

FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE SOCIAL

Daniel F. Collins
Manhattan College

We live, think, and write between baby steps and master theories, where the richness, confusion, tragedy, violence, and joy of life rush at us where we are and await us where we go.

—Robert L. Davis and Mark H. Shadle

“We are all learning to live together.” So reads the banner hanging in the prototypical classroom depicted in the graphic introduction to teaching, *To Teach: The Journey, in Comics*, by William Ayers and Ryan Alexander-Tanner. Good teaching prompts students to engage the surrounding world. Such engagement commences by honoring each student in the room, each voice, each person.

*

We are all learning to live together. So evoked President Barack Obama in his January 2011 Tucson speech after the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and others. “It’s important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds,” the President advised (2011). Learning to live together, we check our ideas and their expression through others.

*

We are all learning to live together. Mary Rose O’Reilly describes her composition pedagogy in the same intertwining of the personal and the social. O’Reilly asks students to begin writing in the personal, because such a stance honors their voice and provides them an opportunity to write from who they are, what they know, and what they want. Her pedagogy concludes in the social, or the communal, as students write for an audience, and this audience informs what they say and how they say it. Writing to find one’s voice, O’Reilly argues, “defines a moment of presence, of being awake, and it involves not only self-understanding, but the ability to transmit that self-understanding to others. Learning to write so that you will be read, therefore, vitalizes both the self and the community” (2009, p. 58). By encouraging writing as the expression of the inner world, O’Reilly escorts students from the idiosyncrasies of the personal to the checks

and balances of the social. “It seems important,” O’Reilly writes, “that many opposing communities exist in balance, polishing each other up like rocks in a river bed, with the friction of daily contact” (2009, p. 11).

*

We are all learning to live together. This is the feeling and tenor of the writing classroom I try to construct and implement, a classroom set to up to explore writing from personal and social perspectives. This collage—an homage to the writers and teachers that inform my practice—attempts to articulate the ways in which personal and social dimensions of writing are embedded in expressivist thinking. Writing, Sherrie L. Gradin describes,

is an act of the whole being; it is through reflecting, questioning feeling, experiencing, reasoning, and imagining that writers become writers. While this might seem an ambitious and ideal approach to writing instruction, I would argue that it is such an ideal that we need to hold to fully educate students in a system that often denies the emotive, creative, and imaginative aspects of the intellect. (1995, p. 57)

For Gradin, expressivism has always been an exploration of self and social world, a form of inquiry and discovery; expressivism has always been about the construction of meaning, about the development of self through a concern for voice and lived experience.

*

Robert Yagelski asks writing teachers to uphold writing as an ontological act: “When we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world. In this regard, writing both shapes and reflects our sense of who we are in relation to each other and the world around us. Therein lies the transformative power of writing” (2009, p. 8). While Yagleski upholds the act of writing over any product, the transformation of self and world enmeshed in writing as an ontological act mirrors an expressivist impulse to write in two specific ways. First, Yagelski endorses “the capacity of writing to enhance an awareness of ourselves and the world around us, both in the moment and over time” (Yagelski, 2009, p. 16). Second, Yagelski acknowledges the transformative qualities of writing as “it opens up possibilities for awareness, reflection, and inquiry that writing as an act of textual production does not necessarily do” (Yagelski, 2009, p. 7). The act of writing, from Yagelski’s perspective, affirms the need to compose one’s story in meaningful ways and provides the means through which to develop a need to reckon with the self through the act of writing. Expressivism reinforces these same dimensions.

*

Expressivist writing theory, it seems to me, upholds the idea that to write is to discover oneself amidst an array of others. It honors the importance of the student engaging and making sense out of the world. Expressivism grew from personal uses of language to using language to engage others. “Personal modes of writing,” Peter Elbow argues, “help writers take more authority over their writing: not to feel so intimidated by it and not to write so much tangled or uninvested prose or mechanical or empty thinking” (2002, p. 16). Randall R. Freisinger agrees, arguing that an academic neglect of the expressivist function of language impairs the cognitive development of students simply because students remain alienated from writing by a strict emphasis on academic writing (1980, p. 162). Sherrie Gradin seeks to redress this neglect by reminding her readers of these social dimensions of expressivism:

I envision a social-expressivism where the best of both expressivism and social epistemic theories are practiced: students carry out negotiations between themselves and their culture, and must do this first in order to become effective citizens, imaginative thinkers, and savvy rhetorical beings. Learning to enact these negotiations means first developing a sense of one’s own values and social constructions and then examining how these interact or do not interact with others’ value systems and cultural constructs.” (1995, p. 110)

Freisinger argues that the end result of the expressivist impulse is no less than connecting personal experience and voice to an expansion of the student’s conception of the world (1980, p. 164). We are all learning to live together.

