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Attitudes Toward Writing

Laurence E. Musgrove
University of Southern Indiana, Evansville

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Attitudes Toward Writing

Cover Page Footnote

Laurence E. Musgrove is assistant professor of English and Director of Composition at the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville where he teaches courses in writing, American literature, and English education.

Attitudes Toward Writing

Laurence E. Musgrove

*I take myself back, fear.
You are not my shadow any longer.
I don't hold you in my hands.
You can't live in my eyes, my ears, my voice,
my belly, or in my heart my heart
my heart my heart.*

Joy Harjo

In *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, Kathleen Blake Yancey (1992) maintains that “portfolios in composition classes often exhibit . . . some metacognitive work, that is, some exploration by the writers of their own composing processes and of their own development as writers” (p. 104). As the term “metacognitive” suggests, much of this exploration or self-evaluative writing takes place after students have completed a series of writing assignments; they look back to see what they’ve accomplished and the degree to which they’ve improved as writers. Yancey also argues that portfolio reflections can “provide information about what is going on ‘within’ the writers to help them set their own agendas and thus exercise some control over their development in appropriate ways” (p. 104). What is within writers is quite different from what they’ve produced, or even the knowledge and skills they’ve developed along the way. What is within student writers are heart-felt stories, narratives of success and failure played out in the English classroom. Unfortunately, the most common of these stories are filled with fear and despair—students fearing teachers’ comments and peer response, students despairing of success or approval. Repeated again and again over time, these narratives of hurt become internalized and shape students’ attitudes toward future writing experiences. Even the most supportive teaching practices will fail in the face of such deep-seated resistances. In response, I believe we should give our writing students a vocabulary of attitude, help them use this terminology to recount and revise their writing experiences, and provide them with short narratives, parables, and poems that exemplify specific predispositional attitudes which contribute to or interfere with their chances of success in the writing class. In combination with a portfolio pedagogy that offers multiple op-

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portunities to set learning goals and evaluate their progress in achieving them, I believe attention to attitude will offer students the chance to see how what they bring to writing influences what they can ultimately achieve in writing.

Defining Attitude

In “The Affective Domain and the Writing Process: Working Definitions,” Susan H. McLeod (1991) maps out a variety of terms most often used by psychologists to name affective states of being so that she can suggest ways we might extend our research into affect and the writing process. These affective states include “emotion,” “feelings,” “attitude,” “anxiety,” “belief,” and “motivation.” Here, I’d like to examine only the first three of these in order to distinguish “attitude” from “emotion.” “Emotions” according to McLeod are intense, positive or negative conditions “where the organism is aroused for a fairly short period of time. Using this definition, grief, joy, fear, and anger are all emotions” (p. 98). Less evident affective states would be “moods” such as “the blues.” The distinct physical responses to emotions and moods are “feelings”: the shortness of breath related to fear and the fatigue that may accompany sadness (98). From the field of social psychology, McLeod takes “attitudes” to mean “psychological states acquired over a period of time as a result of our experiences; these attitudes influence us to act in certain ways” (p. 98). In other words, an attitude is a learned state of readiness rather than the act or response itself. Synonyms would include “tendency” and “predisposition.” Finally, attitudes also have affective, behavioral, and cognitive components: attitudes may be accompanied by positive or negative emotions, and we may act and think in particular ways as a result of our attitudes (pp. 98-99). Therefore, emotions and attitudes are distinct affective states, even though an attitude may lead to an emotional response and then to a feeling or bodily response, as in a student’s negative attitude toward writing resulting in anger and perspiration.

In “Social Cognition, Emotions, and the Psychology of Writing,” Alice Brand (1991) claims that “social-cognitive theories of writing mask the emotional experience of writing” (p. 396). Tracing the development of the term “attitude” in the field of social psychology, Brand focuses on attitude’s emotional component— “a positive or negative valance and a level of intensity” (p. 398)—and concludes with a call for a theory of writing that includes attention to the writer’s emotions (p. 403). In an earlier argument, *The Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience*, Brand (1989) develops the means to survey students’ emotional responses toward writing. When defining her primary terms and assumptions, she helps us further understand the relationship between attitude and emotion when she discusses the difference between “state” and “trait” emotions. According to Brand, “state” emotions represent a person’s affective experience at a specific moment, while “trait” emotions “predispose people to particular state emotions but do not have a locus in time” (p. 59). So, just as attitudes are one’s habitual tendencies toward a response or action, trait emotions are one’s habitual emotional display, one’s regular temperament. Again, attitudes don’t always produce emotions, but when an attitude does prompt an emotional response, the emotional response may be trait, state, or a combination of emotional responses.

