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ABSTRACT

While writers often transcend issues of class, poverty, and privation, the "practice" of instruction in creative nonfiction "classes" may encourage an all-too-real sense of entitlement. Writing in the comfortable spaces of a liberal arts college may suggest that all writers have the same advantages, that all reflective inquiry (like all technological support) is equally accessible. Blithely unconscious of the privilege underlying introspective writing, students may be poorly served by pedagogies that do not demand rigorous examination of stances in relation to the disenfranchised. This paper considers the following problems: Can new pedagogical strategies move students into awareness of privilege? Can their writing progress beyond critical introspection to the larger arena of global need? Can it provide an avenue of action so that student writers of creative nonfiction may move beyond the "word" to "actions" reasonable citizens must surely learn to take on behalf of those less privileged? If not, why is it being taught? Using the example of a course in autobiographical writing, the paper discusses some practices and projects (i.e., student thinking and writing). It also discusses "what went wrong" and then concludes with some student voices. (NKA)

In the Margins of the Privileged Text: Deconstructing Creative Nonfiction's Pedagogy of Entitlement

By Twila Yates Papay

Paper presented at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (54th, New York, NY, March 19-22, 2003)

In the Margins of the Privileged Text: Deconstructing Creative Nonfiction's Pedagogy of Entitlement

The Problem

"My teachers have robbed me of the time to write. Between college social obligations and the assignments of a work-happy faculty, I lack the leisure so essential to the writing life." In blaming others for her lack of a finished portfolio, this student unconsciously parodies more traditional visions of struggling writers triumphing over economic necessities or the ravages of a harsh life. While writers often transcend issues of class, poverty, and privation, the *practice* of instruction in creative nonfiction *classes* may encourage an all-too-real sense of entitlement.

Since students in a privileged environment tend to have *time* for introspection, *leisure and money* with which to travel, *access* to faculty – they avoid challenges faced by the less affluent. So writing in the comfortable spaces of a liberal arts college may suggest that all writers have the same advantages, that all reflective inquiry (like all technological support) is equally accessible. Blithely unconscious of the privilege underlying introspective writing, students may be poorly served by pedagogies that do not demand rigorous examination of stances in relation to the disenfranchised.

This is not, of course, to denigrate student desires to practice creative nonfiction. Introspection, so central to forms like travel writing and autobiography, is essential for human development. Scrutinizing truths of our own lives, examining cultural expectations swirling around their complexities . . . this is a powerful academic occupation. But I would like for us to understand the nature of privilege in which this form resides.

Nor do I deny my own complicity in skimming over classist implications in these forms: connecting my little girl self who learned of faraway Malaysia with the middle-aged woman who

found it so different; reaching back to meet the ancient peoples in a quest for the species self; celebrating the elephants' matriarchal culture and triumphal return to the plains of Kenya. I even like what I've written. Yet all such writing is just another form of privilege, reflecting the freedom our culture has brought to this child of the working class who can profess at a liberal arts college she herself could never have afforded to attend. [And of course, I still couldn't!]

But how have I confronted these issues myself, since my South African Writing Center sabbatical three years ago? How have I shaped a pedagogy to insure that the problems of privilege and obligation arise? In courses like, say, "Writing in the Community," the issues are obvious. But what about creative nonfiction? What links introspection and travel, the scrutiny of personal experience, writing and proclaiming oneself a writer . . . to the recognition of privilege and the will to undermine it? As much as I want my students to love the earth and accept the diversity of peoples, I don't want them merely to *feel* for suffering. I want them to be less classist, first to know the problems of entitlement and then to take action to leave this place better than I have or will. That is, I want them to confront controversies, to listen profoundly – and to shape fair-minded solutions that can become consensual.

The problem, then: can new pedagogical strategies move students into awareness of privilege? Can their writing pro*gress* beyond critical introspection to the larger arena of global need? Can it provide an avenue of action so that student writers of creative nonfiction may move beyond the *word* to *actions* reasonable citizens must surely learn to take on behalf of those less privileged? If not, why am I teaching it?

For me this problem arose in the writing minor capstone course, where students tend to celebrate their "special status" as writers, assuming this practice in itself conveys superiority. I needed to challenge assumptions. Already in Travel Writing I was leading students to separate

travelers from tourists, to examine *ecotourism* and *agritourism*, to question the ethics of travel and its effects upon the places visited. Over time I had confronted problems of entitlement in specially designed journal assignments. But I wanted a bolder approach.

This past term, then, some students and I shaped a course in Autobiographical Writing to fulfill our Values requirement, rethinking autobiography in the larger context of privilege and entitlement. Skills and experiences varied, as the group ranged from exceptional writing minors to a learning disabled student who observed, "A D+ in this course would really please my parents!" But all were willing to experiment – eager to challenge *my* assumptions. While I designed the broad parameters of the course, it was the students who figured out the answers to my research questions. Through rich, sometimes troubled writing and complicated conversations, they struggled to make meaning out of a new paradigm for creative nonfiction.

