

# The CEA Forum

Winter/Spring 2007: 36.1

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**SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS**

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## **EMPATHY, ETHICS, AND WRITING INSTRUCTION**

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Empathy and ethics can and must co-exist in regard to writing instruction in order to respect the differences among us. My abilities to practice this in both attitude and principle have been stretched a time or two. For instance, while teaching academic English at the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands, one student was certain I had assigned him a low grade merely because he criticized United States policies in a paper. In reality, I appreciated the passion with which he presented his case. Instead, the paper received low marks due to its unclear language and the run-on sentences that often produced incoherent paragraphs. Still, I read and re-read the paper carefully, and I asked colleagues for advice because I recognized that the student and I held differing ethical views.

L. M. Toner's dissertation has been a helpful resource for me in college classrooms. Toner provides categories that can assist college writing instructors as we seek to practice empathy and apply ethics. Although Toner's work is more than a decade old, it has not been duplicated. EBSCOHost cites 1161 peer-reviewed articles dealing with ethics and writing, but most of those articles discuss student plagiarism. Further, the discussion of writing instruction and ethics is apparently missing since 319 entries can be found under "writing instruction" but none under "writing instruction AND ethics."

### *The Situation*

Instruction is guided by beliefs, and beliefs in regard to the teaching of writing will vary because writing is essentialist and constructivist, a discipline and an art, process and product, and is dependent upon cognitive, affective, and volitional processes. Essentialism cannot be excluded from writing because writing does not

communicate unless the writer adheres to intelligible conventions. At the same time, writing, by its very nature, is constructive. Before the act of writing, nothing tangible exists; however, in each stage, from planning to drafting, to revising and beyond, a new essence takes shape, a tangible something is constructed. This construction may be used to produce rhetoric that is in line with divergent ideologies such as conservative thought, Marxist methods, or liberation pedagogy.

Toner identifies and describes eight theories of composition (current-traditional, civic education, expressionist, feminist care, heuristic inquiry, socio-cognitive, Marxist cultural studies, feminist sophistic) and divides the theories among three overarching ethical viewpoints: deontological, virtue, and consequentialist.

### *Toner's First Ethical View*

In a deontological view, duties and rights are emphasized. Current-traditional and civic educators belong to Toner's deontologists. Current-traditionalists are described as those who place emphasis on universal standards for writing while seeking to guide students to "represent truth (or 'facts') clearly and accurately and present that truth in very clearly organized textual form" (Toner 39) that carefully conforms to prescribed norms of composition. The civic educator also adheres to universal writing standards and seeks to enable students to apply those rules to their own writing while instilling in "students a sense of their obligations as public servants" (51) which can be fulfilled through their writing. Conservatives promote deontological views when they suggest that language and literature "should celebrate the achievements of the past ... and the heroes and heroines who best exemplify the group's values and aspirations" (Gutek 201). Therefore, when I emphasize grammar and traditional organization of content, my deontological view is showing. When another professor, hoping to instill a sense of civic responsibility, prompts students to write letters to an editor or requires students to prepare a biography of an esteemed individual, that professor is probably motivated by a deontological attitude.

### *Toner's Second Ethical View*

Those who adhere to a virtue view of writing instruction include the expressionist, feminist care, heuristic inquiry, and socio-cognitive practitioners. Educators with a virtue orientation are concerned predominantly with the need to facilitate coursework so the students learn to write independently and confidently (Toner 58). Process writing is emphasized. Specifically, the expressionist desires to share his or her own writing experiences with students in order to demonstrate the persona of an actual writer (Toner 60). In Toner's description, an educator with a feminist bent attempts to lead writers away from producing text in standard manners that are considered male-dominated in order "to write ... discourse that emerges from women's experiences as social agents and, more particularly, as mothers" (Toner 70). On the other hand, the heuristic co-inquirer fits into the virtue view of ethical thought by encouraging students to learn through questioning in their own writing (Toner 81). The final element in Toner's virtue view, the socio-cognitive or problem-solving perspective, guides educators to lead students to "interpret the constrictive demands and creative opportunities of an assigned ... rhetorical task and transform these into their own texts" (Toner 95). We may identify Peter Elbow or Mike Rose with the virtue view of writing instruction; over the past few decades, Elbow, Rose, and others have encouraged us to teach our students to write as professional writers do, processing thoughts through multiple drafts. We have learned that writing teachers must write if we expect to understand our students' writing struggles. Instructors who assign reflections, response papers, or prewriting exercises are following the process-orientation and multiple-draft heuristic. These emphases originate from a virtue orientation of writing instruction.

