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RESPONDING TO PERSONAL ISSUES IN
PERSONAL/EXPERIENTIAL ESSAYS

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Teresa Nanette Owen

June 1994

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Approved by:



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ABSTRACT

Assigning personal/experiential essays in a composition course will, at times, elicit emotional accounts of our students' lives. At other times, we may encounter writing that opposes our own political, religious, and moral values. Some teachers feel uncomfortable assigning such essays because of the content and the necessity of responding to these personal issues.

This thesis will attempt to answer the following questions: What pedagogical issues surround the assigning of personal/experiential essays that involve personal issues in our composition classes? What are students saying in these essays? What is their tone, and what meaning are they trying to convey to their reader? How do we respond to personal issues which make us uncomfortable, while simultaneously demanding organization, clarity, and cohesion?

This thesis will review the growth and diversification of our campuses and the changing needs of our students, and present the controversy between scholars who advocate personal essays and those who advocate only objective academic discourse. It will also present an analysis of how writers' tone and meaning are expressed through descriptive choices. Finally, it will discuss the role of instructors as audience, responder, and evaluator.

In conclusion, I will argue that by understanding our students' needs to write about their own experiences and biases and understanding the choices students make in their writing, we can actively and comfortably respond, direct, and evaluate personal/experiential essays dealing with the experiences and biases in our students' lives.

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The main support I had in this project came from my family. Thank you Lee, my husband and friend, for encouraging me to pursue higher goals, and thank you Josh and Krista for understanding the many times Mom had to work. I love you.

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INTRODUCTION

Dealing with a Crisis

This project began in the Writing Center at California State University, San Bernardino. I was a tutor, and a student from a Basic Writing class came in for help on her essay. One of the techniques I used in my tutoring sessions was to read the essays aloud. I did that for two reasons. One was so that the students could hear the rhythm of their writing, and the other was so that the students could hear any errors in the essay. This student was very quiet and seemed shy. I proceeded to read her essay aloud. The essay was about a favorite male cousin who lived with her family and owned a jewelry store in South Central Los Angeles. During the L.A. riots, he became very concerned about his store and decided to go into Los Angeles to check his business. He was murdered. As I finished reading the essay, I looked at the student and saw the tears streaming down her face. Needless to say, we did not discuss any problems with the essay. We spent the half-hour session talking about her feelings, and how she felt writing about this incident. She said it hurt, but at the same time helped because it brought the feelings to the surface where she could deal with them. It was a very emotional session.

When the session was over, I mentioned the paper to a colleague of mine. I told her how glad I was that I was not the teacher that had to evaluate the essay because I thought it would be very difficult discussing the problems of the essay, while at the same time dealing with the emotional aspect. My colleague informed me that I should have directed the student to write on another topic, that she was too emotionally attached to write clearly or coherently. My colleague also told me she did not encourage her students to write personal essays because she was not comfortable responding to personal essays that could be potentially emotional. I was taken aback a little because I was on the other side of the fence, believing that students should be allowed to write about what they are interested in. After talking with several other colleagues and reading several articles, I discovered there is a division between teachers who feel that personal essays have no place in a university composition course and those who encourage their students to write about their personal feelings.

During my research into student writing on emotional issues, I came across several essays that dealt with issues that opposed my own moral values. Now I was faced with wondering how I would respond to essays that affected me morally and politically, as well as emotionally. Issues that affect us emotionally, politically, and morally are all difficult to respond to, and while there is a distinction

between objective and subjective discourse, "all discourse is value-laden" (Rothgery 242). But when values expressed in students' essays conflict with our own, our initial reaction is emotional, causing many of us to struggle with our own emotions and how those feelings will affect our responses.

The focus of this thesis is on how we, as instructors, can best respond to and evaluate personal/experiential essays that discuss personal issues which affect both writer and reader, and how we can help writers move from subjective to objective discourse, by assigning different modes of writing that will, initially, allow students to write about personal experiences, then move towards another mode that would be less subjective and lean towards more objective analysis. In this research, I examined the changes in student population on university campuses, the arguments for objective and subjective writing, the motivation to write subjective essays, the writers' attitudes, and the role of the instructor. Chapter one of this thesis will review how our university campuses have diversified, and it will present the controversy between those who assign and encourage students to write personal/experiential essays, and those who feel we should teach our students only objective academic discourse. I, like many teachers, argue that writing about one's own experiences creates writing that is rich and allows personal growth, and with personal

growth comes academic growth because personal essays foster developmental strategies for narrative and descriptive essays. Through our responses, we can help our students learn those strategies, analyze their feelings, and direct them towards objective discourse that reflects strong analytical and critical thinking skills, which is what most instructors, universities, and future employers are hoping students can produce.

Chapter two will discuss the results of an analysis of students' essays that focused on how writers' tone and meaning are conveyed through their descriptive choices (e.g. tense selection; metaphors). From this analysis, we can understand what writers feel about their subject, and thus focus our responses to address the writers' needs.

Chapter three will explore our role as audience and responder to these essays. Some teachers feel we should be solely committed to knowledge and society and demand only objective academic writing. Others feel we should befriend our students and invite them to expound their feelings, and still others try to walk down the middle, balancing both sides equally (Elbow, "Embracing" 225). Our position on these issues influences the way we respond. At times, we may struggle to separate our own emotions and opinions from our responses because we feel we should only respond "objectively"--in which case, I question if we are being fair to our students and their needs.

Based on this research, I will argue that by understanding our students' needs to write about their own experiences and opinions and understanding the choices students make in their writing, we can be an active audience who can confidently respond, direct, and evaluate personal/experiential essays dealing with the subjectivity of our students' lives, and from there teach them to move from describing to analyzing, arguing, and evaluating their emotions and convictions. Through our responses, we can teach them to move from subjective to objective academic discourse and to be critical thinkers.

CHAPTER I

DEBATING THE PERSONAL ESSAY

History, Arguments, and Value

For the past several years, I was taught different pedagogical theories designed to guide me in teaching composition such as the prose model, rhetorical, epistemic, and the experiential approaches found in the text Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition. My job was to sort through all the information and decide what theory or theories I wanted to adopt. The one I found most interesting is the experiential approach. This approach claims, "The best student writing is motivated by personal feelings and experience" (Judy 39). One discussion among composition teachers begins here because there are teachers who feel that writing based on personal experience is fine for high school, but in college, students should write objectively about their topics, and not focus on an emotional attachment that could affect their critical thinking skills. Robert J. Connors in his article, "Personal Writing Assignments," poses the debate question: Should we emphasize "honest, personal" writing, stress "academic," "argumentative," or "practical" subjects, or try somehow to create a balance among these discourse aims

(166)?

In order to examine the value of personal essays, this chapter will discuss the diversification of university campuses and summarize arguments for and against assigning personal essays.

Since classical times, the student population has evolved from the majority being classically-prepared, elitist students to the majority now being a diverse mixture of races, socioeconomic classes, and levels of education (Conner 172). Because of the "broad, unspecialized" education of this new majority, composition teachers have begun to reject the abstract, impersonal topics and assign topics of a personal nature in order to meet the needs of this new generation of university students.

On campuses today, the theme is diversity and pluralism. As Dinesh D'Souza points out in his book, Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus, the American university is the birthplace and testing ground for the social transformation found in our society today. America is becoming a multiracial, multicultural society with people immigrating in great numbers from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, while European immigration has shrunk from 50 percent of all arrivals between 1955 and 1964 to 7 percent from 1975 to the present. D'Souza claims, "The recolorization of America is further enhanced by domestic minority birth rates, which

exceed that of whites" (13).

The admission policies on many campuses have been altered to meet the needs of and to reflect more accurately the mix of this changing society. A sizable portion of freshman classes are filled with students from certified minority groups such as African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, American Indians, women, the physically disabled, homosexuals, and lesbians, who are being recognized as groups who in the past have been denied equal access to and representation within college programs (2-3).

