

COMMUNICATION AS SOCIAL ACTION: CRITICAL EXPRESSIVIST PEDAGOGIES IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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In his highly influential essay “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” James Berlin positions expressionistic rhetoric as a “romantic recoil from the urban horrors created by nineteenth-century capitalism” (2009, p. 674). In the early twenty-first century, we face a new set of horrors based in a sense of imminent threats from both domestic and global forces along with strident concerns about the influence that our government is having on individual lives. In this time, many feel unable to control their own lives much less effect change in larger society. Academics have responded to the problems of modernity by constructing theories that emphasize the importance of language in constructing reality and the need to critically analyze our social and material conditions. As compositionists have taken up these postmodern goals, they have, as Diane Freedman points out, eschewed expressivism, positioning it as a supposedly “naïve acceptance of the notion of a rational, coherent and unified ‘self,’ a notion critiqued by postmodernists and thought to inhere in all personal writing” (2001, p. 206). Instead of focusing on the importance of the self as a counter to problematic social conditions, postmodernists argue that the expressivist individual actually “conspire[s] in the replication of a capitalist/consumerist hegemony responsible for various forms of political, social, and economic oppression” (O’Donnell, 1996, p. 423).

How can we imagine creative alternatives where students and teachers can, as Paul Markham suggests, see themselves as active participants in public spheres/discourses who can co-create change rather than be passive consumers waiting for others to “fix things”? Giving importance to individual experiences and beliefs is an important step in this process. Critical expressivism highlights that the individual is not a fixed or unchanging entity, acknowledging the role that culture plays in individuals’ identity and identifications. As Sherrie Gradin argues, social expressivism (her version of critical expressivism) “suggests that all subjects negotiate within the system; they act and are acted upon by their environments.

In order to be effective citizens and effective rhetorical beings, student must first learn how to carry out the negotiation between self and world” (1995, p. xv). In order to carry out these connections between the individual and the world, though, “a first step in this negotiation must be to develop a clear sense of one’s own beliefs as well as a clear sense of how one’s own value system intersects or not with others, and how finally to communicate effectively” (Gradin, 1995, p. xv). So, students need to begin with their own experiences in order to be active participants in the larger society.

Critical expressivism suggests that it is through individual experiences that commitments are made, stances are taken, responsibility is assumed and actions are advanced—not through an ephemeral, relative subject position that can easily be seen as objectified by social structures. The more ephemeral and fragmented we see ourselves, the less ability we feel we to have to transform things. Further, the more fragmented we feel, the less connection we sense to communities around us. Feeling connected to communities is an important aspect of transforming the issues that face us today. Feeling disconnected from the self translates into particular views on the power (or lack thereof) of one’s ability to act as well. Too often, people feel disempowered to change any of the problems they see in the world, thinking that the problems are too large and must be changed by someone else.

These feelings are also translated into beliefs about communication. Too often students see discussions and writing as empty exercises that have no ability to change social situations. Critical expressivist practices can help us challenge these views of communication. Instead of seeing communication as empty exercises or as tools to only analyze social texts rather than change society, students can learn to see writing—and social discussions—as social action—i.e., a way of being an agent in public discourses. When students realize their words matter and can have impact on social action (and can even be social action), then they become more aware of how important it is to take responsibility for their words and the work those words do in their communities and the lives of people.

Critical expressivists’ emphasis on individual experiences illustrates the importance that those experiences play in one’s interactions in the world—including the political and social problems that face us domestically and globally. Instead of seeing the individual as an isolated, monolithic entity whose sole intent is to search for inner truth, critical expressivists demonstrate that the individual is situated within larger social experiences. Eschewing the importance of individual experiences as postmodernism does fails to acknowledge the important work that a fairly stable concept of the individual plays in the beliefs we have; our lived realities of who we are and how we engage with others; and the actions we take and their impact on others. Even as they recognize the durable quality of the individual, critical expressivists are aware (and work to teach students to

be aware of as well) that these beliefs and actions are socially situated and constructed over time. Learning how we learned and developed those beliefs and how they have solidified over time is an important step in building public voices that help us become active agents in public arenas, both of which are important practices in critical expressivist classrooms. We need to see both the “stable” self that is somewhat durable across time and recognize how it is constructed to be durable and the consequences of that durability.

