

Fundamental Problems in Structure: IDEAS ARE ALL THAT MATTER.

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As educators, most of us know if we are reading a bad paper before we finish the first paragraph. The “bad writing” cues we pick up on can be as diverse as our students, but usually I find that (with the uncommon exception of egregious grammatical errors) the most common category of writing conventions that signify a poor paper so immediately are structurally based. Sort of. Actually, they are reflected in the structure, even though they sometimes have nothing to do with it.

Let me put it this way...

On many occasions I’ll read a paper that I would consider “Structurally deficient,” but not for any of the reasons that the student might expect. In such a paper, the structure might actually be quite “correct,” but the problem with the structure is not really the structure itself. The problem is that, like a beautiful car careening down the street without a driver, the well-built paper is so obviously hollow. I read many papers that are, in a sense, a suit of shinning armor without a soldier, a flashy argument without an idea that is bright enough to back it up. I call this a structural problem because it is not solely a problem of content and it is not solely a problem of thesis (or lack thereof). More than anything, the

problem probably has something to do with a lack of balance between the structure and the idea because the idea (though it might be a very good one) does not “hold up the structure.” It’s not developed enough to serve as a foundation.

All in all, I will risk over-generalization for the sake of clarity: At the heart of every meaningless but skillfully written paper is a fundamental misunderstanding about what an “idea” actually is.

Of course, almost any student smart enough to be accepted to a major university or college would likely be offended if I told him/her to his/her face that he/she did not know what the word “idea” even means. And so, before I continue, I think that I should establish three concepts from which I am working:

1. A fully formed idea has multiple layers, and is a construction in and of itself—normally independent of the paper it might inhabit.
2. Ideas are not “talking points.” In a thesis paper, the thesis should be expansive and should not serve as a simple answer to a set of questions (“Everything I say is the way it is because [insert thesis here]” does not make an inspiring paper).

3. A really good argument is not just a logician's trick. It should be, for all intents and purposes, a real thing.

By now I imagine that, you, the reader, might be filing me away with the same people who want to tell you what "Art" is, and what it isn't—or with any other brand of semantic fundamentalist that you may not like (folks who want to tell you what marriage is and isn't, what "good and evil" means, what patriotism really means, or what is fashionably "IN" or "OUT"—that is with people who draw sharp lines of theoretical demarcation. These, typically, are people I avoid and so I would not be surprised if you want to avoid me as I try to tell you what an idea *really* is. Nevertheless, I hope you'll indulge me for a few minutes and, if nothing else, briefly consider the ramblings of an idealist on the nature of ideas.

Being Chaos Friendly

I come into teaching writing from a very chaos-friendly art school background. Personally, I don't like it at all when someone tries to tell me what something is or is not because I come out of a tradition that constantly questions everything and almost never confirms anything. Maybe such a perspective only affirms one value: The value of ideas. When one is always questioning, one ends up learning a large variety of concepts primarily through the act of deconstruction. This subtractive mode of pedagogy doesn't value assumptions much but it does offer the pupil a sense "mechanics" concerning the systemic concepts (the structure of any subject) he or she studies.

When I was nine years old, I enraged my mother by smashing all of my transformers. I told her that I just wanted

to know how they were put together. When I smashed them to pieces and then examined each piece, I actually did figure out how most of them were constructed, and if I had started the process with the proper tools, I think I could have taken them apart in a gentler non-destructive way and then (hopefully) put them back together successfully.

While some students lack the tools to deconstruct or reconstruct an idea properly, I really feel that, at the college level, it is more likely that students lack the **willingness** (not the tools) to disassemble and reassemble an idea. At DU, especially, I think that most students come to college with an understanding of multiple writing styles. What they need to learn here in college is a willingness to define and understand the ideas they write about within AND without the process of writing.

They need to understand that writing a paper is "not about the paper." The odds are that nobody will ever read that final ASEM or FSEM paper again after it is graded. On the other hand, the idea behind the paper *might* just possibly live on in the student's memory. Those of us who teach writing know that "it's not about the paper"(when the paper is a class assignment) just as we know that grades don't matter all that much except as a stimulus for rigorous learning. Every quarter, it seems as though I have one or two students who exhibit the reckless, yet awestruck childlike attitude of the proverbial nine year-old who smashes his toys to understand how they work. Though these students sometimes exhibit sloppy writing skills, it's my opinion that the writing center (and/or a diligent professor) can offer some simple tools to whip their writing into shape. Basic structural writing tools (such as following the form of a thesis paper, journalistic essay, fictional narrative etc.) are generally

just a question of understanding the conventions of a genre and applying them. Knowing what you really want to explore within that genre is another thing. I will focus the remainder of this little essay on the other 90% of the class. The cautious applicators of form who know how to write but still need to learn how to really explore a topic.

And so I'll get back to my three rather fundamentalist definitions:

1. A fully formed idea has multiple layers, and is a construction in and of itself—normally independent of the paper it might inhabit.

