

Who Am I?

- Cribbs

Every day when I put on my backpack and walk up Forbes Avenue to my classes, I become Susie the College Student. I leave my loud, boisterous self at home and become the serious student I am expected to be. In order to fit into the environment around me and succeed in it, I have to act, dress, and speak in a certain way.

What I do every day is not something new and particular only to myself. Everyone creates different identities for themselves in different situations, but not everyone knows they are doing it. James Gee, a noted scholar in the area of Discourse theory and images of identity says the following about our daily habits of putting on and taking off different identities:

At any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes. Thus, what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but saying (writing) combinations. These combinations I call Discourses with a capital "D". Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes. And social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes.

A Discourse is a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize. (PSSW, 319)

While Gee asserts that we take on these different Discourses in different social situations to basically fit in, they can also be molded and shaped to accomplish different goals, or changed by others with whom we interact. In working at the Community Literacy Center on the North Side, I came to realize that our own images of identity can be consciously altered in order to create bridges across cultural boundaries. My relationship as a mentor to Alison and my experiences with her lead me to realize that a good mentoring relationship is not something that just happens. It is constructed. Creating our own identities within the relationship was a large part of that construction.

Two Worlds Collide

One of the most important things about me, that sets me off from many people I know, is that I'm from an extraordinarily small town in the middle of nowhere. Pittsburgh, to me, is humongous. This factor plays a huge part in determining my "home discourse" the Susie with whom I am the most comfortable. In other words, my small town background is a large part of what makes me. I'm a little naive, not the least bit worldly, generally optimistic. Mostly white people lived in my town, and not a single African American went to my high school. My multiculturalism is definitely limited.

My family has also had an impact on my identity. We are a loud family, in general, so you have to be loud to be heard. As a result, I can be a little boisterous. My family is always laughing and I learned at an early age how to make other people laugh. They trusted me and taught me how to make my own decisions. I can think independently of them. But I also learned how to respect other people, not swear and be vulgar and to avoid judging others.

Another large determinate in who I think of myself as being is my educational background. As a senior English/Professional Writing major at Carnegie Mellon University, words are my life. I write them, I read them, and I analyze them. Also, being at Carnegie Mellon makes a person used to being with well-educated, well-spoken people most of the time.

In all of the aforementioned areas, I have a specific "identity kit" In my hometown, I speak a different way than I do at CMU. I revert to my Western Pennsylvania twang. I talk about things like the weather and movies and television, not Shakespeare and poetry, or Discourse theory and images of identity. With my family, I'm the silly one who doesn't get jokes, but can always win at Trivial Pursuit and Jeopardy. I'm the absent-minded smart kid. In classes at CMU, I'm articulate and attentive; I have to be, to survive. I'm punctual, responsible and talkative in class, but I'm serious. With my friends, I'm a goofball, saying the wrong things at all the wrong times and making jokes constantly. I keep people laughing. All of these identity kits were with me when I walked into the CLC the first day. Which one was going to be right for being a mentor?

Now enter Alison. We sat beside each other our first day at the CLC and, as fate would have it, ended up working together. She took charge that day, leading the introductions and talking to everyone, but there was something about her that climbed

under my skin and stayed there. She was too “take charge, almost to the point of being bossy”. She was loud and she interrupted people when they were talking. At times, she demanded to be the center of attention and would talk until she was. It was going to be difficult working with her. I knew it from the moment we were paired together.

Breaking Ground for Construction

Different mentors in the class took different strategies in working with their mentees. Some wanted to maintain a strictly academic relationship. They would work on the program goals and that was all. Others wanted to be their mentee’s friend and aimed for that in their actions. I didn’t know what was going to work with Alison. She was smart and I had to keep her interested in what she was doing, but I also wasn’t a teacher and didn’t want to act as such. So I began trying different strategies, trying on new identities to see which one clicked with Alison and allowed us to accomplish something.

I started with trying to be Alison’s friend, which resulted in our being completely unproductive. She would get up and leave, find people to talk to, or goof around. I was acting like my normal self with my friends, goofy and funny, and we weren’t progressing through the program like we should have. My goofy identity was not going to work in this situation.

