Autonomy, Intimacy, and the Teaching of Writing[1]

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My discipline is clinical psychology, and for the past two years I have taught a freshman seminar[2] entitled **In the First Person** which introduces students to ways of thinking about young adult development by asking them to read and write about autobiographical texts, most of which are written by other college students. Two anthologies of first-person student writings I have used in the course are Peter Madison's Personality Development in College, and George Goethals and Dennis Klos' Experiencing Youth: First-Person Accounts.

Both the structure and content of **In the First Person** are shaped by my conviction that everything we do as teachers has an impact on students' personal as well as their intellectual development--on their growing capacities for autonomous action and expression and for intimate involvement with others. My conviction is based on the following assumptions about young adult development and about the significance of the role of the teacher:

(1) Autonomy and intimacy are life concerns of special importance to university students, particularly since attending college is a culturally sanctioned step toward social and economic independence.[3]

(2) The role of the teacher in a student's development is as a conveyor of knowledge, skills, and an approach to scholarly work. As a significant adult who is not the student's parent, the teacher influences students' inevitable changes in their relationships with parents, and the development of their relationships with peers, through the activities and approaches toward learning which he or she requires.[4]

(3) Teachers contribute to students' developing definitions of the nature of intellectual work and scholarship. They can reinforce isolation or collaboration, competition or cooperation, anxiety or exhilaration in students' developing conceptions of these activities.

(4) Learning to write is paradigmatic of student's developmental relationship to

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[2]Freshman Seminar is a required one-semester course which combines instruction in English composition with the study of introductory-level material in a discipline in the Residential College at The University of Michigan.

[3]In Chapter 7 of Childhood and Society, Erik Erikson presents a list of critical life concerns which emerge at successive stages of development from infancy to old age. While, as Erikson shows, the concern with autonomy begins in early childhood, the college situation gives it a special urgency as students are confronted with the necessity for sustained individual effort in the midst of unusual opportunities and pressures to socialize. According to Erikson, intimacy arises as a concern during adolescence.

[4]For a discussion of various dimensions of the teacher's role see Joseph Adelson, "The Teacher as Model," in Nevitt Sanford, Ed., The American College. See also Nevitt Sanford, "The Developmental Status of the Entering Freshman" in the same volume.

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the collegiate curriculum because, more obviously than many other kinds of learning, its emphasis on skill development and on communication provides a concrete analogue to their concerns with autonomy and intimacy. Successful writing instruction requires the teacher and student consistently to evaluate the development of the student's thought processsess, attitudes towards course material, and ability to communicate his or her understanding to others.

In this essay, I describe three practical techniques for teaching writing that grow out of the beliefs and assumptions outlined above, and I suggest their developmental force for students as persons as well as for students as writers. As I have said, the task of writing stimulates concerns with autonomy and with intimacy in the student: During the initial stages of composing-- collecting ideas in a journal, freewriting, focusing upon expression rather than communication-- students are most profitably concerned with autonomous activity. Yet , in those intial stages students are also concerned with communicating in their own voices to an imagined audience, a process of self-revealing, or intimacy. Later stages of composing--organizing and polishing-- require students to communicate in effective voices to a real audience, and to address that audience's ignorance of what the writers have to say, in other words to achieve intimacy. Later stages of writing also require students' autonomy-- their self-assurance and competence as writers who would give precise shape to the messages they wish to express. As they compose, student writers must learn to balance internally the needs for autonomy and for intimacy so that the impulse behind each concern can be satisfied and harnessed to produce effective writing.

In this balancing, it is important first for learners to separate initial from later stages of composing, and contemporary composition theorists help with that distinction. In _Writing Without Teachers_, Peter Elbow exhorts us to separate the process of creation from that of editing. Trying to do both at once, a practice typical of students who write their papers the night before they are due, is, as Elbow says, like trying to drive with the brakes on. The advantage of Elbow's advice is that it makes legitimate a stage of writing during which ideas are collected and thought through on paper, when organization and polish can be temporarily forgotten. It invites students to experience the particular satisfaction of improvisation and to separate it from the subsequent satisfaction of shaping ideas and perfecting langauge. The key to getting students to follow Elbow's direction is to <u>require</u> them to do so, to require that they keep a journal of ideas and to give them class time to write in it. Students have told me repeatedly that the requirement of a journal introduced them to a useful and satisfying tool; in some cases students have continued to use the journal on their own long after our class was over. Of course, simply assigning a journal is not the same as teaching students to improvise--to collect and manipulate ideas. That is another matter which must be handled in another way.

The following technique encourages an experimental attitude toward the task of gathering material. It is designed to give students a sense of control over the mysterious process of "getting started"

and "knowing what to say."

