"I Just Turned In What *I* Thought": Authority and Voice in Student Writing

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New Voice

The story of one student writer shows how the challenges of writing from sources are tied to issues of voice and authority.

Keith stepped into my cubicle on Monday morning, tentatively looking around. "Is this it?" he asked hesitantly.

"This is it . . . you've found the Nerve Center," I joked. Keith's eyes passed over the peeling pasteboard cubicle dividers, the flickering fluorescent light, the dented (and empty) metal bookcases. It looked more like a storage space than an office. I smiled a little sheepishly; I knew what the cubicle revealed about my status. "Have a seat," I invited warmly, "it's great to see you."

Keith sniffled, eyes watering. This was his first time to be sick at the university, away from home and the old comfort of staying home ill. Instead of watching TV and drinking soup prepared by Mom, he was dragging himself to classes, doing his best to keep up. He was a first-year student taking the first-year composition course. Writing wasn't easy for Keith; he mentioned even the first day of the course that he had to come early over the summer to take a remedial course for those deemed not prepared for regular college English, and that he wasn't sure he was ready for the papers he'd be writing this quarter. Now he was about to receive his first graded paper for the quarter; other than his preparatory work over the summer, it would be his first graded work in college, period.

Keith was a student in my first college writing class in the fall of 2002. As he undertook a transition from high school to college writer, I was transitioning from high school to college teacher: after beginning my career teaching secondary English, I had now returned to graduate school, moving into a career in English education.

When he'd gotten settled and looked across the desk at me, my expression was pained. "Keith, I have your paper, and I want to make sure you understand what's going on. Basically, you're getting an F because you didn't use any examples from the text." I put the graded essay on the desk between us, and I waited, watching his response.

I had been dreading this moment all weekend. When I'd read Keith's paper and discovered to my horror that he had not referred to any of the assigned read-

ings, I had felt both confusion and anger. Had he not understood the assignment? It clearly called for "Examples from at least two of the readings and from your own experience;" I even double-checked. Had he written it at the last minute? It couldn't be; students had brought rough drafts to class the week before, Keith included. What happened? Did he just not care? Did he think I wouldn't notice? Why hadn't he included textual examples? My mind raced into the future: Would he freak out when he saw the failing grade? Would this be my first complaint to the director of the program? Would he fail the next paper too? Did I fail him as a teacher? Now, I had broken the news: *you failed*. How would he react?

Keith looked at the paper without touching it. He saw the rubric and comment sheet stapled to the front of his paper; he'd seen that same rubric when the essay was assigned, and he'd used it in class as a guide to revision. Somehow, though, it seemed like another animal entirely now, covered in my crinkly handwriting, comments squeezed in between the typed lines and squirreling up the margins. And the grade: 56 out of 100. He'd known it was coming, knew it the day he handed it in. Still, there it was: his first graded assignment, failed. He took a deep breath; then he looked up at me and smiled. "I knew exactly what you were going to say when I got here. I knew what was going to happen."

His explanation revealed that this was true. Keith knew a lot about what had happened and why: "I've always had a problem incorporating textual examples."

I started a little at his use of the term. Is this the way an "F" writer talks?

"I had to take [the remedial course], you know, this summer. In that class, we didn't really have to deal with any readings; it was all based on your experience. The papers were all about what we thought, our opinions and our reasons for them. I think I'm comfortable writing that sort of paper, *my* argument. But the problem is the same problem I had in high school: I don't really know how to work the readings in. I thought, going into this paper, that I'd just write a draft first, without any quotes or anything. I just write better that way, if I focus on what I think."

Keith then opened his course reader to show its bookmarked, highlighted pages—passages he had identified and annotated where they might be added to his paper. He continued: "Then I planned to go back, and work the quotes in later, in between. Then I put it off and put it off, and I never got back to it. I kept thinking about it, but for some reason I never did it. I just turned in what *I* thought."

