



The Great Conversation (of the Dining Hall): One Student's Experience of College-Level Writing

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On Monday, September 9, 2002, as a first-year-student at the University of Iowa, and after having been on campus for less than three weeks, I walked into my second class of the morning, an honors seminar in the humanities, and sat down, completely pleased with myself and how college was going. The professor was sitting across from me, so I smiled and nodded “good morning.” As I did so, I noticed a small stack of white, typed sheets sitting next to her customary cup of coffee, yellow legal pad, and blue pen. As the bells of the Old Capitol began to chime, signaling the end of the passing period, the professor handed the sheaf to the girl on her left, watched it start its way around, and began to read aloud. We were instructed to write a six- to seven-page paper on a subject of our choosing, but that related in some way to fantasy fiction. The paper could be argumentative, persuasive, a demonstration of knowledge, or simply a discussion of something we found interesting. This was our first writing assignment, definitely a significant step in the semester, but even more importantly, and certainly more terrifying for me, was the fact that it was the first essay assignment of my college career, and I was one of the only freshmen in the entire honors class. Over the next month, as I worked on the essay, struggling to realize the full potential of my resources, I learned that to write at the college level requires not only a thorough knowledge of the material to be discussed, but also a cogent, thoughtful, and passionately presented synthesis of that material.

Immediately after receiving the assignment, and in spite of the panic it aroused, I began to jot down notes; even then, I knew broadly on what topic I wanted to write. The honors seminar, entitled “Other Worlds, Other Realities” addressed fantasy and science fiction literature from Frankenstein to the slipstream and magic realism of today. However, in addition to those modern forms of the genres, our reading list also included a pair of writings by J. R. R. Tolkien, his short story entitled “Leaf by Niggle,” and his essay “On Fairy-Stories.” In these writings, loosely conjoined by Tolkien’s examination of the artist’s role in society, I found someone I could admire, an author who was an incredibly creative man committed to art as well as academics. Nevertheless, I was also baffled as to why such an apparently brilliant philologist would expend his energies creating a fantasy world like *The Lord of the Rings*, and I desperately wanted to understand the man behind the words. Yet, while I certainly did not suffer from a lack of interest in the subject, the scope of the assignment and the breadth of my inquiry quickly overwhelmed me.

Back at the dorms that afternoon, I sat down and tried to bang out an essay proposal. After an hour, I had a five-page outline and a source list that included not only the short story and essay, but also *The Hobbit*, the entire *The Lord of the Rings*, biographical information on Tolkien, and several of the reviews of him and his oeuvre we had read in class. How was I ever to cram all of my interests into a six- to seven-page paper when Tolkien said and addressed so much? I did not, in the attempt to write the essay, want to do an injustice to the man or his work. Almost everything he said seemed important and interrelated, and I did not want to leave out even one meaty or beautiful quote. Over the next few days, as I grappled with my topic and proposal, the emotional and intellectual maelstrom I passed through came to remind me of my experience a few years earlier in my high school Modern British Literature class.

Just as I was now passionately curious about J. R. R. Tolkien and *Tree and Leaf*, I had been similarly excited about writing an essay on our most recent British Literature book, *Pride and Prejudice*, but again, had possessed little clue as to where to begin. In that situation, my English instructor had helped me realize that the trick to tackling such a broad question was to reread, reana-

lyze, and hone the assignment and my subsidiary questions into one central question. In this way, I could construct the essay by choosing individual quotes and specific details from the text that both interested me and provided evidence for my answer.

However, my difficulty with the *Pride and Prejudice* paper stemmed not only from the format of the question, but the fact that it was the class's culminating essay. Despite the effort I had put into completing the course's previous written assignments, I had repeatedly failed to generate thoughts and language that would create the awe that I so wished to instill in my instructor, and I desperately feared failing again. As I wrote that semester, I had pictured my younger brother, a talented musician, who, in his auditions, always strives to make his adjudicators stop, take pause, and put down their pencils. I greatly respected my British Literature instructor and the topic she had assigned, and wanted to create a similar reaction between her and my essay. Using the teacher's previous lessons on refining topic questions, I had already picked my quotes, made an outline, and drafted a thesis, checking off all the individual steps on our writing rubric as we had been taught, but as the due date approached, I had still not actually begun my first draft.

