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CHANGING THE SUBJECT:

**USING FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVES IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM
TO FOSTER SELF-STUDY, WELL-BEING, AND EMPATHY**

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“To write is thus to ‘show oneself,’ make oneself seen, make one's face appear before the other [. . .] one opens oneself to the gaze of others and one puts the other in the place of an internal god” (Foucault, “Writing the Self” 243).

French historian Michel Foucault believes that, in addition to empowering the writer, autobiography can form the subject who examines how she is subjected to and how she is a subject of her thoughts and actions; in fact, Foucault indicates that regular self-writing actually changes the writing subject. For, just as the public self prepares a face to meet the faces that it meets, the autobiographical subject is likely to be influenced, consciously or otherwise, by her perception of how she will be perceived morally and ethically by her (internalized) reader. Therefore, the self-writer begins to act and think as if she were being watched by others, a self-censoring mechanism reminiscent of Bentham's Panopticon, the focal image in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. [1] According to Foucault, even when the subject is not subjected to public scrutiny, such as when she is engaged in self-writing, she performs as if her thoughts and actions were under surveillance, henceforth producing an internalized space shared with an imagined “other” that Foucault deems “an internal god” (“Writing the Self” 243).

Accordingly, I have found Foucault's discussion of the effects of surveillance on the writing subject useful for

examining the teacher-student relationship commonly engendered in the English classroom. For example, in the public space of the classroom, faculty offices, the library, or even casual interactions anywhere in the college community, the teacher and student perform their roles knowing they are being watched. Likewise, when they are not publicly performing their respective roles, the teacher and student may continue to perform for each other as if their thoughts and actions were under surveillance by the other. [2] Besides the direct assimilation of the gaze of the other in teacher-student relations, there are additional factors affecting how the subject internalizes the gaze of the other, such as expectations from either the teacher's or the student's peer group, the influence of former teacher-student relationships, and the subject's vision of herself as a teacher or student. In addition, in the English classroom, where student writing is often specifically intended for the teacher's eyes,[3] the internalized gaze of the other can and often will directly and visibly affect teacher-student relations. I believe this effect is magnified and compounded when self-writing is incorporated in English classroom pedagogy in that it makes the self-writing subject aware of and responsible for her subjectivity, and aware of, and reliant upon the teacher's role as audience.

I have found through my own teaching experience that incorporating autobiographical texts and self-writing into my pedagogical practices can foster a classroom environment that pays attention to subjectivity to promote mindful, ethical behavior in both teacher and student, and teach empathy for the other. My pedagogical practices are greatly influenced by progressive, feminist and psychoanalytical pedagogies that I believe fall under the auspices of what feminist pedagogue bell hooks terms "engaged pedagogy." In this essay, I will show why and how self-reflective personal writing improves the well-being of the writing subject, and how self-writing taps into a student's multiple intelligences, possibly facilitating the writing process for some learners. It is my intention to promote the use of self-writing in the college classroom as a valuable resource for teaching empathy.

Engaged Pedagogy: Mindfulness in the College Classroom

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks advocates a classroom situation that embraces the goals of liberatory, feminist, and psychoanalytic pedagogies. [4] The progressive, holistic educational approach hooks calls "engaged pedagogy" is largely derived from Paulo Freire's liberatory pedagogy and the teachings of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, both of whom emphasize praxis, "action and reflection upon the world in order to change it" (hooks 14). An ardent admirer and student of Paulo Freire, hooks also believes students should be active participants in transforming the world; yet, like Thich Nhat Hanh, she sees the student as a "whole" human being "striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world" (15). In hooks' view, engaged pedagogy "is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy," because (like psychoanalytical pedagogy) it emphasizes well-being. Likewise, hooks encourages teachers to be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being (15).[5] In hooks' opinion, "part of the luxury and privilege of the role of teacher/professor today is the absence of any requirement that we be self-actualized"; rather than show any interest in enlightenment, hooks believes most professors "become enthralled by the exercise of power and authority within their mini-kingdom, the classroom" (17). To avoid this blatant abuse of power in the college classroom, hooks promotes freedom in student expression and emphasizes a classroom environment that cultivates the instructor's growth (20-1). Because the personal cannot be avoided in the classroom, bell hooks calls for teachers to return to "a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others" (139).[6] In addition to recognizing the importance of the teacher's physical presence, and her possible abuse of power in the classroom, hooks also advises professors to allow space for emotions in the classroom (154-55).