A Problem of Voice and Authority

The day the essay was due, Keith had written a process piece (a post-assignment reflection I collected from all students), which he titled "A. D. D." In the piece, he described *not* a diagnosed case of attention deficit disorder or learning disability but his own "writing process, or better called, procrastination process" and the myriad activities he found to engage in other than revision: laundry, housecleaning, watching television, and checking email. I had read that piece before reading his essay, and I had interpreted Keith's tendency to procrastinate as an example of developing study habits in a first-year student. He delayed revising because he wanted to avoid

writing. I often have the same problem, and I had planned to speak with Keith about strategies for organizing his time, breaking up a writing task into manageable pieces, and other tricks for motivation and planning in writing.

Now, after listening to him speak, I saw it differently: when Keith avoided revising his paper, he was not avoiding writing altogether but was instead avoiding making a shift away from his own ideas and into the readings' ideas. To use quotations and other specific examples was, to Keith, an exercise in communicating someone else's ideas rather than his own. The paper as he had written it, without examples, documented his own thought process and conclusions. He felt that referring to the texts would make it into a paper about someone else's thought process and conclusions. Whereas I see the essay as a piece of writing in which the writer's ideas are the main event and the textual examples serve as mere tools for illumination and support, Keith resisted the encroachment of the readings into the territory of his own argument.

In Keith's comments I also heard, of course, echoes of Bartholomae's notion: "Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion . . . to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse" (Bartholomae 4). Understood this way, writers must first understand the swirl of existing discourse on their subject (in this case, readings on obesity in America); then they must assert themselves as more qualified, or sensitive, attentive, or otherwise authoritative readers of these texts than the reader of their paper. And indeed this frame offers one way of understanding Keith's situation, but I thought then and still think now that Keith's task was less about establishing authority for invention and more about finding ways to express his already-invented argument and to position that argument within the arguments of others. That is, Keith had something to say, a position he had developed in response to and within the discourse of the course readings. His was not a question of entering the room in which the conversation was being held, nor of generating responsive things to add to that conversation; instead, he was reaching for a strategy for composing texts that reflected the authority he had already claimed. He was aware of the need for examples, too, and had plans for which ones to use and where they might go; he can synthesize texts in service of an argument—at least in talking with me about it. The problem then, for Keith, was that to include those texts in his paper would be to make the paper no longer about "what *I* thought." In other words, using explicit references to the very texts from which Keith worked in building his argument drowned out the sound of Keith saying what he thought.

This conference helped both Keith and me to think differently about the task of writing an essay. Over the course of the quarter, Keith managed to find ways to make use of outside texts in his essays without sacrificing his sense of control over his writing. Watching him work, I began to find new ways of thinking about the writer's voice in relation to the voices found in source texts. And in the nine years that have passed since I worked with Keith—years in which I have been engaged in research related to authority in writing—I have further come to link concerns about authority and acquiring a discourse to concerns about voice.

Voice?

At the beginning of my career, I unwittingly approached voice as a kind of flavoring for student writing, like salt. I noticed "voice" in students' language when they sounded like their adolescent or young adult selves: when they used surprising word choices or slang, or when their writing sounded conversational or even quirky. I thought of voice (and encouraged my students to use it) as flair, as personal touches one added to the language of a piece of writing to make it "sound like you." The problem with that view is one of several that Peter Elbow lays out in "Voice in Writing Again—Embracing Contraries:" the metaphor of voice, particularly when used in the way I've just described, activates unhelpful notions of fixed identity and individual uniqueness (183). And flair wasn't what Keith needed. In fact the writing "sounded like Keith," but it wasn't saying the right things. It failed to accomplish the assigned task, which was to make an argument extending from the ideas of others. In this case not voice but *voices* were the problem—that is, his sense that his own voice was somehow not powerful enough or entitled to speak alongside or even over the voices of more authoritative, published, and expert speakers. It was less a problem in flavor but in volume (as he seemed to experience it), or perhaps in register (insofar as register can index positioning of speakers relative to one another).

And, in fact, I think my teaching of voice in the past, grounded in an understanding of voice as individual, "authentic," and more or less stable for students has actually discouraged students from taking on such a sense of authority. I characterized their writing as "voiceful" when it was specific to personal experience, when it vividly characterized personal reactions, or when it conjured unique images that resonated with what I already knew about the student. Yet for Keith to write with voice, in that sense, would mean for him to pull away from the words and ideas of others. It is successful integration of the words and ideas of others, without loss of one's own authority over the ideas, that is called for when writing in an academic voice.

