

Composition Forum 41, Spring 2019

## Composing a Career, from Expressivism to Essayism: A Conversation with Bruce Ballenger



Michael Michaud

**Abstract:** In this interview Dr. Bruce Ballenger and I discuss his career, his many textbooks on writing, his recent collaboration on an extensive study of the revision processes of advanced writers, and the challenges of balancing a career with a foot in multiple academic fields (i.e. composition and rhetoric and creative writing). Dr. Ballenger retired from teaching at Boise State University in the spring of 2018.

**Michael Michaud:** As I was rereading your work this summer, I was reminded of the fact that I first met you on the page almost twenty years ago when I was working as an adjunct instructor, teaching Freshman English at the University of New Hampshire. I adopted and taught with *The Curious Researcher* (3rd edition, I think) and really learned so much about writing, research, teaching, and about the kind of teacher I wanted to be from that book.

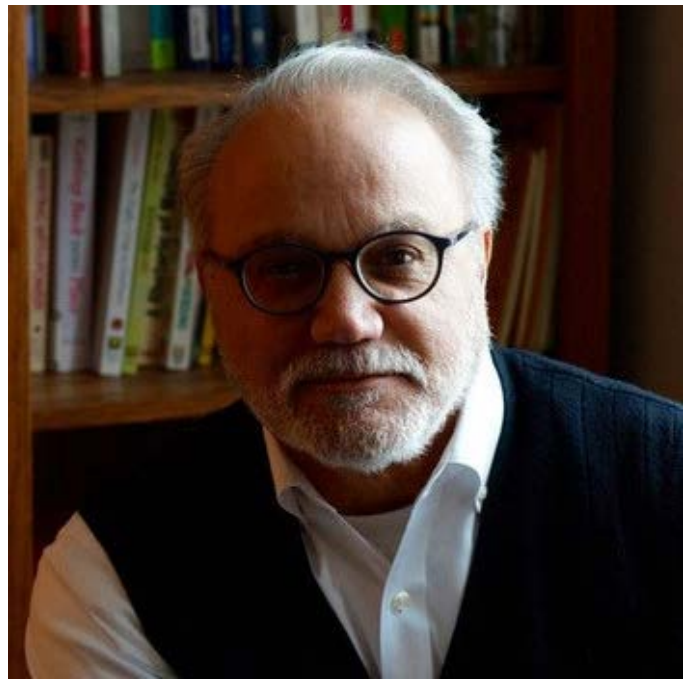
A bit of sleuthing has revealed that *The Curious Researcher* is now in its 9th edition! Further, *The Curious Writer* is in its 5th edition and *The Curious Reader* (2nd ed), written with Michelle Payne, is still in print and available on Amazon. Clearly, you've devoted a considerable amount of creative energy to the writing of textbooks. The Curious series is a significant element of your legacy in the field of composition and rhetoric.

I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about the work of textbook writing--how you got into it and why, why you have continued this kind of work, and what you have found interesting, engaging, satisfying, or worthwhile about writing textbooks and why.

**Bruce Ballenger:** I never intended to center so much of my scholarly and writerly energy on textbooks. The *Curious* series began very modestly. When I was teaching at UNH back in the late-eighties and early-nineties, I was increasingly frustrated with the research assignment in the first-year writing course. Back then, under Don Murray's influence, the class mostly emphasized the personal essay and when we shifted to the research assignment students struggled to apply what they learned from exploratory writing to a more formal academic paper.

Critics of personal writing would argue that this is entirely predictable. But I thought otherwise. Since academic inquiry is focused on discovery, like essay writing, I thought the two had a natural link. But I couldn't figure out how to teach that. *The Curious Researcher* was my attempt to figure that out. I think the best textbooks emerge to solve a pedagogical problem. My subsequent books tried to apply ideas about essaying and inquiry to the entire first-year curriculum.

To be honest, for many years I felt ambivalent about the books. I'm proud of their success, of course, and users have always been very kind. But despite the many persuasive arguments for the textbook as a significant form of scholarship in the field, I often felt like a second-rate scholar. I should be publishing more journal articles! Textbooks are enormously time-consuming,



and I found myself having to welcome back work on a new edition and at times these felt like visits from a friendly relative who insists on vacationing at your place every two years.

