The Ethics of Empathy:
Making Connections in the Writing Classroom

Kia Jane Richmond

A student recently came to me to discuss a problem she was having with her writing; she said that she felt "lost" when it came to starting a paper. I responded in this manner: "*I know exactly how you feel. Let me tell you what I do in those situations*." While some might argue that my response was empathetic and ethical, after much consideration and research on empathy, I have decided that it was not. Rather than asking the student to tell me in more detail about her difficulties, I arrogantly assumed that my own experiences with writing would provide me with enough data to respond effectively to her request for help. This move on my part was not empathetic; instead, it bordered on condescension and manipulation, something of which I am not proud.

Empathy is an important part of teaching writing. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky propose that we teach composition to help students gain access to the language and the practices of the academy (9). To do this, they argue, we must "value student writing" (14). To me, that also requires our valuing the students themselves. Empathy is a vital part of that valuing. The problem is that our own experiences are not enough to help us empathize with our students. We have to be willing to listen to them—to find out what they know and what they are feeling—in order to imagine where they are coming from and to recognize that it might be a place or a set of feelings with which we are unfamiliar. Instead of relying on our memories, we should listen empathetically to our students so that we can help them with their writing as individuals—and not as carbon copies of ourselves.

To be empathetic is to be in tune with another's moods, emotions, and experiences. Often empathy is described as putting oneself in someone else's shoes. However, the concept of empathy is slippery and hard to define (Oswald). In fields such as psychology, ethics, and composition, I have found empathy defined in a variety of ways. For example, according to C. Daniel Batson, Shannon Early, and Giovanni Salvarani in the *1997 Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, "empathy seems to reflect an other-oriented emotional response congruent with the perceived plight of the person in need; it taps feeling for the other." This definition focuses on the ability of a person to imagine the feelings of another without depending on one's own feelings as a touchstone. In a history of the term in *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach*, Mark H. Davis contends that the concept of empathy began (in America) with Titchener's translation of "einfuhlung" in 1909 as an "active attempt by one individual to get 'in-

---

Kia Jane Richmond teaches composition and ESL at Illinois State University, where she is completing her Ph.D. in English Studies. Her focus is on the intersection between emotions and the teaching of composition at the college level.

side' the other, to reach out in some fashion through a deliberate intellectual effort" (5). In this sense of the word, empathy could be viewed as an intrusive, possibly invasive, act. However, the term was later interpreted by Martin Hoffman in 1987 as "an affective response more appropriate to someone else's situation than to one's own" (qtd. in Davis 9). In this sense empathy takes on a different aspect. Rather than trying to get inside another, empathy involves responding to the emotions of another without relying on one's own affective state. Ethically, I think, this view of empathy is more appropriate for teachers of composition to employ.

If we view empathy as a means of connecting to students based on where they are emotionally, rather than where we are, we would be more likely to avoid making assumptions and giving advice that might interfere with meeting our students' needs. In the situation described in the beginning of this essay, for example, I assumed that I knew my student's emotional state and that it was similar to my own. In responding without giving her an opportunity to elaborate on the specifics of her situation, I was not communicating empathetically. Instead, I was insisting that I could solve her problem for her, by telling her what I did when I felt lost. Ethically, I am responsible for helping students to improve their writing. However, when I step past my role as listener and into my role as advice-giver and problem-solver, I limit the kind of communication that Susan McLeod describes as empathetic in *Notes on the Heart: Affective Issues in the Writing Classroom.*

In that 1997 book, McLeod says that "empathetic understanding is usually seen not only as an ability to understand the other person's affective world but also to communicate this understanding to the other in a sensitive, caring way" (114). In doing so, she makes my own arguments about empathy more relevant. Ethically, we should employ empathy as a means of connecting to our students, not merely as a way of preparing to solve their problems but as a method of engaging them in a dialogue about their writing. As composition teachers, we must not assume that empathy is only a one-way communication process. We can be empathetic, but doing so involves our responses to students as well as our taking into consideration their affective states. The use of empathy in the writing classroom is not a new concept; however, the way I am imagining it being used involves both benefits for the students and risks for the teacher.

