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Healing Classrooms: Therapeutic Possibilities in Academic Writing



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Abstract: This article asks us to consider what the process of healing and composition pedagogy have to learn from each other. More specifically, it identifies how the therapeutic potential of writing, which has been largely neglected in the academy in recent years, can influence the ways we teach transferable writing skills. The article considers how composition students and their instructors can write about painful experiences in ways that allow for healing while fostering the critical thinking and inquiry skills our writing classrooms are expected to teach.

“For well you know that it’s a fool who plays it cool,” the Beatles sang in their 1968 hit, “Hey, Jude.” For years I played the fool in the academy, believing that acting “cool” stood tantamount to success, both as student and instructor. During my second semester of teaching first-year composition (FYC), however, family turbulence shattered this charade. Though I was two hundred miles away at graduate school, I was confronted with the fiends of past and present as my father’s illusion of financial security crumbled and the long-festered sores of my four-generation family were scratched open. I was again pained by my mother’s fatal battle with Hodgkin’s lymphoma sixteen years prior. Years of unsuccessful coping with her death rose like a whip and lashed as I felt betrayed by my only surviving parent, who I learned had remained solvent by accruing thousands of dollars of debt with my stolen identity. I came to realize I had long ignored the pain of one parent’s loss, pain that could no longer be suppressed in the wake of the surviving parent’s betrayal. Though I had rarely thought about my mother’s death until that point, I found myself thinking about it constantly. In the classroom, organized lesson plans became scrambled in my mind as the wandering thoughts that then dominated my thinking pulled me back to the past. In my graduate seminars, too, emotions came screaming, clawing, demanding attention. I could no longer pretend to be cool.

Therapeutic Potential in the Writing Classroom

While students were responding to the prompts I used at the beginning of class as anticipatory sets, I was writing about my emotions, what Peter Elbow’s opponents have called “subjective bullshit” (Elbow 140). I disliked that students were performing a task I was unwilling—and unable—to do myself. Since I could write about nothing else, I selfishly began asking students to journal about what was on *their* minds. As my students and I continued doing so, I made two observations. On the one hand, the silence that long defined my response to pain was not unique. Many students wrote about painful experiences they had never before talked openly about. In a matter of weeks, I read journal entries about abusive (step)parents, crippling disabilities, divorces, cruel bullying, and crises of faith.

On the other hand, these very personal writings encouraged me to consider the classroom’s potential for articulating tragedy and its lasting pain. This potential, I believe, was not wholly incongruous with the academy’s mission. The academy is responsible for that vague, yet noble, objective of liberating the mind from prejudice and egocentrism. Part of this objective is the potential to produce engaged citizens with greater understandings of themselves and others, citizens who can leave our classrooms and practice empathy, foster inquiry, and treat others with dignity. This is an idealized understanding of the work we do with students, though I suspect it is one of the reasons many of us continue teaching. As students and I continued writing that “subjective bullshit” and sharing it with one another, I witnessed these ideals become increasingly manifest in the classroom: Students connected their experiences with those of their peers, both aloud and in writing; they wrote engaging research papers exploring social concerns springing from our discussions and their writings; and they used the chalkboards to write notes of encouragement to other classes during midterm and finals week. I was amazed by how writing and talking about what was on our minds transformed the classroom. It seemed there was compatibility between the purposes of the academy’s composition

classroom and the process of healing I believe this writing facilitated.

Before proceeding further, however, a necessary question confronts us: What do we mean when talking about trauma and healing? In her widely-read *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman says, "At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force," arguing that trauma can be defined as any event in which one is forced to respond to "the extremities of helplessness and terror" (33). After the trauma is over, one continues to experience psychological responses like hyperarousal, in which the victim constantly fears the danger will return (35). Intrusion occurs when trauma is relived in the mind, and the body's sympathetic nervous system is constantly aroused (37-39), sometimes leading to constriction, after which the victim is finally rendered unable to cope with her pain (42). Marian MacCurdy defines trauma somewhat differently, saying it refers to the lasting emotional effects of a situation that has indelibly marked us, producing emotionally-charged "images [that] are hard to verbalize because they are locked into a part of the brain that is preverbal" (162). Whereas Herman argues that the term trauma refers to an actual event, MacCurdy suggests trauma should more properly be understood as the process of a painful event continuing to impinge on our lives through the images it has imprinted in the brain. Both are similar in arguing trauma is intrinsically linked to contiguity, to the way in which an event continues to touch our lives and thinking. In fact, part of trauma's potency derives from how our brains process and sustain these painful episodes, locking them in the nonverbal hippocampus and amygdala of the brain's deep limbic system. Here they are frequently stored as images, linked to sense perceptions, and detached from the emotional responses they produce. These traumas remain in our experiences and identities but not in our dialogues, forever touching us while nevertheless remaining beyond simple articulation.