Creating social change through progressive classroom practices is the focus of feminist educator Mary Rose O'Reilley's autobiographical pedagogical narrative *The Peaceable Classroom*. Throughout the text, O'Reilly responds to the question: "Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?" [7] Quoting Thich Nhat Hanh, O'Reilley urges teachers to embrace the Buddhist concept of right livelihood, and interrogate

whether their work is compassionate (38). To illustrate the need for compassion in the classroom, O'Reilley offers examples of “academic brutalization,” such as (de)grading practices that “contain the seeds of violence” (writing “HUH?” on student papers, for example), and teaching students to bully, demean, and turn others into objects by insulting, bullying and objectifying them (31). [8] O'Reilley has two goals for “peace-making” in literature and writing classrooms: to foster the student's “inner life,” and “to help the student bring his subjective vision into the community” (32). While O'Reilley employs heuristics commonly practiced in English classrooms, her class discussions are also attuned to “the dialogue between inner life and outer world,” and her writing groups “figure out ways of criticizing without inflicting terminal injury” (33-4). As with hooks, O'Reilley is a proponent of personal writing, and has “come to distrust any pedagogy that does not begin in the personal” (60). In what I see as a fulfillment of Foucault's vision of self-writing, these educators mindfully navigate through the public, private and internalized spaces produced by classroom power relations to create a classroom environment that promotes praxis. In the process, both the teacher and her students employ self-knowledge gained through self-writing to better themselves and those around them.

The connection between self-writing, emotional engagement, and praxis is the focus of *Writing to Create Ourselves* by T.D. Allen.[9] In her autobiographical text about teaching indigenous Americans, Allen describes how, through writing about what they want to express, students create themselves. Allen's students learn to look at conflicts within themselves “and sort them out in relation to the requirements of living with others”; they examine and set goals for themselves, and develop discipline; as a result, they find within themselves “legitimate sources of dignity and pride” (15). Allen notes that a student who is “aware of the world, of other human beings, and of relationships between things and people,” usually has access to “material from which he is eager to write” (18). Therefore, as students who write about something that interests them (namely themselves), stand a better chance of fulfilling what composition scholar Robert J. Connors sees as the “writer's job,” which is “to write interestingly” (316). From a practical standpoint, including the personal essay in college writing pedagogy gives students something to write about in which they have a vested interest; on a more philosophical level, inviting the personal essay into the college classroom promotes self-awareness and, consequently, what Foucault would call “care for the self.” [10]

A crucial step to achieving self-awareness through self-writing is for the writing subject to view herself as a subject created by and through discourse. Accordingly, composition scholar Barbara Kamler explains how and why she centers her writing pedagogy on critical discourse analysis, a process whereby the subject estranges herself sufficiently from her writing to read her experience as text. Kamler notes that by viewing our discourse as text [11], we make visible how discourse operates in constructing subjectivities, thereby exposing the functioning of “power relations in the institutional contexts of everyday life” (112). Kamler's writing workshops center on training students to analyze their own discourse and their classmates' discourse as text; for example, in the “Stories of Ageing” workshop showcased in her book, Kamler's students begin by analyzing “a powerful phrase or image” and then moving “to absences, to what the writer had not said” (166). From there, students attend closely to lexical selections or wordings and try to read for traces of dominant cultural discourses operating within them (167). By asking her students to negotiate their writings as societal discourses, they learn “to provide more than an empathic response to texts of personal experience” (119). Although empathy is an important byproduct of hearing and understanding another's story, as Kamler's students illustrate, analyzing personal discourse as text educates us as to how subjectivities (including our own) are constructed.[12]

Research on Personal Writing, Learning and Empathy

As Kamler's study suggests, not only does seeing oneself as a subject created by and through discourse foster understanding of other subjectivities; employing self-writing in this manner can also promote emotional and physical well-being. Numerous studies based on psychologist James W. Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm verify that individuals who write self-reflectively about emotional topics evidence improved emotional and physical health. [13] Pennebaker admits he has no explanation for how his writing paradigm works: “no single theory or theoretical perspective has convincingly explained its effectiveness.” But he attributes the lack of

data pinpointing exactly why expressive writing works “to the fact that expressive writing affects people on multiple levels—cognitive, emotional, social, and biological—making a single explanatory theory unlikely” (“Theories, Therapies and Taxpayers” 138). In general, expressive writing can function within the same parameters as the personal essay. For example, a subject writing expressively along the lines of Pennebaker's paradigm would be given topics such as something she thinks or worries about too much; something she dreams about; something she feels is affecting her life in an unhealthy way; or something she has been avoiding for days, weeks or years. [14] None of these topics necessarily requires the student to delve deeply into highly personal or traumatic events; however, since they evoke emotional self-reflection and require the subject to view herself as a subject of her own discourse, they tend to have therapeutic results. [15] In this vein, it should also be noted that writers do not need to write only about troubling or traumatic events to experience health benefits from expressive writing. In a study that employs a variation of Pennebaker's writing paradigm, Burton and King found that students who wrote self-expressively about intensely positive experiences (IPEs) (rather than about troubling personal experience) also experienced increased health and wellness (150). [16] Therefore, teachers who employ personal writing heuristics that accord with Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm might want to offer the student the opportunity to write *emotionally and self-reflectively* about *either* a troubling experience or an intensely pleasing experience, as either topic promotes health and well-being in students. As a result of her own experience with the Pennebaker paradigm, for example, Louise DeSalvo developed a personal writing pedagogy that employs Pennebaker's findings (“Telling Our Stories” 50). In *Writing as a Way of Healing* De Salvo explores her methodology for teaching healing and self-reflective writing, and offers insight into how this practice transforms the writing classroom. DeSalvo's text is a compelling treatment of how and why Pennebaker's paradigm of expressive writing should be employed in college writing classrooms.