As a writer, this is an odd experience. When you keep returning to the same text again and again, familiarity can breed contempt, and so I've had to find ways to reimagine and extend the work. I also have an ethical obligation to make each new edition better than the last, to justify asking students to buy it. While this can be exhausting, each edition of a textbook has deepened my understanding of its pedagogy and forced me to constantly come to terms with an evolving field. For example, I have worked to integrate more on multimodal writing, genre theory, and transfer. When I'm unfamiliar with some significant new scholarship that's relevant to one of the books I have to be a quick study. I don't have time for a commanding understanding of a subject but I do need to know enough to write to students about it. This is both a scholarly and writerly challenge and over the years I've come to really appreciate the textbook work.

Years ago, Bob Connors wrote that historically, textbooks occupied a "unique place" in the field of composition because it was a relatively new discipline and scholarship was nascent. That's changed, obviously. So has the industry, which is struggling. But I do think that if a scholar wants to influence how writing is taught, writing a textbook may be the most powerful way to do so.

**Michaud:** Building off this last question, I'm struck by how much has changed in the field of composition and rhetoric since the first edition of *The Curious Researcher* was published in, I think, 1994. I'm wondering if you might talk a bit about how you've worked to try to evolve with the field (or not), about what interests or excites you about the field today, about the kinds of topics and questions you feel we should be talking more about, and about your changing role in the field over the course of your career. I know that's maybe too big of a question, but take it in whatever direction you like.

**Ballenger:** It feels presumptuous to offer any sweeping judgments about the evolution of the field. I'm at the exits and as I look over my shoulder what I see mostly is a discipline that is more diverse and inclusive, full of young scholars who are doing amazing work on topics like disability rhetoric, multimodality, second language issues, and genre theory. I'm not familiar with a lot of this work and some of it I don't completely understand, but there's a vibrancy that's very exciting.

What I do miss when I read our journals, however, is research on how writers write. This was a preoccupation of the field when I got started and a major scholarly interest of my mentors at New Hampshire, Don Murray and Tom Newkirk. Back then the writing process was a source of fascination and mystery, especially after scholars (including Don) quickly dispelled the notion that there was a writing process. How do writers solve problems? What choices do they make, and in what situations?

I'm not quite sure why, today, there seem to be fewer scholarly articles or essays on the writing process. I wonder if we have problematized the subject position of the writer so much, especially after the critiques of the cognitivists for ignoring social situation, that it is a risky move to draw conclusions about how writers compose without exhaustive qualifiers. A fair critique of Don Murray's work was his frequent reference to "the writer." What writer? Where? But I still find opening the window on the composing process, especially of students, to be the most fascinating work compositionists do.

I just finished a project with my colleague Kelly Myers that examines how advanced writers—upper-division English majors and graduate students—feel about revision, and one of the things that struck me when doing the literature review was how little scholars have published on revision, especially in the last few years. This is a writing behavior that we all emphasize in writing instruction, a threshold concept of the field, and yet it seems under-theorized and infrequently studied.

So to answer your question, I guess I'd like to see a revival of research interest in composing processes but obviously in ways that foreground rhetorical and social situations. Though talk-aloud protocols have methodological problems I still love the idea of "listening in" to student writers as they try to solve problems and reporting the patterns that emerge.

One other area I'd love to see as a focus of the field is creative nonfiction. I think we have a claim to make that we teach creative nonfiction differently than creative writers, an argument I make in an essay that I recently submitted for a new collection on creative nonfiction and pedagogy edited by Doug Hesse and Laura Julier. Nonfiction genres are inherently rhetorical—they do work in the world—and so I think they are also a fascinating focus for scholarship. I'd love to see more of it.

