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SHAPING THE POINT WITH POETRY

ABSTRACT: *Although basic writers in first-semester composition courses progress to exposi-*
tory and argumentative writing, they may begin the semester with a personal narrative. This
assignment serves as a bridge into college writing since these students already have a variety of
experiences about which they can write. However, there are two possible problems with the
personal story: lacking structure, the writer occasionally fails to make a point in the narrative;
using the expressive aim of discourse, the writer may also obfuscate the point with emotional,
connotative language. To improve student narratives, this article borrows a rhetorical device
from Isocrates, imitation, then combines it with the descriptive structure of Liva Polanyi and the
referential (rather than expressive) aim of discourse from James Kinneavy. Students imitate the
structure of a brief poem, and they use the referential aim of discourse for clarity. Writing pre-
cisely and making a point, students are preparing for academic discourse.

The declarative remark is ubiquitous; I hear it on television, in religious circles, and in education settings — "Everybody has a story." And certainly, most people are expert storytellers, the best authorities about their own experiences; they know how to talk about themselves. After having "plied students with examples of personal narratives, most taken from anthologies" (58), Molly Stocking read her journalism students' essays which were "among the best" she had ever gotten (59). The students explained that they "trusted their own observations" (59).

Since contemporary composition experts, such as Peter Elbow and Mike Rose, laud the positive results of the personal narrative, my intention here is not to address the entire fine corpus of published work about the value of the narrative essay. Instead, I want to stress the additional value of combining Livia Polanyi's descriptive structure for the narrative with James Kinneavy's referential (rather than expressive) aim of discourse for academic writing in a first-semester university composition class. That some university teachers eschew the personal narrative for basic writers is quite likely because of its structure and aim. Perhaps those teachers prefer not to disserve their students

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with expressive writing which is difficult to assess and that sometimes interferes with students' writing in other academic disciplines. Writers in advanced composition courses, who have mastered other aims of discourse (referential, literal, and persuasive) and who have developed organizational strategies, may be better prepared to manage expressive discourse. Nevertheless, while there are sometimes problems inherent with this genre for basic writers, there are also positive approaches to improve student writing.

Basic writers, those recently graduated from high school and now in their first semester composition courses, occasionally write a narrative that is a chronological list of events lacking contextual focus. I recall Ouizer in *Steel Magnolias* who, after listening to Shelby prattle about Owen Jenkins, interrupts: "Shelby, does this story have a point?" After reading a student's chronological list of what time she got up, what she ate for breakfast, where she bought gas, and what she ate for lunch — all prior to the discussion of receiving a community service award that evening — I wanted to ask Ouizer's question. Yes, the award was there, but only in the concluding paragraph with no discussion of its significance save mention that the recipient was "extremely happy" to get it. There was private meaning in this writer's expressive content, but I could not find it. I am not demeaning this student or her efforts; instead, I am admitting that I had failed to help her shape a point. The chronological narrative had been ineffective for the story of her significant achievement. Discussing the focus of personal narratives, Livia Polanyi contends that the event structure "may be quite unimportant, and the story might well be an illustration of some important aspect of a character or situation"; hence, it is often the "descriptive structure [which] provides material indispensable to understanding what significance those events might be said to have for the world created by the story" (209). Again, a chronological relation of events by themselves may not reveal a point for the story, but the descriptive structure can provide a context for the event. I knew that I had to help my student revise this discussion of her significant achievement.

Another problem with the personal narrative is the basic writer's occasional shift into the expressive aim of discourse which becomes so abstract that he loses his voice and also fails to make a point. Too emotionally vested in his experience, he writes: "My friend betrayed me and that changed everything in our relationship." Then he continues with paragraphs about everyone betrayed in some way, never mentioning his betrayal and everything that changed. I knew that I had to help this student with revision, too. Though less involved with contextual emphasis two decades ago, James Kinneavy has provided a cogent analysis of the aims of discourse, those aims still evident in writing. In *A Theory of Discourse*, Kinneavy explains that the expres-

sive aim has its place as discourse: "Since the expressive component of a discourse is, in effect, the personal stake of the speaker in the discourse, there is naturally an expressive component in any discourse" (393); moreover, expressive is "the very kind of discourse by which an individual or group can express his personal or its societal aspirations" (396). Later discussing the semantic features of expressive style, Kinneavy notes:

> If, as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Gusdorf maintain, the expressor must give new meanings relevant to his unique existential situation to all words or even create new words, then expressive discourse should be characterized by an idiolect, a private dialect with some private meanings. And, just as the individual person creates his own idiolect, so also the social person creates its own dialect (or jargon, cant, argot). (431)

Kinneavy further posits that "the referents (kinds of realities referred to) of expressive discourse are usually highly subjective, embodied in images, and connotative rather than simply denotative" (432), that the referents are "marked by superlatives" (432), and that "expressive terms, like exploratory terms, are often ambiguous" (433).

