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A Folklorist's Touch

What I attempt to teach my students in class is how to ask questions, both for themselves, and about their world. As a folklorist-in-training, I am in a unique position to facilitate a particular mode of questioning and attention to detail, as per my training in ethnographic research. A folklorist pays attention to context, and to the details of a student's response. Do they seem nervous? Do they confidently understand the assignment? Do they know what to ask for help with? Folklorists ask open-ended and detailed questions, with attention to the flow of conversation, and an emphasis on the answers of the respondent as being whole and standing on their own. Folklorists do not offer much analysis or criticality during an interview, just as a tutor does not during a session with a student. Both in a tutoring session, as well as in a classroom teaching environment, being able to ask the student the right questions to elicit the most information and thought from them is crucial to the development of their writing process.

The Writing Center teaches us how to ask questions like a folklorist: open-ended, pursuing contextualization, asking good follow up questions, and overall treating the session like a fluid conversation about the student's writing, rather than a question and answer session. When a folklorist meets with their respondent, the interview begins formulaic, and then merges into a conversation or discussion of the topic at hand. In the Writing Center, it is important to let the students lead us to the information as teachers and tutors, not the other way around, just as folklorists do with their respondents. In doing this, the student's confidence increases as they

realize that they have the power to edit their papers; the answers were always inside them, they just needed a sounding board to help them learn how to access those answers. This helps students cultivate the skills they need to create effective documents, which is one of the main goals of the Writing Center. Modeling the interview style of a folklorist, starting first with initially open-ended and contextualizing questions, moving to an attention to environmental genre (typically of the Writing Center space and student, or students in the classroom setting in this context) and following up with more detailed and specific open-ended questions, can help students get to this place of understanding and confidence in their writing more quickly than traditional methods.

In the Writing Center and in the classroom, students do not have the opportunity to spend hours with me getting the one-on-one time they want to perfect a paper. Consider the time constraint: I need to be able to ask the students the questions that will produce the most information from them to start the tutoring process promptly. To build up my personal knowledge of the student, I like to take each paper as an artistic expression of the student's thoughts, feelings, and subsequently themselves to some degree. My perceptivity as a folklorist, and the student's perception of me as a peer, is crucial for shaping the questions I ask each student right from the beginning of the session. If I can ask them the right questions, they reveal much more about themselves and their writing process, and can even reveal more about their feelings on a topic than they realized they had. This works the same in my classroom, and helps to break down barriers between the generic hierarchy of teacher/student. Critical thinking happens when students ask themselves *why* they are doing the things they're doing, not simply how or what. They will not always have me to ask them these important questions, so if I can model particular types of questioning, they too can go home and ask themselves these questions about their own work without me there.

Another important idea folklorists can bring to the table in a tutoring or teaching session is their attention to context and genre. For example, I often find myself asking is “Have you been to the writing center before?”, as many students I have seen have been first timers to both the writing center and the tutoring process. Contextualizing a student in this potentially new environment is crucial to their receptivity of the material we share. Diane Goldstein, a prominent scholar of folk belief, discusses the distinguishing factors folklore amongst similar disciplines in her article entitled “Not Just a Glorified Anthropologist: Medical Problem Solving Through Verbal and Material Art.” Folklorists, as Goldstein writes, uniquely focus their questions and research on genre, and uses the example that a patient’s choice not to follow the medical advice of a doctor “is frequently the result of misunderstood generic expectations” (19). Applying this to a tutoring session, one could begin to understand the context of the student; the generic expectations of a Writing Center or classroom may lead them to an initial resistance to even entering the space itself. With a folkloric lens, I automatically see genre expectations as existing and as important. Gauging their exposure level can help me contextualize my own tutoring procedures and process, and helps them become more comfortable and acclimated to the space. Students often come in thinking the tutors are going to tear their papers apart and use the age old red pen to mark their mistakes. I can subsequently provide them the information necessary to understand the procedures at the writing center. Once the student knows that we are here to help them become the masters of their own paper, and are a useful and perhaps more experienced sounding-board when it comes to writing, we can put them at ease for not just the session, but for their later confidence when they edit their paper on their own.

Teaching my ENGL 1010 course, I often find myself asking my students to “tell me more” after they give me their initial response to my question. This is a great way to elaborate on

an opening concept or idea the student has brought to the table, both for writing center tutors, as well as graduate instructors. I want to get to *why* they came up with the answer as opposed to the answer itself. In the writing center, students often can point out problems in their papers, but don't seem to know why it is an issue, or have even thought that far about what issue they have noticed. Asking follow-up questions like a folklorist – detailed, responsive, and open – can teach the student how to think critically for themselves in their own work, so when they go home from our session or class they feel more confident in being able to ask themselves similar questions.

Some examples of how this plays out in a tutoring session come both from my observations of long-standing tutors as well as from my own sessions. For example, tutor Whitney Howard asked open-ended questions and did not dominate the session with her insights and opinions when I observed her on September 9th. She let the student respond and make the discoveries for themselves, while merely facilitating time management and subject matter. This allowed the student to find their own answers and an understanding of the broader scope of their paper, rather than Whitney jumping in with her opinion as a tutor.

Knowing how to ask questions like a folklorist not only benefits your communication with others, but teaches yourself how to ask the right questions about your own work and thought process. I have learned when revising my own work how to feel more confident in pointing out of my grammar and syntax issues, as well as learn how to plan and stay organized with outlines. If I had not been taught to ask myself if my paper flowed nicely, or if it conveyed a series of organized thoughts, I would not have discovered what specifically my writing process issue was with many of my papers. Reflecting on the open-ended questions I ask my students both in the classroom and in the Writing Center has helped me to ask myself the same questions when reviewing my own work. This is not to detract from the usefulness of a fresh set of eyes of

course, as other minds can invite new questions, perspectives, and criticisms on a given topic, and add to your overall understanding of your paper. However, I view the role of a tutor, or folklorist-in-training, as more of a guide or facilitator to questioning and understanding as opposed to a critic or consultant for the student's work. This helps when the student goes home to finish up their paper, they have gained the confidence in themselves to press onward from the session, and make their ideas shine.

Working at the writing center and my experience practicing ethnographic fieldwork as a folklorist has helped me train myself to ask the right kind of questions to invite the most information from the students I see, as well as offer an example of how they too can ask themselves questions to continue gaining from the experience on their own. Understanding how to ask questions like a folklorist will aid in contextualizing the student with the Writing Center, inferring something about the student's state based on the generic expectations of the environment and their rough draft, and continuing the session through detailed and engaging follow-up questions, a tutor, or teacher, can present a safe space to assist the student in revising their work. This method builds on several of the Writing Center's goals for tutoring students, and offers a unique perspective for both tutoring and classroom spaces. We want the students to become the masters of their own writing and revision process, and tutoring like a folklorist brings the students one step closer to achieving this goal.

Work Cited

Goldstein, Diane E. "Not Just a 'Glorified Anthropologist': Medical Problem Solving Through Verbal and Material Art." *Folklore in Use*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1993, pp. 15–24.