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Alternative Voice(s): A Reflexive Realization

Jason Kane

As members of the field of English studies, we are likely accustomed to writing success. Our writing success stories probably began at an early age when our elementary teachers stamped a red smiley face on our story about saving our friends from the horrible kidnappers or asked us to read our story about our best friend, our dog, Penny, or our cat, Tigger, to the entire class. Our successes probably continued in middle school and junior high with frequent "excellent's" and seemingly endless capital "A's" written at the end of our essays on what we wanted to be when we grew up. It is unlikely at that point, however, that many of us said we wanted to devote our lives to reading and writing. But as we suffered through the difficulties of adolescence and high school, we may have started to pay closer attention to our continued success with more complicated writing assignments—papers written on an entire book, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Lord of the Flies*, or *The Catcher in the Rye*, or longer stories of our own, either personal narratives or fiction. Thoughts such as, "Could I be a writer?" or "Maybe I should take my teacher's suggestion and major in English when I go away to college next year?" began to surface. And throughout our undergraduate career as English majors, our writing skills no doubt continued to progress while we wrote more extensive, critical, and analytical assignments; we continued to receive high praise and marks; we felt encouraged and confident to enter an English education program, or proceed to a master's program or even to a doctoral program.

Somewhere along this path, our successes lead us to teaching the skills—reading, writing, and thinking—we have been sharpening since our writing instruction began with a Crayola crayon, a piece of construction paper, and a desire to make our own *Where the Wild Things Are*. Somewhere along this path, the academy knights us as knowledgeable, qualified to teach students the skills we apparently now possess. For many of us, this knighting occurs while we are still students ourselves, students struggling to process new, multiple, and competing theories on language, reading, and writing. These multiple theories complicate our charge to teach because not only must we figure out how we arrived

at our current position, riding waves of academic writing success, but we must toil to define and position our own experiences as readers and writers within this complicated web of new thought and theory.

As a first-year student of composition theory and rhetoric and a first-year graduate teaching instructor of freshman composition, I have learned the value of what Donna Qualley calls reflexive inquiry. In her book *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry* Qualley explains:

By reflexive, I mean the act of turning back to discover, examine, and critique one's claims and assumptions in response to an encounter with another idea, text, person, or culture. By inquiry, I mean "the sustained work" of coming to understand "through a systematic, self-critical process of discovery [Phelps 877]." (Qualley 3)

Reflexive inquiry, especially if new to a field and its pedagogy, is essential for effective teaching. Looking back and critically examining our own philosophies in light of our encounters with new others, new students, new colleagues, new theorists, allows us to more effectively put theory into practice.

When we first begin teaching, we enter possessing certain theories or assumptions about the concepts and skills we must teach. These theories are usually personal, thoughts about how we achieved the position of teacher. As a beginning composition teacher, I held the theory that personal voice was the key to writing because I believed personal voice was the reason for my own success. However, when actually faced with having to teach voice, I had no idea where to start, not even how to define the concept I valued so highly. Reflexivity proved to be a useful method with which to re-vision my teaching of voice. Reflexivity, turning back to my early encounters with voice as a writing student and examining them in response to new conversations with Peter Elbow, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, and other composition theorists, allowed me to discover that voice is not the simple sparkle I thought it was; it is complex and problematic. Looking through a reflexive lens allowed me to see that my definition of voice was too limited. This

paper illustrates my reflexive inquiry into how I (re)define voice and how this revised definition affects how I would teach voice to composition students.

Remembering My Voice

Reflexivity means turning back to the beginning, to the time when assumptions are first formed. I was in high school, tenth grade I believe, when I first heard that the voice in my writing was strong. At the end of my narrative about my very first summer tennis tournament, Mrs. Bush wrote that I possessed an honest, true voice. However, to be honest I did not know what she meant by honest and true voice. So I took my paper home and asked my mother, a high school English teacher at a different local high school. She told me that voice is the personal sparkle that makes a teacher want to read on; voice is when the person, the writer is *in* the writing. She also told me that I had it. Of course, I felt exceptionally good about myself. I had *voice*.

