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John Dinan

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Writing as Healing: A Risk/Reward Crucible for Students and Teachers

John Dinan

Section: Introduction

Seeking my usual and best partner for brainstorming ideas that need to have some connection to the “real world” of public school education, I recently mentioned to my wife, an elementary teacher for nearly 30 years and now a principal in Mt. Pleasant, that I was writing a piece on “writing as healing.” Usually Lin embraces discussions of this sort, but on this occasion I sensed resistance. We danced around the topic for a bit, and then the truth came out: more than anything, she was uncomfortable with the word “healing.” She quickly acknowledged the value of writers finding “words that heal.” But in a public school classroom? She was uneasy about that. And initially it was a gut-level (that is, fully acculturated) reaction, a public servant’s queasiness about bringing into the classroom something so irrevocably personal, even intimate, as using writing as a “healing” process. Such techniques seem best left to psychologists – that is, to professional psychotherapists who are trained to use writing as part of healing process.

My wife’s uneasiness is widespread. Bring up this possibility at any English department meeting at any level and you will sure hear one or more protests of “I’m not a psychologist” and “Our job is to prepare them, not fix them.” To my ears, these protests, despite their partial accuracy, has the same feel as a writing student saying “But I’m not an English teacher” when it is time for peer-editing. Nonetheless, my wife’s aversion to embracing

this kind of writing as a full partner in our literacy classrooms could not be discounted. A solidly-published 28-year veteran of language arts classrooms as well as a Whole Language language-arts consultant and occasional English Education instructor at our local university, I knew her resistance was complex. I knew that Lin certainly has not joined the flight from “personal writing” currently plaguing our profession. But, just as Shelley’s self-absorbed complaint that “I fall upon the thorns of life;/I bleed” was the object of scorn for those of us who grew up in the New Criticism critical culture, this “healing thing” seemed to here to be, well, a bit too much. She suggested that I drop the term as quickly as possible, and quite possibly the idea along with it, at least as part of our students’ formal literacy education.

Perilous though such a strategy might be, I’m not going to take my wife’s advice. Instead of dropping the troublesome language of “healing,” I’m going to try to understand fully Lin’s uneasiness with such talk when discussed in the context of official literacy curricula, for she is not alone in feeling this way. Also, unlike my wife, some teachers and administrators are just plain hostile; they believe that a writing curriculum should have young writers write about truly worthy texts. . .and that’s about it. There is no give in those windmills. But there are others of us who, though a bit squeamish, are not alarmed at the idea of having “healing writing” as part of what goes in our classrooms.

Such teachers tend to observe closely and identify what writing activities engage their students deeply enough so that they reside at a place where teaching and learning writing can actually occur.

We have seen how orphaned, marginalized modes of writing often prove to be for our students the most magnetizing and provocative.

We wonder if we dare do more of that kind of thing. Or if we do choose to do so regardless of the constraints of our official curricula, we wonder if we must be so damned covert about it.

So that we might become more comfortable, even adept, when dealing with this issue (think of who you might have to mollify), I'll share some of the strategies I've found useful for understanding, justifying, and implementing "writing as healing." I'll do so in four segments:

- 1) An assessment of what is at stake in coming to understand this issue;
- 2) An explanation of the often-hostile environment in which alternative modes of writing are consistently marginalized and in which initiatives such as "writing as healing" take place;
- 3) A definition of "healing" that will give us a chance for arguing the case that "writing as healing" should be (as its sibling "creative nonfiction" is slowly becoming) allowed as a legitimate outcomes-based aspect of our writing curricula;
- 4) A description of four classroom practices/assignments that fit into this broader definition of "writing that heals," all of which can be [and are] used from middle-school on.

This is not just about "how to do it" but "how to be allowed to do it" – and to do so regularly, not just on especially traumatic occasions such as 9/11 or Columbine.