Herman rejects the notion that healing from trauma is possible (211), preferring to understand coping as a process of recovering. For Herman, recovering occurs as the victim slowly feels empowered again (133), remembers a trauma and describes it in detail (175), and reconnects with the "ordinary life" of a human community (155). Though it is true that healing is rarely possible in a totalizing way, we can understand Herman's notion of recovery as the ongoing process of healing. Therapeutic coping, which allows us to regain power and escape the isolation of suffering, facilitates recovery (i.e., healing as process). Understanding recovery as a process calls attention to the fact that healing is never ending, that certain wounds will always be with us in some lasting way, even if we can learn to live with them.

In my class, students and I experienced such an ongoing process as our writing allowed us to articulate events we had long ignored. We were also establishing a classroom community that fostered empathy and inquiry into more global concerns, both as these concerns related to our own experiences and those around us. Broadly speaking, I wanted to consider what the process of healing and composition pedagogy had to learn from each other. More specifically, I wanted to identify how the therapeutic potential of writing, which has been largely neglected in the academy in recent years, could influence the ways we teach transferrable writing skills. I soon learned this topic had already received much attention among psychologists, composition theorists, and educators. This paper focuses on my own personal encounter with therapeutic writing in the composition classroom. Traces of my narrative of pain and healing—drafted and shared in the classroom along with students' narratives—have resurfaced in this paper, which chronicles how my understanding of the classroom as a transformative space developed. Through writing with students about pain, I came to see my role as an educator as inextricably bound to the shared experience of empowerment and community-building at work in the composition classroom. In tracing one teacher's epistemological journey, this paper emphasizes precisely how powerful the writing classroom can be for everyone involved, particularly when writing becomes a vehicle for transforming one's pain into engagement.

Before considering what therapeutic writing can look like in the classroom, we must consider the central role audience plays. Taking ownership of one's pain and sharing it with others assumes a vulnerability on the writer's part. The admission of a painful past upsets, at least temporarily, power dynamics by giving the audience access to what has often been kept private. This confessional component, which often attends the writing about and sharing of one's pain, cannot be overlooked. The inherent vulnerability that arises when the private becomes public poses challenges for any writing-as-healing pedagogy. Work by feminist scholars, especially bell hooks and Wendy Ryden, has drawn attention to the unbalanced power relations at work in the classroom. Consequently, their work has important implications for considering how the power dynamics of a healing classroom can act.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks considers the ways the classroom can become a space to "reinvent" the self" (3), as well as a site for "confrontation and conflict" (178). This possibility for growth and change arises from her paradigm of an "engaged pedagogy," which rests upon the teacher's deep interest in the personal experiences and lives of students (13). As a praxis, this model encourages an environment in which many voices constitute the classroom experience (19-21). Polyvocality, according to hooks, is what makes the classroom "a location of possibility" (207). Dialogism, by bringing a multiplicity of voices into the classroom space, requires that all participants become vulnerable. While confessing one's hurt to an audience requires vulnerability, if every member of the class,

including the teacher, confronts topics of a personal nature, all share a vulnerability. Shared vulnerability equalizes power dynamics in the classroom by requiring each member to be both writer and reader. It is a nearly simultaneous experience of being a vulnerable speaker as well as a privileged spectator. If we, like hooks, insist on a dialogic classroom that is truly driven by numerous voices, the threat of personal writing encouraging an imbalanced structure of power is less likely.

Very similarly, Ryden also insists the classroom should be a dialogic space. For her, writing is therapeutic because it is a “public exchange based on recognition” (239). Allowing writing to become therapeutic, she argues, relies upon reconceiving the role audience plays. Rather than putting responsibility for meaning-making on the writer, Ryden says, “The ethical audience is obligated to try to understand, or recognize, the rhetors and their discourse” (252). Both of these tasks, I believe, resonate with the healing process. Empowerment certainly requires more than “the expunging of negative emotions” (Ryden 239). It also requires the nurturing of self-worth and agency, a task both teacher and students must share in a healing classroom. This collaboration is implied in Ryden’s other concern with the “ethical audience.” An audience that is actively concerned with understanding fellow writers is integral to community-building and the employment of empathy required in the community. Implied in Ryden’s argument is that the writer’s story, or the painful confession that makes her vulnerable, becomes everyone’s story if the audience “assumes responsibility for meaning-making through rhetorical listening and cathartic recognition” (259). Though I am not in complete agreement with Ryden’s insistence that the audience must take on the meaning-making process, which should ultimately fall to writers if their work is to be therapeutic, I do believe that the audience’s active attempts to understand another writer’s experiences is integral. A shared production of insight into others’ lives builds community and further reduces the likelihood of personal writing privileging the listener as more powerful than the writer.

