

# Writing from Experience: The Evolving Roles of Personal Writing in a Writing in the Disciplines Program

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**Abstract:** How did an expressivist course, "Writing from Experience," anomalously come to spend 29 years in Cornell's writing in the disciplines First-Year Writing Seminar program? In answering this question, the author provides a telling example of the forces that propel or impede curricular change and analyzes how, as a result of these forces, the role of personal writing in the WID-based first-year writing program evolved. Personal writing remains, not in a separate course, but rather in new, more thoroughly integrated modes: personal and disciplinary approaches can, with programmatic support, come to work together effectively in a WID program.

I'm fairly sure it's well known that one of the nation's oldest writing in the disciplines programs flourishes at Cornell University: it began in 1966, when First-Year Writing Seminars (FWSs) were first offered not just by English but by eight other departments.<sup>[1]</sup> But I'm even more sure it's *not* well-known that for 29 years, 1968-1997, the English Department included in its array of First-Year Writing Seminars many sections of a personal essay course, English 135, "Writing from Experience," a seminar that, unlike other FWSs, rarely drew on the particular disciplinary expertise of the faculty and graduate students who taught it. I've been the director of First-Year Writing Seminars at Cornell for over half of the program's forty plus years, and like most administrators, I prefer to believe our program is coherently planned. Why, then, did this course, anomalous in a WID-driven program, hold on for so long? And should we regret that it has now disappeared? What can we learn from examining the history of this course?

Most immediately, the history of English 135 provides an excellent example of the relentless currents that propel or impede curricular change: institutional traditions and needs; the advocacy and influence of particular faculty; and shifts in theories of composition pedagogy (as enacted, or not). The crosscurrents of these forces led both to the continuation and finally to the elimination of English 135. More interesting and significant is the story of how these crosscurrents caused personal writing to evolve from its "pre-generic" condition in English 135 to the modes in which it now survives, enriching and improving the teaching of disciplinary writing. For readers concerned about a turn away from personal narrative writing in composition courses and toward teaching the academic essay in WID or topic-based courses, tracing the story of English 135 and the evolution of personal writing in Cornell's first-year writing program provides an example of how the personal and disciplinary approaches can come to work together effectively.

To tell the story of English 135 and discuss the evolution of personal writing in Cornell's First-Year Writing Seminar program, I'll provide an overview of how "Writing from Experience" entered the

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FWS program and of how it was taught, staffed, and directed; I'll describe the niche occupied by "Writing from Experience" in Cornell's new first-year writing program; I'll explain why that niche disappeared; I'll briefly describe courses that developed as off-shoots; and I'll conclude by examining the role that personal writing has now found in Cornell's disciplinary First-Year Writing Seminars.

## The Early Role of English 135 in a Newborn WID Program

Let's turn, then, to the history of English 135. Fortunately, for decades the Cornell writing program has hoarded binders stuffed with brochures describing each semester's First-Year Writing Seminars, back to 1966. Fall 1966 was a noteworthy semester at Cornell because in that semester First-Year Writing Seminars became the responsibility of eight departments in addition to English (there are now over 30 participating departments). Notice that the writing in the disciplines program began in 1966, while English 135, *not* a WID course, was brought into the program in 1968. Why did a basically expressivist course so quickly enter the fledgling WID program, where it was soon offered in great numbers?

Clearly revealed in the rhetoric of the FWS brochures is uneasiness created by institutional needs and theoretical uncertainty. Even though Cornell's writing in the disciplines program was developed in 1966 from valuable, and early, insights about WID, the English department now found itself suddenly in charge of a disciplinary writing program that involved many other departments. As late as 1979, when English professor Jonathan Bishop, who was present at the program's 1966 founding, became its director, he advised students that "The Freshman Seminar program can seem elaborate and confusing" (FWS brochures Spring 1979 - Spring 1982). At the time—the sixties, the seventies—"writing across the curriculum" and "writing in the disciplines" were not very familiar concepts anywhere. Little surprise that the theories underlying these movements were not well-known at an Ivy League Institution, where it's unlikely that most faculty or administrators thought of teaching writing as a discipline driven by theory of *any* sort.