Carl Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg explains that "empathetic understanding" is different from "evaluative understanding, which follows the pattern 'I understand what is wrong with you'" (158). Instead, empathy involves understanding students from their own point of view. Empathy requires dialogue. By listening to students to comprehend their points of view, teachers risk changing their role in the student-teacher relationship from one of evaluator to one of partner. Rogers argues, "If you really understand another person in this way [empathetically], if you are willing to enter his [sic] private world and see the way life appears to him, without any attempt to make evaluative judgments, you run the risk of being changed yourself" (qtd. in Young, Becker, and Pike 287). Perhaps this is really the fear that paralyzes us in our roles as teachers. Some teachers are afraid of stepping outside the identity that students have constructed for them. After all, it is a safe space to inhabit; the subject position of "teacher"

entitles the person to wield power that is rarely questioned. Teachers are judges, critics, and grade-givers. With these roles comes an identity that does not seem, to some, to allow for error. In responding to students empathetically, teachers risk being inexact since emotions are not constant from person to person. When we interact with students empathetically, we also run the risk of not being viewed as "teacher," an idea that terrifies some who are invested in their subject positions as judges rather than helpers.

Empathy calls for two things: sensitivity to the feelings of others and the ability to imagine something that is not actually happening to oneself at that moment. Carolyn Pool relates that being able perceive the feelings of others is a kind of emotional intelligence (12). Another name for this part of empathy is "affective recognition," defined in *The Journal of Social Psychology* as "the ability to identify and understand how another person is feeling" (Oswald). Being able to imagine something that is not actually taking place is a cognitive process, a kind of general intelligence. It involves prediction and a kind of analysis of a situation to be able to imagine something not involving direct experience. This could also be called "cognitive perspective taking" or "the ability to recognize and understand the thoughts of others" (Oswald). Even though empathy is typically categorized as an emotional activity, it is both affective and cognitive in nature. Viewing empathy in this light might help convince those who view emotion as "an inferior form of mental processing" to reconsider the relevance of such an "emotional" concept to writing and the teaching of writing (Restak 71). In the "Dedication to Alice G. Brand" in the most recent issue of *JAEPL*, we are told that "[m]uch of the work in our field has concentrated on *logos* – on the rationality of the word separate from the necessary levening of emotion, thereby imperiling the ethicality of our endeavors as teachers and researchers" (vii). I find it useful, therefore, to go back to Aristotle's concepts of emotion in order to argue that he did not, as some would have us believe, privilege *logos* over *pathos.* Particularly in a discussion of empathy, we should endeavor to locate empathy as a concept whose roots are in both rationality and emotion.

Aristotle, in his categorizing emotions in *On Rhetoric*, of course, does not specifically include either the term or the concept of empathy as an emotion. However, he does hint at an aspect of empathy in his descriptions of "Praotes or Calmness." He argues that people are calm "toward those who are serious with them when they are serious, for they think they are being serious and not showing contempt" (131). In showing us how people tend to be reciprocal toward those displaying similar kinds of behavior, Aristotle is describing a kind of empathy; for it is only through being able to read the emotions of others that we would be able to determine whether or not people are being serious.

Similarly, Aristotle posits that "Pity or Eleos" is defined as "a certain pain at an apparently destructive or painful evil happening to one who does not deserve it and which a person might expect himself or one of his own to suffer, and this when it seems close at hand" (152). Being able to determine whether or not someone deserves pain or destruction is a cognitive act: One must think about whether or not someone has done anything worthy of pain or harm, weighing all the factors which might contribute to his/her guilt or innocence. But Aristotle says that "on the whole, [a person feels pity] when his state of mind is such that he remem-

bers things like this happening to himself or his own and expects them to happen to himself or his own" (152). Here, I believe, Aristotle is also describing one aspect of empathy. If we can imagine that something bad might happen to someone else – that we have felt before or can imagine feeling – we are empathizing with that person before we cognitively decide to feel pity for that person. In both situations, calmness and pity, Aristotle alludes to what we might now call empathy as a tool for gauging when to behave calmly or with pity.

