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Writing Our Way Through: The Pre-Existence of Emotive-Response Discourse in Student-Authored Texts and How to Encourage More of It

Ed Comber

September 11, 2001. I sat in astonishment as I watched a jet slam into one of the towers of the World Trade Center. About fifteen minutes later another jet hit the second tower. Hollywood came to life in front of me. With both towers ablaze, it mimicked a scene from the movie *The Towering Inferno*. This was real. The morning show host tried to find the words to describe what was happening. All he managed to do was stammer and watch in awe too. As I watched I began to think about my students. I didn't think so much about the people in and around the towers or in the planes, instead I thought about tomorrow. As callous as it sounds, as I watched each tower crumble as the steel reinforced beams gave way under the inferno caused by the ignited jet fuel, I knew it was too late for the majority of the people in the planes and towers. But it wasn't too late for my students. Tomorrow I would have to address my students.

My students weren't—aren't—battle hardened in any manner. My 18-year-olds had no reasonable idea of how potentially harsh the “real world” can be. Regardless of whether or not the planes slamming into the WTC and Pentagon were ter-

rorist attacks, this was a tragedy, one of which no one could truly make sense. In order to try to make sense of it, on September 12th I gave my students the option of staying and talking about the previous day's incidents or leaving without penalty. Thirty-seven of my thirty-nine students stayed. What came from our discussion lead me in two directions: I performed a study partly based on what I learned about the power of discussion during times of trauma and created an assignment intended to help students release “emotional baggage” at the start of each semester.

Between researching and teaching Freshman Composition, I have come to realize that much of what we write is personal in some manner. The research I have conducted and located indicates that emotions appear to be a primal aspect of writing, showing in texts in a myriad of ways. The student writing samples I used for my research verified this conclusion too: emotions do appear to play an integral role in writing; it is therapeutic in the sense that it allows the writer to work through a problem.

Unfortunately, this therapeutic aspect of writing has become marginalized in Composition stud-

ies, although a student's need to express him or herself shows up in roughly eighty percent of Freshman Composition texts regardless of the aim (typically evaluative, persuasive, and expressive) (Comber). Commonly, this rather ubiquitous tendency to want to discuss one's experiences is what is often referred to as "healing narrative" or "healing discourse." However, these terms seem inadequate when speaking of the variety of assignments instructors typically give students. At the conclusion of my study, I developed a term I feel more accurately reflects what we often see in student-authored texts: "emotive-response discourse" (ERD). Such a term implies a broader, more all-encompassing idea. ERD is the epitome of what is on an author's mind when writing and how those thoughts and ideas (and the emotions attached to them) appear in the written material. Because a topic can be, and often is, chosen for its emotional appeal to the author, the writer is essentially working through a problem in some fashion. The author is relating an emotional response he or she feels to the topic; the language of the text is not necessarily emotional however. As a result, the author's emotions create the text's language or discourse (in Swales' sense).

The Research

In my research I discovered that teachers have little need to encourage students to write emotive-response discourse. The reason is because ERD appears to be naturally occurring, at least in Freshman Composition student-authored texts (Comber). Using a taxonomy of twenty-four items typically viewed as trouble spots for student writers, I searched the essays of five students—three female and two male—to determine how often these items showed in the final drafts. Although I set the parameters for my study as any combination of three or more of these twenty-four items might indicate a problem, I placed special attention on identifying highly personal topics, noting recurring themes, and overall language use. I discovered that emotive-response discourse showed in eighty-two percent of the seventeen final drafts.

My findings complement those of James Pennebaker and Michelle Payne. Pennebaker's findings are very useful in helping Composition teachers understand the importance of allowing students to write more personalized essays. In his study, Pennebaker and his team of researchers took two sets of students (one set on the first day of classes, the other three months later) and requested the volunteers write only about coming to college. Most of the students, although instructed to write only about their experience(s) of entering college (having new roommates, trying to make new friends, finding their classes), wrote about truly traumatic experiences. Stories of rape, death, and suicide attempts entered the writing regardless of the prompt the students were given (*Opening Up* 81).