Our universities are actively promoting "pluralism" and "diversity" by establishing and funding institutions for minority groups. On our campuses, clubs, student unions, fraternities and sororities, "theme houses," and cultural centers are being structured for individualized groups based on race, gender, and sexual orientation (8).

There is no denying that our campus populations are changing, and because of those changes, our composition classes are also changing. Our students are faced with many social problems, especially in large cities. In their personal lives, they deal with prejudices, drugs, teen-age pregnancies, gangs, dysfunctional families, homelessness, suicides, or admitting their sexual orientation. Faced with so many personal issues, our students are writing about being abused, abusing others, being shot, shooting someone, losing their jobs, fear of not being able to get a job, and

letting the world know they are gay while listening to more and more open gay bashing. Besides seeing student essays that describe the death or serious illness of a loved one, we are seeing student essays that describe personal encounters with the social ills of today, and if we allow personal writing in our classrooms, we are going to have to know how to respond to a student who confesses to shooting someone during an initiation into a gang. Because of the changes in student population and students' interest in discussing personal social issues, pedagogical disagreements can surface as teachers clash about what students should know and control in their writing. Both sides of this issue can be examined in the arguments of David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow.

Bartholomae's side of the issue argues that we have a responsibility to the university, society, and knowledge. We spent many years of our lives gaining knowledge in a certain field and were hired by universities to share that knowledge with our students in order to make them "productive" members of society. Our job is to teach our students how to write academic and scholarly discourse so that when they begin their chosen careers, they will be able to discuss, analyze, argue, expand their knowledge in their special fields. To teach our students otherwise is to do them a disservice because they may not be able to examine life objectively in either their writing or in their

professional lives. Many argue that personal writing is not used in the business world, and therefore, we should not influence our students to write about their experiences.

Bartholomae writes:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion-- invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (134)

Bartholomae believes that students should try a variety of voices and to work within fields to learn the presentation of examples. He claims students should one day write like a literary critic and the next day like an experimental psychologist. Student must appropriate a specialized discourse, according to Bartholomae (135). Patricia Bizzell pursues a similar philosophy by claiming that in failing to teach academic language, expressivists harm students in two ways. One, encouraging students to write in everyday language puts them at a disadvantage when they must write within the academic disciplines. Two, since mastering academic discourse is also learning new ways of thinking, then expressive writing limits students' chances to develop academically-valued ways of thinking (Fishman 648). Many teachers agree with Bartholomae and Bizzell's philosophy: Teaching strict academic discourse should be the main objective in our composition classrooms. But what Joy S.

Ritchie discovered when she was observing a classroom was that if we stress objective academic writing too much, our students write exactly the way we want, but they lack personality in their writing because students believe that writing is a matter of conforming to the conventions of academic discourse, of imitating and reproducing the ideas and information of authorities on a given subject, without a personal voice, much less a personal experience (160).

Bartholomae sums the anti-expressivist position this way:

If my students are going to write for me by knowing who I am--and if this means more than knowing my prejudices, psyching me out--it means knowing what I know; it means having the knowledge of a professor of English. They have, then, to know what I know and how I know what I know (the interpretive schemes that define the way I would work out the problems I set up for them); they have to learn to write what I would write or to offer up some approximation of the discourse. (141)

Many experts disagree with this view. Writing about personal experience can help students create writing that is very expressive. Expressive writing is an act of self-definition of what a person knows, can discover, or wonders about. Personal writing is descriptive writing that tells what a person can feel, see, hear, touch, taste, which reflects the many faceted crystal human beings are (Rico, Natural Way, 16). Such expressivism is located within the individual and is a creative act in which the discovery of the true self is as important as the product (Berlin Rhetoric and Reality 484).

Students also react strongly to Bartholomae and Bizzell's philosophy. Ann Merle Feldman, an instructor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, shared several of her students' responses to "Inventing the University" at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. One student wrote:

I began to reflect...I became angered...It was not news to me that students try to integrate themselves into an acceptable language of the university...I am like the students in this article...[writing] in a class to appease the professor. What you write begins to distance itself from you--becomes unfamiliar with your true feelings...the student capable of conforming to ideologies of the university will succeed. Those that stay firm on their own feelings--unable to conform will no doubt fail. How sad!

Another student writes:

I've been taught to parrot and have been taught to memorize then mentally regurgitate facts that I don't understand and can't place in any context. I use the jargon I hear without fully comprehending it, and have written "A" papers on topics I am totally mystified by. I have been successfully "appropriated" by the "codes" of academia, but haven't really learned. (CCCC, San Diego, 1993)

It is true that successful student writers are those who have adapted to the academic community by taking on the garments of its discourse (Newlin "Why" 51). However, it must be pointed out that this applies to the academic community, not the social community. To many students, the academic community, while a part of the social community, is a community that is "closed" and "structured." The requirements of the social community, which is open,

diverse, and full of different personalities, emotions, and opinions, are many times overlooked when we teach our students strict, objective academic discourse. We have a choice of whether we want our students to think, analyze, and write in new and insightful ways using their own voices, or to think and write in the academic persona which can be very closed and structured depending on the pedagogy in individual classrooms. If we choose the latter, and the academic persona takes over students' writing, then their writing can become lifeless. Writing that does not contain an authentic personality is neither interesting to write nor to read. Yet, lifeless prose often earns students the high grades they desire. Perhaps, there can be a bridge in this dichotomy.

A bridge between subjective and objective writing is what Peter Elbow tries to do in his composition courses. He claims personal essays should be incorporated into our composition courses as part of the curriculum, though not as the only activity we assign--thus, we may intermingle expressivism and objective academic discourse. Since academic discourse tries to be direct about the "position"--the argument, reasons, and claim but seems to avoid the texture of feelings or attitude that lie behind that position (Elbow, "Reflections," 145), Elbow suggests teachers assign a piece of writing based on experience followed by another assignment that builds on previous

assignment but focuses on a conceptual problem (150) to include both activities and expose students to both experiences. Obviously intermingling means one form does not replace the other, but that both forms find a home in the modern composition course.

In Elbow's article, "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues," he claims that life is long and college is short, and very few of our students will ever have to write academic discourse after college (136). He also states:

In my view, the best test of a writing course is whether it makes students more likely to use writing in their lives: perhaps to write notes and letters to friends or loved ones; perhaps to write in a diary or to make sense of what's happening in their lives; perhaps to write in a learning journal to figure out a difficult subject they are studying; perhaps to write stories or poems for themselves or for informal circulation or even for serious publication; perhaps to write in the public realm such as letters to the newspaper or broadsides on dormitory walls. (136)

Students need both personal and academic writing to prepare them for reality outside of the university. Elbow does not advocate that we teach only personal writing, but to include it in academic writing because as a base, it can help students produce good academic discourse (137). Les Perelman echoes this merger, instead of privileging academic writing to the virtual exclusion of the writing required in other social roles (476). I also agree with Elbow's position and feel that the best way we can help our students

is to include both personal writing and objective academic discourse in our composition classrooms.

Several of my colleagues also agree with this philosophy. I conducted a survey of the composition teachers at California State University, San Bernardino and Victor Valley College to receive some feedback regarding the issue of allowing/encouraging personal/experiential writing in our classrooms. In this survey, I received several comments emphasizing the merger of personal and objective academic writing. One colleague stated, "I believe emotion is part of the human response repertoire, and to disallow it would be to say that only part of human experience is valid" (MacPike, Survey CSUSB 1993). Another colleague claims:

Students are writing about something that is familiar and relevant to them; they can see that essays don't have to be solely "objective," or "argumentative," that expressive, reflective writing is also valuable. (Newlin, Survey CSUSB 1993)

When students are in our classrooms, they are in an academic setting; however, when they are out of our classrooms, they are in a humanistic setting that contains widely diverse elements. Teaching them only objective academic discourse might guarantee them success in the academic world and even perhaps in their careers. But are we letting them down in the humanistic world? Some of our students will leave the academic setting to write fiction, poems, children's stories, plays, screenplays, and scripts. I feel, as does

Elbow, that we are obligated to help them succeed in life, not just in an academic setting. We can begin to do this by allowing personal essays which foster developmental strategies for narrative and descriptive writing, and then by directing our students to analyze their feelings and opinions and become critical thinkers.

