THE ECONOMY OF EXPRESSIVISM AND ITS LEGACY OF LOW/NO-STAKES WRITING

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Nothing makes evident the inextricable link between writing and the social quite like teaching college writing. The ways in which differences in expectations and outcomes can sometimes be attributed to social class are often easily ignored by educators and administrators. Used purposefully, however, expressivism can be a pedagogical approach that helps support poor and working class students who otherwise are often told that they are "underprepared" or not ready to fully participate in college. Though the popularity of expressivist composition pedagogy as an overarching pedagogical theory has been out of favor by some for well over a decade, the value of an important component of expressivist pedagogy—the practice of low-stakes freewriting—remains. Consequently expressivist pedagogy can help struggling students find success in the writing classroom.

That expressivism has the potential to help support poor and working class students might come as a surprise to some, given the predominant arguments against it—namely that it is classist, favoring an upper and middle class aesthetic. Linda Adler-Kassner, for example, writes that expressivism is about "the achievement of individual success and satisfaction" (1998, p. 211). She continues, stating that "expressivists implied that writing would help students unearth their genuine selves" and could "fulfill their own needs and desires for self-understanding" (1998, p. 218). However, Adler-Kassner also admits that expressivism risks taking for granted a familiarity with what we might describe as middle class academic discourses where students are commonly afforded the luxury of experimenting with self-exploration and discovery. Students who are not already familiar with such educational environments may not feel they can afford to "find" themselves. For them, finding a job might be more important that finding one's "self." Nevertheless, done well, expressivism has the potential to forge intellectual connections between the personal, political, and economic.

To invoke an economic metaphor, we might imagine that expressivism has a certain *laissez-faire* quality to it. In a more conventional, current-traditional classroom, teacher intervention might be compared to government regulation, and the proliferation of student writing seen as equivalent to capital gain. But

in an expressivist approach, student writing is less regulated by the instructor, just as the capital gained in a *laissez-faire economic model is usually unregulated by the government.* What I wish to do now is illustrate several examples of more prescriptive, current-traditional approaches that resemble the former, followed by contrasting expressivist examples that illustrate the latter.

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Using economic metaphors to describe educational models is not novel. Paulo Freire did it most notably, reminding us that an educational experience is an economic experience, both literally and metaphorically. Indeed, it is impossible to engage the concepts of literacy and deficit thinking in education without evoking Paulo Freire's apt metaphor for traditional education as a "banking" model of instruction. In Freire's metaphor, the teacher makes a deposit of information into the student, who is then richer for having received it. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire claims that the "banking" concept works like this: "the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (1993, p. 53). In this model, students are not taught critical analysis, but are instead taught to memorize and regurgitate.

Although compositionists have significantly revised the outcomes of the composition classroom, in many current-traditional writing classes there is still an emphasis on grammar and form at the cost of relevance and meaning for the writer. While critical literacy and inclusion are often valued in the field of composition in theory, the practice does not always play out. A deficit approach to writing pedagogy still abounds. Freire writes, "the capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students' creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed" (1993, p. 54). He continues, "the banking concept of education, which serves the interest of oppression, is also necrophilic. Based on a mechanistic, static, naturalistic, spatialized view of consciousness, it transforms students into receiving objects" (1993, p. 58). Freire reminds us that while education has incredible emancipatory potential, students can also be oppressed in educational institutions. Current-traditional modes of composition pedagogy all too often resemble the "banking concept" Freire describes.

Mina Shaughnessy was not the first scholar to argue for pedagogies of inclusion that seek to help students not acclimated to academic writing, particularly those from poor and working class backgrounds. Shaughnessy's work paved the way for recognizing that the voices in diverse student populations belong in and enrich the classroom environment. In Diving In: An Introduction to Basic

Writing, Shaughnessy concludes by stating, "teaching [students] to write well is not only suitable but challenging work for those who would be teachers and scholars in a democracy" (2003, p. 317). Yet as much as Shaughnessy's work fueled an interest in basic writers, and critiqued practices that exclude certain populations, her work is not unproblematic. In a critique of Shaughnessy's approach to basic writing, Joseph Harris points out the seeming contradictions between her practice and her theory (1996). For example, in *Errors and Expectations* (1977), Shaughnessy actually recreates many of the practices of exclusion that she otherwise condemns; five of her eight book chapters are focused on traditional conventions: "Handwriting and Punctuation, Syntax, Common Errors, Spelling, and Vocabulary." Despite her introduction, which makes it very clear that Shaughnessy is writing about students who are very new to higher education, much of the book reinforces dated "skills and drills" notions of teaching writing. Harris claims that "*Errors and Expectations* … argues for a new sort of student but not a new sort of intellectual practice. It says that basic writers can also do the kind of work that mainstream students have long been expected to do; it doesn't suggest that work be changed in any significant ways" (Harris, 1996, p. 79). So while Shaughnessy argues for inclusion, she does not make the crucial move to inclusive pedagogical strategies associated with critical literacy, alternative discourse, or appeals to the student's right to her own language.

