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Queering Time and Space: Donald Murray as Introvert Whisperer

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Abstract: This article asks, “what in the broad and excessive definitions of composition and rhetoric keeps us from talking about personality and temperament alongside other issues of identity?” Pulling from scientists, queer theorists, and composition scholars, I explore the lived experiences of introverts and highly-sensitive people, which often spill outside the boundaries of dominant structures in composition. I consider the price paid by highly-sensitive people who may move at a different pace and find their ways of working and experiencing the world devalued in the field. Using personal narrative and a momentary high-sensing lens on the work of Donald M. Murray, I assert that there are those who thrive best in small group or one-to-one interpersonal relations, and I argue that these are issues of identity and social justice for those who find themselves on the temperamental margins in composition and in a western society that has an extrovert ideal.

I was far from the normal academic.
 - Donald Murray

My Professor tells me it's time to begin my presentation. I'm standing, but I'm not speaking. I look to my right and people are looking on with curiosity, as if I am a gadget that has malfunctioned. To the left, students look up from their laptops and papers. Seconds continue to pass and I continue to stand and I continue to not continue, not say a word. Now the heads of those with their backs to me turn, arching, clear discomfort on their faces. There is laughter but nothing is funny. It's not the funny kind of laughter. I wondered, when planning this, when contemplating playing with time, if anyone would get what was going on. I never imagined so many would, so fast. How long could I have gone without speaking? How long would they have given me? In only a matter of seconds, the room was so noticeably uncomfortable that I moved into speaking, into the expected, and we returned to the somewhat sedated state of normativity that so-often blankets us all.

Shape-Changing Affect → Shape-Changing Theory

Composition studies is not void of emotion or affect.^{1} If one were to survey the history of composition—what we as a field have written and what we have borrowed from—one would find, here and there, conversations on emotion and affect. Feminist scholars have, among other things, pursued the affective as performance in order to establish agency and to explore inequities and gendered roles in composition (see Crawford; Micciche). Critical affect studies, as presented by Jenny Edbauer Rice in “The New ‘New’: Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies,” describes a variety of functions of affect, including the physiological, political, and economic, as well as the affective dimensions of language (see also Brennan; Ahmed; Clough; Riley).

Alice Brand, author of *The Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience*, has worked for more than three decades to widen our path of study beyond the cognitive. In 1989, she concluded her aforementioned book with hope for exploration, writing, “What is wonderful about studying emotion is that there is a greater democracy of affective structures than intellectual ones” (213). A quarter century later, however, in “Twenty Years: Reflections and Questions,” she makes visible her uncertainty about the progress that has or hasn’t been made, writing, “But now I wonder: Was anyone left talking about emotion?” (13). In that same article, towards the end, she pivots back to a hopefulness that reads a lot like 1989, as she states, “By now a truism, words are a means of naming and understanding our lives. And, on one level, it’s all we’ve got. At the other end, our lives are experiences beyond our words. Knowing is so much larger than cognition” (15). Brand’s first book, *Therapy in Writing*, came at a time where

“a British expressive model” was giving way to “the cognitive process movement” (10). She writes that her first book was “completely ignored,” “not reviewed,” “not critiqued,” “invisible” (10). There would be similar conflicts in composition (such as the expressivist/social construction battles addressed later), but in each era there have been voices, sometimes to the detriment of their own standing in the field, pushing to make the affective known and accessible. Kia Jane Richmond, in “Repositioning Emotions in Composition Studies,” reflects on a time in composition where the affective was downplayed because scholars feared being “labeled instantaneously as expressivists” (70) or because of “possible associations between writing and therapy” (73), neither of which, at that time, would have granted much capital in composition. Along with Brand, scholars such as Wendy Bishop, Thomas Newkirk, Sherrie L. Gradin, and others fought the stigmatizations surrounding claims of expressivism, therapeutic work, and the personal/social binaries. Whether it was an attempt at a social expressivism in Gradin’s *Romancing Rhetorics* or a dashed-together Writer-Teacher-Writer in Bishop’s “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition,” it is because of such struggles for and towards the affective—a continual elbowing for space—that we now are positioned to address the affective in composition. Even more recently, the conversation has continued in a special issue on emotion in *Composition Forum*, where the editors remind us that, “Every day, whether we are teaching writing, administering writing programs, or writing ourselves, emotion is already working for us and against us (Weisser, Reiff, Bawarshi, Langdon). I concur, only adding that for those with highly-sensitive temperaments, who currently lack framework and representation, the statement of emotions working against us may be doubly true.