Because of my interest in the connection between writing and healing, I have expanded my “Expository Writing as Life-Writing” curriculum to include readings from both De Salvo's *Writing as a Way of Healing* and Pennebaker's *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. Accordingly, I now ask students to write and workshop self-reflective personal essays and keep a journal in which they are supposed to write self-reflectively for ten minutes every day. While some students balk at the burden of keeping a journal, it proves to be a worthwhile experience for most. For purposes of illustrating the significance and healing potential of self-reflective writing, as well as the importance of incorporating Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm in the classroom, I will share the following excerpt from one student's self-assessment written at the end of the Spring 2006 semester of my “Expository Writing as Life-Writing” class. The passage is several paragraphs long:

As a class we were instructed to write in our personal journals as often as possible. I didn't really object to it like some did. I had no problem writing about the issues in “my world.” We were assigned reading by James Pennebaker regarding writing and well-being. I felt there actually could be some value to it. Ah, finally some positivity! I read a section on a study he did with people who had been laid off, and it said that those who wrote about it had a much easier time dealing with being fired and finding a new job. I found it ironic that I was in the exact same situation as the people in the study—I was losing my job.

“Hey, there might be something to this,” I thought.

I wrote. I wrote about my feelings, about how I felt about being laid off from Allstate. I wrote about change, the stress, questions I had, and the gamble involved with unemployment and new employment. I didn't really expect it to work. I expected to blow up at my wife like I sometimes do, or lose my cool with my parents on the phone. I expected to snap in some way, shape or form that is “typical Jason.” I didn't, and still haven't. Maybe it's subliminal or subconscious, but I have a peace that I simply do not feel I'd normally have. That's not to say I don't get angry, or my patience isn't tested. It just never gets to the “punching out a wall” or angst phase, and that makes all the difference to me—all because I typed it in a journal (and a writing assignment which later stemmed from it) for a self-writing class.

I had known about my layoff for some time, but as the time got nearer to my firing date, as I watched fellow co-

workers around me tense up like rigid knots, I wasn't feeling the weight of the world on me like I felt they were. And yes, I'm still unemployed. However, I am calm in my job search and in the knowledge that everything will work out in the end. I'm confident in my abilities and I am confident in this bachelor's degree I'll be getting—all because I typed it in a journal.

I would be lying if I said being laid off was the only stress in my life during this semester. On top of the unemployment is the fact my wife and I are expecting our second child in October, in addition to taking care of our sixteen-month-old son Brady. It was a bit unexpected...oops. I would also be lying if I said I wasn't feeling the pressure. Pressure for health insurance. Pressure to put food on the table. Pressure to keep up with two kids. The initial shock when we found out about my wife's pregnancy was numbing. I wrote about it in my journal. It helped me to sort it out coherently in my head. When I did that, I was able to think the potential problems through, look for solutions, and just "GET IT OUT" to...somewhere, the air, I don't know. I cannot explain it as eloquently as Pennebaker or De Salvo, I can only say it's like some sort of epiphany—a quiet, coherent calm, all because I typed it in a journal.

ENC 3310 was a class I feel extremely fortunate to have taken. I find a lot of weird coincidences with attending this class, too many to avoid. What are the chances that my *last class* would coincide with me being laid off and then (in class) reading about people with the same experience who felt better after writing about it? And then I write and I feel better like they did. What are the chances that I'd be reading about people positively dealing with trauma and stress in their lives that mirrors my own? To me, that's so odd. I feel like this class was brought to me to help me cope with the stress and anxiety of graduation, a new baby, and a loss of my job. Call it divine intervention, luck, or just fortunate coincidence, but this class *wasn't* a class to me. No bullshit. It was *therapy*.[\[17\]](#)

Jason's self-reflective essay illustrates that "effective thought, emotional health, and active values" can be, as James Moffett claims, an important part of an English teacher's curriculum (24-5). Recognizing and respecting how levels of linguistic abstraction reflect an individual's psychological development is central to Moffett's theory and pedagogical practices. In brief, in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, Moffett advocates a pedagogy that aligns itself with a student's developmental capacity for understanding "speaking, writing and reading in forms of discourse that are successively more abstract" (25); consequently, with the help of her peers and "a guiding adult," the student has an opportunity to correct and adjust her cognition by observing how she abstracts her discourse (27). [\[18\]](#) By viewing herself in the "abstractive hierarchy," [\[19\]](#) the student gains knowledge of her "internal complexity" and of her external relationships (29). Through dialogic discourse, such as conversation, correspondence, and writing to an audience, the student learns rhetoric, or "how to do something to or for or against or with another 'party'" (41); through "monologic" discourse, such as the personal journal, autobiography and memoir, the student observes the resonance between the main figure (third-person subject) and the observer-narrator (first-person subject) (43).[\[20\]](#) Moffett believes both dialogic and monologic activities are equally necessary pedagogical practices: whereas dialogic activities develop *interpersonal* communication skills, monologic activities develop *intrapersonal* skills (88). Thus, interpersonal and intrapersonal communication "feed each other: when we communicate we internalize conversation that will influence how we code information in soliloquy; how we inform ourselves in soliloquy will influence what we communicate in communication" (88). As Moffett's study suggests, our interpersonal and intrapersonal communication skills are linked together in such a manner that not only does one inform the other, but also each skill has the capacity to improve the other.

