

YOUNG SCHOLARS IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

WRITING WHAT MATTERS: A STUDENT'S STRUGGLE TO BRIDGE THE ACADEMIC/PERSONAL DIVIDE

Emily Strasser
Vassar College

Stanley Fish, in a 2002 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article titled “Say It Ain’t So,” writes, “No composition course should have a theme, especially not one the instructor is interested in. Ideas should be introduced not for their own sake, but for the sake of the syntactical and rhetorical points they help illustrate, and once they serve this purpose, they should be sent away.” He argues that beginning writing courses should teach grammar and style only, while students’ opinions and experiences should be dispensed with immediately. If, in fact, the purpose of writing education is to produce grammatically adept writers, Fish’s boot-camp approach may do a fine job. Yet I would argue that writing can and should be much more than sophisticated sentence structure and nuanced word choice. The devices of grammar and rhetoric remain superficial skills until a writer employs them to express important and powerful feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Students leaving Fish’s course will never love what they are writing, and so their abilities to construct complicated grammatical structures will not be put to meaningful purposes. Other writers do advocate, in marked contrast to Fish’s grammar-centered approach, methods centered on students’ experiences, interests, and ideas. Gerald Graff and bell hooks, for example, each present a vision of writing as a marriage of the personal and the intellectual, enabling self-empowerment and the possibility of challenging institutions and inspiring communities. In advocating a pedagogy that values the personal as essential to the academic, I draw extensively on my own experience as a student writer: in my own development as a writer, the assignments that mattered most were those in which I used persuasive and analytical skills in personally meaningful writing. Writing and education are useless tools if they fail to speak to a student’s life, experience, and passions; therefore, teachers in all settings should value their students’ voices, encouraging them to write and claim their own stories and expressions.

My own love affair with writing began with just such a teacher—my eighth grade language arts teacher, Janna. In her class, I learned to value writing as a way of telling my own stories and expressing my thoughts. Throughout the year, we moved through units of myths, fairy tales, Shakespeare, and superheroes. We read selections from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and were assigned to write our own stories about transformation. We explored alternate versions of popular fairy tales, and then wrote our own retellings. We wrote essays addressing questions such as “What are the essential elements of a superhero? Why do we create these superhuman beings?” I was excited to write about these topics—to express my voice and create my own story in response to what we were studying. Fairy tales and myths were not written and owned by famous authors and intellectuals, but passed down orally from generation to generation, told around the fire on dark midwinter nights, embellished and altered by each subsequent teller to express personal creativity and the values of the times. As eighth graders, we, too, had

stories to tell and values to express within the timeless and ancient forms of myths. As if we were just storytellers in a long succession, Janna made us believe that our voices mattered.

Today we have moved beyond the oral tradition into a written one, yet even though our books are copyrighted by single authors, ideas and stories are built from myriad voices who have come before. No work is completely original and isolated. Writers must enter previously existing discourses with their own voices. Gerald Graff, in his book *Clueless in Academe*, criticizes the way the academy perpetuates “cluelessness” by making intellectual discourse appear opaque, specialized, and inaccessible, and by accentuating a false divide between popular and intellectual culture (1). Graff asserts that argument in academic discourse is not so different from argument in popular culture, the media, or daily life, yet that higher education manages to obscure these similarities. He proposes that to mend that divide, teachers should teach students to incorporate their street smarts and common skills of argumentation and persuasion into academic writing, illuminating their similarities rather than their differences. If students can learn first to write analytically about superheroes, something that they know, they can learn how to apply those critical thinking skills to loftier subjects in the academy. Graff points out that one of the foremost ways academia perpetuates a divide between popular and intellectual culture, between outsiders and insiders, is by discouraging simple outsider questions such as “So what?” and “What’s the point?” as naive. Instead, Graff encourages his students to address basic “So what?” questions in their writing, thereby situating their argument within an academic conversation, responding to real voices and ideas. Just as academics will have to propose and defend their points within the context of what other academics have said, Graff’s students will learn to claim their arguments within a previously existing conversation. In Janna’s class, we learned to write stories that responded to and built off of other stories, adding our versions to the long histories of tellings. Like Graff, Janna believed that her students had something worthwhile to say, and she encouraged us to say it.

