

EXPRESSIVE PEDAGOGIES IN THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH'S ALTERNATIVE CURRICULUM PROGRAM, 1973-1979

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James Berlin's account of 1960s-era expressive pedagogy is over twenty years old, but it continues to inform scholarship in composition and rhetoric. Despite the critical reappraisal of Berlin's histories in the wake of the field's archival turn, some scholars continue to cite Berlin's taxonomy of rhetoric and pedagogy, and the place of expressive pedagogy within it, to analyze the field's history and future. In describing what he sees as a dearth of archival histories on twentieth century writing instruction, David R. Russell observes that Berlin's "book remains the most-cited treatment of the 20th century" (2006, p. 258). Richard Fulkerson draws extensively on Berlin's tripartite classification of the field in "Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century. Using overblown rhetoric similar to that Maja Wilson observes in Berlin's critique of expressivism (see her contribution in this volume), Fulkerson concludes "that expressivism, despite numerous poundings by the cannons of postmodernism and resulting eulogies, is, in fact, quietly expanding its region of command" (2005, p. 655). But as Karen Surman Paley and others have pointed out, Berlin's conclusions about expressivism rest on evidence found in textbooks and published research and ignore actual classroom practice. According to Paley

it is unfortunate that Berlin ... does not seem to have tested his theoretical conclusions against actual "expressionist" classroom practice. If he had, he might have seen a range of pedagogies, some more overtly sociopolitical than others, depending on the comfort level and belief system of the teacher. (2001, p. 22)

This essay takes up Paley's call to research "actual 'expressionist' classroom practice" by examining materials from an experimental first-year program at the University of Pittsburgh known as the Alternative Curriculum, which ran from 1973 to 1979.¹ While the Alternative Curriculum archive provides an

incomplete picture of classroom practices, syllabi, student papers, newsletters, and other program documents upset the generalizations of expressivism made by Berlin and others. Specifically, program documents reveal that teachers and students adopted personal writing strategies for purposes other than self-knowledge. Students, for example, engaged in personal writing activities to experiment with alternative writing styles, to build a group identity as members of the program, and to critique American higher education and its marginalization of alternative learning programs such as the Alternative Curriculum. The purpose of journal writing within the program was not always “to capture one’s unique, personal response to experience,” as Berlin contends (1987, p. 152); instead, students practiced journaling to complete writing activities that stressed audience, revision, and genre. Perhaps most importantly, teachers in the program who drew from expressivist theory—especially economist David Bramhall, who taught a journal writing course that used a chapter from Ken Macrorie’s telling writing—led courses that in practice challenged expressivist assumptions about personal writing.

THE ALTERNATIVE CURRICULUM PROGRAM

The Alternative Curriculum, a first-year program that eventually accepted sophomores as well, was part of a larger general education reform package at Pitt that itself was a response to student and faculty unrest (see “Arts”; Levenson; Marbury; Tiernan). A letter sent to new students in 1975, signed by AC core faculty as well as graduate and undergraduate assistants, identifies ten objectives of the program, among which are a “self-designed curriculum,” “learning from the inside-out and by practice,” an “open environment; learning outside the classroom,” and “finding one’s own purpose for learning.” After several failed attempts to start the program, the AC opened its doors in 1973, enrolling 150 students, 130 of whom were selected through a lottery process with another 20 selected based on interviews with faculty (Kambic, 1974, p. 2). Program announcements indicate that students were assigned to “core groups” consisting of fifteen students and one faculty member. During the first weeks of the semester, groups met to reflect on the nature of education and to discuss their learning goals. According to letters sent to prospective students, there were assigned readings for these group meetings, which included popular texts on alternative education—including *How Children Fail* and *Freedom and Beyond*, by John Holt, and *Summerhill*, by A.S. Neill. Students were also expected to attend what were called “offerings,” lectures given by faculty and community members who spoke on their area of interest or expertise. These offerings, which covered such topics as “Black Autobiography and the Liberal Experience,” “The Physics of Music,”

“A Revolution in Catholicism,” and “Change in Education and the Social Order,” were intended to raise questions, issues, and methods that students could pursue in their work throughout the term.