"Writing as Healing" in A Hostile Environment

Hostile Environment, Part 1: The Problem With "Healing"

As is so often the case, part of our challenge is with language, specifically, with highly-connotative

words. The term "healing" conjures too many images that seem to have little to do with the stated outcomes of writing curricula. To "heal" there must be a "wound", that is, trauma. And dealing with trauma does not fall under our job description. That's what school social workers and psychologists and counselors (and, yes, principals) are for. My wife and others have told me stories about students breaking into tears while doing the current MEAP writing test – not because they had nothing to say and were thus going to screw up the test, but because the prompt invited [quite unintentionally] the opening of wounds. As a metaphor, "healing" can be very off-putting.

One way around that is to change the name of the thorn on the rose. During his thesis defense, my colleague Ed Comber, whose article on the transformational aspect of writing appears elsewhere in this issue of *LAJM*, came to the conclusion that the phrase "writing as healing," though not necessarily inaccurate, was not a term he'd be able to sell beyond the coterie of "spirituality in writing" advocates that shares even less status in current writing curricula than did the California-dreaming "T-Groups" of the therapeutic '60s. So Ed (using a ploy favored by evasive academicians everywhere) came up with a new term that would reduce pesky connotative forces – emotive-response discourse. We know that a rose by any other name is not at all likely to smell as sweet. Might "writing as healing" by another name not seem so, well, effluent?

Another problem with the phrase "writing as healing" is that, unlike "creative nonfiction" or "narrative writing" or even "persuasive writing," it too narrowly defines the purpose of the writing involved. Creative nonfiction and what textbooks sometimes call "opinion essays" can have multiple purposes — including the purpose of healing. WritTo show this, Muriel Harris gives us the words of Bonnie, a young student discussing this familiar split between two paths that converged in the "woods" of her own writing identity: "Sara told me that when she writes a paper for a class, usually she writes what she thinks the teacher wants to

hear. Only when she is writing a journal or other personal writings, does she enjoy writing and let it help her organize her thoughts to see her emotions more clearly. I can relate to her feelings because my writing style was that way for a long time.” (Harris 67) As it turns out, both Bonnie and Sara have learned to play the “give her what she wants” game in the classroom even when personal writing is encouraged. Taking the path less-traveled by is reserved for elsewhere.

This student cynicism about school writing, even when “personal,” is at the heart of a final criticism of assignments that invite “writing that heals.” Some teachers find personal writing assignments objectionable because in the name of “connection to a student’s actual life” they may in effect coerce students to “self-select” (or even make up) topics that they are uncomfortable with. That is, some students, well-trained in “giving the teacher what she wants,” may feel compelled to get deeply personal when doing “writing as healing” assignments, believing that such openness and willingness to deal with what’s closest is what will give them the best chance for success. Providing an “out” in the form of an less-personal writing option may not let them (or us) off the hook, at least not when we reinforce the “really personal” choices most strongly (often simply because such topics require more of our attention as teachers). This is a legitimate concern. In addition to being a privacy issue, a “she likes really personal topics best” orientation can add to student cynicism about school writing, causing even assigned personal writing to become one of the usual suspects.

At times, this outcomes-based, assessment-driven orientation, inevitably myopic to some degree, can subvert truly substantive changes in literacy curricula.

The good news here is that the “personal” in “personal writing” need not be “the really juicy stuff” for it to be fully engaging. We have some control over that informing definition of “personal.” Also, because of the resolving/restoring nature of the

literacy-learning contexts such as are being discussed in this issue of *LAJM*, what may begin as a mildly uncomfortable or cynical exercises more often than not, given careful responses by teachers, evolve into something far more healthy.

Hostile Environment, Part 3: Curricular and Collegial Constraints

A third systemic obstacle to our even considering “healing writing” initiatives in our classrooms are our current assessment systems, especially the MEAP. It’s pretty well-known that in Michigan the MEAP drives a good deal of public school curricula. At the college level, a surge of interest in data-reliant outcomes-based assessment threatens to do the same.

. . . helping students establish more mature ideas of writing, along with increasing their sense of their own qualifications to “do the writing thing,” is a valuable objective.