hooks and Ryden help us understand the knotty relationship between classroom community and the therapeutic experience. Community is, as Herman notes, central to the experience of healing, so that relationship becomes particularly compelling for this discussion. If healing is to occur through a regained sense of belonging, the classroom must be a space where as many students as possible feel empowered. As Margaret Price reminds us, no environment is completely safe for everyone, so we must strive to sustain classrooms that are safe for the largest possible number of students (100-101). By encouraging dialogism and empathetic listening, though, as hooks and Ryden advocate, we make the classroom a space where equal power relations and community-building, if not guaranteed, are at least possible.

In encouraging a strong classroom community, teachers lay the groundwork for recognizing, articulating, and confronting pain. Though I am not supposing that every student who walks into the classroom is traumatized, I do believe all of us have painful experiences that, as Herman and MacCurdy note, continue to touch us in some way. Not all students will write about pain (or even their emotions) if given the chance, nor should they if they find it uncomfortable. We must remember the therapeutic nature of the classroom is only one of many possibilities. The pedagogical design that follows understands healing as one possibility, as one way of framing the composition classroom by allowing students to write in certain self-exploring ways.

Though not all students write about trauma, all of my students have much to say when asked to write about something that is bothering them. While some topics are more emotional than others, all students deserve the opportunity to write about what is on their minds, even if it seems trivial to their instructors. In fact, instructors should stress that all topics are meaningful, because as Louise DeSalvo notes, those who write about pain can frequently believe their observations are “insignificant” (125).

If we compare one of my student’s writings about trauma with my own, we can see how easily writing-as-healing can be dismissed, even before it starts. One student who chose to journal about her boyfriend every class was, in my mind, suspect of writing about the insignificant. Similarly, someone reading my own work might have found my impersonal, third-person story about a five-year-old boy playing and merrymaking at his mother’s funeral equally inconsequential. Like the student, though, my writings were an attempt to work through, and perhaps better understand, why one image so persistently haunted my thinking. As the student’s writings continued, it became apparent that her boyfriend had supported her years before when her father had abandoned the family. As a first-year student, she was away from this supportive figure for the first time. Through her writings, she eventually confronted her father’s leaving and examined how specific relationships in her life had been influenced by his actions. Meanwhile, my writings pointed to a gnawing fear that I had not mourned my mother’s death adequately, both during the funeral and in subsequent years. My fear, in its illogic, ignored the reality that at five years old I might not have been capable of understanding the complexity of a parent’s death. While the student’s writing facilitated a change in understanding, my writing could not move beyond the conviction that my father’s betrayal was some type of cosmic justice for my having been a child who had not adequately grieved his mother’s death. One parent’s betrayal, in other words, was what a child who betrayed the other parent deserved.

Such examples serve to illustrate that as instructors we must strive to remember it is only through allowing students to write about what is central to their experience—no matter our opinion of those experiences—that the therapeutic potential of writing emerges. A claim like this, of course, reverberates with the expressivist model that dominated composition studies in the 1960s and reached its zenith with the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, a meeting of American and British writing scholars that “reasserted for U.S. teachers the value of the expressive model of writing” (Berlin 210). Expressivism affirmed the personal-growth model as pedagogically valid, insisting students can learn to write by exploring what their own experiences teach them. James Moffett believed each student should “write about raw materials from his own experience” (12). By privileging individual experience, the expressivists argued, the classroom could become more democratic. Elbow insisted teachers should become learners themselves (vii), reading and writing beside students in a nonhierarchical classroom (77). Ken Macrorie wanted students to reject the notion that they were writing for teachers altogether, and understand themselves as the authentic audience (105). Privileging individual experience, which I advocate alongside these scholars, is contentious. As T. R. Johnson says, the biggest obstacle to teaching personal narratives based on experiences is the belief that it “render[s] the teacher largely irrelevant” (102). In writing beside students, though, the teacher becomes as actively involved as other class members, and is as much an active participant as anyone in the classroom’s work. Moreover, encouraging students to write about their emotions and creating an environment that recognizes these writings requires a great deal of an instructor.

