

Teaching Voice as a Method of Close Listening

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Recently, at a show, the bartender told me he couldn't sell me two beers at once, even though the second was for my friend. You're a fucking cop, I said, the worst insult imaginable to someone in my online social circle. You're a narc. I wasn't so much interacting with a human being, but popping off in his mentions. Soon after, I apologized to the bartender, utterly ashamed. If the interaction had been on Twitter with an audience, dozens of people might've applauded me for my irascibility. We think nothing of calling someone a piece of shit online 10 times a day. In real life, it doesn't feel quite as heroic. It feels ugly.

–Luke O'Neil

Believe it or not, I laughed the first time I read this anecdote. Not because I think it's funny to be a jerk to bartenders, or because I'm part of the Twitter horde that would understand the narc insult. Rather, I laughed because the article from which the story came has a slightly absurd and somewhat self-deprecating tone. (It's title: "My Candid Conversations with Extremely Online Folks Who Suffer from Internet Broken Brain.") However, pulled out of that context and pasted on my own page, the anecdote sounds different. Listening to its resonances, I now hear not funny and absurd, but regretful and sober.

In face-to-face conversation, it's easy to react with shock and moralism to the incivility enabled by social media, easy to lament that we live in an era when communication has gone wrong. We've got cyberbullies, flammers, doxers, trolls and more; in recent years, it has felt as if there are throngs of people online who are downright proud of the damage they do.¹ They delight in the way their persona sounds in cyberspace and the rhetorical effect their voice has for their audience, which as the story above suggests, may rarely be their interlocutor. But the digital era has also reinvigorated voice—both written and spoken—in other, less toxic, ways. We've seen a resurgence in oral composition (think: podcasts), and social media has reared a generation of individuals with sharp, performative skills in text and video. Understanding this situation as one coin with two sides means that we have many pedagogical opportunities when teaching voice in composition. First, becoming attuned to voice means listening—to your own voice and to others' voices—and recognizing the embodied aspect of voice. Second, one should understand that pedagogical and philosophical orientation while listening matters. Third, in thinking about broad cultural and discursive concerns (like those in the barroom anecdote above), teachers might consider how to use voice as a tool that is inventional, expressive, rhetorical, and ethical.

Embodied Acts, Expressive and Rhetorical

I did not have my own epiphany about the importance of voice at a bar; rather, mine came by mundane, institutional means. Several years ago, my university made big changes in the first-year writing requirement. What had been a writing class was now a written, oral, and visual communication class. Needless to say, it was a big shift for everyone from departments to

instructors to students to the registrar. For my part, I tried to suss out a methodology that would bridge my own training in literature, composition, and rhetoric with my new charge, oral communication. Eventually, I landed on voice as a bridge for teaching written and oral composition. However, teaching voice well is no easy enterprise, especially across modes. In writing, voice can be hard to pin down, let alone teach, because written voice is a combination of specific technical aspects of a text—diction, patterns of syntax—and the writer’s sense of self, attitude, and worldview.² In speaking, voice is breath and sound wave and flesh and hormones; it’s a barometer of emotion, reaction, desire, and confidence; it’s the trace of personal and communal vocal patterns.

Once I landed on voice as my bridge, I began to like teaching public speaking because of the way it embodies expressive and rhetorical relationships. Listening to the qualities of students’ voices, watching them express emotion—consciously and unconsciously—through their bodies, seeing them mature in confidence and intellect during the semester, all seemed to be the best parts of teaching public speaking. It also intersected with another facet of my pedagogical life: my work as a yoga teacher. I was already prepared, because of yoga, to watch for the subtle aspects of bodies appearing before and among others. Looking for subtlety is important when using voice as a pedagogical tool, that is, as a way of listening to students speak and as a way of reading their writing. Additionally, yogic philosophy also trained me to think of embodiment as phenomenological appearance rather than expression of an innate—or even socially constructed—self.