### *Toner's Third Ethical View*

The third ethical viewpoint, the consequentialist educator, is distinctly social-constructivist, pursuing definite

volitional ends which are often associated with social welfare and/or political activism (Toner 105-6). First, liberation pedagogy's idea that "we have the power to take control of [our lives] and live them as we would like" (Gutek 239) fits well in this view. Second, the instructor guided by Marxist ideals desires to show students that their thoughts and experiences are shaped by their actions, speech, and writings. Finally, the critical theorist's drive to "bring about transformative change in society" (Gutek 309) situates this theory firmly in the consequentialist's ethical view. A teacher who encourages students to transform thoughts into actions is probably following the consequentialist viewpoint. These tasks are often emphasized through pedagogy that involves student communication with a wider readership outside the classroom. Consequentialist educators will often showcase student writing by encouraging presentations, assigning student-created blogs, or generating students' interest in writing for publication.

### *Significance*

Every college writing instructor will face empathy and ethics issues in the classroom; therein lies the significance of delineating three distinct ethical viewpoints affecting writing instruction. Each instructor will be required to rise above his or her own ethical stance, recognizing and critiquing it and other views in order to respond to student texts that follow a different ethic. We need to train ourselves to expect differing viewpoints and to respond openly and non-judgmentally. As Joseph Harris states, "We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say" (98). And the things we want to say and the ways we want our students to write are impacted by our communities and ourselves as well.

Perhaps a few examples of teachers/professors I have known can illustrate the significance of these ethical views in our writing classrooms. I will name these instructors Aaron, Peter, and Mary. First, Aaron could be labeled a deontological educator because he presents writing standards based on Aristotelian reason or because he instructs students to write about C. S. Lewis' studies on mythology and religion. Second, Peter acts as a proponent of the virtue view when he assigns students readings from works of professional writers and when he presents for class discussion examples of his own works in progress. Third, Mary presents herself as a consequentialist writing instructor when she introduces students to the "Take Back the Night" initiative in which women and men are led to protest violence against women.

The ethical rub comes in when one of Aaron's students would prefer to write about a current, postmodern figure who is more interested in transforming the world than in adhering to universal standards. While that student likely would be welcome in Mary's classroom, Aaron could face ethical and empathetic issues in dealing with the student. The reverse is also true. Mary's consequentialist stance may make it difficult for her to accept an essay describing the importance of Christianity in world history. Peter's position allows him to more easily straddle the ethical issues that result from conflicts between deontological and consequentialist views. As long as students are in the process, working to capture thoughts and conquer the process, Peter can live with either the historical or current figure as an essay topic.

Of course, Aaron, Peter, and Mary are composites and generalizations. Few of us hold completely to any one of the beliefs recognized by Toner. Still, identification of our own belief systems can ease frustration for us and our students if we recognize the various ethical perspectives and if we learn to negotiate or at least to recognize and acknowledge others' viewpoints. Most of us are given freedom to present writing instruction according to our own ethical views. Furthermore, students gain important experience by interacting with a variety of professors who hold a variety of ethical viewpoints. Within that freedom, empathy can become a lubricant that can be used to cool the atmosphere when a conflict between a student's and teacher's view reaches a volatile friction point.

### *Conclusion*

Earlier, I mentioned one conflict which arose when my own deontological view met a particular student's consequentialist view. To the student, his socio-political statements were more important than the mechanics of clearly stating his ideas. On the other hand, although ideas are important to me, I believe it is my duty as a writing instructor, to guide the student toward the use of clear language so that his or her ideas can be read and appreciated by readers. In my view, it was my responsibility, then, to assist the student to recognize the standards that would make his writing accessible to more readers while still endeavoring to encourage the student's socially constructive commentary. The student will need to judge whether I was empathetic and successful in my encouragement. Personally, I have since found elements of Toner's virtue view beneficial when negotiating between the deontological and consequentialist ethical viewpoints. By adopting the virtue view's stance that writing is an expressive activity best brought to completion through multiple drafts, I can encourage both ideas and mechanics. Empathetic ethics in the writing classroom necessitate acceptance of each individual along with the recognition and acknowledgment of conflicting viewpoints such as the underlying beliefs Toner labels *deontological*, *virtue*, and *consequentialist*.

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Return to [Table of Contents](#)