A Personal Writing Approach: Controversial Debates

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอข้อถกเถียงซึ่งนักวิชาการท่านสำคัญๆ ในวงการการศึกษาการเขียนอาทิ บาร์โทโลเมย์ [1] แพทตริเซีย [2] และนอบเบราช์ [3] ได้กล่าวไว้เกี่ยวกับมุมมองด้านลบของวิธีการการเขียนเชิงบุคคลหรือเชิงพรรณนา การเขียนดังกล่าวนี้ให้ความสำคัญกับการแสดงออกของความรู้สึกได้รับการขนานนามและวิพากษ์วิจารณ์ดังนี้คือ 1) ทำให้นักศึกษา “ไร้ประสิทธิภาพ” “ไร้พลัง” และ “มืดบอด” 2) ปิดโอกาสผู้ตลอดจนทำให้นักศึกษามีข้อจำกัดในการเขียนเชิงวิชาการ 3) มุ่งเน้นเฉพาะการการเติบโตของปัจเจกชนแต่กลับละเลยบริบททางสังคมของทักษะและองค์ความรู้ และ 4) นำไปสู่การสอนที่ผิดๆ ภายใต้กรอบวิธีวิทยาที่เกี่ยวข้อง บทความนี้เสนอว่าวิธีการการเขียนเชิงพรรณนาไม่ควรถูกมองว่าเป็นภัยคุกคามหรือปัญหาสำหรับนักศึกษา แต่ควรได้รับการพิจารณาเป็นหนึ่งในทางเลือกในวิชาการเขียน นั่นคือครูสามารถใช้ประโยชน์จากวิธีการการเขียนเชิงบุคคลเพราะวิธีการเขียนนี้ช่วยให้เรียนรู้ที่จะปรับใช้วาทกรรมที่พวกเขาคุ้นเคยเพื่อแสดงความคิดเห็นและนำเสนอสิ่งที่พวกเขาสนใจ ท้ายที่สุดบทความนี้เสนอว่าครูที่สอนวิชาการเขียนควรผสมผสานรูปแบบการเขียนเชิงบุคคลกับรูปแบบการเขียนวิชาการ

คำสำคัญ: การเขียนเชิงบุคคล การเขียนเชิงพรรณนา การศึกษาการเขียน

Abstract

This paper addresses the controversial debates raised by key scholars in composition studies namely Bartholomae [1], Bizzell [2] and Knoblauch [3] regarding negative aspects of personal writing or expressive writing approach. This writing pedagogy giving importance to emotional expression has been labeled and criticized that it 1) makes students “suckers,” “powerless,” and “blind,” 2) limits and disadvantages students academically; 3) focuses upon personal growth while ignoring the social settings of specified skills and bodies of knowledge; and 4) can lead to misguided teaching. Grounded in the relevant theoretical arguments, the paper asserts that the personal approach should not be regarded as a threat or a problem to students in the academic settings. In stead, it should be considered and employed as an alternative in composition courses. Simply put, teachers can benefit from expressive writing approach as it helps empower students to better adapt and use familiar discourse to voice their ideas and represent the interests of themselves. This paper finally suggests composition teachers harmonize personal discourse with academic discipline.

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1. Introduction

The issue of personal writing is still a hot one in composition studies. Personal writing has been stereotyped as non-academic and it has been debated as ultimately problematic [4], [5]. Some believe that personal writing is dangerous; some believe that personal writing has no place in academic writing [6]. Personal writing has been criticized for many reasons. In the past two decades, personal writing has been rejected as a pedagogical cornerstone in composition studies [7]. This paper argues that personal writing is a bridge for growth in academic writing. Personal writing should not be disregarded and treated as meaningless in composition classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to address the controversial debates raised by key scholars in composition studies namely [1] - [3] regarding negative aspects of personal writing or expressive writing approach.

In this paper, I will employ a theoretical framework in composition studies to support my argument of why personal discourse deserves to share its place in academic writing. Rather than harming and making students "suckers," "powerless," "blind," and "disadvantaged" in the academic settings, I argue that composition teachers should assign personal writing to help students learn to use discourse to voice their ideas and to represent themselves. To begin with, I provide a description of the problematic term—personal writing. Then, I have sought to examine the usefulness of personal writing to assert the notion that personal writing is indispensable and it is the key to growth in writing and learning. I also include in my supportive evidence the research and studies of the use of personal writing in ESL/EFL pedagogy.