By the time I was an undergraduate, I had learned to equate successful, good writing with strong voice. I had that personal sparkle, a flare that made me stand out as a writer. My teachers told me so. And it was *mine, my voice*; nobody else had it.

My love for writing, my love for my praised voice, led me to the field of English studies, specifically composition, and to my current position as graduate teaching assistant. I, of course, was also convinced that my voice, my true self deeply, was responsible for getting me my new job.

Although I was understandably nervous to teach my students, my confidence in myself as a vociferous writer steadied my nerves. When I collected the first stack of papers from my freshman composition students, I zealously attacked the personal narratives as an inspector of voice. I could not wait to hear the honest and true voices of my students. But I heard nothing but a flat, monotone buzz. My students seemed to write, as Nancy Sommers says, "In the voice of Everystudent to an audience they think of as Everyteacher" (160). The following quote from a student exemplifies the Everystudent buzz I heard:

Drinking then becomes a mind quenching substance. After consuming a certain amount of alcohol, one gets a free easy going feeling. Most like this feeling; and honestly so do I. But while in this temporary state that eventually passes, one tries to maintain. This feeling of exuberance by drinking more.

"Where is this person?" I thought. "I do not hear her in the writing. There's no personal sparkle, and this is a personal narrative. I must teach her and

everyone else to develop their personal voices." But as I scrambled to plan a class on teaching voice, I realized I didn't have a clue how I could explain voice to my students let alone teach them how to write with it.

Reflexive Encounters and the Redefinition of Voice

As a new teacher, I began to think reflexively, to have conversations with others in order to examine and critique my own assumptions about voice. I did not feel confident telling my students that they had no personal sparkle. I could point to the use of third person pronouns such as "one," phrases like "most people today" and "in today's society," and suggest alternatives, but this was not satisfactory to me as a teacher nor a writer. I had been so proud of my voice for so long without really knowing what to be proud of or why. My hubris in my voice had been my hamartia, my tragic flaw.

While enrolled in a course on composition theory, I dedicated much of my time to my reflexive explorations of voice. Elated to encounter an article by Peter Elbow entitled "How to Get Power through Voice" in our week's reading list, I chose to read it first. The article begins, "People often lack any voice at all in their writing. . . . They have none of the natural breath in their writing" (62). Initially, I was excited to encounter a well-respected theorist who seemed to define voice as I did. I felt that my personal theory had been validated. However, as I revisit Elbow's text, I read reflexively, which leads me to a more worthwhile encounter.

Elbow attributes lack of real voice or the use of fake voices to an overwhelming concern about audience. He argues, "People often avoid [real voice] and drift into fake voices because of the need to face an audience. I have to go to work, I have to make a presentation, I have to go to a party, I have to have dinner with friends" (62-63). Elbow says to write without an audience, but is this possible? We have to go to work; we have to go to parties; we have to speak with friends; we are members of multiple communities in which we have to communicate. I look back to my own writing autobiography. I read my writing memorabilia and realize that I did not always write in the same "voice"; obviously, at times I was very conscious of my audience. But were these voices of mine fake? I do not think so. They were equally real. I cannot point to what I would call my real voice or even voices. All of them have been affected by audience, by my brother, my mother, my teachers, my friends, television shows that I have seen, books and articles I have read. These influences do not seem negative—they enrich my voice(s). Elbow says that the voices we have learned by imitation are not us; they are not real.

"If I used my real voice," he says, "they might think I was crazy" (63). Reflexivity has shown me that I was crazy to think I possessed a voice any more real or special than my many other voices or those of others.

