

# Elmhurst College Proposal for Faculty-Student Summer Collaboration Stipend

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Submitted to Elmhurst College Faculty Development Committee

by Tom Nachtrab and Nathan Dunlap

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**“What Do Our Students Know about Knowing?”**



## I. Introduction

### A. Project Title:

**“What Do Our Students Know about Knowing?”**

### B. Abstract:

1. **Objective:** Build a qualitative description of ideological assumptions about “knowing” that prevail among a group of Elmhurst College undergraduate students.
2. **Method:** Analyze samples of students’ written discourse to discover characteristics of conceptual frameworks that underpin students’ ideation of knowledge, learning, education, truth, certainty, and closely related ‘epistemic’ conceptions.

### C. Summary:

We, “instructors” and “students,” are engaged in an enormous institutionalized social activity: “higher education.” Such education, in twenty-first century industrialized society, engages human beings in a kind of organized occupation with “knowledge.” Knowledge is regarded as a social good. Accordingly, contemporary society deliberately sponsors “education” in order to foster the production, dissemination, and exploitation of knowledge by and for our collective selves.

We, at great human expense, pursue knowledge, yet we expend little in validating how much concurrence we have among ourselves on what “knowledge,” or the human activity of “knowing,” is. Our expensive pursuit of it usually just “goes without saying.” We make assumptions, often not very consciously, about one another’s conceptions concerning knowledge and knowing.

The spark for the project herein proposed is our informed suspicion that the conceptual frameworks of ‘knowing’ actually employed by the many and various actors and stakeholders in the socially sanctioned, organized pursuit of knowledge may be less sharply-drawn, less deeply shared, and more contradictory than we think.

We therefore propose this project as an instrument to begin probing the degree of specificity, the amount of consensuality, and the measure of pragmatic consistency of some of the conceptual frameworks currently in play in our own small backyard of higher education at Elmhurst College.

## II. Narrative

### A. Current Situation

Elmhurst College's continuing existence relates to, even depends on, frameworks of concepts about 'knowing.' These frameworks are shared, *imperfectly*, by civic, economic, social, and political *communities* in which the College participates. The frameworks are also shared by *individuals* who participate directly in the College's activity: students (past, present, prospective), material resource providers for the students (parents, families, and scholarship grantors), governors and operational agents (administrators, staff, and faculty) of the institution, and resource providers to the institution.

All of the sharing communities and individuals ascribe positive value to the concept of knowing, attested by their expenditure of time, energy, and resources in propagation of knowledge. Yet where do their various versions of the concept of knowing overlap, and where do they diverge? Is the overlapping great enough, and are the divergences small enough, to support effective and efficient propagation?

For example, probably the most pragmatically important example, do concepts of knowing prevalent among *students* correspond closely enough to concepts of knowing prevalent among teaching *faculty*, so that the common goal of augmenting knowing among students can proceed effectively with minimal 'waste' of time, energy, and resources in the overcoming of contradictions and inconsistencies between expectations of students and expectations of teaching faculty?

In other words:

1. What do Elmhurst College *students*, in actual practice, assume knowing to be?
2. What do Elmhurst College *faculty*, in practice, assume knowing to be?
3. What, quantitatively and qualitatively, is the comparative alignment between these sets of dominant assumptions?
4. Can awareness of that articulated comparative alignment give us opportunity to improve our practices for augmenting knowing (our students' practices of 'learning,' and our faculty's practices of 'teaching')?
5. If so, *how* should we modify our practices?

The project proposed here is a first step in contributing some potentially valuable answers the first of the five questions in the inquiry model outlined above.

### B. The Project Plan

Our inquiry project will identify and characterize assumptions about 'knowing' within a sample group of Elmhurst College students.