Kinds of Attitudes

One of the difficulties that arises when discussing attitudes is determining kinds of attitudes. This is evident in McLeod's essay mentioned already above. While she readily offers names for kinds of emotions and feelings, she doesn't name specific attitudes, except to say that students have negative ones (p. 99). Cataloguing attitudes is particularly difficult, I think, because the terms "attitudes" and "emotions" and "feelings" are often used synonymously in our discussions of habitual emotional response and behavior. For example, what might the attitude be called that prompts a student to have the emotion of despair? Would the attitude be called "pessimism"? "Hopelessness"? Could it also be called "despair"? If I am prone to emotional despair when faced with writing, do I have a despairing attitude?

Interestingly enough, some help in this regard comes from Wayne C. Booth who has an abiding interest in the relationships between writers, their texts, and their readers, as evidenced in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988), and *The Vocation of a Teacher* (1988). In the last named volume, and in an essay titled "The Scholar in Society," Booth criticizes the ideal notion of objective inquiry and, instead, proposes the scholar who accepts his or her social and thus value-laden role while practicing the habits of honesty, courage, persistence, consideration, and humility (pp. 67-73). For example, scholars are persistent when they choose to investigate a "problem until it is either solved or proved pointless" (p. 70); scholars demonstrating humility "have tested their powers for discovering the truth and have discovered instead vaster and vaster domains of ignorance" (p. 73). In other places, he equates these habits with "virtues," "powers," "traits," "strengths," "characteristics" (p. 67) and "attitude" (p. 64). While Booth would probably see these five habits of scholarship more readily as demonstrated behaviors or virtues, they do provide us with names we can attach to attitudes. By that I mean, if we can say that someone—a firefighter for example—is predisposed to act courageously, we should also be able to claim that he or she has a courageous attitude.

A Pedagogy of Attitude

Thus, for my purposes in the writing classroom and in the context of a portfolio pedagogy, I introduce a vocabulary of attitude, provide literary examples, and assign self-evaluative writing to prompt students to account for their own attitudes toward writing. My purposes are, of course, to help students write and think well, to feel confident when faced with a variety of writing tasks and rhetorical situations in and outside school, to effectively plan, draft, revise, and edit their writing, to be capable readers of other students' writing, to develop the independent ability to evaluate the appropriateness of their own writing, and to find personally and publicly significant purposes for writing. In terms of attitudes, I want students to understand how specific predispositions influence what they can achieve and how they can improve as writers.

At the beginning of the term, I give my students a definition of attitude, making it synonymous with one's predispositions toward particular tasks,

ideas, or people. Then I take Booth's terms for the five scholarly habits, add the attitude of hope to his list, and introduce six pairs of positive and negative critical attitudes, listed in the figure below, that contribute to or interfere with learning.

honesty/dishonesty
 courage/fear
 persistence/procrastination
 consideration/narrow-mindedness
 humility/arrogance
 hope/despair

Then in a series of mini-lessons, I share with my students short pieces of literature exemplifying these attitudinal pairs. While I prefer short literary examples because of their intensity and because they take less class time, longer stories, novels, essays, and plays may also be appropriate at other times to demonstrate attitudes in conflict. The table below lists some poems, parables, and short stories that correspond to specific attitudes.

honesty/dishonesty	"A Ritual To Read to Each Other," William Stafford
courage/fear	"Fear," Stephen Dobyns
persistence/procrastination	"To Be of Use," Marge Piercy
consideration/narrow-mindedness	"Those Winter Mornings," Robert Hayden
humility/arrogance	"Eclipse," Augusto Monterroso
hope/despair	"Drouth," Wendell Berry

Wendell Berry's poem is an excellent example of how opposite attitudes are cued by the same event.