Actually, several of the semantic features which Kinneavy describes are similar to student papers that I have mentioned — the superlative "extremely happy," the high degree of subjectivity, the lack of focus, and the ambiguity of the indefinite "everything." During a recent writing seminar, a colleague exclaimed that personal expressive discourse was more difficult than the academic discourse which he had written as an instructor and graduate student. His exclamation may have validity because he is accustomed to writing for an audience, accustomed to the reality and focus of his message, but not accustomed to semantic ambiguity.

A proponent of the personal essay as democratic and cultural, Joel Haefner suggests "a pedagogy that attempts to balance the individualistic, expressive view of knowledge with a social, collective perspective" by bringing "the personal essay into the collaborative writing project" (132). In collaboration, students can challenge "the sanctity of the ' I ' by writing in groups and by using 'we'" (134); they can also engage in dialogism, though consensus is not always necessary (135). Perhaps the "Declaration of Independence," analyzed by James Kinneavy, may serve as an expressive document that illuminates Haefner's more recent suggestions.

While the "Declaration" has "important persuasive purposes," according to Kinneavy, "it is also a piece of discourse with strong expressive components" (409). Kinneavy further explains that accompanying the persuasive aims was an expressive aim: "to enable a new

social personality to achieve self-determination . . . this is always the purpose of expressive discourse" whether individual or social (410). For a thorough analysis of the "Declaration," I would refer those interested to Kinneavy's chapter on expressive discourse. (Included are characteristics such as the expressing self, the use of "we," the emotional appeal, connotations, abundant superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs, ambiguous referents, the idiolect of new meanings for words, the subjective view of reality, and abstract language.)

Though Jefferson was the primary author, this document underwent a total of 132 revisions, fifteen from Jefferson himself, thirty-one from the drafting committee, and eighty-six from Congress (Kinneavy 438). Jefferson, according to Kinneavy, also borrowed phrases and analogies from British and French philosophers and from pamphlets of fellow Americans. This document was indeed a collaborative project. Nevertheless, "many of the signers were probably not even aware of its vast implications" (440). For instance, particular ambiguity rests in the phrase "all men are created equal": "The vision," contends Kinneavy, "has not yet been fully realized today. Political, educational, sexual, racial, economic, housing, and other equalities are still being fought for" (440). So even in this collaborative document, the term *equal* has multiple meanings.

Juxtaposing Kinneavy's research on Jefferson with my own classroom experience, I have found writing differences: in the hands of Jefferson, the expressing self ends in the "Declaration," but in the hands of basic writers, the expressing self often can end (but certainly must not always end) in solipsism. Just out of high school and in their first composition course at a state university, students may produce the "private dialect with some private meanings" which Kinneavy has described (438) in their personal expressive narratives. But they will need referential, literal, and persuasive discourse for writing in the contexts of all academic disciplines. Writing essay responses in these other academic courses, moreover, they may experience frustration because of interference from the expressive aim. As freshmen, basic writers need composing skills for clear academic writing.

Sixteen years after the publication of "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae remains valid for composition pedagogy if freshmen writers are to be part of the academic community in universities. These basic writers, posits Bartholomae, "assume privilege by locating themselves within the discourse of a particular community" (143). He adds:

> What our beginning students need to learn is to extend themselves, by successive approximations, into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions and necessary connections that

determine the "what might be said" and constitute knowledge
within the various branches of our academic community. (146)

It is not that students must learn how to write, but that they must
learn, contends Victor Villanueva, "how to write within the conven-
tions of the university" (88). Rather than use the expressive aim, there-
fore, I prefer to aim for academic conventions with basic writers. Of
course, the expressive aim has its place, but perhaps a place in the
curriculum sequence after first-year composition courses.