In J.E.C. Welldon's translation of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, we are told that Aristotle says, "We are truly responsible for our emotions as for our reasoning" (73). In this sense, Aristotle separates the emotions from rational thought, but I don't believe that he is privileging one over the other. Rather, as Kennedy says in his translation of *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle recognizes that emotions are "an attribute of persons, not of a speech" (37). Both our students and ourselves as teachers bring emotions to our writing in any circumstance because as humans, we are emotional as well as rational beings. Kennedy tells us that "Aristotle's inclusion of emotion as a mode of persuasion, despite his objections to the handbooks, is a recognition that among human beings judgment is not entirely a rational act" (38). Thus, making judgments involves not only cognition but emotion as well. This is something that teachers of composition are likely to forget from time to time. When we judge a student's writing or conversational remarks, we use both rational thought and emotion to decide what to do. Empathy allows us to blend both kinds of judgment into one.

In her discussion "Aristotle on Emotions and Rational Persuasion," Martha Nussbaum attempts to clarify how Aristotle viewed emotions. She asserts that he saw emotions "not [as] blind animal forces, but intelligent and discriminating parts of the personality, closely related to beliefs of a certain sort" (303). She explains that the emotions, "while not 'irrational' in the sense of being noncognitive, are based on a family of beliefs about the worth of externals" (314). If we consider the emotional components of empathy in this way, as an emotion based on beliefs about what someone else is feeling or thinking, we would then assert that empathy is not irrational but merely a method of communication that is not only emotional but cognitive as well. Nussbaum states, "What is stressed [by Aristotle in *On Rhetoric*] is the fact that it is the way things are seen by the agent, not the fact of the matter, that is instrumental in getting the emotions going" (307). If we take Nussbaum's interpretation of Aristotle to heart, we will be able to see connections to our own teaching of writing. In order to understand our students' difficulties with writing, we must connect to the way they view the situation and not merely rely on our memory of situations that happened to us that might or might not be similar in nature. We must work more toward listening to students, using empathy as a method of communication that is not related to our power as instructors of writing.

Empathy is a specific kind of communication, one that seeks to minimize power relationships between discussants. This, I think, is what makes empathy a difficult concept for many writing teachers to employ. Our positions as teacher are filled with power – both real and assumed. We are grade-givers who exert our power over our students through our assessments of their finished products. We are also viewed as experts who are supposed to have all the answers to questions

about writing. As teachers, we exert our power over students when we encourage them to do (or not do) specific things with their ideas in their writing. Rarely do students ignore our advice; instead, they rely on us as experts to give them the appropriate information to help them communicate their ideas most effectively. We are assumed to have the students' best interests at heart, not our own. However, we are also responsible for the interests of the academy, as Bartholomae and Petrosky (and others) have asserted. Empathy need not negate that responsibility. By listening to our students empathetically, we are treating them as potential members of our community, as people whose ideas and feelings are just as worthy of attention as our own. By setting aside, but not abandoning, our roles as judges and experts when using empathy, we are not abdicating our responsibility to the academy. Rather, we are opening ourselves up to our students as dialogue partners through empathetic communication.

An ethics of empathy revolves around the idea that empathetic communication gives both the speaker (or student) and the listener (or teacher) an opportunity to be understood and to understand. The key is that empathy invites connection rather than coercion. Empathy displaces the power dynamic (at least to some extent) in the student-teacher relationship because the focus is on the speaker's message and emotional state rather than on the listener's position in relation to the speaker. This is sometimes a difficult distinction for teachers to make. For example, Wendy Bishop explains, "Students trust writing teachers with their thinking and their feeling" because their classes are usually smaller and more likely to tolerate close, interpersonal communication between student and teacher (512). Teachers who are not empathetic might be less willing to listen to students from a place of detachment because those teachers do not view their positions as listeners but as evaluators, or, as Bishop suggests, because they "have not been trained or encouraged" to view writing, or the teaching of writing, as "a therapeutic process" (506). While it is not my intention here to argue for writing as a therapeutic process, I believe it is necessary to talk about how conversations with students might involve a component of therapy, such as empathy, and the ethical implications of such an integral part of communication.

