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ABSTRACT

An autobiography course for nontraditional students at community colleges can foster appreciation for cultural diversity and integrate discourses that challenge writing genre hierarchies. Students who signed up for such a course developed processes that worked best for them. Selected as texts for the course were autobiographies that reflected cultural and literary diversity. Students, most of whom were women in their thirties, responded to the readings by forging personal connections with the texts' authors. Student-centered learning strategies were found to be especially productive with regard to students who were members of under-represented, marginalized groups. After first reading some noted autobiographies, participants were arranged into groups which read autobiographical works in progress and discussed audience responses. Authors and audiences alike were encouraged to negotiate criteria which gave predominance to writers' individual goals. Confidence and writing skill grew. Genre styles and writing processes deserve continued study, as these can empower or disable students, especially those students who are members of marginalized groups. (Eighteen references are attached.) (SG)

Cover Sheet

Composing a Self in Student Autobiography

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Composing a Self in Student Autobiography

Responding imaginatively and responsibly to changing student populations, particularly the diverse needs of nontraditional students, many of us accept as crucial to the mission of the community college. A creative writing course in autobiography is well suited to serve this mission even as it fosters appreciation for cultural diversity and integrates into the curriculum oppositional discourses that challenge genre hierarchies in literature as well as in academic discourse. Autobiography, blurring distinctions between history and fiction, has become increasingly experimental in the twentieth century and accessible to more and more Americans previously silenced by dominant androcentric forms and values. The models provided by diverse autobiographers such as Richard Wright, Lillian Hellman, Ivan Doig, and Maxine Hong Kingston, offer students new formal and substantive choices in composing self, voice, and life stories in a supportive learning environment. Such choices may be particularly important in empowering nontraditional writing students who have difficulty mastering expository and argumentative prose forms.

I first designed and offered such a course in fall 1989, and began what I project to be a four-year study of student autobiographical texts and interviews. The initial meeting of Writing 240 ("Introduction to Imaginative Writing: Autobiography") attracted eleven women and two men--all white, I should add; subsequently both men and two of the women dropped the class. Most of those who stayed in the course were re-entry students in their 30s. I realize this small sample cannot be universalized, yet students like these on the margins of our institutions--just those the

community college should serve--have often been overlooked in developmental and composition studies. Much about the effects and effectiveness of our pedagogies may be learned from examination of their writing processes, interactions in workshop response groups, and formal and substantive autobiographical choices,

Most of the women drawn to Writing 240 acknowledged an intrinsic value in personal writing. Among students in my three other freshman writing courses that term who said they would not take Writing 240, the most common reasons given were: (1) that the course would not "count" as a sequence in meeting their degree requirements; and (2) that they did not consider their life interesting enough to write about, one elaborating that he would wait until later in life when he had done something important.

I believe these responses mirror an institutional bias against creative and autobiographical writing as a legitimate academic experience in composition or humanities, as well as one source of a debilitating fear of writing. As Caywood and Overing have observed, the traditional composition classroom privileges expository and argumentative essays, advancing clear theses in impersonal, rational voices over exploratory and autobiographical genres, featuring alternative, organic forms and intimate, subjective voices (xii). The standard justification for this set of values is that the freshman composition sequence functions as "service" courses intended to prepare students for college survival and introduce them to academic writing. This position seems unsatisfactory on several counts. It negates the value of private, personal, or informal writing as literature and as legitimate and important ways of learning in the academy. Moreover, students often have much difficulty translating their writing experience with the expository

essay in traditional rhetorical modes to writing tasks assigned in other coursework (see, for example, McCarthy). Many composition researchers have pointed out that the academy contains not one but many discourse communities within its bounds. Yet, as David Bleich recently observed, many of us are still teaching "expository prose" in college as "the basic skill that underlies the ideal of academic discourse," despite the findings in composition and literary studies which indicate that "the so-called abiiity to write is not a single definable thing, that writing in different disciplines requires different kinds of teaching techniques, and that faculty in different disciplines must participate in writing programs . . ." (10). Moreover, Bleich believes genre hierarchies favoring "expository prose and academic discourse serve the traditional sex/gender system and inhibit what most of us accept to be the necessary and urgent task of reforming that system" (Bleich 14).