The students, like all of us, hold basic assumptions, fundamental conceptual frameworks, of which they are, like all of us, not completely aware. They are performatively operative, yet ‘go without saying.’ Such assumptions are aspects of ideologies that we use with little consciousness, frameworks of reality that we can hardly even ‘see.’ So, our inquiry here cannot succeed by directly asking students to tell us their assumptions. We will therefore conduct our inquiry in the following less direct way:

1. We will employ “discourse analysis” to indirectly expose ideological assumptions of our sample of students. We will analyze samples of students’ *written* discourse, employing techniques of academic analysis, developed over the past 15-25 years by scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, et al., and known generally as ‘discourse analysis,’ ‘critical discourse analysis,” or CDA.
2. We will confine our inquiry, as we may find practical, to elucidating students’ basic conceptual assumptions related to ‘*knowing*’: to knowledge, learning, education, truth, certainty, and closely related ‘epistemic’ conceptions.
3. We will define a sample of current Elmhurst first-year students. We will pursue a definition of the sample that is ‘general’ or ‘generic’ within the first-year specification. Sample size will be defined in terms of number of students and number of writing samples. Our preliminary estimate is that the number of students will be in the range of 15-40, and total samples of writing will be in the range of 30-120. (Discourse analysis techniques deal with written text at various levels, including down to the word and phrase, entailing high expenditure of time per sample in analysis activity.)
4. Capturing of samples will likely focus on ‘blind’ samples from Spring 2008 first-year composition courses. Appropriate Institutional Review Board approval will be sought after this proposal is approved.
5. The key ‘intellectual product’ of this project will be ‘thick descriptions’ of conceptual frameworks that we judge, after our discourse-focused analysis, to prevail in the writing and thinking activities of our sample set of students.
6. We will include in our report a response to the question of “What implications should we draw from our experience in the subject project for improving the planning and conduct of future inquiry in related areas.”
7. We will also include in our report a response to the question of “What implications can we responsibly draw, if any, for improving any current practices in doing the work of any segment of the Elmhurst College community in propagating ‘knowing?’ In other words we will look for possible implications for any immediately applicable opportunities to improve teaching, learning, or educational support activities, from the individual and

local to the collective and campus-wide. We remember, however, that this current inquiry project is only a small first step in addressing the large first question of an even larger 5-question inquiry model, as outlined above in section II.A.(p. 3)

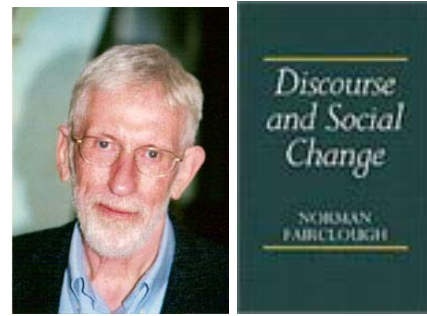
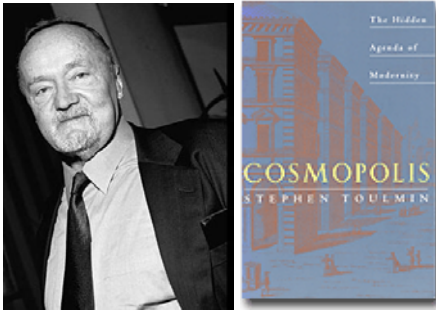
8. The material deliverable of this inquiry project will be a written report that will document the project’s objectives, methods, findings, and implications. The containers for the report will be a combination of current *de facto* standard containers for electronic / physical files, such as Word, PDF, PowerPoint, Excel, HTML, etc.
9. We understand the potential positive collateral value to Elmhurst College for our inquiry project and the Faculty Development Committee’s sponsorship of it. After completion, we will be prepared to enthusiastically reorganize, and re-present, the products of this project for specific audiences and venues such as research showcases, admissions or alumni events, etc.
10. The project we propose here, an inquiry into cultural ideologies and conceptual frameworks, obviously floats on its *own* worldview or set of assumptions. We have said that holders of such assumptions are generally quite imperfectly aware of those assumptions. We claim no exception. Nevertheless, we must try to declare, as specifically as we can, the fundamental assumptions of our enterprise.  
To that end, we state:

“We conduct this inquiry project within the context of our own acceptance of a framework of social constructivist theory of meaning. Such theory holds that we humans, cooperatively and collectively, through symbol manipulations, generally build the meanings of our discourse and, consequently, the truths of our cultural and personal worlds.”

