



6-1994

On Blindness: Three True Stories

Kevin Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davis, Kevin (1994) "On Blindness: Three True Stories," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol8/iss3/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

ON BLINDNESS: THREE TRUE STORIES

by

Kevin Davis

I.

As writing center director on a small university campus, I spend a day each fall touring campus, visiting all the new professors. Generally, these are casual, informational meetings: I explain a little about the writing center's operational philosophies, describe who the peer tutors are and what kind of duties they perform, and drop off a couple of brochures we've put together.

Last fall my tour took me to the office of a newly hired department chair. A large man with a frazzle of white hair, he bastioned himself in an administrative fortress: an expanse of desk dividing the room into a sizable work area for himself and a tiny space for visitors; two rigid, straight-backed side chairs facing his desk; an overly plush, multi-adjustable desk chair gracing his side. The layout of the room and my uncomfortable chair told me to get past the small talk, to move straight to the sales plan.

He sat—barely cordial, fingers intertwined, knuckles white from excess pressure—while I explained our function, our services, my role in assisting the faculty with writing task design. I placed my literature near the center of his desk, and he unclenched one hand, slid the papers, with a single middle finger touching them as if they were contaminated, to the desk's left-hand corner, just above his trash can. He reclutched his hands, peered at me over the bulging knuckles, and slowly enunciated his question: "Now let me get this straight. You use student employees to tutor writing?"

That's right.

"And these students are *under-*" he thundered the word, wincing with the pronunciation, "graduates?"

Yes. All good writers. All trained before working. All supervised by more experienced workers.

He paused slightly, pushed the papers over the desk's edge, lifted himself by pressing against the desk, and glowered down at me. "You'll never see my students in this writing thing of yours. My students cannot learn from *under*graduates. Why, where's the expertise in that arrangement? That's like the blind leading the blind."

II.

Working the morning shift in the writing center, I looked up as a thirty-something woman moved tentatively through the entrance. Recently divorced—a white, untanned stripe circled her wedding finger—she wore inexpensive, out-of-date, Sunday-school clothing, and straggly, half-bleached hair, long overdue for a touch-up. Without a book bag, she clutched two notebooks and three texts before her, apparently shielding all her vital organs from our attack.

Joni—a thirty-something, junior, special ed major, then in her third semester tutoring—rose to greet the timid writer. I looked at Joni’s close-cropped hair, t-shirt, and Wranglers and remembered that I had first met Joni when she walked, as timid and oddly dressed as this woman, into my freshman comp class two years before.

Joni took the woman’s elbow and guided her toward the couch. “Hi, I’m Joni,” she said and, barely pausing, added, “And I used to be as scared as you look. What can I do to help?”

The woman looked a little more at ease. “Hi,” she responded. “I look this way because I just came from Dr. Jones’ office. I have him for history, and I have to write a combination book review and biography. I went to ask him what to do, and he totally overwhelmed me with his explanation. I’m so frustrated I’m about to quit, but I thought I’d come see if you can help?” It was clear to me that this woman’s future hung on Joni’s response, and I pushed my chair back a little nervously. An experienced and polished tutor, Joni still might lack the skill to pull this one off, I worried. I was ready to step in if anything went wrong.

“Well,” Joni drawled before stopping. I watched her closely, trying to decide if she was thinking or panicking.

“I’ve never written a biography book review, but three years ago I’d never written anything and I’m still here,” Joni finally continued and I relaxed. “Let me look around. I think we may have an example from Dr. Jones, and some of these books will probably help, and the boss”—she motioned over her shoulder with her thumb—“probably has a handout in the file drawer. I’m sure we can figure this out. But it may be like the blind leading the blind.”

“Oh Joni,” the woman said, “Dr. Jones could see everything and he couldn’t help me a bit. Maybe a blind woman’s just what I need.”

III.

On my way to the library yesterday, I caught up with a couple walking arm-in-arm across campus. “Young lovers,” I thought, preparing to pass.

But then I looked more closely, slowing my pace. The young man, nearly six feet tall and muscular, wore faded, forest green slacks and a garish, unmatching purple-checked shirt. His head was cocked upward, staring at nothing, and over his left shoulder, rigid and vertical as a flag pole, explaining both his odd dress and the angle of his head, his white cane pierced the first crisp air of early fall. His right arm curved at the elbow, bending forward until his hand rested comfortably on the young woman’s left arm, just above her elbow.

My eyes moved to the woman: very thin, long brown hair with wind tracks across it, a hand-beaded belt through her Chinos. The man said something I couldn’t hear, and the woman tilted her head back in conspicuous, prolonged laughter. As she laughed, her body turned slightly, and I saw for the first time her right arm.

She wore a denim shirt, the sleeve rolled up. Below the darkness of her cuff, a slender white arm extended in front of her, curving inward to an even smaller wrist and a tiny hand with willowy fingers, barely bigger around than the white cane that she used to guide herself and her blind companion across campus.

The blind were leading the blind, a wonderful site, filled with incredible layers of trust and simplicity, possibility and hopefulness. I smiled, whistled Hawk-Eye's three-note salute, and turned back for the writing center.