Within this climate, there is less and less room for “alternative” modes and genres and purposes-for-reading-and-writing, including in our literacy classrooms. At times, this outcomes-based, assessment-driven orientation, inevitably myopic to some degree, can subvert truly substantive changes in literacy curricula. (Think not of exchanging *The Scarlet Letter* for *The Red Badge of Courage*, but of trying to replace *The Great Gatsby* with *Killing Mr. Griffin*.)

Most English teachers I know truly dislike the MEAP, even though in the case of the writing component the test is reasonably well-designed (and certainly well-intentioned). The problem? It’s usually expressed, with frustration, of “teaching to the test.” One way to interpret this criticism is to see it as a very insightful frustration on the teacher’s part with how this kind of reoccurring and high-stakes testing (and apparently it will only get worse) prevents them from playing a crucial role in the long-term growth of their students. Good teachers know that they are part of an extended family that is collaboratively raising children over a long pe-

riod of time; on behalf of their students, they resent being cast by the curriculum as line workers at the Toyota plant.

Teachers resent being constrained by monoliths such as the MEAP because they know that the stakes are high. One of the most powerful things we can do as writing teachers (strong parallels exist for our responsibilities as reading teachers) is to create conditions over a period of time in which our students' concept of writing – and of themselves as “doers of writing” – can evolve from a narrow and discouraging set of notions about writing, including self-concepts, to a sense of writing (and themselves as writers) that is generative rather than constricting. Especially in the K-12 realm, but certainly at the college freshman level as well, helping students establish more mature ideas of writing, along with increasing their sense of their own qualifications to “do the writing thing,” is a valuable objective. (I consider it my primary, albeit tacit, goal for my writing classes, but don't tell anyone.) One way to accomplish this long-range objective is to argue for curricular acceptance of all the kinds of writing and writing assignments which contribute to achieving it. “Healing writing” is one such kind of writing, having far more intrinsic value than, say, a conventional research paper. As such, the argument would go, it should be accepted into the writing curriculum — MEAP or no MEAP.

But the MEAP is what we have at the public-school level, and service-based academically-oriented objectives are what we usually have at the university level. That is what we have learned to live with, at least overtly. We understand that, except for an occasional excursion into personal writing (too often in the form of unsatisfactory narratives known in my department as “beer can essays”), we are increasingly hard-pressed to justify writing assignments whose undeniably “expressivist” nature often makes them unwellcome in an environment dominated by expectations that students at all levels must at a minimum learn how to write academic papers [in high school, this would be for the college-bound kids]

and/or nuts-and-bolts “real world” pieces [this would be for The Others]. At the secondary level, MEAP-driven tower walls, stronger all the time, are an obstacle, especially those dimensions that are driven by crass political considerations. At the college level, meanwhile, there has long been a bias in favor of students partially learning things they don't know rather than learning more deeply and complexly what they already know, albeit on a fairly simple level. In both environments, left-field notions such as “writing as healing” face an Bunker Hill battle.

Bringing Writing as Healing In From The Cold

Expanding the Concept of Writing as Healing

To me, the charge up that hill is worth it. But my conviction about the value of “writing as healing” initiatives (and others of its ilk) is not based on a belief that that my students should have the opportunity on a regular basis to find in themselves the “words that heal,” whether dealing with a national trauma such as 9/11 or simply trying to get a grip on family strife. Frankly, like my wife, I'm uncomfortable with such overt “healing” curricular agendas. (They strike me as being as paternalistic – colleagues more radical than I would say “imperialistic” – as, at the other end of the spectrum, are most “cultural criticism” approaches to teaching writing.) Closer to my own agendas is the belief that writing of the kind we are discussing in this issue of *LAJM* is peculiarly well-suited for achieving the critical-thinking objectives of our literacy curricula.

We know that we need to let our students be the thing we want them to be if they are going to achieve the learning outcomes we have set for them.