In this chapter, I analyze how critical expressivist pedagogies can help students learn to incorporate individual experiences into education in order to create public voices that provide them with agency in public arenas. Critical expressivism focuses on “conditions of language use,” not “studying private truths” (O’Donnell, 1996, p. 437). By doing so, critical expressivism can help students learn to situate their own experiences and personal narratives within larger social arenas and take responsibility. Students can become more responsive to their audiences and more responsible for their words so that they can see the ways communication is more than just an empty exercise. Students can “become invested as writers when they realize that being articulate when something is at stake ... is what launches individuals into public life” (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 444). Communication can be social action.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND PERSONAL GENRES

Postmodern critics argue that expressivists define the individual much like the modernist individual: eternal, universal, rational, coherent, unique, and authentic (Judd, 2003, p. 489, Freedman, 2001, p. 206). Berlin argues that for expressivists, reality resides “within the individual subject. While the reality of the material, the social, and the linguistic are never denied, they are considered significant only insofar as they serve the needs of the individual” (Berlin, 2009, p. 674). In Berlin’s estimation of expressivism, the external world serves as material for the individual to “understand the self” (2009, p. 674) and “awaken in readers the experience of their selves” (2009, p. 675). He argues that expressivism denies “the place of intersubjective, social processes in shaping reality. Instead, it always describes groups as sources of distortion of the individual’s true vision, and the behavior it recommends in the political and social realms is atomistic, the individual acting alone’ (2009, p. 146)” (quoted in Paley, 2001, p. 190). Other critics insist that expressivist rhetoric and pedagogy focus “upon personal growth while ignoring the social setting of the specialized skills and bodies of knowledge,” thus emphasizing “a naïve view of the writer ... as possessing innate abilities to discover truth” (Fishman & McCarthy, 1992, p. 648).

This definition of the individual leads to problematic views of the solutions to the world's problems. Berlin argues that for expressivists, the solutions to the problems of a commodified culture are supposedly found through re-experiencing the self. For expressivists, the only hope in a society working to destroy the uniqueness of the individual is for each of us to assert our individuality against the tyranny of the authoritarian corporation, state, and society. Strategies for doing so must of course be left to the individual, each lighting one small candle in order to create a brighter world (Berlin, 2009, p. 676-677).

Donald Judd shares Berlin's critique of expressivist solutions to the current social problems, describing a class project on homelessness that had only minimal success. Although students were awakened to new ways of thinking about homelessness through discussing their personal beliefs on homelessness, Judd claims expressivist practices left students "ignorant of larger social forces which play fundamental roles in the eviction of the homeless" (Judd, 2003, p. 77). Judd argues that because it focuses only on individual's reflections on social issues, expressivist teaching "offers little guidance on how to think more critically about homelessness and many other important social issues" (2003, p. 76). Judd insists that focusing on individual responses to problems—a practice he attributes to expressivism—leaves students floundering to find solutions.

Interestingly enough, although Judd agrees with Berlin on some accounts, he argues that Berlin offers an overly simplified definition of the individual used by expressivism. Countering Berlin's argument that expressivists see the "self as 'universal, eternal, authentic ... that beneath all appearances is at one with all other selves'" (Judd, 2003, p. 489), Judd shows how, in actuality, for expressivists "the self goes through changes in its interactions with other selves and with the world. The self is neither universal, eternal, nor autonomous" (Judd, 2003, p. 63); instead expressivists argue that the self is shaped by other people and institutions (2003, p. 71). And he is not alone. Many critics have illustrated that branches of expressivism like critical expressivism draw on an individual that is not "monolithic, centered or rational" (Gradin, 1995, p. xv). In fact Sherrie Gradin argues that the expressivist individual is one who "confronts one's own beliefs and examines her interaction with culture [and] is particularly plural and decentered because the self is constructed differently in various times and in multiple classes and cultures" (1995, p. xv). Critical expressivists highlight the way the individual builds connections with communities in which the individual is situated, valuing both individual experiences and social relationships.

This process of building relationships can be facilitated by genres that have been traditionally labeled "personal" and have been critiqued by postmodernism. These genres can help students become more engaged in the classroom and their worlds because they encourage students to start with their own experiences, and

then negotiate between them and different worlds. Freedman writes of “the capacity of personal classroom writing ... to negotiate the divide college students often feel between school and work or school and home, their writing and their caring, their knowing and their being” (2001, p. 199). When students begin with their own experiences, they can feel empowered in institutional settings that can often be alienating, and they can find a public voice that gives them agency. Students begin to see the ways that various institutions and various identities/identifications have shaped their actions (and inactions) and have caused them to feel powerful or powerless in particular situations. Writing about these instances can help students understand the causes behind their actions (or inactions), help them feel passionate about these life experiences, connect them to others through these analyses, and lead them to take different kinds of actions out of those new realizations.