Drouth

All day the crops burn in the cloudless air,
 Drouth lengthening against belief. At night
 The husbands and the wives lie side by side,
 Awake, the ache of panic in their bones,
 Their purposes betrayed by purposes

Unknown, whose mystery is the dark in which
They wait and grieve. All may be lost, and then
What will they do? When money is required
Of them, and they have none, where will they go?

Many will go in blame against the world,
Hating it for their pain, and they will go
Alone across the dry, bright, lifeless days,
And thus alone into the dark. Others
In grief and loss will see more certainly
What they have loved, and will belong to it
And to each other as in happiness
They never did—hearing, though the whole world
Go dry, the hidden raincrow of their hope.

(Berry, 1997, p. 54)

In my classes, as we talk about this poem and try to understand why some despair and why some remain hopeful when confronted with the same failure, the poem also gives us the opportunity to talk about the failures that we all face in writing, how failure and error are natural and necessary for growth, and how difficult it is for us to remain hopeful when faced with the hard work of writing.

In my writing classes, students also keep portfolios designed to help them track their attitudinal development, along with their progress as more knowledgeable and skillful writers. Portfolio ingredients include a résumé, an initial attitudinal survey, learning goals, a personal grammar and usage handbook, in-class writing, homework assignments, essays, and portfolio self-evaluations written at midterm and at the end of the semester. A sample midterm self-evaluation assignment is included below.

Part I

Copy the questions below and compose a short paragraph response to each.

1. Of all the reading, writing, and thinking goals you set for yourself, which were the most important to you?
2. To what degree have you been able to achieve them during the first half of the term?
3. Which ones do you still need to work on?
4. What new goals would you now set for yourself?
5. Of all of the writing you've accomplished, which was the most meaningful?
6. Of all of the reading you've accomplished, which was the most important to you?
7. If you had an opportunity to change this class, what would you do?
8. Of all of the ways you've progressed in this class, which one are you most proud of?

Part II

Review your responses to Part I above, and then compose a four-page essay in which you reflect upon the growth you've experienced so far this term as a result of what you've accomplished in this class. Describe the person you were at the beginning of the term, especially that person's attitudes toward writing. Then, describe the person you are now and contrast your present attitudes with your earlier attitudes. How have the activities in this class contributed to that contrast?

I am especially interested in how you might use the six pairs of attitudes we've discussed in class to think about your "attitudinal" progress in this class. These six pairs include hope/despair, courage/fear, perseverance/procrastination, humility/arrogance, honesty/dishonesty, and consideration/narrow-mindedness. It should not be necessary to discuss all six pairs, but I would like you to concentrate on at least three of them.

The first part of this assignment is designed to prompt students to reflect on their learning goals, the degree to which they've achieved those goals, and what they've accomplished during the term. The second part of the assignment asks students to focus on the person they've come to be and, more specifically, on how their attitudes about writing have changed.

Student Stories

While I've included excerpts from midterm self-evaluations below in order to demonstrate how students think and write about their attitudes, I want to admit that as of this time I have used this approach in only two of my classes, in an English education course for English majors who are prospective teachers and in a first-year writing class, both in the fall of 1997 at the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville. The school draws a homogeneous population of students, most first generation college students, and most from Evansville and the immediate tri-state region, including Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky. All of the students represented here are white, female, and between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two.

Sharon, a student in the first-year writing class, describes in her self-evaluation her experiences in high school, but also her concerns about writing in college:

Imagine a young girl who is just starting college. She is eager to learn, but also afraid that she won't be able to handle her new challenge. The girl you are picturing is the person I used to be. Before school, I was hopeful, but also despairing and fearful when it came to this English class.

Writing had never really been a problem for me. I always had positive experiences with writing in high school. However, I knew my teachers were more lenient in high school than my professors would be in college. I also imagined that I would be writing ten page essays. These reasons combined made me fearful about writing in college.