Just as Graff criticizes how the academy makes intellectual life appear foreign to students’ lives and experiences, bell hooks disparages the separation of mind, body, and spirit that she sees prevalent in the academy. She writes, “I learned that far from being self-actualized, the university was seen more as a haven for those who are smart in book knowledge but who might be otherwise unfit for social interaction” (16). Indeed, students and professors in higher education are often expected to value academic and intellectual pursuits over personal health or a balanced lifestyle, as if academic and personal life cannot coexist. In my experience as a college student, I see the image of the sleepless, caffeine-crazed student glorified. Professors and peers expect students to stay up all night to finish a paper, and then stay out all night on the weekends partying. Fellow students are surprised if I tell them that I get at least six hours of sleep a night and make some time to read for pleasure. College culture, as I have seen it both at college and as portrayed in the media, does not encourage a well-balanced, healthy lifestyle, but values extreme separations of “study” from “party,” mind from body, and work from play. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks advocates a holistic pedagogy that reintroduces fun, excitement, and pleasure into the classroom. She argues that teachers should be fully “self-actualized” human beings, both intellectually and emotionally, who care not only for the analytical abilities of their students, but for their emotional and spiritual well-being. She says that students and professors should regard one another as “‘whole’ human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world” (14–15). Students cannot be expected to care about learning and writing if they themselves are unloved and unfulfilled.

Janna was one of those teachers who nurtured both her students’ intellectual and emotional well-being. She cared deeply for each of us who passed through her classroom, feeling for our poor, mixed-

up adolescent selves. Some days, she would sense that our spirits were down, or our bodies were restless, so she would read to us, or let us play outside. Janna saw us as people, not nameless students, and because she respected us as such, we respected her endeavor to teach us. Now, five years later, I still look to Janna as a teacher, mentor, and friend.

Those who suffer most from the separation of popular and academic culture that Graff describes are those who have limited access to academic institutions—the impoverished, the illiterate, the marginalized. Working at a summer program last year for underprivileged and at-risk minority middle school students—Katrina evacuees, children of alcoholics and convicts—I saw this firsthand. Attending the worst schools in the state of Georgia, these particular students had not had teachers like Janna, teachers who valued their voices and encouraged their personal expression, teachers who understood that the academic is lifeless without the personal. From their experiences, the students understood school as an endless memorizing of dates, writing of expository essays, and reading of literature, that was completely alien from their lives. As Graff calls it, “the same old ‘school stuff’” (6). bell hooks writes that students should “rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences” (19). Without a community that valued their voices, or an understanding of how the academic could and should connect to their lives, these students did not see that expression through writing could be self-empowering.

Despite this, there was one girl in the program, Danielle, who surprised and impressed me with her dream to one day become a writer and publish her own autobiographies. Danielle had a difficult home life, with an absent father and overworked mother. In some ways, she was overly mature for her age, carrying herself like a woman, making sophisticated observations. On the other hand, she was often absent, or came to the program moody and irritable, purposely causing problems in the classroom; her behavior was perhaps a reflection of her troubled home life. Yet despite her difficult childhood and marginalized position in an unequal and racist system, Danielle understood that her experiences were important and relevant. She had the desire to share her voice with the world, and to add her stories to the public discourse.

