Humanizing Pedagogy and the Personal Essay

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Abstract
This paper analyzes the practices and applicability of a humanized pedagogy in the composition classroom that relies heavily on personal essay assignments. Rooted in expressivist theories of composition, the personal essay is used as a tool of self-exploration as well as individuation. Expressivist theories of the personal essay imply that it will have a humanizing force in the classroom as students are encouraged to develop their own writing voices. Our classroom observations showed us that there was a strong connection between not only the theory and practice of using personal essays, but also of the outcomes such practice will have on student writing, creating a more humanized classroom environment. These observations served as a useful bridge, uniting theories behind composition instruction with first-hand experience of their use.

Keywords: writing, personal essay, humanizing pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Peter Elbow’s Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process offers a solution to the perceived contradiction that our image of the ideal student-centered classroom, while encouraging students by accepting their myriad views and abilities, may devalue the learning experience by ignoring standards. The position that subject matter is of primary concern, what Richard Fulkerson describes as the formalist theory of composition, now all but gone from recent scholarship, resists process and post-process approaches to writing on the basis that the feel-good withdrawal of judgment from student progress acts against their best interest when these students find themselves applying for positions outside the university (Four Theories 4). Elbow (1994: 8) tells us that we can resolve this perceived conflict by alternating roles, acting as an ally to our students by holding back judgment one moment while promoting critical self-reflection the next.
This provides added value by preparing students for life outside the university with the kind of confidence that comes from being treated with dignity and respect.

What Elbow is arguing for amounts to a student-centered humanizing pedagogy, one in which the teacher relinquishes authority to the students, allowing them to craft their own way. His hope (and others who embrace this paradigm) is that students will continue the tradition as they find themselves in positions of power outside the university. These humanized classrooms typically view the student as the real subject, while the course material functions as a means to that end. In effect, these courses do not only study “English” or “Writing,” but add a new element, the “Self.” When teachers focus on the identity, experiences, and valuable contributions of students, they often find avenues for learning that typical instruction does not allow.

Unfortunately, when teachers see their classrooms as centers for human growth and progress, they can fall victim to a misguided self-perception that promotes their own agendas at the expense of their students. Beth Daniell (1999: 401) makes this warning clear, telling us “we must all be careful of literacy narratives that make us feel good . . . [and of narratives] that cast some of us in the role of ‘hero of liberty.’” The danger, then, is that this kind of pedagogical perception may politicize the classroom and usurp the very individuality of the student that it purports to liberate. The conflict between theories of humanized pedagogy and the implementation of such pedagogy can be reconciled through an awareness of the power structures intrinsic to the classroom.

This paper analyzes the theories behind and the practices resulting from a humanizing pedagogy using observations of a first-year writing course. The section we observed was chosen based on the overwhelming support and admiration received by the professor, Dr. Mitchell Taylor, from current and former students, as well as faculty reports and discussions indicating that the writing assignments in this professor’s courses adhere to the standards set by the university’s curriculum. We wanted to examine how this course functioned in terms of its humanizing effect on the student, the professor, and the classroom environment. What we found was a reinforcement of long-standing composition theories, namely, process, expressivist, collaborative, and computer-mediated instruction theories that have informed Dr. Taylor’s teachings and are reflected in his practices, all of which point toward an accepting, encouraging, and humanizing pedagogy.

2. The Personal Essay
In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970: 51) defines humanizing pedagogy as a teaching method that “ceases to be an instrument by which teachers can manipulate students, but rather expresses the consciousness of the students themselves.” Freire further argues that teachers who are able to promote a humanizing pedagogy are more apt to develop “mutual humanization” (Freire 1970: 56) in a dialogic approach with their students in which everyone ultimately develops a critical consciousness. The courses we observed were conducted at a mid-sized liberal arts school in the north-eastern United States. As such, typical students are far from the marginalized populations that Freire dealt with, yet Freire’s underlying assumption remains constant – if education can operate as an agent of oppression, and then it can also operate as an agent of change.

In the case of our observations, the students themselves became the location of change, as indicated by the professor’s assignments which focused on self-reflection. The course’s culminating project asked students to write an auto-ethnography that answers the question “What is I?” In writing these auto-ethnographic projects, students consciously constructed versions of themselves based on reflections throughout the semester. Though essays encouraged personal narrative, they were still tethered to the writing situation in that students recounted their experiences with the class and with the progress of their writing. Lilian Bartolomé’s (1994: 248) work has shown that teachers who adopt a humanizing pedagogy that “values the students’ background knowledge, culture, and life experiences … creates learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers.” When student writing makes use of background knowledge, students are likely to develop agency over their future learning. Students develop this agency because they are working on and making sense out of knowledge which is meaningful to them.