I find some of the closest resemblance, as far as how I approach this article, in the writing of those in composition like Lad Tobin, Susan McLeod, and Kia Jane Richmond whose work operates at the intersections of experience and theory—who seem to make visible an affective-relational, connections that create the potential for change, not just intellectually but at a felt, embodied level, as it pertains to writing and classroom pedagogy. McLeod, in *Notes on the Heart*, begins each chapter with the experiential, and uses this experiential to put tension on theory while using theory to put tension on the experiential. Though her work isn’t centered on what mine is here—the introvert and highly-sensitive experience—she makes visible the kind of felt sense that is common to these groups of people when she highlights such moments as “When I walk into the room, I pick up a little of the electricity in the air; it crackles from the students to me and back again” (1). In “The Ethics of Empathy: Making Connections in the Writing Classroom,” Richmond begins with a single paragraph, 135 words, on an affective, relational moment where a student comes to her about feeling lost on a paper. Instead of listening to her student, Richmond tells the student that she relates and then tells the student what to do in that situation. Richmond realizes that this is *not* empathy, and in that realization—an affective one—we get the article that comes from it. In the spirit of this attention to affect, I greatly appreciate the words of Kristie Fleckenstein in “Defining Affect in Relation to Cognition: A Response to Susan McLeod” when she writes that, “Affect is ...an integral, if not the *initiating*, part of all knowledge construction (447 emphasis mine). As early as sentence two in paragraph two of “The Ethics of Empathy: Making Connections in the Writing Classroom,” Richmond is quoting theory and expanding a conversation on the ethics of empathy, but it is her sensitivity to a single affective, experiential moment that allows her to challenge how she reacted to her student, to write it up in a blend that is relational, experiential, theoretical, and pedagogical, and to begin a conversation that can potentially have an impact in the field. Lad Tobin, in *Writing Relationships*, also works with the shape-altering potential that comes when experience puts pressure on theory and theory on experience. He leaves himself completely unguarded as to where he stands when he delves into a kind of inter-affectivity, writing, “In my writing courses, I want to meddle with my students’ emotional life and I want their writing to meddle with mine” (33). Not only do I agree with this statement, but, now trying to make visible a representation of the introvert and highly-sensitive experience, I would add, “In my writing courses, I can’t do anything *but* meddle with my students’ emotional life and they can’t do anything *but* meddle with mine with their writing.” To do anything less, for me, as a highly-sensitive person (HSP), would be to turn my back on the affect, the emotion, the motivations, the drivers that I see, feel, and experience from/with students in every semester that I teach.

Where this article breaks from the scholars I’ve mentioned is that it is not placing the focal point in the affective but rather in representations of the introvert and highly-sensitive experience. That is not to say that those who do not identify or experience the world as introverts or highly-sensitive people (as I discuss later) cannot gain from this article, but it is to say that for people who are introverted and highly-sensitive, a focus on the affective, on the experiential, on the relational, is not a luxury we can do without. It is integral to who and what we are and how we might best thrive in a learning environment. Simultaneously, if the affective is not seen and valued, we as introverts and highly-sensitive people cannot be seen or valued (as demonstrated in the opening story of this article and the follow up at the start of the “Conclusion” section).

In the article that follows, I use a combination of my own experiences as an introvert and highly-sensitive person, along with scholarship on the subject of introverts and highly-sensitive people, to examine where the composition field has (or hasn’t) made visible the 15-20% of the population who have highly-sensitive temperaments (Aron ix). In the first section, “Temperament, Time, and Timelines,” I begin a conversation about how I found my identity in the

academy through the writing of Donald Murray. And yet, time and the 1980's "social turn" made the option of my reaching out to and identifying with parts of Murray seem impossible. With the work of queer theorists, particularly the work of Jonathan Alexander, I begin to seek a lens to see what elements of Murray were forgotten, lost in excess, when James Berlin defined him as an expressivist in the late 1980s. In "How I Met Murray," I write about how my experiences as an introvert and highly-sensitive person seemed to contradict the stark lines that the composition field had drawn between social-epistemic rhetoric and valuing Donald Murray. While Donald Murray will never overlap with the explicitly political and hyper-collaborative nature that some social constructivists like James Berlin pushed for, there is an overlapping element of social-epistemic rhetoric *and* the work of Donald Murray that are both visible, not at the explicitly political but in the affective work of the relational. In this section, I also use a temporary affective, relational lens to bring forth how Murray's writing style and way of being in the classroom might be a guide for introverts and highly-sensitive people among us. In "Temperament and Social-Classroom Justice in Composition," I bring in Dr. Jerome Kagan's Harvard experiments and research on the highly-sensitive experience, Susan Cain's claim of an extrovert ideal in American society, and the ways that the composition field has, at minimum, left these issues unspoken for and, potentially worse, have created classrooms and research space that marginalize the ways in which introverts and highly-sensitive people might thrive in the field and help those around them to thrive better. In "Orientation," I use the experiential to make visible the alienation and suffering that can arise when the ways of being and acting introverts and highly-sensitive people most identify with are not recognized or valued. In the conclusion, I return to Donald Murray to make a case for the consequences that have been caused, even if indirectly, in composition by ignoring the experiences and needs of introverts and highly-sensitive people, and I make a final push for representing introverts and highly-sensitive people through styles of writing, theory, and ways of *being* and *doing* in the classroom and beyond.

If we as humans change the shape of our knowing, our doing, and our being as we interact with theory, so too does theory change its available shape when it interacts with us. In that case, if we have been vague and dismissive, as I will argue we have, about introverts and highly-sensitive people, then it only makes sense that we lack theories that are shaped to fit the experiences of such people. This article is an attempt at representation of the introvert and highly-sensitive experience as it relates to composition and affective theory. It is my hope that what comes from this article will be more voices of introverts and highly-sensitive people, more diverse discourse, as we seek to make visible theories, experiences, and ways of *being* in the academy that are not only beneficial to these oft-unmentioned people, but that, through making visible the work of introverts and highly-sensitive people, we will benefit students, instructors, and the composition field at large.

Time, Temperament, and Timelines

When I first decided to write about Donald Murray, it was from a desire to tell my story from the perspective of an introvert and a highly-sensitive person—that Murray is, above all, the reason I pursued composition studies and was sustained in graduate school. In trying to tell this story, however, I continually bumped against two obstacles. The first is that Donald Murray, defined by James Berlin as an expressivist and part of a past era, seemed confined by terminology and timeframe, as off limits to a teacher and student coming into composition studies in a post-expressivist era. The problem was greater than definition and separation of time, however, as I also realized I had no interest in rehashing a decades-old debate about expressivism and social-epistemic rhetoric. For me, the conversation was always a different one, one that I could not square with the material in the composition field.