Perhaps this is why Bishop described the disciplinary seminar program as elaborate and confusing and was accordingly inspired, in 1968, just two years after the institution of the new disciplinary writing program, to install a course that he (with two colleagues, Neil Hertz and Taylor Stoehr) had developed six years earlier as a year-long advanced writing course aimed at well-credentialed freshmen (it had provided an alternative to the basic year-long writing sequence).<sup>[2]</sup> Now called English 135, only one semester long, and open to all students, "Writing from Experience" would focus on students' writing and experience, as the description Bishop provided in 1968 makes clear: English 135 is "[d]esigned primarily to give the student practice in writing about his own experience, either in the present, here at Cornell, or in the past. Most of the class time will be given to the students' own work." Although there was some tweaking (for instance, the description was altered to be gender neutral), the description remained basically the same through its last semester, spring 1997.<sup>[3]</sup>

Developing and administering English 135 drew on a theory for teaching writing with which Bishop was very familiar, namely his recent teaching experience at Amherst. There he had taught the famous English 1-2 for several years under Theodore Baird. Bishop's approach to English 135 resembles that of Baird to English 1-2 in fundamental aspects, as becomes clear from Robin Varnum's (1996) thorough history of the Amherst course, *Fencing with Words*: students in both courses would "write frequently and from experience" (p. 1); student texts would be the primary object of discussion (p. 1); attention would be given to the relation between language and reality, a positivist slant, and to the writer's voice and authority, an expressivist slant (p. 244). There would be weekly staff meetings (p. 5). At Cornell, however, the course was further pruned down: unlike the Amherst model, which featured carefully contrived and sequenced assignments (p. 1), English 135 would have no common

set of assignment sequences; indeed, Bishop discouraged specific assignments altogether. Perhaps he remembered that at Amherst, according to Varnum, the assignments could seem puzzling to instructors (pp. 136, 229) as well as to students (p. 167).

Bishop's "Writing from Experience," although eschewing assignments, resonates with the Baird vision. As Bishop wrote to his staff in an August, 1996, handout now in my possession, students were to

focus on their current Cornell experience[...] to engage themselves with the world they find themselves in, to go places and do things, to notice whatever is going on, and to see what happens when they formulate these discoveries in words on paper. Sooner or later that which occurs in the present will remind them of the past. When this begins to happen, remembered experiences too can provide subject matter[...]. And they are already perfectly capable of coming to terms with it all in their own way without artificial preparation. Writing is not just a set of rules imposed from without. Nor is it necessarily an egotistic flight of fancy. As a response to the real, it is an opportunity to become actual writers in relation to the truth of the matter and a living audience, right away.

Students, Bishop urges, will not be "composing anything that need formally be called an 'essay.' Instead they will be writing straightforwardly, even naively, about experiences they have actually had[...]" He goes on to emphasize a feature important to him, namely that "The course is really concerned with writing at what may be called a 'pre-generic' level." Quite definitively, this course was not designed to introduce students to writing in a discipline or to writing in a genre (not the personal essay, not fiction, not poetry), any of which would have necessitated responding to "a set of rules imposed from without." Clearly, the course provided an excellent venue for the spirit of the sixties. Setting out in a fresh direction, English 135, as Varnum argues of the Amherst model (p. 7), departed from the current-traditional mode of teaching writing that is considered to have been dominant at English 1's inception and which certainly had been thriving at Cornell.

Having successfully installed English 135 into the new WID writing program, Bishop equaled Baird in intense and steadfast support of the course. Baird kept English 1-2 going for 28 years, from 1938-66. With Bishop's advocacy and administration (while writing program director and as course leader for instructors), English 135 continued as a First-Year Writing Seminar for 29 years, from 1968-1997; its spin-off courses went on for another seven years. Over those 29 years, English 135 was usually offered in significantly more sections than was any other topic, in or out of the English department.

