Navigating Discourses

"Suci? Did you have a question?" my professor asked.

"No," I replied flatly. I was sitting in one of my sociology classes that I found mildly interesting, and my professor had seen my hand move up in her periphery and thought I may have raised my hand.

"You don't have *any* questions?" she tried again. Clearly, she wanted me to say something, anything, but I had nothing for her.

I shook my head, she said ok, and continued with the lecture. This incident taught me to only brush my hair out of my face or scratch an itch on my face when the teacher could see what I was doing. I could not chance having to speak when I was not prepared to do so. This professor knew that I was paying attention and that I understood what we were learning. It puzzled her that I never said anything in class. My assignments would be returned with notes like "You have very interesting opinions. Why don't you speak in class?" or "Would you like me to cold call you?" I never answered her questions; I just ignored them. This was not the first time a teacher noticed that I did not speak up in class. Teachers have always noticed that I am usually quiet in a class, and some have tried to help me, but I ignored their efforts, content with my actions in the classroom.

I'm not mute; I speak up, just not often. The opinions my teachers read in my assignments were based on my spending a lot of time thinking and writing. I discovered writing was the best way for me to express my thoughts. It allowed me to see what I was thinking, and edit it so that it said exactly what I wanted it to say. I could not do this by speaking out loud, I

felt more comfortable being able to plan out what I wanted to say. Further, I never could find my place in the college classroom. The people around me seemed to know what to say and when, but I did not. My teachers noticed that I had interesting opinions, ones that were probably different from the opinions posed by other students. I never felt comfortable voicing my opinions in class, because I never wanted to show that I was different, that I did not belong. For awhile, I thought that this was a problem, that I should be thinking like the other students, and that my inability to do so made me a bad student. I thought of the reasons that I turned out this way: My high school was notorious for its inadequacies in providing a "good" education for its students, so I never received a "proper" high school education. My parents were foreign, so I did not receive help at home; I had to learn on my own. These theories about my failures in education led me to continue my inquiry about how I became bad student and how I came to disregard the institutions of schooling that I had once held to high esteem.

I attributed my inadequacies in the classroom to problems with my personality and intelligence. I thought that I did not fit in a classroom because I was not smart enough. However, upon reading the article, "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics" by James Paul Gee, I started to see elements of my background fall into place. Gee argues that how people choose to present themselves reflects back on their background and identity. Gee defines this idea as Discourses, which are "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (526). Gee goes on to explain that a person can present cues that mark him or her as part of a particular Discourse, such as word and grammar choices, body language, and overall appearance. Moreover, a person is a part of several Discourses at once (Gee 526).

The first Discourse one learns is referred to as his or her primary Discourse, which is where one first acquires an identity and ways of interacting with others and is usually acquired in the home. After learning a primary Discourse, Gee explains, most people are exposed to learning a secondary Discourse, which is found in the community—schools, religious institutions, organizations, community groups, etc. (527). Lastly, Gee explains that among the Discourses there are dominant and nondominant Discourses, which are secondary Discourses that provide the user with a link to society at large (in dominant Discourses) or to a particular community (in nondominant Discourses) (527-8). It is in this last explanation of Discourses where I find a problem with Gee's argument. Gee goes on to claim that it is not possible for a person to gain fluency in a dominant Discourse unless one has been taught it in school and at home. What Gee is arguing says that members of nondominant Discourses have no way to gain fluency in a dominant Discourse because their primary Discourses would not give them "an early apprenticeship" in the superficial features of the dominant Discourse (531).

Gee's ideas about what a Discourse is and how they interact with each other made me reflect on my experiences. My primary Discourse is nondominant, my parents are from Indonesia and Indonesian was their first language, and school taught me how to be a member of the dominant Discourse. While I agree that people come from dominant and nondominant Discourses, I do not agree that members of nondominant Discourses cannot be fluent in the dominant Discourse, and upon reading "The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse" by Lisa Delpit, I saw my frustrations being voiced. Delpit's argument says that it is possible for students to learn and use a secondary discourse, and further, that the secondary discourse does not have to separate a student from his/her home life, but instead can be a tool to change the system in which the secondary discourse interacts with the primary discourse.

In my high school, which I always admired for being so diverse, there were students whose primary Discourses were dominant and nondominant, but their abilities to adapt to the Discourse of school were varied. I had several friends who came from nondominant Discourses, their families had moved to the Poconos from the city, and in school, they were considered "smart" kids. They applied themselves in the classroom and their grades reflected it. I was more closely associated with this group of students, but I did not feel that I was like them. They seemed to enjoy school and were good at it. Despite what Gee believes, in my school, the group of students who could fluently navigate the Discourse of school came from dominant and nondominant primary Discourses, and they were able to navigate it at the same level. In fact, the primary Discourse of our class valedictorian was nondominant. In her speech on graduation day, she acknowledged her background by telling everyone that by fifth grade her parents were no longer able to help her with her school work. Because of her and my other peers' success, I know that it is possible for members of nondominant Discourses to successfully navigate the dominant Discourse. However, I was still left wondering, what about the other students? What about me? What made other members of nondominant Discourses unable to fluently navigate the dominant Discourse?

