“ONLY CONNECT . . .”
THE BRIDGE OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING

“If Robert Penn Warren’s so great, how come he uses ‘I’?” This puzzled inquiry from a bright twelfth grade Advanced Placement English student spotlights the unfortunate success we English teachers have had in relentlessly stamping out the personal voice wherever it has reared its head in student writing. Since the 1981 inception of the Alaska State Writing Project and its affiliate, the Fairbanks Writing Project, the English Department at Austin E. Lathrop High School has been searching for ways to reach that personal voice, to provide the instruction and practice necessary to infuse student writing with integrity, as well as clarity and accuracy. What we have found is expressive writing, a term which encompasses a myriad of forms, and which we believe holds the key to successful student writing in the transactional (or expository) mode which is the traditional kind of writing expected by universities and the proverbial world of work.

In this post-Bay Area Writing Project world, the value of writing as a tool for learning is an accepted fact; Mary K. Healy, Co-Director of the National Writing Project, described writing to learn this way, “By taking possession of new information by reconstructing it in their own words, students begin to see themselves as their own teachers, responsible for their own learning.” When we set out to mend our ways, we could clearly see the validity of statements like Mary K.’s; what we couldn’t see was how, exactly, to get to that kind of empowering writing. Without reading much of the “literature” but relying on short, intense conversations over lunch or the xerox machine, we gradually came to see the outline of the following definitions:

**EXPRESSIVE**

1. **PURPOSE**
   - writing to learn,
   - writing to think
2. **POINT OF VIEW**
   - always first person
   - “I”

**TRANSACTIONAL (or Expository)**

- writing to communicate what you have learned, what you think
- may be first or third person—
  - “he, she, they”

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EXPRESSIVE WRITING (continued from page 7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. VOICE</th>
<th>EXPRESSIVE</th>
<th>TRANSACTIONAL (or Expository)</th>
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<tr>
<td>personal</td>
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<td>may be personal or impersonal,</td>
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<td>depending on the purpose,</td>
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<td>piece</td>
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<td>may be informal or formal</td>
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<td>in structure, depending on</td>
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<td>purpose and audience, but</td>
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<td>there is a definite form</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>others</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>polished (edited, corrected)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>final piece of writing</td>
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<td>4. FORM</td>
<td>unconcerned with form</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>5. AUDIENCE</td>
<td>self</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. CORRECTNESS</td>
<td>unconcerned with correctness; unpolished (unedited) “final product”</td>
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Even as we worked to shape some specific assignments to encourage honest writing, we struggled with the persistent, nagging feeling that expressive writing is somehow touch-feely and self-indulgent, too “soft” to justify instructional time better spent on the “hard” discipline of learning to write “it,” as Keith Caldwell of BAWP calls standard, third person college writing. But we persevered, buoyed by the frequent tiny insights our students shared with us, and have come to believe firmly in expressive writing for the following reasons:

1. Such writing generates thinking.
2. We learn more if we have asked our own questions. (Bob Tierney, BAWP)
3. We see clearly what we don’t know when we struggle to use it by recasting, paraphrasing, or synthesizing.
4. Expressive writing makes the steps in learning explicit, and therefore open to teacher guidance and correction.
5. Active “rehearsal” of knowledge, as Donald Graves of the University of New Hampshire calls it, leads to student ownership of that knowledge, and thus to retention.
6. Finally, it seems that the purposes of language (and language instruction) are thinking—learning what we know as we say or write it—and communication of what we have learned—language to be crafted and polished.

After three years of “team teaching” on opposite sides of a very thin folding wall, we put together our first public joint effort for the fourth summer Institute of the Alaska State Writing Project at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks in June 1984. In that presentation, Susan explored the use of learning logs, and in particular, reading response logs, with tenth through twelfth grade literature students of all abilities.

Expressive log entries, whether free or directed responses (including role playing and simulation) provide the opportunity for active learning through guided “rehearsal” of content: the information becomes the student’s own, while at the same time the instructor can see and respond to the thinking. For the student, the log increases writing fluency, while developing honesty in questioning and critical thinking as she is engaged in a dialogue with herself. While building a sense of confidence in her personal voice, the student begins to trust her own opinion and response to content. For the teacher, the log can give feedback on the learning environment, thus shaping the direction of whole group as well as individual instruction. And finally, the log creates a pool of ideas for the student to draw from for class discussion, and for interpretive and evaluative expository writing assignments.

Although by now we were committed to expressive writing, any remaining misgivings were dismissed when we realized how specific expressive assignments could lead to pieces of transactional writing. In fact, we had stumbled upon a natural progression of writing for different audiences, as Peter Stillman puts it:

There’s eventual merit in students’ understanding that as they move closer to college age, they should be expected to work increasingly with transactional forms of writing—away from or in addition to writing for audiences comprising the self and trusted peers and teacher. This isn’t a sad reality, just a farther venture. ... What colleges expect—what ultimately the world expects of its writers—is the distancing of writer from audience. (Teacher’s Guide to Writing Your Own Way. Boynton/Cook, p. 12.)

The linking assignments which bridge that gap between expressive and transactional writing result in first person, informal expository pieces of polished writing which build directly on expressive assignments, and which can be treated as ends in themselves, or as a stage in the development of a formal, third person expository piece.

One such linking assignment is the Content Assessment, which grows out of a directed reading log entry calling for role playing. The piece which results can easily be revised by the writer into a third person, formal essay if
that is the instructional objective. Roger, a student in Classical Literature—a remedial twelfth grade course which meets a graduation requirement—shows in his response to such an assignment the effectiveness of linking expres-

sive with transactional writing to hear in the student’s own voice what course content he has made his own.

