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ABSTRACT

Unfortunately, students with emotional and psychological disorders are not uncommon on campuses anymore. In fact, along with the increase in the number of physically disabled students on campuses (now 6%), professors face new challenges, especially from those high-risk students suffering from hidden psychological disorders like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, and depression. There are many reasons for these increases, from government laws encouraging those with disabilities to attend college to the deterioration of family and community life. When a student makes a self-disclosing remark in an assigned paper, one instructor suggests that there are at least five possible responses for teachers in this position. First, they can use the "Ostrich Approach" by writing nothing in the margin. Second, they can use the "Rush Limbaugh Approach," by pointing out errors in the student's writing while ignoring the content. Third, they can use the "Sally Jessy Rafael Approach" by soliciting more information via platitudes like "thank you for sharing this with me." Fourth, they can use the "Dr. Quinn Approach" by rushing to perform heart surgery when an accepting ear was all that was needed. And fifth, they can use the professional approach by acknowledging someone's pain ("This must have been a terrible experience") and offering professional help and asking the writer what he or she would like you to do, if anything. (Contains 10 references, a handout of student writing samples, and some succinct guidelines for teacher responses to student self-disclosures.) (TB)

RESPONDING WHEN A LIFE DEPENDS ON IT:

WHAT TO WRITE IN THE MARGINS WHEN STUDENTS SELF DISCLOSE

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CCCC Washington, D.C. March 24, 1995

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The air gets warm/and thinner by the breath/
When will be the mercy/of the coming of my death

Not long after a San Diego student submitted this poem to her teacher, she committed suicide. The teacher, who had overlooked the warning of a seemingly bright and beautiful coed, later warned us to "pay close attention" (in Louv 429).

Today, I want us to "pay close attention" to the disclosures of some of our students. First, I want to share with you the reasons for the growing number of students with psychological disorders entering college. I will then examine some student writing samples with you as I offer some guidelines for effective response.

Many of you, as writing teachers, can recall a student or students who acted strangely or withdrawn in class or in a conference would break down about problems of abuse or depression. Or worse, perhaps you didn't notice a student had any problems at all, only to find later, as two of my colleagues did, the student's name appear as a suicide in the newspaper.

Unfortunately, students with emotional and psychological disorders are not uncommon anymore. In fact, along with the increase in numbers of **physically** disabled students on campuses (now 6%), professors face new challenges, especially from those high-risk students suffering from hidden psychological disorders--like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, manic depression, and suicidal tendencies--or more common mental disorders stemming from drug addiction, depression, or post-traumatic stress from war, abuse, or rape. Last year a Michigan study found that 1 in 2 Americans have experienced a mental disorder at some point in their lives, and that 30% suffer in any given year (Goleman A-1).

Why are we in this predicament? Well, society and especially the college student population is changing. The increase in violence, family abuse, and drug use have led to the "vanishing web of support" that once sustained families (Louv 1990). Some mental illnesses (like eating disorders, schizophrenia, and suicide) are also more likely to develop during college years.

Second, with federal government budget reductions and advances in psychotropic drugs, more and more patients are being released into the community. And third, since the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the number of students with disabilities entering colleges has increased from 2.6% in 1978 to 8.8% in 1991. Of the 4 million elementary and secondary students with disabilities, 8% of those are emotionally disturbed, and with the help of ADA

services and a change in society's view of mental illness, many of these are bound for college.

While current statistics count college students with psychological disorders as only **.3%** (Community College Times), they are almost twice as likely to be enrolled in a community college (63% vs 37% in 4-yr. college report any disability). One community college professor from New York state revealed to me that 80% of her returning women students were on Prozak.

Most disorders (80%) can be controlled through drugs, counselling help in the community, and special needs assistance in colleges, under ADA regulations, these high-risk students do not have to disclose their illnesses to professors. And an even more dangerous situation is that there are many more who are unaware they have a problem and have not been counted or diagnosed, who are receiving neither medication nor counselling.

