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ABSTRACT

Voice can be considered as the writer's attitude toward the reader (the rhetorical function) and the writer's attitude toward the subject or object being written about (the epistemic function). Voice is expressed by such things as word choice, rhythm, sound, and juxtaposition of words and sentences. Moreover, the writer's attitude toward the subject is one aspect of the implicit set of assumptions and values that guide inquiry. Unfortunately, it is often this unheard voice--the unacknowledged feelings and attitudes--that inhibits the students' ability to become self-critical, analytic, dialectic, empathic, and synthetic. By considering voice as an important aspect of their writing, students can learn to distinguish among attitudes that convey negative or positive functions. Through an analysis of their own writing, students can discuss and discover what feelings are being expressed. By being fluent in the dialogues of feelings, wherein attitudes and voices challenge and modify each other, the students' writing can become an orchestration of many voices offering more complex interpretations and fuller explanations. (HOD)

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Voice and Feeling in Academic Writing

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CS 208 220

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Voice and Feeling in Academic Writing

Voice is usually considered an important aspect of personal writing and is sometimes discussed in connection with argumentative writing, but few have paid much attention to the function and variety of voices in academic writing. There seems to be a kind of implicit assumption amongst handbook authors that when the student moves from first person expressive writing to academic writing, s/he will uncritically adopt a distanced, impersonal, objective voice which is uniform throughout the essay and identical in all the disciplines. It is the thesis of this paper, however, that this uncritical acceptance of "voiceless" academic prose is not only contradictory to the best writing in the humanities, but also prevents the student from fully exploring and expressing his or her understanding of whatever phenomenon s/he contemplates--be it a text, a social event, or a change in the physical world.

A year ago I was drawn to consider voice as an important aspect of teaching Freshman composition when I began using William Coles' Composition Writing as a Self-Creating Process[1] as a class text. As many of you know, Coles' pedagogical aim is to have students conceive of writing as a process of self-discovery and self-creation. Students are encouraged to consider each assignment as an opportunity to explore, wonder, and question, to reflect upon and revise their interpretations of themselves and the world. In this course, the teacher and students are more concerned with understanding and explanation, with richer, more complicated interpretations, than with argument, proof, or assertion.

What do these concerns have to do with voice? What connections are there between the voices one hears in student writing and the acts of interpretation or inquiry that precede and inform their texts? I'd like to explore these connections and the functions of voice in academic writing (writing that expresses understandings and offers explanations) first by examining several student compositions where, I believe, voice has a negative function, and then by considering if voice can have a positive function. For instance, are these voices that are valuable to develop? And, if so, how can they be evoked? In this later discussion, I'll be particularly interested in relating voice to theories of language, meaning, and learning that support and inform an epistemic concept of writing.

Voice can be considered as the writer's attitude towards the reader. This is the rhetorical function of voice. But I am far more concerned with the voice that expresses the writer's attitude towards the subject or object about which s/he is writing. This is the epistemic function of voice. Like the writer's attitude towards the reader, the writer's attitude towards the subject is expressed by such things as word choice, rhythm, sound, and juxtaposition of words and sentences. Moreover, this attitude is one aspect of what Michael Polanyi calls "tacit knowledge,"[2] the implicit set of assumptions and values that guide inquiry. Voice then can be seen as the outward manifestation of feelings that are largely non-verbal, often unacknowledged. If writing is to serve a creative function then, the voice of the writer must become part of our concern, for it often is this unheard voice--these unacknowledged feelings and attitudes--which inhibits the student's ability to become self-critical, analytic, dialectic, empathic , and synthetic.