Nor are such inconsistencies relegated to the past. Deficit thinking is still a prominent part of current-traditionalist pedagogy. For example, a popular textbook used for introductory composition courses, *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (Graff, G., & C. Birkenstein, 2009), follows a deficit approach to writing instruction. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein send the message that academic writing is a mysterious process that many students do not already know, one that must be taught to the student because their current way of writing is unacceptable. They provide fill-in-the-blank templates for academic writing, like the following model:

> In discussions of X, one controversial issue has been _____. On the one hand, _____ argues _____. On the other hand, _____ contends _____. Others even maintain _____. My own view is _____. (2009, p. 222)

Graff and Birkenstein's templates include some of the most common rhetorical moves made in academic arguments. In the introduction, Graff and Birkenstein write, "often without consciously realizing it, accomplished writers routinely rely on a stock of established moves that are crucial for communicating sophisticated ideas" (2009, p. 1). Later they write, "less experienced writers, by contrast, are often unfamiliar with these basic moves and unsure how to make

them in their own writing" (2009, p. 1). As a result they seek to convince student writers that they lack the proper knowledge to make these rhetorical patterns found in academic writing, thus likely making students distrustful of their own writing processes. And since many of the students Graff and Birkenstein have in mind might be from diverse populations, their current-traditionalist model seeks to naturalize and homogenize student writing. The negative effects of their claim that college writing is mysterious, and that new college students are underprepared, hardly seems worth the potential benefits.

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In contrast to these current-traditional perspectives, Peter Elbow claims that the composition classroom should be a place where students get comfortable with the processes of writing. He wants students to experience writing for its empowering potential, which is how he experiences writing. Elbow writes, "I get deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing—figuring out what I think and feel through putting down words; I naturally turn to writing when I am perplexed—even when I am just sad or happy; I love to explore and communicate with others through writing; writing is an important part of my life" (1995, p. 489). From this one can glean that teaching conventional form and grammar is not necessarily as high on Elbow's list of pedagogical priorities as sharing and communication. In one of his discourses with David Bartholomae, he tells him, "I simply want to intervene much less than you do" (Elbow, P., & Bartholomae, D., 1997, p. 507). Elbow wants to intervene less in students' writing as a way to empower and encourage. In my experience, intervention unfortunately often comes in the form of finding errors and making and heavy-handed corrections—teacherly activities that can do very little to encourage and inspire thinking and writing. Elbow explains how he encourages students, writing that "the most precious thing I can do is provide spaces where I don't also do their thinking for them" (Elbow, P., & Bartholomae, D., 1997, p.508). Elbow continues: "students easily distrust their experience, and we do harm if we try to 'correct' them about their own experience" (Elbow, P., & Bartholomae, D., 1997, p.509). Elbow wants students to learn to trust their knowledge and experience. And it has been my experience, both personally and professionally, that students who are new to academia are particularly vulnerable to distrusting their own experiences, their writing, and even their way of speaking.

Ultimately, what I find most valuable about Elbow's expressivism as a counter to deficit thinking is that his pedagogy does not assume students, especially those who are new to academia, are empty receptacles for knowledge or too unprepared for college writing. In this way, Elbow's contribution to the field provides us with potentially revolutionary possibilities, and has potential emancipatory power for

students. The message of a pedagogy of freewriting asks students to begin writing and believes that all students can make valuable contributions, wherever they are, in their lives and educational journeys. Elbow's approach is more about helping students express themselves through writing and not about teaching them about how bad their writing is and how much they need to change.

For those who are concerned with the inclusion of diverse student populations, Elbow's argument is appealing. Clearly, Elbow gets satisfaction from writing and that resonates with many teachers of writing. However, Elbow's approach is not without limits. While it can be especially inclusive for poor and working class student populations in that it allows these students to enter the academic conversation sooner, some argue that it actually favors middle and upper-class students who are already competent at reflection and generating ideas and writing. Not only has Elbow argued for low-stakes writing, he actively argues that being a "writer" and being an "academic writer" are not only two different things, but that they are also at odds with each other. Here is what he admits: "I choose the goal of writer over that of academic" (1995, p. 490). He writes, "If my goal is to get them [students] to take on the role of academic, I should get them to distrust language" (1995, p. 495). It is clear that Elbow resists traditional, academic modes of writing, but he makes many compelling points that provide practical approaches to being more inclusive.

Because freewriting asks students to start writing immediately, they can never be too "underprepared" to begin. Students begin writing—*now*. Not only can expressivism be used as a means for understanding social class as it plays out in college-level writing, but it can work to address the corporate, capitalist economic models that are increasingly at play in today's educational systems. Since finding pedagogical ways to support diverse student populations is crucial for a democratic educational model, I argue that there is still something to be learned from a critical expressivist pedagogy. Expressivist pedagogies can provide models that allow for the academic success of diverse student populations, offering a counter to the deficit models found in current-traditional practices. Expressivism is less obsessed with how "underprepared" students are for college (especially students from diverse, nonacademic backgrounds) and is more concerned with the idea of facilitating writing, as well as intellectual liberation, for all students.