The night before the essay was due, while my mom was fixing dinner, I crept downstairs, notes and outline in hand, plopped myself down on top of the kitchen island, queried, "Mom?" and out of frustration, started to cry. What was the point, I asked, of working hard that night on that essay if in the morning, when I turned it in, I would still fail to earn my teacher's respect and regard? I mumbled that it was better just not to turn it in at all, than face the humiliation of another mediocre response from my instructor. My mother, a veteran parent and teacher, stood silently over the stove for a moment before turning around and fixing me with a stern, but not unconcerned, glare. It was no skin off the teacher's nose, she said, if I did not turn in that essay, but its absence would certainly not impress my instructor in the way that I wished, or satiate my desire for validation. She turned back toward the oven and we sat in silence, but after a few moments she asked over her shoulder, "What have you got so far?"

For the next hour, she let the chili burn as I explained my theory of Mr. Darcy and *Pride and Prejudice*. When I had finally

finished, and taken a gulp of air, she chuckled and said, “You have the potential to do with words what your brother does with music—add vibrato, adjust speed, and hit the note in just the right way. But, if like him sometimes, you doubt yourself or do not practice, you will never reach that level of performance. You have got to take the risks if you want the reward.” Later, I would come to understand that while sitting in the kitchen, talking to my mom, I was making my first utterances in the “conversation of mankind.” As Kenneth A. Bruffee notes in Capossela’s *Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring*, “Reflective thinking is something we learn to do, and we learn to do it from and with other people. We learn to think reflectively as a result of learning to talk” (128). That night was the first time I ever talked through an essay with another person, a practice that has now not only become a habitual part of my writing process, but an absolutely necessary one as well.

At eight o’clock that evening, I finally decided to take the chance, put my head on the chopping block, and start to write. As I did, I began to pay closer attention not only to individual sentences, but to discrete words and phrases as well, and in so doing, I realized that I *could* do with words what my brother did with music: vary my tone, timbre, and cadence to draw out that desired awe from my audience. A week later, when the instructor returned the essays, my efforts were richly rewarded. The second page of my paper was mark free except for “Cool!” written in electric blue ink next to a sentence that I am still proud of, nearly four years later. I had written,

Darcy certainly belongs to a higher social rank than the Bennets, and his manners and mind are no doubt superior, but in his actions toward Bingley and Jane and his decisive inaction concerning Wickham, his pride crosses the line into a detrimental character trait. However, pride is not the only factor in the equation of his mistakes; the whims of society also play a role.

In that section of my essay, I had shown a connection between two quotes that appeared more than thirty pages apart in the text, and I had even ended with a transition to my next paragraph. I had shown both the instructor and myself that just as

my brother was a young but passionate and serious student of music, I was a young but passionate and serious student of the art of writing.

Throughout Modern British Literature, and especially during the *Pride and Prejudice* essay, I had seen the importance of clear thought, crisp organization, interpersonal communication, and a host of other foundational essay-writing skills. However, by the end of my high school career, I had yet to participate in any real semblance of a literary debate. I had no experience with criticism or the comparison of academic articles. Now, barely a month into my first year of college, the professor of my honors seminar fully expected me to do all of those things while experimenting with holding a collegiate level of discourse, and once again, I found myself doubting my abilities.

The dorm I lived in as a first-year student, and still live in, is shaped like a giant eight-floor, cinderblock shoebox. While one of its narrow ends sits perpendicular to the street, the other looks back west, down the hill, toward the Memorial Union and eventually the Iowa River. On the south side of each floor there is a lounge, whose only redeeming qualities are several groupings of large, comfy chairs, and a wall of picture windows that face Old Brick, a very old Presbyterian church that is now a modern social venue on campus. At eleven o'clock on Friday, September 20, my friends found me sitting in the third floor lounge alternately looking up at swarms of bats in the steeple above and students in the pedestrian mall below, perfectly perplexed by my paper topic. Drawing both practical lessons and confidence from my reminiscences of my trials in Modern British Literature, I had taken a deep breath and limited my scope of inquiry to "On Fairy-Stories" and "Leaf by Niggle." Earlier that week, after finally turning in a workable essay proposal, I had decided to uncover the man behind the words by starting with a close rereading and reanalysis of those two tiny texts, but Tolkien was proving an elusive and wily old Englishman.

By now, my poor copy of *The Tolkien Reader* was a palimpsest of neon-colored sticky notes and highlighted passages, thoughtful annotations, and frustrated expostulations. I had walked through "Niggle's Parish" several times, and repeatedly

sat in the lecture room, listening to Tolkien theorize about the values of fantasy literature, but still, I felt that I was no closer to the big picture. I knew that I needed to talk to people about the essay, but my thoughts were hopelessly jumbled, painfully plain, and completely unoriginal. Tolkien's quotes on fairy stories and anecdotes and arguments about juvenile pleasure reading were starting to solidify into vicious, repetitious, and unproductive circles of thought, and I did not want to experience this mental miasma, let alone inflict it on anyone else. Worse yet, my rough draft was due in one week. As I flicked off the light and left the lounge that evening, I decided that while it had been a good idea to start my research by limiting my field of vision, it was now time to reexpand my scope of inquiry. If I was not yet ready to speak to other people about Tolkien, then perhaps I was at least ready to listen.