Technique 1: 5-Card Draw[5]

I have used Card Draw to introduce assignments such as this one: "Write a 3- to 5-page paper in which you take a position on an issue in human relations that is related to our class discussions and readings or to your own life"; or one from my Senior Seminar which requires students to research the life of a famous person--F. Scott Fitzgerald, Woody Guthrie, Fritz Perls--and to begin a lengthy psychological case study. The materials for 5-card Draw are five 3x5 file cards per student. Cards are handed out one at a time with the following instructions:

> Card 1: Write at the top of your card:
> "One thing I might like to write about in my paper is..." (When they have all written that one-sentence statement, have them continue with), "My thoughts on it now are...." (After they have finished writing have them look back over the card and underline details that seem interesting.)
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> Card 2: List the details you underlined on Card 1, in the form of statements.
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> Card 3: Choose one statement from Card 2, write it at the top of Card 3, and expand upon it. (After they have finished, have them summarize Card 3 in one sentence.)
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> Card 4: Form the negative of the statement at the top of Card 3, write it at the top of Card 4, and expand upon it as if you believed it.
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> Card 5: Put the last sentence on Card 4 in the form of a statement, write it at the top of Card 5, and expand upon it.

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[5]I was first introduced to this technique by Professor Gerald Belcher, an historian at Beaver College.

5-Card Draw can convince students that they have more to say on a topic than they first think they do, that they have something to say even before they have researched the topic, and that they are ultimately capable of more complex ideas than they can imagine about a topic at first. And they might be further convinced that what they have to say is worth revising and polishing before it is "handed in." Clearly, the number of cards used and the instructions are bounded only by time and imagination.

The generation and manipulation of ideas in writing which this exercise provides for is one way of teaching students that writing advances thinking. In the same way, writing can also help students interpret primary texts as they explore their reactions to material and discover what seems worth communicating to others.

In my Freshman Seminar, **"In the First Person,"** I require students to evaluate their many complex and contradictory reactions as they learn to interpret the thoughts, feelings, and motives of young adults from autobiographical accounts they read. As students learn to evaluate and to interpret, the instructor is crucial in two ways:

(1) In helping students gain and use psychological knowledge to make inferences about human personality and development.

(2) In validating those processes of inference which students bring to class from their prior formal and informal learning.

Students' interest in psychology is grounded in inferences they have already made about themselves and others in their life-long activity of organizing and making sense of the social world. To build upon students' native interest requires instructors to help them evaluate what they already believe in the light of what others--experts and peers-- also believe.

Technique 2: Writing and Thinking

The diagram below is intended to instruct students about the logical and psychological status of their own and others' interpretations. It helps them sort out the inferences they make about the lives we study in class and to recognize the data, or evidence, on which those inferences are based. A major task for beginning students is to evaluate the extent to which an inference is based on their own experience and the extent to which it is based on the details of the text. The diagram helps students write and think about the sources of their inferences.[6]
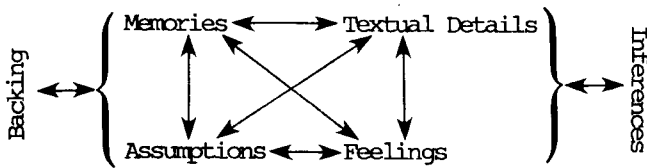
The diagram shows that the sources of the inferences we make about others--about their thoughts, feelings, motivations-- can result from our own feelings and memories, from our assumptions about the way the world works, and from the details of the text. Each of those sources of evidence receives support, or backing, from our own experience, from the avowals of others (consensus), and from the opinions of experts, including those who formulate psychological theory. Furthermore, as the double arrows indicate, each category influences every other category. For example, just as our assump-

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[6]I developed and modified this diagram based upon students' reports of their own experiences reading autobiographical materials.

tions about life influence our selection of relevant details of a text, so our assumptions are influenced by unexpected and convincing details of a particular life.

With the aid of this diagram, I give writing assignments which ask students to separate their inferences from the evidence for those inferences, and to write about both how they evaluate the life they are studying and why they evaluate it as they do. A typical beginning assignment is to have students divide a notebook page into two columns labeled "Details" and "Reactions." As they are reading a first-person account they are to note their reactions to the account and to cite the specific details of the text which led to that reaction. They are then asked to write about why that detail led to that particular reaction and what that reaction leads them to infer about the person who wrote the account. For example, while reading the case of Cindy (Goethals and Klos, pp. 28-41), a student noticed that she was reacting with anger toward Cindy and that her anger correlated with details of the text in which Cindy describes conducting her personal life in accordance with her mother's wishes (for example, breaking up with boyfriends at her mother's sugges- tion). The student's feeling reaction was influenced by memories of struggles with her own mother and by her assumption (backed by many other students in the class) that Cindy was old enough to make up her own mind about whom to date. The inference which resulted from these sources of evidence was that Cindy was in a relationship of destructive dependency with her mother.

Another typical writing assignment asks students to explore a general assumption such as the one above that asserts that someone Cindy's age should be old enough to make his or her own decisions about dating. In a class of young adults in which the topic is young adult development, such assignments lead to lively debate and learning that advances social as well as intellectual development.

