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### SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS

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## IT'S WRITTEN ON THEIR FACES:

## THE RHETORIC OF EMPATHY

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*Introduction*

In a reflection on her teaching practices, Wendy Bishop in *Teaching Lives* suggests that over time she became a "social expressivist," in that by writing about her own teaching she learned "to develop a personal voice within the public matrix of professional communities" (ix).

For the compositionist committed to the personal essay as a medium that engages students' interests and creativity in meaningful ways, Bishop's belief that one can use personal reflection to enter and enhance public discourse presents the writing teacher with a challenge: that of offering empathetic acknowledgement of the student writer's individual experience while encouraging rhetorical awareness of the topic and audience beyond the self.

This essay examines the **emotional labor**—acknowledgement, empathy, trust—that writing teachers can employ **rhetorically** to guide student writers towards a more public and profound discourse.

**DISCLAIMER** : I am not nor have I ever been a counselor or psychologist, though a few family members and most of my colleagues would say I am long overdue for therapy.

*I. Opportunity knocks and I reluctantly open the door*

When Janet appeared in the doorway of my office late one afternoon during the second week of spring semester, I have to confess that I was not exactly thrilled to see her.

I had already been besieged by other seniors that week as they sought readers for their capstone course projects. At my school, seniors must assemble a committee of three readers to review their work, so as soon as the project is introduced they scurry about the department enlisting sympathetic—or the merely available—faculty to join their committees.

My second thoughts at seeing Janet in my doorway were not only a result of my already having agreed to serve on five other committees that semester but also my awareness that Janet had signed up for the senior seminar at least once—maybe twice—before. It is not unusual for seniors to begin the capstone course and then drop it when faced with the prospect of the tasks involved. Indeed, upon asking around, I discovered that Janet had apparently had disagreements with her faculty readers and the instructor of record for the seminar the semester before and had failed the course, not dropped it, but failed. Since she had to pass the course to graduate, she had to take it again, only this time she had to pass or else.

So when she appeared in my door, I knew immediately that she had come to me not so much out of preference as out of necessity. Apparently, when you burn too many bridges, any spindly crossing or fallen log to the other side looks good. Her project, an extended creative nonfiction essay, technically fell under the jurisdiction of the creative writing faculty, but since she had already been there and done that so to speak, she had come to see me. Prior to the department hiring an “official” creative nonfiction teacher, I had led Janet and about 20 other students through an introductory creative nonfiction course, so I was somewhat familiar with her work and her habits.

Even among the interesting array of students drawn to the creative nonfiction course, Janet had been unusual in several ways. A transfer student, she introduced herself to us and revealed a checkered academic past that included various majors at several different colleges that she had abandoned for both academic and personal reasons. Although she had an imposing physical presence and a dramatic sense of fashion that had her in dreadlocks and tie-dye one week and a business suit and heels the next, she often was rather quiet during class discussions unless pushed to join in, and then she always had a lot to say and would bluntly state her opinion and let the chips fall where they may.

So taking a cue from her own sense of keeping it real, I asked Janet what had gone wrong with her previous attempt at completing her senior project. I received no clear answer from her, although she did admit to having trouble meeting deadlines and to not working well with her main faculty advisor for the project. When I asked her why, she simply shrugged.

I cautioned her that I would not tolerate any lapses and that my goal was to get her through the course so she could graduate. I said this with emphasis, which for me is a slight tilt of the head forward, eyebrows raised, and my lips drawn into a tight line. I told her that if she missed any deadlines for drafts or progress reports—and I can say now that she did not—I would not sign off on her project. I told her I also expected her to produce a finished, polished, original piece of writing. This meant she would produce drafts, I would respond, and she would revise. At the time, it all sounded simple enough.

Janet, relieved she had found a faculty member still willing to work with her, had smiled broadly, accepted my challenge, and left with a promise to toe the line and keep her work flowing my way. As she left my office and I added her to my list of senior projects for the semester, I wondered what if anything had changed with her besides a good dose of desperation, and if both of us would make it through to the end successfully.

So she would write, I would respond, and all would end well—or would it?

*II. A brief history of my life as a responder to student writing*

Counting my work as a teaching assistant, full-time instructor, and tenure-track faculty member, I have been reading and responding to student writing for about 18 years. As I type these words and think of all those drafts and papers, I feel overwhelmed and slightly giddy. Then like in old-style cartoons, I envision page after page lifting off my desk, circling around my head, then fluttering through an open window and up into the sky, forming a continuous stream of papers wrapping around and around the earth.

