

RE-IMAGINING EXPRESSIVISM: AN INTRODUCTION

Tara Roeder and Roseanne Gatto
St. John's University

It's no secret that the term "expressivism" has been a divisive one in the field of composition and rhetoric. In order to avoid simply rehashing old debates, we began this project with the rejection of an overly simplified "social epistemic"/"expressivist" binary. Our goal here is to begin a new conversation, one in which established and emerging scholars united by a belief that the term expressivism continues to have a vitally important function in our field can explore the shape of expressivist theory, research, and pedagogy in the twenty-first century.

While our project undertakes the question of what it might mean to re-appropriate the term expressivism, an equally important one might be: why bother? As Peter Elbow himself writes in his contribution to this volume, "As far as I can tell, the term 'expressivist' was coined and used only by people who wanted a word for people they disapproved of and wanted to discredit." As Sherrie L. Gradin points out in her groundbreaking book *Romancing Rhetorics: Social Expressivist Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing* (a book to which we are greatly indebted, and which in many ways began the conversation we are continuing today), "the expressivist emphasis on imagination, creativity, and process ... has often resulted in a charge of anti-intellectualism" (1995, p. 7).

In an email exchange several of us participated in while working on this project, Peter Elbow raised a concern about the value of the term expressivism itself, along with the intriguing question: "Could it be an instance of disparaged people deciding to use the term of disparagement out of pride?" That certainly resonated with the two of us, who have indeed heard disparaging criticism from colleagues who view expressivism as outmoded, elitist, or uncritical. The term "expressivism" seems quaint, somehow; identifying as "expressivist" naïve. So while it makes sense to challenge the very use of the term, it also began to make sense that reclaiming it (or, claiming it for the first time, since it was, as Elbow reminds us, not "ours" to begin with) might be a gently subversive act. (Or a perversely ironic one?) Or, as Nancy Mack put it, "building on the term by attaching the word 'critical' is a rebellious action—and not just reactionary. How terms accrue meaning is Bakhtinian. We can only hope to appropriate the word momentarily and utter it with our accent."

So it is with our accent that we offer this exploration of not only how the term expressivism came to mean, but also how it might come to mean anew. We believe that the best expressivist practices have always been about complex negotiations between self and other, and the dismantling of the “public”/“private” binary that still seems to too often haunt our conversations about writing and pedagogy. But we also want to push our theory and practice further, conceptualizing the ways in which our expressivist values inform our scholarship and our teaching in an increasingly corporatized educational system.

So what exactly do we value? Our contributors have no one, uniform voice or approach, and we think this is a good thing. We notice that when the two of us talk about teaching and writing, we spend a lot of time questioning handbooks and guides for the “novice” writer, where race and gender and class and sexuality are erased in the name of an increasingly ludicrous concept of “correctness.” We know we don’t believe in prescriptions or generalities; we believe in a localized, context-specific pedagogy where one size never fits all. And we fiercely value our students and the complex embodied knowledge they bring to our classrooms. We think that when their experiences are at the forefront of our classrooms, exciting thoughts, relevant research, and meaningful connections can take place via a variety of platforms, from handbound books to conversations to YouTube videos.

So what makes this “expressivist”? We are indebted to a tradition in which scholars such as Peter Elbow, Sherrie Gradin, Nancy Mack, Thomas Newkirk, Thomas O’Donnell, Michelle Payne, Lad Tobin, and Robert Yagelski have demonstrated the complex ways in which the “social” and “personal” are not two poles in a binary system. We are also indebted to the feminist maxim, “the personal is political.” We hope that this will be the beginning of a new discussion, one in which the complex interactions between self and other are contextualized in a way that values the individual circumstances of our students’ lives and the ways in which they make meaning of their experiences and interrogate the culture in which they live.

Our contributors focus on both how to position expressivism theoretically within twenty-first century composition studies, and how specific assignments and pedagogies can facilitate our understanding of what expressivist practices mean to our students and ourselves. While many of the essays share similar themes, and there is some overlap between the sections, we identified four major strands surfacing in our contributors’ work.

Section One, entitled “Critical Self-Construction,” complicates the notion that “personal” writing and “academic” writing occupy separate categories on some hierarchy of sophistication. It opens with Peter Elbow, who problematizes the very terms “expressivism” and “personal writing” that have so long been

connected with his work. He questions what the term “personal” means, pointing out that when we are truly invested in “academic” topics, our own feelings, histories, experiences, and languages will inevitably shape our texts: “I may not be writing here about my sex life or my feelings about a sunset, but it’s a personal story nevertheless.” This insight sheds a meaningful light on the collective project we are undertaking here, one in which each contributor was compelled to become involved because of her or his own beliefs and experiences as teachers, writers, and thinkers.