Currently we are encountering this scenario. The counselor says, "A full-time job is too much stress for you. Why don't you sign up for courses at a community college?" (As if taking classes is not stress?)

Then, when the student becomes stressed in trying to manage family, work, a college schedule and the rigors of writing, writing teachers become the first point of contact. And many of us don't know what to do!

Yet, scholars have generally shunned this issue, readily speaking about how response shapes revision but leaving personal issues to psychological journals (Beach 1989 and Singer 1990).

In Lives on the Boundary, Mike Rose (1989) describes the personal, social, and academic anxieties that often leak into students' writing. Especially in journal writing, Toby Fulwiler (1989) admits that teachers avoid writing that is "too private to witness," yet insists that journals are one of the few places students have "license to . . . try things out--freely, without fear of penalty [or] censorship" (160). Unlike formal essays, says Fulweiler, journals contain connections, digressions, and dialogue with the teacher. James Britton (1975) has also contended that when writers "explore" their attitudes, they may "actively invoke a close relationship" with their readers (89). Journal writing especially encourages confessional writing, its informal, subjective, self-expressive nature eliciting self disclosure even if unconsciously. Because of this, Fulwiler argues that journals require a different mind set for response---not the typical thesis, structure, grammatical expectations.

SO, you are saying to yourself, I WON'T ASSIGN PERSONAL JOURNALS! But, even when assignments are based on "objective" responses to literature, the circumstances can evoke suppressed emotions that writers have experienced in common with characters they are analyzing, even if the experience itself does not necessarily match. The intimate nature of writing, itself, serves as both a stimulus and a catharsis for past experiences. When those feelings are expressed, the teacher cannot avoid or dismiss them. To do so would be negligent on our parts.

If our role as teachers is to establish an atmosphere of trust in which students can express feelings & attitudes freely without threat of condemnation or personal judgement, we have an ethical & legal responsibility to effectively respond and refer if necessary.

It is not expected that we must "cure" or solve these problems. "We are not psychologists" Lil Brannon (1962) reminds us. That is true. We have neither the background nor the expertise to cope with these special needs. We are in danger ourselves of getting caught in the quagmire of our students' disorders if we don't learn some guidelines for appropriately dealing with disclosure.

Before I do so, I'd like to describe how this dilemma was thrust upon me one afternoon in 1992 while I was rushing through responses to Langston Hughes' "Harlem." I was happy to see that one student, let's call her Mary, was seriously interpreting the poem. "The gist of the poem," she said:

> is what happens to a dream that is put off or left to . . . the wishes of another. Does it burn or irratate [sic] you like a sore? Is it something that nags at you because you really wanted to achieve it?
>
> I think Hughes is asking how Horrible is it to carry a dream around with you and never achieve it. . . .
>
> It nags at you so much, that you want to get it out of your mind or run from it. . . . When Hughes asks "Does it explode?" He wants to know if you finally just burst

> violently. . . . Are you filled with rage? Personally, my dreams were shatterred [sic], and it wasn't by my own hands. My family took my dream and consumed it like a bunch of vulchers. I'll never be able to be the pure, trusting person I once was. I was pushed into society, and corrupted. My body belonged to the highest bidder. My dream was to remain pure and be able to have the freedom to express it to another soul. My body was taken away but I kept my soul. My dream now is to reunite my soul with my body and to share it with someone that won't lock me up and throw the key away.

My first reaction was one of disbelief! What was I to write in the margin? If I wrote nothing, I would not be acknowledging her plight. If I wrote, "Thank you for sharing this with me," the response would be inadequate drivel. I decided to write "This must have been horrible for you." I made sure to catch her alone after class and broach the subject. I first asked if perhaps she was writing a short story. She said, "No, it really happened." I said nakedly, "I wasn't sure how you wanted me to respond." And she said a very interesting thing: "I just wanted to say it. I didn't expect you to say anything; I just had to say it."

The next year, when I asked students to respond to Morrison's Bluest Eye, I had asked safe questions focusing on the girl, Pecola, and had not expected to receive a phone call from another students who was crying and pleading, "I can't write a

response to that story. It is too close." On the same day I read another journal response by Sarah found on your handout.