Pennebaker also noted that regardless of when students wrote (the first day or third month), visits to the doctor's office for those who described traumas declined noticeably, while those who chose superficial topics showed a gradual increase. Pennebaker's conclusion in all this is two-fold: 1) most students will naturally write about painful experiences, and 2) "Writing about coming to college promoted health for a little over four months" [emphasis added] (81). "The degree to which writing or talking about basic thoughts and feelings can produce profound physical and psychological changes is nothing short of amazing" (89), Pennebaker asserts. Even more important is that other psychoanalysts have performed similar and varying research with startlingly similar results.

Were the findings from Pennebaker's research and my own composition-centered research not intriguing enough, Michelle Payne also notes that in her classes similar results are apparent. Her students also took on talking about their personal feelings in their texts, choosing to write about trauma "regardless of the kinds of assignments required in their first-year writing course, regardless of whether the teacher focused on personal or academic essays, or any combination of the two" ("Strange" 120).

Arguments for more Emotive-Response Discourse Centered Assignments

How do we further encourage the apparent natural occurrence of emotive-response discourse then? In order to free students from possible emotional restrictions and encourage them to write more emotive-response discourse, our assignments should allow more student-chosen topic options. Adelizzi and Goss, in *A Closer Look*, point out that students write best when allowed to write on a topic of interest (144). Permitting students to write on their own expertise allows them to further explore the world. Teachers can then ask more probing questions, ones meant to encourage students to think critically about their views or life experiences. Often instructors inhibit students emotionally and intellectually when they fail to allow more student disclosure and release of “emotional baggage,” argue Adelizzi and Goss. The emotional release, and the ensuing increased critical thinking, allows students to relax more after the writing (a cathartic release that follows the completion of the task) and, thus, facilitates increased confidence in writing.

A relaxed student is more apt to become attentive, actively participate, and work with increased diligence.

It seems, too, that we need a more pro-active approach like those suggested by Adelizzi and Goss now more than ever, even had the 9-11 tragedy never occurred. Our world, Adelizzi and Goss note, has changed considerably in the last twenty-five years; people in general, they argue, are now searching more for their own identities. The search is a direct result of the variety of jobs now available, many of which are highly specialized. Such variety can be overwhelming and highly confusing. This confusion can hinder students’ understanding of themselves, adding additional stress to their lives. Such stress complicates students’ decision-making faculties. Thus, because college is intended to be a preparation for real life, by encouraging

emotive-response discourse, teachers can more effectively help students determine who they are, what they want in life, and, perhaps most importantly what interests them (150).

On a more localized level, Jeffrey Berman and Jonathon Schiff assert that writing in a more emotive way also heightens a student’s understanding and appreciation of certain types of literature. Teachers only need to have “the desire to facilitate students’ self-discovery” (“Writing about Suicide” 311). By facilitating self-discovery, an instructor creates writing activities that become more of a community issue than a singular, author/student oriented issue. Through this approach, writing becomes more group oriented through activities like response groups. Thus, facilitating self-discovery helps students learn from and connect with the experiences of other students and/or of well-known authors like Morrison, Hemingway, Shakespeare, or Dillard.

This connection Emily Nye notes in “The More I Tell My Story,” reflects Bruner’s idea that the products of written discourse “are constructed by culture” (Bruner qtd in Nye 390). Bruner, Nye indicates, shows that teachers can better help their students learn about themselves through encouraging the placement of more emotions in student-authored texts. Encouraging students to explore their emotions, as Joann Cooper states (qtd in Nye), allows students to develop texts that “nourish [them] into a caring relation” with other parts of the self. Teachers thus help make students “whole” by aiding them in making sense of their own experiences (392).

As an added bonus, this will help students to claim and craft “a voice for the future” (393), a means by which they can more effectively and efficiently voice their opinions and become more active participants in life.

“Writing encourages structure and organization of thoughts,” Nye says, citing James Pennebaker (394). As a result, it “clears the mind of unre-

solved trauma” and helps people foster problem-solution abilities (395). By fostering problem-solution abilities, teachers allow students to mature faster and more fully.

Suggestions for Emotive-Response Discourse Exercises

So where does this research lead us? What assignments might help students learn to manage, discuss, or release some of their trauma, pain, or “emotional baggage,” especially in light of what happened on September 11, 2001?

