DEVELOPING THE SELF THROUGH WRITING

MIMI SCHWARTZ

"There was no reason to come to school before this because it was the same thing day in and day out. But I started writing about me, about the seasons, my grandfather, about dying and about love. I broke out of my shell. I think it's saved me.
—a potential school drop-out

Teachers from grade school to graduate school traditionally stress writing as a powerful *communications tool*. The essays, book reports, and term papers we regularly assign and grade support this transactional function of writing. In recent years, thanks to James Britton, Janet Emig, Toby Fulwiler, among others, we also stress writing as a powerful *thinking tool*. The increased popularity of journal writing assignments, as prewriting for more formal assignments, attests to this recent pedagogical emphasis on writing as a method for discovering ideas as well as for public communication.

In this article, I'd like to advocate another powerful dimension of writing — one that committed writers embrace but committed teachers often reject in the classroom: that is *the power of writing to develop the self*. By this I mean writing, not only to explain or process information, but also to grow personally and creatively as well as intellectually. Of course, this involves thinking and communicating; but it also involves feeling, discovering, risk-taking, problem-solving, inventing and reinventing, to name just a few of the other processes that also shape the confidence, performance and development of the whole self.

Just the word "self," when placed in an academic context, makes many colleagues uncomfortable. Too subjective, too unpredictable say those who feel that only objective, replicable data belongs in academia. Not enough time, not enough relevance, say others whose commitment to teaching content makes it difficult to

add any other objectives to an already-packed syllabus. The implication is that writing which caters to the self—other than the academic self—is an out-of-school activity, or one reserved for "creative writing" courses; it is a luxury which busy teachers preparing students for academic and work world success feel they can't afford to indulge in.

As a teacher of autobiography and poetry writing as well as the academic essay, I propose that we can't afford *not* to develop the whole self in our writing courses. For it is this kind of experience that makes students become committed writers; it hooks them on the power of the written word to find, express, clarify and codify themselves on paper, for *their* satisfaction as much as for others. Without this conviction, writers, like cocktail party conversationalists, fall into a "How are You? I am fine" communication routine. They go through the motions of expression, but with little self-investment. They get the writing done to satisfy the teacher, the boss, the editor, whomever, but pay a price in voice, fluency, and motivation to produce a text that really represents them.

Take this opening paragraph of a college application essay, for example, written by a student who receives A's and B's on most academic writing assignments:

> From living in three different worlds—the private school world, the hometown world, and the summer world of a farming community—I've developed a unique flexibility and openness about myself which I'm very proud of. What separates my worlds are the people. These people have been developed mostly by their economic and physical atmospheres, causing different goals, values, and future plans. By participating in each world I've found that I've been able to fit comfortably in all three and to accept their values without judgement while I take advantage of the situation to choose and understand my own values. . . .

Clearly, this writer has mastered the three-part thesis statement in opening paragraphs, but where is the authenticity of voice that makes the reader believe in the "openness and flexibility" he claims to have developed? How much more rigid and distant he seems than another high school senior who wrote this opening for the same "tell me about yourself" application essay:

> My friends tell me sometimes that I think too much. And

perhaps I do. They say that I am too busy analyzing to ever relax and enjoy things, that I should stop thinking and start doing. They may be right. I guess I tire them with my theories and revelations. I was talking to a friend at a party several weeks ago, and I told her that in a way the party symbolized Pascal's theory of the duality of man. She laughed. I blushed. She went to get more beer. . . .

There is a real person behind these words—one who sees language as a means of expressing himself, not just impressing others. And this self-investment makes us respond to his words far more than we do to the stiff, formulaic prose of his classmate; prose which Ken Macrorie calls Engfish because of the strong fishiness of so much school and bureaucratic writing. What it best conveys, unfortunately, is not a genuine applicant but the power of academic convention to overpower the writer's voice (even beyond the classroom), causing the self out of fear or disinterest to become separated from the text.