I am also concerned that restrictive learning models may disable many of our students. Nancy DeJoy observes that composition classrooms and textbooks construct an ideal "ungendered, unraced, unclassed" "generic student," a model which may repress or suppress, rather than enable or empower, those of our students who don't fit the ideal. In particular, we need to examine the source of students' resistance to assuming the authorial roles embedded in the types of academic writing we teach. Some students cannot wield the potent oppositional weapon of argument, because they are not ready to assume the role Toril Moi calls "the author as God the Father of the Text" (62). But Phyllis Lassner has suggested that "[f]or those who do not recognize themselves as worthy opponents with a fair chance of winning, [even the reportedly 'humane'] Rogerian rhetoric can be . . . as

inhibiting and as constraining as any other form of argumentation" (223). The "subjective knower," as defined by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule in Women's Ways of Knowing (ch. 3, 4), one who has fought hard against crushing odds to learn to trust herself, may be far from prepared to admit the validity of an opposing viewpoint. Deanne Bogdan has argued for the value of agnosis, stemming from a "poetics of need": students may block things they can't yet let themselves know as a constructive gesture, needed to maintain identity at certain stages of their development. On another front, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede call for a "Rhetoric in a New Key" which encourages alternative, collaborative models of authorship. In sum, student reactions to our pedagogies and to the types of classroom roles we assign them are complex and far from adequately represented by a single model of a "generic" student or an authoritarian model of the writer. Nor are the writing kinds that may help these students survive in college and find a voice in their other academic classes adequately encompassed by an "ideal of academic discourse" represented by the expository essay.

In the midst of this kind of debate, I advance the hypothesis that personal and private writing has a legitimate place in a re-visioned education which values the full range of private and public experience, discourse forms, and educational modes. Autobiographical writing presented as a creative mode may help many of our students find public voices and develop effective writing processes. Beginning writers are often paralyzed by the idea that they have nothing to write about, that their lives are uninteresting and their perspectives unimportant. To counter this problem, Leon Satterfield suggests that the writing process be embodied by a "creation" rather than a "discovery" metaphor, to encourage students who

might otherwise decide they see nothing inside worthy of discovering (83). Writing-to-learn and process pedagogy has led many teachers to integrate private, exploratory, creative modes of writing into their courses as a means to an end. Regular, private journal writing, with free choice of content and form, was required in my autobiography course, whether or not students chose to share it in workshop. Most of the students in my course used the "private" journal as a first step in developing weekly "public" pieces to read for the audience. Four of the nine resisted regular journalizing, but two of these four eventually incorporated regular journal writing as a productive stage in their composing processes. One of these called the journal the "key" in the process of developing her final Term Project in autobiography: "At first nothing seemed to go together"; "The hardest thing each week, was to set aside time and just get started." Four mothers with children still at home, in particular, developed an interruptible, disjunctive writing process through the journal, though even journal writing can be difficult under such circumstances, as Tillie Olsen has shown us in Silences. One student-mother good-humoredly described her efforts: "Anyway I finally forced myself to sit down, let the dog doo stay in the hall, the laundry stack precariously on the washer, the toilet over flow onto the rug again (!!) and write in my journal. Hooray! I managed to record some thoughts . . . ."

Students developed individual processes that worked best for them. Most were reluctant to share unrevised journal entries; however, at least one student was a "one-drafter" (Muriel Harris's term) who resisted revision. Another student described her journal writing process as if it had a life of its own: "Writing seems to have more control over me than I have

over it. When I feel like writing[,] words meet me half way and I just record them." For several writers, freeing themselves to begin writing without knowing what they will say or who they will be, seemed a necessary precondition for attempting to write at all. This process enacted a lesson Kurt Spellmeyer draws from Foucault: inquiry, blind to its future, imagines a future moment when the writer will finally know who she is and what she wants to say, and thus can make a beginning (723). "[T]he search itself, and the impossibility of its resolution, . . . has enabled him to speak" (727).