As I stated in my introduction, I, like many teachers, believe that writing about one's own experiences creates writing that is rich and allows personal growth which can lead to academic growth. As Julian Quarles points out:

The Personal Essay may indeed subscribe (and to a real extent, should subscribe) to elements of narrative composition we as instructors hope to promote: effectiveness in description, character illustration/illumination, a vibrant prose throughout, a legitimate and appropriate tone, and cleanness in presentation. (Quarles, Survey VVC 1993)

If students can develop these elements in writing about personal experiences, we can help them transfer those elements to objective writing. Just listen to a defense attorney who has been trained in objective argument during his/her closing remarks, and we will find all of these elements. Students who choose such a profession need to be trained in description, narration, analysis, and argument in order to succeed in their careers. Our job is to help them develop those modes of discourse.

Another good reason for allowing personal/experiential essays in composition classrooms is so that we can become

better acquainted with our students. As one of my colleagues argues, "using personal narrative provides for a variety of assignments and serves as a transition to other kinds of writing; these essays help the student and me to all become better acquainted" (Newlin Survey). Becoming better acquainted with our students will assist us to understand their needs so that we can be their "coach" preparing them to meet the rigors of the academic and social world (Elbow "Embracing" 229). In composition courses, one writing assignment builds on the next, and personal/experiential essays can provide a transition to other kinds of writing.

As a new teacher in the composition field, I have experimented with different ideas for my classroom. I wonder how I can help my students move from the subjective to the objective. There are many models to follow, but one I particularly like is the one Cherrlyn Eller uses in her Management 495 class at California State University, San Bernardino. She has her students work on a single project throughout the quarter. Her students write one paper discussing a certain problem, followed by another paper that deals with the controversy surrounding the same problem. The next paper deals with possible solutions, and the final paper is the combined work of all papers.

This same structure, I believe, would work to help students move from subjective to objective writing, by

taking them through the different modes of composition. Elbow gives some guidelines on expanding personal essays into other modes of writing. He says that we should ask students for a piece of writing that is based on some experience. If it is successful, the readers will also experience what the writer did. Next we should ask for a different piece of writing built from the personal experience essay but that explains some issue or solves a conceptual problem. We should not ask the students to suppress their own experience, but do ask that the experience not be the main focus. If the essay does the conceptual job, then the writing begins to move from the subjective. Each subsequent piece of writing should be process writing, in which students try to describe and analyze what they have written and how they went about writing it, along with class discussions examining the differences between the tasks ("Reflections" 150). For instance, if a student writes a narration or description essay about his/her father slowly dying of cancer, maybe the next essay could compare and contrast different treatments for cancer, or maybe compare and contrast different hospitals that specialize in treating certain forms of cancer illnesses. The third paper could be an argumentative paper for or against euthanasia. A research paper could examine how federal funds are used in researching a cure for cancer. The link here is that each of these essays would

include something that the teacher knows is of interest to the student, and each new writing assignment could show the student how one subject can be extended into the different modes of discourse. Of course, we must prepare for the student who becomes bored or frustrated writing about the same subject. Our challenge will be to keep the interest and motivation of each student intact.

In today's composition classrooms, students are writing about problems in their personal lives more than ever. As Stephen Judy points out, "humans have an intrinsic need to sort through and understand their experiences, and second, ... they need to share their perceptions with others" (38). In the last year because of the Rodney King civil rights trial, some teachers have had their students write about their feelings in hopes that such expression might alleviate tensions that led to the L.A. riots in April 1992. They may be writing about these problems just to sort them out as Judy said. But encouraging students to write about personal social issues has caused a problem for teachers because it is easier to read, respond, and evaluate essays that are strictly objective than it is to read those that deal with a student who is gay and wants the world to know, a student who has been sexually abused most of his/her life, a student who has lost a loved one to gang violence, or a student discussing his/her violent acts as a former gang member.

Some teachers will not allow their students to write

about emotional, political, moral experiences or convictions because they are either not comfortable reading and responding to such personal revelations, or they follow the philosophy of Bartholomae and strictly insist on objective discourse. Other teachers, however, encourage their students to write expressively. One of those teachers is Gabriele Rico. Rico's latest work, Pain and Possibility: Writing Your Way Through Personal Crisis, is a textbook designed to help students sort through their crises and write about their experiences. Rico claims that if students are allowed to write about their emotional experiences, they can discover a way through a crisis, uncover purposes they did not know, rediscover themselves, and achieve a new equilibrium which comes with empowerment (XI). The whole text is designed to bring the student from the depths of his/her potentially turbulent emotion and bring him/her to a more free and rational state of being. Basically students gain confidence about themselves, their lives, and their writing. They learn first to express themselves, then to analyze what they wrote, and then to revise their thoughts based on their analysis. In composition classrooms, this is what we aim to teach--confidence in writing, strong voice, and critical thinking.

As Rico and Elbow agree, students should be allowed to write about any experience or bias, especially if it is affecting their ability to go beyond their experiences and

convictions and write objectively. Sometimes a writer can get so emotionally involved with a personal issue that he/she cannot think of anything else. For example, if the student in the introduction had not been allowed to write about her cousin's death, I find it difficult to believe that she could write an objective essay discussing the Los Angeles riots because every time she would think about those riots, she would grieve. But once she has had the opportunity to express her grief and achieve at least a limited catharsis, she will be more able to view the riots objectively. If we encourage our students to expand their thinking by writing about personal feelings, and then direct them to other forms of discourse such as analyzing, arguing, and evaluating that lead to critical thinking and objective writing, the student can eventually be assisted to write an essay that objectively looks at the situation that caused the emotion or opinion. For example, going back to the L.A. riots assignment, a teacher could have the student write a second paper, a cause and effect paper, discussing the underlying reasons for the riots, or the student could research police department policies regarding riots. Since the emotions have come out in the first paper, the instructor can, through written and verbal responses, lead the student to be objective in subsequent essays.

This chapter does not attempt to solve the controversy between those who teach only objective academic discourse

and those who intermingle personal essays with other modes of academic discourse. However, it does attempt to establish the value of personal experience writing in the college classroom. Students should be allowed to intermingle personal essays with objective writing because there are students in our diversified academic community who wish and need to discuss social issues more than they need to conform to the scholarly pursuits of other generations of students. With the changing population on our campuses, personal essays should be intermingled with academic discourse in composition courses because as Ed White writes: "We must be aware that the value of a text is negotiated, culture-bound, located in social structures" (Writers 98), and personal essays are reflections of students' social structure. If instructors create writing assignments that allow students to work with sources of their own that can complicate and enrich their primary sources, students will find new ways to write scholarly, objective essays that are exploratory, thoughtful, and reflective (Sommers 30). We can encourage this process by recognizing our students' and our own biases, understanding how we are affected by personal/experiential writing, and thus focusing our responses to address our students' needs to share their personal lives and opinions with us. We can focus our responses to direct our students to analyze their feelings and opinions, think critically, and write objectively about

what influences them.

CHAPTER II

MOTIVATION AND STRUCTURE

An Analysis of Students' Motivation and Tone

If a child has been a victim of child abuse, a woman a victim of spousal assault, or a person a victim of a violent crime, then he/she usually receives counseling. Counseling is a way for victims to communicate their feelings and fears. This communication is necessary in dealing with problems because language helps us to create and sustain relationships with other people (Cohn 7). These relationships are important to all of us, as valued relationships are essential for giving others moral support and for our own personal growth. In a classroom a teacher/student relationship is pre-established. When teachers enter a classroom at the beginning of a quarter/semester, often all they know about the students are names and social security numbers. It takes a week, sometimes two to associate a person with a name. In the writing classroom where objective academic writing is taught, the relationship between teacher and student may remain distant. There is little motivation for either teacher or student to go beyond that established distant

relationship, unless one makes an initial gesture to remove that distance, or the teacher and student work on a collaborative project, or a problem arises which necessitates a closer relationship.

