

CONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING THE SELF IN THE WRITING CLASS

JEANETTE HARRIS

Writers of every age have unconsciously, if not consciously, created themselves in their discourse, constructing texts that revealed something of themselves as they were or wished themselves to be. Classical writers created themselves less overtly than writers in more recent times, but their concern with ethos reflects their awareness that writers, or speakers, reveal themselves in their texts. With the Renaissance and even more so with the Romantic Age came increased emphasis on the personality of the writer and the revelation of that personality in discourse. Since that time, interest in the writer as a soul laid bare has been fueled by such disparate theories as depth psychology, surrealism, expressionism, and progressive education.

But it was not until the 1960's and early 70's that the emphasis on self-expression was translated into writing pedagogy. Espoused mainly by college composition teachers, this pedagogical approach was primarily a reaction against the traditional insistence that academic writing should be formal, conventional, and above all correct. During its formative years when this approach dominated composition pedagogy, it had no name. Recently, however, first Richard Fulkerson, then James Berlin, Lester Faigley, and most recently Cy Knoblauch have identified both the pedagogical approach and the theory it reflects as expressionism, in many ways

an unfortunate choice because of that term's associations not only with art and drama but also with Kinneavy's expressive discourse with which it has little in common. But the term *expressive* will serve our purpose of identifying a major pedagogical theory that has continued to influence the way we teach writing.

Although the early expressionists, most notably Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and Lou Kelly, were primarily concerned with freeing student writers from restrictions that had traditionally been imposed on them, their purpose was also to encourage students to express themselves freely in their writing—to reveal themselves in an honest, authentic voice. Students were encouraged to keep journals in which they wrote their innermost feelings and to practice free-writing in which they expressed thoughts that they had not even thought—exposing, in effect, their subconscious.

It was believed that through this self-expression a strong personal writing voice and skill in communication would somehow emerge. Although time has modified this approach—few composition courses today are predicated exclusively on expressionist theories—it has become part of our general perception of how writing should be taught. More importantly, it has evolved into a basic theoretical stance—a way of viewing what the primary purpose of writing instruction should be.

James Berlin, in *Rhetoric and Reality*, classifies the expressionist view as subjective, as opposed to objective or transactional. According to Berlin, these three epistemological categories—the subjective, the objective, and the transactional—comprise the major composition theories of our time (6). Citing Plato, Emerson, and Thoreau as obvious historical antecedents, Berlin argues that expressionist rhetoric is based on “the conviction that reality is a personal and private construct” and the belief that “truth is always discovered within, through an internal glimpse, an examination of the private inner world” (145). Thus, Berlin concludes, expressionists view writing as “an art that authenticates and affirms the self” (147). We might extend this view slightly to say that expressionists perceive the purpose of writing as self-expression and ultimately self-creation. Thus, a major purpose of expressive writing instruction is to help the writer define himself or herself as honestly and freely as possible.

In direct opposition to this view, theoretically at least, social constructionists argue that not only language but writers themselves are social, rather than personal, constructs. Social constructionists

such as Kenneth Gergen, Clifford Geertz, and Kenneth Bruffee suggest that meaning, knowledge, language and even the self are community generated. Rather than a writer's defining himself or herself, as the expressionists believe, they propose that writers are defined by their particular group or society. According to Kenneth Bruffee, "social construction assumes that the matrix of thought is not the individual self but some community of knowledgeable peers and the vernacular language of the community" (777).

Therefore, a basic dichotomy appears to exist between those who believe that writers reveal themselves in their discourse and those who believe that writers as well as what they write are a reflection of their respective discourse communities. On the one hand, we have the expressionists, who believe that writing is a way of defining, creating, discovering, exploring, celebrating, and expressing the self. On the other, we have the social constructionists, who believe that writing is a reflection of the linguistic conventions, thought processes, assumptions, acceptable ways of reasoning, and prejudices of the discourse community to which the writer belongs. The first focuses on the individual writer; the second on the collaborative process by which writing becomes a social act. The first espouses the belief that truth resides within the individual; the second believes that truth is a social construct. The first advocates introspection and meditation; the second emphasizes conversation and collaboration. The first is primarily psychological; the second is largely sociological.

However, both views are political. They are predicated on basic assumptions about who constructs knowledge, who defines reality and truth, and, perhaps most significant, who creates the self—that is, who is the creator, the ultimate source of power, the god. Although both views are democratic in that they vest authority in the student, the expressionists see the student as an individual, writing out of his or her own experiences and the knowledge that these experiences have yielded, whereas the social constructionists see the student not as an individual but as a member of a community.

