

Personal Writing: A Taboo in Composition Classrooms

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Abstract

Stereotyped as non-academic and debated as ultimately problematic, personal writing or expressive writing is still a hot issue in composition studies. Personal writing has fought a long battle for recognition in academic settings, and prejudice against personal narratives. The goal of this paper is to explore problematic aspects of personal writing genre and to assert that personal writing in general is academically viable and useful, and that autobiographical projects in particular are an effective way to teach especially in college and beyond. In effect, personal writing should be considered one of pedagogical cornerstones in composition studies. The examination of personal writing in this paper begins with a description of definitions of personal writing, an overview of personal writing, an investigation of three main problems: the issue of problematic personal writing, misinterpretation and malpractice, myths and the limitations of personal writing. Then the paper concludes with recommendations to share with those who are interested in this issue and want to examine it further.

Key words: personal writing, personal teaching approach, expressive writing, composition studies

บทคัดย่อ

ถึงแม้ว่าการเขียนเชิงสร้างสรรค์หรือการเขียนเชิงบุคคลจะไม่ใช่ยอมรับทางวิชาการและเป็นที่โต้เถียงมาตลอดว่ามีจุดอ่อนอย่างมาก งานเขียนดังกล่าวยังคงเป็นประเด็นร้อนในแวดวงวิชาการการเขียนศึกษา งานเขียนเชิงสร้างสรรค์ได้ต่อสู้อย่างยาวนานเพื่อให้เป็นที่ยอมรับในทางวิชาการท่ามกลางอคติต่อแนวการเขียนเชิงเล่าเรื่องส่วนตัว วัตถุประสงค์ของบทความชิ้นนี้เพื่อศึกษาแง่มุมที่เป็นปัญหาของการเขียนเชิงสร้างสรรค์และเพื่อเสนอแนะว่าการเขียนเชิงสร้างสรรค์แท้จริงแล้วมีประโยชน์ทางวิชาการและเป็นไปได้ในทางปฏิบัติ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งโครงการการเขียนอัตชีวประวัติเป็นวิธีการเขียนที่จะช่วยให้นักศึกษาระดับมหาวิทยาลัยและสูงกว่าทำได้ผล จริงๆแล้วการเขียนเชิงสร้างสรรค์ควรจะได้รับพิจารณาให้เป็นหนึ่งในวิธีการสอนที่เป็นหัวใจสำคัญต่อวงการการเขียนศึกษาศึกษาการเขียนเชิงสร้างสรรค์ในบทความนี้เริ่มจากการศึกษาของนิยามของประเภทการเขียนแบบสร้างสรรค์ว่าคืออะไร ภาพรวมของการเขียนเชิงสร้างสรรค์ ปัญหาหลัก 3 ประการที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการเขียนเชิงสร้างสรรค์นั่นคือ แง่มุมที่เป็นปัญหา การตีความและการนำไปใช้แบบผิดๆ มายาคติและข้อจำกัด หลังจากนั้นบทความจบลงด้วยข้อเสนอแนะแก่ผู้ที่สนใจในประเด็นการเขียนชนิดนี้ เพื่อศึกษาต่อไปในอนาคต

คำสำคัญ: การเขียนเชิงบุคคล แนวทางการสอนเชิงบุคคล การเขียนเชิงสร้างสรรค์ การเขียนศึกษา

Introduction

The issue of personal writing or expressive writing is still a hot issue in composition studies (Rosenberg, 2002). Personal writing has been stereotyped as non-academic and debated as ultimately problematic (Surfus, 1994; Fulwiler, 2003). Personal writing has become a myth. Some believe that personal writing is dangerous; some believe that personal writing has no place in academic writing. Personal writing has been attacked for many reasons. In the past two decades, personal writing has been rejected to be a pedagogical cornerstone in composition studies (Rosenberg, 2002).