English 135 found a solid place in the WID program for a number of administrative and pedagogical reasons. Foremost among them was the lack of appropriate leadership or pedagogical development that a new writing in the disciplines program required. The WID program had been developed with the keen appreciation that the best possible results weren't being achieved by requiring all students to write about literature, using anthologies; the program was also developed with keen appreciation that in many disciplines other than English faculty knew how to write, wrote as a basic part of their disciplinary activities, and were capable of teaching students how to write in their disciplines, with better results than in that literature course. But once set up in 1966, the program continued until 1982 with leadership based in the English department and without particular advocacy for WID as a program or pedagogy. Furthermore (not atypically for the time), while developmental programs were sometimes available for graduate student instructors, these were not regularly required of all; and none were available for faculty. Jonathan Bishop did lead purposefully and well, meeting with his many instructors regularly to instruct them in his approach to teaching writing from experience (although Keith Hjortshoj, a former instructor of the course, in a private communication to me

referred to Bishop's "almost mystical understanding of the personal," a pedagogy it must sometimes have been difficult to share). When Bishop was (and when he wasn't) director of the writing program, he ensured that many, many sections of English 135 were offered.<sup>[4]</sup>

Furthermore, the presence of English 135 supported lurking assumptions about writing courses, assumptions that would take years to change at Cornell. One was that writing courses are less likely to really teach writing if they require reading, especially reading other than literature; another was that the personal writing course offers the best "basic" way to prepare students for academic writing (part of the expressivist pedagogy of the sixties and seventies). These assumptions show up clearly in the brochures from 1966 until 1982, when significant changes occurred (which I'll discuss later). Although the 1966 brochure informs students that "You may assume that each course listed below[...] requires approximately a paper a week, even where the course-description does not explicitly spell out the writing requirements," it nonetheless advises that "probably all of you are well advised to go for at least one or two of the English options." Until fall of 1982, every brochure, even while claiming that "all of the [seminars] stress writing" still advises students about courses that will "be devoted almost entirely to writing" as opposed to those "incorporating reading." Virtually all of the courses emphasizing "writing only" are offered by English, and these are either "Writing from Experience" or something like the out-dated current-traditional "Modes of the Essay" (which didn't last long, a point on which the English department can pride itself). With English 135, the writing program could promise at least one bona fide *writing* course.

English 135, as a personal writing course, also satisfied an administrative need. As I've indicated, until 1982 the writing program was run from within the English department. "Writing from Experience" provided the many English MFAs with a good place to teach. No doubt it seemed appropriate to have MFA candidates teach a course without texts in which students would produce personal rather than academic writing: creative writing was conflated with personal writing, without considering the genre in which MFAs were actually experts (fiction and poetry, creative non-fiction not yet being an option). The preparatory teaching materials that Bishop wrote for the graduate student teachers indicate that the graduate students indeed often tried to provide model personal essays to teach style, but Bishop urged that such additions were unnecessary and most likely damaging to the pre-generic approach. Although many graduate students caught on to Bishop's pedagogical theory and appreciated it, others were less enthusiastic or were unclear about its methods, especially as the expressivist sixties and seventies receded into the distance. What were they teaching, if not a genre such as the personal essay? Perhaps the short story? Tellingly, some students referred to the course as "lying from experience": Keith Hjortshoj, in private correspondence with me, observed that "MFAs and their students[...] tended to view [English] 135 writing as literary narration, which [students] often interpreted as vivid narration: make experience seem interesting, or find interesting experiences to write about".<sup>[5]</sup> But deliberation on the curricular or pedagogical appropriateness of English 135 for MFA students or for the WID program was not evident.

## 1982: Challenges to the Role of English 135 in a WID Program

The place of a personal writing course in the WID writing seminars would be seriously reconsidered only when major changes began in the writing program and consequently in the culture of writing at Cornell in 1982: that is when the writing program and its First-Year Writing Seminars became an *independent* program under a new director, Professor of English Fredric Bogel, hired because he was committed to the WID approach. (I was chosen to become associate director.) Under the new directorship, the FWS brochure was rewritten to emphasize the basis of writing in the disciplines and to remove all suggestion that certain courses were more dedicated to teaching writing than others.

Further, the writing program would emphasize and ensure that writing was taught as a guided developmental process in *all* seminars (the "process" approach had been poorly inculcated).<sup>[6]</sup> When the program needed more seminars, it would not as before automatically add more sections of English 135. Most important, all graduate student instructors would be required to take a seminar in composition pedagogy; in a few years, a seminar for faculty on writing instruction became available.