Though students were not necessarily “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions,” nor were they told to “take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire 1970: 17), they were taught to explore their critical consciousness toward writing. It is here that the lines blur between the student/standards debate discussed by Elbow above. The criticisms against personal/expressivist writing, described by Christopher Burnham (2001: 20) as being “arhetorical, atheoretical, anti-intellectual . . . standardless, antitraditional, and relativistic,” are wrong on all counts, particularly with the “antitraditional” claim. The rhetorical tradition laid out by Socrates, “Know thyself,” holds true today as it did in ancient Greece. What other writing assignment better encapsulates Socrates than the personal reflective essay?
When teachers invite student self-reflection the student becomes the subject and thus, standards are neither abandoned nor are they zealously reinforced. One important theory underlying Dr. Taylor’s conceptualization of Freire’s humanizing pedagogy lies in Kumaravadivelu’s notion of a context-sensitive postmethod pedagogy. In constructing his own theory of practice, Dr. Taylor has attempted to create a class environment that is considerate of the backgrounds of his students by using tasks that draw from their lived experiences, thereby creating a “catalyst for a continual quest for identity” (Kumaravadivelu 2001: 545). Additionally, when students are asked to write about writing, a common assignment during our observations, students’ attitudes and perceptions are critically addressed. Dr. Taylor informed us that the decision to include reflective writings mirrors his own reflective interplay between praxis and theory. In order to reflect on his own practice, Dr. Taylor approaches assessment (including his own pedagogical practices) by continually soliciting feedback from students throughout the semester. In doing so, he is able to promote a culture of critical thought.

By accepting student differences and encouraging experimentation with writing, the process (and post-process) approach humanizes the geography of the classroom by elevating students to the level of collaborating peers with the teacher. This collaboration helps foster a supportive academic community in which members are made more equal. Authority barriers are broken that may otherwise impede learning since students, particularly first-year academics, are engaged in the difficult task of negotiating their identities as adult learners. These students are not only inventing the university (Bartholomae), but they are also inventing themselves through their writing.

Each of Dr. Taylor’s formal writing assignments (as opposed to the daily course writings and blog entries) went through a number of drafts, emphasizing for students the importance of process over product. This focus on drafting showed students that they were undergoing a writing journey, exploring a plethora of written genres through reading under the assumption that reading and writing are intertwined. Literature, as well as expository writing, such as Anne Lamott’s “Shitty First Drafts,” was used as a springboard to writing. The reading process encouraged students to interact with the text through group discussion and written reflection, during which they began to understand how they transform and are transformed by reading, giving them insight on how their writing might transform others. This leads students to the implicit realization that whenever they write they write for an audience that will make use of
their writing, consisting of a dialogic relationship between the writer and the prospective reader. The idea of using varied readings and looking at how students read is significant to how students will write. Reading and writing become transactional spaces whereby students negotiate and make meaning that is relevant to them, to their past lived experiences which are later expressed in their writings. After reading three translations of the poem “The Flask,” students were asked for an individual and personal interpretation. Students’ understanding of texts interacts with their previous experiences to yield an interpretation that is used as a starting point for their writing assignments. This transactional meaning-making enterprise also encouraged students to construct their own knowledge, foster critical thinking and creative understanding, and discover and nurture their own personality. One way to promote these goals is to encourage student autonomy while simultaneously developing a community of learners that allows students to rely on each other as a collaborative support group.

3. Collaborative Learning as Counseling

The success of Dr. Taylor’s writing class was buttressed by the support of former students who volunteered their time to help with the current section, functioning as a sort of academic counselor, or mentor, to current students. Former students of Dr. Taylor were invited as guest speakers, discussing past assignments and effective writing strategies. Current students were able to identify with these undergraduate volunteers who were eager to share their writing experiences. These writing assistants, who have faced the same challenges as current students, were able to share their writing experiences and provide solutions to similar problems. “In a collaborative learning environment, each learner can provide a different perspective and a group of learners in a team can revisit the material from the different perspectives,” showing us that teaching and learning are essentially a social phenomena involving interaction and sharing (Han, Beaumie, Shiang-Kwei, & Kakali 2001: 139). It is through such interactions that learning occurs.