2. A Problematic Term

The term personal writing or expressive writing is problematic [8] because it covers such a wide range of practice. Therefore, misunderstandings, misperceptions and misinterpretations about the terminology "personal writing" have distorted the practice of using personal experience in composition classrooms. Spigelman [9] makes his point about this problematic term of personal writing in saying that,

"The personal narrative is not problematic because of the limits of judgment to its validity claim; it is problematic because the uninterrogated and unevaluated personal narrative is seductive and, consequently, dangerous. and because of the use of the personal is within the domain of the rational, because narrative is indeed a way of thinking and a way of reasoning that has been in our human repertoire since earliest times, we should certainly be able to see that, although its form is not transparent, narratives too offers claims, reasons and evidence for serious analysis and critique."

Scholars provide different definitions of personal writing [6], [8], [10]-[14]. Personal writing is most often linked with proponents of the process movement of the 1960s and 70s such as Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, and Peter Elbow. In response to the "current traditional" model of teaching writing, dominant throughout much of the 20th century, the process movement, as a pedagogical practice, put the writer and his or her interests at the very center of writing.

As far as teaching is concerned, if we, as teachers and educators, reconsider the real meanings of personal writing from these scholars' definitions, we will see positive aspects of personal writing in academic settings. To a certain extent, we might recognize the essence in involving students with their personal experience in their papers. For example, Elbow [10] defines personal writing as the preference alternative, that is, writing directed to no real audience but for the sake of self. Bloom [6] argues that all writing is personal whether it sounds that way or not, if the writer has a stake in the work. It is difficult to separate the academic from the personal. Paley [14] sees that personal writing involves "the use of a narrational "I" that seems to be the actual voice of the person who writes." Based on Moffett [12] and Britton [13], personal writing is the informal writing that is closest to intimate speech; it expresses our ideas, feelings, and attitudes, sometimes for others but mostly just for ourselves.

3. Controversial Debates

In a debate with Elbow [15] regarding personal versus academic writing, Bartholomae [16] makes two remarkable claims against the use of personal writing in academic settings. First, he criticizes the limitation of personal writing and its potential for disempowering a student; he states, "It is wrong to teach late adolescents that writing is an expression of individual thoughts and feeling. It makes them suckers and, I think, powerless, at least to the degree that it makes them blind to tradition, power and authority as they are present in language and culture." Bartholomae thus considers the self-authorizing aspect of expressive writing as its major feature and its major shortcoming within the context of the work that writing does in a discipline and in the classroom defined and authorized by history and tradition.

Second, Bartholomae claims that "academic writing is the real work of the academy." He argues that if teachers' goal is to make students aware of the use of play in the production of knowledge, teachers need to highlight the classroom "as a substation—as a real space, not as an idealized utopian space." In a similar fashion, Faigley [17] and France [18] support Bartholomae's claim. Both reject the use of personal writing since they think personal writing does not do any "real" work in the academic community and does not engage in critical thinking.

Peter Elbow [15] argues in the response to Bartholomae that his role as a writer is someone who gets "deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing- figuring what I think and feel through putting down words." He contends that "life is long and college is short. Very few of our students will ever have to write academic discourse after college." In light of this, students should write about their life experiences in language that will last them a lifetime; "they should not be trained to ventriloquize language they don't understand and won't use" [15]. I believe that writing cannot be taught but teachers can show students how to integrate their authentic materials-experience to their work. We also cannot deny that writing takes time and to be good at writing cannot happen overnight. Students cannot produce "real work" by starting at academic writings since academic discourse alone does not allow for this emphasis on rendering experience because it is more about

abstracting experience [15]. In fact Elbow says, "the use of academic discourse often masks a lack of genuine understanding" of one's experience" [15], for in academic discourse the writer can often rely on other's renderings of the experience, that is, "on positions defines within the contested terms of the discipline."