The function and development of an individual's multiple intelligences, including interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, is the focus of research by the eminent cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner. In brief, Gardner's multiple intelligences (MI) theory divides human intelligence into eight areas: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist (Gardner, "Audiences" 216).[\[21\]](#) Typically, those students who perform well in English class have high linguistic intelligence, and "sensitivity to spoken and written language"; these individuals are often drawn to become lawyers, speakers, writers and poets (Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed* 41). Yet, regardless of a person's actual linguistic performance in the

classroom, Gardner believes most people possess the linguistic intelligence to allow for a significant degree of sensitivity to the meaning, order, sounds, rhythms, and other subtleties of language (77). Because linguistic intelligence is the most widely and democratically shared human intelligence, and because it encompasses a wide range of cognitive abilities such as memory, rhetorical function, and metalinguistic analysis, Gardner considers linguistic intelligence to be the most important of all the multiple intelligences (*Frames of Mind* 78-9). Although Gardner believes poets epitomize those individuals gifted with linguistic intelligence, he notes that anyone of normal linguistic intelligence can improve her language and communication skills through practice (*Frames of Mind* 81-3). In addition to linguistic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence are vital to the development of communication skills. According to Gardner, interpersonal intelligence is one's capacity to understand "the development of the internal aspects of a person," while intrapersonal intelligence is having "the core capacity" to "access one's own feeling life—one's range of affects or emotions: the capacity instantly to effect discriminations among these feelings and, eventually, to label them, to enmesh them in symbolic codes, to draw upon them as a means of understanding and guiding one's behavior" [22] (*Frames of Mind* 239). Although Gardner separates interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence into two categories, he often refers to them as "the personal intelligences" since "under ordinary circumstances, neither form can develop without the other" (*Frames of Mind* 241). Due to their differences from the other intelligences, [23] Gardner addresses the question of whether the personal intelligences should be classified with other intelligences, but chooses to incorporate the personal intelligences in his study because they "are of tremendous importance in many, if not all, societies in the world," and are often "ignored or minimized by nearly all students of cognition" (*Frames of Mind* 241).

As I have suggested in this study, all too often English teachers fail to acknowledge, let alone employ, heuristics that recognize the personal intelligences. Too frequently, academicians privilege the more quantifiable intelligences, such as linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. To counteract this trend in education, I believe those of us in the humanities must do what we do best: reach out to students; teach them to recognize and develop their less quantifiable but equally important, if not more, personal intelligences, so that they may become effective communicators and compassionate, ethical citizens. In fact, it is my wish that this essay will encourage teachers throughout the humanities to incorporate first-person narrative writing into their pedagogical practices to stimulate their students' personal intelligences and to allow multiple voices to be heard in multiple arenas across the campus. I believe incorporating multiple forms of self-writing into our pedagogical practices cultivates awareness of our connection with each other, both locally and globally.

My twenty years of teaching [24] and my evolving pedagogical practices have convinced me that drawing upon the personal intelligences can connect the teacher to her students, the student to herself, and the student to her peers, especially the student who may feel unsure of her linguistic aptitude. I have found that most students who are unsure of their ability to write a traditional argumentative essay or research paper (an assignment which draws heavily upon linguistic intelligence) will be comfortable writing a personal essay. [25] Research on MI theory confirms my own observations. A seven-year study by neuropsychologist C. Branton Shearer on implementing MI-inspired curriculum concludes that teachers who understand and recognize their own and their students' multiple intelligences can enhance their intrapersonal competence and practice strategies to use these strengths to maximize learning (160). As Shearer's study shows, encouraging a college student who assesses herself as being weak in linguistic intelligence to rely instead upon her interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences can foster the interest and self-discipline necessary for that student to thrive in a writing or literature class.

In addition, fostering the development of the personal intelligences in the social setting of a classroom can bring about changes in both the individual and the group to promote empathy. [26] As social psychologist George H. Mead notes, "the institution" (such as a university) creates a common response in a community (such as a classroom) "that varies with the character of the individual" (teacher and students) (260-1); as such, "the degree to which the self is developed depends upon the community, upon the degree to which the individual calls out that institutionalized group of responses in himself" (265). In other words, the institution promotes an ideology and provides the corresponding educational setting; however, the tenor of what takes place inside the classroom

is determined by a teacher's pedagogical practices and how her students respond to those practices. Therefore, in any classroom situation, the individual self is transformed to the degree that she identifies and interacts with group practices.[27] Sympathy is developed, according to Mead, "in the arousing in one's self of the attitude of the individual whom one is assisting, the taking the attitude of the other when one is assisting the other" (299). Pedagogically speaking, a sympathetic classroom "attitude" is created when students are called upon to employ their interpersonal intelligence to work collaboratively with others, yet are also encouraged to develop their intrapersonal intelligence to find the other's "attitude" within themselves. Ethically, the teacher's pedagogical aim becomes to encourage the student to consider the other as she recognizes, understands, and works through issues of her own subjectivity.