After this initial period, students were responsible for completing four “learning projects” each semester, and these projects could take the form of a group workshop (led by either a faculty member or another student), an independent study, or fieldwork. Students did fieldwork at local public radio stations, area hospitals, and daycare centers; they conducted independent studies on “Labor History,” “Basic Calculus,” and “Drawing and Design;” they undertook workshops addressing prison reform, children’s literature, and writing. Students did not receive letter grades for these learning projects; instead, by enrolling in the program students agreed to take a block of up to fifteen credits each semester on a “credit/no entry” basis. In consultation with a faculty member, students drew up a learning contract in which they outlined the purpose and shape of their particular learning project, and the corresponding faculty member would comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the project.

Former AC faculty member Dan Tannacito characterized the program’s overall goal this way: “one could say that the program set out to let students define how to envision an alternative way of life within but opposed to the dominant cultural and educational model.” Writing played a vital role in students’ attempts to imagine the “alternative way of life” spoken of by Tannacito. According to Tannacito, “students wanted to learn how literature and writing were an asset in their lives. They had experienced them as an imposition, via schooling.” Students in the program did not write themes, as they might be expected to do in other first-year writing courses, but they did learn traditional genres of academic writing, such as lab reports, research papers and literary criticism. However, faculty in the program also allowed students room to explore alternative forms of writing. Tannacito explained, for instance, how he regularly assigned forms of writing other than the essay. “The main forms of writing that I asked of students,” he told me, “were journaling, note-taking, and creative writing. Sometimes, we asked people to write letters and arguments related to public issues that were being debated or in the local news. There were also community-based writing tasks.”

Tannacito’s comments suggest that at least some AC faculty had a lot in common with expressivists. They, too, wanted students to learn how writing could play a meaningful role in their lives as thinkers and citizens, and they imagined that one way to reach this goal was to teach personal, reflective forms of writing. More importantly, though, Tannacito’s comments reveal that expressive practices such as journaling and creative writing assignments sometimes took place alongside or as part of public and politically-oriented writing projects, which

runs counter to Berlin's claim that expressivist classrooms encourage students to find their voice "not through the happening or the political confrontation" (1987, p. 152), but through private reflection.

EXPRESSIVIST PRACTICES IN THE ALTERNATIVE CURRICULUM

Expressive practices and values surfaced in the AC in a variety of ways that both uphold and resist common generalizations made about expressivist theory. Syllabi, workshop announcements, evaluations, and other documents illustrate that students practiced journaling, freewriting, drafting, and revision. Writing courses were run as workshops, with students sharing and evaluating one another's writing. Students compiled portfolios to document the work they did to complete a workshop or fieldwork project and wrote reflective papers describing what they learned from this process. Some of the program's writing courses taught texts and methods directly associated with expressivism. For example, a fall 1976 program newsletter advertises a workshop based on Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*. According to the advertisement, the workshop

is geared towards strengthening the ability to write, even when you're "not in the mood," and learning to constructively criticize the works of others and hopefully your own. *Writing Without Teachers* by Peter Elbow is used as a guideline. Each workshop session is started off with ten minutes of free writing, after which the group is broken into smaller groups to read and discuss what people have written that week. All types of writing are encouraged.

As the text of this advertisement illustrates, students were encouraged to approach peer review, an important aspect of expressive pedagogy, as a critical and rhetorical practice. Students are prompted to "constructively criticize" each others' work, not simply "check for the inauthentic in the writer's response," which Berlin describes as the purpose peer review serves in expressivist classrooms (1987, p. 152).

While it remains unclear how important peer review was in the program as a whole, journaling appears to have been a widespread practice. Documents in the archive suggest that the purpose of journaling wasn't always "to capture one's unique, personal response to experience," as Berlin argues was the case in expressivist classrooms (1987, p. 152)—although this type of writing did take place. For example, a September 1974 handout written by physics professor John Townsend titled "Learning Strategies and Tactics: A guide and discussion

promoter for students in the Alternative Curriculum” recommends journal writing as an effective learning strategy: “Keep a journal. Because the AC is not tied to specific courses, keeping a journal helped students last year to provide a continuity and a record of events that was valuable to have at year’s end. It also gives you practice in expressing yourself by writing.” A document listing projects completed during the 1973-1974 academic year corroborates Townsend’s comment. Among the projects listed are “Self-evaluation; discussions, journals and essay,” “Working for the University Times; a journal and essay,” “Apprentice movie projectionist; a journal,” and “Becoming a volunteer fireman; a journal and essay.” Townsend’s advice and projects such as these suggest that one function journals served in the program was for students to document their experiences and to generate ideas for more finalized projects that weren’t necessarily personal in nature.