But "Writing from Experience" could not just be abandoned: Bishop remained a strong advocate, the course was popular, tradition and inertia exerted their hold. In fact, direct changes to English 135 would take more than a decade after 1982 to begin: they took place only as the now independently situated program under new leadership helped to develop increased understanding of WID. This understanding flourished as more and more Cornell faculty members took a six-week seminar designed especially for them, the Faculty Seminar in Writing instruction, which helped faculty to recognize why and how they could and should claim responsibility for teaching students how to write in their disciplines.<sup>[7]</sup> Graduate student instructors, who took the now universally required preparatory seminar, began developing excellent assignments for their disciplinary seminars. Furthermore, recognition of WID was growing nationally, and the new program's directors and faculty, rather than ignoring the composition community, as had been something of a habit, took care to become part of it, learn from it, and contribute to it from their rich experiences in the Cornell community.<sup>[8]</sup>

Within this context of the writing program's increasingly purposeful understanding of curriculum development and the best teaching of writing, English 135 and its pre-generic personal writing became increasingly problematic. In the context of a disciplinary program and with genre studies a developing area of interest in the field of composition, instructors of English 135 felt the difficulty of ignoring the genre in which students were to write. With a burst of energy, in the fall of 1994 the English department, under the guidance of English 135 instructor Ann Boehm, created a new course, "The Personal Essay," a version of "Writing from Experience" that would run parallel with it. "The Personal Essay" differed from "Writing from Experience" primarily in that students studied sample essays and knowingly wrote within a genre. Finally, because with Boehm (who was admired by Bishop and graduate student instructors alike) the new personal essay course had a strong course leader, was popular with students, and served MFA graduate student instructors well, in 1997 "Writing from Experience" was retired, leaving in its place "The Personal Essay," soon re-titled "The Familiar Essay."

Shifts in disciplinary interests would, however, displace even these remnants of English 135, expressivism, and the personal essay. Each year, the English department offered a wider and more alluring variety of topic-based writing seminars—for instance, "Cultural Studies" was developed in response to that popular movement in literary studies. The MFAs wanted and deserved to have opportunities to teach a wider range of courses—courses that focused, say, on "Travel and Nature Narrative" or "Linked Stories"—types of writing they both studied and produced. Equally important, very few faculty members would happily act either as instructors of the personal/familiar essay course or as mentors for its graduate student instructors. The creative writing faculty in the Department of English work primarily in fiction and poetry; the course lay outside their areas of expertise and interest.

Perhaps most telling, from an administrative and curricular point of view, was another problem, one that stemmed from the traditions that had built up around English 135. Academic and administrative advisors of students who were weaker in writing often sent them to this seminar that since its founding in 1968 had been advertised and viewed as teaching "just writing" and nothing else. The inertia of institutional habit, supported by the lurking idea that FWSs requiring readings would not focus on writing, caused advisors of needier students to rely on "Writing from Experience" as the best

place for students who, they believed, needed to concentrate on "just writing," preferably on the nuts and bolts of writing. But, of course, English 135 was not a "writing skills" course, an approach as antithetical to its principles as to those of the WID program. Further, such advisors did not consider whether an expressivist or a personal essay course always provided the most helpful kind of "just writing," whether some students with weaker than usual preparation for college writing might find extended immersion in disciplinary writing to provide better, more relevant experience. Although for some students "Writing from Experience" was unquestionably valuable, as a teacher myself of English 135 and its offshoots, I remained doubtful that it provided the best foundation for later writing. Even taking, as I myself did, a genre approach to the course, I questioned how assisting students to conquer the associative forms of the familiar essay prepared them for the linear rigors of argumentative academic writing.

Because of these accumulating concerns, in Fall of 2004, for the first time since 1968, no personal or familiar essay course was offered in the first-year writing program. Rather, in its place the English department now offers writing seminars that take memoir as the object of study, fully, it is hoped, disconnecting the study (or writing) of the personal essay from any perceived "just writing, no reading" option in the FWS program. Personal writing deserves more than a fallback role.