That last point, about what the self is, has been a big part of the scholarly discussion of voice in the past.³ Various trends in composition pedagogy have extolled the value of voice for different ends. As Darcie Bowden points out when tracing the history of the debates about voice, [a]n exploration of the rise and reign of voice obliges us to entertain some of the key issues in composition theory, including the much discussed and hotly debated relationships between oral and written language, between social and individualistic perspectives of writing and self, between literature and composition, between creative and expository writing, and between style and content. (173)

Indeed, the discussion stretches back to classical rhetoric, with dictums about the vitality of spoken language, and gets vocal again in early American writing instruction, with the nineteenth-century shift from oratory to writing (Bowden 175-176). These days, rhetorically minded compositionists are likely to present voice as a way to “dress differently on different occasions,” in other words, assuming different voices based on genre and purpose (Ede qtd. in Bowden 175). In an expressionist vein, voice is considered to be connected to an authentic, but perhaps sometimes illusive, self. Bowden collects variants of this strain in her article “The Rise of a Metaphor: ‘Voice’ in Composition Pedagogy.” In her catalogue of expressivist assertions about the writer’s voice, Bowden includes Donald Stewart and Sheridan Baker. Stewart, in his textbook *The Authentic Voice*, writes that “[y]our authentic voice is that authorial voice that sets you apart from every living human being despite the common or shared experiences you have with others” (qtd. in Bowden 175). Baker urges writers to find their voice, which “should be

alive with a human personality—yours—which is probably the most persuasive rhetorical force on earth” (qtd. in Bowden 181).

Even though the concept of voice has been widely embraced in composition classrooms since the 1960s, there are important critiques of the metaphor’s theoretical warrants, especially in the expressionist approach. The first and perhaps most important theoretical quandary: what is an “authentic” self? Many other problems also spring from valorizing “authentic” voice in writing. If strong voice is made a prized criteria for good or important writing, then the scale may be tipped toward dramatic personal narrative, which not all composition programs—and disciplines—prize (Bowden 184). Emphasizing “authentic” voice can also encourage writers to think of their work as unique and individualistic without acknowledging the social melee in which language dynamically tumbles. Additionally, linking authenticity to oral language—the suggestion is often “write like you speak”—can confuse students about levels of formality and structures of syntax. As with any approach too fervently espoused, the concept of voice can limit the breadth of a field as wide as writing, leaving students with a skill set that may not help them in their most immediate writing situations: other classes. Finally, because distinct voice is as much about diction and syntax as anything else, “finding an authentic self” may do little to help students enliven their prose in the short run.⁴

The value of expressive voice pedagogy in the long run may be different, though. In surveying the approach with Chris Burnham, Rebecca Powell writes fondly of her tutelage in an advanced composition course:

I became a writer in an expressivist classroom.... I gave muddled first drafts to peers who responded to my autobiographical writing using Peter Elbow's movies of the mind.

Alternately thrilled, shocked, or bored by their feedback, I revised and waited for the professor's response.... His readings were gifts.... Writing became expression and communication, a people-filled endeavor. (111)

While Powell doesn't explicitly mention voice in this passage, autobiographical writing is often the default genre for working out a relationship between voice and the writer's sense of self. In Powell's account, the approach also clearly emphasized the relational nature of writing as she engaged with her classmates and professor. Later as a teacher, she continued to use expressivist pedagogy to connect with her high school students and to their writing. Returning then to graduate school, Powell added other dynamics to her teaching, chiefly process and critical pedagogies, but maintained a "commitment to individual expression" (113). As Powell describes it, expressivism helped her identify as a writer and fueled her passion for teaching writing, which suggests that the approach can have a high social value.