A positive approach for improving focus, development, and lan-
guage in student narratives is as old as Isocrates who taught rhetoric
by imitation. Bartholomae has defined learning "in the liberal arts
curriculum" as "more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of
invention and discovery" (143). In addition to imitating the discourse
of the academic community, students can also learn to focus their ideas
by imitating a narrative poem for their first paper of the semester. It is
possible to use a variety of narrative poems. But I have used Countee
Cullen's "Incident" in composition classes and am presenting it here
as an illustration because the language is vivid and concrete, though
mostly because this poem is a narrative with the descriptive structure
advocated by Polanyi for giving significance to "the world created by
the story" (209):

> Once riding in old Baltimore
> Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
> I saw a Baltimorean
> Keep looking straight at me.
>
> Now I was eight and very small,
> And he was no whit bigger,
> And so I smiled, but he poked out
> His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."
>
> I saw the whole of Baltimore
> From May until December;
> Of all the things that happened there
> That's all that I remember.

After reading this poem orally, students and I immediately discuss
the point of its story: a racially prejudiced remark became the source
of pain for an eight-year-old child. We also discuss the understate-
ment in the last stanza so that we understand its contribution to the
strength of the speaker's voice. Rather than using hyperbole or mul-
tiple superlatives to describe the resulting pain, the speaker provides
emphasis through the concise understatement.

Having identified the speaker, we then look at the poem structurally to analyze the method of story telling. The first stanza is background, the setting. The second stanza is the incident itself. The third is the speaker's reaction. Before I can move to my next point, several students raise hands and intuitively blurt out, "If this poem is a story, couldn't it be a little essay, kinda like each stanza being a paragraph?" Exactly, for our further analysis grows referentially, based upon the reality of the speaker's experience. The background stanza is the descriptive frame giving concrete significance to the world and attitude of the speaker: he is "heart-filled, head-filled with glee"; Baltimore is not the deep South, yet prejudice is present. While the incident itself, the second stanza also contains description with the age, size, and specific actions of these two children. Children are not born prejudiced; they learn this attitude at a young age. As for the speaker's reaction, the description of an eight-month stay in a large city is balanced against the closing understatement.

That descriptive structure grasped, we next look at what is not in this little poem/essay, details omitted such as what time the speaker got out of bed, what he ate for breakfast, and what color shirt he chose to wear that day. This discussion is student-guided since students immediately know that those other details would not contribute to the point about racial prejudice, that unnecessary information would indeed detract from the point.

In preparation for writing narratives about their own experiences, students discuss other forms of prejudice, often as we make a list on the board which includes gender, religion, ethnic background, sexual orientation, body type, and socio-economic status. We then discover that there are multiple forms of prejudice: any other word could be substituted for the one that the boy used. Moreover, any one of us could be the target of a prejudiced remark. We now have the framework and catalyst for a writing assignment, for the experience is in the social community of prejudice found in the text while the students' responses will be individual, based upon the text but within the context of their own lives.

However, because some students may never have been the target of any form of prejudice, I offer additional writing topics for the narrative assignment. For instance, I ask that students brainstorm a list of significant achievements in their lives — achievements such as civic contributions, academic awards, athletic recognition, culinary ribbons, a school band trip to Europe, and family assistance recognized only by immediate family members yet significant. I record the list on the board to specify the significance and to validate their events.

I then set aside about ten minutes for freewriting so that students may begin to generate descriptive details for their stories. Volunteering, many of the students share the context of their experience when

subsequently reading the freewritten passage. They occasionally verbalize editorial remarks about their passages to clarify the setting and antecedent information for their peers. This verbal editing is an early indication of their awareness for contextual details.

From our brainstorming and freewriting, the topic is "Write a story about your personal experience with some form of prejudice, or a story about one significant achievement in your life. Be sure to follow the organization of Countee Cullen's poem so that your first paragraph is the setting, the second is the incident itself, and the third, your reaction." The organization which I have requested is indeed an outline because first-semester composition students writing their first paper of the semester usually benefit from a clear framework; they spend less energy discovering a structure, more time developing ideas with specific details. As they become more accustomed to unifying ideas into a coherent whole, they can discard the scaffolding in future papers.

Moreover, I remind these students that even professional writers make outlines. Since most of them have heard of the *Star War* movies, I have a new authority — Terry Brooks who is writing the novelization of *The Phantom Menace*. Offering writing advice, Brooks says,

> You must outline your work. . . . For those who are new, unpublished or struggling, outlining teaches you two things. First, it teaches you to think your story through from beginning to end. . . . Second, if you do make changes — and you will — if you've thought it all through, then you know how the change will affect the outline; it gives you a blueprint. . . . If I don't have something to steer me, I'll leave loose ends. (qtd. in Rigney 19)

Although Norbert Elliot mentions metacognition rather than an outline, he does make the point that students writing personal narratives "must select and edit events, must think about the process of thinking" (26). Like Terry Brooks, basic writers' metacognition may be facilitated from an outline, Cullen's poem serving as a concrete example for them.