Furthermore, studies by cognitive psychologists show that teaching empathy to students positively influences a student's ability to comprehend literature (Bourg 242). Empirical studies suggest that

understanding characters' emotions is necessary for empathizing with characters and that empathizing with characters is related to inferential text comprehension (i.e., thematic interpretation, causal inferencing). There is also some evidence that causal coherence [28] and empathizing with characters interact in facilitating comprehension. (Bourg 256)

In effect, literature that produces empathic responses also facilitates a student's ability to comprehend literature. Although studies by behavioral psychologists have determined college-age students to be the most developmentally ready to learn empathy, other studies show empathy can be "successfully taught" to other age groups as well (Hatcher, Nadeau, et al, 972).[29] For example, the PEACE Curriculum, a training program designed to teach empathy and reduce violence in adolescents, has been successfully implemented in ten states in a variety of settings, including hospitals, detention centers, group homes, school districts, and alternative schools (Salmon 168). Major components of the PEACE curriculum reflect reliance on the personal intelligences, including projects that teach compassion by correctly assessing another person's feelings, and articulating another "person's feelings in your own words" (Salmon 168). Salmon reports that even violent students, or students who lack perceptiveness with regard to spatial boundaries, can be taught empathy through learning to respect another's "personal space" (168). Findings from middle schools that implemented programs to teach empathy show that school attendance increases and suspensions for violent behavior decrease when at-risk students are involved in empathy training programs (Solomon 172).

In *Empathic Teaching: Education for Life*, Jeffrey Berman explores the place of empathy in the college classroom. Berman offers a thorough explanation of what empathy is (and is not) to support his position on why it is important to teach empathy; additionally, Berman shares heuristics for teaching empathy in the college classroom [30]. Although Berman provides much anecdotal information from his thirty-plus years of empathy-based college-level teaching in this exhaustively researched, psychoanalytically-influenced inquiry, he offers only a cursory mention of James Pennebaker's work. [31] Most crucial to my discussion of why we should teach empathy in the college classroom is Berman's last chapter, which addresses major concerns that educators might have about a teacher's motivation behind "the pedagogy of self-disclosure" (Berman 354). [32] Here, Berman addresses controversial issues surrounding personal writing, such as whether the teacher encourages voyeurism in the classroom, whether the teacher uses his power (consciously or unwittingly) to prey upon his students' vulnerability, and whether the teacher tries to play the role of "natural therapist" (354). To address the first problem, Berman has his students fill out surveys to answer whether they feel they are being voyeurs when reading their classmates' essays (7 percent said "yes," while 81 percent said "no" and 12 percent were "not sure") (357). While Berman's survey might appease his conscience and offer an outlet for student expression, I have found another solution to the problem of encouraging voyeurism rather than my intended goal of teaching empathy. Four times during the semester, I ask students to discuss and critique their class readings and address their possible discomfort with these readings in short response essays that are graded, but are

weighted to reflect only one third of their final class grade. (I give this assignment to my literature and to my writing students, since I employ personal writing in both classes.) Further, in my “Expository Writing through Life Writing” class, students have two private teacher conferences in which issues surrounding a student's comfort with class material and pedagogical practices are directly addressed. In addition, in all my classes I allow peer editing to be voluntary. Students who want their peers to read their personal essays are strongly encouraged to participate in our writing workshops; students who prefer privacy are permitted to have me as their sole reader. Further, students are given the prerogative to mark as “off-limits” portions of their personal class journals that they do not want me to read. Frequently, students exercise these options. For example, this semester a student writing about childhood sexual molestation selected me as his sole reader. In almost every journal there is at least one entry that is marked “private.” Often a student's most emotionally evocative essay will begin as a journal entry. Again this semester, a student journaling about her paternal grandmother's death went on to write her first personal essay about her American father's family's racism towards her Colombian-born mother.

Conclusion

But what about my own motives for reading personal student writings and published personal narratives? Voyeurism or empathy? I sincerely believe that due to the rhetorical situation I place myself in as a primary reader of my students' personal writings, I occupy the position of compassionate listener who affirms “a position of moral solidarity with the [student],” to use psychotherapist and trauma expert Judith Herman's formulation from *Trauma and Recovery* [33] (Herman 178). In my “official” capacity of English teacher I acknowledge my role as judge and jury, as a compassionate listener of my students' narratives, but also as their assessor.[34] However, I believe I often transcend my place on the bench to occupy the space of “therapist” [35] (a term I do not casually interchange with that of “teacher”). In Herman's view, a therapist

is called to provide a context that is at once cognitive, emotional, and moral. The therapist moralizes the patient's responses, facilitates naming and the use of language, and shares the emotional burden of the trauma. She also contributes to constructing a new interpretation of the traumatic experience that affirms the dignity and value of the survivor (178-9).[36]

I make a direct correlation between what Herman sees as the role of the therapist and that of the teacher who includes personal narratives in the college classroom. In the context of Herman's definition of “therapist,” I agree with Jeffrey Berman's view that teachers do not need to be “natural therapists” to engage in empathic teaching; however, through the practice of receiving and sharing personal writing, teachers will become more experienced over time such “that traumatic knowledge creates the opportunity for posttraumatic growth. They will learn that their students want them only to listen to their stories rather than to intervene in their lives” (Berman 375).