Burnham and Powell argue that the legacy of this approach is much larger than one teacher or one classroom. In fact, they say, a strand of expressivism has become part of the "tacit tradition of contemporary teaching of writing" (116)—even if the field has overtly turned away from it, sometimes with a decidedly cold shoulder. Eli Goldblatt agrees that expressivism continues to be embedded in the field. In hoping to recontextualize the value of expressivist pedagogy, he writes, "we carry the divisions from the late 1980s in our disciplinary lore as though they still have explanatory force. I would argue that the divisions, and especially the

lingering value judgments associated with those early days in the field, do us very little good today” (444). Today’s context, Goldblatt points out, includes the increasing pressure of budget cuts, standardized assessments of writing, and larger class sizes; additionally, today’s context also increasingly focuses on theoretical-cognitive approaches and writing that serves professional and technical needs (442). Goldblatt fears that “we can forget the importance of two impulses that compel writers: the desire to speak out of your most intimate experiences and to connect with communities in need” (442).

It is important to emphasize that neither Goldblatt nor Burnham and Powell push for the value of expressivism as a way of arguing against other approaches; rather, they are simply concerned with the dynamic that expressivism can bring to the writer and to one’s teaching. Burnham and Powell encapsulate their point this way: “Engaged pedagogy, holistic teaching, and self-reflective writers: these are the expressivist project” (125). While those descriptors may be claimed by pedagogues of various stripes, I’d argue that expressivism can foster a particular quality of reflective engagement in the teacher as much as in the writer. Like Powell, my own classroom practice is a seasoned mixture of pedagogical approaches suited to each particular course I teach. I have used voice as an inventional and analytic dimension in courses in first-year composition, advanced composition, editing, and public advocacy. Depending on the course, my emphasis on voice may slant rhetorical or sway expressive. Regardless of which direction my curriculum leans, expressivist pedagogy has taught me a quality of deep attention when listening for student voice.

Using voice pedagogically presents a challenge in that the effects of voice rely heavily on three things: the rhetor's conscious intent; the rhetor's unconscious expressiveness; and the interlocutor's perceptions, assumptions, and associations related to what is explicitly communicated in language and what appears as a trace around or within the language. Often times, listening for student voice requires analytical *and* intuitive perception on the teacher's part. The dynamics of this attention become even more complex when a teacher is attuned to voice in written and oral compositions; these dual skills require the ability to discern how the contours of voice differ in uttered speech and written text. In composition studies, Peter Elbow's work has given me some of the conceptual tools for this process of discernment.⁵ In his introduction to the edited collection *On Voice and Writing*, Elbow contends with critiques of voice-centered pedagogy by describing five "related meanings" of voice in writing, several of which can also apply to uttered speech. For example, he describes "dramatic voice," the way we hear personality in an individual's way of speaking and how that character can turn up on the page (xxviii). Elbow also details "voice with authority," saying it signifies a speech act whose rhetor seems to show "conviction or the self-trust or gumption to make her voice heard" (xxxii). Looking to sidestep the rigid authentic self/social constructionist dichotomy, Elbow cautions against assuming this personality or authority is synonymous with a writer's own sense of self.

Yet, there is a different and more subtle dimension of voice that requires my closest attention, my deepest involvement with the student and the composition in front of me: the "resonant voice or presence" found in the slips, sometimes tiny, between the consciously presented voice and unconscious thoughts or feelings arising from the living person (Elbow

xxxiv).⁶ I've found this feature of voice to be an important guide for listening and responding to students' oral and written compositions for two reasons: resonant voice, the idea of it, helps me gently recognize students' vulnerabilities during their embodied expressive and rhetorical acts; it also helps me spot and affirm students' sometimes appearing confidence and fluency. If voice is phenomenological in that it is usually generated from a time-bound experience of a text or a speech, then resonant voice is perhaps the *most* phenomenological aspect because its sense of appearing and disappearing is even more profound.

Phenomenology of Voice

While making contingent choices about whether to use a rhetorical or expressivist approach to voice isn't new to me, combining that with phenomenology is. Phenomenology, as philosophic study, investigates the experience of consciousness; it asks questions about how phenomena appear in one's individual, subjective consciousness and the meaning they have in one's life-world. Dermot Moran writes that phenomenology "emphasizes the attempt to get at the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever happens in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer" (4). In the context of my discussion, the key distinction I'd make here has to do with "the experiencer." In Rhetoric and Composition, scholars such as Robert Yagelski have looked at the ramifications of a phenomenological approach to writing, but chiefly (although not exclusively) on the side of the writer. Considering the issue from a slightly different angle, my concern here is how a

phenomenological approach can prepare *the audience* (me in this case) to witness what seems to appear in students' voices on the page and in oral delivery.

