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Revival of the Fittest: A Return to Writer Subjectivity in Composition

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REVIVAL OF THE FITTEST: A RETURN TO WRITER SUBJECTIVITY IN
COMPOSITION

by

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Ashley McClary

ABSTRACT

Writing can be unpleasant. And most examples of good writing start from early attempts to identify a partial understanding of complex, complicated concepts that emanated from a willingness to be honest and open and smart about the surrounding world. The inception of a good text—especially when paired with the strength to fulfill an incessant, ridiculous desire to tell a truth—can produce an *affected* writing sample, one of purpose and presence. In the field of Composition, when instructors ask students to write and suggest they do it well, it is easy to overlook the demand that students take new risks in spite of the looming possibility of communicative failure. Academic writing discredits the personal narrative in favor of the unequivocal and favors objectivity over authorial experience. By the same token, we ask student writers to work outside of comfortable contexts and to write for an academic community to which many have not had much access. We ask them to reach deep for an evolved version of a multi-faceted writing persona that will mesh well with a field now stifled by standardization and dispassion. However, despite the persistence of standardization, content appropriation, and the delineation of proper writing form, revivalist Neo-Platonist concepts of “authentic voice” and the accompanying emphasis on truth-telling have had a resonant effect on the pedagogical practices of Composition, particularly as author-oriented texts can more adequately evolve with changing student demographics. As such, the field of Composition should embrace a return to a more writer-centric pedagogy.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CTR	Current Traditional Rhetoric
CUNY	The City University of New York
HBCUs	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
SESL	Standard English as a Second Language
WAC	Writing Across the Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

University student writers begin at a disadvantage. On one hand, effective arguments in higher education require attention to audience and context. But on the other hand, university students are asked to ignore their intended readership: their writing instructors. Instead of writing for their actual audience, students are asked to adopt a seemingly unbiased objective style. It is not enough that a student writes well for her instructor; she must also create a text that follows a traditional standard of good academic writing.

Academic writing insists on argumentative clarity and rhetorical coherence, valuing logic over sentiment. On the academic stage, writing must be largely absent of fault and indecision. Anyone new to the academic genre of writing would likely fail to enact this direct, “objective” style. Yet when beginning students fail to write well, writing instructors often characterize the student writer—or at least her writing processes—as intrinsically substandard. Consequently, the student writer’s persona often evolves into a spurious façade for the sake of passing a course—a pretense that closes the curtains on a less-than-stellar double performance. Since the instructor pretends to be the universal, objective reader, the student pretends to be the universal, objective writer.

Even if we acknowledge that our courses are a stage for academic performances, we still expect students to have confidence in the ever-present expectations of academia and stick to the boundaries of its standardized form. We wrongly assume that non-standard writers should want to have a more traditional writing style. We wrongly assume that students come to writing courses willing to both validate and propagate the academic

preference for objectivity. So long as objectivity predominates the realm of academic writing, instructors will limit authorial creativity and muffle students' voices.

When instructors demand that new students write objectively, they often write clumsily. Despite our best pedagogical efforts, students create writing personas that neither represent themselves nor come close to the traditional standards of academic writing. Some students fabricate interesting, yet incoherent narratives; so we urge them towards coherence in the editing stage. Others procrastinate then plagiarize. Time management and drafting become vital to their success. But the worst offenders cleave to the procedures of an objective academic style so much that their writing seems old and dead. Their papers are unexceptional and boring. If writing instructors offer a rubric of guidelines, these students only meet them minimally. The arguments of these student writers are unduly agreeable. Their warrants are contrived. Their grammar is just barely good enough. The composition is mediocre. The writing is bad. It becomes hard to like such lifeless writing, and even harder to judge it based on the significance of its content.

The students who produce stale texts are not necessarily *bad-at-writing*, even though insipidity seems to be the hardest hurdle to clear. Problematically, stale writing does appear to meet academic benchmarks for grammar and form. But in the student's attempt to appear correct and unbiased, her writing loses its purpose. Attempting to appear objective, student writing loses its objective. Such writing offers summary, not analysis. It reproduces scholastic ideas, but doesn't add to intelligent conversations. Surely, this lack of creativity should caution us against reductive pedagogies that flaunt academic writing as easy to do if all the right steps are followed closely. Despite the

current emphasis on composition process and writing mechanics, writing should not be mechanical.

I believe that when instructors do not warn students against the risks of academic objectivity as a stylistic writing goal, students produce cold texts that do and say very little. While the focus on convention and the turn away from the personal has made the academic style more easily reproducible, it ultimately leads to embarrassing performances from student writers. Academic composition is vapid. It is colorless. It is weak. It devalues identity and personal experience. Worst of all, it strikes student writers mute.

CHAPTER I

PERFORMING COMPOSITION

At first glance, the beginner's academic writing is disorganized, clunky, and obscured by grammatical errors. To most instructors, the style is unacceptable; the writing processes that produce it, inefficient. The processing of students, as opposed to the processing of their writing, begins when instructors characterize such writing as bad—and the beginning stylistic choices of such authors as irreparable, instead of incomplete. Granted, if we insist that students must first learn to speak and write within the confines of academic standards, these examples of “bad writing” are much like the start of any language acquisition: seemingly incomprehensible babble. However, despite the urge to stigmatize unclear beginner writing as bad and the writers inept, such stylistic idiosyncrasies are necessary for the creation of a student's writing voice.

For this reason, the preeminence of error correction in Composition's current pedagogy is problematic. Writing instructors should view issues of grammaticality as symptoms, not the disease; especially since student texts can still be shoddy even if they superficially appear to be grammatically and formally correct. Students can learn to write well without samples, without staunch rules, and with their own styles if we encourage them to work within their comfort zones. Since beginning students already have to work within academic rules for form and grammar in the writing classroom, instructors might revitalize the writing process by encouraging students to write from their personal experiences.

Too often, grammar and form have taken precedence over content and voice. Indeed, as illustrated by their production of overwhelmingly average texts, most students can meet writing standards for objective format and tone. Yet it seems that problems in the composition classroom arise when students are encouraged to produce academic writing that pushes beyond the confines of an overly simplistic writing process. For that reason, my primary criticism of writing pedagogy is its absence of aesthetic appeal. This absence was triggered by the turn away from writer-centric texts to normalize academic standardization and objectivity, which has resulted in a move away from enjoyable, more accessible student writing (Elbow 188 – 190). As far as my expectations go, when I ask that my students write well, I expect bold texts that foreground innovation, pose questions, and demand response. It is not a major priority that they are able to write within the parameters of any formalities.