In the case of developing critical thinking skills, our students will best and most effectively be able to engage in such thinking (and thereby learn to do it by actually doing it with a healthy measure of success) when the topics are familiar (not to be

confused with “well-understood”), important, complex, and dissonant – precisely the kind of subject matter that is also most suited to writing as healing. But arguing that position within an environment reflexively hostile to inserting the idea of “healing” into a public writing curriculum is very difficult indeed. Trying to make such a case on the basis of spiritual values and personal welfare is most likely a fool’s errand. Far better, I think, to press the case for “writing that heals” on the basis of its being remarkably well-suited for helping students achieve established learning outcomes.

We will not be successful making this argument if we operate with a narrow concept of “healing” when discussing “writing as healing.” Writing should never be thought of as curative; life isn’t that nice. For all the reasons I mentioned earlier, linking the idea of “healing” to notions of “therapy” only make our challenge more difficult if our intent is to argue of mainstreaming this kind of writing within our curricula. We are not therapists any more than we are physicians – nor are our students. If I were to choose a term that would cause less discomfort among the critics of alternative modes of writing, I’d choose the word “restore” and sneak in a companion term, “resolve.” Spend a few minutes with each of those terms and you will see how they resonate in multiple directions, some of them not at all suggesting the curing of something pathological. They don’t elicit a “squeamish response” in the same way that “healing” does. Here is what I am after: I want the phrase “using words to heal” to include writing that resolves dissonance, restores equilibrium, inherently requires some degree of detachment of “self” as well as some “objectification” of both subject and object, and – perhaps most powerful and healing of all – enhances the writer’s sense of herself as “craftsperson.” Thus construed, the category “writing as healing” embraces a great deal more than the middle-of-the-burning-forest writing that the phrase so often suggests. Some of this writing is already mainstream; some of it still marginalized but making inroads into writing classes (if not al-

ways into the official syllabi and outcomes promises of the curriculum).

Informed by this broader notion of “healing,” we are in a better position to claim that “using words to heal,” the theme of this issue of *LAJM*, has a broad, deep, and long-range role in the development of our students literacy, especially in terms of their evolving sense of the multiple uses/values of writing and of their own potential for being “doers” of writing of any kind. Obviously we should continue to use writing therapeutically in response to traumatic public events in the ways that other articles in this issue suggest. In addition to its topical therapeutic value, doing such writing has a tacit message for our students, namely, that writing can help make sense of these awful things, or at least let them give external expression of their reactions to such events. But these ventures into therapeutic writing will be only occasional – or at least we must hope so. We are not going to hope for a regular stream of national or even local (the suicide of a fellow-student, for example) tragedies so that our students can have a chance to write with the overt purpose of processing shocking events and the covert purpose of coming to understand the full powers and potentials of writing. Instead, we look for ways to have our students write which on the one hand are essentially “restorative” and “resolving,” two powerful characteristics of “writing that heals,” while at the same time requiring writing processes and a positioning of the writers themselves that will further the more academic, less personal, objectives of our writing curriculum.

Classroom Practices: Somewhat Respectable Writing-That-Heals Activities

We should never feel embarrassed when a student discovers that an assignment addresses needful things, including “healing” in a curative sense. As a writing teacher trying to figure out what sort of writing occasions to provide my students with, however, I’m not just interested in a students becoming “writer who can use writing in a resolving,

restorative way.” Eventually I want them to evolve into the next state; I want them “join the club” and without hesitation conceive of themselves as “writers who know they can use writing in this way.” As this plays itself out in my own classroom, the writing occasions I provide to nurture this healthy self-concept take two very different forms: the rationalistic “problem-analysis” and “decision-analysis” essays and the far-more-artistic “multiple voices” and “creative nonfiction” essays.