Technique 3: Coherence, Glossing, and Glue[7]

The final technique teaches students to analyze their writing closely for coherence by requiring them to detect cohesive devices in each other's work that bind together sentences and paragraphs. Having students comment on each other's writing introduces cooperation in intellectual work that students in my classes have carried outside of class and into other learning situations. In addition, the experience of critically reading each other's writing facilitates their growing ability to criticize their own work.

For this exercise, students trade papers and are instructed to divide a notebook page into two columns, labeled "Main Ideas" and "Glue." Beginning with the first paragraph of the paper they are analyzing, students are instructed to abstract each sentence into its essential idea or ideas, then to number the ideas by the sentence in which they occur, and finally to list them in the first column. In the second column, students list the cohesive devises (glue) that make each pair of sentences cohere. A few sentences from a freshman student paper and their analysis by another student are presented below. (The woman referred to in the example, Anne Moody, was a sharecropper's daughter who became a civil rights activist and wrote the autobiographical <u>Coming of Age in Mississippi</u>.)

> (s1) Anne Moody was influenced greatly by her mother, whether she knew it or not. (s2) She was also influenced by her social situations which were enforced, often unconsciously, by her mother. (s3) One of the most prominent aspects of this comes in the form of the social rules and distinctions that both the Blacks and Whites were expected to follow. (s4) One of the more outstanding distinctions was that of the interrelations between Blacks and Whites.

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[7]I have adapted this technique from ideas presented by Ann Bertoff during her visit to the English Composition Board, September 29-30, 1981.

	Main Ideas	Glue
s1	Mother influenced Anne.	Repetition of idea of influence and of mother's involvement.
s2	Social situation influenced Anne; mother reinforced it.	General to specific: Social rules as instance of social situation.
s3	Social rules for Blacks & Whites as an example.	Specific to more specific: Rules of interaction as instance of social rules.
s4	Rules of relationship between Blacks & Whites	

This example, illustrating as it does the identification of "repetition" and movement from "general to specific" as cohesion for this text, advances an hypothesis about the author's thought process and can provoke a discussion which ultimately facilitates the process of revision. In such a discussion students are also instructed to judge the value for the author's intent of the cohesive devises he or she has used. Thus, Technique 3 advances students' skills of constructive criticism and of collaboration as it focusses on devices-- ideational or linguistic--that affect the clarity of the author's message. In addition, it demonstrates a connection between learning to write and learning to read that can be applied across the curriculum.

The teaching of writing is a paradigm for diverse processes of instruction as it raises life concerns typical to the development of young adults. The central concerns with autonomy and intimacy are addressed by each of the techniques explained above as they (1) encourage students to exercise and reflect upon what they already know about the social world; (2) develop competencies by imparting new knowledge and skills in a way that makes sense to students in terms of their prior learning; (3) create an intellectual and social environment in the classroom in which students can develop trust in their own capacities and

in each other through exchanging ideas and helping each other learn.

REFERENCES

Elbow, Peter, Writing Without Teachers, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Describes a developmental process for writing and a method of learning to write without a teacher. Elbow advocates that groups of interested writers work together, critiquing each other's work.

Erikson, Erik H., Childhood and Society, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963.

Cast against the backdrop of Freud's theory of psychosexual development, this classic describes, through rich case examples, the contribution of cultural forces and social structures to human development.

Goethals, George W. and Klos, Dennis S., Experiencing Youth: First-Person Accounts, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976.

An anthology of short, autobiographical writings by college students, organized into cases which concern autonomy, identity, and sexual intimacy. The cases are also selected to illustrate various theoretical approaches in psychology: psychoanalytic, interpersonal, psychosocial, phenomenological, and object-relational. The authors present very little analysis of the cases; rather they juxtapose the primary texts with brief synopses of the theories. The theoretical sections are well-referenced.

Madison, Peter, Personality Development in College, Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969.

An anthology of autobiographical writings by college students, with analysis according to the author's theory of "reintegration." That analysis stresses how the student's reactions to college are dominated by his or her precollege personality.

Moody, Anne, Coming of Age in Mississippi, New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1968.

The autobiography of a Black sharecropper's daughter who became an activist during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. The story is told with emotional force and with detail that lends itself to psychological and cultural analysis.

Sanford, Nevitt (Ed.), The American College, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1962.

A classic collection of articles on higher education organized into sections on The Entering Student, Academic Procedures, Student Society and Student Culture, Student Performance in Relation to Educational Objectives, Interaction of Students and Educators, The Effects of College Education, and Higher Education and the Social Context. The article by Joseph Adelson, The Teacher as Model, discusses the concept of identification in this context, typical reactions of students to their teachers, and the characteristics of the good teacher. The article by Nevitt Sanford, Developmental Status of the Entering Freshman, describes freshmen in terms of statistics, stage of development, and the situation they face as they enter college. It also discusses college as a stimulus to development.