Before I explain the teacher’s role in building such a classroom environment, I will discuss the important role writing can play in the lives of traumatized students. I offer the example of my student, whose writing journey took her from obsessive concentration on her boyfriend to active reflections on her many nonromantic relationships, to illustrate the possibilities in writing about emotionally-saturated experiences. The therapeutic potential of the writing classroom is particularly poignant on a micro-level like this, in a way that affects our students as individuals. To support this claim, I turn to research in psychology, which suggests that therapeutic writing has real benefits to mental and physical well-being.

To begin with, psychologist James Pennebaker observes that students who write about intense emotional concerns for fifteen minutes for four consecutive days are fifty percent less likely to visit their university’s health center in the following six weeks than students who write about non-emotional topics for four days (*Writing to Heal* 33-34). Furthermore, Pennebaker traces how those who keep pain secretive have more health problems than those who talk about it, conversely arguing that exploratory writing increases immune functions, decreases blood pressure, and reduces symptomatic depression (*Secret Life* 127-129). Similarly, Shelly Harrell notes in *Surviving Sexual Violence*, a collection of articles examining the coping mechanisms of sexual abuse victims, that journaling aids emotional healing for many (329). Psychiatrist Susan Vaughan understands therapy as a student in a composition class, “furiously outlining a new idea for a chapter in her novel, with only enough time to capture the main shapes of the story as it is appearing in her mind’s eye” (156). Though writing can clearly be a site of healing, the above should not suggest that I am advocating for therapizing students. We are not trained as therapists, nor is it our job as writing teachers to be therapists. What should be evident, though, is that the writing classroom has therapeutic potential in ways other classes might not.

Recalling Herman’s notion of recovery, or healing as process, the therapeutic potential of the writing classroom is apparent when we look at how writing allows us to reclaim agency, while also facilitating incorporation in the community around us. The primary obstacle to this healing is the silence that defines and perpetuates trauma. Pennebaker argues that “traumas may be insidious because people cannot talk about them” (*Writing to Heal* 17), a conclusion Judith Harris shares in part: “Traumatized people are often caught in the double bind of calling attention to the existence of some secret while simultaneously trying to protect themselves by deflecting attention away from it” (21). As Harris later notes, denial/silence is a central component of this deflection (32), since individuals mistakenly believe silence will alleviate pain. Silence, while isolating the victim, also robs her of agency by increasing her feelings of powerlessness. In writing, one moves beyond silence and begins the healing process.

At the heart of therapeutic writing is (re)constructing a narrative that often appears in the mind as a jumbled and incoherent series of stimulus-induced emotions. In a strictly literary sense, writing about trauma requires, in James Hillman’s words, a process for effectively ordering thoughts (130), which serves to make a coherent story out of a traumatic event. Telling this story requires confronting the emotions that are often circuitously linked to pain. MacCurdy says healing begins when we conjoin an event’s images with the emotions these images induce (173). Though narrating a trauma requires recurring efforts, it gradually allows us to make the connections MacCurdy notes, leading to a regained sense of agency.

In psychotherapeutic language, trauma writing affects the neurons of the brain and “leads to changes in how you process, integrate, experience, and understand information and emotion” (Vaughan 4). Since human brains connect images with emotion, telling a narrative allows one to connect traumatic images, which are often associated with

pain, with feelings of liberation and empowerment instead, thereby transforming the neurobiological linkages that perpetuate trauma (Vaughan 44-46). This transformation of self-perception is more accessibly noted by Thomas Newkirk and T. R. Johnson. In a study of the performative aspects of student writing, Newkirk says writing about defining life experiences requires “a view of the self as fundamentally changeable” (15). Johnson believes writing becomes therapeutic when one can understand identity as the “self-as-changeable process” (97). Both statements recall Wendy Bishop’s summary of therapeutic writing as looking at an experience in order to “tear out the stitching, reconsider the pattern, and construct my understandings anew” (132). All three comments confirm what Vaughan suggests: writing about pain is foremost concerned with transformation. If we apply Herman’s conclusions, writing becomes therapeutic when it facilitates a transformation from helplessness to empowerment.