Donald Murray hadn't simply appealed to me as a teacher, student, or developing scholar. Donald Murray appealed to me at the core of what I considered to be my identity—an introvert and a highly-sensitive person. Thus, in revisiting Murray, it is not my goal to reframe him (thus doing exactly what I will assert Berlin did previously) but to place a momentary lens on Murray as the kind of model I believe he could be to a certain group of teachers, students, and administrators, namely introverts and those with highly-sensitive temperaments, who generally are ignored in scholarly work in composition studies. It is not my goal, however, even as I write about ideas on temperament that may challenge some views on social constructivism, to set up a binary or battle, as I view fights for pedagogical and ideological supremacy as counterproductive to the more inclusive good we could be doing. What I write about here is, instead, in line with what Wayne Booth calls *rhetorology*, or a "systematic probing for 'common ground'" (11) between those who believe in social-epistemic values and that all is socially constructed and someone like me who believes in social-epistemic values but also believes, like Susan Cain asserts in *Quiet*, that while personality represents "the complex brew that emerges after cultural influence and personal experience are thrown in the midst ...[t]emperament refers to inborn, biologically based behavioral and emotional patterns" (Cain 101). I have seen my temperament, throughout the entirety of my life, as what Brian Little might call biogenic and resistant to change (Little). I would like for the field of composition to consider what these emotional patterns, these resistant forces, mean for highly-sensitive students and teachers, and I assert that we should include temperament and personality when we talk about issues of identity in a composition field that strives for what I call social-classroom

justice.

Thus, what I hope to do is delve into elements of *being* that may have been bound up with expressivism pedagogy and, perhaps, lost or downplayed after the social turn. I do not wish to approach these elements as simple pedagogical choices but rather as ways that some people—namely introverts and HSPs—might best function in an academic setting. In doing so, I pose a series of questions: Are there elements of space and time, of what we privilege, that alienates or disadvantages introverts or the HSP? Do we risk losing caring, compassionate students, future professors, researchers and administrators if we do not find a way to value those who are introverted or highly sensitive, even in the midst of a more social composition? And in what ways do dominant definitions of *composition* and *rhetoric* keep us from talking about temperament when we talk about issues of identity, emotion, and affect?

In posing these questions, I originally titled this work “In Excess of Expressivism.” In considering that phrase, the word *excess* is not accidental or arbitrary, as I desire a dialogue on the things that *spill over* the boundaries that enclosed Donald Murray into expressivism, as happened when James Berlin drew lines through composition history, boxing in and out those who had been part of the field and who would (and would not) continue to be effective in the field (see James Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class”). By spilling over and hence queering the boundaries drawn around Murray, I hope to reveal the ways Murray’s work can help us account for and engage more effectively with introverted and highly sensitive people in our classrooms and our field.

In the introduction to a collection entitled *The Essential Don Murray*, Thomas Newkirk and Lisa Miller write:

In the late 1980s James Berlin put forward a taxonomy of composition rhetorics in which he claimed that each rhetoric has a tacit ideology ... Through a selective reading of Murray’s work, [Berlin] classified him as an Expressionist, with a focus on the inner reality of the writer, and a disregard for wider social realities. The intense individualism of expressionism, so the argument went, caused it to be politically ineffectual ... Murray found this criticism baffling, even incomprehensible ... Unfortunately Berlin provided a convenient shorthand for conceptualizing the field, and the term stuck. (x)

In this same passage, the editors write, “It is beyond the scope of this introduction to make a full response here, but we believe that a reading of Don’s work ... [demonstrates] the futility of such pigeonholing” (Newkirk & Miller x). While I agree with the sentiments shared by Newkirk and Miller, it is not my intent to rehash these debates, either. I would simply suggest that those who earnestly wish to consider Donald Murray in totality should consider all his work, all his articles, the full scope of the life he lived (from paratrooper to journalist to composition writer/teacher to mentor to memoirist). It is difficult to believe that it is a benefit to the field that such broad contributions should be narrowed and reduced to become footnotes in a bygone era.

It’s just the same with James Berlin. I find myself indebted to the work he did to expedite my gaining knowledge of the composition field. I wonder how many graduate students benefit yearly from his detailed history. It is the case, however, in summarizing our field, that more than *years* were summarized and condensed; human life, energy, intellectual and emotional capital were also summarized and condensed, and many nuances and rich details were lost.

Expressionistic Rhetoric

“Expressionistic rhetoric ... has always openly admitted its ideological predilections, opposing itself in no uncertain terms to the scientism of current-traditional rhetoric ... This rhetoric is, however, open to appropriation by the very forces it opposes in contradiction to its best intentions” (Berlin 478).

“Murray is even more explicit ... : ‘the writer is on a search for himself. If he finds himself he will find an audience, because all of us have the same common core. And when he digs deeply into himself, he will find others who will read with a shock of recognition what he has written’”
(Berlin 486).

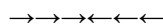


Figure 1. Berlin’s critique of Expressivism and Murray.

Social-Epistemic Rhetoric

“Social-epistemic rhetoric is an alternative that is self-consciously aware of its ideological stand, making the very question of ideology the center of classroom activities, and in so doing providing itself a defense against preemption

and a strategy for self-criticism and self-correction. **This third rhetoric is the one I am forwarding here**, and it provides the ground of my critique of its alternatives ... ” (Berlin 478).

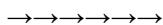


Figure 2. Berlin's forwarding of Social-Epistemic Rhetoric.

In [Figure 1](#) (James Berlin's critique of Expressivism and Murray), one can see how James Berlin, with the use of a few lines from Donald Murray, defined and reduced him into a box based in time, terminology, and ideology. In looking at [Figure 2](#) (James Berlin's forwarding of social-epistemic rhetoric), one can see where I am claiming the greater harm comes. Expressivism is not the final group categorized by Berlin. In fact, Berlin makes clear his goals when he says he is trying to “forward” social-epistemic rhetoric (478). Berlin's word choice—that he is “forwarding” social-epistemic rhetoric—is interesting, as it indicates moving time, ideology, and scholarship along, and thus, away from all that is defined as past, as *other*, by Berlin.

