

John Murphy  
English 697  
Small Inquiry  
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The subject of my small inquiry is the concept of meaning-making. This concept is of course critical to writing, reading, teaching, and learning. There are different schools of thought where a broad expression such as meaning-making is concerned. I have borrowed some talking points from the book *The Making of Meaning* by Ann Berthoff in an attempt to narrow the focus of this potentially expansive topic. I will invoke some of Berthoff's words to aid me in telling a meaning making story; this story involves Cheryl, a student with whom I am currently working.

Every time I see Cheryl I think of Berthoff's definition of Paulo Freire's maxim "begin where they are"! Berthoff's expanded definition tells us that, where new learners are concerned, "begin where they are as language animals, endowed with form-finding and form-creating powers of mind and language" (Berthoff 9). As Freire demonstrated with the peasants in Brazil, one can use whatever tools available within the world of a student to teach meaning to them. In this way Freire began literally where these peasants were; that is, as peasants Freire taught them meaning through various "generative words," (10) the words which were to become representative of their word-worlds, their tools for carpentry, their surroundings, and their clothing are examples, are examples of the first meaning-making of "word-worlds," which the peasants had known in a verbal context.

There are a number of complex issues which define where Cheryl is as a learner. The first is that she is profoundly deaf and has been socialized to not read lips. Also, she

is from Haiti and did not know even “broken” English until after she lost her hearing at age 7. In addition, Cheryl is now being tested for a learning disability. I list these factors to illustrate the distance that Cheryl must travel just to begin to struggle with the reading/writing, meaning-making process. Cheryl is currently enrolled in English 102, her professor told me a story which speaks to Cheryl’s “form-finding, form creating powers.” In a class of 20 students, only Cheryl was able to remember the names, in sequence, of each of the previous students with whom she was seated in a circle. My relating this story is not meant to condescend to Cheryl, it is offered as an illustration of her inherent intelligence which is easy to discern once you have spent time with Cheryl. She has a lot of difficulty accessing this intellect due to the previously mentioned obstacles which greatly affect her meaning-making abilities.

Cheryl has an interpreter who sign to her during class, this helps with her ability make meaning during class discussion about the assigned readings and writing; in terms of her hearing disability, this is helpful during class meetings (It is impossible to tell if these meanings are entirely clear to Cheryl until a further learning disability is diagnosed). Because of issues that appear to be related to finances, Cheryl only has the benefit of an interpreter (signer) during class. Where she must really struggle to make meaning is during her tutorials with me. The combination of the fact that I do not make meaning in her discourse (Standard American Sign Language) and that Cheryl does not read lips makes our collaborative attempts at meaning-making both time consuming and quite labor intensive. This is a critical idea for us; if there were a complete dialogue in place our sessions would be smoother and far more productive.

In lieu of conversing in either of our respective, more familiar discourses, it was

decided that we should use two computers to communicate. We sit side by side at two computers and post a dialogue in maximally sized Microsoft-word. As I have mentioned, This process is not particularly efficient when combined with the obstacles which Cheryl must overcome before she can even begin an assigned text with which we can struggle. I stress these difficulties because they are a reminder to me of the relative ease of my own personal meaning-making processes. This idea is twofold: One, it helps me avoid self pity about any struggles which I may experience academically, I can simply put in longer hours, I am not greatly restricted from doing so as Cheryl is. Also, knowing all she has been through just to sit next to me greatly increases my patience with the pace of our collective effort.

So we begin with the keyboard as our shared discourse to address a more common context of meaning-making. The actual acquisition of an academic discourse, even aside of her lack of hearing, is difficult for Cheryl. A lack of experience with critical thinking, reading, or writing is probably something that Cheryl has in common with the majority of her classmates. What further impedes her in her attempt to acquire an academic discourse is that she is also an ESL student. Her reticence while typing even a secondary question is illustrative of how this specific obstacle stalls her progress. For instance, if I ask her casually if she understands an assignment she may respond "I am not knowing the meaning of some words in the articles." Her embarrassment at the apparent awkwardness of this phrase causes her to hesitate in even typing that informal response! This keeps her distances from meaning making for an even longer time before she has really even addressed the assignment itself.

I have no way of knowing what anyone has said to Cheryl but she seems to have

also experienced an educational set back which compounds all of the issues which I have mentioned. As is the case with many “mainstream” students, it seems that it has been at least implied to Cheryl that it is not all right to begin “where you are.” She has implied that her experience with meaning-making is that some teachers are not willing to meet her where she is. This would seem to counter the statement by Berthoff which says:” What is good for the best and brightest is essential for students who have difficulties. Those we used to call slow learners need the freedom and the opportunities we trouble to offer our prize students” (73). I appreciate the way in which Berthoff also subverts this idea saying: “in turn, what is important and worthwhile for disadvantaged students will prove useful and valuable for the good readers and practiced writers” (73). The way in which anyone makes meaning is analogous to the composing process itself; meaning-making is not a linear process, also, meaning-making itself is specific to the individual who is making it, it is dependent on the context. More importantly, there is not one static meaning to be gleaned from any subject matter, therefore there is no uniform way to make meaning.

I am pleased to say that Cheryl and I are now attempting the type of meaning-making which I initially hoped for as a tutor. That is to say that Cheryl is, , however slowly, beginning to experience the results of the model of meaning-making which Ann Berthoff most ardently supports-the actual composition of a text. Berthoff explains the beginning of this most crucial process: “In composing we make meanings. We find forms of thought by means of language, and we find forms of language by taking thought” (69). Berthoff adds a pedagogical insight which I think is central to Cheryl’s situation:” We can best teach composing process by conceiving it as a continuum of

meaning making, by seeing writing as analogous to all these processes by which we make sense of the world. It is generally a surprise to students to learn that writing has anything in common with anything else they've ever done...it has been taught them, it (writing) has indeed nothing to do with anything else they've ever done" (69)

This lengthy quote makes a vital point concerning Cheryl or any other student. Berthoff's idea of writing as a process of making meanings can be seen like "taking in a happening, forming an opinion," (69) takes some of the pressure off of new writers. If Berthoff's analogy is correct, they have been writing all along. If "thinking,perceiving, writing, are all acts of composing," (69) then it is logical that" making meaning, is the work of an active mind and is thus within their (students) natural capacity." (69) The combination of that notion and the image of Cheryl signing the names of 20 successive classmates gives me hope for her meaning-making future; for that feat is truly the product of an active mind.