Writing is an act of authority, an act of reclaiming the power the vise-like grip of pain robs from us. As Pennebaker notes, writing about trauma allows writers to externalize an event, thereby detaching themselves from the experience (*Writing to Heal* 98), which buoys the authority of writers as owners, not subjects, of emotionally-damaging situations. “In providing us with an opportunity to integrate disparate elements of our autobiographies, all depth therapies such as psychoanalysis allow us to conquer the past and move toward the future with a new sense of mastery,” Pennebaker says (*Secret Life* 159). Similarly, Vaughan argues that “[w]ith self-understanding comes autonomy” (159). Richard Miller also notes how this relationship manifests itself in writing, arguing that as individuals tell their stories they can overcome the power these stories hold over them (285). When our students write about trauma, they reclaim a sense of power by becoming agents of action and creation, rather than the acted-upon victims of trauma. In doing so, students begin to understand the writing process as one of empowerment, where they become authority figures by writing about events that no one else can (e.g., their own experiences), which the impersonal topics many students write about in traditional assignments do not encourage. What is perhaps most important in first-year writing pedagogy is not the finished products students create. Rather, we can guide students through the process of producing energetic, engaging, and intellectually-stimulating writing.

The second way Herman understands recovery, and another way we can understand the classroom’s therapeutic potential, is “reconnection” with a larger community (155). Though trauma is almost always a social activity, the lasting pain of trauma frequently isolates the victim, who has suffered by the violence and/or silent witness of others. Additionally, the victim’s feelings of pain, betrayal, or injustice can isolate her. Reversing this isolation, as Herman argues, is necessary to therapeutic coping. Pennebaker says that writing, as a social activity, automatically pulls one back to a larger community (*Secret Life* 125), echoing the claim of Jean Trounstein and Robert Waxler that writing reverses the tendency to focus on the “internal monologues and raw emotions that draw us away from compassion for and understanding of others” (227). In a discussion of the community-oriented setting of his Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, Michael Kleine says admitting his alcoholism allowed him to experience solidarity with those who had shared similar experiences (155). With these remarks in mind, we can readily agree with MacCurdy’s conclusion that the communal nature of the classroom allows writing to be particularly therapeutic, as students connect their stories with those of others and overcome the “excruciating isolation that is a by-product of trauma” (177).

In my class, community-building has important instructional advantages, as student participation in discussion, peer revision, and research teams are core components. Writing that encourages community seems appropriate for a classroom composed primarily of first-year students and where cross-campus interactions encourage an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas. Though many classrooms produce vibrant communities, I was astounded at the pace of community-building once students began writing their stories and sharing them with each other. As participation burgeoned and students identified patterns among their own life experiences, the classroom fostered its therapeutic potential by drawing students into a community of self-exploring, yet outward-looking people, much resembling the citizens many of us hope the academy will produce.

The Classroom’s Neglect

While the classroom appeared to be flourishing, my personal life became increasingly turbulent. Three credit card companies had outstanding debts in my name, and collection letters and calls increasingly hounded me. One company insisted it would only consider “my” debts as fraudulent if I pressed charges against my father for identity theft, a step I was hesitant to take. During this time, students were writing a speech titled “Where I’m From.” The assignment was to be modeled after Marie Bradby’s book, *Momma, Where Are You From?* And asked students to outline the most important influences that had shaped who they were at present. When writing my speech, I knew it would be dishonest to students to sanitize my personal history. Being honest to students about my experiences meant a great deal to me as a teacher. In my speech, I told the story of my life, the authentic narrative I had until then been unwilling to take ownership of. The class heard my story and, in a very real way, became a community willing to acknowledge a painful experience that I was still in the process of confronting. Though I did not bring up my father’s

actions again with these students, knowing that they had recognized my pain, at least momentarily, allowed me to regain a sense of empowerment and fellowship. Without this classroom, I might never have been able to tell others my story. These students became the very first people to hear me honestly tell where I was from. After writing my speech for class, I no longer blamed myself for my father's betrayal. It was, I realized, like my mother's death, something beyond rationalization, which might very well elide justification forever. But both events had influenced me in ways I was still discovering, and I had to claim them as part of who I was.

Creating an atmosphere to confront and overcome pain was, for me, essential to what it meant to be a teacher. I wondered whether other teachers shared this belief. How did other teachers construct formal assignments that encouraged therapeutic writing, while still focusing on the expectations of their writing programs? The answers I sought were not forthcoming. Though a rich body of research exists about therapeutic writing, few studies are engaged in the task of examining how this research can influence our classroom practices. Anderson and MacCurdy's 2000 *Writing and Healing*, an anthology containing essays on classroom applications, still remains one of the few texts seriously interested in pedagogical implications. It seems this potential has been largely overlooked in the composition classroom in recent years, despite an extensive interest in writing focused on personal growth during the twentieth century.