Besides, if the goal of writing is helping students have authority and voice, I wonder if they have to write only through academic writing. According to Bartholomae [1], it seems that we have personal voice and academic voice and writing only in academic voice is acceptable. To have "real work" in the academic settings, it seems that we cannot count our feelings and emotions as ingredients of our work. In this respect, I would like to take a different position from that of Bartholomae when he states when students learn academic discourse they take on the role of an authority established in scholarship, analysis and research. In fact, this voice, most would say, is not the students' personal voice. Students must pretend, in other words, to know more than they do, to be part of a discourse community that they are not (yet) a part of. Should we cherish this kind of thought? To restate, if the goal of writing is for self-discovery and pleasure, as Murray [23] and Elbow [15] claim, I wonder how we can find our own voice and happiness if we have to borrow the voices of others. I cannot see the point why Batholomae accepts students' rhetorical authority in academic writing, but does not consider the rhetorical authority in students' personal writing. Neither am I convinced that the privilege of academic discourse over personal writing is to re-establish a binary opportunity between the rhetorical and the personal. Based on my experience as an ESL learner, academic writing is impossible without the integration of personal writing. Both actually complement each other. I agree with Elbow's claim that, "the very thing that is attractive and appealing about academic discourse is inherently problematic and perplexing. It tries to peel away from messages the evidence of how those messages are situated as the center of personal, political, or cultural interest" [15].

4. Advocates of Personal Writing Approach

Even if some have argued that personal writing cannot be classified as academic discourse because it is not subject to the same conventions or expectations [19], besides Elbow, there are many advocates of using personal writing in the L1 classroom. These scholars reassure the power and the beauty of writing from personal feelings and experiences. In *"Uptaught"* [20], Macrorie discusses students' dependence on Engfish. He urges teachers to help students break away from "Engfish," this "language that prevents (them) from working towards truths." Unlike Bartholomae, Mccrorie, echoing Elbow's idea, believes in personal writing approach and encourages students to speak with their own voice. Mccrorie emphasizes that by getting rid of Engfish through personal writing, students will gain power and authority.

Along with this, verification of the role of emotion in learning is further encouraged in personal writing. Bell hooks [21] describe the role of writing as a remedy. That is, when students openly release their emotion via writing, it will enable them to become "more fully alive." Newkirk [22] also believes that expression comes from self and claims that "all forms of self-expression; all of our ways of being personal are form of performance." According

to Newkirk, there was a time when religion and ethnicity were not acceptable topics, but expressive writing changed that. Personal writing increases awareness of student feelings and in spite of the risks personal writing poses in a classroom, positive changes begin with expression. Permitting self-expression in the classroom is an "authentic" practice.

Furthermore, Murray [23] who values writing as self-expression explains that all writing is an act of faith, belief in self, belief in the subject, belief in its form, belief in its voice. Thus, schools must recognize how hard it is to maintain faith-and how essential to growth faith is to the student. Besides, James Britton and his collaborators [13] demonstrated, in "The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)," that bypassing expressive language for communicative language cuts off from writing those intimate voices and images that rise to the surface and become available primarily in and through the writer's expressive language [13]. The following section will provide more evidence of positive aspect of using personal writing in academic arena.

5. Personal Writing: Students' Empowerment

As a vital part of personal writing pedagogy, voice gets much attention from many scholars. Responding to the notion that writing about personal experiences disempowers students, Lucille McCarthy presents Stephen Fishman's class as one of which is committed both to the mastery of philosophic method and to the development of student voices. Fishman & McCarthy [24] emphasized that students are empowered, not by suppressing their own voices to mimic the philosophic language that he has achieved over thirty years, but by struggling to use it for their own, by grouping to interweave it with their familiar discourse. Harris [19] emphasizes that the task of the student is no longer simply to write clear and acceptable prose but to find her own voice and speak in it rather than in one imposed by her field of study. In my view writing should be for writing and that students should be encouraged to use any kind of form of writing to express their voice. Composition classrooms are a place where students should have freedom in expressing their voice.

Like Moffett [12], who stresses the importance of teaching writing in context, as "somebody-talking-to somebody-else-about-something," Macrorie [25] wants students to tell truths that 'count' for them rather than merely regurgitating their perception of the official language." Through personal writing, Macrorie's use of voice, then, stems from his condemnation of a writing pedagogy that does not treat the students as possessing significant knowledge. Rather than teaching writing as a disembodied, objective exercise, Macrorie emphasizes how voice makes a case for valuing the writer in the writing. Macrorie presents this view of personal writing through his books. Both *"Uptaught"* and *"A Vulnerable teacher"* were strong influences [26]. And probably the most widely influential, on both secondary and college writing teachers, was *"Telling Writing,"* which in effect outlines what seemed at the time a radical pedagogy based on free writing, journals, telling facts and fabulous realities. About the issue of voice, Freire [27], [28] also links voice from personal writing with dialogue. He says when students' problems become the focal point of discourse, then, students' voices become legitimized because their problems

become the object of reflection for both the educator and the student.