As teachers we must help our students keep the two united—in *all* their writing. To do this, they must learn to become self-invested and stay invested in the text, whether the assignment is a journal entry, a formal critique, or a college application essay. Only then will they see themselves as writers who, like journalist/novelist Joan Didion, believe that *all* writing is "the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind." A steady diet of academic essays alone won't convince them, nor will journal writing. The first is too impersonal, too related to right answers; the second is too private, too removed from outside audiences who can question and deepen initial ideas and feelings.

What is needed are frequent opportunities for the "I" to be on center stage, not only in journals and in begin-the-term personal narratives, but in valued assignments throughout the semester. This may mean sacrificing some traditional academic assignments for more autobiographical writing, but the benefits are well worth it. Not only do students become more motivated as writers and revisers, willing to work harder on the integrity of their texts, but they also become more open and knowledgeable as people, better able to examine, share and assess their growth as individuals.

The case studies that follow are meant to show how self-invested writing—initiated through autobiographical writing—can spur this

kind of development, by making students value their writing as a source of personal, creative and intellectual growth that provides self-satisfaction, not just a grade.

JIM: WRITING FOR PERSONAL INSIGHT

Students like Jim, a college freshman in basic writing, see writing as unrelated to living. The book reports, themes, and term papers assigned to him steadily since grade school seem irrelevant, even alien activities—disconnected from meaningful experience. Consider his first experience with term papers, for example:

> In my junior year, I had an English teacher who made me write my first term paper. I found it very boring because I couldn't express myself. I had to write facts, not my thoughts. Well, needless to say, I did very badly. After that paper, I convinced myself that writing was not going to get me anywhere in life. . . .

Jim is not alone. Many share his view of writing (synonymous for them with school writing) as an unimaginative, restrictive, even compromising ordeal, divorced from honest expression. "Writing papers makes me feel like an imposter because, instead of revealing my personality, I must impress the reader . . ." reports one classmate. Another finds it "a dull tedious task because most topics are of no interest to me."

How different is their attitude from that of playwright Edward Albee who says, "I write for **me**. The audience is **me**"; or from story writer Issac Singer's conviction that to write "**I** must be convinced, or at least have the illusion that **I** am the only one who could write this particular story." Like Didion, these professionals see writing as a powerfully self-centered activity. For too many students, however, writing is a teacher-centered activity in which the "I" plays a minor, rather than key role. No wonder that they are uncommitted writers who see no reason to write, except under duress.

To become committed, these students must first value writing as an integral part of their lives—not as an annoying appendage. Jim made this discovery through two autobiographical essays which showed him how writing and response can help to solve problems in living. One essay made him realize that he wanted to major in music; the other helped him reduce his drinking. In the excerpts below, you can see how the drinking essay—coupled with com-

ments about what he wrote—helped to make writing a personally relevant act for Jim, one that connected his writing to his living. Notice how he values the comments as much as the writing as an essential part of the process (See A and B):

From the Original Essay:

> ". . . .Drinking has definately affected my life tremendously. It has made me late, forgetful, sick, regretful, and most of all poor. I spend over $15.00 to $20.00 per week on booze. I don't even spend that much on food! But it's something to blame troubles on, like missing my Rhetoric and Comp midterm, and that's about the only good aspect to drinking. I can only hope I don't indulge too much and become an alcoholic, like alot of my friends, and can only hope I just. . . .grow out of it.

A. *Teacher Comment*:

> You've captured the impact of alcohol on your life very well. Now that you've written about it, do something about it, too. You've got too much going for you to just hope you "outgrow" it.

B. *From In-class Essay on His Development as a Writer*:

> . . . I re-read the essay along with the Professor's words and ever since then, I've been almost 'affraid' of alcohol. I haven't completely stopped drinking but I have stopped getting so drunk that I can't move the next day. That was one essay I'm really glad I wrote. . . ."

It was not only writing, but sharing his essay that made Jim feel "that was one essay I'm really glad I wrote." Unlike the private journal writer who writes only for himself, Jim values the public dimension of self-invested writing. He wants others to know who he is. As he says with pleasure about his end-of-term portfolio:

> "I can definatly see a personality from my portfolio - myself - who can easily be understood by anyone who reads these writings."