Working with References

At the time I met Keith, however, I had not developed this perspective much beyond a sense that Keith could be encouraged to "speak up." We ended our conference on his first essay by talking about how Keith might revise his paper for an improved grade. We read his essay aloud together, and after every point I asked him questions like "how?," "when?," "how do you know?" I hoped that these would serve as entry points for Keith to include relevant passages from the readings in support of his original ideas; I wanted him to consider the readings as strengthening beams to tuck *behind* his own argument rather than structures erected on top of it or in place of it. As Keith answered those elaborating questions, I hoped he would notice that the answers were his, even when he used others' words to explain those answers.

I was surprised at Keith's rueful but good-natured response to having received a failing grade. Students at this university were typically high achievers in high school, and many have difficulty adjusting to the drop in grades that often

accompanies the new challenges of college courses. I wondered whether the high level of engagement in class Keith had shown at the beginning of the quarter would continue after he received his F. I was happy, then, when Keith emailed me well before the next essay was due and asked if he could come in for another conference for some feedback on a rough draft.

His draft reflected progress from the first paper; he laid out his argument point by point, and he had penciled notes in the margins at points where he thought references to the readings might be appropriate. Our conference was brief, and he left with a plan to insert the textual examples and advice from me to "be sure to explain what each quotation means and why you're using it; don't just dump them in." While I was encouraged to see Keith beginning to incorporate material from the text into the paper, I was a little dismayed at his process. I wanted students responding to and commenting on the readings, not just dropping bits of them in as adornments for an already-written paper.

It was with interest, then, that I pulled his finished essay from the stack to grade a few days later. I immediately noted that he had included a number of direct quotations from the assigned readings. In fact, in the introductory paragraph, he incorporated perhaps too many quotations:

> Obesity has been quite a controversial and intriguing topic in the recent few years. Obesity has become the center of attention for many people because it has been spreading so rapidly. Now, more than half of the adults in our nation can be classified as being overweight and about "22% of the U.S. population is obese" (Koplan and Dietz, p. 440). This percentage of obese Americans has been on the rise for many years and does not look like it will slow down soon. Health problems that have been related to obesity are on the rise as well. "More than 300,000 deaths each year have been linked to obesity" (Goodman and Witaker, p. 497). Soon obesity could be the number one cause of death in our nation. Right now "only smoking exceeds obesity in its contribution to total mortality rates in the United States" (Koplan and Dietz, p. 440). Because of these facts, something needs to be done in order to reverse this rise in obesity. And because of the im-pressionability of teens, it seems very likely that this change could be brought on during the years of adolescence.

Keith's introduction shares problems with many of its kind I have seen in high school, introductory college courses, and even graduate seminars. In the paragraph's last sentence, Keith states his own thesis: to effectively combat widespread obesity in the United States, we should focus our attack on teenagers. However, in the course of providing needed background information, he provides a string of facts that threaten to take over the paragraph; it is for a moment as Keith feared it would be. As quotation after quotation is added to the pile, the writing sounds less and less like the thoughtful and opinionated student I know. Indeed, by the end, Keith can state his thesis only timidly, using qualifiers such as "seems very likely" and "could be."

However, as he moves into the body of the paper Keith again emerges as the paper's speaker. He explains that he offers an idea the class readings failed to address:

> In our readings during class, we went over a lot of information regarding obesity in adulthood and we also went over a lot of information regarding obesity during childhood. One topic that wasn't covered, however, was the one that covers the years *between* these two stages. This group of years may also be known as adolescence. Adolescents are not only impressionable, but they seem to be the most widely affected age group as well. "Although obesity is increasing in all age groups and among all racial/ethnic groups and educational levels, young adults ages 18 to 29 are experiencing the highest rate of increase" (Goodman and Witaker, p. 497).

