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Lost in Translation:

The Immigration to Academia and Implementing Critical Thought

Writing Centers are a place for everyone, whether you are a first generation student, a graduate student working on thesis work, or a student struggling to brainstorm ideas for a thought provoking paper. Freshmen and sophomores come to the Writing Center in droves, unsure on how to “speak” to their professors, let alone write an academic paper for them. At the Writing Center we ease unorganized minds, direct thoughts, parse together confusing prose, and perhaps most importantly, assist our clients in *translating* their thoughts, colloquial or not, to fit into the sphere of academia. Essentially, our students are immigrants to academia. An immigrant is defined as anyone who comes to live permanently in a foreign country. Typically, this definition, within the context of a university is associated with international students. Yet, as instructor, my students come to me unable to communicate their complicated thoughts through their intellectual language. Thus, their prose mimics academia, verbatim from lecture, and the product no longer contains the voices of their author. The student becomes a foreign body to a systemized, structured community, in which they are told not to speak their language. We expect our students to acclimate to our academic culture and expect them to thrive.

The Writing Center and the English 1010 classroom are likely the only places in which we can acclimate our students into the academic climate. For this reason, we must engage our students to value critical thinking. If learning English is the hallmark of becoming an American, then the hallmark of becoming an academic is learning how to engage in all discourses critically.

This idea of an academic immigrant came to me after observing Joseph's session. The student entered the session clearly frustrated. His professor had awarded him a lower score than he anticipated. He couldn't seem to quite grasp why his professor couldn't understand what he was saying within his paper. This metaphorical language barrier prevented this student in engaging intellectually with his professor, and as a result made him feel inarticulate. This student was trying to navigate a new intellectual language, and the professor and the student experienced an impasse in understanding.

Joseph asked the student if he felt comfortable reading his paper out loud. The student agreed, and stumbled through his paper, struggling to mimic the tone of an academic paper. The result was tangled prose, knotted with colloquial elements. Joseph asked the student if he could pause within his reading, and asked the student, "What are you trying to say? Verbalize your idea to me."

The student's eyes lit up. He no longer felt the pressure to mimic a voice that wasn't his own. His own voice was enough. He explained his idea, and Joseph helped him find his voice within his paper.

"So I can say it just like that?" the student asked.

"Definitely, and it makes more sense. You can use your own voice within academic writing." Joseph stated.

In that moment, Joseph's advice was paradigm shifting. All the nights I spent as an undergraduate, attempting to write for my professors, attempting to adopt an accent other than my own felt validated. As a tutor Joseph was able to make the student comfortable throughout the session, reassure him in sharing his voice, and allow him to reframe his idea. Joseph effectively assisted his student in translating his thoughts. His approach was exemplary,

however, seemingly difficult to recreate in the context of the classroom. I decided rather, that as an instructor that I would allow my students to share their thoughts within my classroom without fear of judgement. I did this by incorporating open-ended questions into my lectures. I chose topics my students were familiar with, such as pop-culture, political events, and even university business. I then asked them to discuss these topics critically, and approach the topic through different lenses. I let my students discover their ideas. Immigrate to concepts. I allowed them to become natives within the classroom.

We must do this as instructors, rather than demanding that our students know how to write a good academic paper, we must let them practice the language of academia, within tutoring sessions and the classroom. This is the key for bridging the cultural gap between high school and the collegiate classroom. The reason Joseph's approach was effective was because he engaged the student to view his work critically and then further complicate his ideas. He asked the student how they interpreted their argument, then he asked open-ended questions, and lastly, he encouraged the student to use their own words. Joseph offered the student the necessary tools to help his client practice engaging in an academic discourse, within a low stakes environment. If we engage our students to be critical, and to ask questions about what they say, and think, we have achieved the true purpose of the classroom.

As instructors, we must allow our students to immerse themselves in the culture of academia within the classroom. We can do this by encouraging our students to verbalize their ideas within an open forum and practice critical thought within small group discussions. These types of exercises stretch their vocabularies and familiarize them with the language of academia. Once they have mastered organizing their thoughts, they can then reflect these ideas onto the

page. Additionally, this intellectual stretching then allows for creativity and an understanding of instances in which colloquialism is appropriate.

As an instructor, often I feel like I must hand package and deliver epiphanies and ideas to my students. Ideas that they can easily unwrap and consume, like a Big Mac. However, this approach is problematic, because this fast food mentality produces voiceless students. Our students are immigrating to concepts, to a culture, and to an established institutional environment. We cannot expect them to thrive if they cannot communicate their ideas verbally and through the written word effectively. Thus, we cannot be upset when they attempt to regurgitate information shared with them in the same way in which the information was received, whether or not that method was effective for them. Our students are in a state of flux, as they attempt to adjust to an intellectual climate, which demands them to be natives of academia.

Similar to immigrants our students are extremely intelligent, resilient, and amazing individuals with stories. We cannot do a disservice by these individuals by offering prepackaged lectures and epiphanies. Conceptually, we must challenge our students; give them something to chew on. Students must practice their new intellectual languages, and we must help them become aware of their accents and find their voices. Immigration is a process. Acculturating is a process, which require a process approach to help our students achieve their potential.