Despite their apparent dissimilarities, both sets of essays share certain features that position writers in a place where dissonance can be understood, consciously manipulated, and transformed – one could say “healed.” Each mode requires a notable degree of detachment; this positioning takes the form of a “conscious shaping” in the case of the “creative” pieces and a hard-nosed procedural analysis in the case of the analytical essays. In all four situations, young writers are allowed to move back and forth between what Britton calls “participant” and “spectator” roles (persuader and editor, player and coach, builder and architect) – two roles that all competent writers eventually learn to play in an integrated, complementary way (Britton, 104). As you’d expect, these assignments require students to use language (always a symbolic transformation of the subject and often a partial “objectification” of it) to shape and therefore control experience. The activities also involve them in using their own written prose to “find” things that they had not “thought of” before. Both uses of language can “heal.” Both also further the traditional objectives of traditional writing curricula. (The most important handouts associated with these assignments are posted under the “Writing That Restores” link of my web page :http://www.chsbs.cmich.edu_john.dinan)

The “Problem-Analysis” Essay

The best example of “writing that heals” that already has a place in many writing courses throughout the 7-13 continuum (albeit in different forms and with various levels of complexity) is the “problem-analysis essay.” The modern version of

the problem-analysis essay was born out of the work of Cognitive-Developmental Psychology and its insights into cognitive processes during the 1970s and popularized by teachers such as Linda Flower in her *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing* (Harcourt Brace, 4th Edition, 1993). Within writing curricula, assignments directly based upon this scientific research into cognition were once very popular, in part because the essays themselves are patterned enough to clearly indicate that “critical thinking” (always the grail) is going on. To put it mildly, writing a problem-analysis essay is highly procedural (not always a bad thing in a novice writing class) and resolutely rationalistic; that’s the main reason it is accepted in traditional curricula. And we can be grateful for that, even as we realize that the power of this assignment to draw students both in and out is primarily affective, not cognitive.

At the same time teachers must create a learning environment where learners feel safe to take risks and to make mistakes without fear of harsh consequences.

When dealing with a situation that a student herself has labeled as “a problem” in her life, whether that be a fairly private challenge (a fellow-student who badmouths her) to one that is more public and less threatening (whether to take a good but difficult class that might threaten her GPA), the motivation to engage with it is intrinsic, and that motivation is greatly increased by the student’s awareness that, though her knowledge of the problem is limited by her not having had up to this point an opportunity to use language to construct it, she is, relative to her audiences, the “expert” on this matter. When I ask my own students to write such an essay, I can honestly say, “You know more about it than I do – and you’ll know a great deal more than that by the time you are done. You are the expert, not I.” Any time I can make that claim I know I have taken a major step toward creating the best possible literacy-learning environment for my students. For this reason more than any other I have become a great fan of the problem-analysis

essay over the years. My students engage in it with a good deal of focus, struggle with it, “get” it, receive the payoff of having used thoughtful, analytical writing to resolve dissonant situations in their lives, and feel pretty damn good about themselves as writers once they are finished. All this happens, I believe, because (as is also the case with the other writing projects described below) the assignment meets the conditions for engagement that Brian Cambourne claims must exist simultaneously if our students are going to make a commitment to a project [Cambourne, 1988, 54]:

1) Literacy learners must feel that what they are being asked to do is something they can do. Though acknowledged novices, they must nonetheless see themselves as practitioners, as the kind of people who do this sort of thing.

2) Learners must also believe that engaging with the requested literacy behavior will somehow “further the purposes of their lives.” It is important to note here that most young learners tend to present-oriented, not future-oriented, so claims that “you’ll need to know this when you get to college 2 years from now” are not as powerful as motivators as we might wish.

3) At the same time teachers must create a learning environment where learners feel safe to take risks and to make mistakes without fear of harsh consequences. Creating this environment depends greatly on the relationship negotiated between student and teacher. Much of the art of teaching the language arts resides here, I think. None of the “writing that heals” projects I’ll describe later are “safe,” though they entail different kinds of risks for the students. This is a mixed blessing; my job is to make the lure stronger than the fear.

As an example of conventionally-acceptable “writing that heals,” the problem-analysis essay is very powerful indeed, for it “heals” in several ways. It not only allows students to use writing to shape an experience that intrinsically engages them, but because of its structured – and hence “do-able” – nature it also requires them to “detach themselves from their own pages so they can apply both their caring and their craft to their work” (Murray, 16).

That is, it helps heal a part of their immediate world and lets them be that which we want them to be, thereby helping to mend their sense of themselves as writers.