European philosophers became interested in phenomenological inquiry in the twentieth century, but yoga and Buddhism (among other traditions) have contemplated consciousness in methodical, phenomenological ways for millennia. To my mind, thinking about experiences of consciousness is particularly helpful in teaching voice and can be used as a mindfulness practice. Mindfulness, as it has evolved in the U.S. from Eastern meditative practices, often relies on the concept of the "witness state": a practice of consciousness in which one is attentive to both subjective experiences and objective stimuli, but identifies with neither; in the process, the practitioner develops an awareness of her own attention. In mindfulness, the witness state is considered a dis-identification technique. This attentiveness has a deliberate lightness to it as the practitioner tries to avoid attaching to notions about the objects of attention, instead accepting the transitory nature of consciousness. Mindfulness, translated into a type of close listening, would seek to recognize the dimensions of human beingness that exceed discursive constructs and cultural logics. This attitude resonates with phenomenology in that, as Moran writes, "phenomenology's first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or indeed from science itself" (4). In other words, the hypothetical mindful teacher is attuned, at a certain level, to her own experience of the beingness of the student before her.

But mindfulness and, to some degree, phenomenology are not fundamentally rhetorical practices.⁷ Instead, it was Hannah Arendt’s political theory that helped me synthesize the phenomenological—how things arise and are experienced in consciousness—with the rhetorical act of speaking before others. As a political theorist, Arendt is primarily concerned with how appearance works in the public-political sphere. As Moran writes, “[Arendt’s] phenomenological interests [included] trying to capture the intrinsic meaning of public events, such as being born (the phenomenon she labels ‘natality’), being always caught up in the ‘plurality,’ being caught up in the world (*amor mundi*), and the experience of the ‘between’ which is neither you nor me, but something to which we both belong” (288). Unlike some other public sphere theorists, Arendt does not locate the polis by place; rather, she sees it as “the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together” (Arendt 198). What arise in this realm are phenomena—phenomena that then dissolve “not only with the dispersal of men... but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves” (Arendt 199). Put another way, the space of appearance is more fragile than stable; it’s only created through action, manifesting through deeds and words (d’Entreves 22). This position is indicative of Arendt’s larger view of history, which is that “*events* and not humans make history” (Moran 290).

In this line of thinking, when individuals participate in the public sphere, they do not present a static and “authentic” identity to be reckoned with by others—they bring action and speech to a time-bound field of plural others, “who from their different perspectives can judge the quality of what is being enacted” (d’Entreves 16). It is under these conditions, Arendt believes, that perspectives are tested, and a shared world can come into being. However, Arendt

believes that participants must be willing to practice “mutual active witnessing”—they must be willing to observe and consider others in their particularity as they appear in that moment (Curtis 14). Arendt, who escaped the Nazis and analyzed the dynamics of Stalinism, hoped that this political practice could be an antidote to the impulse to extinguish human particularity that comes to the fore in totalitarian rule.

Now, Arendt would probably consider my classroom the social sphere more than the public sphere; however, having students stand before their peers to speak *as a rhetor* does approximate the polis that Arendt values, which is why I’ve found her theory valuable to my pedagogy. Arendt’s application of a fundamentally phenomenological approach to public, rhetorical moments provides a synthesis of two silent, but important, practices. First, the ability to watch myself watching others appear in my consciousness; second, the ability to witness—and respect—the particularity of others as they stand before me as rhetorical and expressive beings. Additionally, Arendt’s emphasis on the fact that phenomena appear and recede helped me better conceptualize how voice—ephemeral, breathed voice—works in embodied rhetorical acts like speeches. On speech day, nervous students come to class; they speak with what they hope is confidence and fluency; they collapse with relief at their desks afterwards. The nerves, the confidence—neither are intrinsic qualities of a static self standing before the class; rather, they are phenomena that accompany the act of taking the floor before others. All of that is gone when class ends.