Indeed among the different subfields of English Studies, Composition has been one of the only fields within academia conditioned to meet both the societal and academic needs of students throughout the past few centuries. Consequently, the struggle to find a one-size-fits-all approach within the field of Composition at the American university has been complicated by ever-changing student dynamics and a resistance to pedagogical complacency. Admittedly, Composition Studies have evolved far beyond questioning the inevitability of writing standards for the current American classroom, and I don't wish to make a case against standardization for the sake of simply rehashing antagonistic views towards the field. As I understand it, the golden standard of basic writing inculcated with a particular voice, a particular lens of analysis, and a particular type of clarity for the basic writer is fundamentally idyllic. But in our capitalist society,

where we openly praise individuality and innovation, not just average production, any writing pedagogy we embrace should perhaps foreground these cultural ideologies. Writing instructors should demand that students exceed expectations, not merely meet them. We should encourage students to write innovatively. If at this moment we cannot create an entirely new teaching strategy that will ebb and flow with the changing times and mesh with the evolving needs of our student demographics, perhaps we can return to one.

In the past, as a way to create a form of a writing pedagogy that would better relate to the expanded demographic of University students, Composition responded with an intense focus on multi-vocalism. Expressivist writing pedagogies emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a way for students to recount their own personal narratives as an entrance to academia. Even as the field had earlier prided itself on the avoidance of overt sentimentality in student writing, within an expressivistic writing pedagogy “the concern common to all of the groups interested in expression was the reassertion of the importance of the individual, of subjectivity, of personal value in an academic, cultural, and social environment” (Miller 375). As it responded to the exigencies of its time, the field had finally found a way to interject intellectualized students into a world engaged with emergent counter-cultures, which then rejected normalization and classism. For those reasons, the types of academic student writing that were produced had gumption.

More importantly, even as earlier modes of writing at the University had attempted to centralize an objective voice as the standard—as they seem to do now—all types of discourse utilize sentiment, even if that emotion purports itself as indifference or collectedness. Why, then, have we allowed style appropriate to field of Composition to

unreservedly gravitate towards the tense and the formal, the detachedly academic?

What's worse, this fixation on format and grammar standardization has bled into the assessment of appropriate topics for students. Not only are students asked to write within these stylistic confines, they are also limited to certain arguments. We teach students how to write in these programs for the sake of inculcating standardized writing forms, not to advance written communication both for and *within* authoritative communities. It seems to me that the reiteration of good writing form serves very little purpose for the modern writer, particularly in the age of self-discovery through multi-modal communication. If we are to keep up with other emergent technologies, academic writing needs to urge its readership towards identity proclamation. Considering such newfound access to the academic stage, the voices of student writers must be assertive and resonant.

Appropriating Objectivity

Without doubt, the creation of a writing pedagogy that addresses student diversity in a productive manner without wielding multi-culturalism as a tool has been hard to come by in the field of Composition. Despite downplaying the significance of writer subjectivity through the emphasis on process and format standardization, we have yet to discover ways to integrate, without essentialism, student differences in the writing room. In practice, it remains difficult to both address variances of the individual writing process and acknowledge the bodily presence of a motley student collective. In order to attend to individual representations of perspective, argument, and tone for all student writers, the resultant texts would have to meet—no, surpass—the unyielding demands of the more recognizable academic precedent. Such concerns are lofty undertakings, especially since student writing is nevertheless expected to evolve towards convention during a single

semester or at least within an academic year. For many instructors, to attend to cultural issues seemingly external to the classroom means to detract from the primary objective that is to indoctrinate utilitarian writing skills.

Perhaps due to its current role at the American university, Composition Studies seems unwilling to formalize a stance regarding the impact of standardization on identity formation for its collective student demographic. The field has not explicitly assessed its effect on student subjectivity in regards to its dispassionate style of written communication; nor has it unabashedly encouraged a return to an expressive pedagogy, which I believe would allow for more accurate student expression. Instead, students are goaded towards a deliberately objective writing style and innocuous voice for the sake of convention. When we set boundaries of written content and student writing styles, we process student bodies towards particular ideologies that encourage cheapened performances of nonpartisanship. With regards to this, it is our job to teach academic writing, not social decorum. We should urge students towards the production of evocative forms of academic communication, not merely focus on whether or not students can write within the manufactured confines of academic traditions.

In conclusion, Composition instructors no longer encourage egocentric writing from students, especially not in any way similar to the evocative texts engendered by instructional practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Such subjective pedagogies necessitated stylistic variation through the focus on individual experience, perspective, and social context. However, over time the production of “authentic” student narratives became problematic. In the midst of a changing society, instructors either lacked the time or the appropriate training to cope with students in their own processes of being. Wars erupted.

Sexuality progressed. Student demographics exploded. The field now proposes that beginner writers utilize a staid, more universal writing style as a way to better manage its ever-diversifying constituents.

To tell the truth, the academic style has become one in which both form and content must be capable of administrative oversight. Instructors still embolden students to ‘be themselves,’ but with retrofitted grammar and genre. To make it as a good writer at the University, students must be willing to strip their writing to its barest form. From what I have seen, this push for objectivity causes communicative confusion, but not in the way that many both within or outside of the field might think. The confusion lies in our general pedagogy, because we have accepted—with very few reservations—that student writers need assistance in translating their ideas into the dialectical preference of the field. They understand the points they wish to make when writing, but are unable to predict when to appropriate and emulate which forms of standardization. These complications are avoidable if we push for student texts that are explicitly subjective. It is easier to communicate a truth when you can communicate with your own language.

Passive Pedagogy

Concerning the field’s access to diverse student populations in First Year Composition programs, it is problematic to utilize a pedagogy that does not continuously analyze its effect on student selfhood, particularly one that institutes a writing style for the sake of convention. While instructors shouldn’t actively push students toward any particular way of being, neither should students be forced to assimilate to the preferences of academia without question; especially as the academic writing style was concocted following a series of socio-political movements that privileged particular varieties of

English (Wolfram). On the other hand, it is equally problematic to encourage a writing pedagogy poised to mend social inequalities; as it can be more disadvantageous to project values and interests onto certain types of students. By the same token, the affluent or arrogant student must be instructed to write in Composition classrooms. Even while some student populations do not lend themselves to the historically imposed liberation of Composition in the same manner of ‘marginalized’ writers, even the contemptuous student can improve her personal writing style and process. Our primary concerns should involve helping our students develop the voices they bring to academia, not merely that we help them translate their writing voices to appropriate standards of “good” writing.

But perhaps the stagnation in Composition’s teaching practices to meet the needs of our students is simply because difference eludes protocol. There can be no ‘one-size-fits-all’ model in writing instruction, so the absence of such pedagogy is due to resistance, not neglect. Nevertheless, in order to further instructional practices as necessary, it seems critical to first render more visible the risks of academic writing as an inorganic style. Without much practice, it can be hard for writing instructors to remain savvy in terms of how we must instruct, especially since instructors never fully know the students we teach. Our intentions as writing instructors are complex, but we must resist perhaps passively instructing our students towards conformity. Unless we wish to rank student writing based on its mere assimilation into academia—unless we only intend for young writers to produce mediocre papers that assert little to nothing—there needs to be a return to authorial subjectivity. Student writing should once again focus on communicating personal experience.

