ABSTRACT

ROBYN A. DIAZ. Speak Up or Shut Up: What are Civil Discourse Statements? (Under the direction of Dr. Chris Anson.)

In the current climate many students feel afraid to express themselves while others may feel emboldened to speak harmfully against those they disagree with. With the present political climate and an increasing number of voices calling for renewed emphasis on civil discourse on college campuses, this study proposed an investigation into the use of civil discourse statements in the syllabi of writing classrooms across the country. In potentially contentious situations like these, teachers are turning to civil discourse statements. In short, civil discourse statements (CDSs) are clauses of varying length located within the course syllabi that inform students about discussion in the classroom. Up to this point there has been no research on CDSs. This study cast a broad net to reach writing teachers across the country through an anonymous survey that collected participants’ demographic data, their motives for writing a CDS, what they considered to be the purpose of a CDS, and a copy of the CDS itself. These responses were then coded for patterns to begin laying a broad groundwork for future research. The CDSs specifically were examined to determine how the motivations manifested themselves in the rhetoric of the statements, to consider how the pronouns used in the CDSs could impact the tone of the CDS and therefore the class, and to answer the question of what topics are covered in a CDS. The results were intriguing: the teachers’ motivations were divided almost evenly between wanting to prevent uncivil discussions and wanting to create an open, inclusive environment. These motives manifested in interesting ways in the CDSs because the inclusive category was not as popular when the CDSs were coded. More research is needed on CDSs and civil discourse in general in order to fully embody civil discourse in the classroom and bring consistency to classroom policies.