11. Reference models. We must be able to relate (compare and contrast) our inquiry to some other recognized works in order to endow our work with a relevance to communities beyond ‘just us.’ To begin, we have identified the following works as provisional models:
  - Theoretical model: Some of the work of philosopher Steven Toulmin serves for now as our primary comparative model for theoretical aspects of our inquiry. We adapt a framework that Toulmin presents in, among other writings, his book *Cosmopolis*.<sup>1</sup> The adapted framework organizes some predominant ideologies of reality, and of knowing, into a scheme anchored around these reference points:

<b>Cartesian</b>	<b>Baconian</b>	<b>Montaignian</b>
formal / theoretical	empirical / positivist	humanist / pragmatic
theological	theological	rhetorical

- Methodological model: Some of the work of philosopher Norman Fairclough serves as our primary guidance model for methodological aspects of our inquiry. We adapt approaches to discourse analysis that Fairclough presents in, among other writings, his book Discourse and Social Change.<sup>2</sup> Appendix B to this proposal is a high-level representation of the major components of Fairclough's discourse analysis scheme.



<sup>1</sup> Toulmin, Stephen E. Cosmopolis: the hidden agenda of modernity New York: Free Press, c1990.

<sup>2</sup> Fairclough, Norman. Discourse and Social Change. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992.

## C. Expertise

### 1. Faculty Member:

“[E]xpertise to carry out the project . . .,” as requested in submission guidelines for this proposal, can be complicated in this way:

- Project planning, execution, and management expertise: Tom has about thirty years experience doing that, sometimes even successfully, for dozens of [non-academic] projects involving hundreds of people and millions of dollars. Tom has, for the most part however, escaped from all that with some residual energy and hair.
- Collaboration and mentoring expertise: In private life, business, and education, Tom has always sought out excuses for being allowed to work with young people. This is selfish behavior, but it makes him happy, especially when the opportunity permits *one-to-one* collaboration and no responsibility to inflict a letter grade on the mentee.
- “Knowledge” and skill within the “discipline”: Tom pleads to substitute genuine ‘interest’ for this criterion. Should that not cut it, Tom has, in addition to his M.A. in English Studies at Elmhurst, a life-long hodge-podge of experience in language and learning, tutoring and teaching, reading and study in rhetoric, linguistics, philosophy, composition, and even in ‘literature’ (but he prefers that be kept quiet for obvious reasons). Tom requests that his salad day’s flirtation with Wittgenstein’s theories of ordinary language not be held against him, as he did not inhale deeply.

Tom Nachtrab’s most relevant qualification for pursuit of the proposed project is that he finds the question so damn fascinating.

### 2. Student:

Nathan Dunlap, an Elmhurst College undergraduate with a junior class standing, is most enthusiastic about the research project proposed herein. Home educated kindergarten through high school, Nathan graduated from the College of DuPage with an associate’s degree in arts, and plans to graduate with a bachelor’s degree from Elmhurst College in the spring of 2009. Furthermore, Nathan holds a 3.98 grade point average and is a member of Phi Theta Kappa Honor’s Society.

Double-majoring in English and History, Nathan is particularly interested in the circumstances of ideological change and is confident that this project will grant him a greater grasp of the interplay between ideology and language.

In preparation for this project, as well as for his own personal interest, Nathan has studied and responded in writing to articles such as rhetorician George Kennedy's "A Hoot in the Dark," and James Berlin's "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." Nathan will continue his reading prior to the start of the proposed project with "Cosmopolis" by philosopher/rhetorician Stephen Toulmin and "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" by historian/philosopher Thomas Kuhn.