Significantly, for four students, the journal was an end in itself. One of these chose the diary as the genre for her Term Project: "I was told a long time ago that journal techniques that were ever published were authors that could not write or had nothing to say. I now disagree." Journals are "quiet listening friends to me." For three others, private journal writing had already become a long-term habit. One student seemed to feel her identity as a creative writer seriously jeopardized by the temporary writer's block preventing her from writing regularly in her journal during the term. Another writer testified, "I have done it just for myself." She viewed her diary as an important mode of self-teaching: "I believe it has helped me to grow emotionally and intellectually." The course validated her practice, but she did not want an audience for her private journal: "my journal is personal & I'd rather capture my feelings and thoughts of the moment. It's important to me." This student always revised writing to be presented to the class.

Caywood and Overing have demonstrated that student-centered, process pedagogy and feminist theories overlap in their goals and methodologies. Process pedagogy enlarges definitions of writing and its legitimate forms, even as feminist literary critics work to revise canons

and hierarchies in order to broaden the curriculum and include alternative forms of discourse, such as private poetry, letters, diaries, journals, oral and written personal narratives, and autobiographies--often the only forms of discourse available to women (xiii, xii). Both groups work to accommodate and nurture difference; both groups seek to invest students with active roles and confidence in their own authority and ability. Writing 240 was designed with these goals in mind.

I deliberately selected course texts that would represent cultural and literary diversity. Linda Brodkey helped me see that a "negative valuing of difference" is often inculcated with a belief in "the universal human condition." Unfortunately, the representations of this condition are rarely fashioned in the images of--much less authored by--the non-white, the non-male, the non-middle and -upper class, the non-heterosexual, the non-Western among us. If our students do not see their own experience or at least a diversity of experiences mirrored in the "humanistic" traditions represented as "universal" in the core curricula across our country, it is little wonder that they begin to doubt the validity--even the reality--of difference. But if the negative value assigned to difference is "socially constructed," it "can . . . be socially reconstructed and positively revalued" (Brodkey 598).

Therefore, I selected autobiographies that offered a range of possibilities in literary form and content for student autobiographical writing. No preference was given to canonical forms of autobiography, those that generally follow the unified, linear, continuous, teleological Augustinian paradigm. Modern transformations of autobiography with a thesis, like Wright's Black Boy, were introduced along with other

possibilities--for example, the disjunctive, fragmentary, disconsonant autobiographies of Hellman. I offered only the broadest generic definition of autobiography, based on that of Elizabeth Eruss. autobiography has "act value" (it is one's own testimony of one's own life) and "truth value" (on some level the "self who writes" offers a truth of self unimpeachable and authoritative, unavailable to others). Within these broad lines, students were free to define, or redefine, the form to suit the selves they wished to invent and present to others.

The women students responded to the reading, in most instances, by forging personal connections with the authors we read. "The woman warrior was . . . inspiring, since I see many faces of myself, her capsulated stories each separate but invisibly connected would be a great route to take [for writing]," responded one student. Richard Wright "opened my eyes to my own family's prejudice against blacks"; another said, Black Boy "is a very similar story to my own childhood, " except "[ours] was the only white family in a black neighborhood," but both families were dysfunctional, both children abused; another admits she was "shocked" by Wright, but admires his "courage & efforts to rise above his environment & make something of himself. My mother always told me to 'rise above it' whenever I was confronted with an uncomfortable experience & I have found it invaluable in my life." Students were, however, very selective in choosing techniques and subject matter from these models to apply to their own writing projects. Most often cited as influences were Wright's skill with narrative and detail, Hellman's use of dialogue, Doig's use of italicized internal monologue, and Kingston's integration of fantasy into her stories. Two students consistently rejected the examples: "I'm a positive person. I can't imagine

remembering only the pain, humiliation, and anger," as Wright does, although she admired his use of detail; another steadfastly proclaimed that, with the possible exception of Doig, none "affected my concept of autobiography. I prefer to be myself & have my own approach_ I am me & they are themselves_"

Study of published autobiographical texts was integrated with and ultimately gave way to study of students' own writings in a workshop setting. Faery argues that student-centered pedagogies are especially important for women students, "to help them overcome the tendencies toward passivity and intellectual dependence and timidity, which are their cultural heritage" (202). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule have also argued for what they call "Connected Teaching" (Ch. 10). My own classroom experience suggests that collaborative learning strategies are productive with all students, but perhaps especially so with underrepresented, marginalized groups. The writing workshop assigns students an active role and, more importantly, legitimates their membership in the academic community as practicing writers.