The Decision-Analysis Essay

Another essay assignment with a solid traditionalist pedigree, is the “decision-analysis” essay. It needs little explanation here, for it basically is a “problem-analysis” essay done in the past tense. It has the same range of possible topics (some important decision that the student has made – presumably in reaction to the kind of “problem-situation” she might have written a good problem-analysis essay on at the time), requires the same analytical/critical thinking procedures (see the hand-out on my website for specifics), and pushes for the some of the same self-reflective insights (answers to questions such as “What personal and social forces influence and even drive my problem-solving and decision-making behavior?” and “Was I an effective decision-maker in this case . . . and how do I decide that?”). Successful topics can vary in terms of their “being personal;” some are still “too close” (for good analysis or for healing), some are too distant to be relevant. The writing itself forces students to both step back and to reflect – two “movements” that position them in the semi-objective posture that is a staple of traditional literacy curricula – a position, for all of its objectionable coldness and detachment, which allows healing, if healing is what is needed.

We don’t always have to push our students to grapple with “complex human issues” in order to justify their work and ours.

Michael Steinberg encourages such inward-to-outward writing in his students, believing that assignments which encourage it are the best means we have of getting to connect to a world outside of themselves: “I think this is at least a three-step process. First, students need to discover a personal problem or question that demands more

exploration. Next, they have to find ways to shape their inquiries into focused narratives. Once students progress this far, then I think we can begin to show them how to connect their personal experience to more complex human issues” (Steinberg 72). This process can occur with problem-based analytical writing (which certainly will have a strong narrative component if the problem is one the student is dealing with – or has dealt with) as well as narrative writing. As for the third step Steinberg identifies, I think that such language is useful to us if we are trying to develop a saleable rationale for writing that heals, but it is not required if the topic is complex enough on a personal level. We don’t always have to push our students to grapple with “complex human issues” in order to justify their work and ours. Sometimes it is best to let them be.

As for students’ motivation doing a decision-analysis essay, if the decisions being written about were difficult as well as important their lives, it turns out that there’s a good chance of the process being intrinsically motivational. The advantage decision-analysis essay has over the problem-analysis essay is that it is safer; it is more insulated, less in-one’s-face – and therefore more comfortable for students and teachers alike who (often for good reason) are uneasy about the most personal of personal writing.

Classroom Practice: The Voice Project

In notable contrast to the focus and overall “personality” of the rationalistic problem-analysis and decision-analysis essays, I also recommend a “multiple voices” project as an engaging activity that, although playful – actually because it is playful – fits well into a classroom that tries to tap into the intrinsic power of “healing writing” without getting into too much trouble with administrators, peers, and parents. The “multiple voices” project has many versions, many ways of playing out. However, it always entails students playing with the voices they might use in their writing lives. For accessibility, I arrange these voices along the informal-to-formal continuum, a rhetorical distinc-

tion my students have been honing since they were seven. Students are asked to write upon the same topic, but to do so in at least two distinct “voices.” My own version of this assignment is to have them first cut loose from the English essay ties that bind and write an extremely conversational (“over the top” is fine) piece, perhaps addressed to a friend they for whom they would naturally adopt this kind of persona. A second piece, also playfully crafted and often turning into parody, becomes an example of (not necessarily and “exemplar” of) formal, architectural, marbles-in-the-mouth academic prose. The third piece they do (again, on the same topic) is less playful but usually no less engaging. They write a “formal” letter to a person whose job it is to receive and respond to such letters in which they characterize a situation and ask that it be changed by the audience. (You can see how this piece has a “problem-analysis” aspect to it.) They actually mail this letter.