## New Roles for Personal Writing in the WID Program

To repeat, personal writing deserves more than a fallback role. I would consider it serious indeed if the departure of English 135 meant the departure of personal writing in FWSs. In fact, I consider personal writing to be so important that I am glad it is no longer relegated to one course. A writing program should not rely on just one space in which students can discover and act on their personal intellectual or professional or civic passions. Rather, by drawing on an enlarged concept of the personal, discipline-based seminars themselves can and should imaginatively include the personal to enrich students' experiences in disciplinary work.

I do not, then, agree with personal writing scholars such as Lad Tobin, whom Thomas Newkirk (1997) describes approvingly as conceiving of "the writing course as an open space, a 'common,' that needs to be protected from appropriation by academic disciplines such as cultural studies and literary studies" (p. 106) or, in Cornell's case, I suppose, by any other of the thirty departments and programs offering writing seminars. Critics such as Diane Freedman and Karen Paley convincingly argue for "a sharing of pedagogies and a breakdown of the binaries between the individual and 'the social turn' and between private and public discourse" (Paley, 2001, p. 18). Indeed, when Newkirk (1997) argues for an understanding of the self as "a complex cultural performance" (p. xii), he provides a reason to view a disciplinary writing course as exactly the right place to engage and develop the personal.

Like Candace Spigelman and Kurt Spellmeyer, I value personal writing that engages students with their intellectual endeavors; there are sound arguments for ensuring that students engage with topics by drawing narratively on their own experience in relation to those topics (Spellmeyer, 1989, pp. 274-75). There are, however, modes of personal experience other than the narrative, other ways for students to write "personally" on academic topics. Peter Elbow (2002), the scholar most often thought of in connection with personal writing, helpfully offers a broader take on the scope of personal writing:

The *topic* can be personal or not; the *thinking* can be personal or not; the *language* can be personal or not; and the *function* or goal of the writing can be personal or not. These dimensions can occur in any combination. (p. 1, emphasis in original)

And Elbow outlines four types of "personal thinking" (emphasis in original):

Using narrative or story telling to think about nonpersonal topics. (p. 3)

Using feelings, intuitions, hunches, personal associations and analogies to think about nonpersonal topics. (p. 4)

Imagining the experience of others in order to think about a nonpersonal topic.(p. 5)

Using someone else's actual personal experience in order to think about an impersonal topic. (p. 5)

All of these types of personal writing can engage students personally with their disciplinary endeavors. Elbow's analysis leads us to see that while some personal writing draws on personal narrative, being personal can also mean using the imagination for hunches or analogies, for imagined experience. "What could be more personal [...] than the act of trying to imagine someone else's experience or feelings—using empathy, role-playing, the believing game? We do it all the time in order to think not just about personal topics but also nonpersonal ones" (p. 5).

Designing writing assignments that include imaginative, complementary personal writing, however, does not come naturally to most teachers, who are steeped in the culture of "discuss" and "compare and contrast." Innovations of this sort require guidance and opportunities for practice. Part of the change in the culture of teaching and writing that began at Cornell in 1982 was, as I've noted, the requirement that all new graduate student instructors take a preparatory seminar in the teaching of writing; faculty gained the option of the "Faculty Seminar in Writing Instruction." In both the Faculty Seminar and the graduate student seminar, the emphasis since their inception has been the assignment sequence.<sup>[9]</sup> With instructors of these developmental seminars well-informed in theories of pedagogy and composition, and with the guidance of books on teaching writing produced by directors in the program (most recently *The Elements of Teaching Writing* by Gottschalk, director of FWSs, and Keith Hjortshoj, director of Writing in the Majors), FWS instructors have been encouraged to develop plans that help students become engaged writing participants of disciplines. Varieties of personal involvement are regularly part of those plans, as encouraged both by instructors of the seminars and by *The Elements'* chapter on "Designing Writing Assignments and Assignment Sequences," which, for instance, in a section called "The Rhetoric of Assignment Writing: Subject, Audience, Purpose, and Form" encourages instructors to consider imaginary or hypothetical alternative rhetorical situations in which students may situate their writing (2004, pp. 29-46).

