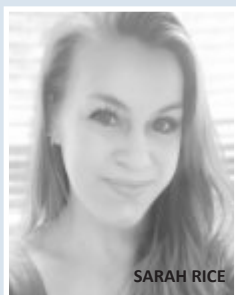


Tutors' Column: "Navigating the 'New Normal' with Abnormal Discourse"

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The impacts of COVID-19 over the past two years, not only as a physical health crisis but also as a mental health, social, economic, and humanitarian crisis, have affected even the most basic aspects of our lives. Still, we tend to reduce and ignore these monumental changes within our private and public lives. Since beginning to return to a new, post-pandemic life, the troubling effects of the pandemic on each individual are becoming more obvious and more important to address. In my role as a writing tutor, then, failing to address the very different, very personalized effects of COVID-19 on myself and my peers only continues to hurt our already grief-stricken community.

Although writing centers provide a safe place for tutors and writers to become better writers and scholars, we typically achieve this through normal or "academic" discourse. This type of interaction, as described by Kenneth Bruffee, promotes "conversation within a community of knowledgeable peers" who accept and follow "the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions" (213). A strong sense of normal discourse within writing centers means a strong sense of collaborative learning, but it does not account for the less universalized ideas and experiences of those involved. Downplaying or ignoring the individual effects of COVID-19 among varying demographics, as unintentionally done through normal discourse, certainly makes it easier for us to conceptualize, emotionally manage, or remove ourselves from the pandemic. The appeal of this silence is obvious when fear, grief, and painful memories act as the alternatives. Easier is not necessarily better, though, as I quickly learned during my first year as a tutor.

It was September 2021, the beginning of my sophomore year, when I held my first peer tutor session. That same day was also the first time I stepped foot into our college's writing center. Armed with four months of virtual tutor training, three observations over Zoom, two "co-tutoring" sessions over Zoom, and one positive attitude, I felt as

prepared as I could be.

Forty-five minutes later, as my first-ever tutee left our writing center, I felt like a complete failure. After living in a socially distant bubble for months on end, I completely neglected the differences in mood and discourse between virtual and in-person interactions. The writer, let's call her Mary, came to the session with an essay for her first-year seminar. She expressed concern about her first college paper, but also mentioned stress about juggling academics, relationships, and extracurriculars in the college environment; I remember her being on the verge of tears while verbalizing fears about time management and whether or not she could handle the responsibilities of a college student. During the first minutes of the session, I felt helpless. On a personal level, I struggled to empathize with her. Rather than dealing with time management and social concerns, I spent my first year of college worrying about COVID-19 while trying to find a Wi-Fi connection for my virtual classes.

Still, I had no trouble engaging in normal discourse with Mary. Both of us being members of the same college community and both wanting to be better writers, we were able to establish a normal discourse centered around academic writing. Just as Bruffee describes, we conversed about “the subject and the assignment” and the “relationship between student and teacher,” important things “pursuant to writing” (Bruffee 213). According to Bruffee’s pedagogy of normal discourse, Mary and I had a successful session. So why did I feel so dissatisfied?

My fear of conflict with the writer led me to avoid and ignore our different personal and academic experiences, particularly concerning the effects of COVID-19; as much as I wanted to help ease Mary’s anxieties, I did not know how to handle the differences between our first years of college. (Granted, Mary and I are traditionally aged students at a residential college; what is unusual for us is not necessarily unusual for students who commute, work full time, or have children.) Because I did not have a typical freshman year, and because I completed my tutor training online, I felt a crippling sense of illegitimacy. Ironically, trying to avoid these feelings of illegitimacy limited my understanding of the Mary’s situation. In our new world where a coronavirus disease has claimed over six million lives, where mental and emotional wellbeing is just as precarious as physical wellbeing, where the distinction between reality and virtuality becomes less clear each day – normal discourse is simply not powerful enough.

To facilitate more individualized and, consequently, more effective tutoring sessions, we tutors must embrace and promote Richard Rorty’s “abnormal discourse.” Abnormal discourse occurs when

“someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of [an agreed-upon set of] conventions or who sets them aside”; this process complicates rather than maintains pre-existing knowledge (Rorty 320). By encouraging the inclusion of knowledge beyond the traditional sphere of academia, abnormal discourse creates tension within conversations involving people with differing perspectives. Abnormal discourse, in embracing idiosyncrasy, ultimately functions “to resist the hegemonic power of normal discourse and to struggle for individual voices” (Gale 66). This “struggle for individual voices” became especially prominent as a global pandemic restricted our individual agency in nearly every way possible. Because COVID-19 has become so intertwined in our lives throughout the past two years, it is impossible to have an open discussion about traditional college experiences without also mentioning the pandemic’s influence on these topics. Ignoring the personal effects of COVID-19 ultimately limits the discussions and work achieved during tutoring sessions.

Recognizing the relationship between differing types of knowledge and experiences, such as emotional burnout from the pandemic and how that burnout relates to work habits, allows writers and tutors to engage in a more honest conversation. When we open our tutoring sessions to include the complexities associated with living through a pandemic, we also open our sessions to generate new knowledge about tutor-writer relationships and effective and inclusive tutor strategies in a post-pandemic world.

Since abnormal discourse inherently pushes past the boundaries of traditional academic discourse, the process of incorporating it into our sessions involves discomfort. I felt this discomfort with Mary, as the idea of openly acknowledging our struggles related to COVID-19 seemed like admitting weakness and an inability to manage difficult situations. My fear of not being competent prevented me from having this vulnerable conversation. Performing normal discourse certainly protected my ego and maintained some of my blissful ignorance, but the memory of Mary’s unresolved personal anxieties at the end of our session cautions against the surface-level solutions provided by normal discourse. In retrospect, I could have discussed “similarities” between our first-year college struggles, talked about Mary’s personal struggles and its effect on her academic work, suggested resources for Mary’s wellbeing, and/or given Mary a few moments to vent about her anxieties. After meeting Mary, experiencing and largely avoiding discomfort within our session, but also experiencing the incompleteness and dissatisfaction at the end of our session, I knew that a potentially uncomfortable session would always be better than one that did not allow for personal growth. I began to realize that my most effective and enjoyable sessions were not the ones in which I avoided all personal topics of COVID-19; instead, the

sessions that involved open and honest conversations about the effects of COVID-19 held the most success.

Unsurprisingly, I still felt like a failed tutor during these first few sessions using abnormal discourse. This feeling of failure did not reflect my tutoring capabilities though, but rather the discomfort I experienced while practicing abnormal discourse. During this process of embracing the unknown and learning to participate in abnormal discourse, it is important to remember that difference and discomfort do not indicate incompetence; only through discomfort is growth possible. Ultimately, the initial discomfort I experience during abnormal discourse sessions encourages an increased sense of empathy and listening skills that transfers into both my personal and professional life.

Over two years have passed since the onset of COVID-19, yet the rippling effects of this crisis continue to alter our everyday lives. We live in a world of new normals, one with widespread vaccines, KN95 masks, and meetings via Zoom, and our writing centers are no exception to this altered sense of normalcy. Fully embracing this new normal, rather than avoiding it out of fear or discomfort, also means fully embracing abnormal discourse. And while this type of discourse can be intimidating at times, it is also a reminder that abnormality does not indicate failure, but rather a brave pursuit of knowledge and personal growth.

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