This willingness to invest himself and take risks in a *public* text is, I propose, an essential, first step in becoming an effective writer. For it provides the voice, energy and openness needed to search

out and test the insights that writing can give us. Some insights we find on our own, but others require feedback from outside readers, if they are to be true. Because Jim has learned to value both in his efforts to clarify his life through writing, he is equipped to find and develop ideas beyond his personal experience as well.

CAROLYN: WRITING FOR SELF-CONFIDENCE

Much of Jim's development of self came from insights about *what* he wrote, his content. For Carolyn, a junior, her development came through insights about *how* she wrote, her process. Carolyn, a bright student and a skilled writer, could whip out a fine, personal narrative very easily, but when it came to taking serious stands on life, she would "crumble," as she put it. The excerpts below—one from a personal narrative, the other from an argumentative essay—illustrate her problem in writing outside of her immediate experience:

> *from "My Roommate Kay"*
> I have a wonderful roommate Kay who I have lived with on and off for three years now. I love her dearly but, boy, does she have some annoying habits. Only someone as laid back and calm as I could spend so much time with her without going crazy. . . . .
>
> *from "Take A Stand" essay*:
> . . . .The question, it seems, is not is abortion a moral issue, but do we have the right to see it as a moral issue? In my opinion we do not. This is not to say that people cannot look at abortion as a moral issue. This is their right. But it is also my right not to look at abortion as a moral issue. . . .

In her end-of-term essay about her development as a writer, Carolyn describes her change of attitude from autobiography to exposition this way:

> "I guess the biggest problem comes when it's no longer 'I'd like to write this piece' but 'I have to write this piece.' In writing "My Roommate Kay" and "Do you Have a Dime in Your Pocket?" I hit on topics that were close to home. These pieces made me think and smile while writing them.
> . . . .As we moved on the fun began to disappear. Instead of writing something from my head, I had to go to the library or give an interview or I had to take a stand on a topic. . . .

In part, Carolyn's dilemma is shared by many students—and indirectly by their teachers: how to keep the energy level up when *not* writing journals or personal narratives. But the problem is not just topical or rhetorical; it's psychological. Carolyn feels insecure, almost threatened when asked to interpret life seriously beyond her own experience. Some students react by substituting their authentic voice with Engfish; others like Carolyn resist that urge and become blocked. "If I have to write about Plato, I feel I must copy Plato and not be Carolyn," she explains. Then writing becomes anguish, she adds, "like trying to force yourself to be a happy on a cold, rainy, dreary day when you've got a cold. Impossible!"

Because Carolyn's portfolio contained a range of essays with all drafts—including informal and formal disclosure, self-centered and world-centered topics—she, and I, as her teacher, were able to look at the concerns and decision-making that made some assignments easy and some so hard. Through this review process, involving conference and written descriptions, Carolyn came to understand what was causing her difficulty, and gradually, "Impossible!" was modified to "difficult, but doable." She began to learn how to take stands without sacrificing her voice, and without crumbling.

To gain these insights, Carolyn first needed to redefine her expectations about the writing process. Because she was bright, she always expected "one shot" fluency, effortless writing. Her autobiographical essays confirmed that expectation; for, as she says, they would "just come to me wherever and whenever, and I could write them." However, to produce essays involving new information not internalized as memory, such expectations are disastrous. You need extra staying power for extra complexity, and Carolyn was not prepared for it. As she explains, "Throughout my life I was never really pushed to do anything I didn't want to. Now here I am having to push myself. What a mess I am!" That "mess" involved incomplete and late assignments, handed in after hours and days wasted in frustration instead of productivity. Ironically, the essays she produced, even when she felt she "crumbled," were not as bad as they were painful. It was her process far more than her product that robbed her of confidence as a writer of anything but the personal narrative.

To straighten out, Carolyn also needed to believe more in herself intellectually, so she could take public stands without losing her cool. She sensed that need herself when she wrote about her

block: "I may have a fear of being rejected or too opinionated and one-sided. . . ." After our interview about her portfolio, I agreed. Carolyn's concern for how her serious side came across was intense: "I'm too extreme in that one. I'm too preachy in that one. I'm too corny in that one" she said continuously about all but her lighthearted narratives. The passion about abortion laws made her particularly uncomfortable.