Thomas Newkirk analyzes the sources of some teachers’ “discomfort” in the face of “personal” writing, exploring the complexity involved in responding to the traumatic and the moralistic in student texts. He also makes a powerful case against dismissing the “personal essay” through the words of his student Brianna, who reminds us that “by turning a blind eye to these types of [personal] essays, we might as well be turning a blind eye to literature itself.” Nancy Mack and Derek Owens also challenge the idea that writing about the self is necessarily a solipsistic or uncritical act. Mack looks at the critical function of memoir, a genre that allows writers and readers to question stability and essentialist notions of identity: “a critical memoir approach asks the writer to continually reconsider one’s own master narratives,” raising questions about how such stories “could be actively re-interpreted and revised to represent a newly constructed, more ethical truth.” Such an insight is exciting in the face of the kind of stereotypical “progression” Owens sees as characteristic in many composition courses: “One might picture the progression like some kind of game board—each student entering via their own unique paths and histories, engaging with them along the way, but ultimately everyone coming closer and closer to a common finish line where it’s not their ‘expressed’ personal histories that matter but, say, the way they marshal evidence, cite sources, make inferences, assemble claims. Establish authority.” The fact that personally meaningful work is, at its best, also “critical” work is evidenced by Owens’ own experience composing his memoir about his mother, a process through which he “became interested in the strangeness of memory and the slipperiness of identity.” Jean Bessette also stresses the “dynamic slipperiness of memory” in her contribution to this volume, exploring the ways in which feminist conceptions of memory as “necessarily social and discursive” can contribute to an enriched understanding of the ways in which asking students to write themselves is an inherently critical act, one in which we need to face head on static and limiting notions of what our experiences signify. Lea Povozaev also tackles the tidy divides between “creative,” “personal,” and “academic” writing, pointing out that the diverse work of “children creating art, prisoners writing poems, and students writing” evidences the fact that creative acts can be “pleasurable, therapeutic, and educational.” The act of eschewing

rigid generic distinctions can, our contributors evidence, be both liberatory and pedagogically useful.

Section Two, “Personal Writing and Social Change,” explores some of the multiple ways in which expressivist theory and practice are connected to larger political and social goals. For Patricia Webb Boyd, in a period when “many may feel unable to control their own lives, much less effect change in larger society,” the question at hand becomes: “How can we imagine creative alternatives where students and teachers can . . . see themselves as active participants in public spheres/discourses who can co-create change rather than be passive consumers?” Boyd sees the role of critical expressivism as one that encourages our students to feel connected to their own experiences, and thus to larger goals and communities. Daniel Collins, in his lyric collage, maintains that “expressivist writing theory . . . upholds the idea that to write is to discover oneself amidst an array of others.” It is through our students’ writing about their lived experience that they can forge connections to a larger culture, and begin to enact change. Scott Wagar and Eric Leake both focus on the relationship between expressivist practice and empathy. For Wagar, the goals of non-violence and recognition of interdependence can be facilitated through a pedagogy based on the insights of theorists such as Mary Rose O’Reilly, who asks “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” A fraught question, but one that is essential to the goals of critical expressivist pedagogy—a pedagogy in which we might “consciously re-frame our work in non-violent terms.” This is not to suggest that we “critical expressivists” have all the answers: as Eric Leake reminds us in his nuanced examination of the role of empathy in successful expressivist teaching, “a critical empathy continually reminds us that empathy is always at best a careful and purposeful approximation of another’s experience.” However, by working together with our students, we may find the kind of ground in which our empathy can be at once nourished and examined.

Section Three, “Histories,” provides valuable insight into the ways in which expressivist pedagogies and ideas have developed contextually. Maja Wilson instructively teases out the links between Berlin’s “battle with the expressivists and Watson’s battle with the introspectionists.” Her playful and salient piece urges us to locate our theories of composition on solid ethical territory, while providing insightful, contextualized readings of Berlin in light of John Watson’s theories of behaviorism. Chris Warnick’s essay takes up Karen Surnam Paley’s call to “research actual ‘expressionist’ classroom practice” by delving into materials from The University of Pittsburgh’s “Alternative Curriculum” of the 1970s, examining the ways in which the innovative program drew on expressivist philosophies, practices, and assignments. Warnick’s essay leaves us with a valuable call to continue the kind of archival research that will better allow us to understand

the practical results of expressivist pedagogies. Hannah Rule explores the rich historical relationship between Romanticism and expressivism, arguing that particular “pedagogies and rhetorics are deemed untenable because they are labeled romantic or expressivist, or romantic-expressivist.” Rule’s essay complicates the neat divides between the various composition “camps” through a careful reading of both the Romantics and the “expressivists.” Anthony Petruzzi similarly looks to locate expressivist practice within a history of “critical conscience” as defined by Emerson, offering a nuanced reading of the role of pragmatism in the development of expressivist philosophy.

Our final section, “Pedagogies,” explores specific expressivist assignments and classroom practices in hopes of illuminating what exactly some of us do as critical expressivists. David Seitz questions the value of having our students “consume academic texts ... and only reproduce their discourse and generic forms.” He instead offers assignments “supported by principles of place-based education and theories of genre as textual sites of social action,” exploring the ways in which students can use writing as a way to mediate between the expectations of the academy and their own sense of the cultures and communities they occupy. Kim M. Davis urges us to value the “intersection of community-based learning and critical pedagogy.” Davis’ ethnographic study of her students in Detroit perfectly illustrates the ways in which “personal writing became the vehicle to help bridge the connection between students’ lived realities regarding race and place and the critical pedagogy goal of multiculturalism.” Sheri Rysdam turns to the expressivist legacy of “low/no stakes writing” as she examines the ways in which low-stakes assignments have a particularly valuable function for emerging student writers. Jeff Sommers re-visits the concept of radical revision in concrete terms, drawing on his own students’ positive experiences with acts of meaningfully re-entering their texts and discovering the “rich possibilities open to them through revision.”

There’s no doubt that we and our students face new challenges as we move through the twenty-first century together. We certainly don’t have all the answers to the questions the writers in our courses will grapple with as they continue to make sense of their experiences, their educations, and the culture of violence in which they live. But we do hope that we can offer assignments, approaches, and responses that are worthy of them, and that enable them to make sense of their experiences and the world around them in meaningful, innovative, and self-directed ways.

REFERENCE

Gradin, S. (1995). *Romancing rhetorics: Social expressivist perspectives on the teaching of writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.