Academic writing has lost its edge, and the reversion to expressive writing could reinvigorate a field often criticized for trite ideas and convoluted diction. We must reassess the value of not only the student voice, but also the physical student body. When we teach student writers, we must ask that they not only write effectively, but *affectively* as well; that they not be afraid to have opinions; that they not be afraid to do the hard work that accompanies emotion and presence and integrity; that they are not afraid to fail. But first we must not be afraid to teach with presence ourselves.

Such is risky business.

CHAPTER II

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In the field, we promote the acquisition of a forced language. University instructors ask that students first recognize, prioritize, and in some cases appropriate select patterns of English, so that students might dialectically engage learned scholars. Accordingly, certain formal grammars and linguistic patterns have become intrinsic to the academic writing style. Indeed, gone are the days of model paragraphs and syntactical sentences to be mapped out on overhead projectors and reproduced by student writers; we now conceptualize the process of writing as continuous and fluid. Pre-writing webs and early drafts mark the beginning of the writing process. High marks and effected GPAs memorialize final, acceptable texts. Furthermore, I view the predominance of any pedagogy that focuses on the writing process as problematic as it distracts writing instructors from some of the field's looming issues, because even if scholars in the field uphold 'process' pedagogy, beginner writers continue to revere the product. The main goal for many of our students is to produce the final draft that marks the end of their compositional theatrics. As a result, the texts are sometimes more like statuesque epigraphs and a lot less like academic dialogues. Such texts dismiss or downplay new information and conflicting ideas. Such writing subverts the very sort of civic engagement it should pursue and refuses to be rhetorical. Without a doubt, the emphasis on clarity and ease of process within our general Composition pedagogy plays a large role in the production of simple, mechanical writing. However, the biggest issue is that

the academic style has been fabricated more for the sake of social distinction, not out of communicative necessity. It indicates an entrance to elitism. Furthermore, throughout the writing process there exists an uncanny understanding of the topics academic essays can and should address if to be taken seriously. Standardization has produced a genre of writing that lends itself not only to the scrutiny of form, but of content as well.

Albeit, a standard acts as an objective tool of assessment purposed towards the recognition of attaining *at least* the middle range of expected ability. Still, instead of acknowledging the limitations to standardization in the attempt to fix the real issue of communicative unpredictability, instructors continue to force students to navigate the system. In his 1986 text, “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae argues that students attempt to translate their own variety of language to one that mimics specialized phrases, prioritized diction, and form associated with academia. He writes:

Every time a student sits down for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion...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. (Bartholomae 523)

Bartholomae suggests the range of voices have been previously been utilized as tools to *accentuate* traditional markers of ability within the academic community; that the student must “appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and he must do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience” (Bartholomae 524). Quite warily, the student inevitably “fakes it” to make it. What is most resonant about the evaluation of the academic style as a type of language appropriation is its pervasiveness

within the field, especially as this idea has been widely circulated for almost thirty years! It is a shame that very little has been done to remedy the issue of translation that acts as a major obstacle between the beginner writer and her access to then academic community.

What is more, when Bartholomae suggests that students mimic academic text, he follows the assumption that all students have the same type of access to the standards and expectations of academia or that they all come fully equipped with preconceived notions of what standard writing looks like or that they should necessarily seek an understanding if they do not. I disagree. Admittedly, the field has always repurposed these very same values of imitation that prevailed in the early history of Composition, as far back as the Ancient Greeks. What differs now is that we are pushed to examine the risks involved for those who have not been privileged in the prevailing socio-political power system, whereas the dominant culture of Romans in Ancient Greece could simply revel in their cultural conquests (Conley 45). Furthermore, Bartholomae maintains the most problematic texts are those in which the writer is lost within a discourse of academic expectations; it is our responsibility to help students navigate the scene through sharing culture—which necessarily include experiences, language varieties, and subjective perspectives of the surrounding world.

I disagree that student writers come to the University stifled by egocentricity, as Bartholomae and other critics of the field suggest. In fact, I believe our resistance to helping students clear their own writing voices in a meaningful way makes what we do expendable. And since we cannot go back to change the history of our field, instructors should instead focus on helping students best respond to the conventions of academic language, which have up to now omitted particular writing and speaking communities.

We must change the trajectory, and the best way would be to reconstruct our student's introduction to a general writing pedagogy as a sort of language acquisition—to regard academic writing specifically as a new dialect; to treat Standard English as a Second Language (SESL) with its own cultural norms and fashioned rules.

Thus, instructors need a better way to navigate linguistic differences between some of our students and the prevalent forms of traditional writing practices. The implementation of SESL as a dialectical variety might help bridge the gap between the experiences our students bring to the classroom and standardized expectations that seemingly will not budge. Through viewing student entry into academia as a move into unknown discourse, it is more understandable that when a student attempts to emulate an academic standard, she mocks the most obvious characteristics of its fundamental culture. In this sense, it is not so much that students write in an egocentric manner for the sake of being narcissistic. However, if the student invents the university and its language for herself in the image of academic predecessors, why wouldn't she first recognize that powerful communities tend to be self-centered and self-serving? When it comes to negotiating cultural differences, wouldn't her writing first attempt to influence readers towards acculturating to *her* norms?

In essence, a glaring issue with the acculturation of the academic style is that some students get the wrong things right. Not only this, but it comes as no surprise that some students are often confused about how to perform in the writing classroom since many of them are not native speakers and writers of the academic style. Admittedly, for those who teach, there might always be an underlying tension between expectation and reality in terms of what our students produce. These writing failures are the implications

of asking students to negotiate the differences between their own conventions of writings with the ones required of academia by themselves; as if the rules of SESL are always sensible or principally irreproachable. If, as Bartholomae suggested decades ago, the writer must see herself within a privileged discourse community before composing effectively, we must further examine what these “insider” advantages are, especially if these privileges have such a perceptible influence in the University.

SESL: The Academic Dialect

Nevertheless, any instructor who utilizes a writing pedagogy that attempts to straddle between grading papers in terms of form or in terms of content might find the move towards subjective pedagogies both invasive and disruptive. However, what does it even really entail to read and help student writers in a way that helps them communicate their experiences smartly? For many, it means that we overlook the grammatical errors to find content. However, the traditional ways of fixing the issues of student writers don't adequately address the problems of beginners' written communication. The issues of “bad writing” aren't that students cannot correctly format or even revise grammar; they are that students are not truly invested in the things that they write. To remedy the situation, students should be pushed towards writing relevant truths they wish to communicate.

It would be beneficial to the field if those invested in it began to conceptualize what we many have dubbed the academic style as a brand new dialect for beginner writing students. Throughout the history of Composition, many scholars have addressed the issue of boring, academic texts in terms of style, but none more necessary to the criticism of objective pedagogies than Kenneth Macrorie. One of Macrorie's most

resonant conceptualizations of the writing class was his introduction of ‘Engfish’.