Like many of you I am sure, over the years as I worked my way through thousands of student essays and papers I have tried many different kinds of responding. To borrow a distinction offered by Brooke Horvath, my responding has indeed flowed back and forth between the poles of “formative” and “summative” commentary. According to Horvath, formative responding or evaluation “treats a text as part of an ongoing process of skills acquisition and improvement, recognizing that what is being responded to is not a fixed but a developing entity” (244). Most of us can recognize the value to student writers of such a responding style, and also recognize that the open-ended quality of such a style requires thoughtful and sustained effort from both students and their teachers.

And, though I risk branding with a large scarlet “S” on my next composition conference name tag, at times I have leaned towards more summative commentary. Of summative commentary, Hovarth says, “Determining a paper's grade and writing comments to explain or to justify that grade; deciding how well a paper measures up to one's expectations, fulfills the requirements of an assignment, meets certain criteria of good prose: in short, passing judgment, ranking: this is summative evaluation” (244). Many of us will recognize our tendencies to offer just such comments, perhaps in response to workload issues or as a reflection of deeper held beliefs that at a certain point students must indeed demonstrate a level of—shall I use the words?—skill or competence in order to pass our courses. But that is an argument for another essay.

My own evolution as responder has been much less tidy and much more recursive than Hovarth's bipolar taxonomy suggests. Over the years, I have tried it all: I have offered affirmative conversational comments: “me too,” “how true,” “yes,” “oh no.” I have tried using abbreviations: Awk, CS, Frag. I have used teacher- and student-generated rubrics for drafts in progress and to grade finished work. I once bravely read and graded an essay in the presence of each student, the tension passing back and forth between us like a sputtering electric current. I have used a pass/fail method. I have taken points off for every error. I have ignored all errors. I have shared grading with students, averaging my grade with their peer reader grades. I have responded to single essays and to whole portfolios.

In short, I have tried a variety of methods of response and evaluation. Which work best depends upon whether the emphasis is on managing my workload—I often teach four writing classes a semester—or whether the emphasis is on helping students discover their own means of evaluating and revising their work. Realistically, I imagine it is a little of both. I also find that I respond differently to first-year composition students than to seniors or graduate students in specialty writing classes. So when Janet turned in a draft of her capstone project, I took out my favorite pen and set to work offering the best advice I knew how at the moment, responding both as an interested reader and as an experienced responder to student writing with the objective of helping Janet revise her essay and pass the capstone course. What happened next, though, was even surprising to me: in learning to respond to Janet in a way that would generate meaningful revisions of her work I learned that I needed to revise my own responding style.

*III. Can an old dull pen take on a sharp new edge?*

Janet and I were at a stalemate. Her second draft showed little or no revision from the first draft, a draft which I had read through carefully several times and offered what I viewed as thoughtful—and insightful—advice for revision. Janet's essay was a blend of memoir and commentary about domestic abuse of women. Central to her essay was an account of her grandmother's courtroom trial for shooting her husband in self-defense as he attacked her. Using techniques from fiction, Janet had re-created scenes from her grandmother's life and from her trial. In addition, Janet included commentary and statistics about domestic abuse in the essay.

Most of my problems as a reader and responder were with the re-created scenes, which were vivid and compelling. She made her grandmother come to life on the page, both as a young girl seduced by a sweet-talking man and later as a working woman with children who felt it her place in life to endure the wrath of an abusive husband. The problems were technical: tense shifts, lack of transitions, shifting points of view—the sorts of issues that would confuse a reader and lessen the impact of Janet's essay. To me, these problems seemed obvious and easy to fix. So I did not understand Janet's reluctance—or inability—to revise. True, she had made some changes, but not enough. In particular, she refused to change a word of a dramatic courtroom scene in which her grandmother speaks directly to Janet, who had not been born yet, as if Janet were in the gallery watching the trial. I explained how this burst of magic realism might confuse a reader and how it seemed out of place in terms of the style and structure of the essay.

As I talked to Janet about this, she sat quietly and listened, nodding now and then, but I could tell that I was not getting through to her. I felt frustrated that although she agreed with me that the scene was confusing she would not or could bring herself to cut it from the essay as I had suggested. As I began to explain again how the scene just did not fit, it suddenly became clear to me that for Janet her being in that courtroom with her grandmother—although fictional—was the most important aspect of this essay—not the reader, not the statistics on abuse, not passing the capstone course.

I stopped myself in mid-sentence, looked away from the draft littered with my comments and directly into her eyes, and said, “I can tell your grandmother is very important to you. You must love her very much.” With that, Janet nodded, teared up a little, and began to talk about what her grandmother meant to her and how much she admired all that her grandmother had been through. I put the draft aside—for that visit at least—and instead of talking myself, I listened to Janet.