I also knew several students from the nondominant Discourse who chose not to engage in the Discourse of school. For this group, school was not important, and they were there because they had to be. Obtaining a high school education was obligatory, so they went through the motions to get to the end. I remember an incident from my twelfth grade English class where our teacher was teaching us nuances of grammar that we should have known as graduating seniors but most of us did not, whether it was because of a lack of an earlier apprenticeship or rejection of that apprenticeship, I am not sure. Our teacher stood in the front of the classroom,

and I should note that the "front" of this class faces the windows instead of the white boards. I never found out why this was, the optimist in me wants to believe she wanted to be unconventional and be able to relate to us in a different way, but I also believe she did not want us staring at the clock or the people passing in the hallways. So at the beginning of every class, she would stand in front of the classroom and ask us to correct the errors of sentences that were given to us on worksheets.

One day, a student named Marco asked our teacher, "Miss, why do we have to know this?" I am sure this is a favorite question of teachers everywhere, and I have not encountered a teacher that could answer this in an effective way; our teacher belonged in that group.

"Because some day you might have to know this" she said. Wrong answer, I thought.

"Well, I'm not going to college, so I still don't see why *I* have to know this" Marco continued. Marco's sentiments were echoed around the classroom, but our teacher continued to ask us to put commas in their correct place in a sentence.

"Well, you're in school now, and in school, this is what you learn" our teacher remarked. Better answer, I thought. At least, the material was now relevant to the students.

What would be the right answer for this question? According to Gee and Delpit, students need to know these nuances if they want to successfully navigate the dominant Discourse. These nuances that our teacher insisted that we might need to know in the future are called superficial features in Gee's theory. They serve as tests by members of the dominant Discourse to decide whether or not a person is a true member of that Discourse (549). When Gee states, "Children from non-mainstream homes often do not get the opportunities to acquire dominant secondary discourses—including those connected with the school—in their homes, due to their parents' lack of access to these discourses", he is correct, and this is proven by the nondominant

Discourse members of my high school (543). He goes on to say, "At school they cannot practice what they haven't yet got and they are exposed mostly to a process of learning and not acquisition. Therefore, little acquisition goes on" (543). However, I believe this is the incorrect conclusion to his previous statement. Rather, schools should be the place where students initially learn the skills and eventually become places for acquisition. Though Gee does not believe a person can acquire the superficial features of dominant Discourse, he does acknowledge that it is possible to feign proficiency in it; he terms this process "mushfake" and defines "mushfake Discourse" as being, "partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies to 'make-do'" (533). To say that students should only be taught a secondary Discourse to the point of "mushfake" would discourage students from trying to succeed in a dominant Discourse.

Gee's proposal is that mushfake should be the goal in teaching members of a non-dominant Discourse since mastery is not achievable. However, this line of thinking has influenced many to believe that members of nondominant Discourses are not worthy of being taught superficial features of dominant Discourse, and as a result, a cycle of indifference has been created. Delpit calls students who engage in this thinking as those who choose to "not-learn" and teachers who decide to "not-teach" (551). This concept prevents students from learning superficial features of a Discourse and inevitably prevents them from seeking success outside of their own Discourse. Therefore, when Gee argues that members of nondominant Discourses are unable to learn the nuances of the dominant Discourse, perhaps he needs to assess their willingness to do so or the lack of opportunity available to them rather than their ability to do so. It is a dangerous assumption to believe that any group of people is incapable of higher levels of thinking based on their background.

I believe my peers were victims of the "not-teach", "not-learn" cycle. When a student from a nondominant Discourse wants to know, "why do I need to know this?" They are not trying to offend, they are looking for the teacher that will say, "You need to learn this because you *can* learn this, and you will use this because you are capable of doing so". Of course, this requires a higher level of commitment from the teachers, and perhaps, they are not prepared to be more than the initial gate-keepers of dominant Discourse.

Personally, I never saw myself as belonging to either of these groups. My ultimate goal was to get to college, and my early apprenticeship in school had taught me how to be a successful student, and as such, I ended up in several honors courses in high school. However, after my sophomore year I no longer took any honors courses, and I never saw myself as being one of the "smart" students. In class, I felt that I was not prepared to be there with them, but in the regular classes I felt more adapted to the classroom than the other students. I treaded this middle ground all through high school, I had the abilities to be fully fluent, but I never chose to act on them.