Curricular Opportunities

Unexpectedly, the imperative to address oral composition in the first-year integrated course led to a shift in how I teach all my classes. I think of the phenomenological approach detailed above as a way of doing “close listening” that can be a companion to the close reading of texts common in writing and literature classes. Whether the assignment is a speech or a podcast or writing consciously with voice, I find it helpful to train students’ ears before they dig into their own delivery of voice. Below are three in-class activities that comprise that training.

To my mind, emphasizing the embodied aspect of voice is another way of considering the humanity of each voice—as complex and messy and political as that can sometimes be. I want students to think about the richness of individual voices, so in my first exercise I show them a photograph of a man. Privately, I call the man, whom I do not know, “John.” (Rin Johnson is the photographer, and she has called the photo “voice edited.”) John is older, black, balding, wears glasses, and is dressed in a suit. In the shot, he’s off-center and in light coming from an unseen window. John’s head is tilted toward the light as he smiles. His crooked teeth show; his eyes are happily scrunched up. With no more than John’s picture before them, I ask students to answer several questions: What does John’s voice sound like? What might his personality be like? Would you want to have dinner with him? Their answers about the qualities of his voice become the way of unpacking what we already unconsciously know about how voices in bodies sound. All expect a gravely, warm, friendly voice, but some students project a slower verbal pace because of region or age.

Also fruitful is discerning what the exercise tells us *about ourselves*. Students raised in the South imagine John has a southern accent; northerners expect different inflections and cadences. Depending on students' life experiences, there may also be assumptions about class and occupation. Let me be clear: the point isn't to reinforce reified identity categories by having students imagine John's voice; rather, students are asked to respond to a very specific, but unknown, person. However, we do come to see that voice has all kinds of valences that we carry with us—consciously or not.

A companion assignment switches media by asking students to read Greg Ruhlmann's "Morgan Freeman Buys a Pop-A-Shot Machine." This piece, which lives online at *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, is a fictional monologue of Freeman talking to a store employee as he decides on a basketball game machine. I redact Freeman's name from the piece, but leave the rest of the monologue as is. Students are asked to read silently and decide what kind of person is speaking based on the textual markers of voice; in other words, students are looking for clues in phrasing and diction. (For instance, certain lines make them imagine older men: "What sort of machine am I looking for, you ask? Well, sonny, that's a harder question than you know. The way I see it, a man can grow close to a machine. Closer than he might suspect.") Once they come upon the allusions to Freeman's movies, some begin to hear the qualities of the actor's professional delivery. It's a revelation that sometimes entails a shift in the person they had been imagining. When it's time for discussion, conversation often moves into intertextuality (they "hear" Freeman's characters from different movies), region (does Freeman have a Southern accent? if so, which kind?), and ethos (he's the voice of God). This exercise integrates analysis of voice on

the page and voice on the breath in a fun way, while presenting an opportunity to talk about the politics of voice, i.e., access to power platforms in relation to assumptions about gender, age, race, class, and region. I usually end the class by asking, “Who is the female vocal equivalent of Morgan Freeman?” (Spoiler: Maya Angelou and Helen Mirren are frequent answers.)

The last exercise is a listening activity about the compositional aspects of podcasts. If you’ve ever assigned a podcast, you probably know how bad the final product can be: a voice, probably monotone, speaking into a low-quality microphone for minutes on end, like it’s a missive to survivors after the apocalypse. I’ve gotten those, and I realized the problem was rooted both in oral delivery and in ignorance about how to compose with sound. To circumvent those problems, I developed “structural principles for composing a podcast,” which sounds very formal, but is, I hope, an elegantly simple technique.

