The Performance of Self in Student Writing

by Thomas Newkirk

Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1997. $20.00; 124 pages
reviewed by Charles Moran

This short, wonderfully-written book is extremely important for writing teachers in these times. Although Newkirk writes specifically about first-year college writers, readers can easily extrapolate from this fitting applications to all grade levels. This is partly because of Newkirk's extensive experience with K-12 education, and partly because Newkirk makes his case with long selections of actual student writing.

The book is an argument for the continued inclusion of personal, 'expressive' writing in our classes—the kind of writing that has been the backbone of our Writing Project Summer Institutes and of our writing curricula since the inception of the National Writing Project. Many contemporary teachers/writers/scholars in the field of first-year college writing now argue that personal, autobiographical writing should not be the center of our writing curriculum. James Berlin, among others, has asserted that an emphasis upon personal writing inhibits the writer's political/social consciousness and thereby forestalls social change—that an 'expressivist' approach to writing is politically conservative. Lester Faigley, among others, has argued from a postmodernist perspective that the 'self' is a romantic illusion, and that a curriculum based upon the expression of 'self' is simply wrong. Harriet Malinowitz, among others, has asserted that a curriculum based upon personal writing puts many writers, perhaps most writers, at substantial risk. Students go public with their deepest loves and fears often at their peril.

To add to this growing critical consensus, emerging technologies and today's political climate push us toward workplace writing and away from the personal writing that has been such an important part of our teaching since the 1970s. I think here of what we have learned from the work of Ken Macrorie, James Britton, Nancy Martin, Donald Graves, Linda Rief, Lucy Calkins, Peter Elbow, Tom Romano, Jack Wilde, Nancie Atwell—the list grows as I type. Should all this be superceded?

Tom Newkirk gives us the arguments we need if we are to claim space for expressive writing in our classrooms. He argues that when one writes about the self, that this writing is itself performance, a construction—not entirely a plumbing of the depths, not at all the discovery and presentation of an essential 'self,' but a presentation of a possible self to an audience composed of teacher and classmates. This 'self' is performed to, and to a degree constructed by, the society that is its readers. The 'self,' then, is not private, but social.

Having defined 'expressive' writing as performance, Newkirk looks at students' performance of self in their writing and at our reactions, as English teachers, to this performance. He shows us how to reread both the writing and our reaction to it as culture- and class-bound, explaining in this process how it is that we English teachers find ourselves so far from today's cultural mainstreams.

The strength of the book are these readings of actual pieces of student writing. In these readings Newkirk helps readers see the ways in which students are, yes, expressing themselves, but also, and simultaneously, constructing a self and presenting it, performing it, for their readers. He helps us understand the genres that students write in: the testimonial, the eulogy, the spectator piece. He demonstrates how a teacher's reading of student writing may not be fully responsive to the work of the writers. He helps us value the words our students write, encouraging us to listen to these writers before we speak.

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