Joseph Harris in the chapter on voice, in his book *Composition Since 1966*, contends, "The metaphor of voice lets the teacher imply that there is more going on here than just another language game: Questions of selfhood are also at stake" (29). Harris is absolutely right. When we use the term voice, we refer directly to the identity of the writer. John Rouse in his article "The Politics of Composition" asserts, "Language training is behavior training" (425). If I go into my classroom and stress to my students how I want them to discover their voices, to look inside themselves and let their natural true-selves resonate in their writing, would I not also be teaching them to behave as if our identities were simple, singular, and natural? But identity formation is not natural. We are not born with an identity, and we do not possess a natural voice. Our identities are constructed, shaped by our experiences, our encounters with a myriad of others, with a myriad of voices. Jacqueline Jones Royster agrees:

I would like to emphasize, again, that we look again at "voice" and situate it within a world of symbols, sound, and sense, recognizing that this world operates symphonically. Although the systems of voice production are indeed highly integrated and appear to have singularity in the ways that we come to sound, voicing actually sets in motion multiple systems. (38)

If I teach voice as individual and true, I may be leading my students to ignore all of the influences within multiple social contexts that create multiple voices and multiple identities. I would prohibit reflexive inquiry.

Royster pleads, "We need to get over our tendencies to be too possessive and to resist locking ourselves into the tunnels of our own visions and direct experience" (33). I was locked in such a tunnel. Reflexivity has freed me and enabled me to realize that I can no longer think of voice as mine and better, of my experience as mine alone and superior. If I do this, I not only prevent meaningful, reflexive encounters with others but also run the risk of misrepresenting and doing damage to the other voices I refuse to listen to, voices perhaps that often do not have as much opportunity to be heard, voices on the boundaries of discourse.

Royster tells a story about a person commenting on her "authentic" voice after a presentation in which Royster says "she glossed a scene in a novel that required cultural understanding" (36). The person would not stop commenting on how great

it was to hear Royster's "natural" "true" self, nor could she seem to understand Royster's position on her voice(s). Royster declares:

What I didn't feel like saying in a more direct way, . . . was that all my voices are authentic, and like bell hooks, I find it "a necessary aspect of self-affirmation not to feel compelled to choose one voice over another, not to claim one as more authentic, but rather to construct social realities that celebrate, acknowledge, and affirm differences, variety [hooks 12]." (37)

Celebrating Differences: Teaching Voice as Reflexive Inquiry

In order to celebrate and acknowledge differences, we have to teach ourselves and our students to act as what Royster calls a "negotiator, someone who can cross boundaries and serve as guide and translator for Others" (34). So teaching voice is not simply teaching stylistic flare, but teaching understanding, awareness of our multiple voices and the multiple voices of others. But how do we teach our students to become negotiators who can cross boundaries and moderate a conversation of multiple voices? Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, who declares she possesses "multiple identities, multiple languages, multiple rhetorics" (55) suggests:

If we accept multiple perspectives, an ever-changing relationship to the concepts of "truth," rapidly changing language, and complex discourse communities as inevitable characteristics of living and writing in a postmodern world, I believe we have to encourage many different kinds of writing, and not just a variety of styles of academic discourse, but experimental writing as well. (56)

Although my reflexive inquiry into the concept of voice has led me to shift from wanting my students to *discover* their *personal* voices to wanting them to *uncover* their *multiple* voices and what social forces have shaped those voices, I still partly define voice as a rhetorical feature. But how do we teach students to understand the complexity of voice as a term that represents identity but also still exists as feature of rhetoric? Joe Glaser defines voice in terms of choice. Glaser says in his book, *Understanding Style: Practical Ways to Improve Your Writing*, "It follows that a good first step to controlling the voices that speak through your writing is to become an attentive reader yourself . . . It helps to notice choices other writers have made" (3). One solution to teaching voice then is to have my students read more, especially texts which represent multiple forms, multiple voices, and hence multiple choices. I see reading and writing as connected —

the better a student can read, the better she can write—the more forms of writing a student has been exposed to through reading, the more forms or choices she has available to her when writing. Bridwell-Bowles suggests we have our students write experimentally, which Elizabeth Leonard tentatively defines as “about reading, about examining how one’s voice is constructed by others’ voices” (225). I prefer to refer to such forms of writing as alternative forms, not because it is the best possible definition, but because it does not place these forms as distant from the boundaries of accepted academic discourse as does the term experimental.