**Michaud:** You've mentioned Donald Murray several times--last year Eli Goldblatt published an essay in CCC called "Don't Call It Expressivism: Legacies of a 'Tacit Tradition'" in which he investigates the "unspoken legacy of expressivism" (439) in our field and questions the appropriateness of some recent innovations in composition pedagogy (i.e. writing about writing, teaching for transfer, threshold concepts, etc.) for certain contexts of writing instruction (i.e. FYC). As I prepared for our interview I found myself thinking about you and about Goldblatt and wondering if you might have any thoughts or observations about his essay?

**Ballenger:** I thought Eli's essay was a wonderful contribution to the scholarship that attempts to reclaim expressivism. Aside from my own historical connections to expressivism, I found Eli's gentle critique of first-year pedagogies like Writing About Writing personally relevant since the writing program I once directed at Boise State now embraces that approach. He writes that he fears that WAW "elevates the study of writing over the experience of writing," and suggests that "students need a reason to write that comes from more compelling sources" than academic contexts. I agree with that. I've always thought the field underappreciated the affective dimensions of writing, especially motivation, and so I was drawn to expressivist pedagogies because they shifted students' emotional relationship to language. When allowed to write in a personal voice while trying to make sense of their own experiences, students told me again and again how much the act of writing changed for them. They said they liked it better, but more importantly, students seemed to embrace the key thing I was trying to teach: that writing is a mode of learning and discovery.

Before I was an academic I worked with community organizers and one of the first things I learned was that my political ideologies about social justice and social change were largely irrelevant to the low-income and working class people we were working with. They couldn't care less about my ideology. Besides, who was I to come into their communities and tell them what they should think? What mattered to them was that we helped them make a concrete change in their lives and for many that meant something as simple as getting a stop sign so their kids were safe going to school. So we helped them organize to get that stop sign. As they began to feel empowered the community organization was ready to take on larger issues, like policing.

In many ways, expressivist pedagogy struck me as like organizing for a stop sign: you start where people are. You help writers feel a sense of authority and empower them to say what they think. And so the critique that expressivism promoted individualism and political naivete really struck me as off the mark.

But, of course, my thinking has evolved. Wendy Bishop, writing about pedagogical identities in the field, described Donald Murray as emblematic of a "writer-who-teaches" rather than a "teacher-who-writes." What this meant, I think, was that a primary source of pedagogical knowledge was the writer's own experiences with the process. I think this is very much reflected in a lot of Don's work. He often refers to "the writer" which was often a code for Don himself. I thoroughly embraced this, and in some ways still do.

It is impossible for writing teachers to ignore being informed by their own struggles as writers, and sharing these struggles is a powerful way to teach. But I remember a singular moment when things shifted. In Tom Newkirk's class (another important mentor for me), we read Lisa Delpit's "Silenced Dialogue," a 1988 piece about how writing process pedagogy complicates power and authority for African-American and poor students. This disrupted many of my assumptions about both the relevance of my writerly experience to students and my own limiting social and class blinders. This has had enormous implications for me as I have evolved as a writing teacher; one of them is the shift from "writer-who-teaches" to "teacher-who-writes." This was a fundamental identity shift, and among other things it

made me receptive to the social turn in the field. It was humbling, and necessary.

Where I still struggle is with the question of whether or not the first year writing class should be exclusively devoted to learning academic discourse, which is one outcome of the social turn. The tension over what the course should do—the so-called “service” obligation—has always been there and I have always thought that first year writing is one of the last places in the curriculum where writers might engage in *public* rather than specialized discourse. Kurt Spellmeyer used the metaphor of the medieval commons to describe such a space, one where writers might roam freely to explore what interests them, engaging in debate and discussion about the relevant issues of the day. It is a space where students can practice being rhetorical citizens. The move to fence off the commons by quickly funneling students into disciplinary writing undermines this.

I think my expressivist roots tell me to keep some of the commons unfenced. Let students write op-eds, personal essays, photographic essays, and reviews that explore topics that matter to them and that potentially have social significance.