*

bell hooks offers a productive definition of voice from a social perspective: “Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically—to come to voice so that you may also speak freely about other subjects” (1994, p. 148). Part of hooks’ instruction here is the direction of student attention to the voices of others. hooks’ sense of self-understanding has both personal and social dimensions: “A personal definition of self aids, and is indeed necessary in, the development of an awareness of one’s socially defined interactions with others” (1994, p. 166). In other words, writers come to know themselves through their actions as social beings. Without a voice, Gradin argues, students may be unwilling to begin important work: “understanding what their beliefs are and where they come from in terms of their own experiences, so that they can see how their value systems might differ from others” (1995, p. 119).

*

An expressivist classroom can become a transformative community, one that embeds personal discoveries in social engagement (Fishman & McCarthy, 1992, p. 659).

*

“We believe that all learning is autobiographical and passionate,” Robert Davis and Mark Shadle confess (2007, p. 9). Davis and Shadle go to great lengths to paint themselves as composition traditionalists upholding the sanctity of academic projects and academic discourse even as they work to extend (and undo) the purview and parameters of both. “We do not think that being the best of academicians is the end point for students or the most useful manner of being. Instead, we hope that students will be intellectuals pursuing pressing questions and fertile mysteries, who can engage, and change, the rhetorical and actual situations of their lives” (Davis & Shadle, 2007, p. 3). Davis and Shadle offer a useful distinction here: writing from the self versus writing about the self (see, too, Elbow, 2002, p. 18): expressivist writing begins from the self, from the personal experiences and observations of the writer. But the writer is not separate from larger social contexts, and so the writing process does not end until such inquiry is used in the making of meaning for the writer and for others.

*

Peter Elbow considers expressivism as a form of discourse that addresses the ways in which interested parties engage other interested parties, all the while identifying (and checking and modifying) our individual and collective stakes in the matters at hand. Elbow endorses the intellectual tasks of “giving good reasons and evidence yet doing so in a rhetorical fashion which acknowledges an interested position and tries to acknowledge and understand the positions of others” (2002, p. 148). Self in a world of others—we are all learning to live together.

*

Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy argue that Peter Elbow “hopes to increase our chances for identifying with one another and, as a result, our chances for restructuring community” (1992, p. 649). Expression, then, becomes about both self-discovery and social connection (Fishman & McCarthy, 1992, p. 650). Both goals rest in the clarification of meaning embodied in the act of expression, acts designed to help us engage our sense of selves and of others (Fishman & McCarthy, 1992, pp. 650, 652).

*

Ken Macrorie writes, “All good writers speak in honest voices and tell the truth” (1985, p. 15). Macrorie values writing as truth-telling: “a connection between the things written about, the words used in the writing, and the author’s experience in a world she knows well—whether in fact or dream or imagination” (1985, p. 15). Such truth-telling overrides the perceived importance of academic discourse, which rings so false and pretentious to Macrorie that he gives it another name: Engfish. Engfish, according to Macrorie, prevents the telling of truth and promotes the telling of lies (1985, p. 14). Instead of Engfish, Macrorie promotes the use of natural, authentic, alive voices, voices that recount and recreate experiences using concrete facts and details to produce meanings for readers (1985, p. 34).

*

Macrorie identifies three resources at hand for any writer. First, the writer has her experiences from which to draw. These experiences can and should acknowledge the ways in which the thoughts and feelings of others have impacted the writer. Second, the writer has her writing skills, those rhetorical strategies used to speak in an authentic voice to connect with her readers. Third, she has her writing group, this circle of others to be used to hone the writing, the practice of writing (Macrorie, 1985, p. 74). “Good writers meet their readers only at their best,” advocates Macrorie, indicating a concern for audience that is generally downplayed in discussions of his work (1985, p. 35). This concern for audience seems fundamental to the ways that Macrorie’s work is about the impact of writing on its readers.

*

Robert Yagelski offers three important points relating to the act of writing: “the experience of writing is an experience of our being as inherently social; it is the experience of the interconnectedness of being” (2009, p. 14); writing “is an act of the self becoming more fully present in the world at the moment of writing” (2009, p. 13); and writing can be a profound act of self-awareness, a deepening of understanding of the self as a being in the world (2009, p. 15). “Writing is therapeutic not because it is the catharsis of confessing,” argue Davis and Shadle, “but because writing about topics that writers are passionate about can help transform lives” (2007, p. 72). The ontological act of writing favors an expressivist emphasis on imagination, creativity, and process.