I use one type of emotive-response discourse encouraging assignment in my classrooms. I begin the semester with a narrative piece in which students are to write about a specific problematic decision. The assignment is simple and straightforward. I require my students to write about one defining decision in their lives, one they made or was made on their behalf. My students are then required to write in a manner that puts the audience in that decision with the writer through highly detailed description. Admittedly, this latter requirement is more difficult to achieve.

As important as what I learn, the assignment helps my students develop their own voices, their own selves, as well as helps them learn about their motivations through reflexive thought and critical thinking.

Regardless of that fact, slightly over sixty percent of my students chose “difficult” topics to write about: divorce, moving from another country to America, the fear of telling parents something (pregnancy, homosexuality, car accident), the death of a sibling, parent, or grandparent, or more mundane yet still emotionally-trying decisions of doing something against their parents’ wishes like overseas travel instead of college, pursuit of “life-long” dreams which entailed moving out-of-state, or not following in a parent’s footsteps by changing majors. The remaining less than forty percent of my students chose topics teachers might view as

superficial. Deciding what college to attend and breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend were the two top favorites, and actually the only two topics that were duplicated in more than five essays each.

While I use this assignment to help students warm up to college writing, it serves one other purpose. It gives me an intimate look inside the minds of my students. The insight I glean from these essays is what I have found to be the most useful. As important as what I learn, the assignment helps my students develop their own voices, their own selves, as well as helps them learn about their motivations through reflexive thought and critical thinking. Additionally, it helps students “heal” some “sick” part of themselves; theoretically they become healthier.

Another potential approach for encouraging more emotive-response discourse is through the use of a creative nonfiction component in problem-solution essay assignments. One example of this is to assign students a collage or segmented essay as the problem-solution assignment or as a precursor to developing an essay topic. Because the collage or segmented essay is organized in a “random” fashion, students are required to organize their ideas around a central idea, concept, or problem, then work through the issue to a logical conclusion. By having students rethink how to organize an idea, concept, or problem, teachers further encourage students to work through a problem, thus developing better critical thinking skills.

A third, more general, suggestion is to incorporate creative writing—not necessarily creative nonfiction—projects into the classroom. Celia Hunt notes that “[a]ny kind of writing involves self-exposure; we place ourselves and our views not only on the page but ‘on the line’” (*Therapeutic* 50). Hunt adds that “creative [writing], especially in the early stages, involves a high degree of chaos, of delving down into the messiness of the unconscious and grappling with our sometimes difficult and disturbing material” (185-86). Wendy Bishop would most likely agree with Hunt. Bishop states, because creative writing is generally free of many restrictions associated with academic writing (formal language,

formal style and format), it helps the author relinquish control of his or her preconceived identity (51). This relinquishing of control encourages students to write more “creative” pieces (not necessarily narratives) and, may be a feasible way to incorporate the concept of ERD into the Composition classroom.

Additional recommendations come from David Starkey’s edited volume, *Teaching Writing Creatively*, in which the various contributors recommend possible ways for incorporating more creative writing or creativity into the classroom. For example, Michael Steinberg proposes the use of four exercises: “The Introductory Portfolio,” “Only Connect,” “Guided Writing,” and “Personal Inventory” (73). Each exercise, Steinberg states, asks students to connect a topic with their lives in some fashion. Students must also use their five senses, which “often leads students to previously unexplored memories” (74). Toby Fulwiler suggests the use of pictures as memory-triggering devices. In this exercise, students are asked to write about what the picture means to them on a personal level (102–110). Additionally, Starkey indicates that by simply “exposing students to writing [specifically language poetry] that they are likely never to have seen before—work that flouts conventions of grammar, syntax, and meaning—[students are shocked into reexamining their own perspectives as writers]” (127).

Another idea for including more emotive-response discourse into the classroom comes from Michelle Gabow. Gabow suggests we teach students to have conversations with themselves based on discussions they have overheard. Using her life experiences as examples, she indicates how developing conversations to their logical ends (based upon partial discussions heard in a subway, a restaurant, or after reading a random line from a murder mystery) has helped her develop a more rounded and conscientious way of writing. Gabow feels that developing this internal or self-dialogue based on overheard conversations or a line from a text helps a writer not only learn about himself but to better communicate.