I can show you this in several samples of students' writing (see Appendix A). These papers were responses to Coles', third assignment:

> ...what would you say you really "know about"? What "ideas" would you point to as being "connected with yout own experience"? How would you talk about them? Choose such an idea, something you feel you really know about, and write a paper in which you make clear exactly how the idea is connected with your life as you are living it.[3]

When I gave these samples to students in class, I asked these questions: "What voice do you hear in this writing? Who is speaking?" They readily volunteer that the first sample sounds like a college catalog, the second like a football coach, the third a textbook for a psychology course, the fourth an advertising brochure for a local gymnasium. Though each of these papers refers to a different experience, the writers' voices reveal common attitudes. These are the voices of moralistic authority delivering indisputable "facts," opinions, and conclusions. They project a belief in perfection, omnipotence, indestructibility. They appeal to communal "right" feeling, demanding assent and agreement. There is no sense that the writer--or the reader--might find one's relationships with any of these activities--becoming a nurse, playing football, being a counselor, or bodybuilding--problematic, contradictory, or confusing.

We can identify the stylistic traits of this authoritarian, (psuedo-) objective voice in the use of you instead of I, in the dominant, assertive verb to be, in the frequent use of abstract nouns as subjects, in the uninterpreted abstractions, and in the phrases that parrot the public voices of authority figures (see "a very big step to take;" "Football takes a lot of hard work;" "_____ is the key to all...;" lifestyle, tension, outlook on life). Also note the lack of subordination.

One pedagogical response to this voice is to tell students to eliminate these traits from their writing and to teach them subordinate structures. But I'm more concerned with having students see (hear?) how this voice buries, glosses over, and even prevents learning, exploration, and understanding. I want them to become conscious of this authoritarian attitude because this attitude restricts what they experience, what they will experience, what they can and will see.

Note, for instance, in the essay on bodybuilding (Sample #4) the unexamined assumption in paragraph three that it is a good thing to create the illusion of a V-shaped waist, to acquire shapely thighs and develop curves. Note how the writer's insistence upon the positive values of the activity stifles exploration of any difficulty she might have experienced. In paragraph five, she mentions "You can cheat," but quickly moves on to describe the correct use of the apparatus, something about which she can write clearly. She seems unable to entertain the idea that someone might want to cheat, perhaps because such an idea whould challenge the attitude she is working so hard to maintain. Throughout the essay we are presented with a monolithic moral attitude, the forces of evil (tension, frustration, arguments, unshapely bodies, fat, embarrassment, salt, sugar, fast foods, and television) opposed to the forces of good with the imperfect human being reaching for "the best reward of all...a trophy in your hand... ." Did she ever get a chance to grasp and claim this trophy for her own? We don't know.

As in many compositions controlled by this tone of voice, this moral attitude, it is at the end, perhaps because the writer is tired and lets down her guard, that we get any sense of dialectic: "And yes, bodybuilding is somewhat addictive. After a few months it becomes a pleasure instead of a chore." What, I would ask this student, are the connection between addiction (normally arrayed by this society with the forces of evil), pleasure, chore, and trophy winning? If she explored these activities in the voices that

complain, compel, delight, and exult, she might begin to express what she knows about--her experience of bodybuilding. When these voices enter into dialogue with each other, the authoritarian voice of her essay will become one voice among many; it may disappear altogether.

The essay on racism and discrimination (see Sample #5) in the Barbadoes and Greneda is more disturbing, particularly because of recent developments in that part of the world. The student's narrative--about being refused lunch in a restaurant, about the unfriendliness of black natives towards white tourists, and about her insistence upon going to black nightclubs where she was unwelcome--is told in a voice that is totally sure of itself and of its conclusions. See particularly the first and last paragraphs.

This voice, which I think writing teachers may encourage with an overemphasis upon certain kinds of introductory and concluding paragraphs, and upon a rhetorical writer-reader model for composition ("Be clear, precise, and direct; say what you're going to say, explain it, repeat it."), prevents this writer from wondering about why the natives might be unfriendly and even prevents her from expressing her own emotional response to rejection, a response which is probably messy and conflicted. In this essay we can also hear the voice of naïve and irresponsible innocence, a voice that often supports the authoritarian attitude: "We hoped to find a nice place to dance for both tourists and natives."