Alison, at the same time, seemed to be trying out roles of her own. She began the first day as a real “take charge” kind of girl, but the other kids shied away from her. I wasn’t getting through to her. Nothing was working for her the way it should be. As a result of this, she toned her bossiness down a little bit. She started to interact with the other teens better. With me, she started to work harder at her projects, but we still didn’t click the way I wanted to.

My next step was to try a combination of half “Fun Susie” and half “Serious Susie.” I wanted to find a middle group between being an authoritarian teacher figure and a friend. So I would joke with Alison and we would laugh, but I would also make her do her work. I would plead with her when she would start to goof around with other students, and she would laugh and come back and do her work. I would ask her silly questions when I could tell she was getting bored, so she could laugh, regroup and have a little more energy to get through whatever it was she was doing. But I also wouldn’t do her work for her. I would prod her and prompt her as she worked her way through the Road to Work, Roads to Learning milestones.

Alison was responsive to this strategy, this identity I had constructed for myself. She also, as previously mentioned, experimented with her own identity in the relationship. In the end, she seemed to take on a combination of two different previous “Alison Identities.” She was still the bossy girl I had met the first day, but she had also incorporated a little bit of the street smart girl, the academically smart girl and a little bit of humor. She respected me enough within this mentor/mentee relationship that we had constructed to listen to me and do the work that I asked her to do. I respected her enough to understand that she would have to chat with other people once in a while and that I shouldn’t get mad about it. It wasn’t my role to yell at her, but to help her do her work. That was the unspoken agreement. The success of our relationship was contingent upon our both adhering to these identities we created.

Broken Bridges

Unfortunately, things between the Alison and I began to deteriorate at the beginning of the last month of the program. One day, as part of my humanness, I was tired and crabby. Alison was not doing her work- she was listening to her headphones and not to me. Instead of adhering to my constructed identity for our relationship, I stepped out of it into my serious student identity. It was frustrating to see Alison blow off her work like she was doing, not to mention that fact that she was basically ignoring me so she could listen to her music. So I got visibly mad at her. I told her she was so far behind and she was never going to get all of her work done. She would ask me questions about her writing and I would make her figure it out on her own.

While I was certainly to blame in the situation, Alison was not a victim. She had always respected our relationship before and listened to me. By listening to her headphones and ignoring me, she was rejecting that established relationship. She seemed to be telling me that she didn’t care enough to listen to me anymore. She stepped out of her constructed mentee identity. As a result, I stepped out of my constructed mentor identity. Our relationship was contingent upon those identities and it fell apart when we abandoned them.

Our bitterness toward one another lasted for a little over a week. I felt rejected and hated because of her treatment of me. I’m sure she felt the same. Our relationship during that time was stiff and formal. There was a day, though, when we both fell back into our old identities that had made the relationship work. And, lo and behold, things went back to normal. We were able to work together successfully and accomplish the tasks that had been laid out for us. Once more, the success of our

mentor/mentee relationship was completely dependent upon our adherence to the identities we had created.

Different Strokes for Different Folks

It might appear, at first, that these constructed identities are something that was common in the relationships at the CLC. After all, in order to communicate across such differences as we experienced, there had to be some give and take between the mentors and the mentees. This just wasn't the case. Each mentor had a specific way of handling their relationship with their mentee. Take, for example, Christa's strategy for dealing with her teen.

I have 4 siblings, 3 of who are younger. So, from the very beginning I took the approach with Tara that was most natural. I treated her like a sister. I teased her, nagged at her, and challenged her. If she was being a pain in the butt and didn't want to participate one day, I said okay, so do what you want to do. Sit here and sleep. When she needed help, I helped her, but I didn't let her take the easy way out. And when she was doing well, I praised her and teased her about claiming that she was so lazy. When she said something I reacted to it, but being that we were both from large families, I think our relationship was pretty solid. I talked to her just like I would have a member of my family.

Instead of constructing a new identity to communicate with her mentee, Tara, Christa relied on an identity she already had- that of being an older sibling in a large family. She was able to reach into her past and pull out an identity kit that they both could relate to. By doing this, the two were able to form a relationship with expectations and communication strategies that were familiar and comfortable to both of them. Our identities are not always new constructions. Sometimes we can rely on ones that we already have.