In Writing Autobiography, I organized students into student response groups which met during class to read autobiographical work in progress and discuss audience response. I did not supply authoritative evaluation criteria for group discussion as I would have done in a competency-based course like freshman composition; later in the course I did publish a list of "Elements of Autobiography" to assist students in describing each other's texts and analyzing the ways in which autobiographical purposes had been or might be achieved. I consistently encouraged authors and audience to

negotiate criteria that give special predominance to student writers' individual autobiographical goals.

Relationships between student autobiographers and their audienc. influence the shape of the autobiographical products. "Public" autobiographical writing is not simply self-referential or self-expressive; it is a "transaction with the world" (Dickerson 3). Joy S. Ritchie's Bakhtinian framework is useful in analyzing this transaction. The student writer uses "language as a productive, generative force for creating meaning"; the classroom audience creates a polyphonic environment of multiple responses to that writing (Ritchie 154-155). So if students generate their own autobiographical choices in Writing 240, they must do so in a potentially conflictive rhetorical situation where other students, the teacher, course texts, and generic conceptions exert powerful "normative" influence. A creative tension is then established between the "normative" impulses of the audience and the "generative" impulses of the student author. And the power relation is further complicated as students alternate between their roles as author and audience.

Nearly all of my students were enthusiastic about sharing writing in workshop response groups. In their role as writers, all felt the influence of the audience on their writing, some very dramatically because for the first time. "Writing before an audience has really changed my style," reported one autobiographer. "I find that dialogue and trying to make the person really 'be there' is so important. . . . I still have a lot to learn about the audience," but "I am feeling more confident about how to tell the story. The feedback is invaluable." Another writer found difference in the gender of her audience: it is hard to write for a female audience, she said, "[b]ecause I have

performed my written identity for men - attacking and surrendering to their assumptions - forcing them to share their classrooms - branding myself with their identity as I created my own. . . . I can't do that here; so what is this practice, of speaking to women?" For most, performing writing for an audience encouraged revision. As one student noted, "I think much harder about my writing when I know it will be presented to an audience. . . . I want to make it enjoyable or provocative for them"; "without revision," she felt her writing was "pretty flat." Many felt empowered by the supportive responses they received from others: "It really valicates my story to see expressions on people's faces or hear them laugh at something I've said. It was my favorite part of this class," one student testified. Another student felt she couldn't "see my own work well," and looked to the audience to help her identify her purpose and technique. Establishing sympathetic connections to her readers evolved into a primary goal: "I can't imagine writing without the intent of having my audience really know me, and the life we [she and her critically ill son] live." She desired above all, "[t]o pull the audience into my world."

A few experienced the "normative" influence of their audience as a force to be resisted, particularly when it encroached too far on their authorial prerogatives. The most experienced and confident writers tried to strike what I considered a healthy balance between pleasing the audience and pleasing themselves. Audience disagreement often taught the wisdom in this balance. As one student described it: "Sometimes the vast majority felt one way about someones [sic] work. Other times different people felt opposite in directions. This is probably at the core of all authors . . . the

knowledge that you can't please all readers in the same ways." She concluded, "response groups can broaden or narrow you."

Two students resisted audience influence more emphatically, however, perhaps out of what Bogdan calls a "poetics of need." One writer clearly welcomed opportunities to read her work to others, but, even as she listened to the responses, showed little inclination to act on audience suggestions and little interest in assuming the role of engaged audience for others. Another student, a long time journal writer whom I would characterize as a "subjective knower," only very reluctantly changed her writing to please her audience. One evening she burst out: "Do I have to go into so much detail?" I deferred her question to the other students in the class, who answered, "Yes," if she wanted to achieve the rhetorical impact she said she desired. She often did revise in response to audience suggestions, but near the end of the term she summarized her experience of the class this way: "I'm really not as good a writer as I thought I was--Maybe I should just continue my journals and forget about writing for others."