She names all the "right" feelings-- "...racism is useless and destructive. ...Having been on both sides, I can sympathize with the latter." But with whom does she really sympathize? Only her rejected self. There is significantly no sympathy for the "natives" who have rejected her, no mention of those she has discriminated against. It is only her experience she mentions. Note, too, how she betrays the significance of the experience with the words unfortunately and mishap; both minimize and soften the experience she had--or might have had.[4]

After discussing these essays, students usually ask: "Well, what voice do you want us to have?" But the problem cannot be approached in quite that way for it is not a matter of simply finding another voice to echo. Nor is it a matter, I hasten to add, of finding one's "authentic" voice. The voice of the demogogue can be as "authentic" as the voice of the persona in a lyric poem, in the sense that both can be expressive of what one feels. Nor is it a matter of replacing one voice or style with another as Richard Lanham and other stylists seem sometimes to suggest. It is rather a matter of

developing, listening to, and reflecting upon the many different voices within and responding empathically to the voices without, and of making them communicate with one another. There are as many voices as there are intentions--which is to say, a multitude which can be harmonious, cacophonous, polyphonic.

The advantage writing offers us, in contrast with oral language, is the opportunity to express and respond fully to each voice. It invites us to be dialogical without the demand for communal consent. We can learn to value the dialogues, not for the problems they solve, but for the insights they offer and the depths they reveal.

By emphasizing voice as attitude, I am suggesting that we need to reconsider the role and value of feeling in academic writing.[5] What we need is not the reduction of feelings--or attitudes--which characterizes the typical research paper and the student writing we have looked at, but a proliferation of feelings. Only by expressing these feelings can we reflect upon them, make them more subtle, develop and expand them.[6]

But to challenge the domination of the authoritarian voice and its false claim to objective feeling will require that both teachers and students change their understanding of what it means to learn or to know, their concept of what language can do and what essays ought to express. Language must be valued for its symbolic and expressive capabilities, not just its referential and signifying functions. Learning must be conceived of as exploration motivated and guided by many feelings (I would put empathy high on this list) as well as by analytic reason. Learning may be in part memorization and repetition, but it must go beyond to include multiple acts of interpretation.[7]

Here I can only mention one person's description of interpretation: Paul Ricoeur's three kinds, belief, reflection, and speculation. Each of these ways of responding to and expressing the world has its own voices, each makes a claim to authoritative knowledge, but all are necessary for full understanding. The full hermenuetic act, Ricoeur insists, depends upon the on-going dialectical interaction of these three interpretive modes.

Finally, this emphasis upon voice--or rather voices--links the teaching of writing with the development of values in a way that cognitive, linguistic, problem-solving, or rhetorical theories of writing do not. If writing is to help students move through, say William Perry's three stages of moral development,[8] from unexamined beliefs, through analytical relativism, to commitment in an ever-changing world, the student must develop more than

the rational dialectic of critical thinking; s/he also needs to become fluent in the dialogues of feelings wherein attitudes and voices challenge and modify each other.

We--students and teachers alike--seem increasingly polarized by the authoritarian voices of the scientist, the politican, the advertiser, the newscaster--those rhetors who claim knowledge of objective truth, who believe there is an answer to every question, a solution to every problem--, and the solipsistic voices of novelists and poets. We too readily accept the former as the appropriate voice for academic writing; the latter we relegate to creative writing classes. I have the sense that many composition teachers believe that they have to choose between the two. But academic expository writing, the writing we teach Freshmen, need not, in fact ought not, to be either one or the other. Rather, academic writing--in history, literature, sociology, even science,[9] should be seen as the orchestration of many voices in the interests of richer understanding, more complex interpretations, fuller explanations. Good writing proceeds from a psychological openness to one's own voices and the voices of the world, from attitudes which are both creative and critical.[10]

Notes and References

1. William E. Coles, Jr. Composing Writing as a Self-Creating Process (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1974. Now distributed by Boynton/Cook Publishers, Montclair, New Jersey).

2. Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

3. Coles, p. 10. With this assignment, Coles is inviting students to challenge Wayne Booth's assumption (from "Boring From Within: The Art of the Freshman Essay," reprinted in The Norton Reader, 3rd edition) that if students write about their own experiences ("my life, my observations, my insights," the bootblack in the Hotel Utah instead of race relations in the distant South, the impoverished farmers around Salt Lake City, not the Okies), their writing will have a stronger purpose and more meaning. Coles' suggestion is that the critical factor in

meaningful prose is not what students write about, but is the attitude or attitudes the writer assumes towards the subject.

4. This essay is an unhappy example of T.S. Eliot's expression of one of the characteristics of his age: "We had the experience but missed the meaning."

5. I have written about this need for attention to feeling in my doctoral thesis, The Expression of Meaning A Philosophy for the Teaching of Writing (University of California, Berkeley; June 1983; University Microfilms International Publication #83-28,856). See Chapter Seven, "Feeling and Writing."

6. For a fuller discussion of feeling in expository writing and academic scholarship, see: Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953); Wayne Booth, Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); The Morality of Scholarship, Max Black, ed. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967); Michael Polanyi, Meaning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

7. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection," in The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, Charles Reagan and D. Stewart, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

8. William G. Perry, Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970).

9. For the role of feeling and epistemic writing in scientific investigation, see David Hamilton's two articles: "Writing Science, " College English 40 (1978), 32-40; "Interdisciplinary Writing," College English 41 (1980), 780-798.

10. Since Freud, narrative voices and dialogue have been recognized as vital to the development of psychological wholeness. I am particularly interested in exploring the psychological values of teaching writing by relating voice (as the expression not only of attitude towards subject and towards audience, but also of attitude towards self) with C.G. Jung's theory of personality development and his typology of personality differences. I have written about Jung's theories and composition in an unpublished manuscript: "Writing, Learning, and the Development of the Self."

Appendix A

Samples of Writing

Sample #1

Choosing a profession is a very big step to take. It is one of the many decisions that will affect the rest of your life. This is why I took so much time in making my decision of becoming a nurse. ...I realized that in becoming a nurse I had a great future ahead of me in a rewarding field. I also knew that in getting there much hard work was going to be involved, but I was willing to work hard. _____ Hospital College of Nursing and _____ College were hopefully going to be my home away from home for the next four years.

Sample #2

Football has been very important in my life. It has taught me how to work hard and the importance of playing on a team.

Football takes a lot of hard work and dedication on a player's part if they even want a little playing. Anyone who can't sprint their back end off in the heat of the summer just can't make it on the field. I have learned this the hard way by actually doing it. If it wasn't for learning this, I would probably be a lazy bum that wouldn't put his heart into anything.

The most important thing football has taught me though is the importance of being a part of a team. In football you can't really be a loner; everyone works for and with everyone else for the betterment of the team. Even though a team may have players that play like individuals, from my experience they don't last very long or just end up hurting the team in the long run. I feel this is the most important thing I have learned, and it is what I know the most about. As a quarterback I depend on the ten other players out on the field: if one of them blows it, I look like a jerk or worse yet, I get taken off the field on a stretcher.

Sample #3

Counseling is a skill that is very valuable, and yet few people have the ability to counsel well. Throughout human history people have sought guidance in their problems. For ages people have come to trusted

friends or paid advisors for guidance. The only thing that enables them to counsel or give guidance is patience.

Patience is the key to all forms of counseling. Anyone coming to someone with a problem wants to tell it to that person at his own leisure. Along with patience , the counselor also needs to be a very good listener. Without listening to the problem, the counselor can do nothing to help him with it.

Sample #4

Bodybuilding

A lifestyle when you discipline yourself to eat right, take care of yourself, and exercise daily is not easy to do. An emerging sport for both men and women, bodybuilding can change your body shape, help improve coordination, lifestyle, and outlook on life.