Asking my students to examine how their voices are constructed by others’ voices through reading and writing about alternative forms is essentially teaching voice as reflexive inquiry. Reflexivity, my method of examining my theories on teaching voice, becomes a method of teaching voice itself. If I expose my students to voices of others, particularly voices which are not often heard and are voiced in multiple forms, they will hopefully be able to make use of those alternative forms, discover the benefits of reflexivity, and become negotiators of cross-boundary discourse.

Using the Voices of the “Borderlands” to Teach Voice

When I suggest teaching voice as reflexive inquiry, I also make an assumption I must address. I assume a certain type of reader, writer, and student—a student capable of reflexivity and becoming a negotiator. Reflexivity will likely be a difficult process for many freshman composition students who are more accustomed to egocentric and ethnocentric thinking. Getting students to think outside of themselves is difficult, but it should be a major objective when teaching writing, especially when teaching voice.

Considering how to get my students to abandon their fortresses of individuality led me back to my encounter as a freshman undergraduate with David Bartholomae’s and Anthony Petrosky’s anthology *Ways of Reading*. Coincidentally, this semester I have also been using this text in a graduate composition course. I realize now that this text facilitates teaching voice as reflexive inquiry. The text contains a number of essays that would be classified as alternative forms of writing. Many selections make use of multiple forms—mixing personal writing, theory, history, narrative, and even poetry within the same piece. This mixing creates different voices and makes the authors’ rhetorical choices visible to the reader. The selections and writing prompts also focus on issues of socially constructed identity, represent voices of others who often do not have a chance to speak, and encourage students to

become Royster’s negotiator. The text encourages reflexive inquiry.

Two chapters from Gloria Anzaldúa’s book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “Entering into the Serpent” and “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” which appear as the first selection in *Ways of Reading* (4th ed.), illustrate the potential of using alternative readings to teach voice. They are such excellent examples because they represent the borderlands, the place where the encounter with the other occurs. Anzaldúa says, “The borderlands are present where two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (21). When a reader enters into Anzaldúa’s texts, she enters the borderlands.

What is especially unique to Anzaldúa’s texts is the blending of forms. Anzaldúa begins “Entering into the Serpent” with a poem in Spanish. Immediately, the reader becomes the other because she will likely be somewhat alienated by the use of Spanish. As the student reads on, she will encounter Anglo-American English, Castilian Spanish, Tex-Mex, Northern Mexican dialect, and Nahuatl—all of these languages and dialects represent Anzaldúa’s many voices. Students of freshman composition are likely to be familiar with only their own language. In order to successfully navigate through these voices, the student will have to abandon her position. If the student is asked to enter the conversation through writing, to include her own voices and languages, she will have to attempt to become a negotiator, a “mediatrix” like *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Anzaldúa calls *La Virgen* “the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that *Chicanos-mexicanos*, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess” (27). Even if a student is unable to smoothly navigate among these voices, the attempt, the struggle should begin to construct a reflexive lens.

Anzaldúa also blends genres in her prose. She includes poetry from others, writes about the Aztec culture, folklore, history, theory, and her own personal experience, her own autobiographical experiences within these multiple social contexts. She shows the reader the experience of an other—how she is shaped, how her voices are constructed. When she writes in these different modes, her voice also noticeably changes. Students are able to see Anzaldúa’s choices, her form, her diction, her style, and consider their rhetorical effect. These multiple genres and voices almost “force” the student to engage in reflexive inquiry in order to make meaning of the text. (See Appendix A for examples of these voices.) The student can examine the multiple

choices and voices in order to better learn how to get power through voice.