Where I differ theoretically from Elliot is the discourse aim (not the narrative mode) for the students' writing. Elliot uses the narrative to "provide access to the numinous of human consciousness" (26) through the "nonrational tradition" (27). But since, as Kinneavy notes, the expressive aim is distinguished "clearly from the rational procedures," and instead is associated with "the intuitive or emotional procedures" (419), Elliot appears to conflate the narrative mode with the expressive aim. Indeed, Elliot maintains that the "narrative is, to use James Kinneavy's famous term, an aim" (25). Elliot next claims that

"Kinneavy is mistaken in placing narrative among the modes; rather, narrative belongs with expressive, referential, literary, and persuasive discourse" (26). Beginning with Kinneavy's phrase "all of these," Elliot then places a dash after the word *discourse* to add a quotation from Kinneavy. But the complete quotation from Kinneavy includes a reference to "narratives and other modes of discourse" before Elliot's dash. Kinneavy has actually said,

> The aims of language are the reason for the existence of all the preceding aspects of language. Sounds, morphemes, syntactic patterns, meanings of all kinds, skills in speaking and the other arts of discourse, narratives and other modes of discourse — all of these exist so that humans may achieve certain purposes in their use of language with one another. (37-38)

The "certain purposes," then, are the aims, not the modes which include narrative.

I nonetheless concede that confusion is possible — upon close reading of additional chapters in Kinneavy's text. Differentiating the mode of expository writing from the aim of creative literary writing, Kinneavy says, "It confuses a mode of discourse with an aim of discourse. Exposition, as opposed to narration, is a matter of what is said, not why it is said; the nature of the reference, not the purpose of the reference, constitutes something as expository" (79). The antecedent for "it" is expository writing, though narration appears to be an aim.

Upon reading further chapters, I discovered another distinction from Kinneavy who asserts, "We can evaluate or describe, or classify, or narrate something — these are modes of discourse, but we cannot scientize or inform or persuade or literate it. These are aims of discourse" (421). Ergo, I would prefer to leave Kinneavy's distinctions as he has presented them because I want basic writers to compose in the narrative mode, but not with the expressive aim. One of the four media forms less adaptable to the expressive aim, according to Kinneavy, is "academic conventions" (431). When basic writers compose narratives, I want these students to benefit from learning "academic conventions," rather than numinous expression.

An option, I reiterate, for using the narrative within the community of academic discourse is to combine the narrative mode with the referential aim, rather than the expressive aim. Hence, this combination is a hybrid giving validity to narration. Again, I refer to *A Theory of Discourse* by James Kinneavy to ground my argument and to maintain consistent difference between the aims and modes of discourse, though neither aims nor modes exist in isolation. In fact, the *pathos* of persuasive discourse has its place in my referential assignment. But because I want specificity from writers, the "I felt bad because that

person made a prejudiced remark about me" will not suffice; the writing should not become entirely pathetic. To incorporate *pathos*, students must actually describe the depth of feeling. One means of doing so is to imitate the understatement in the concluding lines of "Incident." Imitation of the understatement, of course, is not the only means of providing a specific description, but writers may become conscious of rhetoric by using this figure of speech.

Although Kinneavy's reference aim is further composed of scientific, informative, and exploratory discourse, there are divisions among the reference components. Kinneavy explains: "Exploratory discourse fundamentally asks a question. Informative discourse answers it. Scientific discourse proves it" (89). Yet the "providence of referential discourse," asserts Kinneavy, is "with subject matter"; "all reference discourse is 'reality'-oriented" (88).

Hence, I rely upon Kinneavy's insistence that "there must first be a grounding in fact and accepted notions. No great exploration can normally be expected from a vacuum. Exploration is not creation from a prior nothing" (102). Kinneavy himself quotes Chenoweth with the "pool of ignorance" sans background and Popper with each writer talking to himself in a vacuum (102). Surely not denigrating the efforts of basic writers in Kinneavy's quotations from Chenoweth and Popper, I yet recall Swift's "Battel of the Books," particularly the duel between the spider and the bee: should we ask our students to generate writing without first consuming texts, we shall put them in the position of the spider generating "Dirt, spun out of [his] own Entrails" (384) rather than the bee who, after consuming books, generates "Honey and Wax," "Sweetness and Light" (385). Teachers cannot ask basic writers to generate writing from nothing; there first needs to be a text for reference, something that the students have consumed. By reading the narrative poem, therefore, students have consumed a text so that they are prepared to generate their own writing.