In practice the expressionist and social constructionist views often merge, residing comfortably within a single pedagogical approach. For example, proponents of both theories advocate group activities like peer editing, emphasize the students' texts and the process by which those texts are constructed, and assume an idealistic, even romantic, view of writing and language. In fact,

as John Trimbur points out, the two theories evolved out of the same general pedagogical impulses—the interest in students’ rights, open admissions, and John Dewey’s emphasis on the value of experience. Theoretically, however, especially if we view them at their extremes, expressionism and social constructionism are almost diametrically opposed.

First, the two theories provide contrasting views of the role of conventions in writing. The expressionists minimize the importance of conventions, often ignoring the legitimate role that conventions assume in effective communication. For them, the writer is an individual searching for his or her own truth and unique expression of that truth. Linguistic and discourse conventions are to be rejected if they interfere with the writer’s own personal voice. On the other hand, social constructionists privilege conventions because they are the distinguishing features that reflect a writer’s membership in a given discourse community. Thus, social construction theory suggests that the writer should disregard personal voice and aspire to the anonymous conventions of the desired discourse community. According to this perspective, what is written and the process by which it is written are ultimately not as important as how it is written.

Second, expressionism and social constructionism cast the teacher of writing in very different roles. The expressionists in a sense relegate the writing teacher to the role of therapist—someone who merely facilitates the student writer’s discovery and expression of self. According to this view, teachers should primarily be concerned with allowing the students to express themselves freely. Social constructionist theory, in contrast, invests the writing teacher with inordinate power. According to this view, writing teachers determine the conventions that students acquire. And these are not limited to linguistic conventions. They include all the conventions of thought and reasoning and evidence that make one discourse community distinct from another. The teacher thus is perceived as possessing the knowledge that students must have to succeed. If the teacher in expressionist theory assumes the role of therapist, the teacher in social constructionist theory assumes the role of high priest.

Third, the expressionists and social constructionists hold contrasting views about the role that writers assume in their discourse. Expressionist theory suggests that writers can and do create themselves in their discourse—that they actually reveal themselves as

they write. This view ignores the fact that writing is a symbolic and artistic act. The “self” that is revealed in a text—whether that text is a confessional poem or an inter-office memo—is not the writer but the persona created by the writer. The persona is what the writer wants to be or wants the reader to believe he or she is. And the more skilled the writer is, the more honest and natural the persona appears to be. In fact, although language can help us know ourselves, it can also distort who we are.

Social constructionist theory rejects the idea that writers should create themselves in their discourse and argues instead that they should consciously create a persona that is acceptable immediately to the teacher and ultimately to the desired discourse community. This view suggests that writers, by learning the defining features of a discourse, can create a credible persona—one that will be accepted as valid by others in that discourse community. The assumption implicit in this view is that an individual writer is powerless without the “right” language. As a result, the teaching of writing becomes the teaching of specific discourse conventions—in effect, an attempt to teach students how to use the conventions that are valued by or at least acceptable to the teacher.

Ironically, these contrasting assumptions about the roles of conventions, teachers, and writers result in similar problems if we take either view to logical, if extreme, conclusions. First, there is the problem of evaluating writing effectively. If, as the expressionists believe, the purpose of writing is the expression of self, how can we evaluate a text without evaluating the self that it expresses? And if our goal is to produce writers who have authentic voices, how can we judge that authenticity? As Lester Faigley observes, “The sincerity of a text is . . . impossible to assess” (530). But it is no easier to judge writing that is a reflection or an imitation of the discourse of a given community. Social constructionist theory suggests that a text is not a personal but a social construct—the product of the discourse community to which the writer belongs. Are we then to penalize those students who belong to the wrong community by giving them a low grade? If we view discourse solely and seriously as a social construct, we are put in the uncomfortable position of judging our students’ ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds and of implicitly or explicitly encouraging them to reject the linguistic and discourse features of those backgrounds.