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Concepts taken from expressivist practices—like freewriting, as well as much of the emancipatory language of expressivist rhetoric in general—continue to flourish in composition instruction today. Self-discovery, personal voice, and expression are all tropes one finds circulating in the discourse of expressivist pedagogy. In expressivism, the practice of writing can be viewed as a metacognitive

process that allows students to think through ideas, change their minds, and think about process. Like other methods of writing instruction, expressivism promotes a reflective and recursive approach.

Admittedly, in many expressivist pedagogies, attention to an audience can be de-emphasized; students use writing for their own means, as a way to understand their own thinking. A critical expressivist model cannot ignore the economic realities of the educational institution, and perhaps more importantly, the educational realities of students' lives. Victor Villanueva writes that students may rightly be interested in "literacy of the kind that leads to certification, access to high school, maybe to college, the middle class" (1997, p. 633). As much as enlightenment and self-discovery might be the personal pedagogical goal for some teachers, in the end, those teachers are always still constrained by the institution or "the demands of the local chair, or university president" (Villanueva, 1997, p. 635). Students, especially those who are new to college culture, are often still interested in writing, thinking, and speaking in a way that might provide the opportunity for upward mobility if they should so choose to climb. While teaching form and academic literacy cannot be ignored, some aspects of expressivism, like low-stakes writing, can meet the demand for increasing students' academic literacy, while simultaneously valuing the multiple discourses and knowledge they bring to the classroom. This is especially important for those students who do not already have the kinds of literacy that may be conducive to class mobility and success in college.

After all, the personal, the academic, and the economic are always simultaneously at work in the composition classroom. In James Ray Watkins' book, *A Taste for Language: Literacy, Class, and English Studies* (2009), he argues that the evolution of a student's "sensibility" is a sensibility that can be taught, and the writing classroom is one place where that can occur. Watkins writes, "students come to college, the cliché goes, to get a well-paying, secure job; professors teach, in contrast, in order to create critical thinkers and effective democratic citizens" (2009, p. 116). For some students, economic concerns of class mobility and employment are unavoidable realities to their academic experience. Other students might not have the luxury of a time-consuming contemplation and reflection traditionally associated with higher education. Either way, the experience is always also an economic one. If institutions of higher education are unable to achieve change, and "if we do not begin to confront the dominance of economics over democracy," then Watkins argues that "we will increasingly find only the most middle-class students in our classroom" (2009, p. 164). Without some awareness of the status models that are formed in English studies, poor, working class, and first generation students will likely be further alienated in the classroom.

Today's expressivism is not about ignoring the economic, the academic, nor the audience. While it can be about discovering the personal through the act of

writing, it is not only about emphasizing self-expression of emotions. Instead, it can be a way to teach students how to use writing as a tool for thinking and a way for students to learn how to generate writing and familiarize themselves with acts of writing. A new expressivist approach to writing instruction might require teachers to develop strategies that allow a lot of classroom space for low-stakes writing and give students opportunities to get used to the process of writing, which can be especially important for poor and working class students. This is not to neglect form altogether. In fact, as teachers allow this process of expression in class, they can also begin to provide feedback to students and begin to teach form and genre and other rhetorical moves that will be conducive to the academic success of a diverse student population beyond the first-year composition classroom. This occurs while some elements of form (those necessary for learning the kinds of literacies that might lead to future success) are still taught in the classroom. That way, even if a student is not already familiar with the various modes of academic rhetoric, they can still experience success producing writing and improving writing through practice and exposure to academic texts.

An expressivist position in writing instruction is all about a desire to encourage students to trust themselves and get comfortable with writing. In this model of writing instruction, students learn to trust the writing process and trust that it can be a useful way to develop their thoughts. Expressivists like myself might see the *They Say/I Say* model as perpetuating student fears that their writing is not already good enough, that they are unprepared, and that there are secret templates that must be mastered for success in college writing. If students learn to distrust their writing, or "distrust language" in Elbow's words (1995, p. 495), then they might be less likely to turn to writing as a mode of communication, developing thoughts, or as a creative outlet. This potential injury to students' relationship to writing is not conducive to perpetuating student comfort with writing or the ability to turn to writing as a safe place to work through thoughts.

Ultimately, the field of composition employs a diverse population of teachers, with their diverse approaches to pedagogy and theory. I like that diversity. It allows individual teachers to teach to their strengths, while considering the goals and political climates of their institutions. In that regard, no one prescriptive "how to" works for all teachers of composition. Though it has problematic interpretations, expressivism ought not be thrown out. In my own teaching, I emphasize the kind of low-stakes writing that Elbow promotes, where students are able to generate writing—to get familiar with and used to writing as a mode of creative and intellectual expression.

Some students come to college for the improved job possibilities, some to climb the social ladder, and some to stay for the life-changing process of receiving a higher education. Deficit thinking, which sees students as empty re-

ceptacles that must be filled with the ideologies of the teacher, administrator, institution, and culture of higher education, surely disempowers students and fails to value different ways of writing, thinking, and approaching problems. At the same time as a teacher I want to be careful to work toward empowering my students, especially poor, first-generation, and working class students. I want to teach a kind of critical literacy, while simultaneously teaching some traditional approaches to composition that seem to be in accord with students' educational goals—whether those happen to be personal enlightenment, or having a successful career beyond higher education.

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