We all know that students need motivation to write, and for students to write objectively, they need motivation that differs from the motivation to write subjectively. When we give our students an assignment, we constantly remind them to be aware of their audience. We emphasize that we are not the audience, even though in their minds we often are the primary or only audience. Since we are members of that audience, we read, react, and respond to our students' essays, and the way we respond can motivate our students to either maintain the pre-established teacher/student relationship, or we can motivate our students to think of us as coaches/allies/friends. If a student reaches out to us, we should be able to reach out too and help. Our main job is to help students improve their writing, but we can also help them find resources. Most importantly, though, we can just listen because words not only serve as a medium of communication but also help us to identify, shape, and give meaning to those relationships (Cohn 7).

In a composition course students use language to create relationships with their teachers, other classmates, and themselves. Sometimes the personality of a teacher will motivate a student to be emotional in his/her writing. For

instance, a teacher with a friendly, outgoing personality may be able to motivate a student to communicate personal feelings, whereas, a teacher with a more reserved personality may not motivate personal revelation. When a student writes a personal/experiential essay that is filled with emotion, bias, or opinion, that student is looking for a response. We are the audience, reader, listener, and responder, and through our responses, we motivate our students. One essay assignment I give in my basic writing class is, "Write an essay about something that happened to you that has special meaning in your life." My students bring in rough drafts of their essays for a workshop. During one such workshop, a student asked that I read her paper instead of the other members of the group reading it. It was a story about how she and her sisters had been sexually abused by their stepfather. She talked about how angry she was and how guilty she felt because she could not love the man her mother loved. In her essay, she mentioned that she had not been to a counselor because she could not afford one. She continued to say that she just hoped someone would listen and believe her side of the story because, at one time, she had tried to talk to her mother about what was happening, and her mother did not believe her. I told her I was not a counselor. I did not have the training. But I assured her there were people on campus who could counsel her. I functioned as the listener, and we

discussed the tone of the writing. The words did not reflect her anger or guilt. Her tone was more frightened and timid than angry. It took several revisions to achieve the tone she wanted to express. Through the work we did together, we established a relationship that went beyond the pre-established teacher/student one. I was a coach trying to get her to express her true feelings in her writing, and I was a friend who listened and tried to direct her where she could receive help. Obviously teachers should not try to be counselors, but they can be listeners and acknowledge the fact that students may be looking for some recognition and/or a sympathetic response. Sometimes it is easier to write about our feelings than it is to speak them. As we know, next to speaking, writing is the second major form of human communication, and communication is our main goal in composition. We want our students to communicate their ideas in a clear, concise manner, and we teach them how to do this by listening and commenting.

In my basic writing class, one of the journal entry questions I assign is, "What writing an essay means to me." One of my students expanded her journal entry into an essay. What she said about communication is relevant to my argument. The following is excerpted from her essay:

Writing to me means communication, expression, and a way of relaxing my nerves...I use writing to speak for me...Another way I use writing is to express myself. I have a hard time expressing myself vocally. Writing saves me from being made

a fool out of [sic]. Expression in writing tells people the mood I'm in...This makes the person I'm trying to express myself to know how I feel. If I didn't have writing around to help me express myself, I'd probably keep everything inside and explode...I just write my worries away...I think writing is best for communicating because you write what you really feel. (Palmer 1-5)

Students are motivated to write about their personal experiences/feelings because as this student pointed out, if she was not able to express herself, she would "keep everything inside and probably explode." Jean Pival writes that we need to give our students the opportunity to understand their failures, successes, weaknesses, strengths, disillusionments, and dreams in order for them to understand themselves because understanding the self leads to self-mastery and self-confidence (14). As stated in chapter one, self-confidence gives our students the ability to think critically and express their ideas clearly. The student who wrote the essay about her stepfather's sexual abuse, gained self-confidence and after several revisions could express her true feelings. As a teacher, friend, and listener, I gave her the opportunity to understand her disillusionments and gain self-confidence. After the essay was finished, she told me that she could discuss that period in their lives with her sister. It was a discussion that they had always avoided because of fear. She now felt more confident talking about it and was curious if her sister felt the same way. All she needed was a chance and the motivation to

write freely about it. As composition teachers, we do not have to pretend to be counselors. We can help our students by allowing them to write about what they are interested in and guiding them towards analysis, discussion, and evaluation of their feelings.

Motivation plays an important role in what students write. If an instructor believes, as Bartholomae and Bizzell do, that we should teach only academic writing, then his/her students are most likely not going to be motivated to write essays that contain personal content, whereas, students who are in classrooms where the instructor believes as Elbow and Rico do, that it is better to intermix personal and academic writing, will be more encouraged to express their inner feelings/convictions. However, even though instructors may follow Bartholomae and Bizzell's philosophy, they may be forced to deal with a student who has a need to sort through and understand his/her experience, and share his/her perceptions with others (Judy 38).

Instructors who follow Bartholomae's philosophy, have a lot of control over what students write. Students do not have the choice to write whatever they desire, which I feel can create a lack of interest in writing and may lead to writer's block. When a student can make choices in his/her writing, that freedom many times creates an incentive to write, which creates a motive for changing way students view their feelings and opinions (Brannon and Knoblauch 159-163).

In many classes students do not have a choice in topics. They are given a single essay assignment revolving around the classroom discussions, and in other disciplines, depending on the topic, objective academic writing is required. For example, in a history class, students may be given the assignment to write a cause and effect paper on the War of 1812. Unless students are history majors, they probably do not care what caused or what resulted from the War of 1812. But students do need to care about fulfilling the requirements of the class if they intend to pass the class, and, of course, as instructors, we hope to instill an interest about the subject we teach. Students, I believe, need to learn to write on subjects they have not chosen, and they should also learn how to find an interest in any given topic. A teacher can develop that interest by allowing the student to explore beyond the assignment. In trying to develop an interest in the cause and effect of the War of 1812, students could look for parallels in more recent conflicts. Maybe there are parallels in the War of 1812 and Desert Storm. In looking at those parallels, if a student was a participant in Desert Storm, then that student could possibly discuss a personal incident such as describing a specific clash he/she was involved in and comparing it to a specific battle in the War of 1812; thus, transcending the boundaries of objective academic writing. In this case, if the teacher assigns one essay per quarter/semester, and the

student does not have a chance to revise, then the student will probably receive a low grade and could lose the motivation to write. This is an example of what could possibly happen in a classroom where only objective academic writing is allowed, and the instructor maintains the pre-established teacher/student relationship.

Every teacher, subject, and class differs in pedagogy, philosophy, and requirements. No matter what class or subject, instructors should be very clear in their expectation of how assignments will be fulfilled. We also need to be aware of the fact that those names and social security numbers belong to people with identities, personalities, opinions, biases, and problems, and students want to express their opinions, to tell someone of some injustice, or just ask for help in solving some aspect of their lives, and we can help motivate them to question, analyze, and think critically about issues. Dialogue is a wonderful motivator, but we must understand that opinions do differ, and we may come across writing that offends us in some way. When we come across such writing, we react first as human beings, and then we respond as professionals. But in that first reaction, we ask "why?" Why is this student experiencing this, believing this, and writing about this? Once we answer the question, we can recognize the motivation behind the writing. We can also examine the tone in students' essays in order to focus our responses in such a

way as to motivate students to analyze, discuss, and evaluate their ideas more critically. Also by analyzing students' descriptive techniques, an instructor can determine meaning in students' essays.