Bodybuilding can release a large amount of tension, Lifting weights releases frustration and clears the mind of all thoughts that you have had during the day. It gives you time to improve yourself and get a better outlook on life. It can be your own personal time which is put away each day for one and one half to two hours. When I clear my mind of frustrations, arguments, school, and work, I feel more positive about life and people. From my own experience with bodybuilding, I have found when you work to improve yourself, you become more assertive and happier with yourself and others.

I began bodybuilding six months ago and I have noticed a tremendous change of shape in my body. I have gained muscle tone, lost body fat and inches even though I have not lost weight. I have changed the shape of my body. My frame consists of very narrow hips so it appears I have a straight shape instead of having curves. With bodybuilding, I have increased my "lats" and therefore created the illusion of having a V-shape and a smaller waist. I have also broadened my shoulders which makes my arms have more shape and built my legs so I have lost fat on my inner thighs.

During contest time, I weigh 102 pounds. On the off season months I weigh 113. When I concentrate on building muscle mass and shaping my body, I loose weight in order to enhance the appearance of my body. During contest time, I work on reducing body fat and getting definition.

Bodybuilding is also a great way to improve coordination and strength. When you lift weights there is a correct way and an incorrect way. You can cheat or you can use and concentrate on your muscle. Controlling the weight involves coordination whether it is by lifting dumb bells correctly to do curls or balancing your weight evenly to do squats. The strength is built up by the weight you use. The improvement on coordination and strength helps you with other sports such as dance, football, and racketball.

I was never very coordinated as a child. Bodybuilding has improved my tennis and running abilities. I am not embarrassed to join a sports game and therefore am more confident and have more self esteem.

My lifestyle has changed because of bodybuilding. My eating habits have changed. In order to be a serious bodybuilder you must be willing to give up a lot of salts, sugars, and fast food. You must discipline yourself. At first it is difficult to clean up your daily routine, but it is well worth it especially when you can actually see the results. You feel and look more radiant and healthier. Your activities tend to change also. Instead of sitting down in front of television, you might decide to take a walk or do something constructive.

And yes, bodybuilding is somewhat addictive. After a few months it becomes a pleasure instead of a chore. In conclusion, bodybuilding is a unique sport which can change your shape, improve your outlook on life, and improve your coordination. The best reward of all is when you walk off the stage with a trophy in your hand feeling proud of what you've done: then all of the hard work has paid off.

Sample #5

Six months ago if I were to write a paper on racial discrimination, it would have been filled with opinions formed through what I've heard or read. Unfortunately, I can now conclude my own personal opinions because I have actually experienced racism.

For graduation two friends and I went to Barbados and Greneda. These two islands, located in the West Indies, are populated for the most part by natives who are either black or dark skinned. In Barbados we stayed at a Holiday Inn that depends on tourists for their income. At the hotel we didn't come across any direct discrimination, but were

informed that there exist night clubs for tourists and separate night clubs for natives. The "tourist" clubs were excessively white while the other nightclubs were mostly black. The natives that questioned us as to which nightclubs we attended immediately changed their attitudes after our response. They become less friendly and talkative. Furthermore, the deeper into the city we went the less eager people were to greet and help us.

From Barbados we traveled to Greneda where we encountered the most discrimination. After we closed the Red Crab, a small pub, we moved to the Sugarmill. The Sugarmill is a stone building decorated to resemble a disco. Our first time at the Mill we hoped to find a nice place to dance for both tourists and natives. At the bar, we were surprised to find out differently. The bartenders passed us up several times, but we were finally served. Once our order was taken, every native to our side was served before we finally received our drinks. The real racism was experienced when we were refused service at a restaurant. The waitress didn't actually say she wouldn't serve us, but she informed us they were no longer cooking lunch. As we looked around to see everyone also eating, we realized what was happening. We had just experienced the ultimate step of dsicrimination.

Our vacation in Barbados and Greneda proved to be quite uplifting. Although I already had the opinion that racism was useless and destructive, I was able to conclude that opinion for the first through my own personal experiences. Having been on both sides, the discriminator and the one being discriminated against, I can sympathize with the latter. My mishap with racism has enlightened my consciousness of others.