The next morning, I hiked down the hill to the library, and after deciphering the building's arrangement and puzzling out the Library of Congress System, I made my way to the fourth floor and what I came to think of as The Aisle of Tolkien. I had gone to the University's main library envisioning merely a larger version of my high school library, and hoping to unearth maybe a half dozen biographies on Tolkien. Instead, I found at least five dozen books on all aspects of his life and work. Shocked but excited, I waded in. As I sat reading one huge compendium on Tolkien, I noticed that several authors repeatedly referenced a text by Colin Wilson. I was extremely impressed with the clarity of Wilson's writing, as well as his overall interpretation, and I suddenly found myself wishing I could read his book.

On the off chance that it might be sitting somewhere in the stacks, I decided to go take a look. A few minutes later, I returned to my sunny cubicle, Wilson's *Tree by Tolkien* in hand, and stumbled across a quote that seemed to clarify almost automatically the world of Tolkien. Wilson had written, "[C]ertain people are dreamers and visionaries, and although they may seem relatively useless to the community, they embody values that the community cannot afford to forget" (20). The Hawkeyes had a huge football game that Saturday afternoon, and from my chair, I could look out the window onto the library's back parking lot, and see some twenty groups of people tailgating and apparently

listening to the game on their car radios. While I do not remember whom we were playing that day, or even if we won, I do remember feeling as if I had suddenly slipped into scenes portrayed in two of my favorite books, Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* and Laurie R. King's *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*.

As I flipped back and forth between one author's examination of Wilson's analysis of Tolkien, Wilson's actual words, and Tolkien's original essay, I felt just like King's young Oxford student, Mary Russell, or Potok's school-aged Talmudic scholar, Danny. Both of those adolescent academics, while sitting in their respective libraries, had experienced the wonder and challenge of academia for the first time. Now, like them, I was listening to multiple levels of textual analysis for the first time in my life, and once again participating in the conversation of mankind, though this time, it was certainly at a much deeper level. In an article I first read in *Modern British Literature*, Donald G. Smith, a teacher at Apollo High School in Glendale, Arizona, explains that when reading, we can

[S]top, reread, look up explanatory and supporting materials and then pick up the conversation where it left off. We can mull over a line until we see its worth. We can add our own perceptions, questions, and applications. We can disagree, attack, defend. In short, we can take part in the Great Conversation of humanity. (21)

When I walked back across the Pentacrest and up the hill to my dorm late that afternoon, notes and library books tucked safely in my book bag, I felt like a real college-level scholar. However, by Sunday afternoon, the rosy glow of academia had started to fade.

Once back from the library, I began to organize my notes. I planned to group them by topic and argument, and then, whip out my so recently new highlighters and officiously color code my quotes to match sections I had noted in *The Tolkien Reader*. Finally, I would arrange the different colored sections, creating a vibrant visual representation of my essay's argument. Then it hit me: I had proposed a topic, but had never established those two elements key to almost every essay, an argument structure and a thesis. My thoughts were still just a jumbled mass, and now, I

had three times as much information and my rough draft was due in five days, not seven. It was definitely time to recall the good old lessons of British Literature and seek out people with whom I could hold a conversation. Legal pad in one hand and lunch card in the other, I walked up and down the floor, knocking on my friends' doors, seeing if they wanted to go to dinner. Once we had all taken seats in the cafeteria, I looked around that table, and asked, "So, do you mind if I talk about Tolkien?"

At first, I just threw out random quotes and information. Then, as I started to get a sense of what I had read, and what of it I liked and did not like, I began to make connections, saying, "but Auden says this . . .," or "yes, but about Wilson's argument that . . ." By the end of dinner, not only was I asking questions and making arguments about specific passages, my friends were too, and everyone was excited to see how the essay would turn out. I repeated this interlocutory flood several times over the next few days to myself and to anyone who would listen, and in the end, it worked. I decided to argue that Tolkien had written *The Lord of the Rings* for two reasons, because he viewed his role as "a subcreator of a fantasy secondary world" as both useful on a broad scale and pleasurable on a more personal level, and that these *raison d'être* were evident in *Tree and Leaf*. Even though I did not start writing until Thursday afternoon, I was rather confident that I could create a solid first draft. I had already done several verbal and mental drafts, and by Friday morning, the day on which I was to hand in my essay and read it through with the professor, I had a rough draft with which, I must admit, I was quite smitten. However, it should come as no surprise that I was definitely less starry-eyed when I walked out of my writing conference less than half an hour later.