*

Mary Rose O'Reilly asks her students to enchant themselves with their writing, through their writing (2009, p. 54). To be enchanted suggests that the work will be engaged, completed, relished. One danger may be that that students simply fall in love with their stories. I don't simply want student narratives, stories about their lives. I want well-written narratives, crafted compositions about who they are and who they want to be. Meaning made by meaning shaped. Ander Monson helps me out here, in a passage I distribute to my students for discussion. Forgive the lengthy quotation:

But I still don't want to read what most people have to say about themselves if it's just to tell their story. I want it to be art, meaning that I want it transformed, juxtaposed, collaged—worked on like metal sculpture, each sentence hammered, gleaming, honed The action of telling is fine: kudos for you and your confession, your therapy, your bravery in releasing your story to the public. But telling is performing, even if it seems effortless With years of reflection on that story and how it can be shaped as prose (and how its shape changes from our shaping it, reflecting on it), given audience and agents and editors, rhetoric and workshop and rewriting for maximum emotional punch—given the endless possibilities of the sentence on the page, I expect to see a little fucking craft. I guess I want awareness, a sense that the writer has reckoned with the self, the material, as well as what it means to reveal it, and how secrets are revealed, how stories are told, that it's not just being simply told. In short, it must make something of itself. (Monson, 2010, p. 13)

Yes, writing should move and surprise; it should teach its readers and writers something new.

*

Bristling against the personal narrative, Ander Monson attempts to articulate his concerns: "These writers presume—and doubtlessly been told, perhaps in workshops, perhaps by me—that their stories, finally, matter in themselves. Still, I see something in these also-rans: they might serve to matter if explored further, with style, an angle, some kind of action working as a countermeasure against the desire of the I to confess" (2010, p. 16). Against this backdrop, Monson argues the need "to tell a compelling story, but also to examine that compelling story and the act of storytelling through the prose, to let the sentences get some traction and complexity, to generate friction against what is being told" (2020, p. 17). Yes,

through their writing, writers explore their relationship with others and with the social and cultural conditions that inform their writing. And through their writing, students develop a conscious linguistic shaping toward purpose and effect.

*

“I am learning to consider what my students can do with their knowledge,” offers Ken Macrorie in his book *A Vulnerable Teacher* (1974, p. 111). Increasingly discouraged about the lack of student engagement in the classroom, Macrorie sought to create ways that students could engage classroom texts through their experiences. Classroom teaching became concerned with the mutual illumination of course texts and student experiences. “When my students and I are learning most powerfully, we are ever remembering where we came from. And so there is some living going on in our learning place” (Macrorie, 2010, “Preface”). No longer bored, Macrorie and his students began to surprise one another, if only because they do not know what others might say aloud to the class. Macrorie’s practice becomes an invitation to self-reflection and self-scrutiny in a community of others doing much the same work. With no monopoly on knowledge, students and teachers alike use their experiences to offer insight into course materials and then use course materials to reframe their understandings of the world (Macrorie, 2010, p. 79). Students come to value their own experience and their insights into these experiences.

*

Our courses fail, Macrorie argues, when we deny students their lives (Macrorie, 2010, p. 13). Macrorie’s sharp reminder indicates the need to ask students to connect their lives to the classroom. By making actual feelings, thoughts, and experiences significant to the ways in which students and teachers engage each other in the classroom, vulnerability becomes an important ingredient in the construction of knowledge. This is a vulnerability not based on fear and weakness—which would be simply another form of trampling on students (which is probably worse than simply ignoring them)—but a way of exercising their power as thinkers, writers, and people.

REFERENCES

- Ayers, W., & Alexander-Tanner, R. (2010). *To teach: The journey, in comics*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Davis, R. L., & Shadle, M. F. (2007). *Teaching multiwriting: Researching and composing with multiple genres, media, disciplines, and cultures*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

- Elbow, P. (2002). Exploring problems with “personal writing” and “expressivism.” *The Selected Works of Peter Elbow*. Retrieved from http://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/16
- Elbow, P. (1991). Reflections on academic discourse: How it relates to freshmen and cColleagues. *College English*, 53(2), 135-155.
- Fishman, S. M., & McCarthy, L. P. (1992). Is expressivism dead? Reconsidering its romantic roots and its relation to social constructionism. *College English*, 54(6), 647-661.
- Freisinger, R. R. (1980). Cross-disciplinary writing workshops: Theory and practice. *College English*, 42(2), 154-166.
- Gradin, S. L. (1995). *Romancing rhetorics: Social expressivist perspectives on the teaching of writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Harris, J. (2006). *Rewriting: How to do things with exts*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Macrorie, K. (1974). *A vulnerable teacher*. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden.
- Macrorie, K. (1985). *Telling writing* (4th ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Monson, A. (2010). *Vanishing point: Not a memoir*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf.
- Obama, B. (2011, January 14). *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2011/01/obama-in-tucson-full-text-of-p.html>
- O'Reilly, M. R. (2009). *The peaceable classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Yagelski, R. P. (2009). A thousand writers writing: Seeking change through the radical practice of writing as a way of being. *English Education*, 42(1), 6-28.