Engfish represents a writing style that oscillates between that of academic writing and the student’s own voice. In spite of any misgivings concerning writing instruction and our role it, writing teachers don’t seem to want stale, academic writing, even if they are grammatical in form. Macrorie writes: “With all that fish smell permeating the room, teachers feel queasy. Then they try other ways of getting rid of Engfish. They ask students to keep personal journals. Maybe if they talk about themselves they’ll find their natural voices” (12). That writing stinks. And quite frankly, its nauseating presence lingers in the writing classroom long after instructors attempt to rid student writers of it.

In short, such writing lacks individual style. This deficiency of style, much like the absence of personality in face-to-face communication, is not as easy to remedy. Due to the funky stench of failed attempts to write in the academic style, it can be incredibly sickening when composition goes bad. However, as opposed to the dead English, propped up by standardized grammars and forms that can fatigue a reader, energetic writing more readily lends itself to ideas of socio-political growth in our society. Additionally, if we are to utilize the pervasiveness of the writing process in our pedagogy, live texts—those written out of subjectivity—complement its very fundamentals, as it offers a foothold for student writers. Students new to the University would be more invested in their arguments if they were encouraged to focus on issues that affect them.

Admittedly, to encourage ‘live’ writing is in itself problematic; especially as the process of connecting words and authorial experience can itself be a difficult task. For those both in and out of the field of Composition, writing is not all about creating sparks.

Besides, not all people can be interesting and dynamic, and sometimes their writing may not be as well. To encourage writing that is clear, honest, rhythmic, and evocative would be to encourage an entire lifestyle change for some students. Nonetheless, similar to a time when the field emphasized writer authenticity in the University, we must once again beckon students towards vibrant writing voices.

Authentic Voice

According to Donald Stewart's textual introduction in *The Authentic Voice: A Pre-Writing Approach to Student Writing*, "the primary goal of any writing course is self-discovery for the student and...the most visible indication of that self-discovery is the appearance...of an authentic voice" (xii). This type of writing makes use of an idea of self-discovery that motivates writers to embrace a very tangible out-of-body analysis as a mode of self-evaluation. Once writers find a version of themselves relatable to academia—one that will allow them to ask questions and attempt to respond dialogically—they should be able to find a language, a tone, an authentic voice to match the occasion. He continues:

Authenticity means, quite literally, genuineness...Your authentic voice is that authorial voice which sets you apart from every living human being despite the number of common or shared experiences you have with many others: it is not a copy of someone else's way of speaking or of perceiving the world. It is your way. (Steward 3)

However, with this call for authentic voices, I believe it is even more important that we seriously consider how the academic writing that we ask for relates to student bodies; that we instruct students how to utilize forms of academic communication in a way that

renders them purposeful not only for a final grade but for the sake of communicating *real* ideas and addressing *real* issues.

Furthermore, in some cases, “[part] of the work of finding [ones] own deep writing comes from awareness of the body... Cultivating that connection—that pathway between [the head and the body]—creates deep writing” (Herring 7). One of the most understated risks involved in academic writing are those that concern the physical bodies of our student demographics, in that one goal of the writing instructor should be to help students communicate effectively without putting themselves or their communities in harm’s way. Writing as a form of communication makes use of the mind *and* body, because it first takes an awareness of the world to speak or to write truths. For the beginner student, the inability to write and speak freely might spur from the inability to describe her position in relation to others or the inability to acknowledge her privileges and disadvantages. As such, voice in academic writing acts as a marker of identity. When we ask students to write in multicultural classrooms, we demand that they first discover then express themselves to a community of others:

We define multiculturalism as the effort in the latter half of the twentieth century to encourage citizens in the United States to embrace the racial, ethnic, class, gender, religious, age, and physicality differences in our population; multiculturalism is an approach to living that respects, incorporates, and mediates the differences and similarities of our population. It suggests a reckoning with the erasure of cultural identities inherent in the melting-pot ideal and with the possible essentialist interpretations of the salad-bowl or jambalaya metaphors, which serve

better the more desirable goal of a cooperative, relational pluralism
(Severino 1).

As it stands, the attempt to address or acknowledge multiculturalism is still a threat to some. In the writing classroom, who are instructors to mediate the differences in the writing classroom for a society that has turned a blind eye to issues of classism, racism, gender inequalities, ageism, and sexism? Even as the field has conceptualized the writing room as “contact zones,” where exactly can we stand when faced with congested multicultural junctions? Quite problematically, the most persistent conceptualization of multiculturalism as a serious issue has been that of the ‘melting pot’ or ‘salad bowl’ or even ‘jambalaya’. But people are not food. Furthermore, the differences in cultural values and traditions vary in so many ways that they don’t often necessitate the same types of metaphorical containers. So as we struggle to find a balanced way to appreciate variety in the writing room, it is important to remember that culture is not a thing to be consumed—we should recognize differences and we should find a common place to share them, but not attempt to make cultural differences palatable for all.

The focus on multiculturalism within the field causes many to ask: “Is the purpose of writing instruction to help students find their voices and cultivate expressions from alternative social and cultural locations, or is the purpose to initiate students into the academy and the society it serves?” (Severino 3). Why do *we* have to teach students to write across a multitude of disciplines across a variety of social types? It becomes readily apparent that if we don’t begin to embrace multiculturalism in American universities, we would have to re-evaluate our cultural insistence on individuality as a predominant ethos. Particularly since “assuming that expressive and personal writing is natural reflects a

peculiarly American emphasis on individualism as the basis of identity—an idea not shared by all cultures” (Lisle and Mano 14). However, if we analyze our field in its current form, a writing pedagogy that incentivizes objectivity limits student responsibility.

Finding Macrorie

Luckily for us, if we were to return to a more subjective pedagogy there would be a number of things that we would not have to figure out for ourselves. Moreover, instead of conceptualizing the move towards expressivistic writing as offering an easier model of writing pedagogy, we might instead view it as a focus on ethos as a rhetorical appeal, more so than logos—even if, as suggested by Peter Elbow, what we’d receive from young student writers would be that of a “resonant voice,” not a written representation of the whole self (Bumham 30). Although not as prominent as others in the field, Ken Macrorie spearheaded this pedagogical shift to peer-responses, “freewriting,” theoretical presuppositions “of the classroom as a community,” and truth-telling (Enos 420). In a 2010 interview concerning his pedagogy, he rehashed a letter to his pupils from his younger years in which he wrote about the predominance of academic stylistic features, which to him, acted as a major handicap in written communication:

I’m sick of reading phony writing, including some of yours. It’s not your fault. I believe you write that way because in composition classes like this one the aim is usually to get you writing without a lot of mistakes in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. You can’t write well until you know those basics. I apologize. I’m a writer myself and I know there is something much more basic in writing than those basics. It’s meaning. I’d

like you to try an experiment. Go back to your rooms and try harder than ever before in your life to write truths—not the truth—whatever that is, but your truthful memory of an event in your life you can't forget. Try to get it right, your perception of it. (Schroeder and Boe)