And what kinds of autobiographical choices did these women make in this environment? First, most made the choice to tell the "truth." It is "cheating," as one student put it, to lie in an autobiography. The reward for honesty lay, for most, in deeper self-knowledge. However, this commitment to truth did not preclude embellishing life stories to "bring them to life for my audience," or selecting "the side of truth that I want people to see in my autobiography," or allowing memory to operate selectively in choosing to remember the "good" things. One student showed the concern of the "received knower" for writing a verifiable truth (see Belenky et al. ch. 2):

she consulted "diaries and writings from the time period to recreate the truth as I knew it" then, and meant to engage her brother and sister in writing their versions of their common childhood experiences so that she could test, though not subsume, her own version. At the other extreme was the author who wrote in self-reflexive modes that challenged the possibility of an objective truth of self: in letters to an unknown woman, she asks, "Do you exist outside the stories of your lovers? Do I?" Another woman worked her way through writer's block in attempting to write a family history: "I realized why I have failed . . . I had been trying to record straight facts; to keep myself emotionally uninvolved; to avoid personal revelations. The books read for this course changed my intentions. I realized I couldn't dissociate myself from my family's history, I was still a part of it. I couldn't tell the whole story without my own story interwoven somehow."

My students tended to tell stories of connection or frustrated connection, which Flynn (427-428) and Friedman (38) characterize as a woman's way of writing. For example, several narratives focus on relationships between parents and children. The narratives of two women were absorbed by a dysfunctional relationship with their mothers and/or fathers. One of these used autobiography to build bridges of sympathy. Dominating mothers appeared starkly in vignettes by two others. Loving memories of mothers or grandmothers were recreated in yet two more. In another's diary, conflicting responsibilities to children and to self became a primary theme. In three other pieces, relationships with lovers and husbands shaped the subject matter.

Most saw a thread running through their stories connecting the present self-who-writes to past selves dramatized in the autobiographies. Wrote one autobiographer: "How curious that a bird's call can connect my child self to my adult self to evoke feelings I couldn't have expressed [then]." Careful attention to chronological presentation can also create a sense of connected being. Yet formal choices sometimes enact a distance or alienation, for example, through third person pronouns for self-reference or a flat first-person narrative that avoids inner views of the protagonist and loses self in monotonal accumulations of factual, external descriptions of her life's plot. One student armed herself against a painful past with distanced doggerel rhymes that disguised rather than revealed the actions they depicted. Another autobiographer created this haunting Lacanian scene: "I look at myself in the mirror and consider who it is that meets me there. I am sure I don't know her. She is older looking that I perceive myself. . . . I don't care for her much, it's true. Somehow fate has intertwined us on a journey neither of us can escape."

Self in multiples or fragments, and not necessarily conflictive but often liberatory, was suggested by the recurring pattern of mixed genres and voices incorporated into the student autobiographies. For example, a flat, impersonal, distanced narrative voice carried one woman through many painful years of her life story; but its spell was increasingly broken by interpolated fairy tale, letters, diary entries, songs and poems. At 16, her protagonist begins to emerge as a three-dimensional character glimpsed in sustained internal monologue and dramatic rendering, in stark contrast to the previous pervasive voice.

Two autobiographers skillfully created tension between connection and disjunction in their Term Projects. An omniscient narrator with a consistent persona within a loose chronological framework provided the connecting agents in one autobiography, where heterogeneous subject matter, dramatic dialogue, still lifes, internal monologues, and a poem provide a texture of discontinuity. Another autobiographer chose the thematic link of desire to structure a series of embedded levels of awareness carrying the narrative voice back and forth through time and through dissolving and reforming selves before her often bewildered student readers. Under such influences, most other students grew increasingly experimental in both form and subject matter as the term neared its close. Confidence and writing skill grew in the process of composing a self and, I believe, constituted a very important kind of learning experience.

Unfortunately, institutional biases do little to recognize and encourage such experiences in the academy. I am committed to continued study of genre perceptions, writing processes, student interactions, and autobiographical choices, especially among non-traditional student writers. They deserve our attention, for they may show us how pedagogies and genres in composition act to empower or disable students, particularly the marginalized and excluded who seek access to a better life through the community college. As Rebecca Faery reminds us, "If we do indeed make our worlds with language, as linguists and philosophers tell us we do, then we must continue to think hard about how we invite students, especially women students, to make their world with words, and about what kind of world they and we make together (211).

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