To conclude, I offer some reflections on Louise M. Rosenblatt's classic text *Literature as Exploration*, [37] which considers the dynamics of the reader's personal responses to literature, and the power of literature to transform the individual. Throughout her study, Rosenblatt reminds us that when a student has been emotionally moved by a work of literature, she will be led to ponder moral and ethical decisions that have implications outside of classroom practices. Hence, our pedagogical choices not only offer us inroads to our students' emotional lives, but also situate us in a position where we become morally and ethically responsible for what takes place in our classrooms.[38] Rather than “evade ethical issues” brought about by classroom practices (that include one's choice of literature), Rosenblatt invites the teacher to examine her contribution to the social relationships created in the classroom and to develop “the most precious human attribute,” “the capacity to sympathize or to identify with the experiences of others” (17,18, 37). What Rosenblatt hoped would be the outcome of her study, published on the eve of the United States' involvement in World War II, and reissued during the Vietnam War,

has far-reaching implications in today's world. Through the study of literature, Rosenblatt hoped to train the student to “imagine the human implications “ of “political blunders or social injustices which seem to be the result not so much of maliciousness or conscious cruelty as of the inability of citizens to translate into human terms the laws or political platforms they support” (184). She wanted students to recognize that “whole nations have been, and indeed are today, so dominated by such dogma in their political and social life that they follow its dictates no matter how disastrous the consequences to themselves and others” (184). Rosenblatt's vision is that by considering the ethical and moral consequences of our actions, teachers will help to create “citizens with the imagination to see what political doctrines mean for human beings” (185).

Like Rosenblatt, I urge teachers to adopt a pedagogy that allows personal voices to be cultivated, heard, respected and *felt* in the college classroom. If we persevere, I believe we can teach each other to recognize that each subject we encounter might have hopes and fears similar to our own, masked by political rhetoric and marred by social injustice. Equally important, however, is my belief that our classrooms must be spaces in which we listen to and give agency to the voice of the other, and recognize the importance of difference, dissent and alterity. In effect, I am advocating a classroom environment that is both essentialist and anti-essentialist in nature. Similar to what Gayatri Spivak discusses in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, I believe the classroom must become a space in which students learn to see the authority of their voices, but also recognize the limits of their power. We must teach our students that they are responsible for themselves as subjects within the limits of their power, a power that is limited so that others might also maintain their right to power (Spivak 18-19).

Thus, I return to Ihab Hassan's probing question: “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” It is my hope that this essay replies to that question with a resounding “Yes!”

Notes

[1] Foucault writes: “Hence, the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action” (*Discipline* 201). [\[back to text\]](#)

[2] For example, to prepare for class, either party might internalize how she believes the other will respond to course material or anticipate the other's expectations of her. [\[back to text\]](#)

[3] I believe English classes differ from other classes in that quite often the student is evaluated, as it were, intersubjectively, by the writing she produces for the teacher. Likewise, many English teachers employ self-writing practices, such as journals and first person response essays. In other fields of study, such as the sciences, most often students are evaluated through objective means. [\[back to text\]](#)

[4] Paulo Freire's well known model for liberation pedagogy promotes a system in which teachers and students are co-subjects in revealing and re-creating “knowledge of reality” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 56). Central to Freire's theory is the practice of *conscientization*, or coming to a consciousness of oppression and the commitment to end that oppression, in which “the oppressed” become fully committed in their struggle for liberation. Feminist educator Kathleen Weiler observes that, “like Freirean pedagogy, feminist pedagogy is grounded in a vision of social change” (19). However, Freire's original focus was exclusively economic, and did not represent other forms of oppression of pedagogical importance, such as issues relating to expression and exploitation of gender (Brady 145). Feminist pedagogy, rather, rests on truth claims of the primacy of experience and consciousness grounded in historically situated social change (Weiler 19-20). In *The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education*, Mark Bracher observes that since “intrapsychic” conflicts “underlie writing problems of all sorts, it follows that one of the best ways to improve writing is to help writers recognize and deal with these conflicts” (153). Bracher believes that if a teacher understands the basic aim of psychoanalytical treatment and the primary forces operating within it, she will be able to effectively adopt strategies from psychoanalytic pedagogy into her teaching practices (9). [\[back to text\]](#)

[5] Interestingly, in “The Ethic of Care for the Self As a Practice of Freedom,” Michel Foucault echoes these sentiments: “One must not have the care for others precede the care for self. The care for self takes moral precedence in the measure that the relationship to self takes ontological precedence” (7). [[back to text](#)]

