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In Praise of Silence

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BEBE NICKOLAI

In Praise of Silence

BEBE NICKOLAI

MARYVILLE UNIVERSITY

“Listen . . . with the ear of your heart.”

—The Rule of St. Benedict

I thought I was ready for her, a sophomore in my honors rhetoric class. I have been teaching the honors rhetoric class for almost twenty years. Yet every semester I revise my syllabus for the class as I realize that honors students can handle even bigger challenges—more difficult readings, more demanding writing assignments.

This semester, I again chose a new textbook, *Lend Me Your Ears*, edited by William Safire. The text includes 233 speeches to interest and challenge these students. I gladly abandoned the *College Writing* books that repeat what most honors students learned in high school.

But early in September, I found myself asking again, “Who is an honors student, and what will I learn from her this semester?”

This semester, she has taught me to let her choose from many rhetorical situations for her writing so she can work with me to design assignments that capture her imagination and let her go where she wants to go. I have to offer her the possibilities of depth and breadth because sometimes she wants to explore one place and other times she wants to range freely among many places. Based on what I have learned from her, here are my new “guidelines” for the first assignment in this class:

Choice #1: Write an essay *or* a speech on an issue that is important to you. In your composition explain why this issue is important. *Consider* presenting objections to your position. The composition *may* focus on a concern about society, religion, education, health, business, law, the environment, politics, *or* policies.

Choice #2: Write an argumentative speech *or* essay based on values. You *may* decide to ask others to live up to higher principles, respected traditions, *or* even new values *or* complain that they have not done so. Your composition *may* take the form of a tribute, sermon, eulogy, *or* commencement speech. You *may* wish to develop your main point with anecdotes and examples.

This semester, she has also taught me to turn more of the class over to her and her classmates. She has shown me that, if I give her an example of how to do a rhetorical analysis of a speech and give her many speeches from which to choose, she can present an engaging presentation to the rest of the class. She talks about rational appeal, emotional appeal, and ethical appeal. She talks about the writer’s tone. She keeps her classmates’ attention.

She has taught me that my syllabus is not a map to be followed but a suggested path. At the beginning of the semester, I thought I was going to teach an honors class

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on American rhetoric, but the student found speeches by Mussolini and Karl Marx in our textbook and said, “I want to analyze these speeches.”

How could I say no? Now I’m thinking about changing the title of my “American” rhetoric class.

Then she said, “I want to look at the speech Al Sharpton made at the 2004 Democratic Convention. I know it’s not in our book, but I can get everybody a copy.”

My honors student’s passion has gained my respect, so we are studying not just American rhetoric but international rhetoric, not just the speeches in the textbook but speeches students find in their much larger world. Revisions of my syllabus now appear regularly.

Her questions about assignments have pushed me in directions I had not considered. When we discussed writing a persuasive speech based on values, she asked, “Does it have to be serious?” I answered, “No,” and the class launched into a discussion about how to write satire, how to use exaggeration, how to present the opponent’s point of view in a satiric speech, and how to include factual information in effective satire. This conversation was not part of my lesson plan.

Although she thrives in the classroom setting, our one-on-one conferences about her writing have been most enlightening—for me. My honors student has been more critical of her writing than I have. “I don’t think this is the best word,” she said critically. “I don’t think I said this very clearly,” she moaned. I told her that she didn’t need a certain comma. She tenaciously defended it: “I want it there for emphasis.” I tried to convince her that the structure of her sentence was good and that the conjunctions were perfect, that the sentence flowed beautifully without the comma. She was not convinced—and that’s good.

Of course, not all students in my honors courses have the courage to push the boundaries of my syllabus and assignments; so one challenge for me has been how to nurture in other students her thoughtful and critical attitude.

First of all, I have tried to encourage her courageous challenges and to make sure that other students have the opportunity to appreciate her gifts. When she was brave enough to write a speech that included fragments, I brought the fragment-filled paragraph to class as an example of writing that fits an author’s humorous tone. Other students said they had been taught never to write fragments. She grinned and sighed in relief that this often banned sentence structure was once again an option for her.

When asking students to critique each other’s writing, I gave her paper to a student who was still struggling to find his voice. When he told her that he was having trouble answering the ten questions on my carefully designed peer editing form because her essay was “different,” she advised him, “Realize you don’t have to textbook every single question. You won’t lose points or anything if you don’t give the teacher the answer she expects. You just have to get around the questions.”

Yet I believe the most important thing I have done to nurture a critical attitude in my class is to impose a moratorium on my mouth. When a courageous risk taker starts pushing the boundaries, I *try* not to answer immediately. This semester students have seen me standing in silence more often than ever before. They have seen that a moment of silent thought can result in “untraditional” answers.

BEBE NICKOLAI

Yes, in my honors rhetoric class, I have learned about silence from this honors student who is quite assertive, quite sure of what she wants to get out of her education, quite willing to devote extra time to finding and exploring her passions, quite willing to bend unnecessary rules, quite open to many answers and many possibilities.

She is a student with many talents, many gifts, and, therefore, many responsibilities. In my writing class I want her to learn about challenging herself while respecting others. I want her to learn to trust and to question. I want her to learn about literary traditions and the importance of creativity and originality. I want her to be dedicated to her work and free to explore. I want her to reflect on human nature and take courageous action. I want her to ground her confidence in a spirit of humility, a spirit in which she acknowledges her own gifts while appreciating the gifts of others.

So I listen to her.

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