusing into…" on the top tab and choose "Creative Process."
[3] http://www.focusing.org/perlprocess.html

based on the topic they chose, which was the end result of Perl's activity (and which further made the process authentic and contextual rather than autonomous).

By the time they had completed the entire process, two students consistently found it productive, fifteen were skeptical at first but decided that the process was "okay" and that they may or may not try it again, and three, although open to the concept at first, agreed that the process was ineffective. Of the twenty responses, I chose to focus on four students— Alex, Jeanette, Christopher, and Sarah. I chose Alex because he was one of three students who concluded that the process didn't work and that he wouldn't try it again, but he was also the only student who began the process optimistically before concluding that it didn't work. I felt that Alex was the only student of the three who sincerely attempted to apply the process before concluding that it didn't work. I chose to include Jeanette because she represents the majority of the class who were skeptical with the process at first and pragmatically concluded that the technique was "okay" but either not for them or would require more practice. I chose Christopher and Sarah because they were the only students who found the Guidelines effective and enjoyed the entire experience. By including and interpreting responses from these students, I argue that in order for these students to surpass active learning and achieve critical learning, they must first have affinity within the semiotic domain of meditation—the semiotic domain which encompasses felt sense.

Findings

In this section, I include responses from Alex, Jeanette, Christopher, and Sarah in order to show how students who were already members of affinity groups within the semiotic domain of meditation were able to achieve critical learning, while others could achieve only active learning, and, therefore, found the Guidelines less effective. I also make direct connections between Gee's

concepts of active and critical learning and how these students employed specific portions of the Guidelines.

Active Learning. In his first response, Alex wrote, "In general I think that felt sense is a good method to clear your mind and focus down on what you want to write…Felt sense seems like a slow process to writing, but I think it will make writing easier and more enjoyable." Alex was one of the quietest students in my class, yet he was surprisingly open in each of his responses and seemed willing to try something unfamiliar.

Alex determined that he was thinking about gambling and answered the rest of the Guideline's questions as they related to that topic, when answering the third question in the Guidelines:

> Now ask yourself, "What's on my mind? Of all the things I know about, what might I like to write about now?" When you hear yourself answering, jot down what comes. Maybe you get one thing, maybe a list. If you feel totally blocked, you may write down "Nothing." Even this can be taken further by asking yourself, "What is this 'Nothing' all about?"

Trying to work with his topic generated by the Guidelines, Alex decided, days later, that he didn't want to write about gambling and chose to write about Madden, a PlayStation football game, and how the strategies used in playing the game could be applied in real life situations as a template for how to be successful. Alex was the only student who changed his opinion about the process after writing his essay. In his final response, Alex explained,

> Now that I have written my essay, I have determined that felt sense does not work…I can see how felt sense can work for some people but it didn't work for

> me. I have trouble coming up with topics when I have to think about it. Usually a good idea will just come to me when I am not even thinking about it.

Even though Alex concluded that the Guidelines didn't work for him, he still attended to his felt sense on his own through active learning. In fact, he attended to what Perl describes as the third (of four) *pivotal moments*:

> As you are writing, periodically pause and look to that felt sense somewhere inside you—that feeling, image, or word that somehow represents what you are trying to get at--and ask whether your writing is really getting at it. This comparing or checking back ("Is this it?") will often lead to a productive "shift" in your mind ("Oh *now* I see what it is I want to say").

When I asked Alex how he came up with the topic of Madden football, he explained that topics were typically assigned to him, so generating his own was a new concept. He described the process of choosing another topic as spontaneous and that the topic "literally just popped into my head."

Even though he may not have used the term or realized it, Alex was listening to his felt sense—something inside that told him that the other topics weren't right but that Madden just worked. Alex may have disliked his first topic, but he did use the Guidelines effectively and, as Gee describes, he "unconsciously, [understood and operated] within the internal and external design grammars of the semiotic domain he [was] learning" (40).

Although this is an example of active learning, because Alex did experience the world in a new way when he used the Guidelines, became aware of his felt sense, and later felt that one topic wasn't working and that another was just right, he was unaware of this and found the Guidelines ineffective. Because he had no prior experience with meditation—like most of my

students—he was not able to reach critical learning. Alex was unable to connect the concept of felt sense to prior knowledge, which rendered him unable to recognize that he was, in fact, attending to his felt sense. The concept was too foreign and without affinity within the domain of meditation or at least more practice using the Guidelines, Alex's critical learning could not help him apply his knowledge in a critical, relevant, or conscious manner.