My professor had carefully worked through my essay, underlining awkward passages, glossing sections, and stopping to ask for clarification. By the end of our twenty minutes together, my essay was not quite a sea of blue ink, but it might as well have been. I was adrift amidst the questions she had asked: what purpose does art serve, what role should the artist play, what happens in the act of subcreation, when does subcreation occur, why is perfection so important in the creation of a secondary world? Staving off hopelessness by returning once again to what I knew,

I realized that I needed to create a workshop-like atmosphere such as the one I had participated in during my final year in high school in my Advanced Placement Language and Composition class.

Several times during AP Language and Composition, the other students and I drafted essays and submitted them to our classmates and teacher. Then, over the next week, after we had read each other's essay, we reviewed the drafts in a roundtable format. In that class, surrounded by fourteen students, all of whom were eager to improve the quality of their writing, as well as an instructor who was herself a masterful writer, my knowledge and use of written language was once again heightened. Before that class, I had never been conscious of the power of a single pronoun. Then, when I started one paragraph in a personal essay about my love of rollerblading with the phrase, "Right before you get to the bridge there is this perfect curve," one of my classmates wrote on my paper, "Deliberate? I don't want to be in the piece yet, or at all! I don't know how to skate, so seeing this pronoun makes me nervous." I grinned at the smiley face drawn next to the comment. No, I had not thought about the authorial consequences of my pronoun usage, but I silently vowed to my reader that I would from then on. In a book I would not read until much later, Toni-Lee Capossela notes that "Writers improve when they use the questions of a thoughtful reader to shape their work, then eventually begin to ask themselves the same questions" (2). Hanna Arendt adds simply, "For excellence, the presence of others is always required" (qtd in Capossela 1). During every writing cycle, the ideas and questions of my fellow AP Language and Composition students pushed me to become a better writer and gave me a completely new set of questions with which to scrutinize my writing.

Looking back on my experiences in AP Language and Composition while staring at my recently mutilated first draft, I realized that I needed to create my own personal writer's workshop here at the University of Iowa. I had already created a verbal forum based upon my experiences in Modern British Literature, but now I needed a place to test my actual, written ideas. I started hesitantly, e-mailing my first draft to my parents. Then, once they had replied and said I sounded more logical and looked to

be improving, I showed it to a few close friends. Similar to AP Language and Composition, some of my peers gave great comments on ideas and structure, while others looked intensely at my sentence-level work and grammar. Both kinds of scrutiny helped me improve my essay. All of us had each been taught different things about syntax and structure by our high school English instructors, and this variety allowed an informal writing center to develop on our floor our first year.

However, even with all of this kind attention, I still felt that something was missing, so I took the plunge, and went to the campus Writing Center. There, one night at the beginning of October, I experienced a frisson moment. The consultant and I sat hunched over a round table, desperately trying to discover what was missing in my essay, because it was obvious that something was. Finally, she made as if to speak, halted, and then started afresh. “Explain to me again why Tolkien wanted to do all this?” I sat silently for a minute, and then started to think aloud:

Well, he didn’t create his fantasy world for himself alone; he didn’t have to, it had already been in his head for a long time. However, to utilize what he believed to be fantasy’s valuable abilities, he needed to let readers experience it, but he had to help them because it was so new. He had to make it detailed and based in reality so that it would be understandable. Then, if he wanted to be a subcreator, the ultimate level of writer for him, Tolkien had to give up his creation to an audience. Without an audience, his secondary world could not exist, could not flow into reality.

I turned back to her to see if all that made sense. A slow grin was slowly creeping up the side of her face. She pointed to my notepad, “Write that down—quick!” In that moment, I had finally connected “Leaf by Niggle” and “On Fairy-Stories,” the utilitarian, allegorical story and the high, theoretical essay, ultimately paralleling the development of the short story’s main character, the artist, Niggle. By the morning of the final due date, I had not only shown “Flowing into Reality” to friends and family, but had taken different sections of it to the professor several times, and actually visited the campus writing center twice.

A few days later, when the professor returned our essays, I had proof that all of my hard work, as well as the hard work of

my coaches, peer readers, and listeners, had paid off. Written on the last page, in that now familiar blue ink, was the comment, “Excellent—cogently argued; your claims are well supported by quotations and relevant details. I’m impressed with the improvement from first draft to final version.” My essay, which had started as a furtive monologue, had slowly but surely ballooned into a full discourse, whose interlocutors included over a dozen texts, as well as my friends, family, and professor.