To investigate the role of personal writing since the demise of the personal essay class, I surveyed recent years of assignment sequences in the writing program's files. I expected to and did find that many sequences of writing leading up to an essay include some kind of exploratory personal writing of Elbow's "feelings, intuitions, hunches," "narrative or story telling" type: one near-retirement professor of history who offers a seminar on the blues has been so moved by his students' personal stories that he now finds teaching the writing seminar to be his favorite assignment. More often, surprisingly, I found that instructors' assignments frequently ask students *imaginatively* or *hypothetically* to step into new rhetorical situations, to occupy other positions—to become, for instance, a soldier or a monk in some episode of history (imagining the experience of others), or to write to a real audience for a real purpose (making an impersonal topic personal). Instructors appear to have realized that this type of imaginative personal writing (which widens the narrower concept of personal narrative writing) helps novices to engage productively, because personally, with the ideas, facts, and perspectives they encounter. Indeed, instructors at

Cornell have played the imagining game to produce assignments that lead students to discourse genres that are much more personal than that of the student, academic essay.

When instructors of Cornell FWSs plan preparatory writing based on actual (not imagined) personal experience, they often do so in the form selected by Sarah Day-O'Connell (2001), who for a writing seminar in music wanted students to fully appreciate the debate about program music, music that tells a story. In "Famous First Performances," Day-O'Connell asked students to listen to a piece of music, knowing nothing about it, and then write up their response. Some students told stories about the music; others did not—and students thus had entered the academic debate on the superiority or inferiority of program music as compared to abstract or absolute music. Students became personally involved; they had something at stake before finding out what the authorities had to say and before ultimately writing an academic essay. A similar if less commonly employed device in FWS assignments is to have students engage with real audiences outside the classroom. Emelie Peine (2007), in a development sociology writing seminar called "Corporate Controversies: Exploring Big Scandal in Big Business," asked her students to select a letter from a recent major journal on a subject relevant to the themes of her course. After a sequence of work, students wrote letters to the editor in response to the letters they had chosen. They actually sent these letters, some of which were indeed published. Peine required such personal writing because she wanted students to take her course personally, to become involved responsible citizens. Their writing acquired a personal function with a civic purpose. The genre of the letter, too, offered a more personal form for engagement: students will need to write effective letters after they have left the academy.

But even more popular with instructors (and with students) is using an imaginary rhetorical situation and function to draw students personally into the questions of a discipline. Students do not write of personal experiences or emotions or intuitions; rather, for instance, they locate themselves in the personal truths of others, using imagined or hypothetical rhetorical situations. Richard Bownas (2005), teaching in government, offered the writing seminar "The Future of War." In assignments on the tragic situations in Rwanda and Sudan, Bownas asked students to involve themselves. For instance, they wrote a first-person War Crimes testimonial based on their study of Rwanda. Turning to another genre and new perspectives, Bownas had students also write a policy advice memo to Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice about U.S. intervention in Sudan. Bownas commented that he wanted to help students achieve empathy, and the testimonials, he found, "were vividly imaginative, integrating historical facts with personal experience in convincing narratives. Some students went well over the assigned page limit in their enthusiasm for the task[...]." The genre was not the academic essay but a form students might need in later careers.

Stephen Nelson (2006) offered another government seminar, "Globalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." To help his students fully appreciate the issues involved in investing abroad, he had them become consulting teams for two different firms ("imagining the experience of others"). They then had to make recommendations to the board of directors about costs and benefits of relocating production of the company's products. Nelson reports that he was "blown away" by the amount of work students put into the project, which he believed they saw as intimately concerned with work they might do after leaving Cornell (note the personal function of this genre for students). He also observed that students wrote "passionately" and with "fastidious" attention to evidence when they had to develop arguments about globalization by selecting an imaginative rhetorical position. He himself, he commented, found the assignments "enjoyable to read." That instructors take more pleasure in the results of such "faux" assignments is no small benefit.