The way students feel about their subject matter and how they express those feelings can mean the difference between writing that is less energized and writing that is powerful. As mentioned previously, the student who wrote about her stepfather's sexual abuse was not expressing her true feelings. She wrote: "I finally couldn't take it anymore, and I just decided that I had to tell her. So one day I told her that I had something bad to tell her. She asked me what it was, and I told her. Well she didn't believe me and called me a liar. I was upset" (Perez, Student Essay). When I read this, I asked Maria if all she was was upset. She said that she was very angry with her mother, and in fact, at that moment, hated her. I asked Maria where in her essay she expressed that hatred. She replied, "She's my mother. I couldn't say out loud that I hate her" (Perez, Student Conference). Then I asked Maria why she wrote the essay. She said so that she could get her feelings out, and she hoped that someone would believe her. She finally realized that her true feelings on the subject were not being expressed. Tone is an important aspect in expressing meaning. In Maria's case, she was concerned about how she presented herself. She was concerned about

appearing the dutiful daughter, not about her real underlying feelings. As a colleague pointed out, "all people have a need for a high evaluation of themselves and for the esteem of others" (Newlin "Why" 45). We try to make ourselves look good in the eyes of others. Our students do this when they write essays for us. They hope for acceptance through grades and responses, not only as writers, but as human beings with feelings and knowledge about their topics, and if a student is discussing a topic that he/she knows is going to illicit a strong reaction from the reader, then through our responses, we can develop confidence and self-esteem, or we can tear them apart.

David Bartholomy addresses this need for the esteem of others in his book Sometimes You Just Have to Stand Naked: A Guide to Interesting Writing. He claims that when we write about ourselves or something in which we were involved, we present ourselves in the best possible perspective. We emphasize or exaggerate our "good" qualities and de-emphasize or make light of the ones we are not proud of. We present ourselves as we would like to be viewed by others rather than as we know ourselves to be (127). I agree with Bartholomy and have come across several examples of how students present themselves in essays.

A student in my Freshman Composition class wrote an essay about the hatred that developed between her and her sister because as they grew up, her sister "changed" and

started hanging around with the wrong people and using drugs. Throughout this essay, the student portrayed herself as the good, supportive, caring sister who was only trying to capture their childhood togetherness that they once shared. It was a well-written essay which makes her look good in the eyes of the reader and makes her feel good about herself. But as Bartholomy also points out, it does not make for the most effective writing (127) because we are only reading her perspective. We are only seeing the good side of her, and I question why that hatred developed. What drove her sister to "change"? The writer comes across as being too good. She seems concerned but does not write about any of her negative emotions. She distances her emotions from the writing, just as Maria did, which for me, as a reader, is less interesting, and if I am not careful in my attempts to bring out her negative emotions, if there are any, I can damage this student's self-esteem. But by having her write about the development of the hatred, the writing will be more interesting because as Bartholomy says, one quality that does make writing effective is a willingness to "stand naked" (127). Our students who write about abuse, death, homelessness, violence, and their sexuality are willing to stand naked. They are willing for their readers to see not only the good in their lives, but also the problems and horrors. They are willing to express their views even though those views are sometimes rejected by

society.

Standing naked is very hard to do, and even when students do, they still try to present themselves in the best possible perspective as seen in another essay from a student in a basic writing class. The student wrote an essay about his past experiences in a gang in the Los Angeles area. In this essay, he discussed the gang's violent deeds that many people would find appalling. At the end of the essay, the student added, "I hope your opinion of me doesn't change because of this." The most important aspect of the essay, to the student, was the teacher's opinion of the student's behavior. The student's motivation was to show that even though he had once been a part of a gang, he now knew that the activities the gang were involved in were morally wrong and that he now had a more positive goal. He was more concerned about how the teacher would evaluate him as a person than how he/she would evaluate the essay. I found myself becoming aware that sometimes the person is more important than the writing, and as I respond to my own needs as a teacher, expecting an essay to meet my requirements, I also need to respond to the needs of the student. In developing students' self-esteem and self-confidence, a teacher responding to this essay should address the very last line before responding to any other part of the essay such as when the student says, "I wasn't scared when we robbed the store. I mean its [sic]

only taking money. But when the guy pulled a gun on us, I just took off. I just new [sic] someone would get killed" (Anonymous, Student Essay). Even though we are horrified by this, we need to address what this student is feeling when he writes the essay, and that feeling is express in the last line. This student made it very clear what was important to him, and that is the content to which we should respond. Students also use other techniques to express their thoughts and feelings about their subjects.

In reading students' personal/experiential essays, the teacher may have to analyze students' descriptive techniques before he/she can determine the essay's tone and meaning because each of us has a personal voice, which is characterized by the words we use. The way we speak and write strongly influences the image we project to others (Cohn 7). Depending on the way we want to present ourselves to our audience, we will choose words carefully. If we want our audience to think we are in control, strong, independent, and successful, we will use formal language with appropriate diction and tone such as we do when we write letters of interest for job applications or graduate school. But if a student is writing about being sexually abused, the language most likely will be informal and the tone will express the feelings of the writer. Writers use several techniques to let readers know how they are feeling about their subject. One technique is to describe something

or someone that is in their past in present tense. I came across several essays in which writers used this technique. One essay was about a boy who at the age of eight had lost his mother. He begins the essay in the present tense: "You see, the best ones die untimely deaths...", and "In her earlier years, I am told, she was..." He then shifts to past tense when he describes his mother's looks and personality. Later in an emotional paragraph, he uses the mother hen metaphor and shifts the description of his mother, "mother hen" to present tense: "She knows what is good and what is bad; what is right and what is wrong; what can hurt and what cannot" (Smith, Student Essay). This shift to present tense makes his mother, who died maybe 10 years previously, seem alive and still influencing him this very day.

Another example that I found very interesting in using the present tense to describe someone who died is in the following excerpt:

This is about a perfect rose by the name of Nichole. She is seventeen years of age. She has short, dark hair, and dark brown eyes. She is very petite but also very strong inside.
I first met Nichole when I started running...
(Barter, student essay 1)

The essay discusses Nichole's accomplishments as a student and a track star. Nichole was killed in an automobile accident four years before the essay was written. However, describing Nichole in present tense in the first paragraph

makes the physical Nichole more vivid and alive for the reader. Dr. Edward M. White says in his book, The Writer's Control of Tone, that "...the choice of tone so expresses the purpose of a piece of writing that this choice governs and directs everything else" (x). These two writers chose to shift their descriptions to present tense and use metaphors, a second descriptive technique, to set the tone of the writing to focus on the good, happy, positive attitudes of their subjects. The use of the mother hen metaphor and the description of Nichole as "a perfect rose," are expressions of these experiences which show their freshness and uniqueness and that they are not simply imitative reports of the vision of others (Berlin "Rhetoric and Ideology" 13). We, as readers, come away with the same positive feelings that the writers have for their subjects because readers like to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel what writers do, and we will respond to those feelings.

With careful reading, composition teachers can analyze the motivation behind the writing and the tone in students' essays. It does take a little more time to do such an analysis, but since we constantly tell our students to be active readers and engage themselves with the text, to question, argue, and evaluate a text as they read, we also must be active readers of our students' texts and question, argue, and evaluate. Through discussion, both writers' and readers' feelings and convictions are developed or changed.

When we engage our students in their writing, we must also be engaged in how and why we respond as we do. Once we analyze the motivation and tone of our students' writing, we can analyze the motivation and tone of our responses to their writing because our responses are just as crucial as the students' texts. Our reaction to a text gives meaning to that text, and since many students revise based on our comments, we help them to analyze, discuss, and evaluate their texts. We teach them to think critically.

CHAPTER III

DEFINING OUR ROLE

Reader, Responder, and Evaluator

When we assign an essay, we establish a criteria for evaluating that essay based on previous evaluations of essays. The usual criteria we expect to find in essays include a logical organization, a graceful style, a strong sense of logic, and an adequate use of correct grammatical structure. Our evaluation of essays is based on how well the writer has met our pre-established standards. Teachers read, respond, and evaluate essays in several ways. Some might assign the paper, read it, respond to it and evaluate it without allowing revision. Others evaluate essays by assigning the paper, reading it, responding to it, rereading it, and then responding again and evaluating. The third way is to read, respond and evaluate, reread, then respond again and re-evaluate. Within the last two processes, reading and responding can happen several times.