**Michaud:** Speaking of expressivist roots, while reviewing your recent work I really enjoyed your essay “A Narrative Logic of the Personal Essay.” It’s an excellent dive into how the form works and what makes it unique. Coming out of the UNH tradition, like you, I think I took it as a given that a personal essay assignment should be a staple of FYC. I no longer do, but I would be lying if I didn’t say that I don’t sometimes miss teaching this form. On the flip side I still remember my frustration in teaching the personal essay to freshman--it just seemed like they were too far from the moves that needed to be made to write the genre well. And then sometimes students would ask me why they had to write the personal essay and what doing so had to do with the writing they were doing in their other courses. I didn’t always have a good answer, but I knew from my own experience that writing about personal experiences can be empowering and even life-changing. That was, at one time, good enough for me in terms of justifying the place of the personal essay in my curriculum.

You’ve obviously devoted a good deal of energy to thinking about the personal essay, its logic, it’s pedagogical possibilities. How has your thinking about teaching this form changed or evolved over the years, if it has changed or evolved at all?

**Ballenger:** I’m still a huge fan of the personal essay, especially in FYC. I actually think there are very good answers to why the genre deserves a place in the first-year curriculum. One of them, of course, you mention: students often treasure the chance to explore the meanings of their experiences and it can change the way they feel about writing. But that isn’t a sufficient reason to make room for the personal essay in a course that has to do so much.

My argument for the genre is two-fold. First, it introduces students to intellectual practices that are at the heart of academic inquiry. Second, it models narrative thinking. I’ll briefly talk about each.

As writers, students often enter FYC with little experience using questions—and discovery—as the driving force for their work. On the contrary, the pedagogy of thesis-driven writing (and worse, the five paragraph theme and its variants) encourages students to begin with conclusions not questions. This is antithetical to academic inquiry since question-asking and exploration are where it all begins. Discovery is at the heart of the academic enterprise and one of the conditions that makes discovery possible is withholding judgment—not rushing to quick or convenient conclusions.

The personal essay is a genre ideally suited to teaching these ways of thinking. Personal essays always begin with some kind of trouble: the writer can’t figure something out, or is surprised by her feelings, or has had an unsettling experience. From this trouble essayists flush from the underbrush interesting questions. In short, essaying asks writers to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty *over time* as they work towards understanding.

I recently wrote an essay on my habit of buying old manual typewriters. After buying my tenth machine off eBay I began to wonder why I was doing it, which soon became a question about what’s behind the impulse to collect things. I wasn’t interested in making an argument about this but in exploring the question, a process that not only took me back to my own experiences and observations but outward to research the psychology of collecting.

What I’ve just described is the process of academic inquiry. What’s so great about the personal essay is that it not only introduces students to this process, but personalizes it. They’re motivated, and they see themselves as active agents in making sense of things. These are the feelings we want them to have when they engage in any academic inquiry project.

I will concede that it isn’t easy to teach the personal essay. For one thing, students are unused to tolerating ambiguity. But what an important lesson to teach! The key, of course, is to explicitly draw out these intellectual



practices for students and to talk to them about how central they are to much of academic writing and research, though the subject might be less personal.

Critics of the personal essay in composition often offer a very reductive version of the genre, saying things like, “I’d rather not read more personal narratives about big games or dead grandmothers.” I’d argue that while the personal essay *can* be a personal narrative, I see it more as a vehicle for *narrative thinking*. Information for an essay may come exclusively from personal experience, though it doesn’t always. This is, in any event, beside the point. The power of the personal essay is the way it structures thought. It begins with a question and then stories towards an answer, looking at its subject in as many ways as possible. Unlike argumentative writing, essaying seeks not to subordinate ideas to a claim but to *coordinate* them—to look for unexpected connections between ideas. Because essayists delay closure—holding off drawing conclusions until the end—the drama of the personal essay is in the writers’ journey to understand something.

Ultimately, what I’m arguing is that the essay is a method of thinking that can be used to think about anything that causes trouble, not just personal experience, and that it’s a powerful alternative to argumentative discourse. My ideal composition course would teach both.