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How do we interpret these remarks? How do we respond?

It seems to me we have 5 options when confronted with self disclosure:

1. First, we can use the OSTRICH APPROACH, writing nothing in the margin, avoiding or ignoring the signal--hoping it will go away, repeating to oneself: "There is no problem. There is no problem."

2. Second, we can employ the RUSH LIMBAUGH APPROACH, and point out to the writer: "You missed an 'i' in suicide."

3. Third, we can ask for more than we need and use the SALLY JESSY RAFAEL APPROACH and wallow in someone's problem, hoping to expose every intimate detail, supplying platitudes, like "Thank you for sharing this with me." We are in danger of developing a codependency.

4. Or fourth, we could become DR. QUINN, using antiquated medicine to heal the patient, rushing to perform heart surgery when an accepting ear was all that was expected. Indeed, since we are not experts, we may slip into misinterpreting a need. And we must recognize some students are good actors.

5. And finally, we can use A PROFESSIONAL APPROACH, acknowledging someone's pain (This must have been a terrible experience for you), offering assistance in securing professional help, & asking the writer what he or she would like you to do. DON'T ASSUME!

Marti Singer in a 1990 English Journal article suggests that "once we have read a paper, there is a contract between us and the person--a contract of confidentiality. . . . We need to respect the students' possible anxiety in telling the story at all. . . . [Then] We need to ascertain what the writer needs and what our role is to be--advice-giver, clarifier, info-giver, listener, facilitator, friend" (74).

I have written some general guidelines for you on this handout to share with your colleagues. I urge you to develop some in-service workshops for faculty and some of these issues be incorporated into English Education Programs. And be willing to share experiences. Although mental illness is a taboo, we can learn strategies for handling it.

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GUIDELINES FOR SELF DISCLOSURE IN STUDENT PAPERS

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PREPARE:

1. LEARN ABOUT YOUR LEGAL RESPONSIBLITIES AND THE SUPPORT IN YOUR INSTITUTION AND COMMUNITY.

   These could include clinical psychologists, counselors, special needs/ADA coordinators, and social workers. Know your college's student code of conduct and what procedures should be followed if a student threatens harm to himself/herself or others.

   Learn legal implications. (If the student has not disclosed a disability, you are not liable. If a student becomes a threat to him/herself or others, confidentiality is suspended.)

2. CONVEY SUPPORT SERVICES IN YOUR SYLLABUS: GIVE #s/LOCATION.

3. DIVIDE JOURNALS INTO ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL SECTIONS (not read by instructor). DEVISE ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF RESPONDING.

WHAT YOU CAN DO WHEN THE TIME ARISES:

1. ASSUME NOTHING.

   Sometimes students make up stories. Sometimes students are already being helped. Ask. Also, a referral does not constitute a resolution of the problem. Since many agencies are overloaded, the student may have to wait weeks or months.

2. KEEP A PROFESSIONAL DISTANCE AND SET LIMITS.

   The nature of students is that they tend to be takers, and often unwittingly, we become "rescuers." We do not need to "fix" all problems--we can't. We can, however, listen and refer students to others with the expertise, experience, and resources to help. Let students solve their own problems.

3. MAKE A CONTRACT FOR SCHOOLWORK, OUTLINING RESPONSIBILITIES.

4. USE THESE REFLECTIVE STATEMENTS RATHER THAN DIRECTIVE LANGUAGE. THESE PHRASES THAT MAY HELP:

That must have been upsetting (a horrible experience). (Do you need some assistance with this?)

I can hear your frustration. Is there someone you can talk to about this? Would you like to talk to a counselor?

You seem upset. Is there anyone you trust who you would like to call to talk with you?

Are you talking with anyone else about this?

What would you like me to do? (Most just want you to listen.)

Let's talk about this. Suicide is a very final solution. Can you think of any other alternatives?