[6] By embodiment, hooks has in mind a teacher's body posture, tone, word choice, and so forth, in addition to the oftentimes-obvious markers of gender, race, and ethnicity. In addition, hooks urges teachers to recognize the less easily noticeable, but nevertheless significant, marker of class differences (129-65; 177-89). [[back to text](#)]

[7] This question was initially posed to O'Reilley in 1967, by her professor Ihab Hassan, during a colloquium for teaching assistants (9). [[back to text](#)]

[8] Likewise, it could be seen as an act of violence *not to* write “HUH?” on a student paper that is clearly confusing. However, I believe O'Reilley is suggesting finding ways to offer constructive, “peaceful” criticism while grading students' works. [[back to text](#)]

[9] T.D. Allen spent most of her teaching career working with American Indians, for many of whom English was a second language. Her instruction allowed for “a long-restrained Indianness” to emerge in students' written English (Povey qtd. in Allen, x). [[back to text](#)]

[10] Foucault argues that one cannot care for the self without self-knowledge. He also believes that one must acknowledge the rules of conduct that affect how knowledge of self is produced. This is where ethics plays a part in construction and knowledge of self (“The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom” 5). [[back to text](#)]

[11] Kamler notes that linguists and social theorists, such as Foucault, employ the term “discourse.” Kamler takes a linguistic approach in which discursive practice is seen as a form of social practice (112). [[back to text](#)]

[12] A male member of Kamler's writing group wrote: “I found the strong feminist perspective from some members of the group challenging, enlightening and frustrating [. . .] To be made aware of the range of patriarchal discourses running through society and then identifying some of these elements in myself was an uncomfortable realization [sic]. To think that you're full of these influences and that for a variety of reasons, you can get away with it as a white male and so are possibly part of one of the most insidious forms of sexism is confronting. As is the prospect of change. Nobody is immune to the abundance of discourses that shape our society, but it is easier to identify them in other people than in yourself” (120-1). [[back to text](#)]

[13] In addition to his books on writing and healing, including *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval*, and *Opening Up: the Healing Power of Expressing Emotion*, Pennebaker and his associates have published articles about the Pennebaker Paradigm vis-à-vis writing about trauma, including “Effects of Writing About Rape: Evaluating Pennebaker's Paradigm with a Severe Trauma” and “Disclosure of Traumas and Immune Function: Health Implications for Psychotherapy.” Pennebaker is also interested in how the words we choose serve as keys to understanding a person's personality and actions in social situations. He has published many articles in this field—an area of study I feel is tangential to his expressive writing paradigm. [[back to text](#)]

[14] These topics are listed on Pennebaker's website: <http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/faculty/pennebaker/Home2000WritingandHealing> [[back to text](#)]

[15] In *Writing As a Way of Healing* Louise DeSalvo explains Pennebaker's paradigm in relation to her classroom pedagogical practices. For a thorough illustration of why Pennebaker's writing topics have therapeutic value and how they could be implemented, see chapter two of her book, “How Writing Can Help Us Heal” (17-28). [[back to text](#)]

[16] Burton and King report: “In a variation of Pennebaker's writing paradigm, a sample of 90 undergraduates

were randomly assigned to write about either an intensely positive experience (IPE) or a control topic for 20 minutes each day for three consecutive days. Mood measures were taken before and after writing. Three months later, measures of health center visits for illness were obtained. Writing about IPEs was associated with enhanced positive mood. Writing about IPEs was also associated with significantly fewer health center visits for illness compared to controls. Results are interpreted as challenging previously considered mechanisms of the positive benefits of writing” (150). [[back to text](#)]

[17] Jason Burke has given me permission to reprint his words in this essay. [[back to text](#)]

[18] Moffett writes: “The more one becomes conscious of his own abstracting, the more he understands that his information is relative and can be enlarged and modified. By perceiving, inferring, and interpreting differently, he enlarges his behavioral repertory, and sees new possible courses of action, and knows better why he is acting as he does. Choice becomes more real” (27). Moffett's viewpoint, as with others in this study, mirrors Foucault's aim of self-writing and in which the writing subject is made aware of how he is subject to and a subject of his own knowledge and actions. [[back to text](#)]

[19] Moffett's book includes a detailed and complex hierarchy of language abstraction in which he divides the “mind's materials” into hierarchy of classes, sub-classes, super-ordinates and sub-ordinates (19). [[back to text](#)]

[20] I am referring to Moffett's “Spectrum of Discourse,” which is organized according to a hierarchy ranging from simplest to most complex: Interior dialogue (egocentric speech); Vocal Dialogue (socialized speech); Correspondence; Personal Journal; Autobiography; Memoir; Biography; Chronicle; History; Science; Metaphysics (47). While I find Moffett's theory to be of interest, I find his categories to be stringent, limiting, and outdated. In brief, they do not account for the blurring of genres commonly seen in postmodern literature, such as in Tim O'Brien's autobiographical/fictional account of the Vietnam War, *The Things they Carried*. [[back to text](#)]

[21] MI theory is a broader view of intelligence than what some consider the standard view of intelligence (the IQ), which only gages linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence (Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed* 41). [[back to text](#)]

