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Twenty-First Century Academic Writing: The Blending of the Personal and the Academic in the Context of Community-Based Writing

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Community-based writing classrooms are on the rise, but the “movement as a whole remains largely unstudied” (Deans 14). In their book *Writing the Community*, Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks and Ann Waters call community-based initiatives a *microrevolution* because, despite the growing number of schools that have implemented successful programs, “a great many composition instructors know little if anything about it” (1). In general, community-based writing classrooms, sometimes referred to as *service learning courses*, couple writing instruction with hands-on, experiential components. Students work with community members in such sites as non-profit agencies, local schools, literacy centers, etc., and write about their experiences.

I have had the privilege of teaching and conducting research on the writing that students produced in four sections of a college-level, community-based writing course that I taught over a two-year period. My goal over the two-year period was to have students write personal, narrative texts about their experiences but also have them do the type of work that is traditionally associated with academic writing, i.e., conducting analyses and working with the texts of others. To construct a definition for what is considered traditional academic writing, I began with the work of David Bartholomae, a noted proponent of academic writing in the field of composition studies, who ties academic writing to the historical practice of citing and analyzing the works of others. Using Patricia

Bizzell’s more recent claims about what is considered academic writing, I discovered that the context of the community-based writing course could be an optimal environment for exploring a twenty-first century contemporary issue, changes in what is considered academic writing.

Twenty-First Century Changes in Academic Writing

Regarding the changes in academic writing, Bizzell, in *Alternative Discourses in the Academy*, states, that because “academic discourse is the language of a human community, it can never be absolutely fixed in form” (1). In the twenty-first century, the increasing diversification of the human community that makes up the academy has led to a diversification of traditional academic writing. According to Bizzell, no longer is academic writing the objectified, non-emotional voice that has long been associated with an academic community that is “male, European American, and middle or upper class” (1-2). More women and individuals from various ethnic groups have become educators and decision makers in the field of education, and Bizzell argues that they have incorporated the discourses of their communities into more traditional forms. These discourses may be non-white, non-male and can include cultural allusions or colloquialisms (Bizzell 2). Yet, according to Bizzell, we “find these discourses appearing in articles in top-rank academic journals and in books from prestigious academic presses. But they have combined elements of traditional academic discourse with elements of other ways of using language, admitting personal experience as evidence, for example” (2).

Thus, the new work in the academy that Bizzell identifies places personal experience (which can be recounted using non-traditional, non-dominant discourse) as possible evidence on par with the historic practice in academic writing of substantiating one’s claim by relying on the work of others. Regarding student writing, this balance between the personal and the academic is important in community-based writing courses for two reasons. First, the personal experience component is a factor because a commonality across

such courses is that students write reflectively about their community experiences. According to Chris Anson, a wide variety of disciplines have community-based courses, but “despite this educational diversity, the concept of *reflection* appears again and again as a widely recognized strategy... In many service-oriented courses, reflection is encouraged through two often overlapping media: class discussion and personal writing” (167). Second, academic writing becomes an issue when a community-based initiative is combined with a writing course, given the widely held belief about the purpose of composition classrooms: Writing classrooms are believed to prepare students to do the work of the academy, a charge closely tied to traditional notions of academic writing.

Conceptually, if we rely on Bizzell’s claim about the changes in academic writing, teaching students to produce texts that blend the personal and the academic should not negate the understood goal of writing instruction: to prepare students to do the work of the academy. Bizzell refers to writing in the field of composition studies that reflects this blending as “rigorous, reflective scholarship,” but she does not articulate a way to introduce this type of work to students (2). Because Bizzell does not provide that framework, I investigated the following question: How do we introduce writing that foregrounds personal experience and includes elements of traditional academic writing to students? I investigated this question in the community-based writing sections I taught over a two-year period because such classes, as writing-intensive and experience-based, are optimal environments for exploring the intersection of personal writing and academic writing.

Exploring Academic Writing and Personal Writing

In my community-based writing classroom, I explored this blending of traditional academic writing with personal writing via specific assignments designed to prompt student writing about their experiences. I structured the assignments to move from the personal to the academic and then to the blending of the personal and the academic, discussing with students the elements of each genre as we progressed through the term. For my own assessment of how to think through the progression of the assignments, I began with an analysis of academic writing because I considered it the incumbent

and personal writing the challenger.