Thus, to box one in is also to box one out, and to be boxed out of progress is to be eliminated from usefulness. It is no wonder that before he passed away, Donald Murray complained that his work was considered “dated, yesterday's news, old fashioned” and even “quaint” (Stewart 45). These words illustrate the negative impact on a person who finds himself on the wrong side of how we tell time. Murray considers himself *dated*, *yesterday's* news. And herein lies the problem with defining any teacher, scholar, and human by a single ideology or pedagogy. Our field will always be moving from idea-to-idea, practice-to-practice, will always be making yesterdays out of today's, but we only invalidate the usefulness of our teachers and scholars when we summarize them, capture them, define them, and enclose them into modes of singularity, particularly ones they themselves do not accept or own.

Queering Time and Space: How I Met Murray

Here is what is most ironic for me—I first read Donald Murray in 2013, in a Teaching Composition course as a graduate student, and, like many students, I did not yet know the debate between expressivism and social-epistemic rhetoric. In other words, I had not fully been immersed into the chrononormativity (Freeman) that trapped Donald Murray somewhere between the 1960s and the 1980s.

In a combination of not knowing this and encountering the power of Murray's written word, I read Murray as if he were next to me, and I felt no distance between Murray and me, in either time or terminology. In fact, in the same semester that I first read Murray, I was slowly giving way to a social-epistemic ideology that told me my private voice might not simply be mine but more likely might be the product of familial, social, and cultural influences. I remember once, at a get together after a graduate reading, debating a classmate about expressivism and social-epistemic rhetoric, demanding that I had a private voice and that my writing was *mine* and mine *alone* and that it had no social or political complications. I recall, even then, knowing my vehement response had little to do with whether or not my voice was a compilation of the familial, societal, and cultural voices that shaped and defined me. It was rather a fear that the only place I had *ever* been comfortable, that had been my defense against social overwhelms, my private place, was now being taken from me. Yet, I knew just as well that I believed in some combination of what Berlin wrote of social-epistemic rhetoric and what Wayne Booth wrote about in *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*. There is always, around us, the forcefulness of ideology, the making of new knowledge and power. I recognize this play for power even if I'm not attracted to it, but I find that it is tempered well with what Booth calls listening-rhetoric (LR) and how “pushed to its fullest possibilities, opponents in any controversy listen to each other not only to persuade better but also to find the common ground behind the conflict” (Booth 10). When Berlin's social-epistemic rhetoric was touched by Booth's LR, I saw the undeniable potential of a knowledge-making in motion between people coming from different backgrounds and stances.

Thus it became a problematic reality for me, one that the composition field didn't seem to allot for, that I embraced social-epistemic rhetoric as empowering, as able to remake identity, but I also found that elements of my temperament, which had been with me since I could remember, were present whether or not I embraced or neglected different pedagogies and intellectual stances.

When I first made the switch from studying creative writing, which I did almost exclusively from undergrad through my first semester of Master's work, to rhetoric and composition, I found myself having to go into classrooms and do presentations, peer review, and answer questions from classes of twenty-five students. It is probably not an exaggeration that, in the first few weeks of doing this, I was the worst consultant in my cohort class. I wanted to know, before I entered a classroom, every word I would say, every word that would be said to me, every question a student might have, and any follow up that might ensue. Playing my introvert card, I demanded to be able to see these things in my mind, to process them, before I entered into a real time that I was trying to make pre-recorded. A

single line from Donald Murray's "Teaching Writing in an Age of Dissent," however, would revolutionize my one-to-twenty-five classroom experience. Donald Murray declared that "We must *glory* in contradiction and confusion" (118). *Glory* in contradiction and confusion. *Glory in* contradiction and confusion. *Glory in contradiction* and *confusion*. No matter how I said it, which words I emphasized, it sounded like something I'd never heard before. Being raised in fundamentalist religion, being taught in a very authoritarian manner, having made three visits to counselors over the years, one telling me about introversion, one about highly-sensitive people, and one about social-anxiety disorder, having been preached to that God is not the author of confusion, I knew a lot of things that could be done with contradiction and confusion: it could be run from, could be ignored, could be a source of anxiety that isolates a person from society, but *to glory in contradiction and confusion?*

And, yet.

I made a vow that, for three weeks, I would do just that: glory in contradiction and confusion. I made up my mind that I would not pre-plan for the unknown. I would go into classes, not afraid to *not* have the answer, not afraid to laugh at myself, not afraid to say "I don't know? What do you think?" After all, it had been social-epistemic rhetoric, this idea that truth and knowledge making were in motion between people coming from different places, that led me to want to teach. To be so afraid of the social, of chaos, of confusion was to rob a class of its agency and to prevent the messy conversations that lead to knowledge gains. Thus, both a combination of social-epistemic rhetoric *and* the words of Donald Murray had empowered me in the remaking of my teaching identity.

As I read more of Murray, I knew enough to know that one of his prominent offerings to the field of composition was his writing on the one-on-one conference between student and professor. Luckily for me, and mostly because of my experiences as an introvert, I didn't find myself, when reading Murray's writings on the one-on-one conference, focusing on the elements that those who talked about Murray seemed to focus on.