[22] I believe that Gardner's definition of the personal intelligences defines the goal of Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm. [[back to text](#)]

[23] While some types of intelligence, such as spatial or bodily-kinesthetic, are readily comparable across diverse cultures, Gardner believes varieties of personal intelligence to be culturally determined, thereby being “perhaps unknowable to someone from an alien society” (*Frames of Mind* 240). [[back to text](#)]

[24] I started teaching high school English in 1986. [[back to text](#)]

[25] For English and non-English majors alike, learning to analyze discourse and write correctly and effectively is prerequisite. If a student is more inclined to practice writing and literary analysis when the personal intelligences are accessed, then the teacher should find ways to facilitate that student's success. [[back to text](#)]

[26] The *OED* defines empathy as: “The power of mentally identifying oneself with (and so fully comprehending) a person or object of contemplation.” Sympathy, a similar term, is defined as: “An affinity or correspondence between particular subjects enabling the same influence to affect subjects similarly or each subject to affect or influence the other, especially in a paranormal way.” I find it interesting to note that sympathy suggests feeling affect for the group identity that draws upon interpersonal knowledge, while empathy is individualistic, and suggests intrapersonal knowledge. [[back to text](#)]

[27] Again, the personal intelligences weigh in heavily. The student with self-awareness (intrapersonal intelligence) and awareness of others (interpersonal intelligence), will have a greater awareness of and capacity to be affected by pedagogical practices that foster the personal intelligences. [[back to text](#)]

[28] Bourg points out that in order “to understand someone's emotions, one must understand the antecedent events that led to the emotions” (254). Accordingly, in literature, “story events that fall on the main causal chain of a story and events that have relatively large numbers of causal connections with other events are deemed important by adult and child readers” (254). [\[back to text\]](#)

[29] I found especially interesting a study of deaf children, ages eight and nine that found “that children can learn empathy through classroom activities, projects, and discussions that emphasized perspective-taking and social interaction” (Toranzo 121). Another study on the effects of teaching literature by ethnically diverse writers to multiethnic high school classes concludes that “the study of literature and language can help students explore essential points of connection with and respect for others, however different” (Athanases, Cristiano, and Lay 33). Another article, by Nancy Gorrell, attests to the power of Ecphrastic Poetry (the poetry of empathy) to teach empathy to high school students. Gorrell notes that “ecphrasis” is “a little known, technical term used by classicists and art historians concerning the long tradition of poetic responses to great works of art” (32). In Gorrell's view, “ecphrastic poetry requires the viewer/poet to enter into the spirit and feeling of the subject through a variety of poetic stances: describing, noting, reflecting, or addressing” (32). [\[back to text\]](#)

[30] Berman includes the syllabus and course readings for his “Literature and the Healing Arts” class (377-80). In addition, he discusses his personal writing pedagogy that includes fairly standard but effective assignments, such as writing two classmates' biographies (149), writing a letter to one's parent(s) about how one feels about their marriage (150), and keeping reader-response diaries that reflect the student's reactions to deeply empathic texts, such as William Styron's depression memoir *Darkness Visible* and Lucy Greely's illness narrative *Autobiography of a Face* (285). [\[back to text\]](#)

[31] Like other proponents of personal writing, including those who see its potential to teach empathy, Berman does not consider Gardner's findings. I believe the connection between the personal intelligences and personal writing should be further explored by contemporary scholars. [\[back to text\]](#)

[32] Here Berman identifies many conflicts I had while writing this dissertation, such as whether I, as a reader and teacher, was being voyeuristic. Was I earnestly seeking to be empathic, as was my conscious intention? By asking my students to read personal narratives, some which deal with highly sensitive topics like rape and critical illness, and also edit their classmates' personal writing assignments, was I asking them to be voyeurs? Or, was I sincerely working to develop their skills to become empathic people? [\[back to text\]](#)

[33] I am citing from Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, which deals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In the original text, Herman employs the word “survivor” where I have written “student.” [\[back to text\]](#)

[34] Sometimes this position is problematic. However, my students and I openly acknowledge my somewhat precarious position, and are almost always able to distinguish my classroom duties from my role as compassionate audience—*provided I am able to feel compassion for my students' discourse*. [\[back to text\]](#)

[35] I hold with Herman's definition of “therapist” in that the teacher is a facilitator of language, who shares in the burden of naming the trauma, and respects the confessor's dignity in the process. [\[back to text\]](#)

[36] I am reminded of Foucault's position that “Western man has become a confessing animal.” Hence, our society has produced the genre of confessional literature, in which the writer undertakes “the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage” (*The History of Sexuality* 59). [\[back to text\]](#)

[37] This book was originally published in 1938. I cite the revised edition, published in 1968. [\[back to text\]](#)

[38] While Rosenblatt is addressing the English teacher at all levels of instruction (elementary, secondary, and college), and thus considers students who might be too immature to be held fully responsible for their contribution to the classroom environment, I believe that college age students should be accountable for their

behavior in and contributions to the classroom environment. [[back to text](#)]

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