A common struggle for students whose home lives do not align with the discourse of public education is learning how to advance in the world without leaving behind the communities from which they came. For students who come from families who have little or no experience with American schooling, receiving an education takes them away from the community with which they are most familiar and places them in schools where they must learn a new set of rules. I believe that my peers had to make this decision and whether or not they chose to engage in school depended on what their parents believed. If their parents never told them that education would be something to value, they would not see the benefit in sitting in a classroom every day. My parents were not brought up in the discourse of American schooling,

but they understood the opportunities it could provide for their children, so my early interest in education was embedded in me by my parents.

My mother taught me to read in English before I got to kindergarten. Most people have memories of being read to when they were children. My most distinct memories of reading involve me reading to my mother in our house. I read to my mother as practice, not because she was incapable of reading. She was the one who taught me how to read so that my bilingual upbringing would not hinder my experiences in school.

I remember reading a Little Golden Books version of the story of Bambi. My mother and I sat in front of our unlit fireplace, and she listened to me read the story. When I struggled to pronounce a word, my mother would gently say it correctly, so that I knew how to pronounce it. When I got to the end of a page, my mother would say, "Good!" her words of praise encouraging me to continue. And when I finished the whole book, my mother would smile and say, "Great job! You did it all by yourself!" I felt like I had accomplished something great, and my mother was there to witness it. I learned that taking an interest in school and books would be the best way to make my parents proud, and in my childhood, I genuinely enjoyed my academic pursuits.

Having a full grasp on English was the best way for her daughters to succeed in their education. My mother always reminded my sister and me that she stayed in this country, because she wanted to be able to provide my sister and me with the best possible education. She believed education to be one of the most important things in life. She instilled those values about education in us at an early age, and in my childhood, I thought that doing well in school was the only thing I needed to become a happy person.

I prided myself in doing well in school. All through elementary school, my teachers would tell my parents what a great student I was, and my parents would beam with pride.

Because I was making my parents happy, I was happy. When I was younger it always made me feel accomplished to get awards at the end of the school year saying I was one of the best. These were the standards I would judge myself against, but one day would not be able to live up to.

Eventually, being in school was becoming less enjoyable; a series of family events distracted me from caring too much about school or anything else. At this point in my schooling, I went through the motions of being a student: I went to school, sat through my classes, turned in my work, took exams, etc. repeating the cycle until it came time to graduate. My grades never reflected my laidback attitude towards school, so no one ever suspected that anything was ever wrong. I recall one parent-teacher meeting in eighth grade where my teacher told my mother, "I worry about Suci in class, she never asks questions, but when I see her quiz grades, I see that she gets it."

On the drive home, after we left the school, my mom decided to question me about what my teacher had said. My mom saw car rides as the perfect time to talk to me about issues that I could avoid talking about in another setting. I believe she took advantage of the fact that I was trapped in the car, so I had to talk to her. With her eyes glued on the road, and the radio playing the pop hits of "the 90s and now", she asked me, "Why don't you ask questions in class?"

"I don't have any. I know what I'm doing," I replied and started changing the station on the radio looking for a distraction. Confronting me in the car also meant that we did not have to make eye contact, a result I was very grateful for.

"Well, that's not good enough. You should speak up in class" my mother countered. "Ok, mom" was all I said back. I knew she did not like that response, but she dropped the subject, her eyes never leaving the road in front of her, the radio now playing a song that I liked.

I ignored her advice since my teachers did not seem to have a problem with it. I would continue these actions through my secondary schooling. I sat quietly in class, and turned in good work. I see now that I probably should have heeded my mother's advice. I never saw it as important to speak up in class then, but now, I struggle to make my presence known in a classroom.

What I am seeing now is that the ability to interact in the classroom is a superficial feature of the dominant Discourse. Not being able to speak in class marks someone as not being fluent in the dominant Discourse. It is not simply enough to be able to know the material, but also to be able to engage with it. Questions I am left with are: Did I reject the dominant Discourse or did it reject me? When did the other students who did not believe that they would go to college come to feel that they were not a part of the dominant Discourse?

While I cannot know the situation that my peers are in, I do know that they believed that they could not gain anything meaningful out of school. It is this attitude that hinders them and the development of their abilities as Gee would describe. For these students to want success in school, what I believe needs to happen for these students is that school needs to be a place where they feel they can enhance their lives. Teachers should not assume that these students want less out of their futures, but rather, they need to be given the chance to explore an alternative.

Regarding my situation, I know that I have gone through college feeling jaded by the "system". I still believe in the power of education and the values my parents instilled in me, I just need to find a place within and out of myself that feels comfortable to explore the ideas I have and be able to express them.

Works Cited

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Judges' Commentary on "Navigating Discourses"