Some Practices and Projects (i.e., Student Thinking and Writing)

The course was shaped around two poles, the first typical of autobiographical writing. From Isak Dinesen's *Letters from Africa* we read:

> "When you are thinking about me, you must not dwell on my loneliness and my difficulties, but on this lovely country, my dear natives, my horses and dogs, on the feeling I have of being in the right place for me, of being able to achieve something, and then on the great joy I have of being with someone here whom I really do love."

Then our first prompt was a response: "How do *I* want to be thought of?" Surrounding this piece with a semantic organizer of values and stories, we created initial blueprints for our writing.

The second pole was intended to introduce students to a larger framework of values and privilege. From Barbara Kingsolver's *Small Wonder*, we read:

> "I've lived long enough to eat many youthful words, but a few things I have always known for certain, and this is one: If I had to give up my life for anything, it would have to have the resilience of hope, the elation of new literacy, the brilliant life of a field of flowers, the elementary kindness of bread. Nothing short of that. It would have to be something as sure as love."

The second prompt, "If I had to give up my life for anything," yielded such clichés as "for my unborn children," "for my father's memory," "for my freedom," "for my boyfriend," with little substance (or poetry) beneath the surface. This prompt would have worked better later on, after global education, world hunger, local homelessness, and the roots of terrorism had emerged in our conversations on entitlement.

A second attempt set us straight, as Peggy McIntosh's "Unpacking White Privilege" posed a useful way for students jaded by lip service to the disenfranchised to situate themselves in the equation, to consider their own roles. In accepting the inevitable fact that we can only change ourselves, the class came as well to a startling discovery that seemed to link the two poles: through autobiographical writing we can change the past. That is, we can change our interpretations and understandings of events and actions, a practice that may in time change the future as well. At least, it can change our behaviors. Here lay a larger purpose for writing.

Beyond integrating the tension between two poles (discovering the self and challenging the consequences of privilege), my emerging pedagogy examined an expanding series of questions, which led to the realization that the writing must be *layered* to accommodate them all. [This thinking is summarized on the front of the yellow Handout.]

In *readings* I abandoned exceptional models in favor of short autobiographical excerpts in *Many Voices: A Multicultural Reader,* all raising issues of entitlement. In analyzing these readings we identified concepts and strategies, but also considered how to situate ourselves in relation to the writers. Our work culminated with pieces by two authors interrogating their Western values. Norberg-Hodge's "Ancient Futures: Learning from the Ladakh" (of Tibet) examined inclusiveness and frugality ("fruitfulness, getting more out of little") as the basis for community (not individual) self-reliance. "Forced to reassess the Western lifestyle I had been

accustomed to," she inspired my students to consider the roots of terrorism in our own culture's use of resources. Lee's "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari" contrasted the Bush people's "independence of spirit" resulting from humility and a skepticism "of good intentions" to his own Western arrogance, an attitude with which my students sheepishly identified.

As might be expected, in conferences I nudged students beyond story-telling to reflective and critical thinking. But our readings prompted unexpected collaborative conversations. Here – most of all – students came to link their writing's self-discovery to larger cultural concerns. So time-consuming was the talk, and so important to a comprehension of privilege as embedded in the writing, that I offer you a sample drawn from my notes.

I began this class with a peculiar question, reshaped from O'Reilly's *Peaceable Classroom*. "Can we do autobiography in such a way that people will stop hating each other?" When I posed the question in August, I had to stop a rush of platitudes about learning to love ourselves. The last week when I tried again, students were mute, thoughtful. Finally, Becky ventured, "Well, in sharing each other's stories, we've realized that we aren't alone. Everybody has issues. If that's true for us, I can't imagine what it must be like for people without enough food on the table for their children. But seeing all these troubles we face even with money, we're surely seeing the need for more compassion." Others reflected on how compassion might play itself out on and beyond a college campus. Are there political implications?

At length Alexandra suggested we go at the question another way. "In our term projects, we each confronted and tried to make better meaning out of something we may dislike about ourselves. Shouldn't that make us more understanding of everybody else?"

"Yeah, less judgmental, more willing to forgive," offered Logan.

"But I think it's more like we took control of our life problems in our writing," mused Jess. "This should make us take control of larger problems. We're the ones with privilege. If we can solve our own problems, then why not tackle bigger ones?"

After we thought about homeless children for a few minutes, Brandon went back to our focus. "I tend to categorize everybody," he noted.

"You and everyone else at Rollins," Briggs snorted.