## *IV. The rhetoric of empathy*

I can report that after our break-through moment Janet and I made progress as responder and reviser. After we established her emotional investment in the essay, I suggested that doing the tedious work of incorporating technical revisions to improve the readability of the piece would help a reader understand her grandmother's story better and ultimately would help Janet honor this remarkable woman. And although Janet did not push her revisions as far as I would have liked, she did produce a draft polished enough to pass muster with all the readers of her senior project committee. She had, to return to Wendy Bishop, taken a step towards developing “a personal voice within the pubic matrix” (ix).

As I reflected on my experience with Janet, I realized that ignoring the emotional connections students have with their essays—especially those that draw from personal experience—is not an effective **rhetorical strategy** on my part as a responder. After all, the student writer becomes the audience for the responder's comments. So, the responder must work as hard to engage the audience—in this case the student writer—as the student writer is encouraged to do in his or her essay for its intended audience.

Without drifting any further into what quickly could become cacophony of poststructuralist quibbling over audience and intention, I want to offer a strategy for responders when confronted with essays in which students seem very emotionally invested. And though some might chafe at the idea that emotion should be used to manipulate student revision of an essay, I would say that essays with emotional content require *both* a technical

and an emotional response. And if this emotional response is *rhetorical* in nature with the objective of helping students to revise, then it is worthy and valuable, and at least recognizes the student's own genuine emotional involvement. To do so can establish a learning environment that allows the writing teacher to push students toward developing the ability to create a more public discourse.

In an essay discussing her role as a teacher of future teachers, Jennifer Sumsion reflects on establishing an “ethic of caring” that provides emotional support to the student educators she mentors but which also works purposefully to keep them on task. For her, a central question is how to offer this emotional support “without being drawn into the abyss of endless and ultimately disempowering emotional labour that caring can entail” (167). Her conclusion suggests adopting a thoughtful method of interacting with students that includes deliberative relationships, transparency of practice, and presence. For Sumsion, a deliberative relationship is one in which emotional support is offered not merely as a shoulder to cry on but as means to encourage the student to take to make effective choices: “Through my deliberative and purposeful responses and actions, I hope, then, to create relationships and engage in interactions with students that promote their personal and professional development” (175). These deliberative relationships, though offered in a climate of caring, seek to move an emotional student from “impulsive to deliberative action” and require that the responders themselves act deliberately in dealing with emotional issues. In describing her handling of a phone call from an upset student, Sumsion draws upon past experience to say that “most students gain little benefit from extended counseling-like conversations” and acknowledges her own “limitations as a counselor” (175). As such, the teacher-responder must “pause” and be mindful of his or her own reactions to an emotional situation or content, and keep the focus on the objectives of the assignment or course.

My strategy to use empathy rhetorically in responding to student work has a similar deliberative goal, and allows me to recognize student emotional involvement in a way that is respectful yet not phony. Indeed, while none of us can truly get inside other people's heads or hearts, we can at least recognize that they do indeed have heads and hearts. This recognition seems essential to offering a meaningful response to a draft with emotional content, and can be easier to do than you might think. In reflecting on my experience with Janet and subsequently with other students, I found that with a few simple adjustments to my teacher “persona” I was able to become a more effective responder to student work with emotional content. I offer these ideas in an order that is not fixed but which seems most likely to occur in a responding situation, and which allows each step to build upon the other.

**Step One: Acknowledgement.** Acknowledgement means simply to recognize the emotional value to the student of what he or she has written. For Janet and me, this moment came when I turned to her and said, “I can tell your grandmother is very important to you. You must love her very much.” Rhetorically, as responder speaking to my audience, by acknowledging Janet's emotional involvement I had established common ground with her. She no longer felt I did not “get” what she was saying. As such, she became less resistant and more willing to engage in dialogue or an exchange of ideas. In a fashion, I had also increased my credibility with her, since she now knew I understood where she was coming from.

Furthermore, by not acknowledging the emotional content of the essay I myself was engaging in denial, or a refusal to acknowledge the obvious. And as is well known about most dysfunction, acknowledging that a problem or situation exists is the first step in healing. So by choosing to use acknowledgement to help me respond to Janet's draft, I had also opened the possibility of moving past my own reluctance to address the emotional content of student writing. Upon reflection, it seems odd to make assignments that allow or require students to admit or discuss the emotional context of a situation and then to gloss or skip over that aspect by addressing it only technically or pedagogically. Part of my own reluctance to address emotional issues presented in student work I think is my recognition, similar to Sumsion's recounted above, of my limitations as a counselor or therapist, since, though I am called doctor, I am not a psychiatrist by any means, or even that well adjusted. I am, however, a human being, and therefore capable of reacting to emotional content without the requirement that I have all the answers.