Besides, in writing autobiographically, students can develop their voices, "to articulate and understand experience" [29]. Accounts of personal experience often have the ring of authenticity they bring the listener the "processes of reaching understanding" and "permitting us to enter the living space of another" [30]. Brodkey [31] discusses in her literacy autobiography, *"Writing on the bias,"* how she came to make writing interesting for herself and how through this interest, she came to critical awareness. Bridwell-Bowles [32] makes persuasive cases for cultivating students' personal voices and experiences.

In this respect, it is impossible to discuss this issue without referring to Peter Elbow's claims. For Elbow, power is an abiding concern-apparent in the title to his, *"Writing with Power"* [33], as well as in the opening pledge of his first book to help students become "less helpless, both personally and politically" by enabling them to get "control over words." This power is consistently defined in personal terms: "power comes from the words somehow fitting the writer…power comes from the words somehow fitting what they are about" [33]. Elbow also emphasizes the power of personal writing in *"Embracing Contraries"* [34], "If I want power, I've got to use my voice" [34]. To reiterate, we can see that personal writing approach plays a significant role in helping students have their own voices.

6. Personal Writing: Self-centered Issues

Fishman & McCarthy [24] defends the work of Peter Elbow against the charge that personal writing is too self-centered and that it ignores community. They argue:

Elbow and Herder see expression as more than self-discovery. They also see it as a means of social connection. As we strive to understand our own expressions, we seek insight in the work of others. Thus for Elbow and Herder our expressions are more than manifestations of discourses; they are also the start of our dialogue with others.

Elbow also gives the reason we write is to connect with others or "in order to get inside the heads of other people" [35]. He says, "writing is a string you send out to connect yourself with other consciousnesses." Elbow thus insists that our public texts must be grounded in our personal writing. Since expressions are personal discoveries, when our exchanges with others are based upon self-expression, our exchange can be transformative, can transform or make clearer who we are to others and ourselves. Far from isolating students from one another and making them "suckers" by depriving them of the chance to learn academic discourse, Fishman's commitment to student language led to close listening and intimacy within the class and at the same time helped students master disciplinary methods and texts.

In addition, Paley [14] shares her experience and sees the importance of personal writing in linking to outside society. As she writes:

Despite the accusation that autobiographical nature of the writing in "expressivist" programs is solipsistic and apolitical, that the topics are insignificant outside the immediate classrooms, I introduce students who eagerly wrote about topics that mattered not only to them but to the gender, economic class, family and ethic group from which they emerged.

More recent representation of expressivist pedagogy include the notion that respect for the experiential and cultural knowledge that students bring to their essays enables their writing abilities to develop fairly quickly. Thus rather than have the student struggle clumsily to "invent the university," the teacher in an expressivist classroom might be more interested in creating a space for what the student has to offer within the university [14]. Last but not least, Martha Marinara gives us insight of the benefit of personal writing in involving students with social settings. She says that "the unique opportunity to help students negotiate the borders between the work and school, past and present, self and others" (as cited in [36])

7. Before Entering Academic Discourse

Rather than harming and disadvantaging students, as Bizzell [2] claims, personal writing benefits students by facilitating writing in general and strengthening academic writing in particular. Those who support classroom instruction in personal writing point to its ease and accessibility. When students find that they can write for their pleasure [15], personal writing will become motivation. Later on students will gradually realize that experience based-writing is thus a method of helping them to enter the academic discourse.

In *"Live on the Boundary"* [37], Mike Rose points out the benefit of personal writing. He explains that writing may impede genuine understanding if teachers assign students to write about unfamiliar subjects in the unfamiliar language. In *"Reflections on Academic discourse"* [15], Elbow agrees with Rose by saying that "often the best test whether a student understands something is the ability to "translate it out of the discourse of the textbook…into everyday, experiential, anecdotal terms. In discussing many topics, writers can choose among a wide range of forms and styles; a given subject does not necessary cry out for abstract analysis rather than more humanized discussion, or a combination of both.

In addition, personal writing is supported by contemporary educators because it urges student ownership of topics and texts [38]-[40]suggests that when students write about topics that come from personal experience, they are invested in their topics and care about "getting it right." Graves [41] found that second grade children were more fluent on topics of their own choosing than on topics chosen by the teacher. In brief, I would like to support my claim with Bruner's [42] statement:

We live in the sea of stories, and like the fish who (according to the proverb) will be the last to discover water, we have our own difficulties grasping what it is like to swim in stories. It is not that we lack competence in creating our narrative accounts of reality-far from it. We are, if anything, too expert. Our problem, rather, is achieving consciousness of what we so easily do automatically, the ancient problem of prise de conscience.