The solution was partly rhetorical: to learn how to channel passion through logical appeals, making better use of facts to support emotion and ethics. More basic, however, was her need to find a comfortable, yet serious voice which she felt sounded like an "uncorny, unpreachy" Carolyn. In her last essay about her portfolio, she began to succeed. It was intense, persuasive, filled with specifics, and Carolyn to the core; her conclusion reflects a new sense of self-satisfaction: "Writing has not gotten any easier. I still feel I might crumble under pressure, but now I know I won't. I've developed more confidence in myself."

If Carolyn had only written academic essays all term, she would not have learned as much about how to move from self-centered to world-centered experiences without breaking down. It was by writing both, and comparing them, that she began to see how to maintain an integrity of self in a variety of writing roles. That awareness, that comes through practice, is another essential step for all writers, if they are to write successfully in different rhetorical contexts with self-confidence and self-investment in their texts.

TEACHING THE WHOLE SELF: GOALS AND STRATEGIES

What Carolyn and Jim have learned through writing, I propose, extends beyond the printed page. I have no formal follow-up to prove it, but I predict that Jim is now more likely to value writing and feedback as aids for solving problems, and Carolyn is better able to take an effective stand, even a controversial one, with friends, family, and work groups. Both, I think, have gained confidence, through writing, in their ability to deal with conflict and solve problems without crumbling.

Developing this problem-solving skill and confidence are goals often overlooked in our efforts to teach the compare and contrast paper, comma splices and transitions. Yet I believe that, as effective teachers, we need to value them as much as we do the teaching

of academic discourse. First, because otherwise we are only giving lip service to the idea that a liberal education means educating the whole person, not just the marketing major, engineer, or nurse. Second, because only to the extent that we teach the whole person, not just the writer, will we get the whole person invested in the text. And without this investment, writing will remain an algorithmic chore rather than a creative, self-satisfying act for most students.

The question, as with all pedagogical suggestions, is "Fine, but how to do it given an already overpacked curriculum?" One answer is to set up new writing courses that make the whole self a more central figure in the content of the course. Offerings such as Writing Autobiography, Researching the Family History, Writing for Many Roles, and Poetry for Non-poets would do much to legitimatize the whole self in academia and weaken the domination of academic discourse as the only valid writing on the college campus.

Other solutions involve less administrative hassle and so can be incorporated into existing frameworks of writing courses. Some of these, as implied earlier, include: 1) assigning open-ended, self-centered essays on a regular basis throughout the term—and making sure that feedback is part of the process; 2) requiring a portfolio of all essays, including drafts, to provide a tangible basis for discussion of progress and problems in a variety of writing tasks; and 3) designing assignments that shift from a self-centered to world-centered focus (often on the same topic), so that students learn how to stay self-invested even when "I" is not on center stage. Too many students, brought up in "Never Use I" classrooms, do not understand, as Thoreau does, that "there is no such thing as pure objective observation," that the "I" is in control, even from the sidelines. Paired assignments such as these can help convince them.

Most valuable, I've found, is teaching revision as a problem-solving process. Students who learn to trust and utilize this power of revision are most likely to benefit in writing and in day-to-day living for several reasons. First, faith in revision encourages risktaking and discourages premature closure on ideas. Rewriters are better able to work with complexity and avoid oversimplification because they believe that, eventually, with hard work and enough time and feedback, they will figure things out. This attitude also makes it easier for them to set high standards of excellence. Unlike one bright student who always handed in mediocre, last minute work, saying,

"I could have done better if I didn't start last night," committed revisers are more confident about telling themselves and others that "I did the best I could." This attitude helps them in day-to-day living as well as in writing.

Second, revision can show writers how to develop and maintain an authentic voice. Like the student below, writers gain confidence in their power of expression by revising a stiff voice into a more natural one:

> *initial conclusion of "My First Crush"*
>
> Therefore, this is not merely the story of my first crush. It is the description of a situation in which two people were unable to take a risk. This taught me the importance of taking chances, not only in relationships with the opposite sex, but in every aspect of life. Life is full of risks, and if there was no one willing to take them, no one would get anywhere. Although life has its share of disappointments and embarrassing moments, fearing them is not worth letting valuable opportunities slip away.
>
> *revised version*:
>
> I believe that this is not merely the story of my first crush. It tells of two people who were unable to take a risk; and it taught me the importance of taking chances, not only in relationships but in every aspect of life. Life is full of risks, and if no one is willing to take them, no one gets anywhere.