Inattention to the writing classroom's therapeutic potential is increasingly apparent. For the sake of simplicity, I focus only on FYC, the nearly universal course through which almost all students who study composition in higher education are introduced to academic writing. As I reflected on ways to emphasize empowerment and community, I surveyed the archived syllabi for the FYC class I was teaching. In these 413 syllabi, I found that only one in ten instructors highlighted either empowerment or community-building as central to the writing process. Even though syllabi do not provide a complete image of a course, they do provide telling images of how instructors understand the subjects they teach. Higher institutional levels are similarly inattentive to therapeutic possibilities in the writing classroom. Of the Writing Program Administrators' twenty-two 2014 learning outcomes for FYC, only two suggest a tenuous awareness that writing can be therapeutic. One outcome, which states that students should "[u]se composing processes and tools as a means to discover and reconsider ideas" ("WPA Outcomes"), could easily be aligned with the process of healing that occurs as students use writing to explore their sense of identity. The other outcome corresponds to community and expects students will "[e]xperience the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes" ("WPA Outcomes"). Both seem coincidental, rather than displaying an awareness of healing potential. As in the archived syllabi, institutionalized rhetoric in the WPA outcomes overlooks therapeutic transformations in the classroom.

However, in the last twenty years or so, many rhetoricians—though they have not necessarily been concerned with healing in the classroom—have lamented that predominant pedagogies distance the student from the self and others. Susan Miller's 1991 *Textual Carnivals*, for instance, explores how institutionalized composition typically seeks to produce writing and speaking in alignment with the "middle-class values of propriety, politeness, and cooperation" (7), ensuring that students who do not or cannot uphold these values will feel "displaced" (79). Nancy Sommers summarizes the influences of traditional academic discourse by saying, "I have been under the influence of a voice other than my own" (26). Distanced from her own identity, Sommers is forced to produce that "distant, imponderable, impersonal voice" required most frequently in academia (27). Richard Miller offers another perspective on academic writing, saying it is concerned with constructing and maintaining a voice that gives us very real, tangible rewards (satisfactory course marks, advancement on the tenure-track, etc.), rather than personal satisfaction (277-278), echoing Pennebaker, who says academic writing is really "concerned with status" (*Secret Life* 80). Nonetheless, as a field we have not changed in response to such criticism; learning outcomes for FYC still suggest composition instruction today is not concerned with empowerment or the shared act of establishing a community into which students can safely integrate themselves.

Praxis

In considering ways to nurture empowerment and community-building, I turn to the expressivist model of composition instruction and discuss what we can adapt from that model in creating a writing-as-healing pedagogy. Journaling, popularized by Elbow as "free-writing" (4), is an important component of the expressivist model. Moffett, Macrorie, and Elbow all highlight the essential role of personal journaling. Whereas Moffett argues for explicit exploratory writing of the self, Macrorie and Elbow urge students to write about what is on their minds, whether it is self-exploring or not (Macrorie 38; Elbow 4). Either method is effective in eliciting student engagement and making the classroom emotionally accessible.

I believe the most effective use of this rather informal writing occurs at the beginning of class. Ten minutes of silence dedicated to continuous writing allows the classroom to become a site where students can count on regular

reflection. While one-word prompts like loneliness, betrayal, happiness, or justice encourage students to write about issues preoccupying them, I sometimes provide a short quotation or question to encourage students to write about something that is on their minds using a common prompt: What was a recent situation you wish you could have changed? What has made you angry most recently? What is bothering you today? What is the most memorable event that has happened to you this week? Whom do you admire? Though these are open-ended questions, they encourage students to write about similar observations that they can share in small-group discussions and to reflect on ideas they might bring up in large-class discussions. Students keep these writings together in journals, allowing them to explore motifs that occur frequently.

The first time we began writing these open-ended journals, I was surprised how many students wrote about the same motif many times. My own writings oscillated frequently between anger at my father's actions and sorrow over my mother's death. One student wrote often about being bullied as a child because he was a Sikh. Another wrote about the challenges of adapting to college life with a hearing disability. Yet another wrote about the challenges of her coursework, how she was devastated with the scores her seemingly futile efforts were earning in her biology and chemistry classes. In each of these four cases, obvious motifs presented themselves in writing, motifs suggestive of larger concerns and, sometimes, lasting wounds.