Academic Writing. A review of Bartholomae’s work was helpful in providing me with some ways to think about what is considered traditional academic writing. First, a foundational element of academic writing is its identity as a genre that represents the discourse of the power elite in the academy, i.e., those individuals who create, and understand, intellectual property, the brightest and the best, the educational elite, the insiders. Membership within the group, or at least participation in the group’s discourse, Bartholomae argues, requires that all writers “must imagine for themselves the privilege of being ‘insiders’—that is, the privilege of both being inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted a special right to speak” (“Inventing” 597). Thus, academic writing is as much—or much more—an artifact that identifies the writer as one who belongs to a privileged group of insiders than it is a genre that is governed by a discrete set of conventions and rules.

Nevertheless, regarding some of the common elements that can be seen in more traditional academic writing, I constructed the following list, which was developed from Bartholomae’s work. To develop the list I relied on Bartholomae because of his advocacy of academic writing, and because the elements he identifies are corroborated in the work of other composition theorists (Bizzell; Connors; Crowley). Thus, academic or “traditional” academic writing is:

- Critical writing, where students take critical stances against dominant ideologies (“Writing” 71),
- A means to have students “do what academics do: work with the past, with key texts...; working with others’ terms...struggling with problems of quotation, citation, and paraphrase” (“Writing” 66), and
- A way to help students “invent the university,” i.e., “the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse” of the academic community (“Inventing” 623).

I would add to the list that such writing does not contain provision for exploration of the student as “self” but the student as configured as an academic insider via the

discourse. The student as self is replaced by a constructed, objectified one who speaks authoritatively about issues that often lie outside of the student's lived experiences.

Personal writing. On the other hand, personal writing texts have been defined as those that are produced when students are asked to write about themselves, from autobiographies to expository forms (e.g., comparison/contrast essays). Regardless of the form, the commonality across personal writing texts—and the definition upon which I will rely—is that within such texts students write about their own experiences through the use of the narrative *I*. In other words, a major contrast between personal writing texts and those considered more traditional academic texts is that personal writing texts elevate students' own experiences to replace, or co-exist with, what Bartholomae refers to as the key texts and the works of others that form the basis of more traditional academic writing ("Writing" 66).

Investigating How Students Blend Academic and Personal Writing

My investigation of the blending of personal writing with more traditional academic writing became possible as students in my community-based writing classes wrote reflective essays about their experiences in the community site. This reflective component, as stated previously, is a common phenomenon in community-based classrooms (Anson 167). My students wrote personal reflective essays that foregrounded their accounts of their experiences in the community site through the use of the narrative *I*. Their texts also included information from key academic texts, reflecting academic ways of thinking about the experience and related socio-political issues. Of course, there are other forms of texts that students can produce related to their community-based experiences.

In *Writing Partnerships*, Thomas Deans outlines a taxonomy for classifying the work students produce in community-based writing classrooms (17-19). Deans offers three paradigms: writing *for* the community, writing *about* the community, and writing *with* the community. In writing *for* the community courses the focus is on nonacademic writing, and students often work with non-profit agencies. The students produce workplace documents for the agencies such as newsletters, reports, brochures, etc. In

writing *about* the community courses, students participate in more traditional community service (i.e., tutoring at schools or helping at homeless shelters). The primary location of learning remains the composition classroom, and students write reflective essays about their experiences and social issues tied to the community site. Writing *with* the community courses focus on the community site, and students, faculty, and community members "use writing as part of a social action effort to collaboratively identify and address local problems" (Deans 17). The texts that the students produced in my community-based writing classrooms fall under Deans's second category, writing *about* the community, where course curriculum was designed to have students integrate their retelling of their experiences with their thinking about the "works of others" tied to issues they encountered in the community site.

Students were shown how to write ethnographic field notes about their experiences, and they used those notes to discover and explore the issues that became the topics of their assignments.

Examples of Community-Based Writing

Over a two-year period, I taught four community-based writing courses with university students, who worked collaboratively with urban middle school students in the city of Detroit as part of an after-school program. In two of the four sections, university students worked with middle school students to build Web pages. In one section, the student groups worked together on an entrepreneurial project, and they created a magazine-like publication in another section. The racial composition of the university classroom varied each semester, including a mixture of White and Middle Eastern students, along with a limited number of African American students. Almost all of the middle school students were of African American descent.