Opponents argue that personal writing makes students powerless and disconnected from questions of language, power and politics. Others argue that personal writing is not rigorous work and fails to teach the necessary skills of academic literacy such as critical thinking, analysis, or argumentation. Personal writing never come with positive connotations but rather comes with negative connotations (Rosenberg, 2002). While traditionalists in the academy reject personal writing because they regard personal experience as inherently subjective and unscientific, postmodernists question its representation of subjects as individuals. In particular, they reject modes of writing instruction that suggest that a writer can be free beyond the contingencies of history and language (Spigelman, 2001). Why so?

From my experience in the *Theories of Literacy* class in the US where I found my voice in academic settings, I believe in the power of personal writing in developing the love of writing. I would like to assert that personal writing in general could be academically viable and useful, and that autobiographical projects in particular are an effective way to teach. This is necessary for further writing in college and beyond. Thus, in this paper, I would first like to explore why personal writing has become problematic. Why is it rejected? Why is personal writing stereotyped as a taboo in classrooms? What are the barriers of personal writing? What created the negative connotations associated with personal writing?

I have laid out this investigation to show how personal writing is perceived. I will begin the paper with the definitions of personal writing, an overview of personal writing, the investigation of three main problems: the issue of problematic personal writing, misinterpretation and malpractice, myths and the limitations of personal writing. I will conclude with my recommendation to share with those who are suffering like me and those who are interested in this and want to examine this issue further.

What is Personal Writing?

The practices of personal writing go by many names, often used as if they were interchangeable: personal criticism, autobiographical criticism, narrative criticism, personal narrative, self-writing, life writing, autography, and confession criticism (Paley, 2001). According to Berlin, expressivism is almost always associated with notions of encouraging the student to develop his or her own unique self in writing- writing that avoids and even disdains connection with the material world (Paley, 2001). The term personal writing or expressive writing is problematic because it covers such a wide range of practice (Gere, 2001). According to Gere, personal writing is “prose that gives significant attention to the writer’s experience and feeling” (2001, p. 204). Personal writing then can include the informal practices that range from free writing, journals, and letters to friends and family. However, it can also include the more formal writing assignments that students are assigned in first-year writing classrooms such as personal essays, personal-experience essays, autobiographical essays, and personal narratives. Personal writing is most often linked with proponents of the process movement of the 1960s and 70s such as Macrorie, Murray, and Elbow. In response to the current traditional model of teaching writing that had held dominant sway 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.

Elbow (1987) defines personal writing as the preference alternative, that is, “writing directed to no real audience but for the sake of self” (p. 60). Murray’s (1991) claim “all writing is autobiographical” becomes a cover term for all kinds of writing—personal, reflective narrative, fiction, nonfiction, and academic writing (p. 654). According to Bloom (2000), all writing is personal whether it sounds that way or not, if the writer has a stake in the work. It’s difficult to separate, say, the academic from

the personal. Paley (2001) sees that personal writing involves “the use of a narrational ‘I’ that seems to be the actual voice of the person who writes” (p.13). According to Moffett (1968) and Britton (1975), personal writing is the informal writing we do that is closest to our casual, intimate speech; it expresses our ideas, feelings, and attitudes, sometimes for the eyes of others but more frequently just for ourselves. It may be the kind of writing adapted to exploration, experience and discovery. Personal writing is typically understood to involve combining autobiographical and theoretical content into a new genre that has been demonstrated, for example, in works as Nancy Miller’s *Getting Personal*.

Overview of Personal Writing

Personal writing has fought a long battle for recognition in academic settings, and prejudice against personal narratives. The denial of the personal dates back to the Plato’s allegory of the cave (Spigelman, 2001). According to Spigelman expressive writing pedagogy resulted from the good faith efforts of many writing teachers to encourage students to find and express their individual voice. Stewart and James Berlin emphasize that expressivist rhetoric as it was taught in the sixties and seventies was “unsparingly critical of the dominant social, political, and cultural practices of the time” (Berlin, 1988, p. 485).