Most of Macrorie's criticisms concerning student writing implicate not only himself, but also the overwhelming criteria of academic writing that crush creativity. Similarly, his issues also stemmed from the idea that the students simply were not writing about the right things. During his teaching years, the Vietnam War raged on. It was then during a time filled with unanswered questions and problematic notions of nationalism that he published student writing in *Undressed*, which would later unfold as "Arrangements for Truthtelling". Furthermore, Macrorie produced some of the most lasting student-centered writing strategies during the 1970s. In his text, *Telling Writing*, Macrorie sets up a relationship between the searches for truth with the re-telling of experience via writing. For him, the ability to "write freely" becomes more about liberation from other writing techniques—particularly those held in high regard within the academic community—than a push to tell the often anarchistic truths about social contexts. Macrorie attempts to differentiate Truth and truths. Acceptance of this multiplicity for the writing instructor is key:

But it's truthtelling that does the most to release language powers. We ask for truths to the world out there, which can be verified; and truth to the world inside, the writer's feelings, which no one can verify...Perhaps when they're telling truths...they concentrate first on what they're saying

and second on what others will think of it. They may be doing that because truth-telling puts them on solid ground. (Macrorie 7)

If we as instructors are to utilize a similar pedagogy, it seems imperative that we understand that “truth-telling” is not the only way to create interesting texts; but that it is the most effective way to facilitate the types of student writing we seek.

However, in any such pedagogy, we should also ask: Is it always okay to tell the truth? While this seems to be the case for Macrorie, there are a number of cases in which the truth will not set a reader or writer free. As such, there are risks to this type of writing that Macrorie does not address. But we can. Throughout the text, Macrorie argues that truth-writing is something of the writer’s own, yet it points to the ancestral or memorable. What about those who wish to leave those connections behind? How do they write the truth? To me it seems we must recognize this genre of writing as a variety of its own. Students have multiple voices. Let them talk.

In short, academic writing is bad because it has increasingly become a way to praise an overt bias towards objectivity and the turn to mechanical writing. It also has a limited readership, so its themes are delineated by power structures. As a result, instructors teach writing as they see fit. Many encourage low-risk subjectivity for student writers because the risks seem to be unnecessary, and the goal becomes to repress textual emotion for the sake of academic taste.

CHAPTER III

WRITING TRUTHS

Writing instructors have multiple responsibilities: to focus on the writing process; to help mediate “contact zones” for students; and to encourage stylistic, authorial expression (Pratt 85). My criticism is that the field has learned to downplay its ideological significance for the sake of scholastic impartiality. But even so, Composition pedagogies stress the primacy of the writing process as a way to obscure more covert goals and intentions of the classroom. The emphasis on a writing process limits instructor accountability, because at least one of its aims is alarming: through the reiteration of a writing process, we—perhaps necessarily—transform the beliefs and principles of our pupils. In writing process pedagogy, the types of papers produced by students seem obviously similar, while the ethical implications are multiple and shrouded by habit. Indeed, the push for clarity over ambiguity and the demand for deductive reasoning encouraged by the insistence on thesis statements and proofs both indicate our reverence for a particularly American ideology: student writing should be efficient, nonpartisan, and lucid. As such, our writing pedagogy is a nationalistic one. Even if we don't encourage political or social theory outright, the acknowledgement of such writing as ‘good’ in academia sets the precedent for how students *must* learn to communicate. Good writing has become that which is functional in form, minimal in outrage, and absent any negative repercussions for its affiliated academic institution.

The mere suggestion that the field *could* affect students in terms of their identity has become more detrimental to our specific field as it unnerves, instead of incentivizes those who perceive it. Public intellectual Stanley Fish's argument that we "aim low and stick to the tasks we are paid to perform," instead of pushing students towards a type of special morality has limited our instructional engagement in the multicultural classroom ("Why We Built the Ivory Tower"). However, all academic fields of study encourage a valuation system. The field of Mathematics constantly recognizes new findings that complicate earlier understandings of numerical relations: it cherishes innovation. Biology necessarily integrates the experimental and accords supposition. The study of History, our confrère in the Humanities, strives to properly acknowledge and archive the overlooked. In the field of Composition, our very own predecessors believed that one goal of the writing instructor *should* be to encourage public writing to improve social conditions, even though they were largely persecuted for it.

Just the same, goading students toward truth-telling is all too easily fraught with arguments against prioritizing any particular socio-political issue over another. And since writing instructors, administrative entities, parents, and critics cannot agree on appropriate content for the writing classroom, we attempt to strip the field of all its subjective implications, despite the presence of ideology inherent to the processing of not only student writing but the students themselves (Berlin). Even worse, when and *if* those invested in the field write about what we actually do, we are wary of actually provoking our readership. We do not wish to respond to questions to which we might not have definite answers. Yes, pedagogical transparency has its flaws; however, for the sake of

our students, writing instructors must at least dominate the conversation concerning academic writing practices and articulate what it is we *really* do (or at least wish to do).

Providing this, when our students ask for suggestions in terms of research topics, do we not already urge our student writers toward the issue we find most suitable for the occasion, for what we think of the student, for what we think might better their role in society? Of course we do. And do we not shape the voice of student writers when we encourage one thesis statement over a weaker, ‘less focused’ one? Sure. There are occasions to speak, and we should wish for our students to speak to them rhetorically. And in our desperation to help ease the process along, do we not encourage vulnerability and exposure through academic writing, while we, ourselves, remain protected behind our red pens—hidden behind our insistence that we merely instruct the writing process? I think so. It does not seem fair to ask for so much from our students, but not readily expose ourselves. For many scholars, these are the very same writing processes that have happened to us. Now is our chance to happen to it. Let’s rebel against the constrictions of our field that suggest student writers come unprepared to do more than just regurgitate and perform standard texts.

In reality, we ask that students compose themselves. And we wholeheartedly contribute to this composure. We edit for clarity. We edit for grammar, and as a result, we edit towards subjective content. The tension between Fish and us seems to be that we refuse to admit this act, even as we enact it under the best intentions. Writing is subjective and has always been. But now, as it stands, our role in the multicultural writing classroom is safely delegated to part mediator of differences, part grammar expert—but simply a writing specialist and never a social consultant. We insist to our critics that we

do not purposefully encourage topics on race, gender, class, and nationalism—our students do (Hairston). Nevertheless, with growing access to self-help books and online editing, very few people find this reductive writing instruction useful. To avoid working the field further into obscurity, let's tell the truth: a written text is the physical attempt to partially preserve concepts, interactions, and ideologies. Writing instructors are obliged to read and offer assistance towards textual clarification, while simultaneously advocating for not only student voices, but also student bodies. Our obligation is to fulfill a role that many others will not—to actually read student writing, to listen to their voices, to hear them.