Allowing revision is an important part of the evaluation process because it allows students to rethink their argument, define it clearly, and become proficient writers. If a paper is evaluated and given a grade on the first draft, then there is no motivation for students to

read the comments and think more critically about their writing. When we allow revisions, our students can analyze our comments and improve their writing. In this chapter, I will examine our role of reader/audience, responder, and evaluator, how we are affected by the personal issues our students write about, and how we should respond when we are affected personally. Our responses can help strengthen our students' writing by helping them meet the pre-established standard, and by developing their self-confidence as writers. Our responses can help our students achieve organization, clarity, cohesion in their arguments, reasons, and claims, and, at the same time, bring out the feelings and attitudes that lie behind those positions (Elbow, "Reflections" 145). The way we respond can be categorized under three different sections that I call the "avoider," the "activist," or the "motivator and peer/challenger."

When I give my students an assignment, one of the first things we discuss is their perception of audience. Who do they think they are addressing in their writing? Inevitably some answer "the teacher." Of course I do my best to change that perception, but it is an undeniable fact that I am part of that audience, a major part. I am the principle reader and evaluator. The students may invoke a fictional audience, but the one they are trying to impress is me, the "reader" to follow their argument.

There are generally two basic groups of audience. One

group is external to a text, and in our composition classes that includes the teacher, the other students, and possibly tutors. This is the audience whom the writer must accommodate. The other group is the "implied" audience within the text. This implied audience has a set of suggested or evoked attitudes, interests, reactions, conditions of knowledge which may or may not fit with the qualities of actual readers or listeners (Park 160). The group that this chapter is focused on is the first, the people external to the text.

In chapter one, I quoted Bartholomae when he said that if his students were going to write for him, they had to know who he was, know his prejudices, and psych him out (141). This is all part of the game. Our students do try to learn what it is that we like or dislike. They do try to psych us out. This is the level that many students work at, but there is another level that we should try to convince our students to understand. They need to learn there is an external audience present outside the teacher such as classmates, tutors, other teachers, or that implied audience at a presentation or conference who have certain beliefs, attitudes, and relationships to the writer and to the situation. Depending on the situation whether it is a peer workshop or a conference presentation, there will be certain characteristics of response to the text (Bitzer/Park 159). For instance, in a peer workshop, audiences do not respond

as readily to ideas as they do at conference presentations. Audiences in a peer workshop will comment on structure, style, logic, and grammar because they feel more comfortable addressing these issues than they are with ideas. Most members of an audience are reluctant to express their opinions on ideas in classroom discussion and in peer workshops. However, at a conference presentation, the ideas are the main focus and what the discussions center on. But evaluating structure, style, logic, and grammar do not define our role as reader and audience when we are faced with an essay that opposes our political, moral, or religious values.

As previously mentioned, students write about their beliefs, biases, or opinions in order to communicate their ideas, but also to invoke a response, as I experienced when the student wrote the essay that revealed how she had been sexually abused for many years. In this chapter, we will discuss an essay that describes the initiation procedure into a gang when the writer shot someone. As human beings, we react differently to each essay. The first one invokes our sympathies, the other our disgust or horror. Our reactions to the text determines how we will respond, and how our students will react to our responses. We have to surpass just looking at the normal characteristics of writing. We have to recognize that we are readers with our own emotions and convictions. Lad Tobin, in his article,

"Reading Students, Reading Ourselves: Revising the Teacher's Role in the Writing Class," claims: "This paradigm of the teacher-as-objective-reader fails to do justice to the complexity of the reading and writing processes and to our relationship to our students" (336). It is also important to remember that when we do respond, our students then become the readers and audience for our responses, thus beginning the dialogue towards analyzing, discussing and evaluating.

While reading common midterms for the Freshmen 101 classes at California State University, San Bernardino, I came across an essay describing a gang member who had to shoot someone in order to join the gang. When we read these essays, we are not to respond to them. We must give them a holistic score, 1 to 6, based on whether the student answered the question, developed the topic, and used the proper structure and grammar. I was very disturbed when I read the essay, realizing that the student was confessing to a criminal offense. As teachers/evaluators, we were to respond to the writing. As a human being, I felt a moral obligation to myself and to society to see this person punished for his crime. I thought of several questions. Is this student telling the truth? Should I tell someone else what this student wrote? How much confidentiality exists between students and teachers, as we are not ministers, priests, doctors, or lawyers? But when a student writes

such an essay, is that student betting on confidentiality, just as the student who writes about being sexually abused is relying on me not to reveal her situation to anyone else, while maybe hoping that I can intervene in some way and stop the abuse? How do we respond to such writing?

Many of us react in one of three ways: we are forced or we choose to avoid the content; we respond strongly, letting the authority figure take over and try to fix our students' problems and change their convictions immediately; we question and challenge our students to analyze their opinions. I have labeled these three models as the "avoider," the "activist," and the "peer/challenger."

The avoider is someone who avoids either assigning essays that could be potentially personal such as my colleague in the introduction, who told me to tell the student who wrote about the death of her cousin to write about something else, or someone who ignores the personal aspect and comments only on the basic characteristics of the writing. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes we are forced to avoid such topics, and other times we choose to avoid them.

After reading the essay where the student wrote about shooting someone, I wanted to respond to the content, but that was not my job. At that time, I was directed only to read and evaluate, not respond, and this I did. Sometimes, however, we choose to avoid the content and only address the structure, style, logic, and grammar. Louise Rosenblatt

believes that when students read and write personally, they reveal some of their "conflicts and obsessions," tempting teachers to deal directly with these psychological issues, but she warns teachers against meddling with the emotional life of the students:

Unfortunately, like members of any other group, many teachers are themselves laboring under emotional tensions and frustrations. Given the right to meddle in this way, they would be tempted to find solutions for their own problems by vicariously sharing the student's life. They might also project upon the student their own particular preoccupations and lead him to think that he was actually suffering difficulties and frustrations that were the teacher's. Assuredly even worse than the old indifference to what is happening psychologically to the student is the tampering with personality carried on by well-intentioned but ill-informed adults. The wise teacher does not attempt to be a psychiatrist. (208)

I agree we should not be psychiatrists, but we can be listeners. A student who writes about being depressed can possibly be suicidal, and he/she needs help. We cannot and should not avoid the situation. Many of our campuses have the facilities to help these students, and we can listen to their problems and direct them to the proper people that can help them. But there is the other type of essay that may oppose what we feel emotionally, morally, or politically that we may have to deal with directly, sometimes even personally. Should we respond, and if so how?

Scott Lankford from Foothill College wrote an article for inside english--about an essay from one of his students describing a group of young men going into San Francisco for

a night of fun, beating up gays and homeless people.

Follows is an excerpt from the student's essay:

My friends and I were now on our way to...the gay capital of America...to make fun of the bums and kick them around...in San Francisco. Halfway up on the ride one of my friends shouted out, after we had a couple of beers, "Why are we going to Polk Street?" I replied calmly, "I have a report due and there is no other place to go, besides we can go get drunk and piss on the bums...We stopped for a second to take a leak on a wall, but we did not realize that there was someone sleeping there. I felt a claw grab my ankle, telling me to stop. I was scared for a minute, and did not know what to do. I started kicking him and then my friends joined in, because they were drunk and did not know what to do. We finally stopped after about 30 seconds of non-stop blows to the body. One of my friends shouted, "Let's get the f--k out of here," and I agreed. I thought the guy was dead. (3)

This incident described the beating of a homeless person, but Lankford points out that the student continues describing other incidents in detail. One such incident described the beating of a gay person. Of course, Lankford is horrified by what he has read, and his reaction to the text gives a strong argument for Rosenblatt's comments about teachers, themselves, laboring under emotional tensions and frustrations, that might be projected upon the student. In this case, the teacher, Lankford, is openly gay. He tries to remember if the student was in class on one of the days when he admitted he was gay. He also wonders if the violence is directed at him and is concerned about how to respond to and grade the essay. He admits that he was "too emotionally unnerved to respond effectively" (3). He

finally decides to respond to the essay as if it were a fictional piece and questions the student on who the student perceived the audience to be, and if the student realized that his word choice could be offensive to many of his readers (3).