Unlike Elbow, who believes these writings should never be evaluated, discussed, or commented on (4), I think collecting these journals and reading them on a daily basis is important. First, collecting them daily shows students you care enough about what they have to say to acknowledge each piece of writing. Second, collecting them frequently allows the teacher to make a comment on all entries while they are fresh in the students' minds. Reading these journals and providing one comment apiece does not take much time. Providing a positive comment or a question for further thought shows students what they have said is important and empowers them in a way that ignoring their journals would not. Reading journals this often also allows teachers to become active participants in the community in a more personalized way. As the expressivists noted, another benefit of seeing these journals frequently is our ability as instructors to encourage students to explore certain topics more fully in longer, formal papers, which are often the crux of FYC courses. Moffett, for example, believes these writings will motivate students to write more (12). I agree with him, and I frequently set aside class time for examining our journals, during which time we mark entries that we would like to explore further in formal papers.

While the expressivists were primarily concerned with writing that facilitated personal growth, I want to take an additional step in advocating for writing that empowers. John Dixon, for instance, urges writing that creates "knowledge that helps the pupil perceive himself" (11), much like Moffett, who attempts to define growth as a "movement from the center of the self outward" (59). Dixon's outcome is unsatisfactory in that, as this paper suggests, empowerment requires a transformation of self-perception. Victims of trauma frequently perceive themselves as worthless, used, or powerless against the forces around them. This perception is the victim's reality, and therapeutic writing requires a transformation of this self-perception, not a confirmation of it. Given current research, Moffett's definition actually seems counterfactual, for growth through writing requires an inward movement through a series of confrontations in delving into a trauma with determination and repeated efforts. It is only through looking inward that healing occurs and, paradoxically, one can begin to look outward.

In my FYC classroom, students write four formal papers, each requiring more stylistic sophistication, secondary-source integration, and higher-order thought and analysis: (1) the profile paper requires students to identify a topic of importance to them and interview someone who shares a point of intersection with that topic, after which students write a piece profiling their interviewee; (2) the personal narrative requires students to recreate and explore the significance of a defining moment in their lives; (3) the analysis paper requires students to reflect on an experience and, by employing explicit criteria, evaluate their behavior during this experience, which they illuminate by utilizing secondary source information to provide context or background information; and (4) the research paper requires students to explore a topic of significance to them and write a research-supported piece defending an arguable thesis. In most cases, the topics increasingly focus on ideas that have been most present in the daily journals, as students feel more authoritative as writers and are willing to write formally about their own experiences. Almost all students who repeatedly write about painful experiences in their journals examine a related topic in their research papers. The Sikh student who was bullied, for instance, wrote about institutionalized discrimination against Sikhs and Muslims in airport screenings; the student with a hearing disability examined the university's policies on accommodating and aiding disabled students; the student struggling in her classes explored whether her lifelong goal to attend medical school was worth it (by the final presentation of her research, she decided it was).

The semester during which I first noticed the therapeutic potential of the classroom, I strove to create a different environment, one in which I firmly believe healing began to take place. As I wrote—time and time again—about my mother's death, I gradually became empowered enough to talk about it for the first time, initially with students and eventually with friends and colleagues. Many were shocked to learn of her death, for I had never before mentioned it.

Students, too, began discussing their wounds in class. In the writing journals that accompanied formal papers, they explained that writing about painful experiences allowed them to look at these events in new ways. I hope the authority they affirmed in these reflections still allows them to confront their pain. At the end of the semester, I asked students to address how they understood the classroom community that semester. All twenty students, in fact, affirmed that it was important to their in-class experience, many noting how the community not only allowed but also encouraged them to express their thoughts. Some noted how peer responses to writing and discussion allowed them to understand life events and themselves in new ways. Our shared experience of writing about and telling our life stories, some of which were painful, allowed this to happen.

Despite what I believe are the obvious benefits of encouraging healing in the classroom, many challenges confront instructors who take up such a task. As MacCurdy points out, incorporating the personal in a course's major projects could be misunderstood as a mandate that every student produce essays of a deeply personal nature (190). As educators, though, we can only create the opportunity for students to explore their wounds if they wish. Some instructors fear that encouraging students to revisit past traumas is ethically questionable, believing the emotions associated with particularly painful events might encourage suicidal ideation or self-mutilation in students who begin a task they are unprepared for emotionally. As Guy Allen notes, though, students rarely write about experiences they cannot handle emotionally (273), so the risk that writing will encourage self-harm is minimal. Other teachers are hesitant to read emotional pieces, as some of the topics students elect to discuss put instructors in a precarious situation bifurcated by their legal obligation to report dangerous behaviors/thoughts and their personal obligation as confidants. Instructors almost always notice indications of self-harm, however, long before students are comfortable enough to write about it. Those teaching in a healing classroom, though, should be prepared to speak with university officials or counselors if students write about harming themselves or others.