It is worth noting, however, that this collaborative technique serves a counseling purpose. Students discover that they were not the only ones having difficulty finding a specific topic or how to overcome procrastination. The interactions and exchanges taking place during these collaborative learning episodes are also fun – when students teach students, the power structure typically in place between student and teacher is removed, resulting in a more casual environment. Dr. Taylor holds a belief from his previous learning experience that fun is a key factor in motivating students to learn. He strives to help students find their way to success
because he believes there is no single path that all students should take. He offers multiple venues for students to achieve successes so that by semester’s end, they may not necessarily love writing, but they will no longer fear it.

Breaking down the writing process into independent but interrelated tasks helps students achieve success and thus empowers them with a feeling of “I can,” rather than “I can’t.” This can-do attitude constitutes a major characteristic of Dr. Taylor’s philosophy of teaching. Simon Borg argues that teachers’ cognition, i.e. what teachers think, know, and believe should be under scrutiny to understand the teaching of specific skills such as writing in this venue because “teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs” (Borg 2003: 81). Dr. Taylor is an example of how teachers’ cognition is displayed through teaching practice.

Teachers and teacher-students tend to be concerned with the most up-to-date research, teaching methods, strategies, and techniques. However, they tend to forget that even with carefully designed syllabi and teaching methods, students do not necessarily learn what we plan for them to learn. No single syllabus can prepare for the fact that students will learn what they need to learn based on what is relevant and significant to them. There is no “one size fits all” teaching method as Maria de la Luz Reyes argues. Usually, teachers set their objectives beforehand but they can never know what learning trajectories students may take. When interviewing Dr. Taylor, he acknowledged the fact that every student will learn something different from each activity and hence he tries to create an overall course that allows room for students to take what they need from it. This adaptive approach allows him to respond to the different learning styles and learning strategies of the students. For this reason, Dr. Taylor’s writing class is not burdened with method or prescription. Instead, students are given autonomy to control their learning using their course blog. In choosing not to absolutely follow any one teaching method, he is able to construct adaptable learning tasks to match students’ needs and learning preferences.

Building on the “one size fits all” method, a teacher should be cautious. If, for instance, working with computers is popular, or if the institution requires a particular technique to be used, teachers should be conscious that the choice and implementation of a teaching technique should be regulated by their students’ needs and motivations. Teachers should use teaching techniques
they also feel comfortable using. This point was stressed repeatedly by Dr. Taylor during our interview and bears heavily on his perception of effective teaching. According to Dr. Taylor, the best teachers are those who use activities they enjoy because if they force themselves to use uncomfortable practices, their students will surely respond in kind. For instance, teachers who dislike the music choices of their students will have difficulty incorporating music into their classroom without appearing disingenuous to their students. Worse yet, teachers who see no learning benefit to computers will be handicapped when forced to incorporate blogging and wikis into their syllabus by administrative and curricular demands. When the teacher is comfortable using computers, however, students may need to be eased in to the technology. An effective way to do this is by scaffolding writing assignments that use gradually more complex tasks.

4. Developing a Community of Online Writers

During the last three decades, scaffolding research has focused on classroom interactions, student learning, specific strategies used during the scaffolding interaction, and on the key characteristics that a teacher should possess to scaffold effectively. More specifically, scaffolding has been used in teaching to help learners achieve tasks that are beyond their current level and ability to perform alone but still within their zone of proximal development (ZPD) as first introduced by Vygotsky. Stephen Krashen explains, in a Vygotskyian sense, that tasks are most effective when they are targeted slightly higher than the student’s level. When scaffolding, the teacher breaks down a learning task into manageable components allowing the learner to complete a series of simpler instructional tasks that eventually build a completed model for the student as these instructional tasks gradually become more complex.