As Freedman insists, “students are unavoidably bringing their personal lives into their academic work, the classroom space, and their conversations with teachers and peers” (2001, p. 200). Drawing on those experiences in both the kind of discussions they have and the kind of writing they do are useful ways for students to learn what is at stake in their communications. Starting with personal experiences and locating them in larger social contexts is a center stone of critical expressivism practices that help students learn they are “supposed to have something at stake” in their learning. As Danielewicz argues, there are two key results of personal writing genres: “students learn that they are supposed to have something at stake in writing an argument, academic or otherwise” (2008, p. 421) and “students who do write when something is at stake are participating in public discourse; they expect something to happen as a result of writing” (2008, p. 421). Both of these benefits highlight why the genres typically denigrated as “personal” hold much value for students and our classrooms.

The next section discusses two examples that illustrate the way critical expressivist pedagogies in the classroom can help students be responsive to audiences and take responsibility for their words and actions. They show the ways that discussions and writing in personal genres can help students start with personal experiences in order to create authoritative public voices that make them active participants in public arenas.

EXAMPLES OF CRITICAL EXPRESSIVISM AT WORK

EXAMPLE 1: CURRICULUM AS CONVERSATION AND DISCUSSION

Class discussions and conversations are one crucial way that students can learn to be responsible language users. Instead of seeing them as “just” discussions, critical expressivist pedagogies can turn class discussions into moments

where students take responsibility for their words in a community and learn to place their own experiences within larger social contexts. Once students see how their ideas have been shaped, they realize that their ideas are not “givens” but have been produced and can, thus, be changed and transformed. Classroom discussions and the curriculum the teacher establishes can be a starting point for this kind of change.

The narratives students bring to the classroom should be an important part of the class curriculum. In “What Is Public Narrative,” Marshall Ganz argues that we make sense of the world through three types of stories: story of self, story of us, and story of now. The story of self “communicates who I am—my values, my experiences, why I do what I do;” the story of us “communicates who we are—our shared values, our shared experience, and why we do what we do;” and the story of now “transforms the present into a moment of challenge, hope, and choice” (Ganz, 2008, p. 1). All three steps are important in critical expressivist classrooms because the story of us cannot be built without a thorough knowledge of the story of self and the story of now, which leads to civic agency and action, requires both of the other two stories.

Making these stories a central part of the class situates the curriculum as a conversation rather than a merely a presentation of information (Shields & Mohan, 2008, p. 296). Carolyn Shields and Erica Mohan advocate for curriculum as conversation that focuses on “teaching students to ask about other perspectives, and to question, reflect, critique, and challenge” (2008, p. 296). This approach requires that instructors honor “each student’s unique experiences in the sense-making conversations of the classroom” (Shields & Mohan, 2008, p. 296) in order to “ensure that a greater range of student experiences is considered valid and valuable as a basis for learning” (2008, p. 296). Thus, classroom conversations should honor students’ experiences and situate them in larger social contexts as a way of making sense of what is happening in the world, just as Ganz’s three types of stories encourage students to do. Creating the curriculum as a conversation means the students’ stories and sense-making are the basis of the class, but these experiences are situated within a questioning of, reflecting on, and challenging of other perspectives—connecting the story of self and story of us, ultimately moving toward a story of now that can be filled with hope and choice.