As such, stories are part of our collective folk tale, and stories help us form our consciousness. It is natural for individuals to tell stories about themselves and their worlds.

8. ESL Echoes the Benefit of Personal Writing

Although research studies in EFL about this issue is still young, there are a number of studies that support the use of many kinds of personal writing in ESL contexts. The following evidence

reassures us that we cannot ignore or separate the use of personal discourse in school contexts. Personal writing increases writing fluency and confidence and develops ideas in writing. For example, Lucas [43], through her case studies of nine ESL students, reports that students who had done "personal journal writing" had benefited from the experience, since students gained confidence in their writing ability, and discovered new insight into themselves. Peyton [44] reported the positive impact of dialogue journal writing on ESL students in promoting their acquisition of English grammatical morphology. Knepler [45] introduced an informal experimental writing mode, called "impromptu writing," to ESL college level students which encourages students to write as much as possible within a limited time. Soucy [46] recommended free writing as a tool for learning and written language development for ESL students, particularly for those students who are preparing for the academic community.

Furthermore, journals provide a place to practice personal writing and keep a record of an educational experience and intellectual growth [47]. Students develop their confidence as writers through personal journals as they get used to recording their life on paper [48]. Last but not least, Allen's study reflects that ESL learners benefit from personal writing practice. These students benefit most from expressive writing pedagogy and often make stunning breakthroughs. From his classroom-based research, Allen [49] has found that students felt relief to release tension and trauma associated with writing. Also, they revealed that writing increased confidence and an understanding of writing process, especially editing.

9. From Personal Discourse to Academic One

Academic settings should be the first place where students learn positive attitude toward personal writing. Rather than shaping negative stereotypes of personal writing as something bad and useless, schools should review their roles in getting rid of the habit of writing what Macrorie [20] calls *Engfish*, which he describes as "the phony, pretentious language of the schools." At the same time teachers should help students gear to the road of academic writing by providing students a chance to cherish their voices and personal experience as meaningful material in academic papers.

As such, in composition classrooms teachers had better look at the insight, not the form, of personal writing, which offers students "claims, reasons and evidence for serious analysis and critique" [9] like the way academic writing does. Elbow [15] clearly states that by learning how to translate learning into their own language, students will develop the skills necessary to write good academic discourse. Rather than limiting the opportunity for students to learn, Elbow points out clearly about the power of personal writing in preparing, shaping and developing students to write in academic setting. This is because students would write about what they really know and care about. In this way, personal discourse empowers, not disempowers, writers. I strongly believe that personal writing helps students move beyond their own stories to understand larger discourse, where they learn to situate their stories within or in opposition to these larger discourses.

To this point, I would like to take critical pedagogy to support my arguments that we should not separate personal discourse from academic one.

Instead, we had better harmonize personal writing in academic disciplines. An understanding of one's culture enables individuals to name their lived experience and, ultimately, to criticize their oppressors [28]. When individuals interpret their own culture through their language, their words become a means of personal and social transformation. Rather than setting a strict form of writing, schools should encourage students to become the primary interpreters of their experience by using words from their specific culture. Bell hooks [21] states that "given that critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully" (as cited in [5])

10. Conclusion

As previously discussed, writing about topics drawn from personal experience does not make students "suckers," "powerless," "blind" and "disadvantaged" but it, instead, would give them "voice" and encourage honest writing. Encouragement to write about their personal experiences would suggest to learners that their personal thoughts and lives are appropriate content for the curriculum and for sharing with others in the classroom. Such personal writing would validate students' inner lives and their specific social milieu. From this process, students get involved in community and society when they write. Needless to say, in order to draw upon personal knowledge, students would not need to do research in reference books; the necessary information would be accessible through simple recall. During this process, students learn to be independent and get self-confidence.

In summary, for many reasons, students gain benefit from experience-based story writing. Expressive writing is a way of using our own language and voice to help us discover our ideas and thoughts on a given subject or topic. In the end, all roads lead to Rome—academic discourse or school discourse. This paper, perhaps, makes us forget for a while the theoretical dispute between the camp of personal writing and that of the academic one. Instead, we teachers had better adopt an approach that will soften students' resistance against discourse and reveal to them the charm of it.

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