In our observations of classroom practices, Dr. Taylor used scaffolding to develop student interest while offering a potential for writing development using a wide range of genres. For instance, larger writing units focusing on the body’s primary senses were broken down over the course of one week (for each sense) as students were asked to write shorter exercises that examined a specific object’s relationship to the senses. Using a range of purposes and audiences, Dr. Taylor invited students to write short paragraphs to test their rhetorical agility in dealing with the supplied writing situation. Students were asked to select an object, such as a photograph, and write a brief persuasion paragraph to an elderly audience. Shortly after, students were asked to write a narrative paragraph to an audience of young children. As the semester progressed,
students become more comfortable and more aware of various writing genres. His major concern was not immediate assimilation, but learning, which was “determined by how learners perceive[d] the usefulness of classroom events” (Kumaravadivelu 2001: 78). This concept of learning assessment fits with Howard Gardner’s (1989: 158-159) general aim of education which states:

[W]hen you are trying to present new materials, you cannot expect them to be grasped immediately. (If they are, in fact, the understanding had probably been present all along.) One must approach the issues in many different ways over a significant period of time if there is to be any hope of assimilation (Gardner 1989: 158-159).

In addition to in-class writing activities, blog homework is assigned as a pre-writing task for larger essays. Classes discussed assigned readings ranging from philosophy, rhetoric, and professional writers’ writing processes. Blogging was used during the class to edit or add emerging ideas during discussion and as such it built upon previous writings. Essay writing is broken into interrelated tasks that contribute to the overall essay. All essays written throughout the semester became data for students to use for their final research paper. Near the end of the semester, students had written essays that incorporated multiple genres as they shared their self-perceptions and reflections on their development. As evidenced in group evaluation discussions, students enthusiastically enjoyed not only the blogging, but, as Dr. Taylor described, “the writers they became” by exploring new ideas. The small tasks and the essays as a whole build into bigger pieces that enabled students to construct an autoethnographic research project that examined their course development.

The increasing complexity of student’s personal blog writing showed clear evidence that students were becoming empowered, motivated, reflective, and connected “writers” in new knowledge-construction environments. The new communication dynamics evolving in this class and the subsequent impact it had upon students fostered a humanized pedagogy that created positive and secured learning environments as described by Bartolome above.

Though not all students are comfortable with blogging, especially when it is a compulsory and public part of class assignments, it is still a venue for developing individual virtual identities. Both public and personal, blogging challenges and renegotiates the private reflective tasks students engage in through asynchronous communication – writers create responses to an ongoing dialogue, a dialogue that Dr. Taylor uses to encourage revision.
Students could at any time build upon their previous class assignments, editing and rethinking previous posts. Through this practice, students developed autonomy as they recursively constructed their identities as writers. As we revisited blog entries over a period of two months, we sensed a progressive development in students’ writing as students chose to write in varied genres and for varied audiences.

Dr. Taylor uses readings about writing that rethink the notion of a community of writers. Members of this community support each other in a variety of ways. Students respond through blogging to peer drafts. In this way, student collaboration helps them realize that writing is not a linear process. Writers usually go through a drafting process, and drafts are not expected to be perfect. Students share and exchange comments on their first draft and continue this feedback-dialogue through blog entries until the final version of their essays. Within this virtual community of writers, students start at the periphery by sharing few comments, providing timid feedback at the beginning of the semester. Once they identify and become familiar with the dynamics of this community of writers, they develop agency and take more action by moving to the centre as described by Etienne Wenger in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Within the broad definition of identity, students are able to construct their learner identity through this community of writers. This community of writers, then, gives room for students to discover that their efforts are validated by the teacher, other classmates, former students, and ultimately, by themselves.

Another venue for validation came from a permanently open channel of communication with Dr. Taylor. Using the communicative channels of face-to-face interaction, blog comments, and office conferences, he was able to provide and receive feedback concerning his teaching practices. However, prior to probing feedback from his students, he cultivates a raised consciousness about their personal goals for taking the class. In this way, he is able to adapt his communication to their stated needs. Unless students are knowledgeable about their personal goals they cannot (re)cast their needs and share them with the teacher. One student provided feedback in the form of a song by altering the lyrics of a popular song to reflect the anxieties and successes of writing in Dr. Taylor’s 101 class. Other students were asked to reflect on their learning in the course – what they were expecting to have learned, what they had achieved, etc. Timothy Stewart (2007: 256) claims that “[a]s teachers, we tend to assume that the way we look at a task will be the way learners look at it,” though this is not necessarily the case. Stewart
further argues for the relevance of inviting learners’ views on lessons and teaching in general. By soliciting feedback from students, teachers are better positioned and informed on their teaching practices. Armed with this knowledge, they are able to make prospective amendments in order to meet students’ needs and fulfill students’ aspirations.

The final course project, an auto-ethnographic analysis, represented a culminating assignment in that it asked students to write a comprehensive reflective essay, defining themselves as they provided course feedback.