Additionally, feedback on emotional writing requires a response displaying sensitivity and acknowledgement on the instructor's end, which, as Linda Brodkey has proven with her well-known "Literacy Letters," instructors can be hesitant to provide. As such, a final note is in order regarding our pedagogical response to such writing. As therapists have demonstrated, writing allows individuals to heal most fully when they can express themselves "without interruption or judgment" (Harrell 329). If we wish our pedagogies to be both instructive and therapeutic, our dilemma as instructors is in providing feedback that helps improve writing while still empowering students. Though a third-person research paper examining airport discrimination might seem more peripheral to trauma than journal entries about bullying, I believe both assignments facilitated healing through empowerment and re-establishing community ties, for in each case the student felt safe enough to share his experiences with his peers. In fact, the student later noted that the research paper, by exploring what he considered to be insistent bullying at a national level, was the most fulfilling piece he wrote all semester. Even the formal papers that initially seem peripheral or sometimes unrelated to wounds, then, require conscientious feedback.

It can be difficult to assign grades to papers that you know, either from journals or discussions, deal with topics derived from traumatic or extremely painful experiences. The first time I offered students the option to write about painful experiences in the personal narrative, for example, I read a paper examining how the writer and her mother had escaped a vicious stepfather and his emotional and physical abuse. The paper was poignant, but it failed to meet many of the assignment's learning outcomes.

Because of situations like this, I often send electronic feedback to students a day before returning actual papers. This initial feedback is brief, but includes highlighting strengths, pointing out areas where papers are strongest, and mentioning a few areas that could be strengthened in very specific ways. Not giving a grade at this point allows students to receive feedback as formative and evaluative, but not linked to a specific grade—i.e., a perceived judgment. These comments are also included in part on the papers I return the next day. I put no actual grade on the paper itself, but include a separate rubric on which I have reproduced learning outcomes and assign points accordingly. After passing back papers, I immediately note that my evaluations are of the papers as artifacts of students' development, not of life experiences. Furthermore, I try to emphasize *evaluation* not *judgment*, a task that is easier to theorize about than practice. Ordinarily, I keep a private grading journal, where I can reflect while grading particular pieces using a text-dictating device, which allows me to journal and grade simultaneously. A grading journal helps me ensure that my process for producing feedback remains focused on evaluating papers in relation to empirical learning outcomes rather than becoming an idiosyncratic, emotional reaction to particular pieces.

But if we are committed to the dialogic conversation about healing, as I have suggested, our responsibility can extend beyond grading to processing our own trauma in the classroom community we create. In my own writing, I was far less willing than my students were to address what had replaced my mother's death as the most painful moment in my life. While I was more willing than I had ever been to write and talk about my mother's death, I was still reticent about discussing the details surrounding my stolen identity. Many of my colleagues knew my identity had been stolen, but none knew about the familial complexities in which this event was wrapped. The people to whom I

told my story most honestly were the complete strangers working at national credit bureaus and the creditors who wanted their debts settled, and I was only honest with them because necessity required it. As the semester progressed, however, I grew more comfortable with talking about what was happening outside the classroom.

Our pedagogies are constantly under threat of criticism. Theories like feminism, eco-criticism, Marxism, and postcolonialism have challenged traditional writing instruction with what are, for the most part, valid criticisms of the ideologies imbued in these institutionalized pedagogies and the language policies they maintain. In conclusion, I must note that I do not desire to pose another radical intervention in our ever-evolving pedagogies. I am not advocating reconstructions of our classrooms as therapeutic centers where instructors play the role of untrained counselors. What I seek, however, is to encourage a classroom that creates and sustains a site of personal dialogue in which students and their instructors can choose to approach, explore, discuss, and narrate the unspoken pain of their lives. Not all instructors will be willing to redesign their writing classrooms like this. Nevertheless, I hope this article calls attention once again to the important role empowerment and community-building can play in the classroom, and how understanding the healing process can inform how we teach transferrable writing skills. Writing that facilitates healing also encourages students to find their own voices as writers, while challenging them to address larger contexts and more global concerns in productive ways.

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