Here Keith articulates his point as an alternative to those positions found in the readings. In the conference I described at the beginning of this essay, Keith said that quoting the readings distracted the paper's energy from what *he* thought into what *they* (the articles' authors) thought. Here, though, Keith's position is not obscured behind or overshadowed by the experts' voices; instead, he steps up alongside the readings and shows where they have failed. While the paragraph is rough, it represents a significant shift in Keith's stance relative to the texts. Keith enters into dialogue with and even disagrees with the texts rather than competing with them for authorial power.

As the essay draft continues, Keith becomes more and more comfortable engaging in discussion of the texts, noting degrees of agreement and points of departure. He begins to walk through the assigned readings, noting how each overlooks adolescents and proposing that the solutions in each article be redirected at this important group:

> I agree with Greg Crister when he says in his article 'Too Much of a Good Thing' that overeating should be stigmatized (2001, p. 461), but I think that this stigmatization should be focused on young-adults and teens. . . The minds of today's youth are very delicate and could be stigmatized very easily.

That Keith can agree with parts of an author's argument even while pointing out its flaws reflects Keith's increasing tendency to *use* the texts for his own purpose rather than simply recounting them—and it is the practice of recounting texts without discussion or elaboration that enables sources' voices to "take over" a student paper. While in revision he will work on detailing his solution more clearly—what might "stigmatization of youth" look like, and how would its results differ from what Crister proposes?—Keith now can quote the text and advance his own points within the same paragraph.

Why So Difficult?

As Keith began to cite assigned texts, detailing his own position in relation to the voices of the readings, he began to demonstrate awareness that his voice is one in a field of many, that others have spoken on his subject in the past and will again. He located his particular position within that field of voices. As Thonney points out in a recent article in this journal, academic writers across disciplines make some similar moves in their published work. In adopting one of these moves, "respond[ing] to

what others have said about their topic," students struggle with synthesizing and using references rather than simply mentioning them (348). In another move, Thonney notes, students "adopt a voice of authority" by "learn[ing] to imitate techniques of experienced writers" to navigate between first or third person and to write concisely (348, 353).

Yet doing this is not so simple. I see working from sources and voice as much more intimately connected problems (see also Elbow, "Reflections"). Some of the difficulty students have writing in an academic, authoritative voice while using source texts appropriately stems from the complex set of abstractions required to position one's argument relative to those of authoritative others in print, while also positioning oneself relative to readers (in this case classmates and teacher). As Graff and Birkenstein explain,

> the underlying structure of effective academic writing . . . resides not just in stating our own ideas, but in listening closely to others around us, summarizing their views in a way that they will recognize, and responding with our own ideas in kind . . . to argue well you need to do more than assert your own ideas, You need to enter a conversation, using what others say (or might say) as a launching pad or sounding board for your own ideas. (3)

Graff and Birkenstein offer templates writers can use to make these moves, but the mental activity involved in using those goes beyond simply filling in the blanks. To use them successfully, writers construct a vision from the texts they have read and may write. They must envision the discourse on a topic as a conversation—meaning also that they must envision each author as a speaker, even though their contributions have been asynchronous and encoded in writing rather than speech. They must envision themselves as speakers among the other speakers, though in fact student writers are usually beginners in disciplines where the authors of the source texts are key figures. When a writer like Keith struggles to make use of readings in his papers, he learns to set his own worldview ("what *I* thought") in the context of what others think and have said. As James Moffett points out, "[d]ifferentiating among modes of discourse, registers of speech, kinds of audiences is essentially a matter of decentering, of seeing alternatives, of standing in others' shoes, of knowing that one has a private or local point of view and knowledge structure" (57). For a student writing in a course context, this differentiation is complicated by the different authority positions the student writer must simultaneously occupy: a novice citing experts must nonetheless take a stance of authority over his or her own argument; a student seeking approval and awaiting evaluation must write without reference to that most immediate context for the writing. These problems can present themselves in writing as problems with voice.