According to Fulwiler (2003), since the 1980s the early process movement’s emphasis on voice and personal experience has been thoroughly critiqued. In particular, the terms authentic voice and the self became contested territory as critics argued that both the personal and experience were shaped, indeed made possible, by language and discourse conventions. The process movements focus on the individual and on voice, in other words, privileged a certain of the subject steeped in modernist notion of the rational and knowable self- a view that postmodern theories of the subject were quickly deconstructing. By the 1990s, these critiques dramatically

altered the landscape of the personal and problematized the notions of self, experience and voice.

The popularity of personal writing in the early twentieth century resulted from a host of historical and social changes: a change in literary taste, including a preference, along with the romantic movement, for a depiction of everyday experience expressed in everyday language; a change in the center of knowledge, from divine to the individual's inner consciousness; and in education, a shift to a Deweyian emphasis on the individual student (Berlin, 1988). In the past fifteen years, there has been an active debate among composition and rhetoric teachers over the merits of teaching personal writing in freshman composition.

During the ongoing debate, in recent years, scholars have made small inroads to promote experience-based writing, but for the most part, personal writing is still considered untrustworthy and questionable. Opponents of expressivist writing pedagogy blame writing teachers for doing students a disservice by encouraging personal narrative the year writing course and argue that instruction in academic discourse more effectively prepares students to engage and critique the institutions that shape their lives. However, supporters of personal writing have proclaimed it an addition to, rather than a substitute for, academic writing, asserting that personal writing serves different purposes.

Personal writing or expressivism has suffered attacks from two sides: critics on the outside fault it as too centered on individual experience, while some proponents in the inside have distorted its ideals and practices and thus denigrated the movement as a whole. In addition, personal writing is sometimes treated like a taboo subject, not often mentioned by composition scholars. Little research exists in students' personal uses of writing, except by expressivists who see personal writing as a way to break away from dry academic prose. Gordon Harvey (1994) writes,

“a personal /textual assignment could, in fact, help promote (critical) reading, if used as a self-challenging exercise preliminary to an essay” (p.646). Because expressivism, at its extreme, refuses to discuss the ideological nature of “academic” language and focuses instead upon the writer’s inner self (Faigley, 1992; Berlin, 1987), its notion of “self as apart from society” reflects what many feminist theorists and ESL theorists criticize.

Problem 1: Dangerous Term

Advocates believe that expressive writing is fundamental for learners of any age. However, the stereotypes make it dangerous and problematic (Elbow, 1991; Paley, 2001). Elbow (1995) says voice has become a dangerous term. It has a tendency to imply romanticism, expressionism and individualism, a dangerous thing. David Bartholomae, one of opponents of personal writing, argues that personal writing makes students ‘suckers’ and ‘powerless’ (Bartholomae, 1985). Regarding the problematic term of personal writing, Spigelman (2001) explains:

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” (p. 83).

Actually, the real problem is not personal writing *per se* but perception of it. One of the reasons that make opponents of personal writing think personal writing is non-academic because they interpret the term with negative connotation. No one seems to speak of expressivism neutrally (Oakes, 2003). Expressivism has negative

connotations by various composition theorists particularly James Berlin. Many of negative connotations have arisen from misunderstandings of the romantic and progressive underpinnings of this pedagogical view. Some equate expressivism with free writing. To others, expressivism is a more general focus on some sort of personal voice in student writing, "The expression of private versions of experience couched in original metaphors which show that they are not simply imitative reports of the versions of others (Berlin, 1988, p. 13). Personal writing or expressive writing is almost always placed in opposition to academic writing- defined negatively in this way, in which the personal equates the non-academic. Despite the prevalence of personal approaches in teaching writing in both literature and composition classrooms, personal writing continue to be thought of as an ancillary, something students do before they get down to the business of real writing (Wood, 1997).

Problem 2: Misinterpretation and Malpractice

For decades, personal writing has been for so long stereotyped as resistant to anything not directly to classroom practice. Schools have shaped negative attitude of personal writing. Some students have learned that academic writing seldom requires one to respond personally or even emotionally, and so they are in some danger of thinking of the writing they can do well as merely academic writing. Students are used to thinking of school writing as a prescribed formula: the five paragraph essay with a thesis statement and four paragraph support that they get in the habit of writing what Ken McCrorie (1970) calls *English*.