The History of Composition

Maybe we simply need a reminder of how the field has responded to demographic changes and social expectations over the years. Changes in the field have always been brought about through social needs. In 1862, the United States Congress passed the Morrill Act, which insisted on more research in Engineering, Science, and Agriculture at American universities. This scientific turn led to a Composition course that would take writing just as seriously, formulaically, and objectively as other fields (Crowley 54). Furthermore, by the end of the Civil War in 1865, student demographics began to change drastically to include a wider range of students from lower economic classes. In order to create more pedagogical coherence in the field, by 1874 Harvard University had begun to administer a writing exam for its “English A” course, which set the precedent for a pedagogy that would act as a prescriptive bandage for substandard student writing. Other major colleges and universities followed suit. Writing samples were utilized as a way to assimilate non-traditional students to the writing standards of the University. However, it

is vital that we keep in mind that these arbitrary academic preferences, still used by writing instructors today, had been established less than two decades prior. These academic rules were merely necessitated by the need to acculturate a diverse collection of social and cultural ideals into a unified, more manageable academic standard.

During that time, many new students had very little access to representations of academic writing forms. As such, Current-Traditional Rhetoric (CTR)—a type of writing instruction criticized for its adherence to strict forms like the five-paragraph essay and its de-emphasis on syntax—trivialized rhetorical invention or discovery during the writing process. From this approach, early instructors introduced sample essays, mock sentences, and transitional phrases as guides for student writing. The precedence of structure over creativity led to the accumulation of seemingly professionally produced texts. In hindsight, those who criticized CTR argued that this particular mode of Composition attempted to solidify an emergent middle class that had not existed prior to the 1950s. Particularly, the writing pedagogy encouraged “middle-class values, such as social stability and cultural homogeneity, and supported the meritocracy associated with the military-industrial complex” (Bumham 22). Such social and cultural tenets were reflected in CTR writing instruction, as the main demographic was the conventional, male, well-to-do, hetero-normative student.

For student outliers, the 1890 Morrill Act was directed at former confederate states to expand educational opportunities to racial minorities. This act led to the formation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Twenty-eight years later, institutions like Hampton University of Hampton, Virginia or Claflin University of Orangeburg, South Carolina exemplify one of the most obvious historical markers of

academia's flagrant attempt to meet the needs of an evolving student body. Furthermore, the growing backlash to CTR extended into the 20th century where it was met with the emergence of New Rhetoric. New Rhetoricians wanted to at least partially revert focus to the most involved part of the writing process: the student writer. Following WWI, the focus on grammar became tied to a sort of educational progressivism, especially after scholars noted the effectiveness of war propaganda as forms of written rhetoric (Conley 261). New Rhetoricians asked: "What can you, the academic student, do for American society?" This pedagogy not only heavily prioritized the formal style of writing, but it also centralized a type of rhetoric linked to civic duty. Nonetheless, this type of academic writing was simply not enough to raise spirits concerning the usefulness of a literate, well-written student body.

As such, during the 1930s administrators within the American University became disillusioned with Composition in its then current form. They attempted to get rid of the field as a writing requirement for University students. In fact, the strongest opponents insisted that students did not have any real "content" to address, despite an earlier call that students be more involved with civil issues. This opposition led to a move towards Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) studies that remain an interesting aspect of Composition today, due to a seemingly more obvious engagement with writing practicality. The proponents of WAC studies suggested that students could actually *do* something with Business or Technical writing, not merely engage in exercises of mere mental agility and purposeless rhetorical form. WAC pedagogies emphasized writing as practical—as a means to an end—not as an idealistic venture. Furthermore, unlike previous decades that made use of legacy admissions—University acceptance preferences

based on the prevalence of family alumni at a particular University—the then emergent class of students did not even have familial ties to American academic standards in the writing classroom. The 1944 GI Bill further expanded the student body to an even larger group of diverse races, genders, and social classes. Growing diversity within the University led to the need for an even more expansive conceptualization of student voices: voices that could be heard literally. During this time, Public Communications and Composition split from being a once unified field.

Unfamiliar student demographics, early writing exams, and a more pronounced focus on grammar led to the field's most persistent focus on error or "bad writing". According to author Mina Shaughnessy, in her text *Error and Expectation*, this problematic view of student writing as characteristically bad was—and I will stress, still is—the biggest misconception that writing instructors have. Composition characterized its non-traditional student writers as inherently flawed and grammatically inept (Shaughnessy 393 - 396). However, if we are to trace the history of the field, it is only following the drastic changes in student demographics that most "bad writers" emerged. To me, it seems quite apparent that these students were those who had limited access to academia, unlike their traditional counterparts.

Concerning the history of Composition, Shaughnessy retrojects that the early conceptualizations of error in writing came from the inability of instructors themselves to re-strategize and invent new ways to instruct students new to the University. Similar to the acquisition of many skills, particularly languages, student writers make mistakes because making mistakes is the only way that anyone could begin to get better. Nevertheless, assertions of bad writing and compositional errors followed the "open

admissions” policy of The City University of New York (CUNY). This modification instituted the possession of a high school diploma and mere residency in a particular area as the base criteria for admissions to most universities. In lieu of how important the open admissions policy is now to the modern University, it should be easy to imagine how the acceptance of language varieties should inform our ideas of an academic writing standard. Without reflecting upon the history of the field, change might appear hard to come by for instructors invested in writing courses, but in fact, Composition has evolved with every major change in student demographics. Historically, uncertainty did not stifle pedagogical modification nearly as much as it seemingly has for us.

While addressing the historically progressive modes of academic access risks agitating social or political tensions, measuring student composition against inaccessible benchmarks purposefully excludes the social and political differences that have produced it. Granted, the presumption of such a compliance to any traditionally held view of a “good” writing standard is neither univocal regarding *what* or *who* should be taught as models in the field, nor *how* or even *if* such standards should always be imitated. The acknowledgment of Composition’s history portrays a messy engagement with a variety of tensions that have existed between dominant and subaltern cultures in our field. Even as educational administrators have moved beyond creating entirely new schools and programs for marginalized outliers, we must still be encouraged to create new practices that engage all students in the writing classroom. Just as the recognition of difference should not hinder the texts that our students are able to produce, neither should multiculturalism be wielded as a tool for the specific ends of forced, cultural engagement. In an ever-expanding, diversifying nation, instructors can no longer pretend the

normative, standard student or his or her or hir¹ complementary writings exist. As such, the field must further examine the social implications of standardization in Composition Studies and push for a return to writer subjectivity. Our students can tell the stories. Then we can reflect on the pros and cons of a more adaptive pedagogy.