Lankford responded to the style of the writing, not to the content. He avoided having to deal with the student about the violence. By avoiding the content, I feel Lankford gave that student an impression that Lankford did not care about the violence in the essay. And the student, realizing he could write about such things without being challenged, passed the class and enrolled in Lankford's English 1A transfer-level college composition class (3), which means that Lankford will have to deal with this rhetoric for another term. Unless Lankford deals with the issues, the student will most likely continue to write about incidents that Lankford is uncomfortable with.

Lankford has, by some standards, performed perfectly. He has not let himself be swayed by the inflammatory content of the essay to respond critically; he has not let the student know about his feelings, and he has succeeded in keeping the young man as a matriculated student in his institution (Albert 7). Lankford notes in his article that the student "lived for several years in Kuwait before emigrating with his family to the Bay Area" (3). Janice Albert in "Talking Back" wonders what this is supposed to

mean:

Does it suggest that he can be forgiven for not understanding that in the United States assault is a crime? This student badly needs this information! He is at risk of being picked up by the police and charged with attempted murder. Does he know that? By keeping silent, is the instructor tacitly suggesting that some beating are OK? Some people are not protected by the law? Is that how Lankford thinks about himself as a homosexual living in the Bay Area? If so, then who is the person with the problem here? (7)

Albert has a valid argument about keeping silent. When we avoid the personal issues in our students' writing, are we sending the message that while we do not exactly condone such actions, at least we tolerate them, blaming the way our society has evolved? Each one of us needs to analyze seriously the message he/she is sending when he/she avoids such issues. Being the avoider is not being fair to students nor to ourselves. Many teachers do deal with papers that present discomfoting ideas by responding to structure, style, logic, and grammar, as Lankford did and refer to external authorities such as handbooks, textbooks, and style guides instead of reacting to the reading experience. But if that is what we do, then we cheat our students and ourselves because we send the wrong message, a message that may be interpreted that we will ignore such ideas. This could lead a student such as Lankford's to continue engaging in violent acts. By avoiding our students' emotions and biases, and our own, we are not able to affect a change in their critical thinking

Anne M. Greenhalgh in her article, "Voices in Response: A Postmodern Reading of Teacher Response," draws on David Silverman and Brian Torode's speech unities of interpretive (appealing to external realities) and interruptive (appealing to the reality of the reading experience) voices to examine if a teacher is responding to external realities or to the reading experience. For example, Lankford wrote, "Word choice could be offensive to some readers." Therefore, "Word choice" is the interpretive part of the sentence and "could be offensive to some readers" is the interruptive part. The external, abstract, third-person voice of authority in "Word choice" offsets the teacher's concrete experience of "could be offensive," since the interpretive precedes the interruptive. The interpretive voice overrides the teacher's interruptive voice, making the offensive act less important. However, if Lankford would have written, "Some readers could be offended by word choice," then the interruptive voice dominates the interpretative voice, thus making the offensive act the important aspect of the essay and sending the writer the message that he needs to think about what was written that was offensive. If teachers are avoiders, most of their comments present the interpretive phrase before the interruptive phrase(404-405). But should we or can we ignore the reading experience? David Rothgery asks, "Has contemporary theory with its insights into the

'situatedness' of our existence and perspectives, left us any sense of a valid--indeed, a necessary, 'we-can-no-longer-go-back-to-that'--directionality by way of shared ideas" (244)? We can take a more active role than the avoider in responding to the personal issues and convictions of our students' lives, but I also think we must not go so far as to be activists because as avoiders ignore situations, activists are seldom open to discussion about situations.

The activist is at the other end of the pole from the avoider. This is the teacher who would have told the student in Lankford's class that his actions and opinions were not right and disallowed the paper, thus judging the person by the deeds and not allowing the student to respond to that judgment. This teacher insists on the teacher's version of truth because like Rothgery states, "Society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth--i.e., the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (241). In our society "political correctness" is the standard. We teach our students that sexist language, bigotry, and discrimination will not be tolerated in our classes. We are the educated members of society, and some teachers feel it is our job to change students' opinions and teach our students the "correct, objective" way to view society. But just "telling" our student the "correct" way to think is not teaching them to be critical thinkers, nor

teaching them to analyze and discuss differences in opinions. Composition should be an interactional process.

Some activists tend to disallow personal emotions and convictions as unacceptable or untrue. However, just as being an avoider is not being fair to my students or myself, I once again question whether I am being fair to my students or to myself if I am an activist. By repressing their emotions and opinions, am I violating their right to freedom of speech? Will the student see my views as simply personal opinion and dismiss them? If he/she does, then the writing will not improve (White Assigning 91). Therefore, I have to agree with Brannon and Knoblauch that the proper role for a teacher is not to tell the student explicitly what to do but to serve as a sounding-board that will enable the writer to see confusions in the text and encourage the writer to explore alternatives that he/she may have not considered (162). In other words, be a peer/challenger to our students.

When we respond to our students, we are engaging in a form of "conversation." We ask them questions and give them suggestions. If we ask them to revise, we expect them to answer our questions and follow, at least, some of our suggestions. This exchange is usually not a verbal conversation, unless the exchange is in a conference. According to Brown and Yule, "we use speech largely for the establishment and maintenance of human relationships

(primarily interactional use), and we use written language largely for the working out of and transference of information (primarily transactional use)" (13). Responding to our students' paper is interactional because we are establishing and maintaining a teacher/student relationship. We engage our students in a form of conversation which includes conversational principles or speech acts.

An illocutionary force (speech act) is defined as "the speaker's intention, so far as the auditors can discern it from the context" (Heatherington 423). These speech acts encompass four conversational principles. The first principle is that the speaker is sincere. Was that student who said he shot someone sincere when he said that gang life was behind him and that he was glad the person did not die? From the other information in the text, I did believe this student to be sincere. The second principle is that the speaker is telling the truth. Did he really shoot someone, or is he trying to psych out the teacher? Until I know for certain that this incident did not happen, I assume it did. The third principle is that what the speaker has to say is relevant to the topic or general areas of concern, and finally, that the speaker will contribute the appropriate amount of information or commentary, not withhold anything important, and not rattle on for an undue amount of time (425). These principles work both ways. When we write to our students, we need to be sincere, to tell the truth, to

make sure our comments are relevant to the topic, and to not withhold anything important like Lankford did in his responses. When Lankford responded to his student by commenting on the intended audience and the word choice, was he telling the truth? Probably yes, because he is the "authority" who knows the information about grammar. Was he sincere and were his comments relevant to the topic? At one level he was--the authority level talking about grammar and diction--but not on the humanistic level. He was not sincere with himself, nor did his comments address the content, which means he violated the fourth principle of conversation. Lankford allowed a passive authority figure to take over, and he did not express his own personal feelings. The authority figure became a shield.

Many times we hide behind that authority figure, not letting our students know that we have feelings, beliefs, values, and convictions. But what we must recognize is that on the humanistic level, we are their peers. We are the readers of their papers, and they are the readers of our comments, so "if you want the reader to feel, you have to feel too" (Murray 226). Our students are smart. They know when they have affected us, and instead of putting on the mask of authority, we should reveal our own position, particularly our doubts, ambivalences, and biases (Elbow "Embracing" 224). We need to cross that line from authority to peer and let them know that we are human beings with

feelings.

Carole Deletiner crosses that line all the time in her composition courses. She allows her students to write about their personal feelings, and she in return, in her comments, tells her students about her personal life and feelings.