First, students are introduced to thinking about a podcast as both story and sound. The story part is relatively easy to grasp, but sometimes hard to put into practice. The point is simply that any topic can be told as some form of narrative. For most topics, a student can ask who’s investigating what, and how? That’s the story. Or, has an idea taken on a life of its own, becoming an actor in world events or private lives? That’s the story. You get the picture—a podcast is not a data-dump lecture on particle physics or politics in the Middle East.

As I teach it, sound is broken down into oral and aural, helping students think about the human voices on the podcast and the rest of the soundscape. In podcasts, aural elements often convey structure, tone, or scene. For example, music can establish the introduction and

conclusion; it is also often used to create transitions between segments. Likewise, sound effects can be used to convey mood or tone; ambient sound often provides scene.

After we establish oral and aural sound, the discussion moves to the relationship between different sounds, which I have students conceptualize spatially as layers. *Layer* is a compositional term I landed on, but one that shouldn't be confused with the actual mixing of sound tracks in production, although there is a loose relationship. In class, we talk about layers as components such as ambient sound, background music, interviews, narration, hosts' monologue/dialogue, and sound effects. After listening to a podcast that is aurally dynamic—Radiolab is good for this—I ask students to decide which is the central layer on the soundscape. In other words, what is the essential through-line in the podcast? Sometimes it's the hosts discussing the ideas unfolding in the podcast; other times it might be an interview around which everything else is built.

After we agree on the central layer, we consider what the remaining layers do. Are they meant to support the central layer by establishing scene or tone, like background music and ambient sound sometimes do? These are “underlayers.” If the layer creates some type of meta-discourse—think narration, a host's monologue, or sound effects—then it's an “overlayer.” This straightforward but flexible compositional strategy has yielded more sonically interesting podcasts in my classes. And, even when it's done poorly, it's still better than the lonely voice after the apocalypse.

Conclusion

The longer I work with voice in the classroom, especially the close listening aspects, the more I find it has social and rhetorical implications in my life as a teacher, scholar, and citizen. I have to face the challenge of developing attunement to—if not sometimes appreciation for—the voices of my students, colleagues, neighbors, friends, and foes. This attunement demands close attention to a plethora of semiotic channels not always expressed in text. That close attention can conjure both intimacy (as when I'm listening to a friendly voice in headphones) and aversion (when the sensory experience of a voice becomes physically or psychologically painful). How I listen to others, then, becomes a method of respect or disrespect, either of which can have interpersonal and political repercussions. This last point—attending to others' voices, respectfully witnessing how they show up in the world—is one that I try to impart to students. Best case scenario, close listening to others is also a preparatory step toward using voice better in our own writing and speaking, as well as a method of engagement in the body politic.

Notes

¹ See *This American Life* episode “Meme Come True” by producer Zoe Chace, who attended “the DeploraBall, a party for trolls and others who say they memed Trump into the presidency.”

² For an interesting close reading of voice, see Toby Fulwiler’s “Looking and Listening for My Voice.”

³ See also Peter Elbow, “Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries.”

⁴ For other inquiries into the utility of voice, see I. Hashimoto, “Voice as Juice: Some Reservations about Evangelical Composition” and Carl Leggo, “Questions I Need to Ask before I Advise My Students to Write in Their Own Voices.”

⁵ Elbow’s work has often focused on what speech can bring to writing—in fact, that is the subtitle of his 2012 book *Vernacular Eloquence*. That book addresses “the role of the tongue” at different stages of writing, from early freewriting to late-stage revision. Elbow has also edited two *Landmark Essays* collections on the topic: *On Voice and Writing* (1994) and *On Speech and Writing* (2015).

⁶ When I taught an entire advanced composition course on voice, we found that Ernest Hemingway had a formula for generating this type of resonance in his fiction: leave important details out. In *A Moveable Feast* he writes, “It was a very simple story called ‘Out of Season’ and I had omitted the real end of it which was that the old man hanged himself. This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew what you omitted and the omitted

part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood” (75).

²See Barbara Couture’s *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric: Writing, Profession, and Altruism* for a discussion of how phenomenology and rhetoric might be wed.

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