Sharon has a good writing history, but still she doubted her ability because she was unsure what to expect from college writing assignments, as well as fearing what she didn't know: how her writing will be evaluated in college. Most students in the class also feared writing, a common and tragic cultural attitude toward writing, and one we, as teachers, should address directly in our classes and in our professional organizations.

Ashley, from the same writing class, reveals another attitude toward writing and learning:

Despite being in this class only a few months, I have noticed a change in my attitude toward English already. I never thought that I would feel any different toward the reading, writing, thinking, and learning skills incorporated into an English class. But the attitudes I had at the beginning of the semester are totally different than those I have now.

I was a very narrow-minded person when entering this class. I had my beliefs and would very seldom listen to anybody else's. I also had a hard time taking the criticism and the advice peers had to give me. I like the way my essay was, and I did not want to change anything.

Ashley makes a significant judgment about herself and her way of responding to others' ideas. Realizing her narrow-mindedness, and perhaps her arrogance, she has an opportunity to see the limits of her knowledge and to recognize the value of considering other perspectives. Her response also reminds us that terminology and self-evaluation won't affect attitudinal change by themselves. Because the primary text in the course emphasized critical thinking and because the class included multiple opportunities for peer response to writing, Ashley was able to connect writing to thinking and negotiation, and learn the benefits of consideration and humility.

I also asked English majors who were prospective secondary teachers to reflect about their predispositions toward writing and teaching writing. The following excerpt by Shana may be surprising:

As I began this semester, my attitude toward writing was very negative. I had not had many good experiences in writing during high school; therefore, my attitude toward writing was despairing and fearful which led to procrastination.

I did not want to have this negative attitude, but all I had experienced in high school writing classes was failure. Because the teach-

ers never told me what I could do differently to improve my writing, I was not given the opportunity to improve or view myself as a writer.

My attitude toward teaching writing was just as despairing. When I decided to major in Secondary Education, I only focused on teaching literature. I guess I thought that I could teach writing as minimally as was required, and the main focus of my classes would be on learning the great works of literature. With this attitude, I would not have been very helpful in producing writing students who were confident and good writers.

Perhaps this response isn't so surprising after all, but Shana obviously writes better than she thinks she does. In addition, the opportunity to reflect about her attitudes and the reasons for them helped her see the degree to which she was already successful and allowed her to make new goals for developing her skills further. The last paragraph of her self-evaluation demonstrates a changing sequence of attitudes from despair, fear, and procrastination to hope, courage, and persistence:

As I look through my portfolio, I see that I was not a bad writer. I just needed to develop the positive attitude that I could become a writer, and with some practice and guidance, I have become a better writer. The best example of my writing improvement is my personal essay. By learning that I needed to change my sentence structures and comma usage, I learned how to use them correctly in my writing. I now know how to use sentence variety, and I feel more confident about commas. I will probably struggle with commas for a while longer, but in the second half of the semester, I will continue my positive attitude as I courageously attempt to become a good writer.

Conclusion

As a teacher of writing, I believe I've had some initial success in helping these and other students connect their histories as writers to how those histories affect their attitudes. By giving them a vocabulary of attitude, providing them with works of literature that demonstrate or model particular attitudes, and asking them to reflect about how their writing experiences have shaped their attitudes toward writing, I hope that students are better able to re-shape themselves into successful writers. Writing this essay has also helped me think about ways I might extend my research into the relationship between attitude and writing, such as focusing on the particular attitudes of hope and fear in future surveys of students and teachers. For example, what is the relationship between an English teacher's age and his or her hopefulness toward students of writing? To what degree do teachers believe student attitudes of despair and fear can be changed?

Finally, returning to the relationship between attitude and emotion, revisions

of attitude frequently result in revisions of emotional experience related to writing. To demonstrate, I conclude with the final paragraph from another one of my first-year students' self-evaluations. In this case, Nicole reveals how a focus on attitude affected other aspects of her life and notes the emotional objective of her improved attitudes.

I have used what I learned in this class both inside and outside of school. I use my persistence techniques in my chemistry class. This is an attitude I am aware that I should have toward all of my classes. Outside of school, I have become more hopeful and courageous in attempting all of my goals in my life. These goals include making myself happy while being successful in all that I do. ☺

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