In most retrospectives on Murray, whether written or in conversation, he seems to be remembered for the most obvious of things—the sheer volume of conferences he conducted. By his estimates, Donald Murray averaged "seventy-five student conferences a week, thirty weeks a year" ("The Listening Eye" 149). In total, Murray surmised that he must have "held far more than 30,000 writing conferences" in his teaching career ("The Listening Eye" 149). The second focus concerning Murray, especially as the expressivist movement gave way to the social turn, was how isolating and self-focused the work of Murray was, as if he didn't prioritize anything beyond the personal Self. This can be seen in articles from James Berlin's "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class" to Thomas J. Stewart's "Aloneness and the Complicated Selves of Donald Murray," which seems sympathetic to Murray but attempts to use a social-construct lens to explain why Murray's abusive childhood may be the reason for the aloneness in his writing life. Having come into composition studies in a post-expressivist era, I didn't have to think much about the second of these focuses, as most people in composition studies today readily recognize the social and political influences in all that we do. When it came to the first focus, however, it was not the volume of Murray's conferences that caught my attention but rather Murray's affective response to those conferences. For instance, instead of focusing on the 30,000 conferences, I focused on how Murray writes that even after all those conferences, he was "still fascinated by this strange, exposed kind of teaching, one on one" ("The Listening Eye" 149). That language—the intimate, exposed nature of one-to-one teaching—first pointed me to personality and temperament. In the same article, Murray writes of doing one-on-one conferences from the dark of morning to the dark of night and that he is "tired, but ... a good tired" ("The Listening Eye" 148). Now, considering the magnitude and volume of these conferences, the word *tired* is a mild one. I know many professors who care deeply about students but who function best, energy-wise, in a one-to-many classroom climate. They would be far more than *tired* from endless days of one-to-one conferencing. It then became about how energy is lost and gained. Concerning that belief, Murray didn't leave me guessing, as he adds, "My students have generated energy as well as absorbed it" ("The Listening Eye" 148). In some of his plainest language on the affective, Murray writes, "One thing the responsive teacher, the teacher who listens to the student first then to the text, soon learns is that the affective usually controls the cognitive, and the affective responses have to be dealt with first ... Writers' feelings control the environment in which the mind functions. Unless the teacher knows this environment, the teaching will be off target" ("Teaching the Other Self" 93). This language, these experiences, the exposed, the one-on-one, the losing and regaining of energy, the sensitivity to the affective, models the experiences of a highly-sensitive person, especially the highly-sensitive introvert, who is best in small settings, and who gains energy by one-to-one exchanges. In this way, we see Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes' "queerness that exceeds boundaries" (432), as it's about more than pedagogical choices but ways of *being*, about more than *number* of conferences but about *reasons* for conferencing. While it may have seemed expedient in the 1980s for those who opposed what they viewed as expressivism to define Murray as an isolated expressivist and move away from him, it is easier, with time and distance, to see some of the excess that was left off, forgotten, and pushed away, as we moved away from Murray.

Perhaps, then, in absence of a current battle for ideological and pedagogical supremacy in our classrooms, we can

take a step back and re-humanize Murray the person, the teacher, the scholar. We can consider that Murray's practices, while not mandatory or even beneficial for many, may, in many ways, demonstrate what an introvert or highly-sensitive body looks like and performs like in the academy, the pace at which we move, and the spaces in which we best function.

Temperament and Social-Classroom Justice in Composition

So why care so much that we have a conversation about temperament and personality? Why the desire to say that, along with social constructivism, there may be what Susan Cain calls a “temperamental footprint” from childhood to adulthood that never disappears? (Cain 117) Why try to do work on behalf of Donald Murray when he didn't even defend himself? For these answers, one might want to invest time in reading about the realities for introverts and highly-sensitive people. Books like Susan Cain's *Quiet*, while coming to us in the form of popular reading, do well to highlight the history in the United States of what she calls an extrovert ideal, including remarks from the social and psychological professionals of the 1920s that shyness “could lead to dire outcomes ... from alcoholism to suicide” (27) and a declaration from 1940s Harvard provost Paul Buck that the university should reject the “‘sensitive, neurotic’ type and the ‘intellectually over-stimulated’ in favor of boys of the ‘healthy extrovert kind’” (28). If these comments are thought repugnant but outside the realm of composition, one should read Helen Rand's 1934 article “Extrovert English,” which was published in *The English Journal*. This essay is steeped in audacity, such as an assumption that extroversion is the norm and introversion is an unfortunate inversion. Concerning this, Rand writes: “Introvert characteristics do not normally develop, *if my observations are right*, until the Sophomore year in college” (Rand 23, emphasis mine). In this essay, Rand uses *extroverted children* as an interchangeable term for *normal children* (Rand 25), and posits that introverts do not seem to exist in high school or their freshman year of college, but come to be introverted in that Sophomore year when students turn self-centered and “read and write informal, personal, intimate essays” (Rand 23). In contrast to these selfish Sophomores, “Freshmen [stretch] their minds beyond themselves” (Rand 23). Thus introverts, along with their intimate, personal ways of working, are to be discouraged in favor of the exploratory, activity-driven ways of the extrovert. Much could be said about Rand's tone and her open disdain for introverts (“There is more hope for that Freshman, and the race if we have more like him, than for any introvert Sophomore”), but it is most important to reflect on the theory that stems from Rand's prejudiced views (23). For Rand, being extroverted is the normal way of the world, and to avoid “introvert wanderings” (Rand 24) it should be the goal of the professor to keep students “self-unconscious” (Rand 25). Thus, what we get in these pages is a pre-politically correct, possibly extreme version of what we privilege in composition classrooms even today. Rand promotes group activities and believes assignments should focus on the world beyond the self, as “[too] much looking in keeps us from looking out” (Rand 25). It is interesting to note, for someone so keen to look beyond the self, that Rand's contempt for introverts, leading to her wish to abolish personal writing and thought, is based on her own *personal* preferences, namely “[her] observations” and how “Analyzing our sensations does not seem to [her] to be a wholesome or even necessary occupation for any of us” (Rand 23-24). Therefore, while we won't find language this overt in most composition circles today, many times the attitudes and methods we privilege demonstrate a binary of social/personal that values the work we deem objective against the work that we think subjective. It is Rand, in the forceful language of 1932, that makes clear that the objective, activity-driven classroom is meant to benefit the extrovert, while devaluing the personal and experiential is meant to rid the world, for as long as she can, of would-be introvert people. Perhaps, with this lens, we can ask ourselves if our work and allowances have benefitted one group or way of working over another.