To promote the blend of academic and personal writing, the university students in the community-based writing classrooms wrote ethnographic personal and analytical reflections about their experiences, influenced by theoretical course readings about social issues tied to the

community site. The text I used, H. L. Goodall's *Writing the New Ethnography*, called for a type of ethnographic work that foregrounded critical thinking about one's own positioning—i.e., gender, race, ethnicity, social class, regional, etc.—and how that positioning affected interpretations of various cultures and contexts. Students were shown how to write ethnographic field notes about their experiences, and they used those notes to discover and explore the issues that became the topics of their assignments.

The progression of the assignments throughout the term was designed to begin with personal writing, move to a focus on academic writing, and end with a form that represented a blend of personal and academic writing. (A summary of the syllabus assignments is included in the Appendix.) Students completed four major projects throughout the term. The students' first assignment was a personal writing task in which they explored their fixed positions, such as race, gender, etc., and the impact of those positions on their reactions and expectations. For the second, a two-part assignment classified as more traditional academic writing, students created article summaries and comparative analyses of those articles. The third assignment was the first blended text that incorporated elements of personal writing and academic writing. Students wrote personal, experiential accounts of incidents or issues tied to the community site, and field notes and a research source were used to write the analyses of incidents or issues. The final project required students to use their field notes and at least four additional sources to develop critical analyses of their community-based experiences.

This selection of assignments effectively allowed students to process the community-based experience through observing and notetaking. The assignments also helped students discover the importance of their own voices in the knowledge making process and the components of what is considered academic writing. Students, particularly in the "Positioning Yourself" assignment, were allowed to experiment with the discourses of their home communities. This was especially important to me as an instructor because it provided a window into the life experiences of the students in my writing classroom; many of those students came from ethnic backgrounds that I was not familiar with. The information they provided in

their essays helped me to gauge their potential reactions to various components of the community-based program and my planned curriculum.

The purpose of the "Comparative Analysis" and "Choosing Another View" assignments was to have students hone their skills regarding how to work with more traditional academic texts, or what Bartholomae referred to as the works of others. By starting with personal writing and moving to assignments with a greater emphasis on academic writing, I was able to demonstrate for students the differences between the two genres. This move was especially effective as students began to work on their final assignments, which included a blend of the personal and the academic.

As I stated, I considered it a privilege to teach the community-based writing sections for two years. The opportunity to explore the emerging issue of changes in what is considered academic writing was important to me as a researcher/teacher. One reward came from showing students how to observe, take ethnographic field notes, use those field notes to learn more about the community, and write critical analyses that helped prepare them to do the work of the academy. My greatest reward came from reading the texts that students wrote. I believe the freedom that students had to blend the personal and the academic—along with the context of writing essays tied to hands-on experiences—led to the production of texts that were an absolute pleasure to read.

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Appendix

Course Syllabus – Summary of Assignments Course Assignments

Field notes: Field notes are essential components of ethnographic research. They are systematic, written records of observations and experiences throughout the term. Field notes will become the primary source for almost all written assignments

Positioning Yourself: Fixed positions (such as gender, race/ethnicity, social class, region of the country, etc.), combined with your life history and personal preferences will affect your analysis of the service-learning experience. Write a three-page summary on how you think these positions affected your initial reaction to the setting and your future expectations.

Comparative Analysis: You will read two different articles or book excerpts about a related topic. After reading the articles or excerpts, you will be responsible for preparing one-page summaries of each text and a comparative analysis. You also will give an oral presentation of your summaries and analysis to the class.

Choosing Another View: For this assignment, you will need to write about an incident you observed or an issue you

addressed/discussed with one of the middle school students. Use actual (recalled) dialogue. Include a characterization/detailed description of the middle school student. Use a researched source to discuss the incident or the issue. Your field notes are an essential part of this exercise. You might try to look at the incident or issue from the middle school student's point of view. How did he/she react in the setting? Explore the "why" of the reaction as it relates to the source you use.

Final Project

1. Research Proposal: For this assignment, you will submit a one or two-page summary of the topic and research question you plan to address in your final paper.

2. Research Project: For this final 5 to 7 page paper, you will use your field notes and at least four researched sources to demonstrate your ability to think critically about your experience and to construct knowledge from the course content and community-based context. What did you learn from the experience? What are the implications of the knowledge?

3. PowerPoint Presentation: This 10-minute presentation should focus on the main issues identified in your paper.

About the Author

Kim M. Davis (kimdavis@wayne.edu) is a PhD candidate in Composition and Rhetoric at Wayne State University, where she has served as a GTA and is currently a part-time faculty member. Kim is completing a dissertation that explores the integration of personal writing, academic writing, and critical pedagogy in the community-based classroom.