Listening empathetically to our students' comments might seem to some to border on emotional invasion of privacy. For example, in his discussion of ethical dilemmas related to students' "emotion-laden texts," Dave Waddell suggests that teachers can be viewed as unethical "when they coercively or voyeuristically prey on their students' secrets" revealed in open-ended personal writing assignments (67). One could expand Waddell's statement about texts to students' revelations about their writing difficulties. We are just as ethically responsible for maintaining emotional (and professional) distance from our students when we use empathetic listening as we are when we read their writing. In order to do so, we must remind ourselves that our students often come to us with their writing difficulties because of our positions of authority and not necessarily because they trust us as individuals who are invested in their personal growth. While some teachers might foster "a nonthreatening environment" or "a classroom that engenders a sense of safety" as Waddell predicts (68), it is reasonable to presume that others will not; nevertheless, both types of teachers must help students with their writing problems. Empathy allows any teacher the opportunity to interact

with a student without regard to the personal nature of the problem or to the teacher's own comfort with emotional issues. Furthermore, empathy does not require teachers to view teaching or writing as a therapeutic process; it only requires that they invest in empathy as a specific communicative process: dialectic.

Dialectic is a "particular kind of dialogue" that is used for "constructing and revising knowledge that its participants can share" (Clark 19). Empathy is a dialectic process that is comprised of listening and responding. One of the most effective ways that we can help our students is by separating these two components of empathy. When we listen, we should focus on what the student is relating, not thinking about our own similar (or disparate) experiences or about what we are going to say in response. Listening is an active process; it requires us to suspend our own agendas in order to hear completely what the other person is trying to tell us. Responding is secondary. Only after we have checked with a student to see if we have understood what he or she has said—using, perhaps, a Rogerian "restatement" technique such as the one explained in detail by Nathaniel Teich (22)—should we move toward considering how we will respond.

For example, when one of my students asked me for help with a paper for another class, she said that she was frustrated because she could not find much information to use in making an argument about a specific (and rather unknown) author. She said, "I don't feel like I am going to be able to do what the teacher is asking of me, and I don't know what I should do." While she was telling me about her search for sources, I had to remind myself (mentally) that I should be listening to her story and not thinking about my own difficulties with research. This allowed me to concentrate on her situation specifically and kept me from beginning to devise solutions for her problem until I had heard all she had to say.

From time to time, I stopped her so that I could summarize what I heard her saying about her struggle. By interacting with the student in this manner, I was able to suspend my own frustrations with research and focus on what she was trying to relate to me—that she felt inadequate and was scared to tell her teacher that she was having difficulties with the assignment. Instead of saying, "I know what you mean. I have often had trouble myself with finding sources," I said, "It sounds like you are really upset about not finding what you think you need to meet your teacher's needs on this assignment. That must be really frustrating." She nodded her head and went on to describe her dilemma. While I did not specifically make suggestions as to how she could find more sources, I acknowledged her emotions and then let her know that it was acceptable to share her feelings with her literature professor. Thus, I used both empathetic listening and a kind of inner dialogue to help me defer my own emotional response to her comments. This allowed me to reinforce my relationship to the student as a helping one—one without any strings attached to my power position as a teacher.

As dialectic, empathy provides us with the means to help students with their writing difficulties without having to depend on our subject positions as teachers for authority. We are given the authority to respond by the students when they choose to share their problems with us. This authority is not only given to teachers; it is also given to friends, classmates, and others who take the time to listen from a position of empathy.

When a student chooses to share with us her difficulties with a particular assignment or part of the writing process, she is inviting us to visit her world, not overhaul it. For example, one of my students recently asked me to talk with him about trouble he was having with incorporating quotes from external sources into his essay. In doing so, he was not asking me to write his paper for him, nor was he requesting that I change the assignment to help him avoid using quotes altogether. What he wanted instead was to have someone listen to him as he described how frustrating it was for him to blend his own ideas with those of so-called experts on the topic. If I had responded to him without listening empathetically— if I had merely said, "Here, put this quote here and reword the other into your conclusion"—I might have solved an immediate problem; however, I might have missed an opportunity to help him consider why he finds using quotes so difficult.