In her first response to felt sense and the Guidelines, after visiting The Focusing Institute's website, Jeanette explained, "I thought the whole idea of felt sense was kind of confusing…But I'm sure it works, I'm just not familiar with this 'asking yourself questions' thing. It seems very new-age." After using the Guidelines in class, Jeanette realized that, although the process didn't work for her on that particular day, she wouldn't be opposed to trying again later. Here it seems that Jeanette was fixed on the second question posed by the Guidelines: "Ask yourself, 'What's going on with me right now? Is there anything in the way of my writing today?' When you hear yourself answering, take a minute to jot down a list of any distractions or impediments that come to mind." Jeanette explained that she had been out very late at a concert the night before class which made it difficult for her to concentrate or want to write at all.

In her reflective response the following week, after having time to mull over the process, Jeanette explained,

> Perhaps the felt sense exercises are something that takes practice. It's usually difficult for me to grasp the concept of something new the first time around, so maybe that's why the entire process didn't completely win me over. But what doesn't work for one person could work miracles for another.

Remaining optimistic about the process even though it didn't work for her, Jeanette continued to look at the situation pragmatically and understood that even though the process didn't work for her on that day, didn't mean that it didn't work at all. She understood that the concept might become useful later on or in a different context.

Jeanette was involved in active learning, because she understood that the process might be useful in the future and that it "takes practice." Relative to Jeanette's assertion that practice may help, Gee writes, "[a]ctive learning in a domain also involves preparation for future learning within the domain and within related domains" (39). Without practice Jeanette was unable to reach critical learning and attend to, reflect on, or critique the principles and patterns—the design grammars—that make up felt sense. She was just introduced to the semiotic domain of meditation through felt sense and could have attained critical learning had time permitted more experiences with felt sense or another pedagogical technique related to meditation.

Critical Learning. Although Christopher stated that he was confused at first after reading the information on The Focusing Institute website, he didn't let this hinder his willingness to try something new. After using the Guidelines in class, Christopher decided that they worked for him. He found question four particularly helpful:

> Ask yourself, "Now that I have a list—long or short—is there anything else I've left out, any other piece I'm overlooking, maybe even a word I like, something else I might want to write about sometime that I can add to this list?" Add anything that comes to mind.

Referring to the list generated by the Guidelines, Christopher explained, "Overall, I thought that felt sense was very beneficial. I was able to find underlining thoughts and ideas. I never really realized that after one idea is evoked, how many other ideas there are." Christopher's opinion of

felt sense and the Guidelines remained consistent and in his final response he reiterated that the process was helpful and enjoyable. Christopher commented that using the Guidelines was a technique that could serve him throughout his academic career. He concluded,

> I learned that you don't have to start off with an initial idea because things can evolve and may turn out better than the original idea . . . This writing process helped me find what was important to me at this time. It helped me to seek for something in my soul that I felt passionate about. I enjoyed using this process because it led me to multiple possibilities that I could write about and then I was able to make the final selection.

Because of Christopher's ease in finding his felt sense and his final response, I was interested in finding out whether he had any affinity with meditation. I asked him if he was familiar with any forms of meditation that would've helped him when finding and attending to his felt sense. Christopher explained that he prays regularly so he was accustomed to quieting his body and sitting in silence. This included him within the semiotic domain of meditation and allowed him to critically learn the concept of felt sense. Drawing on his understanding and affinity with prayer, Christopher was able to apply his experience to the new, yet similar, concept of felt sense, making the pedagogical technique successful for him.

After Sarah visited The Focusing Institute website and was informally introduced to felt sense and the Guidelines, she was the most optimistic writing, "I think the idea of Felt Sense is fantastic…It shows a different way of going about writing, a way free of stress and limitations." Sarah was the most excited about the Guidelines, and found the process easy and invigorating from the first stop and pivotal moment: "Find a way to get comfortable. Shake out your hands, take a deep breath, settle into your chair. Close your eyes if you'd like to; relax. Find a way to be

quietly and comfortably aware of your inner state." I later found out that she was familiar with yoga. Being familiar with the semiotic domain of meditation through yoga, Sarah stated that finding her felt sense seemed "natural," which enabled her to move beyond active learning to critical learning. She not only found her felt sense but attended to it. She was also one of the few students who could appreciate the interrelated elements as well as the ways of "thinking, acting, interacting, and valuing" within that domain because she was already a member of a related affinity group (Gee 40). Sarah concluded,

> I personally enjoyed the entire Felt Sense process. I thought that it was a very unique approach to writing, one that I've never used before for that particular purpose. It was a calming experience, in general. I didn't feel rushed, watched, monitored, or pressured. I felt that I was able to hear and listen to my thoughts as they came, with no necessary order or hurry.

Sarah was able to think about felt sense as a form of meditation, as a domain within a larger system, "a larger design space composed of clusters (families) of more or less closely related semiotic domains" (Gee 43). For Sarah, this was critical learning because she took her understanding of meditation within yoga and applied it to a new situation.

