COMMENT ON ALICE M. GILLAM’S “THE ROAD TO HELL: GOOD INTENTIONS AND THEIR UNINTENDED EFFECTS”

It’s always a pleasure to read a well written and positive review of your work. Alice M. Gillam does an excellent job of comparing, contrasting, and contextualizing both my book, Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference and Nancy Grimm’s book, Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times. It’s not surprising to me that these books are both out at the same time and that both seem to touch a nerve with educators: both speak to what teachers actually do—that is, combine theory and practice—and who they are doing it with: incredibly diverse student populations. Most of what we do as teachers takes place in relative privacy, for even in “public” schools there are few observers and evaluators in our classrooms. But what happens in writing centers and conferences is often even more private, almost intimate. Because so many of us who teach composition regularly conference and may well have worked in writing centers, the glimpses Grimm and I offer into those settings reach readers who teeter between the voyeurism of watching an intimate act and the professional recognition that they have themselves done such things. With the range of skills and cultures present in so many classrooms and the underlying value systems that may clash on multiple levels, there are many more things that can go “wrong” in conferences and writing centers than either Grimm or I have outlined.

Gillam is right when she points out that I am most interested in the effect conferencing has on “students’ sense of agency in their own literacy learning” (125). When I am writing for an unfamiliar audience or am attempting to write in an unfamiliar genre, I need to know, usually from speaking with those who have experience in that genre or with the audience, that I am capable of producing what I want. I also need to know that I am welcome to return to those people I consulted with to get additional help. I am unable to move ahead, to put words on paper, without the “talk” I have before launching into a project. How is that any different
from students? As soon as we can conceive of ourselves as learners like our students, some of the difficulties we seem to experience in teaching and conferences will subside. Unfortunately, at many institutions, “learning” is a luxury for faculty. They teach too many sections to have time to develop new courses, to do the kinds of research and reflection that provide energy and impetus to keep teaching. They are not financially supported to take time off or to travel to conferences where they could experience “learning” again. The genre of teacher research into which Grimm’s and my own work fall offer many teachers a way to be teacher-scholars and improve their practice. We know that most people learn by building on what they already know—readers of these two books will feel, hopefully, as if the firm ground they thought they stood on is suddenly shaky, but it’s still a place from which to start their own learning.

Gillam also points out that my review of sociolinguistic literature on conversation and classroom discourse shows striking differences between the two. While she doesn’t find that surprising, what continues to surprise me is how rarely composition experts have looked toward sociolinguistics to inform what is usually an interdisciplinary field of study. Psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, neurobiology, and even computer models are drawn on to explain motivation, writer’s block, literary interpretation, poetic language. Yet a field that devotes itself largely to the study of talk—the common denominator of classrooms and conferences is rarely referenced. Perhaps it is because of what Gillam sees as one of the “liabilities” of such an approach: long transcripts “laden with notations” can be “difficult or tedious to follow” (127). The transcripts I included are lightly notated compared to many in the field of sociolinguistics. I do not indicate changes in intonation, for example, that lead me to make some of the interpretations I do; they are cumbersome for someone who simply wants to get a “feel” for the conference. The length of conference excerpts was also carefully considered—one frequent drawback of discourse analysis is that not enough of the transcript is available for readers to challenge the interpretations of the transcriber. So although it was meant as a mild criticism, I am pleased when Gillam writes that “the data before us suggests alternative interpretations” (127). It means that despite the tediousness of the data and the awkwardness of reading real speech, the transcripts were sufficient to provoke the kinds of discussion that need to take place routinely.
Shorter excerpts also do not always make the speakers “alive” and memorable, especially if one speaker says little. That may be why Gillam remembers Erin and Eric, who are both teachers and speak at length, but not their students. (Erin, by the way, is not Eric’s student, as Gillam writes on page 126; Jeff is Erin’s student and Dana is Eric’s student, and it is Erin who “engineers” agreement through marginalization in her conference with Jeff.) It’s important, at least to me, that readers remember that these are transcripts of real people negotiating real difficulties.

Finally, I’d like to point out, especially in reference to my opening paragraph, that what Grimm and I do rhetorically is not “ethical sleight-of-hand” with all the connotations such a term carries. The rapport I establish with readers is the result of discussion in many different forums and with many different colleagues about my own practice and theirs, about what theory says and what we do, about what we desire and what we get. I don’t wish to slip anything past readers or to suck them into agreeing with me. If what Grimm and I write is “convincing” and “compelling,” I am pleased. I think it could only be so, however, if it struck a resounding chord with readers. Neither “high-minded assumptions” (123) or arrogance about practice have a place in the kind of teaching I hope to accomplish.

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