**Step Two: Empathy.** Empathy means to display sensitivity to the feelings evoked by the student writer, even if you have not been in a similar situation or if perhaps you would react differently. For Janet and me, this process included my reacting to her descriptions of the brutality and hardship her grandmother had endured not simply as a writing teacher concerned with readability and technical improvement but as a human being who understood the emotional consequences of the actions described. With simple comments such as, "Your grandmother must have felt so betrayed to have been put on trial for defending herself," I displayed to Janet my empathy with her grandmother's situation.

Rhetorically, displaying empathy allows you to foster a sense of being on the same side or wavelength with a student writer. Practically, all it means is offering comments that project your awareness of the student's emotional involvement. Some might call this "mirroring," in that you can simply affirm what is obvious: for example, "The sudden death of a close friend is such a shock. You must have been really upset." Such a comment can reflect cues in the essay itself or a responder's own experience or knowledge of a similar situation. What is important is to convey sensitivity to the student writer of the emotional implications of the event described in the essay.

This use of empathy is in keeping with the conceptions of "emotional labor" discussed by James Diefendorff and Robin Gosserand who define this practice as one in which the goal is to "influence the emotions of others….so that work goals can be achieved" (945). This kind of emotional labor can be seen in a wide range of occupations, from the sales person who instantly becomes a customer's new best friend in order to sell a product to a medical professional who adopts a persona of nurturing concern to gain a patient's cooperation. Indeed, many professions develop protocols that specify the kind of emotional labor workers should enact when dealing with clients or customers. In another essay, Gosserand and Diefendorff categorize this kind of labor as not only projecting an appropriate emotional response but perhaps also shaping the responder's own emotions: "Two commonly discussed strategies for regulating one's emotional displays at work are (a) *surface acting*, which involves suppressing one's felt emotions and faking the desired emotions, and (b) *deep acting*, which involves modifying one's feelings in order to display the appropriate emotions" (1256).

Some might suggest that to appear empathetic without actually feeling empathetic is somehow wrong or a kind of trickery. I agree that using empathy **rhetorically** might suggest a kind of subterfuge such as that of surface acting, but I would argue that it is a lie that does not harm. Suppose someone does you a kindness that you don't really need or want but you offer appreciation for their efforts anyway. While your thank-you might not be genuine in the strictest sense, it certainly does no harm. And perhaps in reflecting on the kindness in order to be able to offer genuine-appearing gratitude, you may even become more appreciative of the kindness itself.

**Step Three: Trust.** Trust means to feel confident in another person's intentions and abilities. For Janet and me, trust was slow in coming, but after the session in which I recognized the need to acknowledge and empathize with the emotional content of her draft, I felt that she was more comfortable—and confident—of me as a responder to her work. By offering respect for the emotional content of her work, I had also shown respect for her as a person, and, it would seem, as a writer. Less on guard, Janet began to place more trust in what I said about the technical issues in her writing.

In a real sense, I was not only responding to her as writer to writer but also as human to human. By doing so, I had been "present" to her in the sense defined by Allison Tom: "Presence in the teaching relationship means being a genuine person in our interactions with others" (qtd. in Sumsion). By dropping my guise as an editing robot and reacting to Janet's essay emotionally, I had appeared more genuine to her and therefore less suspicious or threatening, and became more trustworthy.

Rhetorically, establishing trust with a student writer enriches whatever appeals—ethical, logical, and pathetic—

that a responder might offer. While we might assume that because of our training and experience students automatically trust the advice and comments we offer for their essays, this is not always the case, especially if we have chosen to ignore the emotional content of an essay. A student writer cannot be faulted for ignoring the editorial advice of someone who appears to be clueless as to the emotional significance of an essay. But once trust is established and nourished through continued acknowledgement and empathy, both student writer and responder can more fully engage in meaningful dialogue about other issues to improve a draft. And indeed, despite the emotional connection, my relationship with Janet was one of teacher and student, of more experienced writer speaking with a student writer. To keep this teacher-student relationship clear and foremost, Sumsion urges a "transparency of practice" that makes explicit to students a teacher's primary responsibility to promote student growth even while establishing a context of mutual caring (176).

### *V. A band-Aid for my bleeding heart?*

Before anyone gets the wrong idea, I would like to say that I am still a hard ass with my students, but now in a more understanding way, of course. I expect them to engage fully with their assignments. I expect them to demonstrate sophisticated thinking and analysis. I expect them to use appropriate rhetorical strategies to convey a message to an audience.

But now, I do listen for the heartbeat in personal essays, for it is there, waiting to be heard as surely as the words on the page.

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the New Orleans CEA conference, and is happy to report that the beignets at Cafe Du Monde are as sweet—and messy—as ever.

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