In a theater FWS, a "Survey of One-Act Plays," Brian Holmes (2005) combined real personal experience and imaginative settings for writing. In some assignments, Holmes asked students to imaginatively assume new roles—a scenic designer for a play to be performed at a Cornell site, or

assistant to the artistic director, making recommendations for which play to produce. For one major essay, Holmes, putting students into two-person teams, asked them to choose and rehearse ten-minute plays, which they presented to the class. The steps of his performance sequence called for students to "mirror the approach actors take in preparing for a production [...]." In addition, students wrote "a series of assignments including their initial reflections, discussion questions, a character analysis, and reflections on acting in an actor's notebook." The last step of the process required their writing "a first-person essay recounting their approach to the play and how their thinking about the play developed" (Elbow's "personal style" here). The study of one-act plays, including production, arguably became a very personal matter: of the ten-minute play unit, Holmes himself concluded that "[t]he collaborative nature of this work gave the class a [personal] sense of the rewards of working together on a play, an experience [a personal one] essential to understanding the collaborative dynamics of the theater."

In still another field, a History of Art writing seminar on "African Personal Adornment: Changes and Translations" offered by Amanda Gilvin (2008), the final assignment asked students to apply for "a fictional research grant to study African dress and adornment." Students chose areas that suited their interests (the student majoring in natural resources focused on the illegal trafficking of ivory—Elbow's personal *function* for the writing) and they studied as models real winning proposals for research grants submitted by students to Cornell's Institute of European Studies. With their research proposals, Gilvin's students submitted a budget and a resume. Here was a "real-life," personal project in which students wrote out of (imaginary) self-interest and with a (real) eye to their futures.

Such assignments do not ask for the type of personal writing that was required by the vanished "Writing from Experience" or the subsequent personal essay courses. But they add a dimension that the personal essay rarely offered: these assignments help students imaginatively to enter the disciplinary worlds in which they are still novices, in which they observe from the fringe unless offered a way to move inside. Further, they offer students the experience of new voices, new perspectives. The liberation of an imagined rhetorical situation draws students into perspectives and events from which they might otherwise remain disengaged and voiceless.

Might not students sometimes be more ready for this kind of imaginative personal writing than for many types of personal writing or creative non-fiction? I agree with creative non-fiction expert Robert Root (2007), who points out the depth of knowledge and writerly engagement required for good creative non-fiction—think Dillard or McPhee (pp. 31-32). Research, experience, reflection—these are at the heart of excellent creative non-fiction; and long experience and long reflection are at the heart of the personal and familiar essay. In the memoir courses I teach, juniors and seniors, when they write about their research on loons or their passion for computer programming, produce richly detailed reflective pieces. But freshmen generally are far less ready to do so; their writing is often thinner and more obvious—why wouldn't it be? Perhaps it's better, early on, to employ imaginative personal writing in the disciplines to help students mature; they will then later be ready to excel in the writing of personal narrative.

## Conclusion

An essay on the evolution of a personal writing course in a disciplinary writing program would be incomplete if it failed to acknowledge that many of us *prefer* reading the personal essay or other types of creative non-fiction written by freshmen to reading their academic writing, even if our curricular and pedagogical principles may dictate otherwise. Elizabeth Sargent (2007) mourns that even after creating an excellent WAC first-year writing program at her institution, a program in which she believes, "[...] [creative non-fiction] is still the only kind of student writing that seems *real* to me. I'm

getting old and I don't really care about academic discourse at all. It's mostly boring and most first-year students don't have the intellectual passions, the substantive knowledge or the expertise yet to make it work" (pp. 53-54). But many first-year students don't have the "intellectual passions" or the "substantive knowledge or the expertise" to make creative non-fiction work well either. Perhaps, compared to poor academic writing, poor creative non-fiction is just more tolerable to read, less likely to call out our analytical ire?

As an administrator concerned about the internal coherence of our writing program, I'm glad that the imaginatively situated writing I've been describing avoids the dichotomous trap of our asking either for "boring" academic writing or for "interesting" personal writing. I'm glad that at least some of the time Cornell seminars avoid the "either/or" of teaching the personal essay or the academic essay. Students and instructors alike are more engaged, more entertained, and more passionately involved when students are provided imaginative ways to enter into the conversation of the disciplines, when they are given ways to make the academic personal and the personal public. I'm glad that the creative impulse of personal, imaginative approaches to teaching writing leads so naturally to the use of genres more inherent and personal to fields of study than that faceless creature, the academic essay.