Conclusion

Being familiar with the semiotic domain to which felt sense belongs allows students—Christopher and Sarah in this case—to be critical learners who can "attend to, reflect on, critique, and manipulate those design grammars at a metalevel" (Gee 40). These students were already members of affinity groups within the semiotic domain of meditation and were able to employ critical learning by applying their knowledge of meditative techniques to a new concept within that domain.

Students who have had previous experience with meditation responded positively to the Guidelines and benefited from the pedagogical technique whereas those without any affinity within that domain did not. My point is that considering student affinity when choosing pedagogy applies to any writing pedagogy or strategy, not only using Perl's Guidelines. Regardless of the pedagogical method, students need to have a foundation from which to build, and we often neglect to help construct that foundation (or even ask students if such a foundation has been laid). Further, I am not suggesting that it's necessary to teach each student individually by tutorial in order to account for different backgrounds and affinities. Rather, by becoming aware of our students' academic backgrounds (Did they attend a small, rural school or take any post secondary classes? Did they take honors classes?) as well as which affinity groups they already belong (Are they dancers, gamers, fashion design majors, biology majors, etc?), we can better implement pedagogy by meeting students where they are personally and moving on academically and collectively from that point.

To reinforce the point that it's possible to create a foundation from which all students can build so that pedagogy need not be individual or tutorial, I will return to my class and the Guidelines as an example. I would recommend that teachers who would like to use the Guidelines but are uncertain of their students' affinities begin by asking their students about their interests and backgrounds. Because, as I have already indicated, the semiotic domain relevant to using the Guidelines is meditative, I might ask my students either as an entire class or in a questionnaire whether they have experience with meditation, praying, or participating in any kind of yoga. Once I have an idea about where my students are, I can better address the class. For example, I might break the class into groups and include at least one student with meditative experience within each group so that when students discuss the Focusing website, there is at least

one student with a meditative background in each group. Another option would be to begin class with a meditative activity (e.g., sitting in silence and waiting for a thought or "felt sense" to inspire free-writing) for several days in order to orient students who have no meditative background to that kind of experience before introducing the concept of felt sense or the Guidelines.

Although many educators may not use meditative practices in their pedagogy, a general understanding of the importance of affinity within semiotic domains of learning can inform teaching in areas beyond meditation. So often we, as teachers, use methodology that we assume will help our students' writing, without considering that they may find it confusing and unhelpful, because they don't share the same affinities that we and perhaps a few other students do. Students who are familiar with a semiotic domain, like Christopher and Sarah were with meditation, have affinity and are able to actively and critically learn within that semiotic domain in a "new" yet "natural" way—as a way of being with which they are familiar. We need to be cognizant of student affinity when choosing pedagogy to ensure that students can produce meanings that are recognizable yet novel or unpredictable. When students become members within whichever semiotic domain is necessary in utilizing our chosen pedagogy, they will be able to think critically about and produce content that is both familiar yet new. Only then can students analyze and move beyond active learning.

When we create a lesson or decide to implement a specific writing strategy, we need to account for time to introduce the concept and perhaps explicitly explain our pedagogy. If our students understand our intentions as instructors, they might better understand why and how to attend to a specific pedagogical technique. I don't mean to suggest that we create individualized lesson plans for each student, but that we ask questions and listen to what our students tell us

about their prior experiences and interests so that we can make better, well-informed decisions about the class as a whole.

Further, I don't mean to suggest that all pedagogical techniques require experience within a semiotic domain as specific as meditation, but that it's important to keep in mind the different affinity groups to which students belong and to call attention to that prior knowledge when introducing pedagogy. For example, students might more effectively understand the point of collaborating in small groups and workshopping essays and projects if the concept is connected to a domain to which students already belong: cooperation in team sports, techniques used in high school newspaper or yearbook classes, or group effort needed for summer jobs. But in order to make these connections, we must first be familiar enough with our students to know which connections to make. A class might include journalism majors, nursing majors, musicians, artists, athletes, traditional students, nontraditional students, international students or any number of combinations of majors and affinity groups. The trick is to become familiarized with our students' prior affinities—and in the composition classroom this task is made easy through freewriting, journaling, narrative, and a myriad of other methods that lend themselves so nicely to our discipline—so that we can decide which pedagogies may work best for a specific class and how to best introduce and apply it, even if that entails including materials that are new to us, altering our syllabi, or allowing students to compose in modes with which we are less familiar. Once we know our students and have their interests in mind, our chosen pedagogy will not only be appropriate but successful. Only then can students move beyond active learning to true analysis and reflection, to true learning.

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