It's only a few weeks into a new semester and I know who the recovering addicts and alcoholics are; I know who's been battered and sexually abused; I know who's ashamed of being Salvadoran or Russian, of being from a welfare family; who had a child when she was fifteen; who dropped out of high school and has never told her husband.

They don't/won't/can't stop writing...and the feelings and the pain drip off the edges of their pages...My fear, rage, and comradeship tumble out onto the margins of their papers in the comments I write to them. (813)

When a student writes about a time when he and a group of his friends went "bombing" in Brooklyn and murdered a homeless person, Deletiner responds by telling him she has no words to describe how appalled she is by the meaningless brutality. He answers her by saying there are people who think hitting people over the head with hammers is fun (812-13). Deletiner does not avoid the content. She expresses her horror about the situation, not of the person, and she allows her student to respond to her reaction, which begins a dialogue. As humans we are appalled, shocked, driven to cry by what our students write, and that is acceptable. When we attempt to edit feelings, unconscious associations, and personal problems from our responses, I feel we are not being fair to our students or ourselves.

The teaching of writing is sometimes about solving personal and public problems: "We cannot create intensity and deny tension, celebrate the personal and deny the significance of the personalities involved" (Tobin 342). We should show our students that we are their human peers, but we must also challenge them to analyze their thoughts and feelings.

Part of our job is to teach our students how to think critically and transfer those thought processes into rhetorical prose. We are the motivator and the peer/challenger. In order to examine our role as motivator and peer/challenger, I refer to the taxonomy of Elaine O. Lees. She lists seven modes of responding: correcting, which is indicating that what the student has written is erroneous; emoting, which is venting your emotions; describing, which is focusing on the worth of the text itself; suggesting, which is addressing the needs of the writer by offering editorial suggestions; questioning, which is asking what is the relation between what is written and what the writer believes in; reminding, which is bringing in past readings, past discussions; assigning, which is creating another assignment based on what a student has written (264-265). If a student writes about a brutal murder, sexual abuse, or the death of a loved one, correcting is avoiding the content; sharing your emotions is fine, but venting your emotions may lead, as mentioned earlier, to the student just dismissing them as personal

opinion; describing can lead to an exchange in thoughts and feelings; suggesting, if done without the authority voice, can lead a student to examine different aspects of the content; questioning can begin the analysis process; reminding can bring in alternate discussions; assigning can move a student from the subjective to the objective. Correcting, emoting, and describing put the burden of the work on the teacher, while suggesting, questioning, and reminding shifts much of the burden to the student. Assigning provides a way to discover how much of the burden the student has accepted (265-66). Using suggesting, questioning, reminding, and assigning is a way to challenge our students to look at their subjectivity and analyze, argue, and evaluate it. Shifting the burden to the student makes our task as responder and evaluator a little easier because we do less thinking and work for students, and this shift makes students more responsible and urges them to think critically about their writing.

We read our students' essays, we respond to them, and then we have to give them a grade. We assign a grade based on the characteristics of structure, style, logic, and grammar, but when a student writes an essay that is exciting, insightful, full of creative ideas, some of us give it a high mark even though there may be flaws in the basics. A grade is an indicator in students' minds of whether the teacher likes or dislikes the essay. But as

Lankford asks, "How would you grade a Gay-bashing?" Lankford admits that based more on grammar and sentence-structure than on anything else, he "reluctantly" gave the student a low B (3). I found myself in that same situation when I had to assign a holistic score to the student who shot someone as a gang initiation. My first inclination was that this student did not deserve to pass the class because of the horrible crime he committed, and I assigned him a low grade. My job, though, was to evaluate the writing, not so much the content. Just because I disliked what the student had done, I was not being fair to the writing. After reading the essay several times, I had to admit that the writing was good. The student had followed the assignment, and while there were some grammatical problems, they did not justify a non-passing grade. I changed my score.

Since a grade is an indicator, the one way that I can see to overcome that initial feeling of emotion when reading a personal/experiential essay dealing with personal issues or convictions is not to assign a grade on that first draft. Instead, read it, respond to it with questions and suggestions, then return it to the student to begin the conversation on the issues. Giving an essay a grade is not important in comparison with dealing with the issues. Forego the grade until the conversation has ended.

We are many things to our students. We are teacher,

mentor, coach, and sometimes friend. We cheer them and antagonize them. We engage in a constant interaction when they are in our classrooms. When they write their essays, we read, respond, and evaluate them, just as they read, respond, and evaluate us. If they see us as avoiders, they may take advantage of us. If they see us as activists, they may dismiss us. But if we show ourselves to be their human peer and challenge them, they will in return challenge us.

CONCLUSION

Resolving the Crisis

When I reflect back on that tutoring session described in the introduction, I am not sorry that we spent the whole half an hour discussing the student's feelings about the topic, and I do not agree with my colleague who said the student should have written about something less emotional. The academic discourse in our composition classrooms is changing because of the changes we see on our campuses. That student needed to write about a tragic situation, one that stemmed from influences outside the academic setting, as did the essay from Lankford's student and the one from the student in the common midterm.

Moreover, as emotional and discomfoting as they are, we cannot deny that these conditions do exist. Those students' essays all involved current issues seen from their personal perspectives. A student who is personally and emotionally involved with the writing will generally write with enthusiasm and feeling. Once we have that energized writing, we must be careful not to suppress it or eliminate it with our reactions and responses. Personal/experiential essays that affect us, students and teachers, emotionally,

politically, morally, or religiously can be a valid mode of academic discourse. Even this thesis is based on a personal, emotional experience. I cried with that student in the tutoring session. It was an experience that not only enriched her, but me as well. I wish I could have talked with her more about her writing, and with the student who wrote about the shooting. I would like to learn more from my students about aspects of life that I have not experienced. I feel that the more I learn about them, the more I can help them with their writing. From our students we learn about society and life, and I know that we can respond to their experiences and convictions because we have our own, and if those experiences and convictions are different, perhaps our students will learn about aspects of life that they have not experienced. Some relationships surpass the pre-established teacher/student relationship. The teacher/student relationship is a human relationship, a human interaction.

This thesis examines the interaction between teacher and student when reading personal/experiential essays that affect us emotionally, morally, and politically. This research could be expanded to examine how other students are affected by such writing in group work, writing workshops, and through peer evaluations. Lankford briefly addresses this in his essay:

Recently, I even attempted the previously

unimaginable experiment of placing the author of "Queers, Bums and Magic" in a peer-editing group with the student president of the Foothill College Multicultural Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Alliance...I was initially concerned that they might not get along well. But not to worry...Jerome was soon entertaining R.J. and the others with hair-raising tales of his own recent community service sentence for robbing a San Jose liquor store. (3,8)

We are all similar in that we all have personal experiences, beliefs, values, and convictions. Some experiences and convictions are more similar than others. Putting people together who seem to have contradictory beliefs may generate an emotional discussion that could lead to change on either part, or they could discover that they have similarities. It would be interesting to see how other students react and respond to their peers' personal/experiential essays.

The personal/experiential essay can inspire students to write about their emotions and biases. Some students have a need to write about them, and some teachers feel they have an obligation as members of society who agreed to teach our students to think and write critically to allow them to write about their experiences. If students are given the opportunity to speak their own authority as writers, given a turn in the conversation, students can claim their stories as primary source material and transform those experiences into evidence (Sommers 30). They can become empowered, with encouragement, not to serve just the academy and accommodate it, but to write essays that will influence them and us to feel, think, and react, and understand the problems facing

society today. They will become critical thinkers who can function in the academic world and in the social world. We can help our students by recognizing the need for them to write personal/experiential essays and by understanding their messages. With this understanding, we can address the pain, the anger, or the violence discussed by our students, and we can actively, allowing our own feelings to emerge, and comfortably respond, direct, and evaluate personal/experiential essays dealing with the experiences and biases in our students' lives.

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