"Writing from Experience" has not truly disappeared: its creative, personal impulse endures throughout the First-Year Writing Seminar program, as it should.

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## Notes

[1] For a history of the First-Year Writing Seminar program see my "Putting—and Keeping—the Cornell Writing Program in Its Place: Writing in the Disciplines" (1997).

[2] In email exchanges with me, Neil Herz has pointed out that in 1962 Bishop, Hertz, and Stoehr developed an early version of writing from experience, English 119 – 20, offered through Spring 1966, when both Hertz and Stoehr had left Cornell; it ended when the fledgling interdisciplinary writing program began in fall, 1966. Usually titled "Forms of Expression," English 119 – 20 is described in only one year as "Designed to provide practice in writing from experience." In the first year it was described as "An introduction to the major forms of expository, persuasive, and imaginative expression," and in other years, little description was offered beyond the fact that it was designed "For freshmen who are candidates for advanced credit[...]" and that it was considered to be "a more intensive version of English 111 – 112," the Introduction to English. In the first two years of the newly founded WID-based writing program, an English 135, "Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition," was offered under Bishop's leadership, but its description differs completely from that of English 135 when in 1968 it was offered as the one-semester "Writing from Experience."

[3] I should note that in 1972-73 English 135 was called "Autobiographical Writing" and had a slightly different description. That excursion into genre did not recur. For the first few years the course was also called writing "about" rather than "from" experience.

[4] In 1981, according to a letter dated 1983 by Keith Hjortshoj (now Director of Writing in the Majors at Cornell), the English department had considered reducing the number of sections of English 135 and expanding those of "Practical Prose," English 136, to the exclusion of most other topics for seminars. Hjortshoj, always an acute analyst, wrote in 1983 of his "suspicion that the proposal to expand English 136 was not based on an honest evaluation of that course, or of English 135, or of the needs of freshman writers; instead, it was a way of avoiding these questions altogether in deference to generally low opinions, in the Department and elsewhere, of freshman students and their writing. Give the agrarian masses Practical Prose. Provide a few literature sections for students who are really interested in the language" (from a letter to Fredric Bogel, 1983). Hjortshoj clearly delineates the problem: the development of the writing curriculum was haphazard.

[5] In the absence of tightly developed assignments, instructors did not make the discovery made by the instructors of English 1-2 at Amherst: when working on the assignment sequences that they developed in common, the Amherst instructors determined that students wrote much better essays when they were sent to their academic subjects for inspiration (Varnum, 1996, pp. 77-79 ). A similar approach to assignments at Cornell could have made English 135 well suited indeed for its WID context. But the course, with Bishop firmly at the helm, kept its particular personal direction.

[6] Until 1982, with the newly independent writing program, its directors did not systematically engage with the rhet/comp community. It took many years of required pedagogical preparation for FWS instructors to

become as concerned with the process of their students' writing as with the product, and to consider such attention to process normal.

[7] The Faculty Seminar in Writing Instruction was developed in 1988 by then writing program director Harry Shaw (professor, Department of English) with the assistance of James Slevin, professor of English at Georgetown University and nationally recognized scholar of rhetoric and literacy. Slevin ran the Faculty Seminar for many years.

[8] Two books of interest to readers about writing and the teaching of writing at Cornell may be the volumes edited by former Knight Institute director Jonathan Monroe: *Local Knowledges, Local Practices: Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell* (2003) and *Writing and Revising the Disciplines* (2002).

[9] When Harry Shaw and James Slevin made their initial plans for Writing 7100, Teaching Writing, the preparatory course for graduate student instructors, the assignment sequence lay at the heart of the approach the course would take. It has remained the central feature of Writing 7100 and of the faculty seminar. Each semester we are fortunate in being able to offer \$500 for a prize-winning assignment sequence, now called the James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Award in Slevin's memory. We receive permission from the instructors to publicize these assignments, part of the Knight Institute's technique for encouraging good teaching.

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