Thomas O’Donnell’s article “Politics and Ordinary Language: A Defense of Expressivist Rhetorics” (1996) provides a good example of how class discussion can use the story of self, story of us, and story of now to create curriculum as conversation that helps raise students’ awareness of the way their views are situated within larger social contexts. He describes a class discussion on whether health insurance should pay for alcoholics’ rehabilitation treatment—a discussion that,

interestingly enough, quickly turned into a debate about what “free will” meant. The discussion pivoted around the question of whether alcoholism was a disease or a choice. If students saw alcoholism as a disease, then they thought that alcoholics should be given treatment, just like any other sick person. If, however, students thought that alcoholism was a “free will” choice that one made, then they did not think that health insurance should pay for that choice. Instead of an abstract discussion of public policy, the class discussion quickly turned to a story of self in which they discussed what “free will” meant to them and where they learned that term; then because they were discussing their perceptions within the classroom, they had to take responsibility for their word use and be responsive to their audience. Through deep engagement with their peers in the classroom discussions which were situated in curriculum as conversation (not curriculum as information transmission), they were participating in the story of us. They began to learn the culture’s shared values and shared narratives about “free will.” The story of now came into play when students realized those larger cultural narratives of “free will” (in which they played a part) had an impact on the actions taken by public policy makers and health care agencies as well as on those whose lives were directly affected by those decisions. They realized that narratives of “free will” and other such concepts directly shaped people’s lives and were not abstract terms that meant little beyond personal opinion. These concepts were based in public narratives that could create despair or could be challenged and questioned to create hope and choice.

O’Donnell’s class demonstrates that critical expressivist teaching does offer students help in sorting through public issues, thus challenging critiques like Judd’s who argues that students in expressivist classrooms are offered “little guidance on how to think critically” (Judd, 2003, p. 76). Discussions like the one on health care that centered on multiple socially-constructed definitions of “free will” illustrate that “it makes little sense to see the expressivist move to the personal as emerging from an inordinate confidence in the capacity of individuals to apprehend untainted truth” (O’Donnell, 1996, p. 432). The point of the class discussion was not to find the one “true” meaning of “free will” and therefore the “right” policy; instead, the point of the discussion was to explore the impacts of language use and the importance of being responsible for one’s language use. In O’Donnell’s class, the group helped individuals sort out their assumptions about “free will” and consider the impact on public policy. The conversational nature of the curriculum focused on students’ stories of how they learned the terms and shifted those conversations to considering how the community used the various narratives to construct policies and who was served (and not served) by those policies. Knowing what stories they are a part of will help students realize the impact of the public narratives. Realizing this, according to Paul Markham

in “You Don’t Know Where You’re Going until You’re on the Way There: Why Public ‘Work’ Matters,” can help them create public narratives—“a discursive process through which individuals, communities, and nations construct their identity, make choices, and inspire actions” (2011, p. 6). Critical expressivist pedagogies that center on the importance of drawing on multiple narratives in class and establishing the curriculum as a conversation can help students take responsibility for their words and to see their communications as actions that have impact—that matter.

O’Donnell’s class illustrates that expressivist principles can help students enter into public discourse in a way that makes them engaged and active citizens rather than passive dupes of institutional structures, as Berlin and others want to position them. How students use language and to what effect becomes the main focus in critical expressivist classrooms, not the solipsistic analysis of the self, as critics of expressivism claim. Students in critical expressivist work need to connect to their audiences and to be responsive to and responsible to their audiences for their words to have impact and to create a powerful public voice. Students focus on the communities they are located within, they begin to contextualize their views within difference, and they work to build intercontextual connections to be responsive to and responsible to their communities and audiences.

EXAMPLE 2: WRITING PERSONAL GENRES/CREATING PUBLIC AGENCY

Critical expressivist pedagogies shape class discussions in ways that teach students about taking responsibility for their language use and studying the impact that use has on the communities in which they are located. Critical expressivist pedagogies can also teach students to achieve similar goals through writing—to help them become “invested as writers” (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 443) and create public voices in their writing. In her article “Personal Genres, Public Voices,” Jane Danielewicz advocates for teaching personal genres that have too often been short-sightedly critiqued as “solipsistic indulgent exercise[s]” (2008, p. 439) and “private, confessional discourse[s], personal catharsis” (2008, p. 440). In an analysis of her seminar course called “Reading and Writing Women’s Lives,” Danielewicz illustrates how students can draw on personal genres to create public voices. In the process of writing personal genres like autobiographies, students can learn the process of being responsive to their audience and being responsible for their words. They can learn to write multiple versions of their stories and multiple tellings of the “I,” thus seeing that there is not one true inner “I” revealed through writing, that interactions with their audiences powerfully shape their tellings, and that personal stories are powerful material for creating public agency.