Accounting for the informative component of reference discourse, I remind students that they must account for the situational context within their writing. While classroom compositions can sometimes be artificial, or "teacher-directed," Kinneavy posits that "at least one facet of the artificiality can be stripped from them by writing them for peers — one's fellow students" (96). Using a poem, students can write for their peers who understand either the universality of prejudice in its various forms or the significance of a personal achievement–both topics related to the descriptive structure in the poem.

As for establishing a point with the narrative, Norbert Elliot asserts, "In decentering the shallow appearance of comprehension and the combative authority implicit in much exposition, we can help basic writers discover ways of negotiation and mediation that are more humane than the egocentric drive to prove a point" (25). By writing

for their peers, however, my students become less egocentric, for they understand that these narrative essays, though individual, will indeed have a point comprehended among themselves. A condition of audience acceptance is that "the story itself," insists Livia Polanyi, "be seen as a proper illustration for what is being put forward as the point" (212). Establishing the point with a story is a means of negotiating academic discourse instead of combating Elliot's implicit expository authority.

After having two days to compose drafts out of class, my students bring their papers to class for peer responses. These responses are focused on essential details so that the writers note referential language. Peers themselves list facts from the background, incident, and reaction paragraphs of other papers. They also pose questions if noticing the need for additional specificity. In a final reflection note, they assess the *pathos, ethos,* and *logos* (terms which we have discussed) of the story. Revising out of class, students have a fairly polished three-paragraph narrative. Then, they are prepared for a discussion of introductory paragraphs. We examine both inductive and deductive introductions; the students draft two or three introductions; subsequently, they choose one for their narrative composition, often after additional collaborative exchange and discussion with peers. Finally, they edit their work for submission—options allowed during any stage of the writing process for teacher conferences or Writing Center consultation.

Longer compositions with further development come later in the semester. Students also write these compositions by employing additional modes and aims of discourse. As David Bartholomae notes, "A student who can write a reasonably correct narrative may fall to pieces when faced with a more unfamiliar assignment" (159). So students do need to progress beyond the personal narrative for academic maturation. Of course, they can imitate other poems, comparison-contrast for instance, as aids for structure and development in subsequent writing assignments. The application of poem to prose writing is as broad as the teacher's reading background. Nonetheless, I also require that students read additional essays as models for their own writing and as references for content generation.

But as an early writing experience for basic writers, this narrative assignment provides them with several benefits. First, the students learn to become close readers—both of their own texts and the texts of others, the latter texts being initially the poem itself then their peers. They also learn to make a point in writing by imitating another text: they shape their narratives according to the poem. After following the writing process, students produce a text with concrete development within approximately two weeks. "If writing is a process, it is also a product; and it is the product, and not the plan for writing," explains

David Bartholomae, "that locates a writer on the page, that locates him in a text and a style and the codes or conventions that make both of them readable" (142). Hence, semester-long revisions with the teacher's responses become unnecessary; the plan itself already exists because their early drafts are focused upon imitation of the poem, though revisions are steps toward the product.

A final benefit of shaping a writing assignment upon a poem is the precision of language. Poet and university teacher, Mary Swander explains "how every word" in a poem "mattered, how every word added one more element to the scene, something that could be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched, how there wasn't much room for fancy adjectives and adverbs, abstraction and general observation" in her poetry workshops (8). As for transference to "regular classroom writing," she notes: "A good essay seems to deal with the same things that a good poem does — how to make an idea concrete, and how, in an interesting way, to lead the reader to a new insight" (9). I have found the same elements of transference in my classrooms for basic writers. The excessive adjectives and adverbs of the expressive aim (such as "definitely" occasionally confused with "defiantly" or the redundant "most unique") and the unnecessary details of emotive writing are all distracting elements which disappear from discourse when students read, analyze, and synthesize information from a poem that they can imitate in their own prose. Swander concludes that her students are relieved "from the pressures of coming up with something 'profound' — the kind of profundity that often ends up in 'mush'" (9). Profound mush may be personally therapeutic and vaguely spiritual, but basic writers soon realize that academic discourse, generated after consuming a text, has a point which the community of their peers as audience wants to understand. In the larger community of other academic disciplines, the history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, music, geology, meteorology, astronomy, biology, chemistry, business, and kinesiology teachers as audience also want to understand the point in essay-test questions and research papers. Shaping the referential point through imitation leads to this empowerment — not only in the basic writing class, but also in any area of critical thinking. The point, therefore, is that we make a point when we write.

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