Directly or indirectly, I contend that Rand's opinions won the day. These ideas we've privileged, in what remains visible and invisible, are demonstrated even in the work of some of our most conscientious composition scholars today. Patricia Bizzell, in “Composition Studies Saves the World,” which is a passionate and reasoned response to Stanley Fish's *Save the World on Your Own Time*, includes a list of students that socially-minded composition professors fight for in an attempt at bettering the world: those who have suffered from racism, sexism, and homophobia. This points composition in a positive direction concerning social justice, as, according to Bizzell, this focus was born out of an attempt to alleviate some of the “discomfort” (177) these students faced beyond what more privileged students experienced. Meanwhile those who face discomforts from being introverts or highly-sensitive personalities in a culture with an extrovert ideal and a composition world with a social focus get no mention from Bizzell. Yet, when it comes time to defend her way of teaching with a social-justice platform, Bizzell *then* turns to personality—her own—writing: “I believe that when my students encounter me as a writing teacher, they encounter all of me, my entire personality, informed by all my religious, political, moral, and social commitments” (83). It is insightful as to where we are as a field that we understand, as teachers and professionals, that we cannot and will not separate our professional lives from our personalities and identities, but there is silence when it comes to those who are introverted, highly-sensitive—students, faculty, researchers who might better thrive if the composition field recognized their identities and valued the work they do based out of quiet and sensitive temperaments. Introverted work might lean towards the personal, the experiential, and an interpersonal connection that we haven't valued or

fully understood in many decades now. It might be work that starts inward and works its way out.

For those who would like to know more about the secondary side of the social/personal binary, Susan Cain brings the work of Dr. Jerome Kagan and Dr. Carl Schwartz to the public. In 1989, Kagan “gathered five hundred four-month-old infants in his Laboratory for Child Development at Harvard, predicting they’d be able to tell, on the strength of a forty-five minute evaluation, which babies were more likely to turn into introverts and extroverts” (99). The infants, subjected to noises, voices, balloons popping, and the scent of alcohol on cotton swabs, reacted in varying ways. “In a startlingly counterintuitive hypotheses,” writes Cain, “Kagan predicted that it was the infants in the high-reactive group—the lusty arm-pumpers—who were most likely to grow into quiet teenagers” (100). The prediction, which proved true in many cases, was based on “heart rates, blood pressures, finger temperature, and other properties of the nervous system,” which were chosen by Kagan because they “are believed to be controlled by a potent organ inside the brain called the amygdala ... [or] the ‘emotional brain’” (101). Kagan had predicted the “lusty arm-pumpers” would be the quiet teenagers, not because they were reacting positively to the noises and stimuli, but because they were *overreacting* to it, *overstimulated* by it. Dr. Carl Schwartz, a mentee of Dr. Jerome Kagan, against the advice of his mentor, picked up where Kagan left off. Schwartz used fMRI scanners to record images of the brain as strange and unfamiliar images flashed at the person whose head is in the scanner (101). As it turned out, the same children Kagan studied, the ones whose “eyes dilated more wildly when they were solving problems, [whose] vocal cords became more tense while uttering words, [whose] heart rate patterns were unique ... [had experiences in their amygdala’s] ... more sensitive to the pictures of unfamiliar faces” (117). This research reflects years of study that suggests, unlike Rand’s claim that introverts and highly-sensitive people simply *come to be* in sophomore year of college or social constructivists tendencies to downplay the biological, that introverts and highly-sensitive people are experiencing the world with brains that more deeply and rapidly record what is going on around them and their very nervous systems are receiving the world at a different pace and with different gravity than those often thought more normative. It is a combination of this physiological reaction to the world, combined with the cultural ideal of extroversion, that leads Dr. Elaine Aron to write in *The Highly Sensitive Person* that “HSPs are prone to low self-esteem because they are not their culture’s ideal” (147). It is, in the academy, an unfortunate irony that the quietest among us have been given little voice and the most sensitive placed in socially-driven environments that no doubt trigger these sensitive reactions. It is also unfortunate that when considering the value of narrative inquiry, of qualitative work, of personal essays and life writing—that the reasons these structures may be identified with introverts and highly-sensitive people is because people whose sense organs and brain are more deeply and rapidly experiencing the world might have more to say based out of those rich, experiential methods and modes. If we are fighting for social justice, according to Patricia Bizzell, we are doing so, in part, to alleviate discomfort; how then can we *not* re-approach the issue of temperament and personality and the work structures we value when we face it from a more informed standpoint?