**Michaud:** I was really interested to read your forthcoming *College Composition and Communication* article “The Emotional Work of Revision.” The piece seems like a bit of a departure from your usual work in the sense that a) it’s more of a research report than an essay, and b) it’s a collaborative venture instead of a solo job. I’m wondering if you might share a bit about how this project came about, what it was like doing this kind of research and writing, what the collaborative process was like, and what surprised you in writing an article of this kind at this stage of your career.

**Ballenger:** This article is a departure for me in the ways that you mention. The collaboration with Kelly Myers came as a gift to me in my final years at Boise State. Kelly came to BSU from Stanford and we quickly realized that we had very similar scholarly interests, pedagogic identities, and ideologies about teaching. We became good friends, and discovered a mutual interest in revision theory.

Kelly has done extraordinary work on *metanoia*—the Greek figure that shadows *kairos* and represents the regret at missed opportunities—applying the concept to revision. (See “Metanoic Movement: The Transformative Power of Regret” in *College Composition and Communication* 67.3, 2016.) We got to talking about the revision struggles of our graduate students. Why did these relatively experienced writers recoil at the prospect of revising their work? From this, we determined to do a research project, interviewing advanced student writers about the emotional work of revision.

What surprised us about the research was not just the depth of negative feelings good writers associate with revision but how resilient they were. The writers we interviewed, especially the graduate students, often found a way to either use these negative feelings or step around them in order to get revision done. Cognitive dissonance theory helped to explain some of this. When we have strong personal commitments to believing something about ourselves then we are equally committed to preserving these identities and making necessary adjustments. Our graduate students really wanted to believe they were good writers and panicked when faced with evidence that they weren’t. Yet they had to do something about it. Despair was not an option. As writing teachers we all want our students to care about their writing, but we don’t often study what happens when they do.

Academic collaborations are complicated but I think the best ones begin quietly in conversation, when you suddenly realize that you not only have similar interests but discover that you often riff off each other, posing questions that drive you both into unexpected territory. It’s the intellectual equivalent of playing jazz. Kelly plays a mean sax, and made me a better musician. She reawakened my interest in doing a research project like this and coming at the end of my career it felt like a great gift.

**Michaud:** If you will, one more question about “The Emotional Work of Revision.” You write:

Though we were surprised by the intensity of the negative emotions students associated with revision, the more compelling discovery was in the way that some of the students actively—though often invisibly—revise and repurpose those negative emotions in order to move forward. More than learning to control or stifle the negative emotion, many advanced student writers find ways to rewrite the emotion as something that serves rather than threatens their writerly identities. (24)

As I read this passage, which I love and which makes a lot of sense to me, I found myself wondering how this all plays out in your own experience. One thing that makes research on writing unique, I think, is that we who conduct such research are not just researching something with which we have no experience. We are all writers so it’s

perhaps hard not to read one's research findings through one's own experience or—this is what I'm really trying to say—to think about one's own experience as a writer in light of or in relation to one's research findings. I'm just wondering how, if at all, your research in this article helped you to make sense of your own experiences as a writer (past? present?) who grapples with “The Emotional Work of Revision.”

**Ballenger:** It's so true that because we research a behavior—writing—that is also at the heart of our professional identities our own experiences are always tangled up with the thing we study. There's no keeping the kite out of that tree. So as I listened to students talk about their feelings towards revision for this study I certainly took measure of how their experience echoed (or did not echo) my own.

To begin with I found that the whole act of talking with students about how it *feels* to write deeply resonated with me. The narrative I tell myself about my experience with an episode of writing has much less to do with what new ideas emerged in the draft or even the problems I tried to solve that day. It's more a story about how it felt to write. For some reason, my immediate impulse is to emotionally brand the writing experience—today it felt good, bad, mixed, encouraging, discouraging, and so on. These are feelings that I carry with me until the next encounter with the work, and I'm always alert to changes in mood.

Sociologists originated the concept of emotional labor and studies on the emotional labor of particular job categories are now common. It seemed a no-brainer to apply the concept to writing, especially since both Kelly and I recognized our own complicated feelings about revision (which naturally surfaced in the writing of the article itself!).