Instead of earning letter grades, students received descriptive comments from an AC faculty member who was responsible for overseeing the project. As part of the evaluation process, students wrote brief descriptions of the projects they completed. These descriptions sometimes took on the shape of reflective personal essays in which the student described what they learned from this project. One such example is an activity description by an unnamed student discussing her writing workshop. Stating that she “found a number of outlets for exploring the uses of writing,” the student lists the different writing activities she completed, which included “a description of AC for the University Course Selection Bulletin,” “an introductory letter to AC for high school seniors,” and “articles for the AC newsletter.” She goes on to describe how, alongside these projects, she also wrote a journal:

I’ve been keeping a journal, for no one but myself to “get at” my confusions, to clarify my idea(L)s, and to record the changes within me in an outward form. I read Dave Bramhall’s packet on “Keeping a Journal” with great fervor. Re-reading excerpts from my journal I now realize that my life is disintegrated; the experiences each day, the forces which are playing important roles in my life, and my real-imaginary wishes all blend into one whole. Writing is becoming more of a natural expression for me. I am choosing it and using it in many ways and I now see why I always will.

The type of journal writing the student describes here is intensely personal. According to her, the journal is “for no one but myself” and it serves to capture the writer’s complex self, its contradictions, beliefs, and changes. At the same time, though, the student claims the process of keeping a journal was among

a set of writing activities that helped her understand the rhetorical nature of writing. By stating that “I am choosing it [writing] and using it in many ways,” this student seems to have an emerging awareness of “how meaning is shaped by discourse communities,” knowledge Berlin claims expressive pedagogy ignores (1987, p. 153).

There were occasions where journal writing within the program took on more of a social dimension. An article in the October 1974 issue of the program’s newsletter, which was designed and written by students, discusses students’ plans for an Alternative Curriculum magazine. The article indicates that there was some debate about what shape this magazine should take and one “idea calls for a community journal in which people, workshops, offering presenters can contribute on a day to day level. We may choose to keep the journal in epic form (a continuous “poem” or story of experiences).” The author of the article appears to prefer this option because she argues that a collective journal would enable students to better process their coursework: “We would begin to use retrospection. So very much is happening all the time. If we take some time out to write/think about it, somehow it all begins to make sense.”

It’s unclear how this debate was resolved or whether a magazine was ever produced; no copies exist in the archive and individuals I interviewed didn’t recall it. However, students and faculty who participated in a field trip to New England-area experimental learning programs in the spring of 1975 did compose a collective journal that sounds similar to the one described in the program newsletter. According to a memo written that same year to Robert Marshall, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Tannacito and Bramhall proposed that interested faculty and students visit the Inner College at the University of Connecticut, Goddard College in Vermont, and other institutions. They hoped to consult with John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, and other educational activists. Estimating a total budget of roughly \$3,000, Tannacito and Bramhall state the trip would result in a 30-minute film and journal recording the fieldwork. No record of the film exists, but a copy of the journal, titled *Total Bus*, does survive. The journal includes over thirty anonymous entries that range from one-paragraph personal reflections to three-page reports that explain the history, structure, and purposes of organizations the group visited. An example of the latter is this excerpt from an entry on the New Haven Women’s Liberation Center:

The center has been in existence for about 5 years. It is not a Yale organization and most women that come to the center now are not Yale students. “The New Haven Women’s Liberation Center developed out of small meetings between friends working on political issues in New Haven in 1968-69. These

meetings soon grew and attracted 30-60 women every Sunday evening, including a number of Yale graduate and undergraduate women.” (NHWLC) The center is funded by donations monthly pledges [sic], \$5.00 fees from women joining the Connecticut Feminist Federal Credit Union and a current \$2,000 NIMH grant.

Passages like this one, which cites the group’s research, suggest the group imagined the journal to serve public, as well as private, needs. The research trip members conducted and wrote about in the journal could be used by leaders in the Alternative Curriculum and other institutions across the campus, especially Pitt’s Women’s Center, to evaluate their organizations and generate new ideas. Journal entries such as this one further complicate the characterization of expressive writing as merely personal or at best quasi-public.