Danielewicz asserts that writing in personal genres does not mean that the self written about is solipsistic, or that the topics written about are only personal. In her class, the first drafts of the personal genres focused on religion, family drama, sexual orientation, cherished hobbies and were written in very writerly-based prose, presenting one version of the “I” and one particular retelling of the experience. While these were “personal” stories, they were also common experiences, ones that contained “issues that concern us all”—“surface[ing] organically,” even though public issues were not assigned, and even in their first drafts (2008, p. 443).

As Danielewicz points out “when students write their own autobiographies, a two-way process is at work: first, they identify and articulate their distinctive positions, and second, in writing for a public audience, they come to terms with how to represent themselves and then must contend with how audiences respond” (2008, p. 436). Students begin writing to express their experiences, but through discussing their work in small peer groups and learning about genre conventions, their goals for their work shift to connecting with the audience, wanting the audience to understand the individual’s experiences. In order to do so, they have to be responsive to how the audience reacts to the telling of the story and the “I” that is constructed through that telling. The small groups, then, help students locate the individual in larger social contexts and lead to changed motivations for writing. Danielewicz disagrees with critics like Berlin who “reduces the dialectic in expressionist editorial groups to one function: ‘to enable the writer to understand the manifestation of her identity in language through considering the reaction of others—not, for example, to begin to understand how meaning is shaped by discourse communities’” (Paley, 2001, p. 191); instead, she found in her class that critical expressivist peer response groups have a significant impact on an individual’s understanding of how their identities—their “I’s” are individually situated and socially constructed. These kinds of groups help students understand how their representations of themselves impact their audiences and shape their possibilities for agency and effective public voice.

Jackie, one of the women Danielewicz studies in her article, is a good example of how writers can use personal genres to create a public voice that gives them agency and authority in public spheres. More importantly, perhaps, Jackie is a great example of how writing personal genres can help students learn “more effectively than any book they might read the truth of the hard, theoretical claim that identity is constructed by institutions, groups, and other social forces” (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 443). Jackie’s first draft of her autobiography expressed strong resentment and anger toward God and toward her family whom she felt pushed religion on her when she was growing up. Through extensive small group peer responses, though, Jackie realized that the way she represented

the “I” in her first draft alienated her audience. It was through the small group work and through studying the genre of autobiography that Jackie came to see that in order to connect to her audience, she had to rewrite the outpouring of emotion included in her first draft since her representation of that emotion that was off-putting to her audience. She had to step back—in her thinking and writing—to analyze the original situations she included and rewrite them so that her audiences understood “the origins of ‘the outpouring of shocking and offensive rhetoric’ or her life as ‘a trained monkey,’ descriptions that were included in her early draft” (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 430) of her autobiography. In order for her work to be relatable to a larger audience, she needed to understand how her audience responded to her language use and the impact it had on her ability to achieve her goals in her autobiography. She had to learn to construct an “I” that was situated in a larger social context. She positioned herself as one writing with “authority, knowledge, convictions, and self-consciousness about issues that concern us all” (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 443) rather than presenting an “I” giving an angry diatribe. As she made these revisions, she clearly felt she had much at stake in writing. “Her portfolio letter states the case with conviction: ‘I adore this piece and I hope that the readers I hope that the readers can connect to it as much as I do’” (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 434). Instead of seeing her autobiography as a personal expression of feelings or as an empty exercise, Jackie hoped her writing made a difference to a public audience. She felt her writing made a difference—at least she hoped it did, that it somehow changed her audience. This is a powerful outcome from a class assignment. As Danielewicz asks: “How often do our first-year writers ‘adore’ an essay? That achievement alone—recognizing and valuing a powerful piece of work—is significant. But I’m most impressed with that Jackie’s criteria for success include a consideration of whether or not ‘the readers can connect to it’” (2008, p. 434). She truly wanted to make her assertions of “I” relatable to the collective—to make her “I” a “we.”

It is clear, then, that Jackie wrote her way into an authoritative, agentive voice that responsibly connected to an audience to help her position her stories within a larger social context, not to better understand her “inner” self but to understand how the self is socially constructed by engagement with others and how one’s representation of self is never unmediated or “pure.” Her revisions show that voice is not an internal truth but is instead socially constructed, based on responses from and responsibility to audiences. Personal genres as used in critical expressivist pedagogies help students learn more about public issues. Genres like autobiographies can help them understand relationships between self/other/institutions/world (Freedman, 2001, p. 199; Danielewicz, 2008, p. 442). Danielewicz argues “experiments that involve writing different versions of the self lead