What she has learned through writing—how to be yourself, even when serious—will help in public speaking as well.

Third, revision provides the perspective on initial ideas and feeling needed to test and clarify their truth. "Selling" this idea to students, however, is easier done through personal writing assignments than through academic discourse. Take Karen, for example, a soon-to-be-married college senior who revised more to fix errors rather than to find meaning. Only after she finished an essay which clarified—through feedback and revision—her future relationship with her father, did she come to appreciate revision as a problem-solving process.

> *original ending of "My Daddy, Not My Father"*:
>
> . . .I always try to reassure him that he is still my #1 man but is that enough? I am still "daddy's little Wendi" and no mat-

ter how old I am, I will always play that role. No man could ever take daddy's place, ever.

revised version:
. . . . .I always try to reassure him, but it doesn't seem to be enough. I want him to know that a part of me will always be Daddy's "Little Wendi", no matter how old I am. No other man will ever take this special place, ever.

Just a few words—"part of me"—helped Karen to re-see the situation. "I began to feel less guilty and fearful about leaving home," Karen said, pleased with her revised conclusion.

Her satisfaction with this revision made her more committed to revision in general. Rather than just surface error, she began to go after the same precision of expression in exposition as well as narration: "Without her childhood experiences, with Mama and Bertha Flowers, Maya Angelou would not have flourished into the proud and respected kind of person she is today."

Even children can gain personal perspective as well as rhetorical skills through response and revision. The six-year-old below* was able to moderate an initial burst of anger into a reasoned and effective argument after receiving comments such as "How did you know Mrs. G knew about this?" and "Did they only throw legos?" The result was not only an improved letter, but also a good lesson in dealing with people.

1

Dear Miss G-nsh,
I wodd like you to stop your kids from throwing legos under the door.
thank you,
Greg S.

And I men it!

2

Dear Miss G-nsh,
wodd you ples ask your kids to stop throwing things under the door. They are bothering us.
thank you,
Greg S.

*from Mary Ellen Jacobi's class, Atkinson, New Hampshire

Such revisions develop the whole person, not just the writer, and that growth must be valued—even if 'plese' continues to be misspelled. Only then will students believe that revision really is a problem-solving process, not just an error-correcting procedure. College writers must also get credit for improving meaning, even if the final product is not perfect. When the voice becomes stronger, the ideas more crystallized, the comments and grade must reflect that effort, even if transitions are still weak and the introduction could still be better. Otherwise, these writers, too, will revise more for form than for meaning.

In all these cases, autobiographical writing has helped students experience self-satisfaction and self-development through writing. They need these experiences and regularly, I would like to conclude, if they are to become committed writers who invest fully in their texts—not only in poetry and personal essays but in academic writing as well. For as literary critic Alfred Kazin points out (*New York Times*, August 24, 1986), his academic writing is not a dry, intellectual exercise divorced from experience, but, like his memoirs (which he wrote "to put his life in order"), it involves emotion as well as analysis, often interconnected to personal needs and history:

> . . .I dreamed of putting my life in order by writing a book against the New York background. This was no great departure from the criticism I had been writing for years. Criticism, for me, was not a theory, least of all a theory holding academics together. It was a branch of literature, a way of writing like any other, of characterization, analysis and almost physical empathy. . . .

Our students must believe in the same powerful connection between self and text, if they are to grow as writers and as individuals. For this to happen, we, as teachers, must also believe in and regularly foster this connection in our classrooms, by enabling students to experience writing and rewriting as creative tools for personal as well as intellectual growth.

Mimi Schwartz is Associate Professor of Writing at Stockton State College and co-director of the Center for the Study of Writing in New Jersey. Her publications include *Writing for Many Roles* and articles on the composing process in *College English*, *CCC*, and *English Journal*.