"No, but listening to these projects," he insisted, "I know we're all individuals with problems to solve. Nothing personal, but I didn't see any of you as being more than a typical student. Not like *me*, of course. But now I know you beneath the surface. And that's the trick. We can't solve *global* hatred. But we can probably lessen hatred in our own circles by opposing it, never practicing it. You can't hate people once you've put a face to what's hurting them."

So the talk was good, surprising me in its complexity – and its honesty. But the proof, of course, was in the writing [and you have several Handout samples]. Here too my pedagogy had to change, as 50% of my writing prompts [those on the yellow Handout] were new, reflecting a focus on privilege rather than self-discovery. I also struggled to push deeper, to make us tougher-minded in the response to prompts. On the back of the Handout you'll find a list of journal assignments shaped specifically for the course:

- ✓ *Memory Wells* (to identify topics)
- ✓ *Decisions Revisited* (to explore values problems, where mistakes were made)
- ✓ *Ethical Dilemmas* (which were merely pieces about a value, till I figured out students didn't understand the word "dilemma." For good measure, we revisited the word "ethical," which was also unclear, as it turned out.) Still, students were distressed at the

exclusion of material that didn't fit. Eventually, we invented a new category, which should have come early in the course rather than at midterm:

- ✓ → *Values Quests* (in which one could write any piece, then reflect on values being challenged or changed) These produced questions previously ignored.

On the yellow Handout as well are some titles for the Memory Project, a substantial piece of autobiographical writing presenting a major ethical concern helping to shape intellectual, emotional, or spiritual life. What was really hard, of course, was interrogating our own texts. It helped to write about the margins, to identify the absent elements and confront the assumptions of privilege. Each workshop was shaped with a rubric to help us hold each other accountable. The result was uneven, as the struggle to engage entitlement pushed the writing deeper, but left insufficient time for elegance. Still, much of the writing was exceptional, while final presentations led to superb reflective conversation. You'll have to trust me, I suppose, that the papers were good, as was the caring for each other. (And the learning disabled student even managed a C- in the course, unexpectedly the only grade below a B.)

So What Went Wrong? Well, everything is a compromise. I gave up some assumptions and good practices for autobiographical writing. Sometimes the issues were trivialized, as when Elyssa wrote: "In my paper I will mention how good I have it compared to people in other countries. I will dedicate my paper to those less fortunate people, so they can read it and realize that I feel for them." And there were serious time constraints:

- ✓ My applying high writing standards (especially stylistic editing, which requires so much time and attention) troubled some students, given the time that went into discussion of values and entitlement;
- ✓ There was not enough reading of work aloud in class (students missed it, as did I);

✓ And finally, there was not enough focus on action.

Perhaps I set my hopes too high for a 200-level class. But I must decide: do I want this to be a course where students learn techniques and practices of autobiographical writing, or do I want it to be an action class? How much can be achieved in Creative Nonfiction? Maybe less is enough. What we proved, after all, is that growing self-awareness can be immeasurably deepened by raising the comprehension of privilege, teaching students to interrogate their own assumptions, and demonstrating that autobiographical writing is socially constructed.

In short, immersing students in introspection and a celebration of the earth remains important. But to place that reflection in the context of larger needs, larger expectations for those of us rich enough to learn to produce such writing – that is surely essential. As Nolani concluded in travel writing: "It's a matter of filling in the margins, noticing whom we've forgotten, remembering where we are."

But I'd rather leave you with an autobiography voice. Here's Alemji, the quietest student I've ever taught [Peach Handout]:

"As I sit here trying to rewrite the past into something that will benefit rather than hinder me, entire families are trying to figure out how to feed themselves for the rest of the week, children are living in abusive homes, women are recovering from rape, and nations are on the brink of war. In the midst of all this, my problems (my years of self-imposed silence leading to my current inability to speak) appear insignificant and selfish. But I am not convinced that I am entirely wrong.

"I know I should be helping others; I have a responsibility in the global community to live according to my values. But how can I serve anyone (including me) if I cannot express

myself? How can I help anyone, when I cannot even let my boyfriend know how much I love him, or if I can't speak even when my grade depends on it?

["*'I am just one voice,'* I whisper from inside my egg. *"'What difference do I make?'*

"'You make as much difference as you allow yourself to make,' my reflection in the upturned shards whispers back.]

"It is important for me to change, not only for my peace of mind, but so that I can finally be a part of something useful. [From within the shell I can do nothing.]

"For this paper I tried to find synonyms for 'inexpressive.' One caught my attention: soulless. From within my egg I cannot communicate my feelings; from outside the egg I must seem completely void of feelings. I wonder how many times people have reacted differently to me because I was seen as being guarded or unfeeling. How many opportunities to help others with their problems have I missed?

"I think this scares me more than life outside my egg."

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