to growth, to knowledge of public issues, and to authority. Writing about one's own or another person's life makes the stakes personal, therefore immediate, tangible, even urgent" (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 442). In fact, Danielewicz contends "we (and our cultures, communities, families) need such assertions of self, such articulation of differences, as a way to fight against the depersonalization and homogenizing effects of globalization" (2008, p. 439). Instead of conspiring to replicate "a capitalist/consumerist hegemony responsible for various forms of political, social, and economic oppression" (O'Donnell, 1996, p. 423), critical expressivist practices can help students fight oppression by seeing the ways they can take actions in our current cultural moment. Unlike critiques that personal genres are empty exercises (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 442), it is clear that they can help students actively engage with social issues and develop public voices that make them active participants in public arenas. If students realize that something is at stake when they write, they become more invested and may, perhaps, see writing as social action (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 443-4). Drawing on critical pedagogies like these, we can help students learn to be responsible language users in public spheres.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS/STORY OF THE ARTICLE

Near the beginning of this article, I asked if we could imagine creative alternatives that could help students position themselves as active voices in public discourses. I suggested that an important step in the process is valuing individual experiences and beliefs. Throughout the chapter, I have illustrated some of the ways that critical expressivist pedagogies use individual experiences to help students become more responsible language users in public discourse. So, if we return to that question now, I hope I have presented a few useful ideas.

I recognize the paradoxical nature of this chapter: I am advocating for incorporating individual experience into academic and other kinds of work in both writing and discussion, and yet there is not one bit of evidence of my individual story here. I have also encouraged including personal genres into academic and other kinds of writing, and yet there is not a stitch of autobiography or autoethnography or auto-anything in this article. And to be honest, it didn't even occur to me to include it in the chapter until I was writing the 27th out of the 50th draft of this piece (numbers are approximate)—I was trained well in traditional academia.

In an effort to answer some of the calls I have made in this article, I want to tell some of the stories of this article—to foreground the motivations, beliefs, values, and hopes that drive this article. Ganz's story of self, story of us, and story of now help me do so.

STORY OF SELF

My motivations for writing this piece come from a strong belief: The individual matters! By this, I do not mean to suggest that I am resorting to a “naïve acceptance of the notion of a rational, coherent, and unified self” (Freedman, 2001, p. 206); nor am I suggesting that the individual is “insular, confined or private” (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 440). I am suggesting we need to examine the work that ideas like “self” and “individual” play in people’s lives. Many people find it important to have a “ground” to stand on—a sort of foundation that they can rely on in this world, and that ground can come from many places. Yes, it’s important to realize that the “ground” changes over time and that we learned that “ground” through social experiences. Nevertheless, a sense of identity—i.e. being an individual—does important work in people’s lives. Susan Hekman argues that “selves must necessarily experience themselves as coherent identities, historically located and contingent, but enduring through time” (2010, p. 299). It is the both/and that is appealing to me, that I believe in, and that attracts me to critical expressivism: stability and contingency.

Just as I passionately argue that the individual matters, I just as passionately insist that pedagogy matters—that composition is a valid and valuable field and that critical expressivism is an important part of teaching. I am disturbed by the divisiveness I sense every time I go to meetings where those who identify themselves loudly as “rhetoricians” work actively to distance themselves from “teaching.” Many moons ago, Stephen North said that the field was suffering because the Researchers didn’t value the Practitioners, the Philosophers didn’t value the Researchers, and so on (1987). All too often I see this same struggles occurring today. My lived experiences in departments that too often feel that rhetoric and theory is privileged over teaching and composition (although I realize that teaching is not the only thing that scholars of composition study). I have lived through many meetings where I alternately felt like sinking in my seat, somehow feeling ashamed to value teaching, or standing up on the table shouting “Teaching matters!” I have lived—and sadly continue to live—a sense of alienation as “the” composition person in an area where Rhetoric is privileged.

My first passion and interest in higher education is teaching and writing about teaching. That’s why it was so important to me to contribute to this collection. I believe in students. I believe in studying learning. I believe it’s important to study teaching. I believe that the divisiveness in our departments and our own areas is corrosive. I like how Karen Surman Paley puts it: “I am not asking naively, ‘Why can’t we all just get along?’ but rather I am saying, ‘Let us look more carefully before we write each other off.’” (2001, p. 197). That is precisely what North urged us to do in 1987. I believe books like this can help move us

toward that. These are core personal beliefs I bring with me to the writing of this chapter, to the conversation.