Because of a combination of the extrovert ideal and the need for HSPs to protect their energy, I’m not surprised that Donald Murray never responded publically to James Berlin’s critique. In an interview that I conducted with Thomas Newkirk in the spring of 2015, I asked Newkirk about Murray’s personal response to the critique. Newkirk answered, “Murray, you know, he didn’t know what to make of somebody who claims his method is apolitical, and here he is, he won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing ... It made no sense to him at all. He didn’t want to enter into it” (Newkirk). I followed up with a question about how Peter Elbow, who was also highlighted in Berlin’s critique, reacted differently than Murray. Newkirk responded:

Elbow continued to write in the field and Murray basically stopped publishing things, like in *College English* or CCCs. . . . Elbow continued to make a case for the kind of pedagogy he believed in. Murray, I think, opted out of the field of Composition ‘cause he thought, if this is the way it’s going to go and you’re going to have this kind of argument, I don’t want to be part of it. (Newkirk)

There are many ways to read Murray’s lack of response, and I’ve heard some of them before, such as an unwillingness to adapt. Also, what of an idea that if it’s worth doing, it’s worth fighting for? Brian Little, introvert and researcher formerly at Harvard, when writing of the personal projects we choose, warns that “[c]ultural, economic, and political climates can both prescribe and proscribe the kinds of personal projects we pursue” (Little). So what should be made of Murray’s lack of defense or his lack of resolve to remain in composition? Did he simply not care? Was it the case of an isolated person becoming more isolated? I would like to argue, just a bit, against this hyper-masculinized need to argue, object, and spend one’s life competing. There is something to be mentioned about a Donald Murray who escaped into his imagination to avoid conflict at home as a child, and a Donald Murray that left the composition field he had well served to avoid a contentious ideological battle. Again I offer Murray’s highly-sensitive affect. Again I read Murray’s experiences—one-to-one conferences, sitting with students, empowering their voices—as more than pedagogical choices. I believe they reflect a certain way of *being* in the academy. They reflect, at least in part, the kind of intimate spaces that allowed Murray the opportunity to see both himself and his students thrive. Newkirk’s words are interesting to me: “Murray didn’t want to enter into [this kind of debate] and he didn’t want

to be part of [this kind of argument]" (Newkirk). Those who are most sensitive, as has been highlighted by Kagan's study, have to be most careful where and how they spend their energy. Brian Little writes that "human flourishing is contingent upon the sustainable pursuit of core projects" (Little). I would suggest Murray, who had sustained himself in a sensitive, personal, affective style of composition, saw that space eroding, and it would have been more emotional energy than it was worth to try to fight battles that baffled him and might have, ironically, further isolated the so-called isolated writer. If Murray had simply disappeared altogether after composition's social turn, it might have demonstrated the lack of value in his work, but Murray continued teaching, published weekly for *The Boston Globe*, and wrote (intimate, personal) memoirs. In other words, he orientated himself to spaces outside composition possibly because composition no longer seemed a place where he might thrive.

Orientation

It has always been easier for me to fight battles for others than for myself. I will defend Murray when I might not defend myself, and I will do work (and find energy) for my students that I cannot or will not find for myself. It is why, at this point, I am willing to embody and share some of my personal experiences as an introvert and HSP, in hopes that it creates a space and dialogue in composition for others who are also introverted and highly sensitive.

In the introduction to her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed asks "What difference does it make 'what' we are orientated toward?" (1). When I think of what bodies turn to and from, it both saddens and frustrates me that the only times I learned who I consider myself to be—an introvert with a highly-sensitive temperament—was in turning my body away from the intellectual aspects of the academy. I can remember, for instance, exactly how I heard about and was diagnosed as highly sensitive. I was a junior undergraduate doing National Student Exchange in Knoxville, Tennessee and was suffering socially and emotionally from being in a place where I knew nobody. It got to the point that, to try to meet new people or to be in classes where I was socially overwhelmed, my body would shake even if I knew in my mind that none of it should be a big deal. Thus my mind would feel fine but not my body and, in thinking of my body not being okay, my mind would join my body in chaos. To go to a counselor was a major decision, as I hadn't in the twenty-eight years I had been living. But also, physically, it was a big deal. Since the counselor's office was on an outside street, I literally had to turn and move away from the heart of campus, away from English and its building, to find a place to talk about temperament. Similarly, it has been in bookstores—fittingly, I guess, in self-help sections—where I had to learn and gain knowledge on who I am and how I best function. What is it about how we view the intellectual that has forced me to counselors and bookstores to learn about how I ought to be? Again I ask: what in the broad and excessive definitions of *composition* and *rhetoric* keeps us from talking about personality and temperament alongside other issues of identity?

In addition, on what we orientate to and from, I offer a dramatic illustration on the cost of not being able to orientate ourselves in the places we find ourselves. At an academic conference in the fall of 2014, a keynote speaker asked me about my research. When I told him what I was doing, about Murray, about trying to reframe the conversation to temperament and personality and not expressivism, he told me I was focusing on the wrong things and that, if I were more well read, I might have better ideas. By the time I traveled home from that conference, I felt so disillusioned, so disoriented from the academy and my studies, that I wondered what I was doing in graduate school. That night I went to campus to print the readings I had missed while away at that conference. As I moved away from campus, preparing to cross the street to reach my car, I found myself wondering if I had wasted a year in composition studies, if I had been fooled and there was still no place for a temperament and identity like mine. Just before I crossed the street, I received a text from a friend who made a joke concerning herself and *silly introvert problems*. In that moment, thinking of how my research had been dismissed and how, what had been a year of research for me might better belong as banter in a text message to most, I crossed the street, my back to the academy, so far lost in my disorientation that I did not wait for the light and, running full speed, was hit by a car coming at 35 mph. The impact threw me up onto the hood, breaking the windshield of the car with my body, and spilling me into the street, into oncoming traffic.

The last text message I sent, maybe a minute before my accident, in response to the *silly introvert problems* text, was to say that hers was a *timely text message*. I didn't explain to her that, by timely, I meant that she had helped solidify that what I mistook as an academic endeavor was really no more than text-message banter, and that I felt I had made a mistake thinking I was fit for composition studies or that there was a place for this discourse in the academy.

Timely.

Thus we return to this issue of time.