In addition, teachers do not give students enough time and opportunity to discover the ideas, or to write expressively. Many the year college writers arrive in classrooms with negative attitude writing. Their idea of an essay is often limited to the formulaic five-paragraph theme and they are quick to draw a representative funnel diagram on the board to illustrate it. If asked what a good essay is, students

invariably say logic organization, and clear thesis statements. A significant number of them have been taught as a rule never to write in the first person. They seem to have been trained to do what might be called academic writing but not to consider their own lives and experiences as valid material. Young writers are often taught that school or academic forms of writing like exposition, argument, and analysis are self-contained or pure genres—that is a personal narrative. Some teachers mistakenly assume that students write only under academic demands and, even then, only to the assignment's specifications. However, Mike Rose (1985) states in *The Language of Exclusions* saying, “students are highly literate.” reading and writing, as any ethnographic study would show, are woven throughout our students' lives” (p. 354).

Furthermore, teachers misrepresent school writing when they say there is a hierarchy that begins with the personal or expressive and builds to the analytical. Instead of a hierarchy, teachers need to see these genres as a continuum—what Janet Emig (1971) referred to as a lovely interplay “there's no reason why good argumentative writing cannot use narrative or story for its support, that personal reflection cannot use exposition or critical analysis—and so on” (p. 30). The question of the personal in composition remains stunningly political. According to (Hindman, 1993), academicians are not the only writers undermined by this perceived separation; most incoming university students, in particular basic writers, believe that college writing should be objective and dispassionate in its subject matter and approach, unwavering in its sentiments and suppositions, impersonal and scholarly in its language and tone. In short, these writers are convinced that academic writing has nothing to do with their real lives or emotions.

Problem 3: Myths and Limitations

The limitations, myths, and prejudices of personal writing distort the use of personal writing and impede its growth in classrooms. Limitations of personal writing

in classroom practice have been noted in a number of research studies. Paley (2001) raises the question how teachers can grade a paper if a personal writing approach is implemented. Also, in terms of gender, the focus on personal experience as the chief source of information may have negative consequences for both boys and girls for different reasons. An emphasis on experience-based writing may tend to devalue the kind of informational writing, in science and technology especially, that boys apparently find more congenial to their interests (Grave, 1973). Girls seem to prefer writing about their personal feelings and experience.

Besides, some students may avoid personal narratives in favor of broader academic patterns because the dominant academic culture has deemed the private as inadmissible. Some scholars seem to think that personal writing frees them from the demands of professional academic writing, demands such as making new knowledge of relevance to English studies communities and/or applying existing knowledge and or theorizing rather than simply relating personal knowledge, regardless of how clever the description (Hindman, 2003). Some writers use “the personal” to reveal intimate details of their lives not readily relevant to professional work; to be cloying flip or trendy or hip; to satisfy their longing to write creative nonfiction without much academic purpose (p.12).

Bloom (2000) discusses about the myths of personal writing and their relation to teaching. These myths make personal writing problematic and got criticized from opponents of personal writing. 1) There is a belief that anything written in the first person singular is autobiographical. Bloom says this is not necessarily true. Nor is it true that everything written in the third person is impersonal: all scientific, technical, business writing. 2) Personal writing is as school genre that can exist in an expressivist composition classroom. This myth limits the practice of personal writing in a particular genre. 3) The students believe personal writing is something to do only

in elementary and high school. College courses should concentrate on what is new, complicated and difficult. 4) Some believes that all writing is alike, or sufficiently alike in intellectual and aesthetic dimensions to be unrewarding to either read or write. 5) Personal writing is too personal. In other words, in academic settings, personal writing should not be prioritized. If students are encouraged to write personally they will remain self-focused and become masters of self and nothing else. They only use themselves and their experiences as the norm and the only norm for their understanding of the world. In this sense, personal writing ignores students' communities. 6) Personal writing is used to against the intellectually rigorous, abstract, objective ways-the normative ways of dealing with information and controversy throughout the rest of academic world.