STORY OF US

“Our stories of self overlap with our stories of us A story of us expresses the values, the experiences, shared by the us we hope to evoke at the time” (Ganz, 2008, p. 12). The “us” being invoked in this collection is the kind of teacher I want to be—the kind of compassionate, critical, thinking, reflective teacher (person) I want to be. It is an “us” I want to use to help shape my story of self because we are collectively constructing a community of values and experiences that help our students, communities, and worlds. The “collective identity” being constructed here across the articles is one I wish to be a part of. The overlap of my story with this collective “us.”

“Like the story of self, [the story of us] is built from the choices points—the founding, the choices made, the challenges faced, the outcomes, the lessons learned” (Ganz, 2008, p. 12). I see this book as a story of us, covering all of these ideas (explicitly or implicitly)—beginnings, ongoing choices, perpetually changing outcomes, ever blossoming lessons. It is a story in which I feel welcomed, not isolated. It is a story in which teaching is valued.

Ganz says the story of us requires one key storyteller, “an interpreter of experience” (2008, p. 12), but I suggest that we are all storytellers. We are all serving a critical leadership function in interpreting “the movement’s new experience” (Ganz, 2008, p. 12). That is a central part of this book’s story seen through the emails we’ve shared, the engagements across articles, the nature of the “collective” part of the edited “collection.”

STORY OF NOW

This is the hardest of the three stories: “A story of now articulates an urgent challenge—or threat—to the values that we share that demands action now. What choices must we make? What is at risk? And where’s the hope?” (Ganz, 2008, p. 13).

While I do not think one writing class can change the world, I do believe that one writing class can help students become stronger language users and can learn that language can be an important part of social action. Words have impact; words can make things happen; words do things; words are action. Students can/should take responsibility for their words. Students can/should be responsive to their audiences. Instead of seeing writing assignments as, well, assignments, they should/can see them as actions that matter—as tasks that matter.

But some writing matters more than others. Part of our responsibility as teachers is to make sure the writing we have them do and the discussions we have them participate in matter. It is also our responsibility to help them see how they matter and to realize that they won't matter to every student in the same way. We can't assume that they should see the world the way we do and that they should take the stances we do—i.e. take on our political views or political agendas.

But we do face a collective sort problem—i.e. a view that someone else somewhere else should fix the problems that plague us. In “You Don't Know Where You're Going until You're on the Way There: Why Public 'Work' Matters,” Paul Markham summarizes it well. He argues that we must “re-imagine citizenship for the twenty-first century” (2011, p. 4). Challenging the “customer service mentality” where we wait for someone else to serve us and fix our problems “requires more than policy change alone—it requires a cultural change, a new civic imagination. This new kind of everyday politics emphasizes the creative role of citizens and their ability to solve a wide variety of complex public problems” (Markham, 2011, p. 4). That emphasis on “a new civic imagination” and “the creative role of citizens” is something that there is an urgent need for. However, there is certainly not one path to fulfilling that need. And there is definitely not one political agenda that will achieve that goal.

Likewise, there is not one writing method or approach that best prepares students to learn the kind of creative problem solving that sort of citizenship will/does require. Valuing individual experiences and situating them in larger social contexts—larger social narratives—will, however, be a crucial part of it. And critical expressivism can be an important part of that process, as I have argued. Critical expressivism can, thus, be an important part of the story of now. Ganz writes: “In a story of now, we are the protagonists and it is our choices that shape the outcome” (2008, p. 13). The choice/action does not need to be huge/monumental, but it must be specific and hold a vision. When making choices, Ganz points out, “It can begin by getting that number of people to show up at a meeting that you committed to do. You can win a ‘small’ victory that shows change is possible. A small victory can become a source of hope if it is interpreted as part of a greater vision” (Ganz, 2008, p. 13).

What we need is small steps and new stories to tell about those steps—exactly what this article has allowed me to do, to consider: what do I want for my students? For our classrooms? For our educational institutions? For our communities? For our nation? While hope may seem like a vague and abstract concept, Ganz insists that “it is a strategy—a credible vision of how to get from here to there” (2008, p. 13). We all have that hope. This collection has allowed me (us?) to make a space for vision and hope in our academic pursuits. The story of now—the hope of critical expressivism.

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