Despite the relatively high stakes of the “third voice” piece, overall the project is a deliberately playful one – but with an agenda. As Frost put it, “The work is play for mortal stakes.” My goal is to help them “heal” their narrow views of what constitutes “acceptable” writing and to start seeing themselves as writers who can make stuff happen with their writing. I do this during the “Multiple Voices” project by simplifying the context. All they have to concern themselves with is their “voice.” I could care less [and tell them so] whether the first two of these three pieces has a “thesis statement” or “unity” or “effective transitional devices.” There will time enough for that later in the course. Instead, I simply acknowledge students’ rhetorical competence in code-switching during oral interactions and ask them to “do it in writing.” The playfulness provides them with some insulation. (In the conversational piece they get to break rules with impunity.) The “healing” entailed in this assignment is not subject-oriented (although it could be that as well if a teacher chooses to make the topic a public problem with which the student is privately struggling); instead, by making craft-for-craft’s-sake

the most important aspect of the writing in at least the first two pieces, the students are allowed to exercise a control over their prose that many have never experienced before. It puts them in charge, and it quickly becomes obvious to them that they are pulling the [stylistic] strings here and creating artifacts that are likely to be at least somewhat distinct from what's being fashioned by the other students. This can be a powerful – and healing – experience for a young writer, and having done this project with basic and developmental writers for the past 25 years, I can testify how this play – this power – engages them and, when put together with other assignments with a similar “hidden agenda,” changes them.

Classroom Practice: Creative nonfiction assignments*

One way to get a more inclusive grasp of the idea of “writing as healing” is to see its similarities to another orphan of the writing literacy field, namely, “creative nonfiction,” or “cnf”, as its supporters usually call it. Defining this “fourth genre,” as it is also called, can be difficult – in part because many of its advocates and practitioners don’t want to cauterize the genre in the process of explaining it. Still, the following characterization by Bob Root of the “segmented essay” – one of the many and evolving varieties of cnf — will serve us well:

Segmented essays don’t abandon structure—rather, such essays are designed in ways that may be organic with the subject, ways that incrementally explain themselves as the reader progresses through the essay. These are not traditional essays, beginning with some sort of thesis statement, then marching through a linked, linear series of supporting, illustrative paragraphs to a predictable, forceful conclusion. Traditional models of structure that textbooks provide are molds into which to pour the molten thought and language of the essay: comparison/contrast, thesis/support, process – all prefabricated shapes to be selected off the rack to fit the body of the topic—or the five-paragraph theme, the one-size-fits-all product of the rhetori-

cal department store. The segmented essay, on the other hand, attempts a tailor-made design, a structure that may be appropriate only to itself (324).

“Creative nonfiction,” to some a troubling oxymoron, is the thing these days in the professional world of essay writing. Root points out, for example, that the segmented essay accounted for well over 50% of recent issues of *Ploughshares* and *American Literary Review* (Root 323). Of course, creative nonfiction accounts for 100% of the pieces published in *Fourth Genre*, a literary journal published out of Michigan State University that was created to accommodate and encourage the healthy development of this genre.

The popularity of creative nonfiction in literary journals, however, will not be an effective argument for working it into our school expository writing curricula – though it should intrigue us because of the “nonfiction” part of its name.

A much stronger case for finding ways of using creative nonfiction on a regular basis in our mainstream, assessment-driven expository writing classrooms can be made based upon its notable ability to engage students deeply in writing, its capacity to move them to reflectively construct the truth of their experience and simultaneously be aware enough of the connection of their constructed experience to that of others so that they operate rhetorically as well as “expressively” and “creatively.”

Precisely because it lacks the rigid formalistic guidelines Root sardonically itemizes above, writing creative nonfiction forces writers to take an unusually active role shaping their essays.

For creative nonfiction writers at any level, there are first the demands of the subject itself (often a complicated one that involves dissonance), and the challenge of “coming to understand” in such cases cannot be met with the patterns of Power Writing. Then there are the (admittedly lesser) challenges of “being understood.” Though gener-

ally “personal writing” that is not as rhetorically-oriented as most nonfiction sub-genres (the “thesis-and-support essay,” for example), creative nonfiction essays are still rhetorical acts. And without the usual arsenal of formal maneuvers and signposts at their disposal for meeting their obligations to the reader (think “Furthermore. . .,” or “In notable contrast. . .,” just to point out two that I’ve used in this article), a creative nonfiction writer must rely on subtler and more artistic means to allow the reader to see/make connections. This is another way of arguing that to be rhetorically successful, cnf writers at any level must know their subject matter and their craft better than traditional essay writers. This quality of creative nonfiction as a mode that encourages engaged learning is perhaps the reason Wendy Bishop, one of our field’s most accessible rebel leaders, goes so far as to say, “We need to be crossing the line between composition and creative writing far more often than we do. In fact, we may want to eliminate the line entirely” (Bishop 117).