I don't have the authority (experience, background) to help you, but I can give you the number of our campus counselor so you can make an appointment to talk with someone. Or would you like me to walk over with you now?

There is a place on campus where you can talk with someone about this. Would you be willing to do this?

I will still support you, but I am not a counselor. You can still call me once a week if you'd like.

I've had other students in class who had to drop for various reasons. You need to take care of yourself first. This college will be around for a long time. When you get back, if you want to talk about academics, please come in.

These guidelines were developed at Lorain County Community College in conjunction with Janet Stevens-Brown, our counselor, Ruth Porter, our Special Needs Coordinator, and Janice McClure, an instructor in Nursing Psychology.

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Responding When a Life Depends on It: What to Write in the Margins When Students Self Disclose

The following are excerpts from student papers. Write in the margin your response to Sarah and Chris as their teacher, if any. Because some professors did not keep originals, the unquoted passages on the reverse side are best recollections and are only meant for later discussion. Names have been changed.

SARAH, 2nd year AM LIT student (Northeast Ohio Community College)

"Pecola's life sears my soul. I feel empathy for her. I wasn't raped or molested as a child, but in my immature pre-adult life I was, and not by a parent. I'll never forget it because not only did it scar my body, but my mind as well. . . . I was teased and abused by other children as a child, but I defended myself, thus not considering myself a victim. I tolerated adults with their abusive language, but it didn't drive me to madness."

CHRIS, 1st year developmental student (PA urban community college)

"A lot has gone on in the past week. I don't know where to start. Basically, my mother tried to commit suicide by over-dosing on medication. I came home from school last Wednesday and she was missing. Nobody heard from her and she didn't do to work and didn't call off. So I went looking for her. I went to my fathers house and called the Hospital just as a last resort. That is when they told me that 2 people found her in her car passed out and called the police.

When I found out I more or less freaked. My whole body was shaking and I felt wick. So my dad & I went to the hospital. When I saw her lying there I went and touched her hand. She felt so lifeless that I immediately broke down.

. . . . through all of this I feel emotionally and physic-ally exhausted. With school (midterms), work visiting my mother and taking care of everything at home I feel overwhelmed.

I just feel numb almost. I just can't believe that this actually happened. I love my mom so much and don't know what I would do without her.

I feel so confused. . . . I feel sad, scared, happpy that she is OK, angry at her for doing what she did, overwhelmed becasue of work, school and taking the time to see her, to frustrated because I didn't see this coming. . . ."

MIKE, 1st year writing student (West Virginia private college)

I sometimes dream I'm a giant penis. I order men to bend over. Someday I'll have kids, and I won't have to do it anymore.

RHONDA, 20 yr. old developmental student (PA urban comm. college)

"My head is ready to explode. I have so many different feelings in my head I can't even think straight. In general, my mom tried to kill herself, one of my best friends is 7 1/2 months pregnant and has nothing, my ohter friend has guy problems, I quit my job [student quit because manager insisted she work extra hours], and have no money, I can't concentrate in school, I have a guy who I care about 2500 miles away and I have bronchitis. Also my car is in the shop AGAIN! Yet, I am still managing to hold together. How?

I just am so frustrated! I don't know what to do. I think I need a vacation. I might go up to the mountains for a few days to sort things out. My grandparents live ther. It's really relaxing up there. who knows."

JOE, 1st year writing student (West Virginia private college)

We should round up all gays and put them in concentration camps and gas them.

KATE, 20 yr. old developmental student (PA urban comm. college)

"Sometimes I feel like I'm wandering around in this life accomplishing nothing. I don't know what I want to accomplish. I don't want any of the options the world is offering me. I don't think I want a family. I don't want to work to have things. Materialism makes me sick. I can't work just at a romantic relationship with a male; it doesn't fulfill me. Because I don't have any real goals of may own, everyone in my life rules who I am. I hate that. I don't know who I should be. Nothing in life makes me happy. Maybe God is the Answer, but how? Pray, my dad tells me to pray. To whom? What if nothing is there? Faith. Have faith! What is there is nothing to have faith in?"
