

Language Games

I remember hating my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. “K”. She was a tyrant in the classroom. I don’t think I ever had another teacher that obviously hated students so much. She was horrible. I secretly suspected that she was collecting 101 puppies for a Dalmatian skin coat ... [cue theme music: *Cruella DeVil, Cruella DeVil, If she doesn’t scare you no evil thing will...*] It was in her class that I started to hate writing. Every specific detail had to be done *her* way or your work would be returned filled with red ink and comments about doing things the “right” way. I usually cringed when she’d return papers to the class. Sadly, her tyranny took hold of the oral language as well. I remember saying “got” when I should have said “have” during class, and she took great pleasure in “teaching me the error of my ways” in front of the class. Needless to say, this ending with everyone in the class laughing except me. She was the first teacher I had that I can honestly say I had no respect for.

It was about the same time I entered her classroom that I started seeing a psychologist to talk about my parents divorce. My father leaving my mother and I simply devastated me as a young toddler. I had been filled with anger and confusion for years. What did it mean that Daddy was gay and didn’t want to live with us anymore? The psychologist I began seeing, “You can call me George,” spent many years helping me deal with my anger and emotional baggage. He really was a special person. George would sometimes have me write for “homework” from our sessions. I found it therapeutic – and attribute the fact that I’m not in rotting away in a cell somewhere mostly to his help. George helped me get in touch with the fire that was burning inside me and seize control of the flames.

Writing was different when I wrote for George than when I did it for Mrs. K. Writing was natural and comfortable when it happened outside of the classroom settings and red-pen requirements. I felt like what I wrote to George mattered. I felt safe and able to take risks, but in the classroom I knew writing was anything but safe. Mrs. K made sure that students knew writing was a job, a mountain to climb, and that she was most definitely in control. I suppose that was my earliest experience with what I

call the *language games*. However, I don't think the games being played really dawned on me until many years later.

As a freshman in high school I entered the classroom of Mr. P. He was a stern man who ran his classroom in a traditional no nonsense "banking" manner. He taught students the five-paragraph essay. He taught students what to say, when and how to say it, for exactly how long ... and made us believe that to be successful writing had to be done his way. I remember Mr. P writing on countless pieces of my work that I needed to keep emotions out of my writing. At that time, unemotional wasn't what writing was for me. To me, writing – real authentic, meaningful writing came from inside. It was something readers could really connect with because it was a part of me, trying to touch a part of you. But this wasn't what Mr. P considered writing. To be successful in his class, I had to play the game. "Yes Mr. P, you're right...You are smart and I should have done it your way. Oh please give me another chance to show you that I can write how you want me to write!" This, of course, was a game.

I knew what it would cost for me to be successful in Mr. P's classroom and it was a price I decided to pay. I became fake ... I invented a new persona for myself. I held my own value of writing, of an emotional discourse, above the fake and false motions I had to perform in the classroom and sadly, this allowed me to succeed. (*But in the grander scheme, not be successful...*) I wonder why teachers don't understand that. Why do the Mrs. K's and Mr. P's of the world allow students to succeed with such inauthentic output, when true and authentic output would produce such better work and really allow writers to learn? I don't know the answer. But the language game is more complex than that.

My parents (mother, father, step-father) all applauded my good grades, even if they made me feel fake. Good grades equaled success in my school and in my home. Strangely, that never mattered to me. I felt "real" when I was alone in my room writing for no one but me – or maybe for George. I could jump off the face of the cliff and free fall down my paper. It was something special to me – but I couldn't share it with anyone because they (they people in charge) taught me it didn't matter to them.

That may be why I hold authentic, engaged, emotionally charged writing to such a high level of esteem today. When my students give me something real – the screwed up child inside of me wants to shout from the rooftops, “I am not alone!”

Now I realized, much too late, that my idea of good writing could fit within all the other standards; it was only a matter of presentation. But no one taught me that. I figured out that particular rule of the game myself. Writing could have many facets that raise the bar of success. Writing, thinking, communicating...these things are open to interpretations – eye of the beholder type of things. But then I learned that the game has multiple facets as well.

I was a junior at Saginaw Valley State University taking a 400 level linguistics class when I had a disagreement with the professor of the class. Two students in front of me were taking detailed notes of his lecture. One student, a young lady, had missed something the professor had written (and erased rather quickly). She leaned over to the young man sitting next to her and asked how to finish the notes for that section. When the young man started to respond, the professor turned around and saw him talking. The professor told the young man to go sit in the corner for talking-out during a lecture. I couldn't believe my ears, but my pounding heart, attempting to deal with this discomfort, reassured me that this was real and shouldn't be happening. Needless to say, drama ensued. You see, at that time, I was the editor of our University newspaper and was considering writing an editorial about the incident. Up until that point I was a straight “A” student in this class. I had become well practiced at playing the game. However, that came to a halt with my editorial. My next assignment in his class earned a “D”. When I went to his office to discuss the grade, he told me (and this is reminiscent of Mike Rose...) that I was obviously a “C” student because I didn't understand the theories presented in the class. I made a decision in his office that day to remain true to myself. I told him he was obviously a “C” teacher for being so petty as to grade me poorly (the paper was pretty good – even as I look back) because of my editorial. We argued. At the end of the class he gave me something like a “C+”, which I challenged with

the Dean of Student Affairs, (and won...sort of) and had it raised to a "B". This taught me the game at a different level. Sometimes quality didn't matter as much as fitting into the environment and being accepted. The acceptance I understood, just not how much of a power player it was in the game.

When I sit alone, in front of my computer (now) or when it was with paper and pen (as a child) what I write is true. It has/had meaning. I try to emulate that as much as I can in my classroom writing and the writing I expect from my students. I've learned that truth and Truth often are hid behind other factors in the game. It's not right, and I don't agree...but what can I can't change the game by myself. (Although, I'm rather proud to say I teach my students how to put up a pretty good fight for themselves.) There was a time when I had to write with multiple voices. I had a hidden identity. Now, I try to write like myself. One voice with multiple presentations...I try to change the way the game is played. I'm not always successful – but in some ways that's not as important as it once was...in other ways – it's all that matters.