Conclusion

The fact that healthier people tend to be happier and more motivated seems self-evident. Healthier and happier students show up for class more often than those who are not. And since teachers almost always face at least one student who literally seems sick all the time, a question arises: How many students fail class not because of an inability to write at the university’s designated competency level but instead because he or she missed too many classes? Aristotle, as well as the Greeks in general, viewed writing (specifically poetry) as a means to therapeutic ends. A person’s health, the Greeks felt, is directly connected to the person’s internal turmoil(s) (Johnson). Freud developed this idea for psychoanalytic purposes. Pennebaker and others later have shown how writing about emotional events actually makes people healthier.

This is not to say that every malady can be “cured” by writing, but it does indicate that a teacher’s failure to openly acknowledge student personal issues leads to a profound failure to truly help students.

Thus, if teachers learn to help students acknowledge embedded issue(s), we help students to be less inhibited and, ideally, to attend and participate in class more often.

Further, since the average length of a college semester is four months, and Pennebaker’s key finding is that the beneficial effects of writing last “a little over four months,” it seems imperative we act on this information and strongly encourage ERD exercises at the beginning of each semester to promote the mental and emotional health of our students.

As a means to this end, encouraging students to be less inhibited in their topic selection and their writing, which seems to naturally lead to more emotive-response discourse, should become a primary focus in our teaching. Echoing the findings of Payne, Pennebaker, and myself, Charles Ander-

son, Karen Holt, and Patty McGady state in “Suture, Stigma, and the Pages that Heal,” that students choose to write personal information into their assignments. This assertion that writers need to tell their stories is poignant. The “telling of their stories” does not seem to be made consciously; rather, ERD insertion seems to happen naturally, or intuitively, as the students’ desire to heal and tell their story emerges through the act of writing (Comber).

Thus, if teachers learn to help students acknowledge embedded issue(s), we help students to be less inhibited and, ideally, to attend and participate in class more often.

If the natural insertion of emotive-response discourse is indeed true, it means that emotional-based writing leads to a reconstruction of a student’s views and ideas that is more effortless and more effective because it appears naturally. Unfortunately, as Payne correctly offers, there is an assumption that “victims” cannot write about an incident without including emotions (“Strange”139). This is obviously incorrect, as Payne, Pennebaker’s, and my own experiences all show. Regardless of the assignment, students still attempt to draft the event and the writing in such a manner as to fit what they understand to be “college writing” (Payne 139) and still include autobiographical information.

If Donald Murray’s idea that all writing is autobiographical is to be believed, then Wendy Bishop indicates all writing is intimately connected to self-discovery, which leads to “healing” (Bishop 505). In order to avoid becoming trapped in a narrow view of the educator’s role, teachers need to demystify the impression that writing is an organized and impersonal process. Doing so means that “teaching writing [will become] radically more democratic” (506). The result of a less authoritative setting and a more democratized view of writing

can lead to increased student participation, self awareness, and improved student-authored texts.

Wendy Bishop further notes that emotive-styled writing is inevitable in response pedagogies: the Social Constructivist as well as Expressivist styled classrooms already do much to encourage emotive-response discourse. Emotive-response discourse already clearly exists in student-authored texts, as so much of the current research shows, and because both Social Constructivist and Expressivist classrooms already allow for ERD to occur, further indicates that autobiographical student writing is inevitable. Tobin says, that teachers—in both their writing and teaching—do the same thing, yet deny it to themselves (qtd in Bishop 511). When teachers deny recognizing the intuitive or natural occurrence of ERD, they fail to prepare themselves for what students may be thinking and feeling when they write (512).

The result of a less authoritative setting and a more democratized view of writing can lead to increased student participation, self awareness, and improved student-authored texts.

The basic, most fundamental insight in allowing more emotive-response discourse in student texts is that the concept of writing as having the potential to heal allows “transformation” (i.e. deeper understanding, knowledge) of the self or persona (Bracher, Johnson). Thus, because studies have shown that emotive-response discourse—though not named as such—appears to be a natural part of writing, it is time for Composition instructors to also transform themselves. Teachers should begin to transform themselves into more effective and efficient teachers by performing two tasks: They should 1.) initiate assignments that help elicit ERD; and, 2.) help themselves and Composition studies by recognizing that emotive-response discourse appears to be naturally occurring in student-authored texts.

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Ed Comber recently received his M.A. from Central Michigan University, where he is currently teaching composition. His research interests are primarily in Emotive-Response Discourse and Healing Discourse.