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Victoria Jaye  
*Utah State University*

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Utah State University

### The Wall of Silence: Disrupting Kairotic Spaces

Abstract: Every class has a balance of kairotic space where teachers have power and students accept that power within the confining space of the classroom. Power defines our world as well as our relationships to one another; without power there is no control which can be key to governing a classroom. Disruption of this power dynamic can open dialogue between teachers and students that might not have existed otherwise because students feel confined to the strictures binding their power creating a wall of silence. Using brainstorming and reflecting as well as peer tutoring, I experimented with breaking down the wall of silence so that my writing students could join the dialogue of their learning. Not only do they join the conversation, they learn that they are teachers along with me because I also learn from them.

Keywords: power, structure, school, space, teacher, student, wall, silence, disrupt, writing, classroom, authority, brainstorming, reflecting, peer, tutoring, kairotic, dialogue

Victoria Jaye

Practicum 6820/Writing Center

Beth Buyserie/Star Coulbrooke

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## The Balance of Kairotic Space

Kairotic space, as it is referred to by Margaret Price, is the use of a space in relation to the power structure that naturally exists between teachers and students (Price 60). This is a dynamic that exists within classrooms without too much thought on the part of the student—they actively expect the teacher to be the ultimate authority and they themselves to be learning from perhaps not *the* master but a master of the subject (Freire 72). They are the vessels to be filled and it is the job of us, the teachers, to fill their brains with the knowledge we believe is important which Freire refers to as the banking concept (Freire 72). Though it may be accepted without much thought on the part of the oppressed (in this case, the students), power is central to our consciousness; it maintains and shapes our relationships to others based off the power that we gain and lose over one another. This creates a wall of silence between us and our students where they feel they cannot contribute and to the conversation, so no dialogue is opened of any kind (Freire 72). When students are subject to the banking concept then silence reigns in the classroom without interruption; in a writing class, this is essentially useless because the necessary skills for writing are not obtained through lecture (Freire 73). My goal as a teacher is to disrupt silent kairotic power spaces to show students that we learn from them as they learn from us, that way a conversation can happen (Freire 72). I accomplish this in two ways in my own class: through brainstorming (my favorite of all lessons) and reflection days (my other favorite lesson to teach). I also experiment with breaking down kairotic power spaces in my tutoring sessions at the writing center.

### Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an activity that I realized I enjoyed when a student from English 2010 came into the writing center not knowing what she wanted to do for her Values & Needs letter.

This is an assignment I was unfamiliar with but understood the basic tenets of because it was similar to a lesson I was teaching at the time. This student had a starter idea of the problem with parking on the Logan campus but when I asked her if she truly cared about this topic, if it made her angry or impassioned—she said no. Then I asked her to think smaller; what affects you on a daily basis? Lack of sleep, time management problems. She still was not excited yet. What led her to her topic was a problem I currently am having with my own department because two disciplines are fusing leading me to take a class I neither need nor wanted to take. I told her my idea and it sparked something in her; she lit up and began a rant about how she hates having to take certain classes just because her degree demands it. I fed this flame by sharing my own experiences with that anger as an undergrad over my school's ridiculous demands for graduation. I also shared that I have people in my 1010 class that do not need to be there, that I feel could have tested out of it. This student was excited, interested in their topic and it validated my existence as a teacher to be able to bring unfocused ideas into greater clarity as well as get a student excited about the learning/research for their topic. It also validated me as a peer tutor because I was not teaching then; I was listening and feeding a flame like I would with my friends who are having trouble with their thesis topic. Brainstorming, for me, is an activity I can use at any level whether teaching or not because it is not something that has a defined power structure. Offering ideas and feedback happens on any level; I love it because I love watching people become sparkly because they are lit up inside from their own ideas/my input about their ideas.

When a power dynamic has become too pronounced, I try to relax kairotic space by asking my students questions about their topics while brainstorming (Price 60). There are times when this is not enough because students often do not know where to start in their brainstorming, so I ask about their interests, their major, try to flesh out their passions for assignments. Then it

simply becomes two people sharing ideas instead of a teacher telling a student how and what to think.

### Reflection

When an assignment has just been turned in, I always do a reflection day. This is where my students get to talk openly about the assignment they just did and tell me what I could do better as a teacher with my next 1010 class. I ask what was confusing, what did they like and dislike about the lessons, what might be more fun for the next class, etc. This is where Freire's concept of students not having the opportunity to understand that they contribute to learning dies (Freire 72). I want my students to know that I am learning from them in the same way that they are learning from me because they are the teachers (Freire 72). It is difficult to ascertain whether they realize that the kairotic space has been disrupted to become something new and hopefully, more exciting for them (Price 60). I do graded writing journals on those days so that could be the reason for their overwhelming attendance on the reflection days but I would like to think it goes beyond that: I jokingly tell them this is the time to openly criticize me. I think it is that they enjoy being a central part of the learning process and being heard within the academic structure that often does not let them speak. This is the most fun for me because it is a kind of hindsight brainstorm; they tell me what I did not explain well or should have focused more on, and I learn how to become a better teacher through the sieve of their experiences.

### Tutoring Observations

What I noticed in my observations of other tutors was the fact that each tutor had a baseline of peer tutoring without adding any kind of power dynamic to the session. In other words, the walls of kairotic space never came up so therefore, there was no need to have them broken down (Price 60). It is a very easy/relaxed environment where they make the student feel

comfortable and appreciated with their suggestions. It seems to be second nature for many of the tutors to redirect questions without teaching or advising too much which is extremely difficult for me. This could be due to them being undergraduates themselves, so they relate to their peer group more easily or that I am accidentally establishing too much ethos to the point that undergraduates feel they need to defer to me as an authority figure. With grad students, our minds are working at a different level and we may come off as authoritative due to our long years in school.

When tutoring, I try to disrupt the kairotic power space as much as possible so that the student is in control of the ideas and their paper but where I can advise them (Price 60). When I share with students that I happen to be an English teacher and a grad student it seems to make them feel more comfortable. It also gives credence to the idea that I might be able to help them. I will have to test this theory by not saying anything about being a teacher to see how at ease students are. If this does not work to relax the power dynamic then I share with them some of my ideas and show the student that I am a person, a student just like them that has passions/irritations that can be used as a basis for papers. This is usually the last-ditch effort, but I have been lucky so far that if I have to share my ideas then it sparks something in the student, and they can bring their own ideas to the table.

The disruption of kairotic space has become part of my pedagogy as a teacher overall because it is not something that can be broken down all at once (Price 60). It is chipped away at over time and through experience so that the walls of silence that are accidentally maintained can be broken down. I want to encourage learning instead of a banking concept that merely validates my own existence instead of exploring my students' interests/thinking (Freire 72). For true learning to happen, I believe the walls of kairotic space needs to be broken down at least so that

students are not afraid to be vocal in my classes (Price 60). Teaching for the first time has been a difficult, wonderful opportunity and I feel that my experiences in the writing center have helped me personally grow because I can experiment with other teachable moments outside the walls of my classroom. With the writing center, I can practice my pedagogy on the level of my students without standing at the front of the room and commanding attention as the teacher.

## Works Cited

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