5. Auto-ethnography, Writing and Identity

Alastair Pennycook (2001: 143) argued that “...the learner has been cast as a one-dimensional acquisition device...as a sort of language learning machine.” In Dr. Taylor’s class, the student is considered as an agent in the learning process. Agency is promoted throughout the course until the final project which is an auto-ethnographic research whereby students inquire about their development as writers. In coming to understand their individual writing process, they come to discover and unfold their identity. Writing about themselves through the five senses, they discover facets of their identity. This is an ongoing process that happens while investing themselves in the course by constantly interacting with peers, the teacher, readings, and their writings through their blogs and in the classroom. Through these interactions Bonny Norton (1997: 410) argues that students “are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world.” The social world in this case encompasses the classroom, the university, and their previous, present and future lives.

More specifically, the final auto-ethnography project brought together all the writings that students had produced throughout the semester, including the process drafts of each paper. Students were encouraged to look critically at their genre writing selections, the online graphic representations they chose, and their blog templates. All of these components represented an identity snapshot, showing the persona student writers chose to promote throughout the course.

The auto-ethnographic research project, then, carries the dual goals of (1) understanding one’s learning process of writing, i.e. discovering oneself as a writer; and (2) unfolding one’s identity by looking into the aspects that have been explored in the various writings.

6. Transactional Spaces for Teacher Professional Development

The first transactional space for teacher professional development is a rather traditional one. When working in Japanese universities, Dr. Taylor was never observed for peer review in
four years of teaching EFL learners. This lack of peer collaboration corroborates Farrell’s statement that “teachers have been socialized to work in isolation” (Farell 2007: 120). Despite this isolation, Dr. Taylor was continually vigilant in adjusting his teaching practices. Professional organizations helped him reshape his way of teaching like the Japanese Association of Language Teaching. Through conferences presentations, exchanging views with other teachers and practitioners, and working on manuscripts with other colleagues to share his ideas and experiences, he developed professionally. Sendan and Roberts (1998: 241) demonstrate that

the process of professional development is one in which new information and new experiences
lead student teachers to add to, reflect upon and restructure their ideas in a progressive, complex
and non-linear way, leading towards clearer organization of their personal theories into
thematically distinct clusters of ideas (Sendan and Roberts 1998: 241).

Thus, by joining professional organizations and being active, teachers develop and negotiate their cognition rather than accumulate new ideas to use in indiscriminate ways. Subsequent teacher’s decisions have to be well informed by professional communities as well as their instincts.

Another transactional space for teacher professional development lies in collaborative action research. The context out of which this paper emerged should be considered a form of collaborative action research that can be integrated in teacher education but which also takes a professional development stance. In other words, such collaborative research in Kelleen Toohey and Bonnie Waterstone’s (2001: 291) vision “allow[s] for generative dialogue …between theories and knowledge [as well as practice].” As observers, collaborative dialogue research helped us reconsider the way writing teachers envision new ways for future practice, practices that we hope to incorporate into our own future teaching. When observing this class, for instance, a critical consciousness arises in the Freirian sense as to how to teach college writing, how to consider students’ past experiences, value them and integrate them in the writing process as a liberating factor to students that enables them to make meaning of their own experiences and to construct their identities. Paulo Freire (2000: 61) believed that “[c]ritical consciousness is brought about, not through an intellectual effort alone but through praxis - through the authentic union of action and reflection …and in the process become capable of transforming the world – of giving it meaning.” We have seen in the case of this teacher that he did not adhere strictly to one teaching method of writing and this enabled him to enact humanizing teaching practice
where students’ previous experiences, problems, everyday concerns, fears, frustrations and hopes were validated as essential resources in developing academic writing skills.

7. Conclusion

As observers and prospective teachers of writing, we embarked upon a critical journey. We here view the critical in the same vein as Pennycook, as “in a critical moment, a point of significance, an instant when things change. It seems to [us] that in the practicum observation, and, come to think of it, our teaching more generally, this is what we’re looking – those critical moments when we seize the chance to do something different, when we realize that some new understanding is coming about” (Pennycook 2004: 330). For Dr. Taylor and ourselves, our critical moment consists of making a conscious effort to humanize the classroom and the student by expanding the paths available to learning, by accepting students for who they are and allowing them to construct themselves free from judgment and boundary, enveloped by and enveloping a community of writers, whose critical consciousness perpetuates itself in a myriad of possibilities.

References


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