What I chose to do in this case was to restate to the student what I thought I heard him saying; this encouraged him to go into more detail. He explained that using quotes makes him feel that his own opinions are not as important or as valid as those of writers who have been published in authoritative texts. After he explained this problem, I asked him to consider whether the people who wrote the quotes he was using might have ever felt the same way he did, and how they might have dealt with that problem. I did not take over his job as creator of his text; rather, I encouraged him instead to use his own authority as a writer to decide when and where to use other people's ideas to support his own.

While listening empathetically, I was able to see into his world as a writer, but I was not able—nor should I have been able—to take over his world. My job as a writing teacher is to facilitate individual students' growth, not to dictate that growth based on my own (limited) experience as a writer or a teacher. Empathy, as I have defined it, does not allow us to invade our students' worlds. Instead, it helps us to communicate more effectively with our students in a dialectic that validates their experiences as meaningful to their growth as writers and as members of the academic community.

In a recent article in *Ethics*, Robert Gordon argues that "to predict or explain the actual behavior of other agents, it often suffices to call on our own emotions, desires, and practical reasoning, with little or no modification" (733). He discusses giving advice and its connection to empathy: "Typically, when we set ourselves up to give advice, we imaginatively project ourselves into the person's problem situation" (740). Gordon argues that it is important, when giving advice, to "hold back in certain ways from identification with the other person" (740). That is, in order to be able to help someone, we must be able to empathize with that person, to see the problem from his/her point of view, without mistakenly imagining what we ourselves would do in the same situation. For example, in Teich's suggestion that "empathy is *not identification* with the other," I interpret him as saying that we should use empathy to become aware of students' feelings but not attempt to feel the same thing ourselves (251). Teich's point is based on Carl Rogers' definition of empathy as an ability to understand another's "inner world of private personal meanings as if it were your own, but without ever losing the 'as if' quality" of the experience (Rogers and Stevens 89). Being empathetic requires a teacher to leave the responsibility of owning the emotions

and experiences to the students. "Empathy is many things," Lou Ureneck writes, "but first it may be an opening of the mind to other points of view." He suggests that before we can imagine the world as others view it, "before we can crawl into their skins to know their aspirations and anxieties...we need to let go, at least temporarily, of our own closely held views and experiences."

For composition teachers the connection is clear. We should empathize with our students when they have trouble, but we must not assume that our own solutions to similar problems will be applicable or even appropriate for them. We should remember that we should see the problem through their eyes, their emotions, and their experiences *before* we attempt to offer suggestions. This is, as Ureneck suggests, "a very difficult task indeed." For example, when a student comes to us having trouble with an introduction (as I related in my opening example), instead of telling the student what we would do in that instance, it would be more appropriate to ask the student to describe her feelings about the difficulty so that we could better gauge the student's emotional state. We might then offer several alternatives from which the student could choose. By not identifying with the student directly—that is, by listening to the student and thinking about the problem from her particular point of view—we maintain the emotional and critical distance required to help us be empathetic and guide the student at the same time.

When we stretch ourselves toward our students through empathy, attempting to make connections rather than corrections, we are embracing a student-centered pedagogy. Composition teachers who use empathy with their students release themselves from the power struggles often associated with traditional student-teacher relationships. Rather than listening to students with the goal of judging them or evaluating their words, empathetic teachers work to listen to students with the goal of discovering where they are in their thoughts and how they feel about their writing. A frustration for empathetic teachers may arise when we realize that our position as "teacher" within the university setting requires us, at some point, to evaluate our students' writing, the result of their cognitive and affective processing. We cannot step outside our roles as they are defined by the academy; however, at some points during the composing process, we can de-emphasize our roles as judges in order to let students know that their ideas and emotions have merit of their own. Peter Elbow argues that the basic subtext in a writer's text is likely to be 'Listen to me, I have something to tell you'" (81). I would add that students also want to be heard when they come to us for advice about their writing. By listening to students empathetically, teachers are helping students to be heard. This is essential if we are to invite them to become members of our academic community. When they are heard first, and then given advice (when necessary) about any changes required by a specific discourse community, students will acquire the confidence they need to participate in ongoing conversations.