Recommendations

Despite the problems, the myths, and the ongoing debates of the implementation of the personal writing in classrooms, teaching has to go on. Therefore, in dealing with personal writing pedagogy in the classroom, this paper makes two suggestions: First, students and teachers should change attitudes toward personal writing. Personal writing is a principle for a growth academic writing, but negative perception makes it problematic in the academic setting. The negative perception and attitudes toward personal writing are the vital factors that distort and corrupt the use of personal writing. With the negative attitude toward personal writing, many teachers who do endorse personal writing feel pressured to move their students as quickly as possible from the personal to "legitimate" academic forms. Students are so used to thinking of school writing as a prescribed formula and get in the habit of *Engfish*. Writing should be a lovely interplay (Emig, 1971). So, the key concern is, how can we make our students love what is in academic discourse

without having to teach academic discourse? I strongly agree with Spigelman's (2001) notion saying that,

We trust that Linguist, Brodkey and Bloom have very good reasons for opening their essays with personal essays in academic journal. But we don't always grant this same trust to our students when they tell us their personal stories in writing we assign (p. 75).

Therefore, at a first step, the teacher should initiate by changing the attitude about personal writing in that "it's not part of academic writing so it's wrong, inappropriate" (Shafer, 1999, p. 223).

Second, I propose integrating the strengths of both pedagogies and blurring the boundary between personal writing and academic writing. Can we blur the boundary of personal writing and academic writing? Are we helping students to break the constraints of their silence, or to voice their minds when we ask them to write expressively, or are we forcing them to cross boundaries they may not be ready to cross?" Elbow (1995) stresses "There is relationship between 2 roles, 2 ways of being in the world of texts. Students should be able to inhabit both roles comfortably". Elbow (1991) also suggests that by learning how to translate learning into their own language, students will develop the skills necessary to write good academic discourse. He calls for a view of academic discourse that incorporates personal expressive writing, that encourage connected knowledge by "listening, letting other people in, taking in what is outside, relaxing walls and boundaries in one's head, fostering a change of mind (Elbow, 1990, p. 18). In addition, James Moffet in his *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* offers an idea by having students experiment with personal and expressive use of language and then having them move there to more formal and public kinds of writing. Connors also reconfirms my recommendation on this issue. He raises "Should we emphasize "honest, personal"

writing, stress “academic,” “argumentative,” or “practical” subjects, or try somehow to balance among these discourse aims?” (Connors, 1987, p. 166)

Conclusion

Like language, the stereotypes against personal writing come, go and grow with us subconsciously. Unlike language, I strongly believe that stereotypes should not be fossilized. We can overcome such stereotypes if we try. We just need time, a strong will, commitment, and new viewpoints. I think we know well that personal writing suffers from many negative labels. We should find ways to confront such negativity. If writing is a discovery, as Murray (1985) says, why don't we set writers free? Why do we have to set a framework in teaching writing? Why is only an academic writing acceptable? Writing is an art and personal but why we have to teach students to only use an academic style. Why do students have to write to serve institution curriculum rather than for themselves? The need for writers is to be heard, to bring a piece of their lives, culture to the world with languages they feel most comfortable with.

To this point, I believe we teachers cannot ignore personal writing since it promotes self-actualization, expression, and fulfillment. What is the point of writing if our piece of work becomes soulless? I value an organic and personal writing. Based on my experiences, I write well and enjoy writing when I get involved with my feelings and topics. That means if the subject matter, in some way, relates to my life and provokes my emotions, I can see my writing grow. I would like to conclude with the notion of Shafer (1999, p. 223) saying that “ Do we define a liberatory education as shaping our students to be like us or do we celebrate a mosaic of new styles and voices radiating from our classrooms- voice and style that are troubling and difficult because they are not part of education”. I really want to see Peter Elbow's books

Writing without Teachers and *Writing with Power* become a real phenomenon in today academic writing settings.

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