One of the students in our study described revision as “scary” and “horrifying.” I don't think my feelings were ever that extreme, but the sometimes-long periods of staring off into space while I tried to figure out what to do to revise a draft often made me despair. What helped me feel better was recognizing how central invention is in the revision process. Whenever I get stuck, I turn to the manual typewriter and bang away, thinking about what I'm saying or what I might say in the draft. This is a few steps from freewriting in a notebook because it looks better than handwriting (though not much because I use the “X” key a lot) and it is slightly more composed (i.e. I think a bit more about what I'm going to say before I say it, but not much).

When this works, and it often does, I find it exhilarating. The key is to pay attention to how it feels. When I feel despair during revision, I know there's something I can do about it. I'm not powerless. I don't have to stay with that feeling unless I choose to. Anyone who has spent much time in therapy will recognize this principle.

Obviously, the other piece of this is to have process-strategies to choose from when these feelings arise, which is why teaching process is so important. I've devoted much time, especially with advanced students, to trying to flesh out a range of process-strategies—especially with revision—that they can turn to when bad feelings arise. Our work on this article reinforced the power the internal, often unstated emotional script holds on us as writers--but we can rewrite that script. It's in our power to do so and in some cases we must if we want to move forward.

**Michaud:** You are one of only a few scholars I know who has managed to straddle two fields simultaneously--composition and rhetoric and, for lack of a better term, creative writing. Was it always this way--keeping a foot in both fields? Why? What are the challenges? The rewards?

**Ballenger:** I've been thinking a lot about this lately, especially since I just completed a draft for the collection I mentioned earlier, focused on composition and creative nonfiction pedagogy. From the beginning I've felt that I straddled the disciplines of creative writing and composition studies. Though my doctorate is in rhetoric and composition one of my master's degrees is in creative nonfiction. I feel much more at home in composition studies—for what it's worth, I greatly prefer CCCC to the AWP convention.

I especially feel the tension between these disciplinary identities when I teach the graduate creative nonfiction workshop for our MFA, and at the heart of it is a conflict between pedagogic identities. The instructor's identity in the conventional workshop is “master craftsperson.” A preferred version of this is the “Famous Author” whose authority comes from his or her publishing success. In many ways, this is quite sensible. But it is at odds with the way I was trained in rhetoric and composition, where we try to create constructivist, student-centered classrooms. The Iowa workshop model doesn't lend itself to this comp/rhet kind of teaching and over the years I struggled to figure out how to resolve this conflict. On most days I couldn't resist adopting the role of master craftsman and in the first five minutes of workshop I heard myself taking over. Students expected this, and waited for it.

In the last couple of years, I began to question the orthodoxy of the creative writing workshop itself and its utter dominance as a pedagogy. I asked myself whether it needed to be so central to my teaching. I began to experiment with smaller, peer review workshops in which students shared “sketches” or experiments with material, some of which might be developed later in the course, to share in full-class workshops. I didn't participate in these, though I

gave extensive written feedback on sketches. As a compositionist, I was interested in the writing process, especially how writers generate and choose material, and added readings and discussion on invention. We read about how writers use notebooks, develop helpful writing habits, and do research. This kind of content is unusual in a workshop-centered class, especially at the graduate level. There simply isn't time for it and I think the assumption is that advanced creative writers have this figured out, or should.

Right before I retired I felt like I was finally finding ways to assert my pedagogic identity as a facilitative, student-centered teacher in my creative writing courses. It felt good. I should add, though, that it hasn't always been easy as a creative nonfiction writer working in the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Mostly, I've struggled to publish the kind of work in the field I prefer to write—more exploratory essays in the tradition of Peter Elbow, Sondra Perl, Wendy Bishop, and Donald Murray. As the discipline has matured there seems to be less room for that kind of writing. We now privilege the article instead of the essay. This is understandable to some extent as the field becomes more empirical and its research methods more refined, but I miss reading scholarly essays like that and I wish I had more chances to write them.

**Michaud:** Thank you so much for this conversation Bruce. It's been a pleasure speaking with you and I wish you the best in retirement.

**Ballenger:** Thank you for the opportunity to talk.

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