Despite the call to relate Composition Studies to its historical contingencies, it remains vital that those involved within the field acknowledge the secondary issues—the ideological implications of how instructors are involved with Composition’s pedagogy. It remains true that when we strive for a “particular language” or “particular dialect,” we already alienate those we attempt to help, especially when we take the issues of multiculturalism into serious consideration (Miller 991 – 992). As such, it seems vital that even as we encourage a form of standardized academic writing, that we recognize it as a chosen variety. To clarify, if problems lie in our student’s inability to navigate the move from the margins of academic writing to the standard, perhaps we should interrogate that very same standard. As a reminder, it remains important to strive for a comfortable medium: there must be *some* idea of a recognizably academic text, even if—especially if—students and their writing are to be taken seriously. If grammar truly is a systematic reconstruction of public speech forms, affected by a plethora of cultural interests and goals, we must truly evaluate our insistence on a specific grammar (Weaver 115). We must contextualize stylistic choices in the field as being that just that—merely an option for diverse student populations.

During the writing process, many students experience a communicative lull. They do not trust themselves to write. They ask: “How should I say this?” or “Can I word this like *that*?” Students are aware of the arguments they wish to make, but suffer through

¹ Hirs is a gender-neutral possessive adjective (MIT).

translating their ideas into academic language. Furthermore, what we might deem a universal writing standard differs from decade to decade. It often changes over a few years, within a semester, among instructors of a particular writing program, and sometimes within a single grading session for a single grader. The reasons seem inherently connected. Rubrics are intentionally vague. Teachers are different. But instead of recognizing these conditions as hindrances to the idyllic move towards standardization, these differences should be viewed as advantages. Instructors should better integrate multiple cultural perspectives. The collection of inventive writing pedagogies of writing instructors—a group that continuously evolves in terms of cultural diversity itself—should be the field’s strongest weapon against critics of First Year Composition programs that insist we do more to help young writers.

CHAPTER IV

‘GOOD WRITING’ PEDAGOGY

Process pedagogies reflected a social turn in Composition Studies, which resisted the overwhelming, seemingly oppressive grand narrative that had ruled the field historically. Theoretically, those who utilized the pedagogy believed that knowledge of the world was something to be captured via communication. Students were encouraged to write, and since they needed content, the field saw its first purposefully ideological shift to topics of race and gender. As such, during its emergence, the question of authorial intent bubbled to the surface: if we were to encourage a particular type of student voice, how seriously could we take amateur writing? This new mode of writing encouraged the development of texts, not the singular, hackneyed products of current writing instructions. Neo-Platonism, or Expressivism, dominated the field as a pedagogy that exhibited freedom of expression, bringing with it the revival of Plato’s conceptualization of language in relation to truth:

Plato’s epistemology leads to a unique view of language. Because ultimate truths cannot be communicated, language can only deal with the realm of error... Truth is finally inexpressible, is beyond the resources of language... Truth is conceived as the result of a private vision that must be constantly consulted in writing (Berlin 771 -772).

A conceptualization of writing as a means to express truth fit hand in hand with process pedagogy: the ability to draft and revise repeatedly allowed for constant attempts to

catch, express, and seemingly make permanent illusive ideals. Nevertheless, due to the complications of exacting the pedagogy for emergent student communities—and perhaps with regard to the newfound issue of actually having to deal with student opinion—the field shifted against what it characterized to be the production of anarchist texts and communication of radical ideas. Throughout the field of Composition, the early 1990s brought forth a series of “post-process” texts, which attempted to refocus student writing to particular areas of specialization. If we concede that a writing standard is indeed necessary to the field, let’s at least stretch the realm of possibilities as best as we can to play within these confines—especially since no game is ever really fun without rules. An Expressivist pedagogy centralized the student writer and was one of the last pedagogies of our field to outright admit its intentions. It can only be productive to reevaluate some of its methods.

One of the toughest things to admit as an instructor of Composition in the University is a set of traits that make up “good” writing. It seems most instructors and even administrative entities go through a great deal of trouble to portray—as objectively as possible—academic writing samples to be mimicked by beginning student writers. Rubrics merely list general parameters that characterize papers that should receive high marks. Teaching objectives are mapped out in purposefully vague language. Gone is the writing instructor who would freely assert his or her teaching methods for either fear of criticism or acquisitions of inadequacy. The issue of transparency has created a hoard of writing instructors who feel uncomfortable about relating such a subjective list. As technology advances and students gain access to a variety of information via the Internet, perhaps we should be encouraged to map out our teaching objectives—and do so in plain

language. Roger Sale's 1970 text, *On Writing*, freely asserts a singular characterization of what could be deemed to be a traditional, academic student: one who would now need nothing more than Internet access and a focused mind to produce the sort of standardized texts that some believe constitute academic writing in Composition classrooms.

According to Sale:

A 'good student' is one who has learned how to 'do' school, who sees what is asked of him by his teachers, and who knows how to go about performing in ways acceptable to them. He has a sound, instinctive grasp of English grammar, he knows how to make an outline, how to do research problems, how to compile a bibliography, how to write topic sentences and concluding paragraphs. Often he does not know that he knows how to do these things, but he has sat in English or Language Arts classes ever since he can remember, and somehow he does what they require competently... The 'good student,' thus, is extremely adaptable (Sale 4).

This illustration simply emphasizes the ease with which academic writing can be done. However, this academic performance is incredibly problematic. In terms of what can be taught—and good writing skills can be taught—this student seems to do most of the work himself. The instructor is mostly absent from education. To further address the prominent issues of using such a reductive writing process, Sale switches focus to another student: the one we typically characterize as needing us the most:

The 'bad student' is different only because he does what the 'good student' does but does it more slowly and less well... [He] starts sentences

he does not know how to finish and lurches this way and that without ever seeing any good way to control his paper...He daydreams, gets up and combs his hair, calls a friend or gets a Coke, and with each interruption his chances for a smooth and neatly worked out paper diminish, because it becomes harder and harder for him to remember what he was writing about, where he thought it might go, how it might look when he finished (Sale 5).

Following this analysis, could it be that an underlying goal for writing instructors is to chastise the student who refuses to work under the imposed system, under the time restraints we deem important? Are writing classrooms intended to strictly punish students who refuse to sit or work within the confines of standardized parameters? Is our goal to admonish inattention to the rules and regulations of academia? If so, let's tell it as it is. Even as some students find the writing process difficult, I hope that First Year Composition has not used its accessibility at the University to process the student towards a particular end, so that they become a type of student that merely learns to follow rules. If students produce dead texts, it can only be that the type of writing processes we demand has killed them.

The strict adherence to standardized, academic writing has lessened all of the characteristics that make writing interesting. When externalities encouraged tones of stiffness and objectivity in student writing to reflect engendered ideals of masculinity for a male dominated student body, the field responded with a pedagogy that could purposefully recreate a consistent writing product: one that was purposefully solid and bold in form. When the University needed a quick response to the emergence of

multicultural students following World War I, Composition expanded its pedagogy to include non-traditional students. Even as the field fixated on conceptualizations of ‘correctness’ in relation to its held standard, it at *least* attempted to engage difference by mapping ways to address these differences as errors or aberrations. It seems that now as we have admitted to the suppression of certain dialects and speech patterns that are often reflected in writing, we have come to a stalemate. The prevailing option seems to be that we do nothing since everything cannot be done. But there is another choice: we can be honest as instructors in the field. Let the chips fall where they may, but we cannot have an emergent group of young writers, leaders, thinkers, and speakers who are all afraid to speak up. If we truly care to teach our students to write—and all of them at that—perhaps we ourselves could stand to do something new. Let’s extend the notion of artistic license to our students that often accompany any discussion of the texts of Faulkner, Morrison, Cummings, and Heller. As a whole, the field of English wields these writers as exemplars for young writers. Why then, do we insist that they do not break the rules of a selective, standardized English?