### **3. The Combination**

Tom Nachtrab and Nathan Dunlap have a short history of successful collaboration. Nathan excelled in Tom's Classical Rhetoric and Contemporary Discourse class in the Fall of 2007. During that time and subsequently, Nathan contributed generously to learning activities not directly related to course requirements, including the promotion of thoughtful campus-wide dialog and development of this proposal.

### **III. Contact Information:**

#### **A. Faculty Member**

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### **IV. Current and Previous Grants**

Tom Nachtrab has received no grant awards in the academic milieu.  
(Granting of this current proposal would allow him to make this section of his future proposals less conspicuously deficient.)

### **V. Publications and Presentations.**

#### **A. Faculty Member Tom Nachtrab**

Student Connections Conference of Illinois State University, Springfield, IL

March 2006. **Attacking Word Problems: A Language-Based Approach to Teaching Practical Mathematics**

Triton College Academic Support Conferences, River Grove, IL  
Aug. 2004 – Aug. 2006 **Talkin' 'bout English** (8-hour lecture series)

Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), San Francisco, March 2005  
**Feminist Perspectives on Teaching Electronic Discourse**  
(in collaboration with Dr. Bridget O'Rourke and Dr. Tina Kazan, Elmhurst College)

Elmhurst College Research and Performance Showcase  
May 2004 **From Manuscript to Print**  
A New Historicist Interpretation of Shakespeare's Narrative Poetry  
May 2003 **Language and Meaning**  
Darwinian Roots of Social Constructivist Theories of Language and Composition

River Oak Review Literary Journal  
2004-2007 Assistant Editor

Elmhurst College Classroom Guest Speaker  
Oct. 2003 – Oct. 2004 **Adult Literacy in the U.S.** (ENG106)  
Feb. 2004 – May 2004 **Electronic Writing Technologies** (ENG410)  
July 2004 **Rhetoric, Materialism, and Genetics** (ENG521)

Business Professional Presentations  
Various: Total Quality Management, project management, application of electronic technologies, technical education, business writing, process flow analysis, supply chain management

Fine Arts Building Gallery, Michigan Avenue, Chicago  
Aug. 2003 **Up Against It** Photography exhibition

## **B. Student Nathan Dunlap**

Nathan has submitted work to publications such as Middlewestern Voices, and awaits publication decisions.

# Appendix A: Sample Discourse Analysis Worksheet

# TN/ND Inquiry Project

01: 105109/5/06 4:07

I really can't seem to think about what to write at this moment so I will write what is foremost on my mind.

I believe that a woman can survive on her own and do whatever she wants in this world. So as an independent person I tried to prove my point by moving to a place where I had no job, friends, family or even a place to live.

It took me about a week to find a place to stay and two weeks to find a job. I thought everything was going great until I bought my car. To make a long story short I made a bad choice of car. Within a week I had paid more than half in repairs of what the car was worth. Every one I new started talking. "You should have taken a guy with you", "no woman goes car shopping on her own" said my friends.

I really can't  
seem  
to think about  
(what to write)  
at this moment  
so I will write what is foremost on my mind.

**Comment [TN1]:** ontologically real? Expressing assurance, sincerity?

**Comment [TN2]:** my perception may / may not reflect reality? Not confident?

**Comment [TN3]:** decide? cognitive process?

**Comment [TN4]:** product of writing is a 'thing,' an object?

**Comment [TN5]:** time (now) is made of dividable parts; the parts are things

**Comment [TN6]:** mind is a thing, belongs to me

**Comment [TN7]:** statement of individual commitment? Reflector of

## Appendix B: A Hierarchic Interpretation of Fairclough's Discourse Analysis Framework

(Based on the text of *Discourse and Social Change*, especially pp. 231-8)