AN ECONOMIST TEACHES KEN MACRORIE

The course documents I examine in this section dramatize what happens when any set of pedagogical theories—be they expressivist, current-traditional, or social-epistemic—gets deployed by specific teachers in specific classrooms with specific students: elements of these theories are accepted and followed while others are ignored, misread, challenged, or revised. David Bramhall, a political economist who helped found the AC and often served as the public face of the program, led a workshop in the first two years of the program entitled “On Keeping a Journal,” which included among its readings a chapter on journal writing from Macrorie’s telling writing.² Bramhall’s course is concrete evidence that expressivism influenced the work of faculty across the curriculum. This influence can’t be described in simple terms, however. The course syllabus and sample student journals suggest that Bramhall appropriated certain aspects of Macrorie’s pedagogy while disagreeing with or misreading others. Specifically, Bramhall’s advice to students about journal writing echoes what Macrorie states about the importance of “oppositions,” but Bramhall, who imagines the purpose of journaling differently than Macrorie does, also seems to misread Macrorie’s point about “telling facts.”

The course syllabus contains only one sentence that references Macrorie directly, but other passages in the document allude to points Macrorie makes in telling writing. For example, the course description ends with this paragraph that touches on, without naming specifically, Macrorie’s idea of “oppositions:”

So, try it. Don’t feel you have to write every day, but when you have an idea, an impression, an experience, a new way of

seeing something (or yourself), write it down in a real paragraph so you can recapture it later. Argue with yourself when you feel yourself divided about something. You can always rethink and write new feelings about a past entry—you're not committed forever to a first impression. But let go some, be honest with yourself, and have fun with it!

Macrorie begins an earlier chapter on “oppositions” with this definition:

Strong writers bring together oppositions of one kind or another. Kitchen language and elevated language, long and short sentences, fast and slow rhythms. And what they choose to present from life—whether it be object, act, or idea—is frequently the negative and the positive, one thing and its opposite, two ideas that antagonize each other. (1970, p. 71)

According to Macrorie's definition, opposition may be created through style or content, the latter of which seems to be more important to Bramhall. His advice to “Argue with yourself when you feel yourself divided about something” sounds similar to Macrorie's idea of opposition being created by “two ideas that antagonize each other” (1970, p. 89).

The only direct reference Bramhall makes to Macrorie in the syllabus is this summary of the chapter on journal writing: “I guess the main thing stressed in the MacCrorie [sic] chapter included here [“keeping a journal”] is to write concretely—and to write thoughts and feelings rather than mainly a record of actions.” Here Bramhall seems to be alluding to what Macrorie calls “telling facts,” concrete images and details that portray a writer's realization of a feeling or idea. Macrorie recommends the following steps for creating “telling facts”:

when you have to mention anything in order to tell a story or make a point, force yourself to put down the name of that thing if it has a name, or to show it in its particular setting or doing its thing particularly. Don't say you pushed the throttle and the motorbike did its thing. Give the name of that thing and the sound and fell or smell, or whatever you can. (1970, p. 35)

For Macrorie, “telling facts” are important to journal writing for an additional reason: they allow the writer to get meaning from their journal entries upon subsequent re-readings (1970, pp. 122-123). It's interesting to note, however, that Bramhall appears to distill this concept down to the commonplace advice “to write concretely,” which doesn't capture the imagistic nature of Macrorie's

“telling facts.” Additional evidence in this passage—Bramhall’s phrase “I guess the main thing stressed in the ... chapter” suggests Bramhall is uncertain about his reading of Macrorie, understandable given his professional training is in economics, not writing.

The most significant point at which Bramhall’s syllabus diverges from Macrorie’s approach is when Bramhall explains the purpose of journaling. Unlike Macrorie, who argues that “all good journals observe one fundamental: they do not speak privately” (1970, p. 123), Bramhall tells students they can share their journals with others after the fact, but they’ll have more success keeping a journal if they think of it as private. (See Daniel Collins’ essay in this collection for a further explanation of the social dimension behind Macrorie’s pedagogy.) The journal, according to the course description, “is your continuing dialogue with yourself—that’s the purpose and you won’t make it if you try to write it for anyone else—a teacher, posterity, or even a loved one.” It remains unclear whether this disagreement with Macrorie was conscious on Bramhall’s part. Especially given his summary of Macrorie’s chapter, it could be that Bramhall overlooked or misunderstood this part of Macrorie’s argument, and/or it could be that this sense of the journal as an engine of private reflection better fit Bramhall’s teaching philosophy, which was described in a profile of Bramhall that appeared in the fall 1974 issue of the AC Newsletter. An important aspect of Bramhall’s pedagogy, according to the unnamed student writer, is reflection: “Finally there is reflectiveness. Dave feels we must keep looking at the process of learning, and at what is happening to human relations.” Even though the latter part this comment suggests that there was a social dimension to Bramhall’s teaching, it appears that an even more important goal of Bramhall’s teaching was to have students better understand themselves as learners, which could help explain the syllabus’ definition of the journal as a “continuing dialogue with yourself.”