Who controls it? Who decides time and space and what is allowed and when? Who decides when people or when an

academic field moves forward, what it leaves behind, and what it permits in its present? Donald Murray once wrote that “The reader moves forward according to an emotional or intellectual chronology or both. We are all Storytellers” (“Notes on Narrative Time” 198). It is my assertion that some of us, introverts and highly-sensitive people included, might tell both an emotional and an intellectual story. We might move at a slower pace than some. Our hidden rhythm might pause for times to process, and we might find our strength, our great gains, our best work with students and colleagues in the give-and-take of the intimate one-to-one exchange.

In the book *Mindgym*, Sebastian Bailey and Octavious Black write of a term called “entrainment,” a “feeling you get when you’re in flow or when you feel a very strong sense of connection” (153). It is what happens when “my movements match your movements, my rhythm is in harmony with yours, we laugh at the same volume, we use similar words, and we even make hand gestures at the same time” (153). I don’t believe people can come into these moments of entrainment with others if the ideology in which we work forces us to always move faster or slower than is natural for us or to work at paces or in environments that do not complement our best energy.

So how is it that Donald Murray touched hundreds of lives in conferences, was beloved by colleagues, and taken up by some future professionals while, at the same time, so defined that in his own lifetime he believed his work had been passed by? I believe it is, in part, because of the ideological nature of pedagogical battles. Those who got to choose the new normative left Murray and his teaching styles outside it. Suddenly elements that might be the reflection of an introvert or highly-sensitive person in the academy were considered to be the isolation of a person who could not grasp the social as part of the private and individual. But Murray’s work is not just intellectual for me. It’s not just about learning, it’s about *being*. It’s about how some of us function, how we orientate ourselves, and the spaces we fill in an academic setting.

In the end, then, the very thing that attracted me to composition studies is the thing that sustains me: social-classroom justice, connecting in the most human of ways, using the gifts, the life experiences, our perceived strengths and weaknesses to build a big-tent composition community where we can all have voice and agency. Through this field, through the voices of writers like bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Susan Naomi Bernstein, through the example of Donald Murray, I continually come closer to finding my hidden rhythm. I ... slow ... down, or-speed-up, accordingly; I explore texts, pedagogies, and experiences in the classroom and outside of it, and slowly I find a me that can move with time in a way that brings about healthy work and hopefully, in a way that Murray has done for me, will help students find their own hidden rhythms, to find their way on the page, in new media, as bodies in the classrooms, and, ultimately, ideally, as humans moving at the individual pace and with the power that each of us should be dignified to have.

Conclusion

When I sit down from my presentation, the professor opens the floor for questions or comments. A fellow student comments, saying I should not have paced while presenting, as it was distracting. She says I should not have held the paper I read from in my hands, either, because— she doesn’t know if I was nervous—but I was shaking and that, too, was distracting.

I spent a full year reading about Donald Murray before I ever saw him. In the fall of 2014, a member of my cohort found a video online—an interview with Donald Murray at age eighty, two years before he passed away. Murray was asked to read from his work and did, but had to allow the interviewer, Rebecca Rule, to finish the reading because his hands shook so badly he could not finish. His shaking was age, not nerves, but when asked about changes due to age, he replied with an answer that is more social concern than age related: “It’s like the business of the shaking hand. [With age], you’re not worried about making a mistake or feeling, being foolish” (NH Outlook).

In the first year I read Murray, I never read any direct writing from him on personality and temperament, but in the one interview I saw he brings up the introvert/extrovert dynamic saying,

When I retired from [the University of New Hampshire], I used to go up to Young’s or the Bagelry or something and get coffee ... and I stopped, and I immediately found how important it was. And there have been some studies ... that creative people tend to be at the extreme of the tests of introvert and extrovert. And I remember the teachers being confused by that testing and me because they didn’t know which one they were dealing with. And I think that I need to go out and see people and be part of that community and I need to work alone. (NH Outlook)

I can imagine the varying responses to the comments by Murray. There is a touch in what he says of the romanticized writer—the creative as extreme, but there is also the mention of personality, and the typical ambiguity of Donald Murray, this time concerning which personality type he might be. But as I listened, the two things that

registered to me are that personality and temperament were relevant enough to come up in the one-and-only conversation I've seen Murray in and that, when we listen with an ear for temperament, it matters little if Murray identifies as introvert or extrovert, but that he perceived himself, through the "creative," at the *extreme*.

This is why I write this article; these are the people for whom I write it. Those at the extremes of temperament, which, to me, is another social margin. I write about Murray, through Murray, in hopes that this generation can have it better than Murray's.

In this same interview, Donald Murray, speaking of his wife Minnie Mae, who had passed away prior, says, "I think at the age of sixty-five Minnie Mae said I began to accept myself" (NH Outlook). And this is what we must push against. We should not be eighty-years-old before we are okay with our hands shaking in public, nor should we be sixty-five before we accept ourselves. There have been many positive strides in the composition field in the last twenty-plus years. Composition, rhetoric and social-epistemic rhetoric are concerned with the making and remaking of self, of society, of social-classroom justice in the academy, and social justice beyond it. It is time we consider those among us who may be at the margins of personality and temperament. It is time we become mindful of introverted and highly-sensitive teachers and students. It is time we write them into the conversation, even if our hands are shaking as we do.

Notes

1. This article deals with time and space, both of which I needed in order to develop and forward these ideas on highly-sensitive temperament. Thank you to Erin Frost, who allowed me to begin this article in her class. Thank you to Tracy Morse, who allowed me to continue this work in my final semester of my M.A. experience. Thank you to Thomas Newkirk, who took the time to talk to someone he didn't know about the life and work of Donald Murray. Also, a thank you to the editors of *Composition Forum*, who not only permitted space, but who helped me see the vast places where we have started talking about affect and emotion in composition studies. Here's hoping for a greater understanding that, for many, this is a consequential issue of identity. ([Return to text.](#))

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