While I must admit that among my original motives for working so hard on the Tolkien essay was the importance of the grade I would receive, by the end of the month-long writing process, the worth of the score had greatly declined, and upon finally receiving it, the good marks were actually a bit of a letdown. At first, I was puzzled by this, but then realized that what I had really desired was not a grade, but validation that my thoughts and efforts, though only those of a first-year student, were important to both my professor and my academic community. My instructor’s willingness to repeatedly sit down with me and look at my writing, as well as her end comments had shown me that I was valued, more than any letter grade ever could. Bruffee argues that “Normal discourse is what William Perry calls the fertile ‘wedding’ of ‘bull’ and ‘cow,’ of facts and their relevances: discourse on the established contexts of knowledge in a field that makes effective references to facts and ideas as defined within those contexts. In a student who can consummate this wedding, Perry says, ‘we recognize a colleague,’” or a college-level writer (132). More than any grade I have ever received, the attention, time, and collegiality of a teacher dedicated to my growth have sustained and pushed me through the many challenges I have encountered as a student writer.

While working on *this* essay, I chose to define college-level writing not merely through a list of skills, but rather, through a reflection on my growth as a writer, since over the last few years I have learned that college-level writing is as much about process as it is about product. Sometimes, my writing method has been a violent expenditure of energy similar to my work on the Tolkien essay. Other times, it has meant merging materials from disparate courses to gain new perspectives on a topic, and often, it has taken shape as a battle to condense ideas for time and space.

Rarely, but it has happened, I have received assignments in college that neither call for nor expect college-level writing. These papers are worksheets in essay form, whose creators are not interested in involving students in academic discourse, but merely testing them in a way in which the curricula calls for. As Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch note in their essay, "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response," published in the *Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring*, "The incentive to write derives from an assumption that people will listen respectfully and either assent to or earnestly consider the ideas expressed" (217). While the evaluations these assignments procure are likely necessary, they do not inspire much more than an obligatory effort, as it is painfully obvious that no one cares. Thankfully, these negative experiences have been brief and short in my college career.

A few months after the completion of my Tolkien essay, my professor asked if I was interested in becoming involved with Writing Fellows, a pilot program being developed on campus. A peer-based tutoring program, Writing Fellows seeks to improve students' writing abilities by stressing the importance of peer conversation and drafting. I leapt at the chance to become further involved in the writing community at the University of Iowa. Currently, I am starting my third semester as a peer tutor, and have seen with every assignment, student, class, and semester the importance of sharing and refining ideas both verbally and in writing. As E. M. Forester once said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" (qtd. in Capossela 17). However, I have also seen that college-level writing can be amorphous, changing its specific shape, though not its general form, from student to student. One of my first peer tutees was a fifty-year-old English language learner whose passion and intelligence were being swallowed up by the devilish intricacies of the English language. Instead of the normal fifteen- to twenty-minute meeting I usually held, we worked together for three hour-long sessions that semester, trying to make her incredible ideas on women's studies visible through her disjointed syntax. While her essays, even after those long sessions, were far from error free, I would argue that her writing was certainly college level, and her efforts would have shamed her fellow teenaged, native-speaking classmates, who

frequently came not only to their meetings with me, but to their classes unread and unprepared. Few of them wrote essays that engaged the material as thoroughly as hers. Experiences like that one, in addition to the lessons on theory and grammar, have made Writing Fellows one of the most challenging and exciting experiences of my college career. They have allowed me to shift my position in the conversation of mankind, and become an interested listener as well as a fervent speaker.

Nearly two years after completing the Tolkien essay and taking what I consider to be my first steps as a college-level writer, I am continuing to hone my dialogue, expand my skills, and move to the next level of college-level writing. Recently, I have begun work on my senior interdisciplinary honors thesis, an experience that I hope will serve as a good transition from college-level to post-college-level writing. It has become obvious to me, through Writing Fellows and my classes in general, that college-level writing is a dynamic term that means a number of things. Mastering materials and research methods, engaging the readings, grappling with increasingly sophisticated grammar, and synthesizing information from disparate sources are all part of becoming a college-level writer, but primarily, that degree of attainment requires giving yourself over, as a student and writer, to the desire to create meaningful and elegant connections between texts, ideas, and readers. Throughout all of my classes and writing assignments, I have held to the belief that if we, as participants in a community of writers, want to raise our discourse to that of college-level reading, writing, and thinking, and, if we want our work to be knowledgeable, cogent, thoughtful, and passionate, then we must do as Nancy Mairs urges, “nourish and strengthen one another: listen to one another very hard, ask hard questions too, send one another away to work again, and laugh in all the right places” (qtd. in Capossela n.p.).

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