Prompt: A LETTER—Thinking about all the different stories and plays we studied, choose two characters—
each from a different work—and you be one of those characters. WRITE A LETTER TO THE
OTHER ONE. DISCUSSING SOME TOPIC OF COMMON INTEREST TO YOU BOTH. (The pur-
pose of this question is for me to see how well you understand the characters we studied and their
motives for the actions they took.)

Response: Dear Theseus,

This is Jason from Crete. I write this letter to you so that you may learn from my mistakes and stupidity.
By now you know of Medea and her magic ways. I am sorry to say that I am responsible for those ways as
surely as I now write this letter.

If I could go back in time and see how I was changing I might have done something about it but I never
saw the change in me. I slowly wanted everything that I denied at birth. I wanted the power of a king, nay
a god and I would not stop until I got it all. My pride was too excessive for ten men. And yet I hear that
you are also going the same way I did.

I pray that you see the mistakes that I myself missed. If you promise your heart, do it to someone you love.
Not to someone you can use and then throw away into the wind. If you need proof look at dear Medea. If
it were not for me she would be a happy person today instead of a dark, cruel hating person.

Think well, young Theseus,

Jason

However, by far the greatest success we have seen so far with a linking assignment has come from Kathy’s
adaptation of the conventional two hour final examination for Basic Composition II, a required writing course for
average students, tenth through twelfth grade.

The mandatory research paper had been an exercise in rote research skills and typing, with students more
concerned with their footnote page than their topics; but as soon as they saw a real purpose to their papers, their
writing came alive. While slicing tomatoes at Burger King, Laura cut the tip off her right index finger. This experi-
ence produced not only considerable pain, but also the term paper, “The History of Workman’s Compensation.”
Pete visited a national park in Colorado, saw the Anastazi ruins and wondered, “Who were the Anastazi?” The
Basic Comp II research paper gave him the opportunity to discover this ancient people. James considered quitting
school, but after interviewing several high school dropouts, including his mother, and writing up his findings,
“Should Students Drop Out Of High School?” he decided to stick with school.

These three students used Ken Macrorie’s “I Search” technique which stresses student ownership of the topic
and real practical purpose for the research. Using a simple inquiry method and the first person point of view, the
Basic Comp II students began their personal “I Search” papers, and Kathy recognized again the key to good stu-
dent writing: ownership. Students write confidently and enthusiastically when the project belongs to them, not the
teacher.

The “I Search” papers arrived on time, typed with correct bibliographies and footnotes and something never
before heard in a student research paper in Basic Comp II, personal voice.

Since the papers were interesting and covered a wide variety of subjects, the students gave oral presentations
to the class. Usually oral reports or speeches are met with terrified looks and the flat statement, “No way!” but not
this time. Pete brought in slides and talked for thirty minutes. Laura sounded like a lawyer explaining Workman’s
Compensation benefits. All the students gave good clear presentations, and their classmates listened closely
because the speakers were now “experts.” Suddenly Kathy realized that students are not often graded on what they
know, but rather on what they did not learn or understand clearly. Somehow, as composition teachers, we have to
tap specific student expertise to produce good writing, and at the same time provide a positive process for the
necessary evaluation. That’s when the idea for a personalized final exam began to form.

Over the next two years, Kathy developed a method for a personalized final, an extension of the “I Search”
paper, using the final exam time slot because it allows two hours of uninterrupted time. Students are then able to
revise and polish their drafts. Although Kathy has used this method only in composition classes, it can be used
across the curriculum and adapted to specific grade levels.

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There are four steps to preparing a successful personalized exam:

1. The material must be fully covered and reviewed—the students have to feel confident that they are experts in at least one area.

2. The instructor asks each student individually for one specific idea he or she understands well and finds interesting—a conference between teacher and student may be necessary.

3. The teacher creates a role-playing situation that clearly identifies the student’s audience which in turn determines the writing’s form, purpose, and tone.

4. The teacher must allow students enough time for revising and polishing drafts—a two-hour uninterrupted block is usually sufficient.

Because students respond positively to individual attention, each writing situation is placed in a separately addressed envelope and handed to the student the day of the final. Kathy found that the writing is usually the semester’s best because the students are familiar with the subject matter, the situation has clearly identified the purpose of the writing, and the students feel they own the exam: after all, they are the “experts.”

The following paragraphs are two of ten diary entries from a final exam by Kristi, a tenth grader who wrote her “I Search” paper on the problems surrounding death and dying. The situation she was given was “You are twenty-seven years old. You have a husband and two children living here in Fairbanks. Your doctor has just diagnosed inoperable lung cancer. You have less than two months to live. How do you and your family handle this situation?”

Feb. 10.

Got back from Seattle and it was fun but depressing. Jeff and I told the kids about my illness. Jennifer took it with a grain of salt and asked if she could come with me. Right then I started to cry and that made Jack cry. Jack actually looked mad and later told me he would miss me, and to please not go. He also asked me if I was scared. This question hit me the hardest. I am scared but I didn’t want to tell him this, because I thought it would bring up more problems. I want to spend as much time as possible with my family. I have about a month and a half left to fulfill and this is not going to be easy.


Today Jack brought home a red heart made of construction paper and it read:

Roses are red violets are blue
My mommy is the greatest and I will miss her truly.

It didn’t really rhyme but the message was there. He asked me who his new mommy was going to be and I just couldn’t think of anything to say. Then he got up and locked himself in his bedroom until Jeff got home. Jeff had to break down the door to get in. We all sat on his bed and he told us that he was sorry but he didn’t want a new mommy. I told him that Daddy would always be here, but that didn’t seem to help.

Through expressive writing, our students are able to find their own voices and thoughts in preparation for transactional writing that both honestly and clearly discusses ideas that they will take with them long after the assignments, the course; and the classroom are forgotten. What more could any English teacher ask?

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