Rethinking Voice

Thus, on that day in 2002, I first imagined Keith's problem to be a problem of voice and authority, and I still do. However, the way I think about voice and authority has changed. At the time, in my working model of students' writing processes, I had

imagined students "finding" their voices through readings, and though I probably wouldn't have articulated this, operationally I conceptualized authority in writing as having something to say to a given audience. That is, I then imagined, students come in with nothing to say, writing in "no voice." Through engagement with the readings and class discussion, they find things to say, and as they write about those new opinions their writing begins to have voice. Students struggle with the problems inherent in writing about topics on which they are *not* yet authorities, and I had imagined the assigned readings as little toeholds for students to use as they climbed onto the topic.

I think now that my model was incorrect and even unhealthy. The high school and beginning college writers I have worked with were "voiceful" most of the time. Their language, both spoken and written, featured novel uses of familiar words, slang terms, and turns of phrase that signal their memberships and stances, rich in connotation. I always encouraged my students to capitalize on these when composing narratives and personal essays (as Keith was able to do in his high school courses and the introductory college course). However, for reasons of audience and register such terms and phrasing don't typically find their way into the academic essay (it wouldn't have helped Keith much for his paper to include the witticisms that peppered his speech, and he happened not to have much personal experience with the obesity issues in the paper). The task instead was to situate his voice among the voices of others, not by adding flair but by claiming his right to speak on a topic about which he had read and thought, articulating those thoughts clearly and with reference to the others' ideas that had informed those thoughts.

Further, Keith did not enter my class "voiceless" in any sense of the term; in fact, he had much to say and had been an opinionated and lively speaker and writer. My deficit model for voice and authority kept me from seeing Keith's situation clearly. He struggled not with finding something to say but with saying it loudly enough to be heard amid more expert voices. His failure to use the readings in the first paper was not a retreat from serious engagement with the ideas of the course, but a defensive move that preserved space in which he *could* engage with them effectively. Instead of moving from having nothing to say, through the readings, to an eventual opinion, Keith had to learn to move from having much to say, to negotiating differences between his views and those presented in the texts, to presenting both in proper relation to one another.

Sperling and Appleman, synthesizing scholarship on the notion of voice, ultimately characterize voice as "a language performance— always social, mediated by experience, and culturally embedded" (71). That is, voice is something writers make rather than something they already have and then express. Further, that *making* is a situated activity in every sense. Voice, in other words, is just as composed as the text itself. My challenge, then, is to work with student writers to understand and manipulate voice in the context of an academic discourse in which source texts are cited, synthesized, and put to work in service of a writer's argument. This is no easy task, but seeing it now as an act of composing, I can approach it the way I approach so many other composing tasks with students: by modeling my own practices as

I compose, by engaging students in similar practices, and—most important—by engaging students in analysis of and talk about those practices. For, as Elbow states:

> learning new intellectual practices is not just a matter of practicing them; it's also a matter of thinking and talking about one's practice. Or, speaking academically, students need metacognition and metadiscourse to help them understand just what these new intellectual practices are that they are being asked to learn. ("Reflections" 149)

Further, to teach in this manner is not, as some might charge, to pretend again that the writer works alone in shaping voice or that he or she claims authority simply by deciding to claim it. In emphasizing metacognition and metadiscourse, I am not only emphasizing "process talk" focused on individual decisions in crafting a piece of writing but also talk about the complex ways our processes as writers both follow from and push back against our situations as readers, writers, students, and practitioners of the disciplines in which we write. Sperling and Appleman call for just such an approach: "Teaching voice, then, means that we understand with students how and whether one discourse infiltrates or meshes with another, and to what rhetorical, academic, and, not least, political ends" (81). This is a self-conscious, reflexive, and reflective teaching around both voice and authority, taken together as elements of the composed text rather than as preconditions for it.

I keep thinking what I might do differently with Keith now, were he to visit me in office hours these nine years later. What I think is this: instead of engaging him in discussion of the obesity epidemic, his argument about the role of adolescents, and the sources he might use in forwarding that argument, I'd like to engage Keith in a discussion of the very kind in which I have engaged here. It is the discussion Keith himself opened when he named his own problem "incorporating textual examples" and placed that activity in opposition to "just turn[ing] in what *I* thought." I think Keith might have learned something from that kind of discussion that could have helped him that quarter—and I *know* I would have.

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