. . .”healing,” writing projects of this sort show our young writers what is possible—not just what writing can do, but also what they as writers can do.

We want that for our students, and they are most likely to demonstrate it when the writing is driven by an intrinsic need to resolve and restore, that is, to heal. In fact, I think creative nonfiction essays written by our students about complex [but not necessarily intensely private] personal experiences in their worlds combine the thoughtfulness of the problem-analysis and decision-analysis essays with the empowerment of craft imbuing a multiple-voices project. That is, creative nonfiction writing is a fine way to help students achieve the nearly-universal objectives/outcomes of our writing curricula — namely, the ability to engage in writing fully, to use writing to intelligently reflect upon experience, to write with an awareness of an audience’s needs, and to back off from one’s prose

when the situation requires the use of conscious craft to create an artful piece of writing. At the same time, and in a way that I am content to call “healing,” writing projects of this sort show our young writers what is possible — not just what writing can do, but also what they as writers can do.

*For a number of handouts pertaining to integrating creative nonfiction into conventional writing classrooms and assignments, see the “4 Cs Handouts” link on my website at http://www.chsbs.cmich.edu/john_dinan

Conclusion

My students generally come to me with a “wounded” concept of writing [or at least of “school writing”]. Many also have a rather tattered image of themselves as writers. Nothing makes my job more challenging. This is not a knock on public school teachers. They have to do what they have to do, which most often is to align their instruction [a god-awful word] with the kinds of MEAP-backed “you’ll need this when you. . .” objectives I described earlier. Teachers who find themselves in the “getting them ready for college” mode are especially challenged, for it is difficult to figure out what actually happens next to college-bound students. But somehow it must be serious. Listen to this representative voice:

“Thus, I would agree with David Bartholomae’s critique of expressive writing instruction that suggests to students the expression of a coherent and autonomous subjectivity unfettered by the forces that construct us socially and therefore ideologically. But personal writing that serves academic purposes need not be, indeed should not be, self-disclosive; neither should its ends be emotive and self-serving” (Spigelman 71).

None of us who deal up-close with young writers on a daily basis will be terribly surprised that the person who wrote that first [dense] sentence also wrote the [cold] second one. That kind of talk gives me the chills — partly because I fear that public school teachers will feel the need to accommodate it. One common result of doing so is a retreat into

mode-based “academic” writing assignments that proscribe “personal” writing – and hence “writing that heals.”

Unfortunately, students in such a classroom become model-bound to the point of becoming form-bound. Independent critical thinking does not thrive there, and we know it. In fact, most non-technical writing assignments have more than one boundary, and for good reasons we tend to reward students who find the outermost one without going so far as to breach it. If our students are going to be able to operate with liveliness and creativity within their chosen boundaries – or, better yet, if they are going to be inclined to venture beyond the inside boundaries of a writing task and reside for awhile in the place where learning is most likely to occur — then they will need healthier ideas regarding all that writing can be for them as well as a healthy, enabling recognition that they themselves belong to The Writers’ Club. If I can encourage such a change in my students’ sense of “all things writing” – a change I’m glad to characterize as a “self-healing” – then I have done a great deal – especially if I can do so by having them write! The kind of dissonance-resolving “writing that heals” I’ve been discussing in this essay seems clearly – perhaps even uniquely – able to effect this powerful change.

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About the Author

John Dinan, former editor of *LAJM* and past president of MCTE, teaches writing and English Education courses at Central Michigan University. In 1999 he was awarded an Excellence in Teaching Award from CMU.