As Christy Friend suggests, even as we make spaces in our classrooms for a variety of opinions, "we must also create spaces where students can forge alliances with us, with other students, and with others in the larger community" (562). By becoming aware of students' emotions, we open up our classrooms as places of connection. Empathy, employed as a pedagogical method of relating to and

responding to students and their writing, seems to offer a way for writing teachers to make connections between what they claim to value—cooperation, conversation, and critique—and what they do—teach, listen, and advise. Teaching empathetically builds a bridge between our goals and our ethics. ⚲

Works Cited

Aristotle. *The Nichomachean Ethics.* Trans. J.E.C. Welldon. Buffalo: Prometheus, 1987.

—. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse.* Trans. George A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

Bartholomae, David, and Anthony R. Petrosky. *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1986.

Batson, C. Daniel, Shannon Early, and Giovanni Salvarani. "Perspective Taking: Imagining How Another Feels versus Imagining How You Would Feel." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23 (1997): 751-58. Online. Milner Lib. Illinois State U. Infotrac. 23 Sept. 1998.

Bishop, Wendy. "Writing Is/And Therapy?: Raising Questions about Writing Classrooms And Writing Program Administration." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 13 (1993): 503-16.

Clark, Gregory. *Dialogue, Dialectic, and Conversation: A Social Perspective on the Function of Writing.* Studies in Writing and Rhetoric. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.

Davis, Mark H. *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach.* Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1994.

Fleckenstein, Kristie S., and Linda T. Calendrillo. "Dedication to Alice G. Brand." *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* 4 (1998-99): vii.

Elbow, Peter. "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals." *College Composition and Communication* 46 (1995): 72-83.

Friend, Christy. "Ethics in the Writing Classroom: A Nondistributive Approach." *College English* 56 (1994): 548-67.

Gordon, Robert M. "Sympathy, Simulation, and the Impartial Spectator." *Ethics* 105 (1995): 727-42.

Kennedy, George A. , Trans. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse.* New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

McLeod, Susan H. *Notes on the Heart: Affective Issues in the Writing Classroom.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1997.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven. "Aristotle on Emotions and Rational Persuasion." *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric.* Ed. Amelie L. Rorty. Berkley: U of California P, 1996. 303-23.

Oswald, Patricia A. "The Effects of Cognitive and Affective Perspective Taking, Empathetic Concern and Altruistic Helping." *The Journal of Social Psychology* 136 (1996): 613-23. Online. Milner Lib. Illinois State U. Infotrac. 24 Sept. 1998.

Pool, Carolyn R. "Up with Emotional Health." *Educational Leadership* 54.8 (1997): 12-14. Online. Milner Lib. Illinois State U. Infotrac. 26 Mar. 1998.

Restak, Richard. *The Brain has a Mind of Its Own: Insights from a Practicing Neurologist.* New York: Crown P, 1991.

Rogers, Carl R., and H. Jerome Freiberg. *Freedom to Learn.* Rev. ed. New York: Merrill, 1994.

Rogers, Carl R., and Barry Stevens. *Person to Person: The Problem of Being Human.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967.

Teich, Nathaniel, ed. *Rogerian Perspectives: Collaborative Rhetoric for Oral and Written Communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1992.

Ureneck, Lou. "Empathy: Path to a Different World." *Nieman Reports* 49.1 (1995): 19-21. Online. Milner Lib. Illinois State U. Infotrac. 23 Sept. 1998.

Waddell, Dave. "When a Student Ends a Wounded Silence." *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* 4 (1998-99): 61-70.

Young, Richard, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike. *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*. New York: Harcourt, 1970. 273-90.