The course file also contains model student journals that Bramhall distributed to the class, and these texts further reveal the complex manner in which Bramhall appropriated Macrorie’s work. This is especially the case with the first journal in the file, which was written by an unnamed young woman enrolled in the program during its first semester. The journal consists of a handful of entries, all of which focus on the writer’s attempt to figure out who she is. One particular entry discusses the writer’s realization that she has no discernible self:

I want to write something about myself but I don’t know what because I don’t know myself. I’m not even sure I have a “myself” any more at this point. Right before I went home for Thanksgiving I felt as though I really had things straight in my mind and that I was happy with me. Maybe I was justified

in feeling like that for a few days because I really did think I had my head together. But now I know I'm wrong. There is no "me." "Me" is a lot of other people's ideas, opinions and gestures. I am what I want other people want me to be.

A later entry from the journal shows the writer expressing more self confidence, although it remains unclear whether she's come to any greater understanding of who she is, other than that she wants to be happy: "I am fighting. Sometimes I think the other side is getting the better of me, but I won't lose. I can't. Because if I don't win, I'll die. And I don't want to die. A dead person cannot be happy. I want to be happy and I will. Today is the first day I'm going to be alive."

Absent from this writer's journal, or at least those excerpts Bramhall shared with the class, are any "telling facts." Instead of recording images, descriptions, or quotes that capture her self-doubt, these passages present a string of declarative sentences that simply state the writer's predicament ("There is no 'me.'" "I want to be happy and I will."). And even though these passages follow Bramhall's advice "to write thoughts and feeling rather than mainly a record of actions," they don't follow his suggestion "to write concretely." The reasons behind the writer's self-doubt remain unclear, and nowhere does she explain why she has a new understanding of herself or what she will do exactly "to be alive." Bramhall's syllabus suggests that this writer's journal, along with the others he distributed to the class, serves as a model for students. "They help to show how different journal styles may be," he writes. But this student's journal doesn't always seem to match up with Bramhall's own approach to journal writing.

My intention in pointing out this inconsistency is not to criticize Bramhall or the unnamed student writer. Instead, I cite these examples because they illustrate my larger point that we are unable to fully determine the exact pedagogical practices that emerge from expressivist theory—or any theory, for that matter. If we are to understand the myriad ways an important pedagogical theory (or rather, set of theories) like expressivism informed classroom practice, more archival research needs to be done on 1960s-era classrooms and programs, including those, like the Alternative Curriculum, that existed separately from English departments.

NOTES

1. In his essay included in this collection, Peter Elbow similarly claims that historians of the field "need to find more accurate ways to describe the views of the people [expressivism] was pinned on." I agree with Elbow, and this essay attempts to answer his call. I am aware that my reliance on the terms "expressive," "expressivist," and "expressivism" in this essay could be read as problematic because they potentially

re-inscribe the simplistic attitude toward expressivism I seek to contest. However, I use these terms because they frame the field's long-standing debate about pedagogies involving personal writing (another term Elbow complicates in useful ways). In analyzing the complexities involved whenever any theory is adapted to classroom practices, this essay can be read as a first step toward Elbow's goal of eliminating the word "expressivism"—and the assumptions that surround it—from our historical lexicon.

2. Other readings included excerpts from Henry David Thoreau's and Simone de Beauvoir's journals; *The Education of Kate Haracz: Journal of an Undergraduate*, which was originally printed in a 1970 issue of *Change* magazine; and a chapter from Barrett Mandel's *Literature and the English Department* that examines students' journal writing in an Honors drama course. Mandel had previously taught at Pitt and had worked alongside Bramhall on curriculum reform.

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