The editors of *Ways of Reading* say that elsewhere in her book Anzaldúa writes, "This almost finished product seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance" (45). In response to this quotation the editors suggest the following writing prompt:

As an experiment whose goal is the development of an alternate (in Anzaldúa's terms, a mixed or *mestiza*) understanding, write an autobiographical text whose shape and motives could be described in her terms: a mosaic, woven, with numerous overlays; a montage, a beaded work, a crazy dance, drawing upon the various ways of thinking, speaking, understanding that might be said to be part of your own mixed cultural position, your own mixed sensibility. (46)

And in response to Anzaldúa's quote, "I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue-my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice" (36), the editors suggest this writing prompt:

Anzaldúa speaks almost casually about "having her voice," not a single, "authentic" voice, but one she names in these terms: Indian, Spanish, white; woman, lesbian, poet. What is "voice" as defined by these chapters? Where does it come from? What does it have to do with the act of writing or the writer?

As you reread these chapters, mark those passages that you think best represent Anzaldúa's voices. Using these passages as examples, write an essay in which you discuss how these voices are different—both different from one another and different from a "standard" voice (as a "standard" voice is imagined by Anzaldúa). What do these voices represent? How do they figure in your reading? in her writing? (47)

I do not believe that I could design more appropriate writing assignments in order to teach voice as I define it. Bartholomae and Petrosky speak for me. Both assignments require close, attentive reading. Both assignments almost demand reflexivity. Anzaldúa's piece, as well as other pieces in *Ways of Reading*, argue a multiplicity of ideas from a multiplicity of perspectives; however, they share one overarching goal: they argue for valuing multiplicity itself, in identity as well as in writing.

Valuing Multiplicity/Reflexivity in English Studies

Valuing multiplicity has become an overarching goal within our field of English stud-

ies. We strive as a field to be inclusive, to consider the voices of others. As members of the field of English studies, it is our responsibility to teach what we apparently know to our students. However, before we can do this, we have to make certain that we are aware of what we are teaching and how our choices affect others. We must be aware of alternatives. Reflexive inquiry is a useful model. It encourages multiculturalism and inclusiveness. It encourages us to examine and re-see our teaching, to put our theories into practice. However, reflexivity is not only useful to use as teachers, it also seems an ideal model of thinking to teach our students. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles agrees:

As I have been touched, I have changed and my language and my rhetoric have changed. Because we are in the profession we are in, many of us self-consciously reflect on these changes. This may be the one great contribution we have to make to our students, to model for them our self-reflexive analysis of our own discourse practices. (55)

If we practice reflexive inquiry, if we achieve academic writing and reading success, why not model our successful modes of thinking and writing to our students? Why not show them how we are constantly revising our thinking, our teaching, and our writing? I certainly admit that like Elizabeth Leonard, "I am still learning everything that I am trying to teach" (218).

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Appendix A

1) Ella tiene su tono

Once we were chopping cotton in the fields of Jesus Maria Ranch. All around us the woods. *Quelite* towered above me, choking the stubby cotton that had outlived the deer's teeth.

I swung *el azadón* hard. *El quelite* barely shook, showered nettles on my arms and face. When I heard the rattle the world froze. (23)

2) **Coatl**. In pre-Columbian American the most notable symbol was the serpent. The Olmecs associated womanhood with the Serpent's mouth which was guarded by rows of dangerous teeth, a sort of *vagina dentate*. (30)

3) *Lafacultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant "sensing," a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. (33)

4) "We're going to have to do something about your tongue," I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. "I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn," he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, training it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?

Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?

—Ray Gwyn Smith (36)

5) Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation. For the longest time I couldn't figure it out. Then it dawned on me. To be close to another Chicana is like looking in the mirror. We are afraid of what we'll see there. *Pena*. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives. (40)

6) *Si le preguntas a mi mamá, "¿Qué eres?"*

Identity is the essential core of who we are as individuals, the conscious experience of the self inside.

— Gershen Kaufman

Nosotros los Chicanos straddle the borderlands. On one side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of the Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglos' incessant clamoring so that we forget our language. (43)

About the Author

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