An even more significant problem is that both views, in their pure states, are exclusionary. Both suggest to students that there

are mysterious rites of initiation involved in becoming a writer. Although the expressionists claim to value the individual as opposed to the writer, in reality they value the individual who can write convincingly about himself or herself. Writing of this type is often described as fresh, organic, creative, and authentic—qualities that we cannot effectively teach and that students often cannot acquire on their own. Thus, we hold a model—in fact, often read model essays by professional writers who supposedly have this true expression of self to which our students should aspire—but we teach them no skills and provide them with no concepts by which they can attain the goals we set for them. As Flower and Hayes note,

The friendly essay—with its stylish grace, deft logical balance, and voice of calm reason—is often presented as a model of how educated writers talk to themselves. The student is led to believe that the thought of the creative writer flows naturally and effortlessly into poems and novels and that the skillful expository writer thinks in prose. Novices find, in this view, neither a reflection of their own confusion and struggle nor a guide to improvement. (121)

Telling writers to be true to themselves is very difficult advice to follow. Thus, if we follow the expressionist view to its theoretical extremes, many of our students will be excluded from success as writers. They will fail to be the kind of writers that we want them to be—to write the kind of personal essay that we have in mind but can usually not write ourselves. They will never know why. They will just know that they failed.

Social constructionist theory is exclusionary for a different reason. In spite of its emphasis on collaboration, which suggests a writer working within a group, most students are working to be admitted to a group. This view ordains that students must reject the discourse of their native community and acquire that of the academic or professional community to which they aspire. If they cannot or choose not to do this, they too fail. Or if the community to which they aspire refuses to divulge its discourse conventions, students are faced with the virtually impossible task, at least for them, of analyzing the discourse to discover the conventions for themselves. Thus, social constructionism as a pedagogical theory places great power in the hands of teachers. We can, theoretically, determine that whatever discourse conventions we privilege are

the ones that ensure success and teach those regardless of which ones our students want or need to learn.

Finally, both expressionism and social constructionism ignore our oldest wisdom about the dynamics of a rhetorical situation. Consider, for example, the rhetorical focus of each. Expressionists focus primarily on the writer as opposed to audience, language, or subject. Social constructionists focus primarily on the language, or product—how well the discourse conforms to the conventions of the appropriate discourse community. Neither view emphasizes the rhetorical situation in which discourse is produced—the interaction between writer, audience, subject, and language.

In practice, as opposed to theory, we often embrace both views very comfortably in our writing classrooms. Clearly, both expressionist and social constructionist theories have contributed to our knowledge of writers and how they write. Rather than adopting either view to the exclusion of the other, we tend to take what is most useful and effective from both. In fact, Berlin, in one of his latest efforts to identify and define the major ideological theories of composition (see “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class”), advocates what he calls the social-epistemic view, which seems to consist of almost equal parts of expressionism and social constructionism. But, as Fulkerson reminds us, teachers need to be aware of the theoretical assumptions on which we erect our classroom practices. Otherwise, we may be guilty of what he calls “model confusion”—that is, failing to “relate the outcome valued to the means adopted” (348). We can avoid the problems inherent in adopting goals and methods from both expressionism and social constructionism if we know that the potential for those problems exists. There is nothing wrong with implementing both theories if we know what we are doing.

In a very real sense, writers do construct themselves in their discourse, just as the expressionists claim. And for this very reason, student writers are often concerned and fearful about writing. As one of my freshman students recently wrote,

I am an extremely self-conscious person and through some of my writings I feel as if I am exposing myself. Sometimes I feel this is a vital part of being a writer but other times it frightens me and I feel physically and emotionally drained. The paper does not have to be about me personally. There

just seems to be something 'written between the lines' telling about me. (Cathy Jackson)

As teachers, we need to recognize that our students often feel vulnerable precisely because they stand revealed in their writing. Helping them to create the persona they want to project and to understand that there is an important difference between this persona and the self who is writing is essential to effective writing instruction.

We can also not deny the social constructionists' assertion that students need to move beyond their own ego- and ethnocentric worlds to understand the multiplicity of language and the existence of various discourse communities. Student writers must see themselves as individuals within specific interpretive communities and must understand their relationship to their native communities and their communities' relationship to other social and professional groups. And, of course, as teachers we want to help them acquire those linguistic and discourse features they need to attain success in their academic and personal lives.

New theories are exciting and stimulating. They give us fresh perspectives on old problems, thus enabling us to become more effective teachers. Clearly, expressionism and social constructionism both have made significant contributions to writing pedagogy. An experienced teacher can select from both theories useful practical applications. But, theoretically at least, the two are deeply antagonistic and contradictory, and, in spite of the contributions they have made, both have serious implications for the teaching of writing.

Jeanette Harris, Associate Professor of English, directs Rhetoric and Composition at Texas Tech University. She has co-authored two textbooks and has a new book coming out in 1989 from Southern Methodist University Press, *Expressive Discourse*.

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