For this first concept, let's assume a student in my "Religion and Film" ASEM is writing a paper about how the use of "natural light" (this is what it is called when existing light conditions, not augmented ones, are used to film a scene) in a film enhances the film's sense of "realism". While this is possibly a useful starting place for developing a paper, I can tell you as an instructor who has read dozens of papers on this subject that it is not a good starting point for the actual paper. It stands to reason that a ten page paper about how "Terrence Malik's use of Natural light makes his films more natural" is going to be pretty weak.

I sometimes advise students begin to structure their ideas with a series of questions and try to define the worldview of the concept before they write anything at all. For example:

Natural Light:

Does natural or available light actually affect the camera used for the film in the same way it affects the human eye? If so, is this the case with other cameras, film formats, video formats? What is it really like to film in natural

light? Is it more or less difficult and constructed than other ways of filming? If it is harder or easier, how does this play into the sense of what is "real" or "natural"? Does it feel more real to an audience if it mimics the human eye or if it mimics a home video? What do we consider "real" or "natural" when viewing mediated content? Do we view ANY mediated content as "natural" anyway? Does an audience's idea of what looks natural on the screen come from real life or from the history of Realist/Naturalist art?

The questions can and should go on and on, and even if the student has no intention of answering most of them in the paper, the student should develop his or her own answers. Sometimes a flowchart or a Venn diagram can be helpful. To some, what I am saying might seem like I am suggesting students to do heavy logic-based research. However, I would argue that this type of "worldview building" should start with simple brainstorming.

If a student simply begins writing down every question he or she might have about a subject, and then either looks up the answer (when actual right or wrong answers apply) or reaches a personal conclusion (in the case of more speculative or subjective matters), then that student begins to construct a philosophy about the "idea." THIS is, for the purposes of my classes, the beginning of a legitimate idea. Once this worldview is constructed, questions such as "How should I argue this?" or "What genre of paper is this?" start to answer themselves.

2. Ideas are not "talking points." In a thesis paper, the thesis should be expansive and should not serve as a simple answer to a set of

questions (“Everything I say is the way it is because [insert thesis here]” does not make an inspiring paper).

This concept builds on the last one. The flawed argument that “Natural light makes the film feel more natural because it’s natural light.” Will start to fall apart for the writer once he or she has investigated the idea long enough. If the writer has a stronger set of assumptions on what the use of natural light actually connotes and communicates, then a weaker thesis will sound absurd to the student before it is even committed to paper. I find the best way to point this out to students is to liken the writing to arguments they may have heard from candidates in elections. “Is Mitt Romney actually explaining anything to you about small government, or is he simply touting small government for small government’s sake?” Is the line you are feeding your audience educating them or is it just a talking point?

3. A really good argument is not just a logician’s trick. It should be, for all intents and purposes, a real thing.

Though it may be harder to gauge conviction in professional sectors, it is often possible to tell if student writing is unrelated to the writer’s personal beliefs. In my classes, I stress the importance of personal voice. Film criticism is all opinion anyway, so why not write something you believe in? I sometimes worry that institutions such as debate clubs undermine a students’ ability for genuine introspective thought. On the other hand, I suppose such practices can help expose the realities of media that students consume every day. Either way, I’d wager that nearly all the

students I have ever taught come into my classes with some idea that the most important thing in writing a research paper in a logically sound argument. While this is probably true, I also try to instill in them my own ideology that if that a logical argument written without conviction is virtually worthless.

Why is it worthless? I can think of probably a hundred situations in which people are required professionally to write statements that they do not necessarily support or believe in, but such situations are ones in which a person is constrained to do a certain thing “correctly” in order to succeed at his or her job, to stay out of legal trouble, or to maintain other important relationships. But this is not the purpose of a critical writing class and it has nothing to do with the practice of critical thought.

What good is intense study and the discovery of new intellectual horizons if the enhanced consciousness it affords is squandered on menial and highly specific tasks? What good is a belief that nobody believed? Sometimes I tell my students that their papers “need more meat”. I always have to explain what I mean by this as this statement could mean just about anything... but, in the end, If a paper does not represent some idea that is real (true) to the writer, then it’s a paper most people would rather not read.

Ideas Matter

This set of three key points expresses what I have found important to teaching writing in as simple a way as I can think of. Sometime I feel like a kind of subversive bent on coaching students through the hoops of writing for “The Academy” in a way that won’t crush their souls. Higher education has a great power to liberate and also a great power to

assimilate. It's my hope that in teaching students to write with a focus on ideas, that they can develop as critical thinkers and avoid a few pitfalls on their path to seeking a profession. A final paper from a writing intensive class may never be read again after the quarter ends, but the expansion of personal understanding that that paper might create can last forever.

Does anyone doubt this to be true? When I talk about students who

write about lighting techniques in filmmaking, it might seem as though I am taking a trivial trade-based matter and exaggerating it's importance. But just as the paper itself may be unimportant after the grade is given, the content of the paper is sometimes possibly disposable as well. What is not disposable, forgettable, or unimportant is the notion that ideas matter. Ideas matter. Conviction matters. Worldviews matter. Beliefs matter.

