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What I learned this semester
Spring 2005

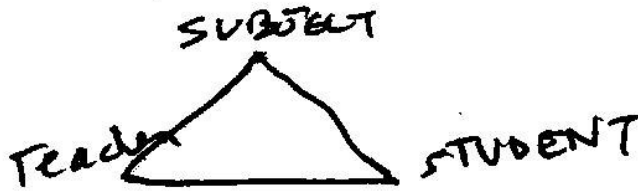
Although as seminar leader I was not required to produce a deliverable, I felt as though I should do so, both because (1) I'm guilt-ridden and (2) I am always thinking Deep Thoughts, and now I could follow one down the rabbit hole to see where it led. I started off the semester with a deep thought about Vocabulary as a key variable that cut across the diversities of my classroom. I focused on my Introductory Writing class, which includes this semester only five languages plus English (seven if you count the usual two creoles).

- Portuguese/Cape Verde Creole/ Cape Verde and Angola
- Gujarati/Madagascar
- French/Haitian Creole
- Spanish/Dominican Republic
- Vietnamese/Java ++
- English from Plymouth to Dorchester

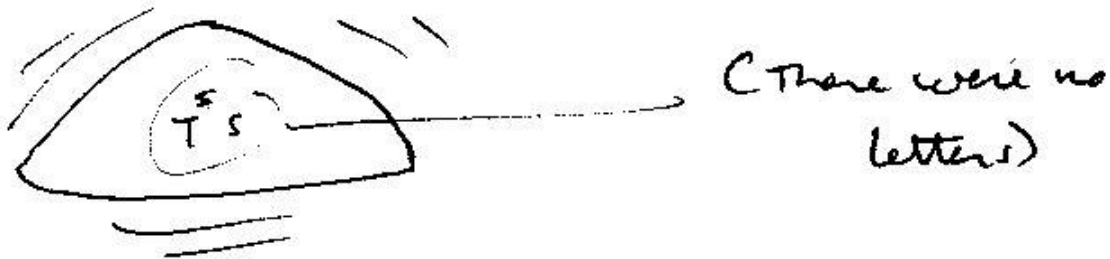
In our meetings we have focused on each other and on the readings in Achieving Against the Odds; for better or for worse, these essays were our models, or at least mine, originally, on how to think about the seminar. The model was to bring autobiography to the classroom and see how who we were and where we had come from interacted with our students' reality. As Linda Cohen points out, our seminar reflects in some sense our classes: we bring our personal selves together and dance forward and backward between our selves and our subjects. Male, female, black, white, native American, gay, straight, older, younger, part-time, full-time, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, practicing, out of practice, brand new hire, owner of a thirty-year chair, West Virginian, we are certainly diverse and inclusive. But we lack diversity in that we seem to share most of the same educational values, although not the same methods nor disciplines nor years of experience. No one has yet admitted to voting for Bush. How open are we and how we are open has been a major content element of this group.

I personally usually back away from the personal and move toward the cognitive. Also, I have always struggled with the issue of diversity as an issue, because my Introductory Writing classes are always so diverse. When I plug in "inclusive," however, the equation changes. Instead of asking, how do I reach (and all at once, to some extent) such diverse students, I began to ask a personal question: how do I and my course include and exclude students? I even devised a questionnaire, not yet distributed, to ask students how I affect them.

This morning, in the still darkness, thinking about this writing I'm doing, I had a minor league visionary experience. I have always, for the benefit of my class and myself, put this diagram on the board:



I use it to put the students into the frame, and also to show that different classes or different teachers might emphasize different angles of the triangle, or different connection lines: some focus on the subject only, some want to be your pal, some want you to know who's the boss, etc. In my closed eyes, pre-dawn, the triangle of its own accord changed into a three-dimensional solid, the lines less straight, the corners less sharp. And it sort of moved and pulsed. The lines didn't connect the corners, since they were all part of the same dense solid shape. I draw it like this, although I don't expect to see it again:



As a reader, writer, and dreamer, I'm constantly writing and re-writing my life in novelistic form. It's an ironic, comic novel about a self-deprecating hero with much to deprecate. The heroic aspect is always the consistency of my failure, and in teaching this semester (winter/spring 2005) has deserved a chapter of its own, causally related to the chaos of the snow days, too many hats to wear, just getting older, a demoralized institution, and (always blame the victim) a solid core of students who are not very good at being students. So I sit here, facing my ghostly confessor (Microsoft Word) and I am, not for the first time, trying to figure out How to Save the Semester, but with new spin: how to save it in a NECIT kind of way.

Let me go back to the beginning and write it again, starting with my ideas for exploration, my students, my seminar partners, and my morning vision of the glowing puffy triangle, a sort of living saateen throw pillow with "teacher, student, subject" embroidered near the corners in golden thread.

Almost all my pre-college writing students have in common very poor vocabularies. (I choose the word “poor” with purpose.) The bank is empty, the purse tattered. I have done some research into word acquisition, and what I learned did not bode well for most community college students: word acquisition is very differentiated by socio-economic status at the beginning of school, and word acquisition takes place in a ratio of 9:1 during the school years. That is, the “typical” kid will acquire about 3,000 words a year, of which about 300 will be taught in school. The other 2,700 are to emerge from reading, conversation with those with more vocabulary, and culture in all its glorious manifestations. If we are shaped by language, a generation that grows up on Eminem and LL Cool J may be different in some ways than a generation that grew up on Rodgers and Hart. Just musing here. (Of course, Rodgers and Hart sort of produces Woody Allen, and then where are you?) And some children, in our image-dominated culture, will not encounter those 2,700 words at all.

A story: a student (Cape Verdean) has written a short paper saying she likes where she lives because it is “convenient.” The paper makes no sense. It turns out that convenient—a word we have used to discuss possible virtues of a neighborhood—means, roughly, “good.” If she lacks a conceptual meaning for “convenient,” what other concepts does she have or lack? Does she have a concept for concept? (And I do not get that this is a stupid young woman.) [Overheard Hollywood conversation from “Annie Hall”: “I have an idea. I need a million dollars to make it into a concept.”] Here’s my concept, mostly too late for this term but next year for sure:

1. Get to know my students better sooner. I will ask this year’s students how to do that, and I will use the techniques I have learned in my seminar and have experienced with my seminar to accomplish this.
2. Continue to research vocabulary acquisition.
3. Encourage vocabulary acquisition. There is no magic bullet here, because the student must do the acquiring, and do most of it out of class and out of my orbit.
4. Foreground vocabulary and a love of words. (This love has been killed by the word lists of previous education, my students tell me. They tell me that they did not learn the words they looked up and made sentences for, and that they hated the exercise.)
5. Derive concept vocabularies from them and for them. Find more words for emotions and belief.
6. Develop verb vocabularies.
7. Bring in disciplinary vocabularies (challenging because of the developmental Gulag.)

And that’s where I am.

As for NECIT 2006, I should be offering specific things to do to improve on what we have done. I’m not sure what those are yet, except to get an earlier start on selection and planning. However, based on what I know we have done, I guess I’d suggest that these elements be repeated:

- That we maintain a place for people to say things safely, about their classes and themselves.
- That we listen to each other.
- That there be a minimum if not absence of hierarchy, and that everyone feels the freedom to make suggestions for changes and improvements.
- That the use of WebCT be encouraged, with tutorial help if necessary.
- That writing and journaling and the sharing of that writing outside of the seminar be supported, because two hours is not enough.