As in the cases of eighth graders writing their own fairy tales, Danielle writing her life story shows that writing can be important and powerful in all settings when it is based on the interests, needs, and desires of writers. My mother, telling me of her experience teaching ESL writing, spoke of how any small accomplishment could be hugely empowering for a student: for an illiterate Haitian woman, learning how to write a grocery list helped her become more self-sufficient in a foreign country, while for a Mexican mother, learning enough to read and respond to notes from her son’s teacher allowed her to be actively engaged in her child’s school life. Graff speaks of the way that the academy creates a division between public and intellectual life, while hooks criticizes the mind/body/spirit division. Our society too often values only a small group of voices, marking divisions by age, class, race, gender, and language. I am arguing that the voices of every age, class, race, gender, and language are important and valuable, and writing can be a tool for self-empowerment and expression, no matter where it falls on the spectrum—from grocery lists to dissertations. Teachers of writing everywhere, from ESL to the academy, should bring the intellectual closer to the personal, to encourage their students to express their voices through writing what matters to their lives.

I have struggled all of my life to find the overlap between the ideas that intrigue and stimulate me, and my emotions, experiences, and the world. I grappled with this issue especially in my freshman high school English course. My teacher, Mark, presented writing as an intellectual challenge, a skill to

be mastered. His demanding assignments and incisive questions challenged me like never before. Yet while I loved the class, the books we read, and the ideas we explored, I often wondered how they could be applicable to the world. During class discussions, or while writing a paper, I was excited by the moments when ideas came together, or opened up to show a spectrum of possibilities, yet at the end of the day, I had homework, was tired and hungry, and my world seemed very distant from Odysseus's adventures, or Miranda and Prospero's enchanted island.

That same year, Janna was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was a complete surprise, and everyone who loved her was shocked and scared. I was frightened and disoriented; I wanted to show my love and support for her, but I didn't know how. During that time, we had been studying Shakespearean sonnets in Mark's class. He assigned us to write a Petrarchan or Shakespearean sonnet, with optional meter. I knew that this would be the perfect gift for Janna—for the woman who had taught me to love writing, I would write a poem from my heart. I chose a Petrarchan sonnet because they tend end more optimistically. Incidentally, they also have the hardest rhyme scheme. I had to put all of my intellectual abilities to work to write this sonnet—figuring out rhyme, meter, and metaphor so that it would fit into the seamless, loving, supportive poem I wanted to give her. In "Soaring the Tempest," I made Janna a mockingbird, to reflect her love of languages and stories, and her cancer a storm she had to fly through:

She sings as sweetly as a mockingbird,
Well-versed and wise in ev'ry tongue and lore.
For ev'ry bird, she is the troubadour.
When she is near all other birds are spurred
To sing so bold and sweet that all are heard,
Inspired by her brave shining inner core
Shimmering quietly without a roar.
She soared the sea of sky and her wings whirred.

So small a bird to fly the windy weather.
She found a way to safely sail rough sky.
But tempest comes, air dense with gale to pour.
This small bird doesn't know how she will fly.
All loved ones flock to take it together
Our dear one will be strong and she shall soar.¹

That sonnet was the hardest thing I had ever written, and it mattered the most. I had to blend intellectual abilities with deeply personal feelings. Indeed, my sonnet is my argument made manifest—when struggling to express what I cared deeply about, only the demands of a stringent form would do. Yes, Stanley Fish, students do need to learn the mechanics of writing, yet without the personal, emotional, and the exciting, writing will never mean anything.

Fish argues that writing should be taught first with rigorous grammar in complete isolation from interesting content and student expression. Yet this type of teaching increases the division between the privileged and the underprivileged, and between the intellectual and the personal (and produces writing that is intellectual to the exclusion or loss or denial of the personal). I believe that writing should be taught with the purpose of empowering individuals across divides such as age, class, race, and language. When students write what matters to them, they write better, more passionately, and more strongly; claiming agency in their expressions, they take on the power to affect change in their lives

and in the world. Teachers of writing in all settings should strive to help their students write what matters to their lives, and encourage them to express their voices and tell their stories.

Notes

¹After some scary months of uncertainty, Janna did recover. Today, she is healthy and still teaches eighth graders.

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