If the field of Composition wishes to encourage student writing that has movement, that has voice—that *does* something—a transformation of the academic standard is necessary. According to Sale, “when we protest that the language is a living language, what we mean is that standard language is living for those who have power” (29 – 30). Even if we teach toward a discriminating type of standard, it is also our duty to empower beginning writers towards civility. Writing as a source of civic power facilitates cross-cultural communicative abilities. If we do, the rewards of such “good” writing far outweigh the risks. Good writers are those who pose questions, not threats. Good writers

use the medium of words to encourage positive change, not destruction. Any writer that operates inside the confines of the academic community, particularly one increasingly dominated superficially by traditions of showmanship and individualism, merely exists, but does not live. In Composition, the best thing we can do as writing instructors is to seek an open relationship that emphasizes truth: especially as it seems our students do not only bring their own experiences to our courses, but predetermined expectations, faulty caricatures of academic writing, and a range of complex questions. We need to reevaluate what it means to tell and write the truth. Better yet, we must carefully examine what it means to teach appropriately.

Yes, any writing instruction that purports to do everything right for every student, that evolves to meet every need, and that satisfies some standard for evaluation is just as idealistic as the pedagogy I have called into question. And no doubt it will come with its fair share of issues, if we were to return to student-centric writing; mainly because the writing classroom can sometimes act as a microcosm of human interactions, both good and bad. However, if we are to seriously treat Standard English and the writing that accompanies it as the dialect variety that it is, we would be able to situate that style of writing in relation to culture. Firstly, it is not only students who bring subjectivity to the writing classroom. We do as well. And while it can be great to voice an opinion, what we should teach are the rules of engagement. Not only does a text offer a particular point of view in a sea of many others, the author's identity is contextualized in relation to others as well. The risks of academic writing range from small acts of miscommunication to the fear of assimilation for divergent purposes. No one wants to encourage either defensive or offensive writing. From Bartholomae's views of student writing to the views of any

other instructor who has encountered the student who thinks “he will get along better if he adopts the teacher’s language,” the issue is one of bad imitation (Sale 129). It is time to “unlearn” some aspects of academic writing for our students.

Expressionism Failed: Why the Return?

All the same, expressionism failed in its attempt to deliver the authenticity it valued, probably because the assumption that a “true self” or “personal voice” that exists deep within all student writers depends on the teacher’s ability to separate real or truthful voices from performed ones (Hesford 134). Moreover, the field’s obsession with food options as a metaphor for writing pedagogies—the fish, the salads, and the side dishes—becomes problematic since “the add-more-spices-and-stir approach to multicultural education also has racist connotations in that it tends to exoticize difference” (Hesford 135). We must make it more obvious to our students that communicating now means talking to *different* types of people despite their varying levels of willingness to listen to or read opposing viewpoints. If we embrace subjectivity once more, we are at least aware that centering authentic student voices could very well lead to identity essentialism. Expressionism has been discussed over the course of multiple historical contexts, but a socio-political context of understanding can directly consider student demographics. The composition classroom can make use of multi-culturalism and growing diversity without the fear of cultural essentialism by focusing on literal student bodies and the communities in which they interact (Mathieu). For productions that might truly represent our students, what we need is ‘body’ and ‘presence’.

Within the field, we need to embrace a pedagogy that will teach students to be more communicative and more interesting. To perform effectively, student writers should

perform aesthetically. Even critics like Stanley Fish exemplify the style of writing we should want in academia. Similar to his widely circulated essays concerning the field, student writer should be accessible and critical. It should be easily accessible, argumentative, and direct. Just like Fish, students should take an argumentative stance as a way to negotiate difference. Such acts breathe real life into writing, and mark the move away from one-sided communication. What we need is a revival of the fittest pedagogy.

Students deserve a writing pedagogy that will encourage them to move beyond the mechanics. Instructors deserve to do more than “guard the ivory tower,” because that’s for the admissions department. As an instructor, why not hope for writing that is good, that reflects a truth or multiple truths? Such is the writing of hope or expectation; it is writing that foregrounds change. Furthermore, the centralization of voice in earlier writing pedagogies simply acted as a marker of style that *might be* affected by identity. What we really need is a turn to public writing that purposefully affects external communities for the better. If we accept the need for a mode of writing instruction that integrate process and change, the emergence of assignments that emphasize public advocacy can revitalize student writing (Mathieu). It is not enough that students learn rules and formalities. They must also learn how to communicate truths that implicate themselves in both academic and civic dialogues.

CHAPTER V

A RESTORATION

Students write differently. For verbose writers, an effective text can emanate from the simple willingness to be honest and open and smart. Almost as if, once elicited by mere sensory experience, words spring from some internal fountain of locution in the author's bowels directly onto the page or screen. These wordsmiths jot observations on squares of old receipts, parking tickets, and empty envelopes. They scribble in bathroom stalls. They blog. Other writers, similar in production, yet dissimilar in intention, are unable to suppress the desire to retort. They write even if only to spite a profusion of forces that insist they remain complacent. Provocation compels such people towards the pen. But for me, and others like me, it takes a restless mind, numerous initiations, countless drafts, and a pedantic ultimatum to compose. Plagued by semantic lapses and unsuccessful thematic connections, the wretched essayist must write and re-write, until she deems the act complete—until the writing style seems decent or at least until the final deadline arrives.

However, no matter the particularities of method, the acceptance of writing as a process has proven indispensable to the study of Composition. Writing instructors encourage students to embrace traditional techniques: to brainstorm, to organize, to draft, to edit. To those students who have grown wary of prescriptive grammar lessons and to those others who have become discouraged by previous attempts to organize

underdeveloped ideas, we contend that if they would simply employ these methods while composing—and enact them almost mindlessly—that they too will learn to write.

Compliant students heed our advice, but instructional stipulations often complicate their writing processes. When we teach process writing, we get processed writing.

Without doubt, to be critical of the field means to come off as ungrateful and idealistic: oddly human in the Humanities. To criticize the field means to engage opponents of writing programs that already view First Year Composition as remedial, impressionistic, or largely ineffective. But we owe it to our students to really examine our role as writing instructors at the University. Those invested in the field of Composition should focus on examining the historical, social, or political truths that have led us to our current pedagogies. Despite our discomfort, we could stand to revisit the particularities of *why* and *when* earlier instructional techniques have failed—especially as we demand that students take on new risks for a critical community, which we ourselves seem to find challenging. Writing is dangerous.

But we should not be afraid.

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