Tara's identity was an unedited version of one she already had within the discourse of her family, but some mentors chose to specifically censor identities they already had in order to relate to their teen. Paige is an example of one such mentor. She grew up in a wealthy suburb, attended a private school, and was afraid that if her mentee knew of her wealthy background, it might increase the distance that was already between the two of them. She simply eliminated this aspect of her identity at

the CLC. She never talked about her background or family with Jason. In her own words, “My CLC identity was simply a censorship of all that I really am” Paige took a preexisting identity and modified it in order to relate better to Jason.

Why?

Why are these adaptations and constructions of identity necessary? Does it mean that we are fake and disguising who we really are when we are out of our “home discourse” and using a different identity kit to maneuver through new situations? What affects our decisions about the identity we chose to utilize in specific situations?

One reason is environment. Take, for example, how we behave in a library versus when we are at a party. We are conditioned to act a certain way in certain areas. Keith Gilyard would be a strong advocate of this position. In his book, *Voices of the Self* he tells his story of growing up in New York City. He is an African American and, when we was young, he was in the most academically accelerated class in school. He was surrounded by white students every day in the classroom, so he constructed an identity for that situation. Along with Eddie Goldstein I became a class clown. We came up with the funniest quips and made the funniest faces. But we both wanted to be laughed with, not laughed at, so we scored highly on all our tests and raised our hands as vigorously as anyone else (Gilyard, 45).

He called this identity “Raymond.” In the afternoons, though, when he was done with classes, he reverted back to “Keith,” the name he associated with the identity he took on among his black peers. He had a specific identity for each specific environment.

James Gee would argue that new environments always dictate some adaptation of identity. As our Discourse changes, the identity kit has to be altered or constructed to fit it. One thing that happens at the CLC is that, while both the mentor and mentee are in the same environment, they have just come from areas that are completely different. Carnegie Mellon and Oliver High School are about as opposite as one can imagine. When we come from these environments into the CLC setting, our differences have to be overcome. To bridge the gap between Oliver and Carnegie Mellon, we have to adapt to the Discourse of the CLC. We each have to mold our identity kit to create a bridge that allows us to understand each other, no matter what environments we are coming from. It allows us to cross difference.

Another factor that affects our creation and adaptation of identity is our expectations for a relationship. In my relationship with Alison, I was looking for something deeper than a teacher/student relationship. I wanted to like her, to see through the protective attitude she created for herself and get to know the real girl. I was motivated to create an identity that would allow me to achieve this goal. And her expectations for the program were different than other students. She wanted more than the money. I think she wanted to learn and she wanted to get to know more about the college students helping her. Our expectations for the relationship were the impetus for constructing our identities like we did.

Paige, on the other hand, had different goals in mind for her relationship with Jason. She said that she thought her role at the CLC “was to be somewhat of a teacher- someone to guide, set an example, and just someone to talk to.” By viewing her role as more teacher-like, she needed to have a different relationship with Jason than I had with Alison. She therefore had to change her identity to achieve her goal. She needed to be someone who could keep James on track and working, someone who helped him with his writing and his projects, while I needed to be someone who could chat with Alison so I could learn from her. Our different goals and expectations necessitated different identities.

The Big Finish

Our identities are constantly changing. We might be one person in school and another person at home. And whether we apply identities we already have, alter preexisting ones for the current situation, or construct new ones to build communication bridges, we always have to keep in mind the important role they play in building relationships with others. They may change from environment to environment, or as our expectations about a relationship change, but our identities are what enable us to talk with and understand different people in different Discourses. Being able to adapt to different situations is what makes successful intercultural cross-walkers. Mike Rose once wrote the following about the school where he is a teacher.

One of the things we’re concerned about is groups learning to life with each other. Education, in a narrow sense, is not our goal. Can you get along with your neighbor? Can you understand that this person has a different life style? This is as important to me as being able to read. (PSSW, 318)

Oddly enough, at the Community Literacy Center, we don’t just learn how to read and write, we learn how to be people that coexist despite our differences. Adapting our own images of identity is what helps us achieve that education.

Works Cited

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Breaking Ground:

Using Identity to Construct Relationships Across Difference

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